“WELL, WHAT *DO* GIRLS DO?”: USING THE ARTS TO LEARN WHY AND HOW GIRLS ENGAGE IN ACTIVISM

“Well, what *do* girls do?”: Using the Arts to Learn Why and How Girls Engage in Activism

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LAY ABSTRACT

Through this arts-based study, I aim to highlight and better understand the experiences of girls who are engaged in social and environmental change work. Guided by a critical childhood citizenship theoretical framework, which integrates theoretical concepts from critical childhood studies and critical citizenship studies, I engaged nine girls, aged 8-12 years, from the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area in individual semi-structure qualitative interviews and two arts-based focus groups. The data used for critical thematic analysis included transcriptions of individual interviews, the focus groups, and girls' explanations of the artwork they created (collages and sign messages). Study findings illuminate the gendered nuances of citizenship, the impacts of feminist and postfeminist tensions on girls' social and environmental change work, and what may constitute "good" and "bad" citizenship for girls. This research makes contributions to the fields of child-centred research, social work research and practice, and the study of girls' citizenship.

ABSTRACT

The aims of this arts-based dissertation are to highlight and better understand the experiences of girls who are engaged in activism. Inspired by years of community social work practice with girls, I came to this project with the firsthand knowledge that girls were working hard to create change in their schools, communities, and beyond. I also saw through my community practice that girls' efforts were often patronized, ignored, and not taken seriously. The goal of this project was, therefore, to showcase and learn about the social and environmental change work of girls, including what motivated, helped, and hindered them in their political pursuits.

My dissertation was guided by a critical childhood citizenship theoretical framework, which I developed by integrating theoretical concepts from critical childhood studies and critical citizenship studies. Methodologically informed by principles of feminist participatory action research, I engaged nine girls, aged 8-12 years, from the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (Ontario, Canada) in individual semi-structured qualitative interviews and arts-based focus groups. Girls who participated in this study thus had opportunities to both individually and collectively articulate their key concerns and tensions as related to their engagement with gender and activism.

Study findings illuminate why gender matters when thinking about girls' activism and citizenship. More specifically, these study findings elucidate the gendered nuances of citizenship, the impacts of feminist and postfeminist tensions on girls' social and environmental change work, and what may constitute "good" and "bad" citizenship for girls. This co-created knowledge makes meaningful contributions to child-centred

research, social work research and practice, and the broader study of girls' citizenship. It is my dream that this work inspires others to take girls seriously as citizens and change-makers, seek out and centre their perspectives and knowledge, and to turn to them as collaborators and co-conspirators as we work towards more socially and environmentally just worlds.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CCA	Constant Comparative Analysis
FPAR	Feminist Participatory Action Research
GTHA	Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area
MREB	McMaster Research Ethics Board
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Chapter 1: Introduction

> *"Dear Rachel Notley,*
> *I would like to talk to you about racism in Alberta. People are getting hurt because of racism. Some are committing suicide or attempting to because of racism. I would like to stop racism. Maybe funding money to talk about stopping racism might help stop it. Thank you for your time".*
> *(Girl Power Program Participant, postcard activism campaign, 2017)*

In April of 2017, I sat in the basement of the Women's Centre of Calgary, a not-for-profit organization in Alberta, Canada with a group of 10-12-year-old girls that I had gotten to know over the course of the past school year. We were surrounded by giant stuffed animals, which some girls used as cushions; the walls were painted bright purple and plastered with the girls' artwork from previous weeks. This program, called Girl Power, met every Tuesday and Thursday after school. The aim of Girl Power was to explore with girls the different issues that impacted their lives as well as to build and strengthen their leadership and activism skills so that they felt more confident in acting on those issues. I worked as a community social worker at the Women's Centre with girls for nearly five years, where it was my job to develop curriculum, facilitate, and evaluate the Girl Power program.

In that particular session, we were discussing various activism tactics that could be used to influence change. Building upon previous discussions throughout the year tied to larger themes about racism and sexism, the girls who were in attendance that day decided that they would like to create a postcard campaign targeted at provincially and federally elected officials. As a result, there were around ten postcards sent to various decision-makers at local, provincial, and national levels calling for direct action to

address issues such as racism, sexism, and contemporary colonialism. A photo of the example text, sent directly to Rachel Notley, the premier of Alberta at that time, provided above can be found in Appendix A.

While Girl Power was able to facilitate these types of collective activist activities, girls would often attend the program and share stories of various ways that they were working to influence change outside of the program in their peer groups, families, communities, and beyond. In November of 2017, for example, one 10-year-old girl in the program told us that she was running in her upcoming school elections on a primary campaign value of "Include Everyone" (Girls Lead YYC, 2017). The following year, another 10-year-old girl who was involved with the Calgary chapter of #FridaysForFuture asked to lead a session on climate change (Girls Lead YYC, 2019). She facilitated an excellent and engaging discussion. Other girls would come to the program to share stories about difficult conversations they were having with their family or friends about gender stereotypes, racial micro-aggressions, and the safety of their queer friends. They shared how they were engaging in both small- and large-scale acts to change their worlds for the better, drawing upon their own networks to support them in whatever ways they could. It was this work, in these programs, with those girls that ultimately led me to see and know the world differently, specifically in relation to how adults respond to and respect girls working to create social, cultural, and political change.

This dissertation was largely informed by my experiences as a practicing community social worker with girls in Calgary, such as the experiences described above. Despite the inspiring social and environmental justice work that I witnessed by 10–12-

year-old girls throughout my five years at the organization, I noticed that their work was often patronized, if even recognized by adults in the first place. Met with phrases such as "you'll think differently about this when you're older" and "it's adorable that you care so much!", the activism of girls was frequently positioned as unworthy of serious consideration. The emphasis was being placed on the playful, 'pink-ified' characteristics associated with girlhood, such as the image of a group of girls sitting in a purple room surrounded by stuffed animals, and not the important work that they were doing to change their social, cultural, and political worlds. In other words, their activism was feminized and thus disregarded. This trivialization of girls' activism and of girlhood itself was a departure from the widespread recognition that older girls across the globe had gained for their activist practices. Malala Yousafzai, Greta Thunberg, and X Gonzalez, for example, all over the age of 14 years, had captured the attention of the world for their social and environmental activism. As I became attuned to these discrepancies, I started to wonder why this was. What is it about girls' activism that dictates whether and how they and their work are respected and taken seriously? Is it a function of how their identities are perceived by adults? Does age matter? Does gender matter? Is it the locations they engage in this work, or the methods that girls use to push for change that somehow render this work invisible? Are there ways that adults can do better at listening to younger girl activists in a meaningful way? It was these questions that inspired and guided my dissertation.

Social Positioning

While my community social work practice experience galvanized me to undertake this research, my own lived experiences of girlhood ultimately serve as the foundation on which this entire trajectory was built. I see importance in centering and sharing part of my own girlhood in this work, as "…one of the ways to legitimize childhood as a valid research site is to undertake research that 'starts with ourselves'" (Coulter, 2014, p. 31). Centering the self is a "feminist methodological tool" (Coulter, 2014, p. 31) that in the study of girlhood operates to facilitate critical reflection about our own lived experiences in relation to specific ages and time periods of our lives and the impacts of such on research.

I was raised in Calgary, Alberta, recognized as a socially and politically conservative city in an equally conservative province. Growing up in Calgary shaped my experiences of girlhood in many ways: as a white girl, unaware of my race and racial privilege because of the invisibility of whiteness in a predominantly white neighborhood; as a middle-class girl, privileged to not worry too much about the financial state of my family; as an able-bodied and able-minded girl, who could easily spend time outdoors exploring my community and the nearby mountains skiing, hiking, and camping; and as a straight girl, who saw herself commonly reflected in the media that I consumed. My girlhood allowed me to make friends with the other neighbourhood kids who looked like me and who shared similar privileges, to play organized sports, and to make art in my free time. Also inherent to this lived experience of girlhood, however, was a gendered experience of childhood. My girlhood, as with all other girlhoods, was impacted in a

plethora of ways by patriarchy. In my life, it manifested itself as rampant fatphobia, internalized misogyny, the normalization of sexual violence in a rape culture, and more.

In reflecting upon my own girlhood, I can remember certain ways that patriarchy impacted me at certain ages that constituted specific times in my life (Coulter, 2014). When I was 10 years old, for example, I remember watching *Gladiator* starring Russell Crowe on DVD and proclaiming to my friend that "I hate racism". She looked back at me, but never responded, sending what I understood to be a subtle but clear message that girls weren't supposed to talk about those types of things. At that time, and throughout most of my girlhood, I remember vehemently identifying as a "tomboy" because of my interest in playing sports and general disinterest in things that girls were stereotypically interested in, such as clothes and makeup. I also remember resonating with Christina Aguilera and Lil' Kim's song *Can't Hold Us Down* – as song dedicated to challenging gendered double standards – dancing and singing along to it with my friends. I was 12 years old when that song came out. Thinking back to the experiences of my own girlhood creates a window through which I can challenge my own childhood (and now adult-oriented) perceptions of girlhood. It also further reinforces my belief that many girls today are likely experiencing, thinking about, and resisting the white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism, ableism, and heterosexism in their lives. It is the complexity of these experiences that has ultimately inspired my continued desire to work towards a better world with and for girls.

Although these reflections upon my own experiences of girlhood point a general understanding of the injustices that many girls face, it wasn't until I attended university

that I learned about, and therefore became able to articulate, what these injustices were. As I'm sure is a common experience amongst young, white, university-educated women, my introduction to feminism occurred in the first Women's Studies class that I attended as an undergraduate student at the University of Calgary. As I started making connections between historical struggle, feminist theory, and my personal experiences, I felt validated, seen, angry, and emboldened. My introduction to feminism as an undergraduate student changed the trajectory of my life and influenced all my professional and academic endeavors henceforth, including the critical epistemological orientation through which I grounded this study. This critical orientation has shaped my current understanding of girls and girls' activism, as well as why I believe it is important to learn from girl activists.

The Importance of Highlighting and Learning from Girl Activists

Even though many girls across the globe are engaged in activism, their efforts are vastly underrepresented in the media, their opinions rarely taken into consideration when decisions are made about their lives, and adult decision-makers often do not take their ideas seriously (Bent, 2013; Cameron, 2023; Gonick et al., 2021). Girls' activism is frequently excluded from spheres of meaningful influence. Although the exclusion of girls' activism has been offered as a critique of decision-making opportunities and procedures for decades (Bent, 2013), I would contend that not much has changed. Girls are still not offered equitable opportunities to share their perspectives or contribute to important decisions that may impact them.

Although girls are not offered meaningful opportunities to influence decisions that are made about their lives, many still find ways to affect the social, cultural, and political

world around them (Taft, 2011). Girls represent a significant corner of the consumerist marketplace, for example, where they exercise "consumer citizenship" (Harris, 2004, p. 163) and influence marketplace trends (Coulter, 2014). They are having political conversations with their families, friends, classmates, and in their communities, as I witnessed throughout my years of community social work practice. Girls are also engaged in acts to catalyze change in corporate and governmental spheres; in Calgary, for example, two girls aged 11 and 12 years generated over 300,000 signatures in support of their plea to Starbucks to stock recyclable coffee cups (Bell, 2018). In Hamilton (Ontario), an 11-year-old girl launched a YouTube channel highlighting books featuring Black, Indigenous, and other racialized characters, an initiative that has since been picked up by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Rosas, 2023).

Girls have much to offer in terms of thinking creatively about social, cultural, and political progress, and many are advocating for and influencing change in places and spaces all around us. However, their efforts are often patronized, and their perspectives pushed to the margins or excluded altogether. This marginalization and exclusion are a hinderance to societal progress; one of the cornerstones of an inclusive democracy is the notion that societies are made stronger when a diversity of perspectives is represented and considered (Government of Canada, 2024). As we seek more socially and environmentally just futures, it is essential that we center those who are frequently excluded and pushed to the margins. Girls' activism – and their perspectives and ideas about how to make our worlds better – must be brought to the fore.

Research Questions

The objective of my doctoral research was to better understand the experiences of girls, aged 8-12 years, who engage in activism. My study included two primary lines of inquiry. The first focused on girlhood identity, investigating the ways girls understood and defined their own girlhoods. The second was related to girls' activism, learning about the ways that they worked to create social and environmental change online, in their peer groups, families, schools, communities, and beyond, what motivated them to engage in this work, as well as why they believed this type of work is important. In alignment with these two research objectives, I developed two questions that I aimed to answer in my study:

(1) How do girls aged 8-12-years-old understand, describe, and experience their girlhoods?

(2) How are girls working to create social and environmental change, and what motivates and inspires them to do so?

Choices Made

In addition to the theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices I made while designing this study, I made decisions that ultimately informed my understanding and shaping of the research questions. I had to make choices around who potential girl participants could be, with considerations of age and gender. I also made decisions around how to define "activism", a term that is often thought of with fluidity. In what follows, I describe how these decisions were made.

"Girls"?

Aligned with my critical epistemological orientation, I understand girlhood as a construct that is historically, socially, culturally, and geographically influenced (Sibielski, 2011). Girlhood has been constructed along a gender binary, positioned most closely with femininity and defined as dichotomous to masculinity and boyhood. Scholarly literature has explored the ways that girlhood is aligned or misaligned with traditional notions of femininity, which has been referred to as either "normative" femininity (Adams & Bettis, 2003; Brown, 2011; Haines et. al, 2009), or "emphasized" femininity (Connell, 2020; Kelly et. al, 2005; Messner, 2000; Morojele, 2011). These expectations of femininity vary based on social, cultural, and political contexts. Gender is therefore not seen as something that children are born knowing, and the idea of girlhood is constantly in flux.

Aligning myself with the understanding that gender is not something that is biological or innate, rather it is constructed, contextual, and embodied, I believe that experiences of girlhood are not exclusive to those who are assigned female at birth (Butler, 1988, 1993). The belief that gender is a construct informed my choice to deploy a transgender-inclusive definition of girlhood, understanding that one does not have to have been assigned female at birth to be defined as a girl. When I refer to and use the terminology of 'girls' and 'girlhood' throughout this dissertation, I am therefore referring to both cisgender and transgender girls alike. At the same time, however, I recognize that the experiences of transgender girls are vastly different than those of cisgender girls. My desire to be inclusive does not negate these realities, and it is important to acknowledge

that transgender girls' experiences of gender identity differ significantly than that of girls who are cisgender.

My community practice experience with girls, and my understanding of the scholarly literature about girls' activism, also shaped my decision-making about participant age. As most of the existing scholarship and discourse about girls' activism focuses on teenage girls or young women, I believed it important to highlight the activist work of girls of younger ages. As I have noted, I witnessed first-hand the important work of younger girls and, in this project, endeavored to center the perspectives of those who are typically ignored: girls between the ages of 8-12 years.

"Activism"?

For the purposes of this study, I broadly defined and understood activism as actions that are being taken to influence social or environmental change, encompassing practices ranging along a spectrum of social and political activity (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022). At one end, this may include overt political actions, such as organizing and/or attending protests and marches, and at the other may include the "more subtle processes through which even younger children often connect their families to politics at the community, regional, and even national scales" (Bosco, 2010, p. 382) such as community work and everyday actions (Tisdall & Cuevas, 2022). Essentially, the objective of this doctoral study was to understand the experiences of girls who engage in activism in whatever ways they understood activism to be, not in ways that I or others had defined or predetermined to be valid.

Dissertation Structure

In Chapter Two, I review the literature on girls' activism. This overview focuses on postfeminist and neoliberal feminist frameworks, which I also draw on in my analysis. It includes an exploration of how girl activists have historically been perceived, as well as understandings of their politics. I conclude this review by offering insights into how this study may build and expand upon existing studies.

My theoretical framework is outlined in Chapter Three. This study was shaped and guided by an integrated theoretical framework informed by the interdisciplinary fields of critical citizenship studies and critical childhood studies. This framework draws from and weaves together theoretical concepts of children's rights and participation, activism and citizenship, childism, childhood innocence, and intersectionality. I articulate how these concepts informed my doctoral research articulating why this theoretical framework was helpful for thinking through the nuances of girls' activism.

I share the methodological and design choices that I made in Chapter Four. I articulate the importance of reflexivity and flexibility while engaging in research with young people, specifically acknowledging my positionality as an adult researcher engaging in research with girls. This critical reflexivity – a process of critically and constantly considering *who* I am in relation to the research and the girl participants and the possible impacts of such – was an important exercise as I worked to address power imbalances that often exist between adults and children, researchers and participants. In addition to articulating my methodology and study design in Chapter Four, I share my process for conducting a critical thematic analysis of the data. The processes for

collecting and analyzing data as articulated in this fourth chapter ultimately led to the research findings that I share in Chapters Five through Eight. These chapters include direct quotes from the girl participants, as well as photos of the artwork they created as they engaged with the arts-based research method. As I describe each of the four findings, I also weave my theoretical analysis throughout, drawing connections between what the girls shared with me in relation to key foci of gender and social and environmental change.

In Chapter Nine, the discussion section, I tie together the conceptual and theoretical threads that were woven throughout the four findings chapters. I identify implications of these study findings for girls' activism, citizenship, and participation. I also offer suggestions for how adults might better support and act in allyship with girls as they express their opinions, share their perspectives, and participate in decisions that are made about their lives.

In Chapter Ten, I offer concluding reflections about this study. I share the limitations and methodological tensions that emerged while doing this research, as well as identify where this research fills gaps in the existing literature about girls' activism, child-centred research, social work, and critical citizenship studies. Lastly, I end by reflecting upon the process of undertaking this study and share my hopes for the impact of this research.

Chapter 2: What is Already Known About Girls' Activism

I was first introduced to the literature on girls' activism while working at the Women's Centre of Calgary. Sarah Winstanley, a former colleague and now close friend, kept a copy of Jessica Taft's *Rebel Girls: Youth Activism & Social Change Across the Americas* (2011) on her desk. I often felt inspired as we were working to pick it up and read random excerpts related to our work in community programs with girls. This casual reading of *Rebel Girls* (Taft, 2011), an ethnography that shares the stories of teenage girl activists across the Americas, catalyzed my interest and reinforced my belief in the political power of girls. Throughout my years of doing community work, during my doctoral program, and now as I write this dissertation, that same copy of *Rebel Girls* sits on my desk. Gifted to me by Sarah, I refer to it often. It is filled with our shared notes along the margins, sticky notes and dog-eared pages. It serves as a constant reminder of the necessary connections between scholarship and lived experience, between theory and practice. My orientation to the literature on girls' activism is therefore centred around this introduction to Taft's work, and my perspective is recognizably informed by many of the concepts that Taft explores.

Jessica Taft's *Rebel Girls*

While the purpose of this review of the literature on girls' activism is not to provide an in-depth review of *Rebel Girls*, it is nonetheless important for me to briefly overview what Taft explored in her work that has proven so formative for me. When she was conducting her field work for *Rebel Girls* (between the years of 2005 and 2006), Taft (2011, p. 4) aptly noted that "girls' activism is an extremely underexplored scholarly

topic, largely invisible in the academic literatures on girlhood and on social movements". As explored by Taft (2011), the scholarship on girls and girlhood up until that point had primarily focused on their psychology (e.g., Brown & Gilligan, 1992), sexuality (e.g., Thompson, 1995), self-esteem (e.g., Orenstein, 1994), friendships (e.g., Hey, 1997), media consumption (e.g., Currie, 1995), and peer relationships (e.g., Bettis & Adams, 2005). Much of the literature at that time was therefore centred around pathologizing girls' behaviour and understanding girls' individual experiences. My work at the Women's Centre of Calgary was focused on challenging these ideas, instead understanding the lived experiences of girls within their broader social and cultural contexts and, therefore, as inherently political. *Rebel Girls* (Taft, 2011) provided me with the language to understand these discrepancies and oriented me towards a more concrete way of thinking about girls' activism.

Although Taft's (2011) *Rebel Girls* marks the beginning of the literature on girls' activism for *me*, the beginnings of the literature on girls' activism trace back much earlier than that. Tied closely to current understandings of girls' activism, for example, there is plenty of literature exploring the punk rock feminist riot grrrl era of the late 1990s in the United States. Catalyzed by women musicians who primarily made underground rock and punk rock music, the intentions of the riot grrrl movement were for young women to politically assert themselves through music, zines, and dance, and signalled an explicit integration of music with feminism (Leonard, 1997). Many of those involved in the riot grrrl movement promoted "sexual awareness, feminism, organising voter registration"

and encouraged people to learn about how to "protect their right to abortion and birth control" (Leonard, 1997, p. 231).

Aligned with and following the punk rock feminist riot grrrl era of the late 1990's, feminist scholars of the early 2000's had started to write about girls' and young women's resistance to dominant gender norms and consumerist culture (Gonick, 2006; Taft, 2011). The literature from the early 2000's about girls' resistance explored girls' own experiences of and definitions of girlhood (e.g., Currie et al., 2009; Kelly et al., 2005) and how they experienced citizenship (e.g., Caron, 2011; Harris, 2004). Within this literature, however, there was often a conflation of the experiences of young women (often thought of as between the ages of 18-30 years) with those of teenage girls (aged between 13-19 years), a practice made clear by Taft (2011) who noted that there had been very little written about the specific experiences of teenage girls. *Rebel Girls* (Taft, 2011) was therefore an expansion of the limited scholarship that existed at that time through its focus on girls' resistance from a new perspective, that of teenage girls.

Since the publication of *Rebel Girls* in 2011, the topic of girls' activism has gained significant attention in the scholarly literature. Although there is no agreed upon definition of what age range constitutes a "girl", girls' studies scholars have taken interest in, highlighted, and platformed the important and sometimes creative work of girl activists. The focus of more recent girls' activism scholarship is primarily concentrated in the fields of communication and media studies (e.g., Keller, 2012; Kimball, 2019), sociology (e.g., Renold, 2018; Taft, 2014), and international relations (e.g., Bent, 2013, 2020a; Koffman & Gill, 2013). Other scholars have taken interest in girls' relationships

with feminism (e.g., Charles & Allan, 2022; Edell et al., 2013; Keller & Ringrose, 2015), which is related to but not representative of understanding girls' activism more broadly.

In what follows, I explore and synthesize the broader body of literature on girls' activism. I first offer an overview of what has been written in the literature related to the conceptualization of girls' activism, particularly in relation to agency, resistance, and girl activist identities. I then extract and analyze two prominent discourses surrounding 'empowered girlhood' and girls' activism, specifically girl power and the can-do girl. Following this analysis of 'girl power' and 'can-do girl' discourses, I address how figurations of the girl activist are shaped by race, ethnicity, and geopolitical context before then identifying some of the gaps in the current body of literature about girls' activism. Lastly, I articulate how the existing scholarship has informed and shaped this doctoral research, for which one goal is addressing some of these gaps.

Girls Activism Conceptualized

Pockets of scholarly literature about girls' activism have cropped up and multiplied, particularly in North America (e.g., Huang & Bent, 2022; Keller, 2012; Taft, 2011, 2017, 2020) and the United Kingdom (e.g., Assan, 2023; Ringrose et al., 2021) over the past two decades. Of particular interest has been girls' activism online (e.g., Brown, 2011; Garcia et al., 2020; Keller, 2012), activism in relation to sexual violence and gender discrimination (e.g., Bernier & Winstanley, 2021; Garcia & Vemuri, 2017; Harris-Harb & Sandberg, 2020), girls' activism in transnational contexts (e.g., Bent, 2013; Khoja-Moolji & Chacko, 2024) and, more recently, activism in response to the climate crisis (e.g., Driver, 2024; Huang & Bent, 2022). Attention has also been paid to girls who are

involved in large-scale social movements that respond to pressing social issues, such as the #MarchForOurLives movement calling for increased gun control in the United States (Bent, 2020). Girls have been – and continue to be – pushing for social and environmental change in many different areas of their lives, online and offline, both through traditional activist methods such as petition and protest (Huang & Bent, 2022), creative methods using public art (Harris-Harb & Sandberg, 2020) and blogging (Keller, 2012).

While the emphasis of this dissertation is on contemporary girls' activism, it is also important to briefly honour girls' activism throughout history. As girls' activism has only really gained increased attention in the scholarly literature as of the early 2000s, it is necessary to acknowledge, how some girls have always been engaged in activist activities (Kahn, 2023). Here I share two examples. Girls were involved in the Suffrage Movement (taking place across North America at different timepoints, but generally between the years of 1840-1920), for example, to advocate for women's right to vote (Dillenburg, n.d.). It has been documented that girls under the age of 21 would attend meetings about women's suffrage, organize and attend public suffrage parades, and participate in union organizing (Dillenberg, n.d.). During the Civil Rights movement in the United States (which has been documented as taking place between 1954-1968), Black girls frequently participated in sit-ins and there are some accounts of Black girls refused to leave areas reserved for white people (Holm, 2014; Laurinec, 2023). Girls have always been present in political struggle, but this work was not often acknowledged or documented (Kahn, 2023). I believe it important to make visible and honour these histories while also making links to and maintaining emphasis on our current moment.

Much of the literature that I have reviewed on contemporary girls' activism is rooted in critical epistemological perspectives, particularly those of feminism (e.g., Gonick et al., 2021; Keller, 2012) and intersectional feminism (e.g., Huang & Bent, 2023; Wilcox, 2020). These feminist and intersectional feminist theoretical orientations recognize that the lived experiences of girls are influenced by social, cultural, and political systems of power (de Finney, 2015; Huang & Bent, 2023; Jiwani et al., 2006). These systems of power include patriarchy, adultism, and neoliberalism. Put simply, patriarchy is a system of power that privileges men and which manifests through sexism against all those who are not men (Bernier & Winstanley, 2021; Pomerantz et al., 2013). Adultism marginalizes children by privileging the status and knowledge of adults (Smith, 2024; Sundhall, 2017; Winstanley & Bernier, 2022). Lastly, neoliberalism is a political and economic philosophy that emphasizes the potential of personal responsibility and individual choice (Benigno, 2023; Gonick, 2006; Goodkid, 2009). Patriarchy, adultism, and neoliberalism are themes that run through the literature on girls' activism, making clear how the activism of girls does not exist in a vacuum but is instead influenced by the greater social, cultural, and political contexts in which they live. Within this context, two of the primary and overlapping concepts used to describe girls' activism in the literature are girls' agency and resistance. In what follows, I trace and explicate these concepts.

Agency and Resistance

Some of the earliest writings about girls' activism were centred around girls' agency and resistance. As noted by Gonick and colleagues (2009), the concept of agency has been central to the field of youth studies since the 1970s and was often articulated as

adjacent to the notion of free will. In their historical study of agency, Thomas (2016) writes that at the heart of this connection between agency and free will was "the powerful message that ordinary people, even those whose lives were structured by profound oppression, possessed the capacity or the agency to make the world a more just and equitable place" (p. 325). In the 1990s and 2000s, however, feminist theorists began to identify how agency is shaped by intersecting systems of power related to gender, race, and class (McRobbie, 2000); or, in other words, how experiences of agency are political (Gonick, 2009). The concept of agency has been defined in many ways, however, and while an in-depth exploration of theoretical conceptualizations of agency is outside of the scope of this literature review, it is important to articulate the weightiness of the concept of agency in contemporary feminist theorizing in relation to girls' activism (Gonick, 2009).

While the concept of agency has historically been the subject of feminist debate (Harris, 2004), the specific type of agency perhaps most relevant to girls' activism concerns how girls take action to influence the public sphere (Kennelly, 2009). This type of agency can be referred to as "political agency" (Kennelly, 2009, p. 260). Political agency in relation to girls' activism, as defined by Loveday and colleagues (2023), "moves beyond a dichotomy between agency and victimhood, and recognizes the many and conflicting ways in which girls and women can exert control over their lives from within patriarchal systems of power" (p. 245). Within the context of girls' activism, an understanding of agency can thus be thought of in terms of girls choosing to take action with the intention of influencing change on social, cultural, and political issues.

The concept of agency within the girlhood studies literature, particularly literature focused on girls' activism, is almost always written about alongside the concept of resistance (Allen et al., 2023; Gonick et al., 2009; Loveday et al., 2023). Allen and Green-Barteet (2023) present a definition of resistance specific to their understanding of girls' activism in that it is "often situated as a girl's response to broader asymmetrical power relations" (p. 613). The relationship between girls' agency and resistance, therefore, is that girls exercise political agency when they act in resistance to unfavourable and subordinating systems of power (Allen & Green-Barteet, 2023; Harris & Dobson, 2015). Resistance, however, can be discursive, performative, or even unintentional (Harris & Dobson, 2015); girls' studies scholars have therefore advised against synonymizing agency and resistance, instead recognizing them as distinct but constitutive concepts that contribute to our broader understanding of girls' activism (Gonick et al., 2009; Harris & Dobson, 2015).

At first glance it may seem like girls' actions of agency and resistance ought to be celebrated when we consider how girls are too often socialized to remain quiet, docile, and subordinate. It has been noted, however, that the concepts of agency and resistance can sometimes reinforce neoliberal ideologies that emphasize personal choice, responsibility, and action (Gonick et al., 2009; Harris & Dobson, 2015). Understanding girls' activism solely within the terms of agency effectively champions girls' individual motivations, capacity, and actions to create change. To center agency in discourse about girls' activism, then, is to center the neoliberal principles of individualism and personal choice, ultimately reinforcing narratives about the individualized subject (Gonick et al.,

2009; Harris & Dobson, 2015). Rooting conceptualizations of girls' activism within neoliberal principles underscores and makes invisible the structures of power that discourage girls from taking action or pushing for change in the first place.

In addition to girls' agency and resistance, another aspect of girls' activism – the girl activist identity – has simultaneously been the subject of academic exploration. Scholarship about/focused on the girl activist identity has elucidated how girls come to identify as activists and what this identification looks like and means to them. Consideration of how girls identify themselves as activists can facilitate better understanding of the social, cultural, and political contexts that either encourage or discourage girls from engaging in the world as activists. I attend to this literature below.

Identity

Over the past decade, scholarly literature about girls' activism has increasingly investigated how the identity of the girl activist is constructed across social, cultural, and political contexts (Bent, 2019; Huang & Bent, 2022; Keller, 2012; Taft, 2014). Conceptualizing how girls may identify as activists or otherwise is helpful for better understanding how girls may perceive their roles in efforts made to influence change in their communities and beyond. This is particularly important when considered within the greater context of what is often referred to as youth apathy, or the idea that young people are generally disinterested in politics or social and environmental change (Taft, 2006, 2011, 2014; Kimball, 2019). Although youth apathy has generally been written about as a gender-neutral concept, there exists an interesting tension in that there is a specific interest in the literature about girls' activism – or youth political engagement and gender.

Scholarship exploring girls' activist identities typically center on identity in relation to "the status quo of a political agent" (Benigno, 2023, p. 42) or in relation to membership in activist communities as individuals (Taft, 2011). Central to this scholarship is Taft's work with girl activists in *Rebel Girls* (2011), of which investigating how girls might articulate the girl activist identity was a key point of scholarly exploration. Taft (2011) has written that the girl activist identity is one that girls have described as "a desire to create change, to make the world into a different and better place" and is additionally centred on a "public-spirited commitment" (p. 26). By this, it is meant that girls believe that one must be concerned with the well-being of others and their communities before they can consider themselves an activist (Taft, 2011). To be an activist, therefore, girls believe that one must be working towards the collective good and in service of community (Taft, 2011).

Despite girls articulating their understandings of activist identities as primarily centred around their intention to create change and commitment to community, studies have found that girls often do not self-identify as activists (Craddock, 2019; Taft, 2011, 2017). In general, activist identities have typically been constructed around notions of exceptionalism, which within the context of activism is frequently thought of as direct forms of action such as protesting, petitioning, and relentlessly championing the issue at hand (Bobel, 2007; Craddock, 2019). For the most part, these types of direct actions are most associated with white, adult men, and girls may not see themselves reflected within these narrow understandings of activist identity (Craddock, 2019; Gordon, 2008; Huang & Bent, 2022; Taft, 2017).

While girls do not often self-identify as activists, this does not mean that the social and environment change work they engaged in to better their communities are not activism. It just means the activist identity has been so narrowly defined that many girls assume that it excludes them. The traditional depiction of the activist identity – bold, outspoken, self-assured (Craddock, 2019) – is contradictory to how girls are typically socialized to be. Interestingly, Taft (2011) found in her work that girls would often separate their activist identities from their girl identities, possibly because they felt it gave their activist identities more validity if they were not associated with traits commonly associated with girlhood. This dichotomy has been written about by Taft (2011) as "a series of oppositions between 'girl identity' and 'activist identity' (superficial/serious; mean/supportive; insecure/confident) [that] is a pervasive and powerful narrative about the transition from innocent, ignorant, or stupid girl to conscious and empowered activist" (p.88). To be a girl and to be an activist are identities that are typically discursively positioned as antonymous.

The messages girls receive about activist identities are further bolstered by traditional news media representations of girl activists. There has been an increased interest in girl activists in the traditional news media over the past decade, often championing *exceptional* individual girls. While perhaps intended to celebrate girl activists, the criteria of exceptionalism may further alienate the every-day girl activist from self-identifying as an activist because they cannot envision themselves being interviewed on the radio or being featured as talk show guests like well-known girl activists Greta Thunberg or Malala Yousafzai. There exists a small body of literature

(which I review below) that has explored the representation of girl activists in the media, speaking to the impact of the media in the discursive construction of girls' activist identities and girls' activism more broadly.

Media Representations

As stated elsewhere in this chapter, girls' activism has gained traction in the media over the past number of decades. Much of this media coverage generally has the tone of being supportive of girl activists, specifically in relation to climate change activism (Raby & Sheppard, 2021). Media perspectives have sometimes positioned girls' activism as representative of opportunities for inter-generational collaboration (Raby & Sheppard, 2021), celebrating youth political engagement in a context that has otherwise labeled young people as politically apathetic. Sometimes, these media representations feature messages of hopefulness and optimism (Taft, 2020). The activism of girls is often written about as a response to feelings of desperation and crisis about the state of current social, cultural, and political affairs, and is articulated by Taft (2020, p. 7):

> The use of these quotes from girl activists about overcoming their own fears and finding hope allows the writers to acknowledge a widespread sense of despair and crisis, but then to narratively resolve these troubling negative emotions via the inspiring optimism of teenage girls. This figuration of the girl activist draws on a longer-standing semiotic linkage between girls and hope. It invites readers to also feel optimistic about a brighter future, despite the serious social and ecological problems to which girl activists are demanding we pay attention. We can read about the girl activist's struggles against injustice and violence or hear her speak about the destruction of the planet, and yet still feel positively about the future because she is figured as hopeful.

While the activism of girls may receive positive coverage in the media, scholars have also noted that responses to this coverage are typically entangled with discourses of childhood that position children as innocent and lacking knowledge about the world

around them (Raby & Raddon, 2015). In an analysis of YouTube comments on a video of Victoria Grant, a 12-year-old Canadian girl advocating for reformed banking policies, researchers Raby and Raddon (2015) identified two central narratives centred on Grant's childhood innocence and presumed lack of knowledge. While Raby and Raddon (2015) found a wide array of messages in response to the girls' activism, many were rooted in the idea that *all* children (not just girls) are not knowledgeable enough to be speaking about topics that should be reserved for discussion by adults. These themes of incompetence and innocence sometimes led commentors to assert that Grant could not have come to create her economic and political analysis on her own but rather, was understood to be a "pawn of her parents (primarily her father) because she could not possibly have learned and understood the material herself" (Raby & Raddon, 2015, p. 177). Commentors generally believed that Victoria could not have formed her own opinions or developed her own political and economic analysis because of her age and her gender, which they largely understood to indicate a lack of education and critical thought.

Interestingly, this interpretation of girl activists as incompetent and innocent may also be what maintains their palatability in the media. If girls are deemed incompetent and too innocent to catalyze meaningful change, they can be considered harmless (Taft, 2020). Representations of girls in the media, therefore, often position them as both hopeful and harmless, exuding optimism for better futures often without indicating any sort of real threat to the status quo (Taft, 2020). Depoliticizing the political work of girls through narratives of hopefulness and harmlessness are strong tools for ensuring that girls are not perceived as being too demanding, too assertive, too radical. These media representations

of girl activists instead often reflect broader conceptualizations of girlhood as a time of naivety, playfulness, and innocence.

These narratives of hopefulness and harmlessness are further enforced by the platforming of individual girls. Instead of highlighting the types of collective action that girls may be engaged in to create social and environmental change, girls are often positioned as individually exceptional and as having worked on their own. This is true for most of the celebrity girl activists that have become household names; Malala Yousafzai, Greta Thunberg, and X Gonzalez for example, have all been depicted in the media as exceptional girls who recognized a social, cultural, or political problem and took action on their own to change it. These media narratives are thus representative of broader, persistent discourses surrounding girls' activism more generally, including the pervasive discourse of girl power. In the next section, I discuss the scholarly literature addressing these discourses. I articulate two separate but related iterations of girl power – girl power and can-do girl (Harris, 2004) – and the ways girl power has been connected to neoliberal feminist theory. These connections between girl power and neoliberal feminism are particularly prominent when thinking about popular culture, such as the 1990s girl pop group the Spice Girls, which I include in this analysis to illustrate the depoliticization of girl power. I then draw connections between girl power and can-do girl discourses and understandings of girls' activism, particularly how the idea of exceptional girl activists has become a quintessential representation of girl power discourses in action.

Girl Power!

Girl power discourses have been explored extensively in girls' studies literature on girls' political subjectivity, specifically in relation to girls' agency and resistance (Benigno, 2023; Gonick et al., 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2013; Pomerantz & Raby, 2017; Taft, 2004). Originating in the United States, girl power discourses first gained traction in popular culture following the Riot Grrl movement of the early 1990s (Gonick et al., 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2013; Pomerantz & Raby, 2017; Taft, 2004). Riot Grrrl started as a political concept intended to assert that girls can and should have cultural, social, and political power (Taft, 2004). Intended to mark a rebellious type of girlhood, the Riot Grrrl movement was most closely tied to punk music and alternative forms of print media, such as zines (Driscoll, 1999). Turning "girl" into "grrrl" was "intended to communicate anger (the grrr stood for growling) and rejection of patronizing attitudes towards young women" (Harris, 2004a, p. 16); Riot Grrrl ideals were largely characterized by anti-status quo rhetoric and calls for revolution (Dunn & Farnsworth, 2012; Jacques, 2001). In the mid 1990s, however, marketing agencies sloganized girl power and used it to turn a profit. Girl power, as a slogan, became associated with the idea of individualized empowerment instead of maintaining its political roots. This shift, aligned with neoliberal ideologies that champion capitalist individualism, ultimately worked to depoliticize girl power. The ultimate example of the depoliticizing of girl power, as a concept, was the use and co-option of the term by the Spice Girls (Bae, 2011).

The Spice Girls were a British pop girl group who took the world by storm in the late 1990s. Perhaps ironically, theirs was also the first piece of music that I owned. I was gifted a *Spiceworld* cassette tape for my eighth birthday and listened to it endlessly for the

better part of that year. I have vivid memories of watching the *Spice World* movie with my friends when it was made available on VHS and remember my mom looking at me and saying "Yeah! Girl power!" when a Spice Girls' music video started playing on TV one Saturday morning. I would dress up like Sporty Spice to go to school and was devastated when Ginger Spice left the group to pursue a solo career. I was enamoured with the Spice Girls and share this information not because I believe that personal anecdotes can wholly represent the global influence that they had on pop culture and feminist discourse, but rather to demonstrate the very real impact that the Spice Girls had on the lives of many girls my age at that time.

The Spice Girls because synonymous with girl power throughout the mid- to late-1990s. Transitioning away from the slogan and concepts originally rooted in political, revolutionary ideas, girl power was instead transformed and utilized as a tool by corporate sponsors to market the Spice Girls and inspire consumption by girls (Driscoll, 1999). This co-option ultimately "redirected the representation of girlhood from a strong, proactive, smart heroine to a worshiper of feminine beauty and heterosexuality" (Bae, 2011, p. 28). The Spice Girls' version of girl power placed emphasis on style, fashion, and aesthetics, with the claim that empowerment can happen through taking control over one's appearance and behaviours (Bae, 2011).

While the Spice Girls may be the clearest example of how girl power discourses entered the mainstream, feminist scholars have since theorized the many ways that girl power discourses have manifested in other areas of social, cultural, and political influence. Anita Harris (2004b) has articulated, for example, how girl power has become

reified through the construction of the "can-do" girl. Harris writes that "can-do girls are notable for their high ambitions…and they seize the opportunities made available within the new economy" (2004b, 17). Girl power discourses, therefore, puts forth the idea that girls can do anything they set their minds to, while can-do girls actualize these discourses by taking action and doing whatever it takes to work toward their goals. While this relationship between girl power and the actualized can-do girl is an important one, it is also notable that there are multiple girl power discourses that manifest themselves differently in the social, political, and cultural lives of girls. In what follows, I summarize these multiple girl power discourses, as first articulated by Jessica Taft (2004).

Multiple Girl Power Discourses

In her writings on girls' resistance as facilitated by girls-serving organizations in the United States, Taft (2004) identified four primary discourses related to girl power: anti-feminism, individual power, consumer power and postfeminism. While written about as distinct discourses, it is important to note they all intersect and influence one another, ultimately shaping how girls and broader societies understand and interpret the political power of girls. When thinking about the influence of the Spice Girls, for example, it is made evident that girls' political lives were discursively shaped by girl power discourses. It is important to better understand the various ways in which girl power discourses have manifested themselves, ultimately affecting how girls engage as activists.

The first discourse Taft identified as related to girl power, is anti-feminism. Anti-feminism asserts that feminism, as a political movement, is negative and not useful to the struggle for girls and women's rights; anti-feminism instead makes claims to girl power

that are individualized, nonpolitical, and nonthreatening to the patriarchal status quo (Taft, 2004). The second discourse, that girl power is informed by the idea of individual power, is rooted in concepts of meritocracy and neoliberalism, or the idea that girls can do anything if they work hard and try their best as individuals. A rhetoric of individual power ignores broader systems of power, such as sexism, patriarchy, racism, classism, and ableism that ultimately oppress girls, instead actively working to make individual girls feel wholly responsible for their successes or failures (Taft, 2004). A third rhetoric, consumer power, identifies with the segment of the marketplace that has been created to target girls of tweenhood age (9-13 years old) as consumers. Girl power rooted in consumer power asserts that girls are not powerful unless they have access to the latest consumerist goods (Taft, 2004).

The final girl power discourse, and perhaps the discourse most relevant to this dissertation and for contextualizing girls' activism, is related to postfeminism. Postfeminist girl power effectively asserts that "girls and women are doing fine, feminism is unnecessary, and the movement is over" (Taft, 2004, p. 72). Within the postfeminist girl power discourse, girls and women have theoretically reached a point of gender equity with boys and men, and are able to live free of barriers, violence, or oppression (Pomerantz et al., 2013; Taft, 2004). In a postfeminist girl power world, all that girls have to do is to believe in themselves and try their best, and then they will be successful. This postfeminist iteration of girl power, while perhaps originating in popular culture messaging, is now manifest in government, education, and popular media (Harris, 2004). This discourse does not exist in a vacuum, however, and is instead enabled by broader

social, cultural, political, and economic contexts (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In North America, these contexts are increasingly neoliberal, with emphasis placed on individualism, choice, and personal responsibility (Harris & Dobson, 2015).

The individualization and depoliticization of girl power, which originated as a political concept, has resulted from this shift towards postfeminism. The Spice Girls are an illustrative example of this shift: girl power – once a politically powerful message about challenging patriarchy –-became a 'pinkified' message which, while professing to 'empower' individual girls, fails to acknowledge or challenge the systems of power that continue to marginalize and oppress them. There is now an expansive exploration in the scholarly literature about the evolution, and contemporary meanings for, girl power, particularly as they relate to feminist theory and praxis. In what follows, and because of their relevance to theorizing about girls' activism, I pay specific attention to the connections between girl power discourses, neoliberal feminism, and postfeminism.

Neoliberal Feminist and Postfeminist Girl Power Entanglements

My experience working in community-based programs for girls (ironically named Girl Power programs) provided me with a unique perspective of what academics have come to identify as the entanglement of neoliberalism with feminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Rottenberg, 2014). Girl power as a postfeminist concept asserts that girls can do and be anything if they just work hard and try their best (Gonick et. al, 2009; Pomerantz et. al, 2013; Taft, 2004). Critical feminist theorists argue that the idea that girls can do anything is a postfeminist idea that implies that there is no longer a need for the political action of feminism (Banet-Weiser et. al, 2020). This notion aligns with neoliberal

ideologies that allege that peoples' lives are shaped by the choices that they make as individuals (Goodkind, 2009). Yet, the reality is that intersecting and persisting systems of power, such as sexism, racism, ableism, and more, affect the choices that people can make as well as the actions that they are able to take (Hill Collins, 2017b). The disconnect between systemic forces and individualized actions can be understood by what feminist theorists critical of this separation identified as "neoliberal feminism" (Rottenberg, 2014). Neoliberal feminism asserts that "the solution to injustice is to work on the self rather than to work with others for social and political transformation (Gill, 2016, p. 617). Postfeminist discourses of girl power, therefore, are supported and enabled by neoliberal feminism; girl power is thus grounded in the idea that girls have personal responsibility to make choices that will empower them, and that the opportunities for choice are devoid of any social, cultural, or political barriers.

To elaborate further on these two distinct but related feminist perspectives, neoliberal feminism is "neoliberalism's entanglement with feminism," an entanglement which does not "critique or challenge the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism (or the media platforms that are co-constitutive with capitalism) but rather contribute to its normalisation and conceit of inevitability" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 4). Using language such as 'free choice' and 'equality', neoliberal feminism emphasizes the power and potential of individual women and girls to take control over their own lives (Goodkind, 2009). Purposefully marketed towards women and girls to encourage them to endeavour to be 'girl bosses' who have 'girl power,' neoliberal feminism hides behind the façade of 'economic empowerment' and instead works to uphold existing capitalist,

patriarchal, and colonial structures. Relatedly, postfeminism makes the assertion that gender equity has been achieved, that systems of power and oppression have been neutralized, and therefore that the need for feminism is over (Pomerantz et al., 2013; Taft, 2004). The idea that girls can do anything – even create widespread social and environmental change – on their own, with hard work, and devoid of the influence of inequitable power systems, provides a false sense of hope about what is truly possible. Postfeminist and neoliberal feminist notions of girl power assert false depictions about what girls can realistically change as they dream and work towards more equitable futures.

There is much to be learned from girls who are working to create change in their schools, communities, and beyond. What has also, emerged in the scholarly literature, is a critique of the aforementioned exceptionalism that is often tied to girls who have received wide-spread attention for their activist efforts (Benigno, 2020). A public glorification of "exceptional girls" – girls who resist oppressive systems with unrelenting "girl power" gumption – has become increasingly prevalent (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Bent, 2019; Edell et. al, 2013; Taft, 2020). For example, as a result of extensive media attention, girls such as Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg have become household names for their activist efforts within the realms of social and environmental justice. Central to the idea of exceptional girlhood is that of girls' empowerment, which relies on individual girls feeling emboldened and confident enough to take action and sometimes assume leadership in efforts toward changes that they would like to see in the world around them (Banet-Weiser, 2015).

The discourse of individual girls' empowerment presents an interesting tension that both acknowledges girls as engaged political actors while simultaneously ignoring the very systems of oppression that they are resisting (Banet-Weiser, 2020; Benigno, 2023; Harris & Dobson, 2015; Koffman & Gill, 2013; Pomerantz & Raby, 2011). Ironically, by idealizing the efforts of so-called 'empowered' individual girls, girls in general are effectively further immobilized to take collective action against the systems that shape their lives. In many ways, the attention awarded to individual girl activists makes invisible the everyday work of girls in our communities who are working to influence change and move towards socially and environmentally just worlds. Placing emphasis on the efforts of a select few detracts from the efforts and messaging of the larger collective, ultimately depoliticizing and disempowering the everyday political actions of everyday girls.

Girl Power, Can-Do Girls, and Girls Activism

Within the context of girls' social and environmental change work, neoliberal feminist and postfeminist discourses of girl power largely fall short. The logic of neoliberal feminist or postfeminist perspectives would assert that girls are able to catalyze change on their own through individual acts. These ideas have made it into the mainstream through the actualization of the can-do girl (Harris, 2004a) and by way of platforming individual "exceptional girls" (Benigno, 2023; Bent, 2020; Taft, 2020) such as Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai, both of whom have sparked global movements because of their perceived individual actions. Girl power discourses have created global waves, affected transnational girls' activism movements by catalyzing girls'

empowerment programming like *Girl Up* and *the Girl Effect* (Bent, 2013). What the platforming of exceptional girls does, however, is ignore the social, political, and cultural contexts that both support them to be considered exceptional as well as limit and make invisible the influence of other girls who may be concerned with similar social and environmental issues. As articulated earlier in this chapter, examples of the social, cultural, and political contexts that limit girls' actions while enabling exceptional girl activists within our current North American context include patriarchy, adultism, and neoliberalism. Highlighting individual exceptionalism thus disregards the patriarchal, adultist, and neoliberal barriers and challenges that those same 'exceptional' girls likely faced while working to create social and environmental change.

While the belief that people – in this case, individual girls – can have significant levels of influence on their own may be a product of the hopefulness often attributed to girls' activism, the reality of efforts towards any meaningful social and environmental change is that they often require collective political action and community solidarity. To understand social and environmental issues as political is an essential move towards justice. Social and environmental justice are inherently political concepts however both neoliberal feminism and postfeminism actively work to individualize, and through that process, depoliticize that which is intrinsically political (Benigno, 2023; Murris, 2013). This depoliticization is true for girls' activism, generally, but there are additionally diverse and nuanced experiences when considering girls' activism within a transnational context. It is important to highlight these nuances and draw attention to the varied ways

that girls can safely engage in activism, as well as to understand why their activism may or may not be considered and taken seriously.

Global Figurations of the Girl Activist

As I write this review of the literature about girls' activism while within a Canadian context, I acknowledge that the literature that I am most emersed in is that which is informed by a North American lens. Conceptualizations of girls' activism, however, have been constructed within transnational contexts and are affected by overarching understandings of race, ethnicity, and geopolitical location. While scholars writing about girls' activism have been drawing attention to these nuances in recent years (e.g., Bent, 2020a; Khoja-Moolji & Chacko, 2024), a clear example gained international attention in 2020 during the World Economic Forum in Davos when Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate was effectively cropped out of a photo that was taken of five youth climate activists who were participating in the event (Evelyn, 2020). Nakate was the only Black girl as well as the only non-European girl activist in the photo (Evelyn, 2020). The literal and symbolic erasure of Nakate from a picture that was supposedly representative of global climate activist efforts is aligned with the dismissal and erasure of the activism of girls who are not white, Western, middle-upper class, and able-bodied and able-minded more broadly (Huang & Bent, 2022; Khoja-Moolji & Chacko, 2024; Locke, 2023).

In addition to the erasure of certain girl activists from public knowledge celebration, it has been noted that some girls who engage in activism do so with greater risk to their safety. Shenila Khoja-Moolji and Mary Ann Chacko (2024), for example,

compared the experiences of Greta Thunberg and Disha Ravi, an Indian girl activist who shared a protest manual in support of farmers from the states of Punjab and Haryana. For her involvement in the farmers protests, Ravi faced state violence and multi-day detainment, outlining a stark difference between the activist experiences Ravi and Thunberg as influenced by racial and geopolitical factors (Khoja-Moolji & Chacko, 2024). Without the privilege of whiteness and colonial power to shield them, girls who are racialized or from non-Western nations face greater threats of violence for engaging in activism and demanding something different than the status quo (Locke, 2023).

The nuanced experiences of girl activists globally are further reflected when looking to girls' activism within the North American context. Ruth Nicole Brown has written about how Black girls' perspectives are often dismissed because of how Black girlhood in the United States has been constructed as characteristically "*sassy*", a term that is "akin to recent monikers of *loud*, *ghetto*, and/or *reckless*" (2013, p. 185, emphasis original). This construction of Black girlhood affects how Black girls' ideas are heard, considered, and taken seriously, because those who are listening often become fixated on how the message is shared instead of what the message is in the first place (Brown, 2013). Dismissing Black girls' perspectives in this way effectively marginalizes them from participating equitably as activists when considered alongside the experiences of white girls, for example, whose voices may be granted more weight and credibility.

While certain girl activists face marginalization, exclusion, and erasure, the academic literature has started to pay critical attention to how girls are pushing back against the systems that are suppressing their important perspectives. In what Khoja-

Moolji and Chacko (2024) have referred to as the creation of "tactical crevices" (p. 106), this includes centering the diversity of girlhood and looking to the varying ways that girls may be acting in resistance – or making a "conglomeration of small cuts" (p. 107) – to what may be considered acceptable within the white, Eurocentric status quo. Both Ruth Nicole Brown (2008, 2013) and Aria Halliday (2017) encourage girlhood studies scholars to turn to popular and hip-hop culture to better understand Black girls' joy and humanity beyond the bounds of how they are constructed as mature and sexually promiscuous. Similarly, when considering the marginalization, exclusion, and erasure of Indigenous girls, Sandrina de Finney (2014) has written about the concept of "presencing" (p. 9), or "girls' everyday acts of presence – avoiding, protecting, contesting, laughing, hoping, dreaming, connecting, documenting, imagining, challenging" (p. 11). Conceptualizing Indigenous girlhood through the lens of presencing draws critical attention to Indigenous girls' refusal to be erased, despite the best efforts of colonial power and violence (de Finney, 2014).

While this review of the literature is by no means a fulsome exploration of the global analysis of girls' activism, it nonetheless captures how conceptualizations of girls' activism are shaped by race, ethnicity, and geopolitical context. Experiences of girls' activism is entangled with political, social, cultural, and economic power. It is important to consider this broader context when thinking about how girls' activism is both perceived and received, particularly in relation to the activism of girls who are racialized and from non-Western contexts.

Conclusion

Although there has been an increased interest in girls' activism over the past decade, research in this area is partial (Kimball, 2017). Insights from girls' studies scholars help highlight that most research on girls' activism is about teenage girls, and there is still little written about how younger girls engage in activism and identify as activists. The existing literature on teenage girls' activism therefore begs the question of if the same concepts related to identity, media representations, and girl power exist amongst girls who are of younger ages, such as with girls aged 8-12 years old.

The current gaps in the scholarly literature have informed my research study questions about how young girls engage in activism. It is my hope that this study honours the important scholarship done to platform the political participation of girls, and that contributing to this body of knowledge with insights regarding girl activists of younger ages will illuminate ways that girls are creating change in their schools, communities and beyond. This summary of the literature has provided a strong foundation and jumping off point for this current study about the activism of girls between the ages of 8-12 years old. In the following chapter, I outline the theoretical framework through which I undertook this study.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Perspectives Informing This Work

My theoretical framework was informed by my community practice experience as well as my familiarity with the scholarly literature on girls' activism. Drawing from two critically oriented bodies of knowledge – critical citizenship theory and critical childhood studies – my theoretical framework aligns with my understanding of girlhood and girls' activism as inherently political experience. Below, I outline each of these theoretical perspectives as they have been explored in the scholarly literature and discuss their relevance to my research. I then identify their points of connection, weaving them together to build the framework that informed my approach to this project. Finally, I explore how this framework guided the choices that I made throughout this journey, particularly how I designed, undertook, and analyzed the findings from the study.

Critical Citizenship Theory

The idea of citizenship is typically thought of within the terms of nationality and nationhood, indicated by a sense of membership or belonging (Lister, 2007). Historically, scholarly debates about citizenship have revolved around the concepts of citizenship *rights* and citizenship *responsibilities* (Cohen, 2005; Larkins, 2014). The civic, political, and social claims that are typically awarded to citizens by way of official citizenship legislation, which in Canada includes the right to vote, can be understood as a citizenship right (Cohen, 2005; Isin, 2008). Choosing to vote is an example of citizenship *responsibility*, or what one might expect to be considered a good citizen but is not legislated (Lister, 2007). In the mid- to late-twentieth century, however, critical citizenship studies scholars began to note the inequitable application of these rights and

responsibilities when considering lived experiences of difference. In other words, when thinking about citizenship while considering categories of difference, it is evident that different people experience citizenship differently.

Critical perspectives on citizenship were first raised by anti-racist and feminist scholars who questioned notions of equitable citizenship for women, racialized, and Indigenous people (Larkins, 2014; Lister, 2007; Roche, 1999). These critical analyses asked how citizenship may be experienced differently based on gender, race, sexuality, ability, and nationhood status. Jeremy Roche (1999) developed a helpful framework for thinking through the nuances of citizenship by drawing on T.H. Marshall's citizenship theorizing, ultimately distilling the idea of citizenship into three categories: the civic, the social, and the political. An equitable and inclusive model of citizenship, Roche (1999) argued, would balance and hold all three citizenship categories in equal weight. To maintain the political dimension of citizenship, such as the right to vote in democratic electoral process, one must also have social citizenship, including access to power and resources to influence decision making (Roche, 1999). Political and social citizenship are contingent on the stability of civic structures, such as legislation ensuring liberty to freedom of speech. Civic, social, and political dimensions of citizenship therefore rely on each other to offer equitable experiences of citizenship.

More recently, critical analysis of citizenship has expanded beyond considerations of gender, race, sexuality, ability, and nationhood status to also include analysis of how experiences of citizenship may be affected by age. In Canada, for example, children have very little access to social capital. As Canadian society privileges the knowledge of adults

over the knowledge of children, evinced by the fact that most of the decision-making power is granted to adults, children are often not able to influence the decisions made that impact their lives. Additionally, many children in Canada may have citizenship because of civic legislation related to nationhood status but are not granted the full rights of political citizenship such as the right to vote until they reach 18 years of age. Critically analyzing citizenship from a difference-centred perspective therefore creates opportunities to explore how citizenship, broadly, and children's citizenship, specifically, is heavily influenced by social structures and societal values at large (Lister, 2007; Moosa-Mitha, 2005).

To adequately understand children's unique experiences of citizenship, it is important to take "difference-centered, relational approaches to children's citizenship, that recognize and value children's practices and differences" (Larkins, 2014, p. 8). Within the context of this study about girls' activism, this points to the importance of "centering the ways in which girls may be practicing citizenship differently and outside of or beyond traditional citizenship structures" (Bernier, 2024, p. 119). There is very little written, however, about how different children may experience citizenship differently. The following theoretical initial analysis about children's citizenship is therefore exclusive of gender, race, or ability, which reflects the current state of the literature. By drawing on the literature on children's citizenship, I explicate the various ways in which children are discouraged from participating equitably as citizens within structures and systems that have been effectively designed only for the full participation of adults.

Conceptualizing Children's Citizenship

Canada ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1991, which outlines specific rights that ought to be granted to children. The UNCRC recognizes and asserts "children's rights to participate, supporting and being supported by understandings of children as social actors within their families, communities and society at large" (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022, p. 792). Most children in Canada have citizenship that is therefore accompanied by a specific set of children's rights, which includes concepts such as the right to food, clothing, a safe place to live, play and rest, an identity, healthcare, and education (UN, 1989). Article 12 of the UNCRC also specifically outlines children's right to freely express their views and have the opportunity to be heard in any "judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child" (UN, 1989, p. 4). In the child-friendly version of the UNCRC published by UNICEF, Article 12 is described as the right to "give your opinion, and for adults to listen and take it seriously" (UNICEF, n.d.). Article 12 could therefore be broadly understood as the right of children to have a say in matters that impact their lives, which is centrally important to accessing social and political aspects of citizenship.

While the UNCRC has advocated for the recognition of the rights of children, there has been little done to accommodate for the different ways that children might choose and be able to participate socially, cultural, and politically outside of traditional citizenship structures (Tisdall & Ceuvas-Parra, 2022). Although most children are "assumed to be citizens – they hold passports and except in the rarest of cases receive at least one nationality at birth" (Cohen, 2005, p. 221), children are at the same time denied

full citizenship rights. Both Cohen (2005, p. 222) and Lister (2007, p. 717) refer to this denial of full citizenship rights as "semi-citizenship", illustrating that children are not awarded the same set of rights as adults despite their citizenship status. There are varied ways in which children are able, or not able, to claim their full citizenship rights (Lister, 2007; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022), or what Percy-Smith (2015) refers to as participation. Modes of participation remain primarily reserved for adults, meaning that experiences of full citizenship are largely inaccessible and unreachable to children (Lister, 2007; Thorne, 1987). Children are instead left to participate in systems that are not designed for them, navigating structures that are meant to facilitate and cater to the participation needs of adults.

Children's Participation in Adult Systems

Within Roche's (1999) terms, there are significant gaps in the civic and social aspects of children's citizenship when considering children's participation. To articulate these gaps, Bernier (2024, p. 12) explains that

> when we think plainly about the rights and responsibilities of children, we can see, for example, that children are not able to conclude legal contracts, their speech is heavily surveilled, and they are not granted autonomy or choice in many aspects of their lives – often including over their own bodies.

Moving away from a static definition of citizenship, therefore, and instead towards an understanding of citizenship as dynamic, evolving, and requiring participation, frames citizenship within the terms of process and action (Percy-Smith, 2015). Citizenship, when framed in this way, is not just a status. Citizenship can also be understood as a process (Lister, 2007; Percy-Smith, 2015; Isin, 2008, 2013).

For many citizenship scholars, the notion of participation has come to be thought of within the terms of "active citizenship" (Cohen, 2005; Lister, 2007; Percy-Smith, 2015). Active citizenship refers to the "avenues…to which most adults gain access through their civil and political rights" (Cohen, 2005, p. 227). This idea of active citizenship has also been critiqued by critical citizenship scholars, however, with the poignant note that a requirement for active citizenship is that one must first be considered a citizen (Isin, 2008, 2013; Larkins, 2014; Lister, 2007). It is not possible to be an active citizen without full citizenship status. For children, who are instead considered in many ways to be semi-citizens (Cohen, 2005; Lister, 2007), active citizenship is therefore not possible. Children cannot participate as active citizens because the scripts of traditional citizenship were not written for them (Larkins, 2014; Isin, 2008; 2014). Children are instead left to participate in creative and often invisible ways, writing their own citizenship scripts that are rendered largely invisible to adults. Left to assert themselves as citizens in ways that may otherwise be considered unconventional, children create their own avenues of participation when given no alternate choices within traditional citizenship systems (Larkins, 2014; Roche, 1999; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022). For some children, this creative participation manifests itself as activism, a way to subvert traditional citizenship structures and claim their right to have a say in matters that affect their lives.

Children's Activism as Citizenship

Activism is typically thought of in terms of highly public actions such as protests, strikes, petitions, and sit ins (Larkins, 2014). In addition to these more obvious forms of

activism, however, contemporary scholarly literature states that activism can more inclusively encompass a broad range of revolutionary actions such as community service and care (Larkins, 2014; Lister, 2007). For children, these actions may include initiating litter clean-up programs at their schools, speaking in support of their friends who are of diverse genders or disabled, or joining online communities related to social or environmental issues that they feel passionate about. By challenging where and how activism can happen, children are able to also challenge the power dynamics inherent to traditional citizenship structures that privilege adult participation. Engaging in activism is one way that children can disrupt the power structures that otherwise silence them. Children who engage in activism are effectively declaring that they are citizens, they belong, and that they both have something to say, and a right to be heard.

To assert their right to voice their opinions on matters that affect their lives, children may engage in nontraditional participation practices to subvert traditional citizenship structures. The ways in which children are able to participate, however, even by means of activism, is additionally affected by how childhood has been constructed. The construction of childhood affects how children are perceived, which further influences whether and how they are able to meaningfully share their opinions or contribute to decisions that affect their lives. It is therefore important to simultaneously critically consider the construction of childhood as a factor that affects children's citizenship, an idea that has been explored in depth within the field of critical childhood studies.

Critical Childhood Studies

Over the past three decades, the interdisciplinary field of critical childhood studies has emerged and grown in response to child development paradigms that previously dominated scholarship about children (James & Prout, 2015; Tisdall, 2012; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). As outlined by Tisdall (2012) in writings about the state of childhood studies in the 1980s and 1990s, "older theories, such as Parson's socialization theory and Piagetian child development, were criticized as presenting adults as mature, rational and competent, whereas children were viewed as 'less than fully human, unfinished or incomplete'" (p. 182). Childhood studies scholars started to recognize how conceptualizations of childhood were dependent on the absence of adulthood (Tisdall, 2012), and thus, were tandemly constructed and reified. It was through this critical analysis of child development that the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies was ultimately born, acknowledging that childhood is a social construction not necessarily attributed to development (Tisdall, 2012).

With roots in sociological thought, and heavily influenced by concepts of social constructionism, childhood studies thus recognizes that childhood is socially, geographically, and politically constructed (Bernstein, 2011; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Garlen, 2019; James & Prout, 2015; Lister, 2007; Meyer, 2007; Robinson, 2008, 2012; Walton, 2021). In other words, childhood means different things to different people at different times. Along with centering the constructed nature of childhood, the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies also looks to better understand how this construction affects the lived experiences of children, with particular attention paid to

children's participation, agency, and rights (James & Prout, 2015; Tisdall, 2012; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). A key part of the evolution of childhood studies has been the development of theoretical concepts that recognize and articulate children's experiences of difference and exclusion. Of most theoretical relevance to my understanding of girls' activism are the concepts of childism, the construction of childhood innocence, and how childhood innocence often operates as an exclusionary practice. It is additionally important to recognize, however, that without an intersectional approach, conceptualizations of childhood become sanitized and homogenized: only de facto male, white, middle-class, straight, and able-bodied understandings of childhood remain. In what follows, I thus also integrate an intersectional feminist analysis into my theoretical conceptualization of girls' activism.

Childism

I came to this doctoral program with a critical perspective of how the knowledge and experiences of children and young people are understood and treated when compared to that of adults. In the community programs in which I worked with girls, we would often speak with girls and adult women alike about the concept of adultism, which refers to the "prejudiced assumptions which underpin and legitimize adult control over the young" (Smith, 2024, p. 228), and implies an "adult position which is implicit, invisible, and thus naturalized" (Sundhall, 2017, p. 164). Adultism can be understood as the power imbalance that exists between adults and children, a power imbalance that is rarely questioned or subverted (Bell, 1995). The concept of adultism was relevant to our work in the community because the programs were predicated on the idea that women and girls

could act in solidarity as peers, which required the active deconstruction of adultist beliefs and values that regarded them as distinct groups and positioned adult women as having power over girls. Within the context of those programs, questioning adultism meant questioning whose knowledge we valued most and why. The adult women volunteers and staff in the programs were asked and trained to think critically about where they were asserting their power as adults, including in conversations and activities with girl participants, and we had ongoing conversations about how to challenge our internalized adultist biases (Winstanley & Bernier, 2022). Adultism, however, is only one part of a network of larger societal systems that oppress young people (Wall, 2022). Directly linked to the idea of adultism is "childism", a term that encourages thinking about the marginalization of children across social, cultural, and political dimensions (Adami, 2024; Biswas et al., 2024; Sundhall, 2017; Wall, 2022, Young-Bruehl, 2012).

Childism is a relatively new concept in childhood studies literature, and there are some discrepancies between how the relationship between adultism and childism has been articulated. Rebecca Adami, for example, refers to childism as "the discursive practices that uphold adult norms and supremacy" (2024, p. 13), and Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (2012, 2013) likens childism to other forms of discrimination and prejudice such as sexism, racism, and classism. Conversely, John Wall (2008, 2010, 2022), Tanu Biswas (2020, 2021, 2023) and Jeanette Sundhall (2017) have written about childism as a theoretical concept that creates opportunities for transformational thinking about children and childhood differently. In this way, the relationship between adultism and childism can be likened to that of sexism and feminism, or racism and anti-racism (Biswas & Wall,

2023; Wall, 2008, 2022). For the purposes of my research, I chose to follow the work of Wall, Biswas and Sundhall that effectively offers the concept of childism as a social, cultural, and political response to adultism. This perspective is best aligned with my pursuit of justice-oriented research and scholarship in that the version of childism offered by Wall, Biswas, and Sundall both recognizes that children are marginalized based on age while simultaneously asserting that better futures for children are possible.

One of the foundational tenants of a childist theoretical framework is the understanding that children are widely considered to be inferior when compared to adults in all social, cultural, and political aspects of daily life and society more broadly. This inferiority is buttressed by the social and binary construction of child/childhood and adult/adulthood, which are "culturally established, structurally framed, socially negotiated, and normatively re-produced in symbolic interactions" (Smith, 2024, p. 126). By this it is meant that children and adults are seen as binary opposites, and this binary delineation is upheld and reproduced by and through social, cultural, and political systems. While there are many reasons why this binary relationship has been established, the two most salient to my research are those related to constructed concepts of linear development and pervading discourses of childhood innocence.

The constructed concept of linear development is fundamentally rooted in the idea that children are expected to develop in specific ways to their age and, in this way, are framed as "becomings" rather than fully formed "beings" (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Uprichard, 2008). In Canada, for example, a child is understood to be anybody under the age of 18 years old (Government of Canada, 2017), while an adult is anybody 18 years of

age or older. On the basis of age, there exists a solid demarcated line separating childhood from adulthood. It has thus become logical and natural to understand adulthood as the absence of childhood and vice versa; to be an adult is to not be a child, and to be a child is not to be an adult. What is particularly unique and interesting about the adult/child binary, however, is the additional expectation that children will eventually *become* adults as they age through a linear trajectory throughout the lifespan.

While there are many reasons why this assumed linear developmental trajectory is both inaccurate and harmful, such as the belief that the ideal adulthood achievable is that of the White, able-bodied male (Cannella & Viruru, 2004), particularly concerning are the ways in which Western societies have worked to actively facilitate and impose this linear child development. To reinforce the adult/child binary, there are certain traits that society has constructed as inherent to childhood (such as innocence) that are understood to be the responsibility of the adults in power to maintain (Robinson, 2012). If children do not follow this linear developmental trajectory enforced by adults, it is believed that there is a risk of innocence – and, therefore, of childhood – being lost. The idea that innocence could be lost if children are exposed to knowledge and experiences that we interpret as being for "adults only" (Robinson, 2008, p. 121) means that a significant amount of sociopolitical capital is spent enforcing Western hegemonic childhood. The construct of developmental linearity ultimately serves as a tool to control the knowledge, actions and experiences of children (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Robinson, 2008, 2012). Adults are only in power if children have none. What is considered to constitute this hegemonic childhood, however, is conflated with and supported by various discourses surrounding

Western childhood such as childhood innocence, a concept that is contextually relevant for understanding girls' activism and citizenship.

Childhood Innocence

The discourse of childhood innocence is now perhaps the most prominent discourse surrounding contemporary Western childhood (Garlen, 2019; Robinson, 2012). Throughout the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period otherwise referred to as the Enlightenment Era, childhood became synonymized with the "sentimental angel child" (Bernstein, 2012, p. 38) and the child was henceforth considered to be inherently naturally wonderous, wide eyed and innocent (Garlen, 2019). Children were additionally constructed as something delicate, precious, and in need of constant protection. The maintenance of this childhood innocence included – and continues to include – the constant monitoring of experiences and knowledge determined to be developmentally appropriate for children or reserved for adults (Bernstein, 2011; Coulter, 2014; Garlen, 2019; Meyer, 2007; Robinson, 2012).

There are important connections evident here between the discourse of childhood innocence and children's perceived knowledge and experience, or lack thereof (Berman & Stacey, 2010). It is not as simple as saying that children know less because they have had less time on earth to gather knowledge and experience, or that only some knowledge is 'developmentally appropriate,' but rather that children *must* know less in order to maintain their childlike innocence (Bernstein, 2011). As Kerry Robinson (2008, p. 121) writes, "…the binary power relationship between adult and child, combined with other discourses of the child and developmentalist perspectives, has underpinned the

construction of certain knowledge as for 'adults only.'" Enforcing the belief that children must be kept innocent means that children are often kept from being shown or taught about certain topics, such as sex, sexuality, gender identity, violence, and war (Robinson, 2008, 2012) and excluded from conversations about serious issues that impact their lives, such as social and environmental justice issues (Garlen, 2019). There is an active relationship between the absence of what is considered adult knowledge and childhood innocence. Individual adults, as well as the institutions and systems that they comprise, make concerted efforts to protect children from knowledge and experiences that might jeopardize their childhoods. Maintaining childhood innocence has become the ultimate Western social, cultural, political project.

Within the context of children's activism and citizenship, the enforcement of constructed childhood innocence means that children are often discouraged from participating in, or actively excluded from, conversations and decision-making processes about issues that affect their lives (Raby & Raddon, 2013). Resting on the belief that children do not (and must not) have valid knowledge – experiential or political – to participate in the political world, children are not granted opportunities to participate equitably as citizens in the same way that adults are (Raby & Raddon, 2013; Wyness et al., 2004). In this sense, the enforcement and maintenance of children's innocence by way of controlling which knowledge and experiences children have access to simultaneously serves as justification for actively excluding them from participating as citizens. Despite Article 12 in the UNCRC, which asserts children's right to participation, these rights are not often upheld because of the subordination of children. Children are excluded from

participating equitably as citizens in due part because of the differences in age-based power between adults and children (Raby & Raddon, 2013; Sundhall, 2017; Wyness et al., 2004).

As illustrated in both explorations of constructed developmental linearity and childhood innocence, the binary relationship between children and adults underpins the entirety of Western adultist society. This binary, reinforced by social, cultural, and political structures and practices, ultimately serves to intentionally position children as inferior to adults and to maintain their subordination. Childism, therefore, is a helpful theoretical framework for thinking and dreaming about the transformative changes needed to create more equitable futures for children. As articulated by Wall (2022, p. 260),

> Childism focuses on transforming understandings and practices, not just around children themselves, or even around child–adult inter-generationality, but also around the pervasive normative assumptions that ground scholarship and societies overall. It suggests, in a similar way to recent forms of feminism, that the more fundamental problem for children and youth is not just how children and youth themselves are understood and related to, but also the social and political foundations on which children's lives and experiences are already imagined and pre-constructed. Social understandings and practices have historically been dominated by adults and adult points of view, leaving the entire edifice of human societies, cultures, language, rights, law, relationships, narratives, and norms built upon a powerful bedrock of adultism. It is this broader and more systemic problem to which childism makes a response.

Childism offers both a lens for understanding the ways children are socially excluded on the basis of age (Wall, 2019), as well as a tool for escaping "the dominance of adult norms" (Sundhall, 2017, p. 165). This is particularly important within the context of this research, specifically as adult norms and the subordination of children affect our understandings of citizenship, participation, and resistance (Biswas & Mattheis, 2022).

Exploring the activism of young girls through the lens of childism created opportunities for me to meaningfully center children in the research by first challenging my own adultist biases and assumed expert adult knowledge. Intentionally questioning and deconstructing the notion that I know the most or the best simply because of my adulthood enabled me, as a researcher, to instead work to center the knowledge and perspectives of the girls who participated in this study (Josefsson & Wall, 2020). What a childist theoretical framework does not necessarily account for, however, are the nuances of lived experiences of children of varied identities. For example, childism does not consider how childhood is affected by gender, race, nationhood, disability, class, or sexuality, which ultimately exacerbates experiences of social exclusion (Adami & Dineen, 2021). While childism offers theoretical tools to challenge adultism, it was vitally important for me to also turn to intersectional feminism to facilitate thinking about the diverse identifies, experiences, and lives of children.

Intersectionality

Without the intentional integration of a childist analysis with intersectional feminist theory, hegemonic conceptualizations of childhood remain white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, and male (Bernstein, 2011; Burman & Stacey, 2010; Garlen, 2019; Stienstra, 2015; Taefi, 2009; Walton, 2021). When girls – particularly racialized, poor, disabled, trans, or queer girls – are not included in normative conceptualizations of childhood, understandings of girlhood and the lived experiences of girls are pushed further to the margins. Working to center girlhood through a childist and intersectional feminist theoretical framework, therefore, creates opportunities to make explicit the

infinitely diverse lived experiences of young girlhood. An intersectional feminist analysis, which is a critical theoretical perspective, has the potential to articulate the reality that girlhood is constitutively constructed alongside the broader discourses surrounding childhood, such as discourses of childhood innocence, that shape our social, cultural, and political worlds. Acknowledging and naming the intersecting axes of power and oppression that influence girlhood is important for better understanding the diversity of girls and the ways this diversity plays in role in which girls are or are not able to participate equitably as citizens and why.

Age has historically been ignored by feminist scholars as an axis of identity in intersectional feminist theorizing (Burman & Stacey, 2010; Taefi, 2009; Wall, 2022). At the same time, much of the childhood studies and childism literature takes a gender-neutral approach in theorizing childhood (Taefi, 2009). Erica Burman and Jackie Stacey (2010) explain some of the primary reasons for the general absence of integration between childism and feminism, writing that feminists were historically concerned with garnering women's recognition as whole, individual subjects separate from their perceived natural attachment to children and childrearing. It was essential for women to gain status as whole people without their inherent worth being tied to children, childrearing, and domesticity (Burman & Stacey, 2010). Recent years have seen a shift, however, and feminist scholars have started to consider childhood in their theorizing, most often in relation to the study of girlhood. Although this is a promising development, Sandrina de Finney and colleagues (2011) point out that much of the feminist theorizing positions girls as *becoming* women, aligned with critical childhood scholars' critiques of

the tendency to perceive children as *becoming* adults (Coulter, 2014; Wall, 2022; Walton, 2021). When children are considered as "'becomings', not 'beings', as 'persons in the making', not 'persons'" (Murris, 2013, p. 254), their present-day experiences and realities are dismissed and they are theorized to be incomplete and incompetent humans until they reach completeness and competency, which is typically equated with adulthood (Uprichard, 2008).

Although not all childhood studies scholarship makes explicit reference to other axes of identity beyond age, critical childhood studies scholars tend to honour children as socially constructed agents (James & Prout, 2015). This perspective, coupled with intersectionality, creates opportunities to better understand how childhood has been historically and contemporarily constructed along a multiplicity of micro and macro axes of power in relation to competing constructs, such as childhood innocence. It is necessary to recognize and centre girls as whole people, while simultaneously acknowledging their positionality as children who are affected by intersecting systems of power and oppression.

As articulated by Black feminist scholars, micro and macro axes of social power greatly affect the lived experiences of people (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2006). While these theorizations have not typically been extended to consider children, it is apparent to me that an intersectional feminist approach to better understanding the experiences of girls who engage in activism is relevant because of the complexity and diversity of girls' lives. It is true, of course, that children have different lived experiences because of their identities and macro axes of power (Bernstein, 2011;

Epstein et al., 2017; Wall, 2020). In particular, and in relation to the construct of childhood innocence, lived experiences of childhood are not universal and are instead constitutively entangled with intersecting micro and macro axes of social power. For example, some childhoods are deemed more worthy of protection than others from entities that may corrupt their innocence, as some childhoods are considered to be more representative of inherent innocence than others (Bernstein, 2011; Epstein et al., 2017; Garlen, 2019; Robinson, 2008; Taft, 2011). There are significant tensions and nuances within the construction of childhood as they relate to intersecting micro and macro axes of social power, which is an important consideration when thinking about the ways that girls are both able to engage in social and environmental change work, as well as how they are able to meaningfully influence change.

To concretize this idea of the nuanced and complex nature of childhood, I draw from scholarship that has explored the historical experiences of Black children in the Americas. Long before the period of Enlightenment, innocence as a concept has been historically linked to whiteness (Robinson, 2012) and has ultimately been constructed as a mechanism of white supremacy (Walton, 2021). Robin Bernstein (2011) writes about how Black childhoods in the United States have come to be constructed and understood based on the historical agendas of slavery. One of the primary justifications of slavery on behalf of white slave owners was rooted in falsified ideas that Black people did not experience pain and suffering to the same extent that white people did (Bernstein, 2011). Black children were sent to labour as slaves while white children were contrastingly considered too delicate to engage in such work. The justification of the labour of Black

children hinged on the notion that they did not feel pain or suffering, contributed to the construction of Black children "as deviant or as adult 'laborers' and, consequently, as 'nonchildren', or 'pickaninnies'" (Bernstein, 2011, p. 34). Black children, also considered to have had too much exposure to experiences and knowledge typically reserved for adults, were also henceforth considered to be potentially corruptive to white children. White children and their innocence were to be protected from Black children at all costs. In many ways, "Innocence had become the exclusive property of the vulnerable white child, while the pain-free pickaninny was exiled from innocence and with it, from childhood - and humanity" (Bernstein, 2011, p. 68).

Along with social identities associated with class and race, both of which are linked to capitalism, white supremacy, and colonialism, constructions of childhood are also intricately entangled with systems of patriarchy and gendered social identities. Enlightenment era philosophers in both Europe and colonized North America were inspired and informed by Christian puritan religiosity (Bernstein, 2011; Garlen, 2019; Robinson, 2008), and with the dominance of Christian ideology came ideas about sexual purity. As a patriarchal, misogynist religious ideology, this sexual purity encouraged by Christianity was meant to be maintained by women, and ideal womanhood was signified by submissiveness, domesticity, sexual purity, and a general lack of passion (Bernstein, 2011. The ultimate representation of womanhood was one that depicted asexuality. This depiction is of course not what we know real women to be. In this time period, women were at the very least expected to have sex with their husbands. The expectation of sexual purity was thus downloaded onto girl children, who were assumed to not be engaging in

sex (Bernstein, 2011). Girls became symbolic of a complete state of purity, devoid of all sexual desire, and therefore, sexually innocent (Bernstein, 2011; Robinson, 2012). As poignantly written by Bernstein (2011, p. 63): "In the second half of the nineteenth century, white childhood, and especially white girlhood, became laminated to the idea of innocence". Girls, and white, middle-class, Christian girlhood, became the pinnacle representation of constructed childhood innocence (Bernstein, 2011; Cook, 2004; Robinson, 2012; Walton, 2021).

While the constructed nature of childhood that I have written about thus far has been informed by and rooted in historical accounts, these histories present significant ramifications for our understandings of childhood today. The conflation of girlhood with childhood innocence, specifically white, middle- and upper-class, Christian girlhoods, is still evident in the "moral panic" (Robinson, 2008, p. 113) that erupts every time girls might be exposed to information deemed potentially corruptive, such as that related to sex and sexuality (Coulter, 2014; Garlen, 2019; Robinson, 2008, 2012). This panic is particularly true for disabled girls. Sandrina de Finney and colleagues (2011) as well as Deborah Stienstra (2015) articulate how disabled girls are often treated as infantile, asexual, and considered so inherently innocent that they are shielded from all knowledge and experiences that adults deem to be too mature for them.

Interrogating how discourses of childhood innocence are interwoven with multiple axes of social power and identity is an essential exercise for better understanding the complex and nuanced nature of childhood. It would also be impossible in this dissertation to explicate the infinite ways that diverse childhoods are affected by systems of white

supremacy, colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism, and ableism. What this brief intersectional feminist analysis of childhood has instead done is deconstruct the notion that there is a universal childhood. Childhoods are experienced differently based on gender, class, race, and ability, all of which affect how and to what degree those childhoods are considered to be innocent or deserving of rights. White, middle-class girlhood has become the quintessential representation of childhood innocence, thereby denying "the shelter of innocence to the Black/brown/indigenous/migrant/disabled/queer child who is, by proxy, marked as risky" (Walton, 2021, p.338). It is essential, therefore, to integrate the theoretical concept of childism with that of intersectionality to understand the experiences of young girls who are engaged in social and environmental change work. Centering girls, in all their complexities, requires deep analysis that considers the many systems of power that they must navigate when trying to influence change in their schools, communities, and beyond.

A Critical Childhood Citizenship Framework

When thinking about how critical childhood studies may be operationalized within the context of citizenship and activism, it is helpful to think about where, when, and how children have opportunities to participate in decision-making. Although most children, as noted earlier in this chapter, are "assumed to be citizens – they hold passports and except in the rarest of cases receive at least one nationality at birth" (Cohen, 2005, p. 221) – it is also true that they are denied full citizenship rights. As children are not granted full citizenship status, their political needs and interests become the responsibility of the adults in their lives. Adults are ultimately entrusted to make decisions that are in the best

political interests of their children (Cohen, 2005). The best interests of children, however, are not always aligned with the best interests of adults (Cohen, 2005; Roche, 1999). When looking at climate policy, for example, the best interests of children and adults are not necessarily the same. While we would all benefit greatly from swift and drastic actions against climate change, studies show that children are the most affected by its impacts (UNICEF, 2021). Despite this knowledge, adults continue to block meaningful climate action because it is contradictory to their own best interests. In Alberta, where I am from, there is significant resistance led by adults in response to notions of a just transition, which would require a shift away from reliance on the oil and gas sector and ~~instead~~ towards renewable energy sources. Adults often cite concern over an increase in taxes for a carbon tax, or the expense that may come with additional training required for a change in career. The best interests of children often clash with the best interests of adults, but the full citizenship status of adults allows for them to dominate both conversations and policy decisions.

Cohen (2005) writes that the dominance of adult decision-making power in citizenship spaces also negates that fact the children have their own political needs and interests *now*, not just political needs and interests of the future. The decision to grant citizenship rights to children only when they reach adulthood, however, is rooted in broader ideas that have been constructed around the capacity, rationality, competency, and knowledge of children (Cohen, 2005; Larkins, 2014; Lister, 2007; Percy-Smith, 2015; Roche, 1999). To illustrate this point, Robinson (2012c, p. 30) writes:

> Children's production of knowledge has been dismissed and disqualified as local and naïve and unsophisticated. Children's knowledge has been subjugated through

> Western scientific discourses, such as philosophy and psychology, that have given credence to the authenticity of mature adult knowledge and experiences as rational and logical, over the perceived irrationality and naivety of children and young people.

While the constructed developmental linearity of childhood suggests that children are less cognitively developed than adults, which in turn contributes to assumptions that children are inherently more emotional and irrational, the discourse of childhood innocence additionally impacts the ways that children can engage as citizens.

The dismissal of children's knowledge, generally, and within the context of citizenship, specifically, makes it clear that certain knowledges and knowledge holders can be marginalized and excluded on the basis of identity (Fricker, 2007). This phenomenon, in which there is "injustice done to an individual in their capacity as a knower and transmitter of knowledge (Baumtrog, 2018, p. 294) has been identified by critical philosophers as "epistemic injustice" (eg., Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013; Murris, 2013). Through this lens of epistemic injustice, it becomes apparent that when analyzed from an intersectional perspective, exclusion can also be epistemological. In childhood, for example, children are often considered to be inferior because of what they are presumed not to know; they are believed to know less because they have been living for a shorter amount of time, with less time to acquire knowledge (Burroughs & Tollefsen, 2016). A compounding factor is that under the guise of constructed childhood innocence they are also shielded from knowledge that has been deemed to be too adult for them (Robinson, 2012). The knowledge they do have is not recognized as legitimate as it is not 'adult' knowledge. This supposed lack of legitimate knowledge results in children being considered generally incapable and incompetent to make decisions that impact their lives

(Cohen, 2005; Lister, 2007; Percy-Smith, 2015). The epistemological injustice faced by children dramatically affects how they can move through and influence the world around them (Cohen, 2005; Lister, 2007).

Black feminist activists and scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins have done much of the heavy intellectual lifting when thinking about how this type of epistemological injustice impacts the lives of people at the margins. It is the knowledge that is considered to be of the highest legitimacy and value that defines "disciplines of power" (2019, p. 287), meaning that the most privileged and powerful perspectives shape which knowledge we ultimately consider to be the truth, or the most truthful. While Hill Collins has not written specifically about children or girls, the conclusion can be made from her other writing about knowledge hierarchies that for those who have little power, such as girls, their knowledge is thus widely considered to be less-than or nonexistent. An intersectional analysis is further useful for conceptualizing girls' activism, therefore, because it allows us to disrupt what we might traditionally consider to be valid knowledge, presenting opportunities to create a more robust, fulsome understanding of knowledge in multiplicity (Hill Collins, 2017a, 2019).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined my theoretical framework, which includes the weaving together of concepts from critical citizenship theory and critical childhood studies. In this process, I also actively acknowledge my positionality as an adult doing research with children and take this as an opportunity to challenge the subsequent power that I hold in these relationships because of systemic adultism. As articulated when

exploring the concepts of adultism and childism, this power exists across social, cultural, and political realms, including in the politics of knowing. Particularly as it pertains to the social and environmental change work of young girls, I knew as I undertook this project that it would be vital for me to work to decenter myself, as an adult, and intentionally center the lived experiences and knowledge of the girls who engaged in this research with me. The critical reflexivity that I practiced as a community social worker extended into my work as a researcher on this project, and I take seriously the responsibility to continue thinking critically about and challenging the assumed power that is often given to me simply because I am an adult. I recognize too that the power that I hold as an adult and as a researcher was essential not just for the doing of this project, but also for the knowledge that was subsequently produced through it and will be shared more broadly.

Just as my positionality influences the ways that I engage in work and research with young people, it simultaneously affects the ways that young people engage with me. The weaving together of concepts from critical citizenship theory and critical childhood studies for this project was not just a philosophical choice, therefore, but an ethical one. To engage in ethical research with young people with diverse identities, lived experiences, and knowledge requires ongoing critical reflexivity that challenges the assumption that I am the holder of more valid knowledge simply because of my positionality as an adult. My theoretical choices for this research study served as a constant reminder to challenge myself, my internalized adultism, and to think intentionally about whose knowledge I valued more weightily and why. These theoretical

orientations informed the choices that I made throughout the course of this project, the principles of which are woven throughout the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

Chapter 4: What I Did in This Study and Why

In this chapter, I share the decisions made about my study design and methodology, as well as describe the steps taken throughout the data collection and analysis processes. I articulate how my study design aligns with my theoretical framework, writing about the choices made to root this study in a methodological framework that integrated tenants from feminist participatory action and arts-based research. My recruitment methods and data collection procedures follow my discussion on methodology. I follow this with participant demographic data as well as short, descriptive vignettes about each participant. I conclude this chapter by sharing my approach to data analysis.

Methodology

In my research I blended methodologies of feminist participatory action and arts-based research, seeking to mediate power structures that typically exist between adults and children, researchers and participants, while also honouring diverse ways of thinking, doing, and knowing.

Feminist Participatory Action Research

Feminist participatory action research (FPAR) considers the experiences of women and girls as valid knowledge, recognizes the impact that sexism has had on their lived experiences, and draws attention to how relations of power are embedded in everyday interactions (Reid & Frisby, 2008; Shimei & Lavie-Ajayi, 2022; Yoshihama & Carr, 2002). Reid and Frisby (2008) write that the primary dimensions of FPAR include: 1) centering the lived experiences of women and gender diverse people while also

challenging patriarchy; 2) thinking and working from an intersectional feminist perspective; 3) honouring difference; 4) practicing reflexivity; and 5) taking action, with the understanding that this action might take a diversity of forms. FPAR processes therefore work to center the lived experiences and knowledge of those who have traditionally been pushed to the margins, including women and girls who have experienced further oppression on the multiple intersecting axes of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, nationhood status, and more (Wheeler et. al, 2020). An FPAR methodology is particularly relevant for centering the knowledge and experiences of girls, as central to my research are questions about the marginalization that girls face based on age and gender.

FPAR calls for democratic inquiry and intentional attention paid to power structures inherent within traditional researcher-participant relationships (Reid et. al, 2006; Reid & Frisby, 2008; Shimei & Lavie-Ajayi, 2022). Democratic inquiry aims to challenge the notion of knowledge hierarchies and expertise with the primary belief that all people have valid and important knowledge to share (Glass & Newman, 2015). Within the context of this study, and as conceptually explored in chapter three, this is particularly relevant for thinking about the knowledge hierarchies that typically exist between adults and children. The "participatory action" aspect of FPAR additionally asserts the importance of girls and women's active involvement in research because "…those who have experienced historic oppression…hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences and should help shape the questions [and] frame the interpretations [of research]" (Cahill, 2007, p. 298); their inclusion also challenges and flattens existing

power hierarchies like those that exist between adults and youth (Yoshima & Summerson Carr, 2002).

Although power imbalances between the researcher and participants in the research process cannot be fully eradicated, I integrated the tenants of FPAR to minimize and address this imbalance. Throughout the design and data collection processes for this research project, I thought intentionally about the ways in which I might be perpetuating adultist ideals or making assumptions about what the participants could and could not do based on their age. Considering the challenges of designing a research project with children that was participatory from start to finish, I instead aimed to integrate tenants of FPAR that centred their ideas, incorporated their suggestions and feedback where reasonable to do so, and honoured the different ways in which they were able to participate. Working collaboratively with girls throughout the research process and creating opportunities for them to participate and shape the research project, such as through an iterative process of developing the focus group guide and allowing participants to choose which questions to answer through their art-making processes, was an important exercise for me and benefitted this research project in being both a means of sharing power and a way of working to better ensure that they were taking on roles that were appropriate and meaningful to them. Guided by these core tenants of FPAR, I also aimed to be methodologically flexible to accommodate for the many ways that participants could engage with the study.

Arts-Based Methodologies

The integration of arts-based methodologies into my research design served as a mechanism to further address the power differentials between adults and girls, as well as to honour the multiple ways in which the participants may have and share knowledge (Mand, 2012). Due to the complex and nuanced ways that girlhood is constructed in an adult-centred world, girls do not experience the world in the same ways that adults do (Driessnack & Furukawa, 2011). These differences in lived experiences inform different types of knowledge, or different epistemologies, pointing to a need to use research methodologies that can make space for, support, and platform these varied types of knowledge. As an adult doing research with girls, de-centering my own adultist lens to center the lived experience and knowledge of girls, while simultaneously recognizing the limits to de-centering my identity as an adult, thus required the use of creative methodologies.

While arts-based methodologies can be used as a bridge to better understand epistemological differences, the arts also present opportunities for children to participate in research in ways that are less confined by diverse capacities in language and literacy (Caldairou-Bessette et. al, 2020; Mand, 2012). In many ways, arts-based methods are aligned with participatory methodologies (such as FPAR) in that they create opportunities for girls to participate in research in ways that feel relevant to how they know and experience the world (Mand, 2012). Arts-based methodologies can work to honour notions of doing research *with* children instead of doing research *on* children, enabling

children to be active and agential participants in the research process (Caldairou-Bessette et. al, 2020).

Design

Recruitment Materials

The girls who participated in this study were recruited through a variety of child-centred ways that prioritized inclusion and accessibility in terms of age and different ways of knowing. Based on my former community practice experience with girls, I came to this work with valuable knowledge about the importance of language and communication styles when sharing information with young people. I intentionally designed my recruitment materials in a format that was visually engaging and used language and terms that were accessible to younger audiences. The design of the recruitment poster and the social media posts were inspired by the design of a comic book strip, making the recruitment materials appealing to girls. The poster, as well as the social media graphics, can be found in Appendices B and C.

In addition to the creation of a child-centred and accessible recruitment poster, I also used the novel tool of a recruitment video. I filmed myself reading a recruitment script that shared basic information about the study while being sure to use plain language, clear enunciation, and the inclusion of subtitles. I uploaded and hosted this recruitment video on the McMaster University video sharing platform MacVideo; the script for the recruitment video that I created is shared in Appendix D. All recruitment materials were approved for use by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (#6495).

Despite anticipating that I would likely be first contacted by parents and guardians about a girl in their life who might be interested in participating, I directed the messaging on the recruitment materials towards girls themselves. The recruitment poster, for example, reads "Are you a girl between the ages of 8-12 years old?" Recruitment materials were directed towards girls with the intention of centering potential girl participants as active decision makers in their choice to participate. I also used transgender-inclusive language, specifying on the recruitment materials that a criterion for participation was that participants "identified as a girl"; despite my use of transgender-inclusive language, however, I also acknowledge that this choice of language in and of itself may not have been enough to encourage transgender girls to participate in the study. The language that I used was purposefully broad, however, using no descriptors other than "girl", with the intention of recruiting a group of participants that was diverse in race, class, and ability.

In addition to directing the recruitment materials towards girls themselves, I used the language of "social or environmental change work" instead of the language of "activism" on all recruitment materials. For this study, and as described in chapter one, the concept of activism was broadly defined and was meant to encompass activist practices ranging along a spectrum of social and political activity (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022). To account for this expanded understanding of activism, as a concept, as well as the variability in how girls might define or understand the actions that they had been taking, the recruitment materials used for this study therefore used this alternate language. The inclusion criteria for this study as having engaged in activism was thus

referred to and defined on all recruitment materials as "worked/working to create change in your school, community, or world, either in-person or online".

Recruitment Methods

I used purposeful sampling to recruit participants for this study, and began sharing my recruitment materials – the poster, video, letter of information and consent for parents (Appendices B, D, and F) and a letter of information and assent that was written in plain language for the girls (Appendix G) – with colleagues and community organizations in September of 2023. Through this process, I directly communicated with over 25 individuals and staff representatives from community organizations that provided programming to girls of the target age group across the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA). Recruitment was limited to the GTHA because of the planned in-person research focus groups and my desire for girls to participate without significant barriers to attend. I also shared my recruitment materials with the administrators from McMaster University's School of Social Work and Gender and Social Justice Program, which those administrators then shared widely using different email listservs. My recruitment strategy also included snowball recruitment, and many people who I had directly contacted for support with recruitment graciously forwarded my recruitment materials to other people they knew who may be interested in this study using a snowball recruitment script (Appendix E), the number of whom is unknown.

Following the sharing of my recruitment materials, one staff representative from a community agency forwarded me a list of contact information for parents who had indicated that their daughters might be interested in participating. I was able to

successfully recruit one participant from this list. The recruitment method that seemed to be most useful for this study was snowball recruitment. Parents often got in contact with me and shared that they had heard about the study from other parents or friends that they knew. I also shared the recruitment materials on my personal social media accounts, including X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and LinkedIn. Some of the community agencies who chose to support recruitment for this project re-shared what I had posted on my personal accounts.

Following these recruitment methods, which spanned the months of September and October of 2023, I recruited nine girls to participate. I communicated with the parents of potential participants as they expressed interest, confirming that their child(ren) met the criteria for participating. I coordinated meetings to meet each potential participant and their parent, either in-person or over Zoom, so that I could provide in-depth information about the study (as provided in the letter of information, Appendix F) and gain informed assent (from girls) and informed consent (from their parent(s)) prior to their participation. Informed assent processes are aligned with participatory approaches to research with children in that they recognize the agency, as well as the rights, of children to have a say about matters that impact their lives (Bosco, 2010). Instead of doing research *on* children, assent processes create opportunities for children to make informed choices about their own participation (Dockett & Perry, 2011).

For assent to be informed, children must be provided with information that is sufficient and appropriate enough for them to make an informed decision about their participation (Dockett & Perry, 2011). I provided each participant with a copy of the letter

of information that I had written in plain language (Appendix G) and then read it aloud to them. I stopped after each section to ask if what I had said made sense or if they had any questions. After reading the letter of information, I reiterated that their participation would be voluntary, that they were not required to participate in the study with me and that nobody would be upset with them if they chose not to, or if they chose to withdraw at any point throughout the study (Dockett & Perry, 2011). I then asked each potential participant if they assented to participate, documenting their answers on an oral consent and assent log (Appendix H).

Participants

Following recruitment, nine people who identified as girls and lived in the GTHA participated in this study. The ages of the girls spanned between 8-12 years, and two of the girls who participated in this study were sisters (see Table 1 for more information). I did not define for girls what it might mean to identify as a certain class, gender identity, race or ethnicity, and asked in the survey if a doctor or other trusted adult had ever told them that they had a disability. The answers provided in Table 1 are therefore reflective of how participants self-identified based on their own understandings of these terms.

Table 1.

Demographic information of seven of the nine study participants; two of the nine participants did not respond to or complete the survey.

Age at time of participation (n)				
8 y/o	9 y/o	10 y/o	11 y/o	12 y/o
1	1	1	4	2

Class (n)		
Working-Class	Middle-Class	Upper Middle-Class
1	4	2

Disability (n)	
Yes	No
2	5

Race/Ethnicity*	
Description	n
African/Black (including African American, African Canadian, Caribbean)	2
East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Korean, etc)	1
European/White	3
Latin, South or Central American	1
South Asian (e.g., Afghan, Nepali, Tamil, Bangladeshi Pakistani, Indian, Sri Lankan, Punjabi)	1
Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Thai, Cambodian, Malaysian, Filipino/a, Laotian, Singaporean, Indonesian)	1

*Participants had the option to self-select multiple races and ethnicities. As some participants selected multiple races/ethnicities to reflect their multiracial identities, the number of responses exceeds seven.

Participants in this study were diverse in class, race and ethnicity, and in their self-identification of having a disability. In addition to their demographic data, I believe it important to center a piece of the story of each of the girls who graciously participated in

this project. Drawing from their individual interviews with me, what they shared in each of the focus groups, as well as the information that they provided in the online survey, below are short vignettes intended to highlight who each girl was, what their social and environmental change work entailed, and how I experienced their participation in this study. The vignettes are presented in alphabetical order based on the pseudonyms that the girls chose for themselves.

Anne (age 11)

An only child of queer parents, Anne joined the study keen to share her experiences of engaging in activism in her school and community. She was highly attentive to the questions that I asked and answered them with enthusiasm, seemingly very comfortable speaking with me – an adult that she did not know all that well. Her first individual interview with me took place virtually over Zoom, where she told me about the partisan political campaigns she had taken part in, the protests she had attended, and her efforts to share information about social and environmental issues with her classmates and teachers at school. Through our conversation it became clear to me that she was familiar with different tactics of community organizing and she spent time explaining to me that she would use a tool called the "empathy bridge" to have difficult conversations with people that might have differing views from her. Anne was particularly passionate about climate change and had attended protests about pipeline development, weaving her activism experiences with her personal reflections about pollution that she has seen where she lives. She was white and from a working-class family, sharing with me that most of the social and environmental change-oriented events that she attended were with her

parents. When she joined in with the other girls in the focus groups, she spoke and contributed to conversations with confidence, often raising her hand first when I asked a question to the group. While always eager to contribute to conversation, Anne also demonstrated self-awareness about how often she was speaking up and would encourage other girls who may have had their hands up to speak first. She responded to other girls with liveliness and excitement, seemingly happy to engage in conversation about the questions being asked.

Dot (age 9)

Dot proudly shared with me in her interview that she was dedicated to helping or teaching people about topics that she felt confident in, such as with schoolwork or swimming. This is what she understood to be 'activism', or as she shared, "taking action, and like…helping other people". She had a lot to say about what it meant to be a girl, specifically about how being a girl meant that she "had a voice" and that girls can do "whatever they want if they just believe". Dot was the younger sister to Winter, another participant in the study; the two of them were Black and from a middle-class family. Dot was very intentional with her words, taking long pauses as she spoke. Assuming that she was done responding, I would sometimes find myself ready to ask the next question or probe further before realizing that she was finding her words to respond to what I had already asked. This intentionality was also apparent during the arts-based focus groups, where she asked many questions of myself and the student research assistant and took her time thinking about what she should include in her art. During the focus groups she sat beside her sister but interacted with the other girl participants throughout the

conversations and at breaks, seemingly excited to get to know them and learn from what they had to say.

Heart Sparkle of the Universe ("Heart Sparkle", age 12)

Heart Sparkle came to her first interview with me prepared with a file folder full of pages that she had written about people who inspired her, a project that she referred to as "Heart Sparkle's Beat". She loved film and musical theatre, and much of what she shared in Heart Sparkle's Beat was related to these forms of artistic expression. She was 12 years old and shared that she spoke a lot with her mom about what it means to be a girl, saying that they often talked about "what it means to be an empowered girl" by doing things like "making posters for our community board and also using my voice to make a difference". Heart Sparkle said that her mom made her more aware of social and environmental issues which was usually good but which she sometimes experienced as stressful, writing in her survey that "I also feel quite stressed about many things, this kinda motivates me to do things – I worry about many things". She was from a middle-class family and self-identified as having a disability. In the focus groups, she was very outgoing and seemed excited to chat with and learn from the other girls about the research topics. In multiple instances during breaks she would burst into song, excitedly sharing tidbits about a musical or play that she was most recently enamored with. Heart Sparkle showed a genuine curiosity about the other girls who were participating in the study, bouncing off their ideas and asking them questions about different things that they would share.

Isla (age 8)

Isla was the youngest girl to participate in this study. She was quite softspoken and quiet during her individual interview with me, requesting that her mother stay close by while she responded to the interview questions. Although her answers to what I asked were short, she would respond definitively. Isla seemed to have a firm understanding of what she believed and what she wanted to share with me. This quietness, however, faded throughout the course of her participation in the study, and in the first arts-based focus group she raised her hand to speak on multiple occasions. By the second arts-based focus group, she was animatedly chatting with the other girls during snack break, talking about their lives outside of the study. Isla confidently engaged in the art-making portions of the study, took the research questions and ran with them, asked few clarifying questions, and immersed herself in creative process. She was from a middle-class family and identified as multiracial, which included being white as well as Latin, south, or central American. She said that she cares a lot and that this caring characteristic is what makes her more aware of the issues. She was really concerned with environmental issues and pollution, especially when considering how pollution affects animal welfare. Isla said that she would share what she knows about these issues with other people in her life, including her family, and take what she had learned to turn it into action.

Keila (age 11)

Keila was charismatic, energetic, and animatedly spoke to me with the comfort and confidence of somebody who was speaking with a peer. She did her individual interview with me virtually, walking around her house and eventually settling outside in

the sun while carrying me around and chatting with me on her tablet. Keila would quickly respond to my questions, making sarcastic remarks like "Oh, I just knew you were going to ask that!" before seamlessly diving into anecdotes about pop culture or stories from her life. She wove these stories in with her understanding of gender and other social issues, often speaking about the dynamics within her family as a Black girl with multiple older brothers. At one point in the interview, she asked me quite assertively if we were almost done because she was really busy and had a birthday party that she needed to get ready for. Keila did not attend either of the arts-based focused group so I did not have the opportunity to get to know her as well as I did the other girls.

Owl (age 11)

Owl was the only girl who I received emails from directly, both when scheduling study visits and when member-checking, signing her emails off with the waving hand emoji. I emailed with her mother, also, but as Owl took partial ownership over her participation in the study, my interpretation of Owl was that she was highly responsible, independent, and felt accountable to the research process that she had chosen to participate in. Owl was also comfortable enough to tell me when I had misinterpreted something that she had said, or if she thought I might need some clarity about a point that she had made. This comfort may have had some relation to having had many conversations about gender issues with her mom and with other family members at the dinner table, sharing with me that they would speak together about the "injustices we face but also the good things about being a girl (like how we mature faster)". She was an East Asian girl and told me that she likes to read the newspaper, which is how she was made

more aware of social and environmental issues. In the arts-based focus groups, Owl was often quick to raise her hand and was excited to share her thoughts and experiences. When the other girls were speaking, Owl seemed to be thoughtfully reflecting on what they were saying, considering how she could next comment or respond. She brought a certain liveliness to the group dynamic, speaking while moving her hands and nodding along while she listened to the rest of the group.

Tianna (age 10)

Tianna was soft-spoken, but confident, and spoke with me slowly in her individual interview – she was clearly being highly intentional with her choice of words. Throughout the course of her participation, it became evident that she wanted to articulate herself in what she believed to be the correct way; she was careful with what she said, and her words held weight when she spoke. This characteristic was apparent in her art making process as well - she often ran out of time trying to create art pieces to her satisfaction. I realized by the end of the first focus group that she had been very quiet in the group setting, perhaps because of shyness, or perhaps because conversation moved quickly. Once the first focus group was over I sat with her individually to ask her about the art that she had created, which seemed to put her at ease and allowed her to share with me her ideas creative thought process. Tianna was multiracial, specifically South Asian and Southeast Asian, middle-class, and came from a politically active family, with whom she she spoke openly about gender and sexual orientation. Characteristically, and as somebody who was thoughtful and intentional with her words, she beautifully stated that she speaks about social and environmental change with her parents “when we talk about

our dreams. When I stopped going to McDonalds, Starbucks, or have coke because of BDS (referring to boycott, divest, sanction) for Palestine". Tianna told me that she was aware of the issues from the people around her, sharing that "many of my parents' friends who are my friends too are activists".

Winter (age 10)

Winter exuded a quiet confidence in her interactions with me, seemingly speaking with thoughtfulness, clarity, and intention. Winter shared with me that an important aspect of her identity as a girl was her grades in school, which she appeared to take quite seriously. Winter often spoke of her older sister as the inspiration for her social and environmental change work. Her older sister was involved with Girl Guides, and so Winter had witnessed firsthand the different community fundraising initiatives that Girl Guides participated in and felt drawn to that type of work. Winter shared with me that she hadn't heard the word "activism" before but said that she thought it might mean "picking up garbage, helping people, but also like…not keeping or staying silent. You know, like, girls aren't being heard. Taking action, talking, that like…girls voices need to be heard". She was evidently passionate about girls asserting themselves as change makers and leaders. During the arts-based focus group, this passion was also made clear. She actively engaged with the other participants, listening intently and nodding along when they were making points that she agreed with. Typically, Winter was not the first participant to jump in an answer a question, but she made sure that her thoughts were known and heard, and it seemed like she timed her opportunities to speak up when she felt it best aligned with what she had to say.

Zendaya (age 12)

Zendaya was close family friends with Winter and Dot and became aware of the study because of these family ties. The three of them attended the arts-based focus groups together, sharing a carpool that alternated between families. She was quiet and poised in those focus groups, speaking mostly with and in response to Winter. Zendaya also seemed very engaged in the art-making activities, however, often running out of time to finish what she was working on and frantically rushing to complete things so that she could share them with the group. Zendaya was a Black girl and was, interestingly, the only participant who spoke with me about menstruation and pregnancy when I had asked the question what it means to be a girl in her individual interview. At that time, she had said that she had heard from her group of friends that one of the hardest parts about being a girl was painful menstruation and worries about teen pregnancy. Most of what she shared with me centred around her friend group and peer circles at school; her social change work seemed to be most focussed around supporting her schoolmates through mental health challenges.

Methods

This study included the use of two qualitative research methods: semi-structured qualitative interviews followed by two arts-based focus groups. The interviews took place between late September to early November of 2023 and were followed by two arts-based focus groups. The first arts-based focus group took place in mid-November of 2023 and the second took place two weeks later in early December of 2023. The interviews and focus groups all ran very smoothly and without issue. Of note, however, was that I had

incorporated questions in the individual interview guide (Appendix I) intended to encourage participants to speak about other aspects of their identities besides their gender that were important to who they were. To my surprise, none of the participants spoke about their race, class, or disability in response to my questions. They instead responded with information about their friends, families, and schools. After a period of time had elapsed following the last arts-based focus group, and after I had begun data analysis, I realized that it would be beneficial to gather more demographic and descriptive data about the study participants. The purpose of gathering demographic and descriptive data through a survey, was to better understand girls' identities and social or environmental change work within the context of other aspects of their identities, with the goal of integrating an intersectional analysis into the study findings. In May of 2024, therefore, I also distributed an online survey to participants (approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board [MREB]). The letter of information and consent for the survey and the survey questions can be found in Appendix O and Appendix P, respectively.

Interviews

After obtaining informed assent from each participant and informed consent from their parent(s), I completed a semi-structured qualitative interview with each participant individually. Aligned with inclusive research methodologies, participants had the option to have a support person present or nearby while they completed the interview. Of the nine participants, four of them chose to have a support person present. The chosen support person, in all cases, was the participant's mother. The two participants who were sisters chose to do their interview together as well as to have their mother present for

support. This request was accepted as it was a means by which to ensure that this research project was accessible for the sisters and their family. In asking the research questions, I divided the interview guide in half and alternated which sister I would ask questions of first, so that each sister had an opportunity to answer half of the questions without first hearing what the other sister had to say. This process was collaboratively decided upon by me and the sisters, who shared that this approach felt most fair.

As children are often more comfortable engaging in interviews if they can choose the location in which they take place (Irwin & Johnson, 2005; Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019), interviews took place either in-person or over Zoom teleconferencing technology at the choice and convenience of girls and their parents. Three of the nine participants had their interviews in-person (one at the McMaster University main campus, two at the Hamilton Public Library), while the other six participants completed their interviews over Zoom. For in-person interviews, I provided fidget toys for girls to play with if they wished to, and to keep their hands busy throughout the interview to enhance their comfort (Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019).

All girls provided consent to audio recording. Prior to beginning their interviews, participants were also asked to create their own pseudonyms to be used for their participation in the project. The names chosen included names of pets, friends, characters from shows or games that they liked, or were completely imaginary. Participants chose the following pseudonyms, which I use to refer to them in all further writings about this project: Winter, Dot, Anne, Keila, Isla, Owl, Tianna, Zendaya, and Heart Sparkle of the Universe (henceforth referred to as Heart Sparkle, for short).

Interviews spanned between 22-44 minutes in length, and followed the semi-structured qualitative interview guide that is provided in Appendix I. The interviews that were held in-person tended to be longer than interviews that took place over Zoom, possibly due to the more relational nature of meeting in-person. Participants seemed much more comfortable and conversational when meeting with me in-person versus meeting over Zoom. The interview guide contained both open-ended questions and question requests (Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019). I began each interview by explaining that my line of questioning contained two "chunks:" the first about girlhood, and the second about social and/or environmental change work. The intention of these interviews was to gain a better understanding of how girls understood and described their own experiences of being a girl, as well as to learn about the social and/or environmental change work that they were engaged in. Throughout the interviews, I assumed an active listening stance, creating opportunities for participants to share their ideas and tell their own stories with few interruptions. As they spoke, I affirmed their answers and engaged with them in conversation where they invited me to do so. Using affirmations such as "wow, that's super interesting!" and "that makes sense!" throughout each interview in response to their answers would signal to girls that I was supportive of their answers and keen to learn more, an interviewing strategy that has been found to be successful in research with children (Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019).

In addition to providing encouragement, I also often paraphrased participants' answers and asked if I had understood them correctly, stating that they were welcome to tell me if I had misunderstood. While power dynamics in relationships between children

and adults often deter children from telling adults when they are wrong, some participants did correct some of my misunderstandings. I thanked them for helping me to better understand before moving on to the next question. Participants were each provided with a $10 gift card of their choice for completing the first individual interviews.

Arts-Based Focus Groups

Following the interviews with individual girls, I held two arts-based focus groups. To accommodate participant availability and promote greater accessibility, the focus groups were offered in a hybrid format (combined in-person and online). The interview guides for each of these focus groups were responsive to what participants had already shared with me and were developed using the data that had been collected prior. The interview guide for the first focus group (Appendix J), therefore, was created after completing a close read of the transcribed qualitative interviews. The interview guide for the second focus group (Appendix K) was created following the first focus group, during which I made notes of interesting concepts that I thought required further exploration. Each newly developed interview guide was approved by the MREB following the submission of an ethics application amendment. This allowed for an iterative and flexible approach to data collection, ensuring that the questions I was asking, and my lines of inquiry were relevant and responsive to what the participants were sharing with me throughout the project.

The purpose of the first arts-based focus group was to explore participants' understandings and experiences of being girls. The purpose of the second arts-based focus group was to learn more about the participants' experiences of engaging in social or

environmental change work. The first focus group lasted a total of three hours, and the second focus group was four hours in length. Both arts-based focus groups followed the same structure: 1) I would greet girls as they arrived at the room in which the study was taking place, 2) I would facilitate a discussion following the focus group guides (Appendices J and K), 3) we would all take a break and have snacks, 4) participants would complete the arts-based activity (collage or sign-making), and 5) participants were provided with the opportunity to share and describe their art work with the group. Participants were then provided with gift cards of their choosing at the end of each arts-based focus group. Gift cards were valued at $30 for participating in the first arts-based focus group, and $40 for participating in the second arts-based focus group. For participants who joined the arts-based focus groups in-person, I provided their parents or guardians with either public transit tickets or parking vouchers. All the participants seemed comfortable with the structure of each of the arts-based focus groups.

Also approved by the MREB was the inclusion of an undergraduate student research assistant to support the smooth facilitation of the focus groups, which included keeping note of which participants wanted to speak next, passing the recording advice around the focus group circle, and preparing the snacks during scheduled breaks. The undergraduate student research assistant was provided with a $50 gift card of her choosing after each of the focus groups to thank her for her support.

For both focus groups, as participants were dropped off by their parents, I asked each participant if they would like a support person to be either present in the room with them or nearby. Four of the participants in the first focus group stated that they would like

to have a support person nearby, but not necessarily in the room while the focus group was taking place. Three of those four participants requested the same for the second focus group. In all cases, the support person was a parent. The parents of those participants, as well as the parents of a participant who joined virtually in the first focus group, signed Oaths of Confidentiality (Appendix L). The parents who had been asked to stay close in case their daughter required support all remained outside of the room that the focus group was taking part in, and the participants were told that they were welcome to go get their support person whenever they would like, although none of the participants did so in either of the focus groups.

First Arts-Based Focus Group: Discussion and Collage

The first arts-based focus group was aimed at better understanding participants' understandings, descriptions, and experiences of girlhood, and included the art-making activity of collage. Eight girls participated in the first arts-based focus group (held at McMaster University); seven girls participated in-person and one girl participated virtually over Zoom. During the first arts-based focus group we engaged in a facilitated group discussion for the first hour, took a brief break, and then completed the collage-making activity. The collage session was followed by a facilitated discussion about the art that they had created.

Upon arrival to the room at McMaster University, I re-introduced myself to participants and their parents and thanked them for coming. Participants were then provided with a sticky-note with a reminder of their chosen pseudonyms and a blank name tag. Participants were asked to design their nametags with the names of their

pseudonyms while waiting for the focus group to officially get started, and were provided with markers, crayons, and stickers to do so. The girl who joined the focus group virtually changed her name plate on Zoom to her chosen pseudonym.

First Arts-Based Focus Group: Introduction. The tables in the focus group room were configurated in a circle, and participants sat around the circle as they arrived. In the middle of the circle was an additional table with an Owl Labs 360-degree video conferencing camera. The camera was connected to my laptop, which was positioned around the circle next to some of the other participants. This laptop is where the girl who was participating virtually could be seen and spoken to, and the Owl Labs 360-degree camera allowed her to view and speak with all the other girls participating in the workshop around the room.

On and around the tables where the participants were sitting were fidget toys, markers, and paper available at each table for participants to use at their leisure throughout the focus group. After familiarizing themselves with the room, making their nametags, and introducing themselves to each other while waiting for the focus group to officially begin, I sat with them as a part of the circle. I re-introduced myself and the undergraduate student researcher, and shared information about where to locate the bathrooms if and when they needed them. I then took time explaining what would take place over the course of the focus group, sharing information about the expected timeline of each activity and when we would be taking scheduled breaks. I shared the same information as I did in the initial assent process about the study being voluntary and their ability to cease participation at any time. I provided an opportunity at the end of this focus

group introduction for girls to ask questions about the structure of the focus group, answering their questions and then asking them for confirmation that I had answered them adequately.

In addition to sharing detailed information about what to expect during the focus group, I provided ample time to discuss confidentiality. I first asked if anybody had heard the word confidentiality before, and one of the participants raised her hand to offer a definition of confidentiality that she was familiar with. I affirmed her answer and then provided the description of confidentiality that was approved for use by the MREB on the focus group guide (Appendix K). I also asked the participant who was participating virtually to confirm that she would not record anything that was done or said during the focus group. Once all participants had shared that they understood the meaning of confidentiality, we did a round of introductions. Participants introduced themselves by their pseudonyms as well as their ages and school grades; I had suggested that they share their pseudonyms and ages, the girls then collectively agreed that they would also like to share their school grades. I also asked the girls in the room to be mindful of the girl who was participating virtually, and if they saw her with a hand raised or attempting to speak, to draw their attention to her so that we could ensure her equitable participation. Following introductions, we started the focus group.

First Arts-Based Focus Group: Discussion Questions. The first portion of the arts-based focus group included a facilitated discussion about participants' understandings and experiences of being a girl (detailed in the first arts-based focus group guide, Appendix J). Before turning them on, I showed the participants the two recording devices

that I would be using throughout the focus group. I then asked that, when they would like to answer one of the questions that I pose or to respond to the response of another participant, they either raise their hands or indicate in some other way that they would like to speak next. I additionally asked that they share their pseudonyms before speaking to ease the process of transcription. Throughout the focus group discussion, participants raised their hands and passed the recording devices to each other. Many of them spoke into the recording devices like they were microphones. The participant who participated virtually would physically raise her hand when she wanted to contribute to the conversation, and the undergraduate student research assistant or one of the other participants would often bring it to my attention that she had done so.

To aid in the accessibility of the focus group discussion, I had written each focus group question on its own large piece of flip chart paper. I asked questions about their experiences of being a girl, as well as what being a girl meant and felt like to them, the details of which can be found in the first focus group guide in Appendix J. Throughout the focus group discussion, I verbalized the first question and showed it to participants on the flip chart paper. Participants would answer the question and engage in conversation with each other as they were presented. Where I required clarity or saw opportunities for a more fulsome response, I would ask the additional sub-questions detailed in Appendix J to ensure that we had a shared understanding of their answers. The focus group discussion lasted a duration of 50 minutes. I stated that we could take our first break and showed them that I was turning the recording devices off. I then provided participants with a snack, and they spent 15 minutes having conversations with each other informally before

I called them back to participate in the next part of the focus group: the collage-making activity.

First Arts-Based Focus Group: Collage Making. Prior to hosting this first arts-based focus group, I had spent the months prior sourcing materials for collaging. These materials included paper, markers, crayons, stickers, glue, scissors, and over 50 magazines of diverse topics. I displayed all the materials on one of the tables in the focus group room so that participants could access and choose what they wanted to work with. During the break, the undergraduate research assistant and I also took the focus group questions that were written on flip chart paper from the first part of the focus group and placed them on the walls around the room so that they were visible to the participants.

I began the arts-based portion of the focus group by engaging participants in a conversation about the art form of collage. To do this, I followed an instruction guide that I had written as a part of my application to the MREB (Appendix M). Once we, as a group, had established a familiarity with what it meant to create a collage, I invited participants to choose one of the questions that had been placed around the room. I asked participants to create a collage that answered the question of their choosing, inviting them to gather the materials that they'd like to use to create their answers. The parent of the participant who was joining the focus group virtually was an artist herself and, coincidentally, already had the materials handy so that her daughter was able to make her collage from home. Participants had 45 minutes to create their collages; I did not voice record this portion of the focus group.

When it was time for the participants to finish creating their collages, I asked them if they would be comfortable sharing their collages with the group. With their permission, I turned the voice recording device back on for this final portion of the focus group. Participants were asked to share the question that they had chosen to answer with their collages, why they had chosen that question, and to verbally describe their collages to the group. I created a set of questions to prompt this sharing, which included: 1) why did you choose the colour of paper that you did?; 2) which images did you include and why?; 3) why did you place these images on your collage in the way that you did?; and 4) how does this collage answer the question that you chose?

Once each participant had shared their collages with the group, I took photos of their collages. Participants took their original pieces of artwork home with them. We completed the focus group by sharing information about the second focus group, collecting their nametags to be used for the next focus group, and asking about snack preferences for the next focus group.

Second Arts-Based Focus Group: Sign Making

The second focus group aimed at better understanding participants' social and environmental change work and took place exactly two weeks after the first focus group. Eight girls participated in the second focus group, which was held at McMaster University, however, two of the participants from the first focus group could not attend the second focus group because of scheduling conflicts, so I scheduled time to meet with them individually instead. For the six who were able to attend the second focus group, and upon arrival to the room at McMaster University, I provided participants with the

name tags that they had made in the first focus group that had their chosen pseudonym. Three participants chose to have a support person nearby, two of whom who had requested this support in the first focus group. The third was the participant who had attended the first focus group virtually. In all cases, the chosen support people were parents. Those support people were again asked to sign an Oath of Confidentiality (Appendix L).

Second Arts-Based Focus Group: Introduction. Just like in the first focus group, the tables in the focus group room were configurated in a circle, and participants sat around the circle as they arrived. Each table had fidget toys, markers, and paper available for participants to use throughout the discussion. After familiarizing themselves with the room and re-introducing themselves to each other while waiting for the focus group to officially begin, I sat with them as a part of the circle. I took time to review the anticipated timelines for each focus group activity and shared the same information about voluntary participation and confidentiality that I had shared in the first focus group.

Second Arts-Based Focus Group: Discussion Questions. I began the discussion portion of the first focus group by reminding participants how to hold and pass the audio recording devices. To facilitate ease of transcription, I again asked them to share their pseudonyms before speaking. I used the second focus group to guide conversation (Appendix K), asking the main questions and sub-questions. Each main question was also written on a large piece of flip chart paper so that participants had a visual representation of what was being asked and discussed. The discussion portion of the second focus group

last 45 minutes, after which we took a 15-minute break and shared a snack. After the break, I brought the group back together to start the arts-based portion of the focus group.

Second Arts-Based Focus Group: Sign Making. To set up the room for the sign making activity, I provided each participant with a poster board, paintbrushes, and a paint pallet. The undergraduate research assistant and I had set up a station in one corner of the room where participants could go to get the paint colours of their choosing. Before asking participants to choose their paints and start creating their signs, I provided them with the activity instructions as articulated in Appendix N. I asked them to create a sign that answered the following question: "if you wanted to share a message with people about what girls are doing to create change, what would you say?", which was also written on a large flip chart paper and hung in a visible place in the room. Participants had 60 minutes to create their signs, and I did not record that portion of the focus group.

Once the participants had finished creating their signs, I asked them again if they would be willing to share their artwork with the group. I turned the voice recording device on for this final portion of the focus group, and participants were asked to speak to the following questions that were also written and displayed on flip chart paper: 1) what is your message?, 2) why do you believe this message is important?, 3) who would you share this message with?, and 4) can you tell us about the choices that you made when making this sign (such as about imagery and colours)?

After each participant had shared their artwork with the group, I took pictures of each sign so that participants could take their originals home with them. I completed the focus group by sharing next steps with all the participants, including that I would reach

out to their parents to share study findings with them once I had completed analysis. I also asked if any of the participants would be interested in taking part in knowledge mobilization activities once analysis was complete, to which two of them agreed.

Individual Meetings in Lieu of Second Arts-Based Focus Group

Participation. For the two participants who could not attend the second arts-based focus group, I offered flexibility about how they could participate. I scheduled individual meetings with each of these participants and followed the same questions, structure, and sign-making activity that I had facilitated in the focus group. Both meetings took place in-person at McMaster University, and their parents and guardians were provided with transit tickets or parking vouchers.

Data Analysis

The data generated and analyzed for this study was the typed transcriptions of individual interview recordings as well as each of the focus group recordings, including the two that were completed individually. I chose not to complete a visual analysis of the artwork that the participants had created through each focus group because I did not want to ascribe meaning to their art, opening a window for potential misinterpretation. I instead analyzed the transcribed recordings of them describing their artwork.

Aligned with my critical theoretical orientation to the research, I analyzed the data using the process of critical thematic analysis as outlined by Lawless and Chen (2019), a method of critical thematic analysis which they identify as a "systematic process for analyzing everyday qualitative data with critical agendas" (p. 97). This framework for analyzing data creates opportunities to connect the micro-level happenings in the

transcribed interview data to macro-level structures, with deliberate efforts to account for both the personal and the political. This critical thematic analysis is facilitated through a two-step coding process.

The first step, open coding, encourages researchers to follow the data as closely as possible (Lawless & Chen, 2019). Researchers code what they are reading, looking for "repetition, recurrence, and/or forcefulness" (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 98) in the interview and focus group transcripts. This first step creates opportunities for the researcher to truly immerse themselves in what exists in the data, which prioritizes "understanding, privileging, and honouring what [participants] are actually saying and revealing to us about their social worlds…" (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 98). Through looking for patterns in what the study participants actually said, instead of interpreting what they had said in the initial coding stage, it is more likely that the researcher is able to centre and honour participant lived experience (Lawless & Chen, 2019).

To facilitate this open coding process, I engaged in constant comparative analysis (CCA) first with the interview transcripts and then with the focus group transcripts (Boeiji, 2002). Once I completed and transcribed the first qualitative interview, I closely read the transcript and made note of any concepts or terms that I thought might be significant in the data. After completing the second qualitative interview, I then did the same thing – I read the transcript closely, took note of any concepts or terms that may have been significant, while also thinking comparatively about the reading that I had done and the notes that I had taken from the first transcript. I repeated this for each of the individual interview transcripts, completing this comparative process alongside my

processes of data collection. I then repeated this process for both focus group transcripts, comparing the noted concepts or terms in the interview and focus group transcripts to each other. Engaging in CCA allowed me to develop an intimate understanding of the data, firmly rooting my analysis in what the participants had shared with me.

The second step to coding is what Lawless and Chen (2019) refer to as closed coding. During the closed-coding process, researchers continue to look for "repeated, recurring, and/or forceful patterns" (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 98), but this time they are looking for these patterns in relation to dominant ideologies that are identified in their theoretical framework. Step two allows the researcher to deduce these themes from what was said in the transcripts, as well as what was coded in the open-coding process, ultimately drawing connections between the data and a broader systemic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019).

To facilitate this closed coding process, I took the codes that I had developed in the open coding processes and did another close read of each transcript. I took scissors to paper and cut out quotes from each transcript that I identified as reflective of each code. Once I had coded the transcripts, I categorized and organized each coded quote as I understood them to be related to each other, decisions that were ultimately informed by my familiarity with the relevant scholarship and my theoretical framework. Ultimately, I identified four key themes in the data, which I share more about in the following chapter.

In addition to my critical thematic analysis, and aligned with feminist and participatory methodologies in which participants are actively involved in research processes with the goal of more even power sharing between researchers and participants,

I engaged in practices of member checking before including these quotes and pieces of art in this dissertation (Buchbinder, 2011; Caretta, 2016; Motulsky, 2021). Member checking created opportunities for participants to provide input into how their knowledge, experiences, beliefs and ideas – represented in this study through their interview transcripts and art– were being used in this dissertation, ultimately "facilitating a less hierarchal relationship between the researcher and research participants" (Caretta, 2016, p. 316). Following my analysis of the data, I got in contact with each girl participant and their parents individually using their chosen method of communication (which was email in all cases) to share and request feedback on the themes that I had identified. If I had chosen to use their direct quotes, or direct quotes alongside photographs of their art, I confirmed that they were comfortable with the quote(s) that I was using and that their knowledge was being represented in a way that they felt was truthful and accurate to them. One girl responded to my email to request that I change one of the words in one of her direct quotes to more accurately reflect her intended meaning in that statement, which I did so promptly and without question. The quotes used to support the findings in the following chapters have thus been approved for use in the ways that I present them by the girls themselves.

Methodological Considerations

While my intention was to centre the knowledge of the girls themselves, the process through which I analyzed the data made clear my entanglement with it. I could not separate myself from the girls' stories as I analyzed them, instead reflecting upon what they had shared while thinking about it in relation to my perspective as an adult

researcher with a deep familiarity with the literature on girls' activism as well as previous experience supporting girl activists. In other words, I could not separate myself from the data (Pillow, 2003, 2015). In addition to sharing the four key themes and corresponding subthemes, therefore, I use the following findings chapters to offer an initial theoretical analysis of each of these themes. The words and artwork presented throughout the four findings chapters (Chapters Five-Eight) are those of the girls, but the perspective offered is admittedly mine. In chapters five through eight, I identify and explore the study findings as they relate to, weave through, and intersect with my integrated critical citizenship and critical childhood theoretical framework. More specifically, I make connections between what the girls in this study told me, theoretical concepts and constructs from critical childhood studies, and ideas relevant to girls' participation and citizenship. This includes an exploration of the concepts of "girl power" and the "can-do girl", postfeminism, histories of feminist organizing, and a politics of hope. The four themes that I explore in the findings chapters are:

1) Expectations of girlhood are contradictory and confusing
2) Girls are met with doubt and resistance when trying to create change
3) Feminist histories are inspiring and motivating
4) Change can only happen if we try to create change together

The title of each theme is drawn from the ideas shared by the girls. I chose to name each theme using their language and phrasing to both honour the girls' knowledge and to demonstrate the participatory nature of this project, centering the stories of girl participants in the research. As I write about and share the four themes that emerged

through this analysis, I incorporate direct quotes and photos of the participants' artwork. I do not offer an analysis of the artwork itself, but rather an analysis of what the girls told me their artwork represented in relation to the questions asked of them in the arts-based focus groups.

Chapter 5: Expectations of Girlhood are Contradictory and Confusing

> Clean up after yourself, be nice, be clean, girls don't act like that, girls don't wear clothes like that, wear something casual, wear something nice, wear something pink and not…green, or blue, or boy colour, because girls are always being told to do something, and…whether you're doing something wrong, they've never done anything correct before, if they're trying to do something right, it's wrong. Don't…don't wear makeup, go wear makeup, or…wear a dress, don't wear a dress, or, go to sleep, stay awake, or…don't cook, I'm getting some food, or please cook, I'm not getting any food…we're just always being told from wrong and right.
>
> - Keila

I asked Keila which messages she received about being a girl and she passionately and matter-of-factly launched into the above monologue. As she spoke, I was immediately reminded of America Ferrera's iconic speech in the *Barbie* film (Gerwig, 2023) that was released earlier that year. In *Barbie,* Ferrera states that "it is literally impossible to be a woman" (Gerwig, 2023, 1:13) and then proceeds to speak about the seemingly endless contradictory expectations that women are expected to nimbly and without question navigate while living under patriarchy. While the speech given by Ferrera was in response to the Ken dolls' hostile takeover of "Barbieland," it was written in a way that was generalizable to life outside of its fictional context. As I listened to Keila, I wondered if her own monologue had been inspired by Ferrera's in *Barbie*. Sure enough, about ten minutes later, Keila asked me "have you watched the Barbie movie?!". When I affirmed that I had, she then asked me if I had also heard Meaghan Trainor's song titled *No* (2016), explaining to me that the song was about how women can be independent and that they don't need to rely on men. It became clear to me that at least part of what Keila knew about both girlhood and womanhood was informed by the

cultural and social context in which we both lived; she was drawing from popular culture references to understand and make sense of the many different and often confusing messages that girls receive about girlhood.

Keila's monologue, as well as her knowledge of popular culture, was consistent with what the other participants told me about the messages they received about what it means to be a girl. This knowledge came from "school" (Dot), "friends" (Anne, Dot, Isla, Winter, Zendaya), "family" (Isla, Dot) and their moms specifically (Owl, Tianna, Winter, Zendaya), "teachers" (Anne), "the internet" (Tianna) and their "pastor" (Dot and Winter). Like Keila, the other participants shared that the messages that they received about being a girl were often contradictory, and that they sometimes struggled to navigate expectations associated with traditional gender roles with how they would prefer to understand and define their own gender identities outside of those expectations.

Navigating Traditional Gender Roles

Perhaps most surprising to me was the similarity in what participants shared about persistent and sexist gendered expectations, such as that women and girls were expected to be primarily responsible for household duties like cooking and cleaning. Zendaya shared that she received these messages from her mother: "she teaches me like how to do like housework or like…any type of work, so in the future, I can be a good woman". Tianna heard similar rhetoric from the boys at her school: "I've had people, I've had the boys in my class, tell me that, 'Oh, girls should be in the kitchen cooking and cleaning' and 'boys who cook and clean are gay', and things like that…". Anne recognized that

these traditional and stereotypic gendered belief systems and expectations persist, implying her awareness of these histories, but also questioned their validity:

> …yeah, I think it's because of the concept that girls aren't as good as men or that we are the people who need to do the housework, and the busy work and not so much…the work that really takes schooling, and, um, I think that…that belief has been going on for a long time and we've tried to stop and it has went down so much, but it's still definitely around. And it definitely shows.
>
> - Anne

Participants were aware of the ways in which girlhood and womanhood have been socially and politically constructed and enforced as the truth throughout history, affecting how they are able to live their lives. Referring to girlhood as a gender construct recognizes that gender is not biological or innate but rather is created by cultures, politics, institutions, and relationships (Adams & Bettis, 2003; Bartholomaeus & Senkevis, 2015; Brown, 2011; Haines et. al, 2009; Kelly et. al, 2005; Messner, 2000). The cultures, politics, institutions, and relationships that construct gender for girls were evident in the stories that some of the participants shared, pointing to the ways in which historical and contemporary understandings of gender were embedded within their personal and social lives. For the participants, this construction manifested itself in the expectations that many others had for them about how they should act and behave, particularly as "elegant and *clean*" (Keila), *polite*, caring, *thankful*, and responsible (Zendaya), "*really* polite…and *dainty*, and *nice*" (Anne), and to "fit the beauty standard" (Tianna).

Aligning with their observations on gender norms, unrealistic beauty standards imposed on women and girls were identified by participants as an additional confusing expectation that they felt forced to navigate. In particular, they spoke about and created artwork that critiqued the Eurocentric, capitalist, and patriarchal ways that beauty has

been defined in Canada (Deliovsky, 2008). In the first arts-based focus group (in which participants were asked to create a collage in response to a question of their choice about girlhood), Anne chose to answer the question: "What do you not like about being a girl?" She created the following piece of collage art (figure 1) using markers and images that she cut and pasted from magazines. In her description of this collage, below, she speaks to the impossible hoops that women and girls are expected to jump through to change their appearance to conform to idealized beauty standards.

Figure 1. Anne's collage in response to the question: "what do you dislike about being a girl?"

> …the question that I chose was 'What do you not like about being a girl?' I chose it because I felt like there would be a lot in the magazines so that I could use for it…I chose the pictures that I did, 'cause I felt, so these ones [the image of the woman in the middle of the poster with bandages around her face and the heeled boot to her left] were supposed to represent how like lots of women nowadays, are expected to, especially if you have more money, to get plastic surgery and stuff, um, and like, fix yourself up with that.

When encouraged to speak more to the other elements of her collage, Anne proceeded to speak about images that she had found to illustrate how women and girls are often encouraged to fix things about their appearance:

> Ummm…uhh…these [the images of the makeup and the perfume in the lower left side of the poster] were about like how makeup is like, makeup and plastic surgery we use to like, fix ourselves or like, people think that you should like, use them so that you're better, so that you're the ideal version. Umm…this is about, um, these ones [bottom right] were about the clothing that we're like, that people think we should wear like wearing business suits, or looking like you're ready to work somewhere isn't suitable you're supposed to, like, look "good".

Anne then articulated how other aspects of her collage were about how women and girls are expected to figuratively make themselves smaller, such as by staying quiet or allowing men to dominate in workplace spaces:

> Ummm, this one [bottom left] was about, like, there's, like, um, all of the women in this photo are hidden behind the men and like, they're just like, and it's a male dominated group right there, which I feel like it's something that happens a lot. So that's what that was about…um, and this one [clipping of "always" in the top right corner of the poster] says, "Always Discreet" and like hiding yourself. Uh…yeah, I think my collage answers my questions by, um, just…these are showing the things that I don't like, like hiding ourselves and trying to make ourselves better and that expectation that you're not good enough, so you got to fix it somehow.

Similar to Anne, Tianna chose to create her collage about what she disliked about being a girl. To create her collage, she used markers, stickers, and magazine clippings (figure 2).

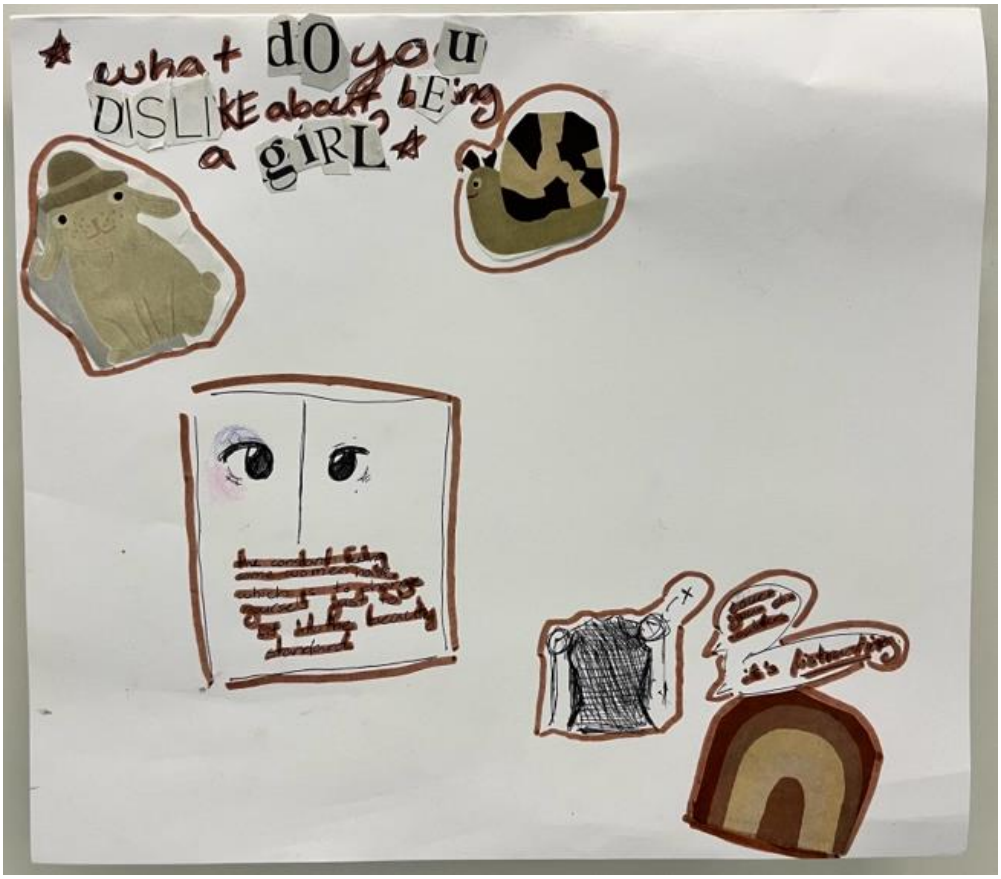

Figure 2. Tianna's collage in response to the question: "what do you dislike about being a girl?"

Tianna's collage, in addition to stickers, magazine clippings, and drawings, includes some written text. In what she described to me as a book, which is the square drawing with two eyes, she wrote: "The constant feeling some women have which is to change yourself just to fit into the beauty standard". In the lower right corner, above what looks like a rainbow, it says: "Cover your shoulders it's distracting". Tianna also described her collage to me. In

her description, she explicitly spoke to 'the beauty standard' and asserted that girls and women should be able to wear certain clothes and makeup because they make the choice to, and not because it's expected of them. She said:

> …in this picture, I wrote how some women [in the square drawing of a book with eyes], like they put on makeup or…and just to fit in the beauty standard, because I have no problem with makeup, I use a little bit of it, it's just that I think it should be used for what makes you happy rather than using it just to fit in some beauty standard. Because I've found some women that think like that…. And then here [in the lower right corner], I wrote how I noticed in schools, they still do that dress code thing where girls can't show their shoulders, 'cause, 'cause it'll distract the boys. Which…I really hate that, because, um, I don't see a problem with showing your shoulders because…it's a simple body part. Who's gonna be distracted from their education by staring at a shoulder?
>
> - Tianna

Tianna's collage and accompanying quote speak to the expectations that are placed on girls to look a particular way, not only because of unrealistic beauty standards, but also in relation to how they are often perceived in a world that sexualizes the bodies of girls (Graff et. al, 2012; Pomerantz, 2007; Pomerantz & Raby, 2023). Shauna Pomerantz (2007) writes about how dress codes "tell us how to read the student('s) body as good or bad, violent or safe, sexual or virginal, feminine or unfeminine, gang member or 'good citizen', appropriate or inappropriate" (p 377). In the sharing of her artwork, Tianna offered thoughtful criticism of how school dress codes surveil and control how girls are allowed to present themselves in public spaces, noting that these policies are often foregrounded with the underlying perception of girls' bodies as inherently sexual and, therefore, a risk to boys' learning and productivity (Pomerantz, 2007).

In addition to speaking about unrealistic beauty standards and the sexualization of their bodies, some of the girls in this study also spoke – albeit indirectly – about their

understandings and experiences of girlhood in relation to race, ethnicity, and culture. Two of the Black girls who participated, for example, spoke explicitly about their hair when describing what they like most about being a girl. In response to the question "What's important to you about being a girl?", Zendaya shared that it was "…my hair because I really love it. And like the way like, my mom does my hair. And then that's very important to me". Keila, in response to the same question, responded that:

> Well…important like details about me, like personally me and my kind, um…is like, my hair, like if I was caught cutting my, if I was caught cutting my hair, I would be in lots of trouble, because I've heard that like hair keeps like lots of memories because you've had it on your scalp since you were born.

The comments made about hair by Zendaya and Keila are aligned with what other research has found about Black girls spontaneously bringing up their hair when asked about gender (Onnie Rogers et al., 2022). Leonandra Onnie Rogers and colleagues (2022) write that when Black girls start talking about their hair in relation to gender, they are identifying the intersectional nature of their identities and lived experiences, pinpointing who they are not just as girls but as *Black* girls. As a white woman, and upon reflecting on my interactions with the Black girls in this study, I now understand that this casual mentioning of hair was a signal to me that "…hair is integral to their identity experience; a shared story about what it means to be a Black girl" (Onnie Rogers et al., 2022). Despite not asking explicit questions about identity experiences beyond gender, these girls were sharing with me that their experiences of gender were also inextricably linked to race. They were not just navigating traditional expectations of girlhood, but expectations of Black girlhood, experiences of which they may not have felt fully comfortable sharing with me. Drawing attention to their experiences of race also emphasizes the need to

center a critical approach to understanding and theorizing about girlhood, as an intersectional feminist analysis was essential for appreciating what Zendaya and Keila were telling me about the nuances of their lived experiences.

Alongside their recognition of complex and confusing social, cultural, and political gendered expectations that they are required to navigate as girls, most of the girls who participated in this study were simultaneously highly critical of them. Despite sometimes feeling pressured to abide by these expectations, they also rejected the premise that girls should look and act in a particular way and expressed frustration with the discrepancies between what was expected from girls versus boys. Interestingly, and in light of their identification of these discrepancies, some girls also alluded to the ways that gender is a social construct. Tianna, for example, shared that

> if you're a girl…there's just…no definition. I think one of my friends is the one who told me that there's no definition of being feminine…as long as to say, that as long as you think you are feminine, then that's totally fine.

It was also stated by multiple girls that 'gender' doesn't mean anything, anyways, such as by Heart Sparkle, who said "even though I know I AM a girl, I'm just like…it's just a gender, it's not really a big deal". So, while experiencing pressures related to their gender, they also tried to avoid feeling pressured to abide by the expectations that are often yoked with girlhood.

Gender Doesn't Really Mean Anything

> So, many people have different experiences, and…for me…well…for me, being a girl just means that I'm a girl, it doesn't really…I haven't really thought about the meaning much. But my experience…obviously has been…like some people are like, they really don't care what my gender is, and some people are a bit…ummm…they criticize you for your gender, for whatever reason.
>
> - Tianna

When I asked participants what it means to be a girl, some girls effectively shrugged their shoulders and said it didn't really mean anything to them. For example, Tianna and Heart Sparkle were critical of the idea that gender should inform who they are as people, with Heart Sparkle saying, "I don't really think about being a girl that much". Anne shared that she learned some of what it meant to be a girl through "talking with my friends who *identify* [emphasis added] the same way", indicating that being a girl is something that one can identify as and is not necessarily something that is inherent or biological (Butler, 1988, 1993).

This awareness that some of the girls had about navigating complex and often confusing expectations of gender while also recognizing that gender is tricky to define poses an interesting conundrum for girls generally. Acknowledging that gender is something that can be experienced or created instead of understanding it as inherent or biological is to acknowledge that gender is a social construct, which is not a concept that has been thoroughly explored in the critical childhood studies literature (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015). Children are often spoken about in gender-neutral terms (i.e., de facto male) (Bhana, 2019); when gender is explored, it is within stark binary contrasts between boys and girls (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015). Girls in this study, however, asserted that their conceptualizations of girlhood were influenced by the people around them and were therefore fluid and unstable, which further points to their understanding of gender as constructed. Although all the participants identified as girls – it was a criterion for participation, after all – some of them were still hesitant to claim that identity as wholly their own. They were instead thinking critically about how gender is entangled

with who they are as people, claiming that gendered expectations associated with girlhood were trivial to how they identified themselves.

We'd Like to Define Gender for Ourselves

> I don't like it how other people get to decide what we should do, what we should be. I think we can decide that for ourselves. Otherwise, we're just like robots.
>
> - Owl

Study participants, particularly when they were speaking about girlhood, expressed that they should be allowed to be themselves in whatever shape or form felt most reflective of who they understood themselves to be. This included the power to choose to wear the clothes that they were comfortable in and acting like 'themselves' outside of the parameters of gendered expectations. Owl, quoted above, passionately stated that girls are perfectly capable of deciding who they are and how they can present themselves. This same sentiment was shared by Heart Sparkle while she was sharing her collage (figure 3) during the first arts-based focus group, which she created using markers and magazine clippings. As she described her collage, she not only critiqued patriarchal and Eurocentric beauty standards, but also voiced the idea that everybody should be able to express themselves in whatever way felt most comfortable for them outside of the binaries of masculinity and femininity.

Figure 3. Heart Sparkle's collage in response to the question "What do you dislike about being a girl?"

This is Harry Styles [top right hand corner], because it was a cool picture, but also because…he's more, kinda what people think is not masculine enough, and I feel like a lot of, a lot of people like…like to say feminine and masculine or like this and that, but it's really just about you are allowed to wear whatever you like to wear, what makes you feel comfortable, like what your style is. I really like Harry Styles. Yeah. So, I also, put these two pictures [pointing to the two images on the bottom of the image] because these were models, but I noticed that a lot of the modeling pictures that they were like, umm…very, like female bodies and like making like the most perfect and, skinny and not like natural body that like someone would usually have, and I feel like that makes other young girls feel bad, or make other people who are looking at it feel like 'I need to be like that to show that like, I can get a job or do something that I want to do' like…to make yourself look like perfect like that.

- Heart Sparkle

It has been explored in the literature that children are capable of, and engaged in, thinking about and defining their own gender identities outside of the binaries of femininity and masculinity (Robinson, 2005). Yet, children's bodies and behaviours continue to be "highly regulated and policed" (Robinson, 2012a, p. 111), and childhood is often seen as a window in time in which seeds of "good" (Robinson, 2012b, p. 259) and 'bad' citizenship are planted, watered, and nurtured. Good citizenship, or what is socially considered to be good citizenship, often calls for an adherence to the white, middle-class, cisgendered and heterosexual status quo (Robinson, 2012). For children, any deviation from these normative expectations of gender and sexuality – including those related to dress and behaviour - can often result in "moral panic" (Robinson, 2008, p. 115). Children's imagining and creation of their own gender identities poses a challenge to sometimes strict governance imposed by adults, ultimately challenging the power that adults assume they have over children, their decision making, and their own bodies (Robinson, 2013).

In my study, the complexities of gender and girlhood were central to girls' discussions of what it means to be a girl. There was a consistent tension between what seemed to be two differing ideas about gender: the first, that gender was largely dictated by traditional (and patriarchal, colonial) expectations, and the second, that the constructed concept of gender was and should be inconsequential. Ultimately, all the participants agreed that they would prefer to be allowed to define gender for themselves – to dress, look, and behave in ways that felt more authentic to who they understand themselves to be as people, outside of social, cultural, and political gender expectations.

As children, participants had clearly started to question and think critically about the expectations of gender that were set out for them. In doing so they are asserting a form of bodily autonomy and citizenship that allows them to imagine and create identities of their own making. Children, considered to be "semi-citizens" (Cohen, 2005; Lister, 2007), often do not have control over important decisions that are made about their lives. As explored in the theory chapter, children are not able to conclude legal contracts, the knowledge that they are privy to is heavily surveilled, and they do not have autonomy over healthcare choices that are made about their own bodies. This is also true for the ways in which they are expected to embody gender; girls often are not granted choice or autonomy over how they would like to express their gender identities. In this sense, thinking critically about and imagining gender differently is both an act of citizenship as well as an act of resistance. Aligned with these ideas, and in relation to girls' assertion of citizenship, Anne specifically spoke to the ways in which gendered expectations not only include how girls should look and dress, but also that they remain quiet and not stand up for themselves:

> I think we're expected to act like really polite…and dainty, and nice, where boys can act tough, but we need to always act soft and nice. And if we're mad we just need to hide it, you don't act on it, you don't stand up for yourself and like, you wait to be talked to, you're supposed to do the cooking and cleaning and just…it's like very diminishing because it just feels like, like people expect you to just like not have a voice and to not…and hide and just like…wait for someone to ask you something.

Girls articulated that they know what is expected of them because of their gender. They also recognized that these expectations existed to keep them quiet and docile. By sharing that they want to define their own gender identities, they were suggesting acts of

resistance to patriarchal and colonial structures that they recognize as being intended to oppress and silence them.

When I first embarked upon this research, I expected to learn from girls about the explicit and overt actions that they were taking to create change in their schools, communities, and beyond. What I had not expected was to hear about the implicit and covert ways that they were actively resisting oppressive systems of power, effectively pushing the needle on social issues such as sexist gender norms and expectations. In the face of sometimes hard to resist pressure that they conform, the girls were engaged in subtle acts of resistance in their social and cultural worlds, asserting that they should, could, and ought to be able to speak and act in ways that feel most genuine to who they are as people. In this sense, they were participating in the shaping – or re-shaping – of gender ideals and expectations, expanding the boundaries of what historically and contemporarily are considered to constitute normative and appropriate understandings of gender.

In addition to these perhaps more subtle acts of resistance, in which they made efforts to exert control over their expressions of their gender identities, they were also engaged in overt actions to create social and environmental change. Resisting the status quo, not just through their social and environmental change efforts, but with how they express their gender identities, they demonstrated one of the many ways that the girls were asserting themselves as citizens with the right to participate and belong. What they shared with me, however, was that they were often not taken seriously in these efforts because of their identities as girls. Their positioning as girls served as a form of sexist

gate keeping in activist work. In other words, how girlhood has been constructed and perceived affected how girls in this study were able to meaningfully engage in social and environmental change. In the next chapter, I take up what the girls shared with me about their social and environmental change work experiences, specifically about how they are met with doubt when they try to create change despite having lived experience and an acute awareness of the issues that they perceive need changing.

Chapter 6: Girls are Met with Doubt and Resistance When Trying to Create Change

Study participants were engaged in a diverse range of actions to change their communities and worlds for the better. Many of them expressed an understanding of the connection between personal and political, even if not articulated using that type of language. Anne, for example, spoke about equitable representation and how it affects what girls personally feel like they can do:

> Like, before people started doing stuff, they might have thought "no, girls can't be in politics". Or no, girls can't be teachers, or astronauts are so many things. But by those people doing those things, and more and more people seeing them do it and wanting to do it…It proves to those people who think that they can't, that they can.

While many of the participants felt and articulated that they can do whatever they set their minds to, they also recognized that the realities of patriarchy and gender-based discrimination affect the opportunities that they are granted. They additionally understood this as impacting the social and environmental change work that they were engaged in.

In what follows, I outline the most common messages that the girls received, as well as what they had internalized and come to believe about what girls can – and cannot — do. I then share their beliefs about how the world is typically harder for girls and women, despite social and cultural discourses of "girl power" and the "can-do girl" that continue to pervade contemporary understandings of girlhood in dominant western culture and popular media (Gonick et al., 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2013; Taft, 2004). The ways in which the girls in this study spoke about these contradictory messages also emerged in their descriptions of the social and environmental change work that they endeavored upon. Throughout this chapter, I use a feminist postfeminist lens to interpret

what participants told me about the messages that they receive about being a girl and the challenges faced by girls more broadly. I delve too into how these contradictions affected the ways in which they engaged with their social and environmental change work.

Girl Power! and the "Can-Do Girl"

When speaking about what being a girl means to them in both the interviews and the focus groups, some girls shared that being a girl is "empowering", "special", and that girls can do anything. In her individual interview, for example, Dot stated that "being a girl is good…and…what you put your mind into, then you will accomplish it", as well as that "girls can become like the CEO of a company, and they can do everything they put their mind in and believe". Similarly, Owl felt that "being a girl feels like […] I could do all that I want to do. And I could become what I want to become…like a superpower!". Winter shared with me that "being a girl means I can do whatever I want to do" and that "it feels special". Some of the girls, when asked, had overwhelmingly positive things to say about what it meant to be a girl and shared optimistic perspectives about what they could accomplish in their lives because of (and not in spite of) their gender.

In addition to the sentiments shared by girls in my individual and group discussions with them about their perceived benefits of being a girl, some of the artwork created by girls in each of the focus groups reflected these ideas. In the first focus group, for example, the participants were provided with a choice of questions to answer through the creation of collage. The questions asked about their understandings and experiences of girlhood, and included questions such as "What do you like most about being a girl?", "What does being a girl feel like?" and "What do you not like about being a girl"? In this

focus group, Owl chose to create a piece of art to speak to what being a girl feels like for her (figure 4).

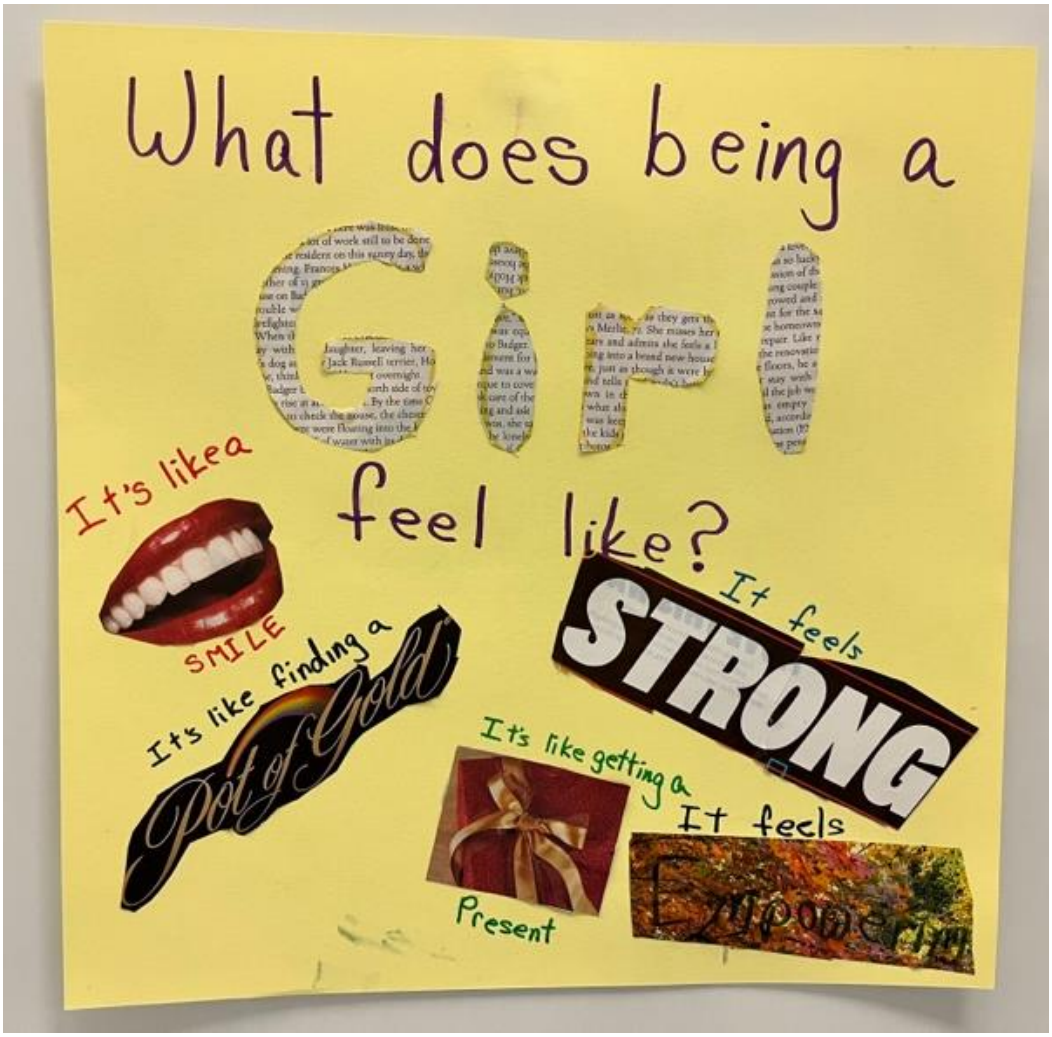

Figure 4. Owl's collage in response to the question "What does being a girl feel like?"

In her verbal description of her collage, Owl shared:

> …the question I chose was…what does being a girl feel like? I chose that question because I had a lot to say about it. I chose the paper color because it just feels like a nice happy color. And the pictures I included were the smile...and this was from a chocolate thing. I said that it's like having a pot of gold, it's a present…and I just wrote, chose to put a background in about empowering, and I…this word "strong" because it feels like nice, it feels like a smile, it feels like finding a pot of gold, like getting a present, it feels empowering, and it feels strong.

Tianna shared similar beliefs that girls can do anything. She was not able to attend the second arts-based focus group so instead participated in a second individual arts-based interview with me. When I asked her what she thought she should be doing to make things better for the next generation of girls, she responded with:

> I want to be able to, like, prove that girls can do anything because I know a lot of people have proved that in the past. However, the stereotype still goes on that girls can't do this. Girls can't do that. I want to be able to change that.

Inspired by that question and our conversation about the next generation of girls, when making her poster with a message to share with other people about what girls are doing to create change, Tianna chose to expand upon the ideas that she had about what she would like girls of the future to know. When I had asked her what her message said, she read to me: "Girls of the FUTURE, you can achieve anything. Don't EVER let others [tell you] what you <u>can</u> and <u>can't DO</u>" (figure 5).

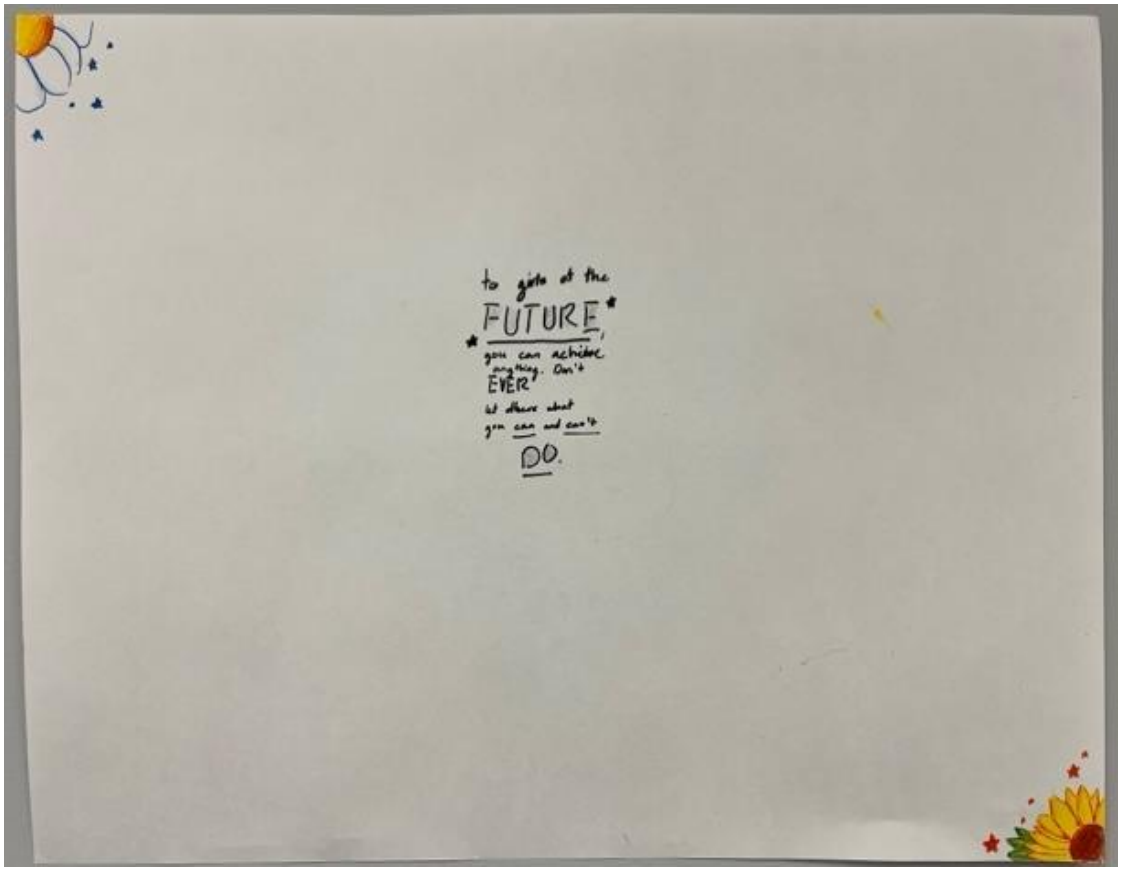

Figure 5. Tianna's message to share with others about what girls are doing to create change. She chose to direct her message towards girls of the future.

Tianna told me that she believed her message was important because of what she hoped for the future of her family. She said:

> …my family is probably going to continue on, and I want to be able to share that with the people in my family in the future, and then they can keep sharing it on to other people that they know.

Both Owl and Tianna thus shared through their artwork their strong beliefs that girls can do anything and that being a girl is special and empowering. Tianna, echoing others, spoke about defying stereotypes that girls are *lesser than* or that they *can't* do when compared to boys. These sentiments were additionally shared by Dot,

who in the second focus group where girl participants were asked to create messages to share about what girls are doing to create change, created a poster that contains two key points (figure 6):

- "girls are trying to Help the environment and making an effort and people shouldn't put them down or say anything mean to them,
- Girls can do what ever they want in life"

Figure 6. Dot's message about what girls are doing to create change.

When asked, Dot stated that she felt that her message was important because "I want every girl to know that they're special".

The artwork that was created by Tianna, Owl, and Dot, as well as their descriptions of their artwork, are consistent with what have been identified in the

scholarly literature as prevalent messages of "girl power" and the "can-do girl" (Mauk et al., 2020; Pomerantz et al., 2013; Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). Messages of girl power, and a championing of the can-do girl, can now be found in music, television shows, on the internet, and, as stated by Owl, even "shirts…books…and keychains". As explored in chapter two of this dissertation, in an envisioned girl power world, girls are empowered and able to do whatever they strive towards, with the impetus that "sociocultural and political change happens as soon as one exceptional girl puts her mind to it" (Bent, 2020, p. 800).

Although many of the girls in this study felt like they could do anything, they also saw that the structures and systems around them made it incredibly difficult – if not impossible – for them to do so. They were able to identify that girls and women have it generally harder in life than boys and men, despite some participants sharing strong and persistent messages informed by girl power discourses. In many ways, they were attempting to navigate postfeminist ideals while recognizing and naming the very real consequences of sexism and patriarchy (Pomerantz et al., 2013). The girls in this study appeared to recognize that, while the ideas behind girl power may be nice to hear, there are some areas in their lives in which these ideas may not actually be true.

We Hear and Know That Life is Hard for Girls and Women

In their interviews as well as in the discussions that we had in each of the focus groups, participants proclaimed that girls can do anything that they believe in. While a hopeful idea, this notion implies that they believe that girls no longer face gender-based oppression, let alone oppression related to race, class, ability, gender, Indigeneity, or

nationhood. This sentiment is, unfortunately, not an accurate depiction of the lived experiences of girls around the globe. Aligned with intersectional feminist theories (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 2019), children are affected by macro axes of power and oppression, including sexism; sexism has very real impacts on the lived experiences of girls. In Canada, for example, when compared with boys of the same age, girls report sexual assault at a rate seven times higher than that of boys (Conroy, 2018). According to police-reported data, girls are significantly more likely to experience family violence when compared to boys (Statistics Canada, 2019). Girls between the ages of five to 17 years old are twice as likely to be prescribed medication for anxiety and mood disorders (CIHI, 2022). In the employment sector, the gendered wage gap begins as early as age 12, and girls as young as 15 years old make an average of $3.00 less per hour than boys (Girl Guides of Canada, 2019). Girls are very much still at a disadvantage when compared with boys, and experiences of violence and oppression are more intense for girls who are racialized, Indigenous, poor, disabled, or newcomers (CWF, 2022).

Despite girls sharing strong messages of girl power throughout their participation in the project, they also often shared examples of how life is particularly hard for girls and women. Keila, for example, spoke with me in her individual interview about how girls can be victims of violence to a greater extent than boys can. She told me about how one of the teachers at her school had taught a group of girls how to report what I understood Keila to be explaining as sexual violence, effectively teaching that group of girls how to keep each other safe:

> it was one of my uh, one of my lessons, it was on health, and it was talking about, so the boys were with the male teacher, and the girls were with the female teacher,

> and we were learning about girlhood and the boys were learning about boyhood, and then the teacher took us to like a special room, built in like…pods, and she said that, once you girls get older, and if it ever happens in the school, that all you need to go…is go into her office and it will be there, and she taught me…more than I needed, more than I needed to, because she's like…she has like emergency kits in there, and she gave one to each of us, and she's like…that will protect a friend, or to protect yourself…she was just trying to keep everyone safe

Keila had an awareness of the violence that girls might experience as they moved through the world and had been in situations where she was to think about how to protect herself and others. Anne had a similar awareness about the violence that girls and women sometime face and spoke with me about how girls and women often show up for each other in community after an incident of violence had occurred. She said:

> everybody kind of has each other's back in that community…and like, when someone's job or someone's like, or someone gets attacked…in the community of like women or girls, people, like respond to it, and help out.

Aligned with the acknowledgement that girls are more likely to experience violence than boys, some of the girls in this study spoke about their experiences of generally being treated differently and as lesser than boys. In her individual interview, Heart Sparkle stunningly stated that "I know a lot of people treat girls like…treat girls like second class citizens sometimes". By using "second class citizens" in her comment, Heart Sparkle was mobilizing a term used by activists and scholars alike over the past number of decades to describe groups of people who are not afforded the same set of rights as the dominant social group. Within the context that Heart Sparkle was using it, she was referring to how girls are treated as inferior to boys because of their gender. This idea reflects Heart Sparkle's awareness of sexism, which many of the girls in this study spoke explicitly about. Tianna, for example, said:

> I've realized like, um, I've had some, like boys on the school…on the school grounds, they've been saying like, oh, women and men are equal, which I do agree with, but then they'll go on and on, belittling women, so then I'm confused…what they believe in, do they think we're equal? Or do – and then when somebody calls them out for belittling others, they'll…they'll go on and on about "oh no no, they are equal". But then they'll…but then they'll discriminate women afterwards.

Tianna's quote speaks about the sexism experienced by girls but also draws attention to the contradictions that girls in this study expressed related to having to navigate between postfeminist and feminist ideas. She explains hearing that gender equality has been achieved, which is a postfeminist idea, while also noting that girls and women still experience discrimination. Through her articulation of the boys in her school saying that girls have achieved gender equity while simultaneously acting in ways that imply that girls are not equal, Tianna pinpoints these complex realities.

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, many of the girls referred to boys as the comparative standard when they spoke about their own social and cultural positioning in the world. Dot, for example, described her collage in response to the question "what does being a girl feel like?" (figure 7) as follows:

> I put that [mind] on there because, like, sometimes people think stuff like, and like, like…think other people think stuff about me, about girls…like think stuff like they can't play this, or anything…like they can't do what boys can do…

Figure 7. Dot's collage in respond to the question: "what does being a girl feel like?"

Similarly, and within the context of a larger conversation during the second arts-based focused groups, Winter and I engaged in an exchange as she described the message that she had created to share about what girls are doing to create change (figure 8):

> Winter: So, um, this poster has like, um, like this just says, says this is spelled wrong, but it says girls can do everything boys can, and then, um, and then here says don't listen to anyone who says something mean. And then I also wrote healthy environment but, like, putting like I just put like trees, and like good grass. And then I just basically decorated the rest.
> Alexe: Okay, and who would you share this message with?

Winter: Um, I would share it with everyone around me, and also like…my school.

Alexe: Yeah? And can I ask…why do you think this message is important?

Winter: Because like…like it has to stop. Like, not keep going on.

Alexe: Okay…okay…you mean like the inequalities between girls and boys?
Winter: Yeah.

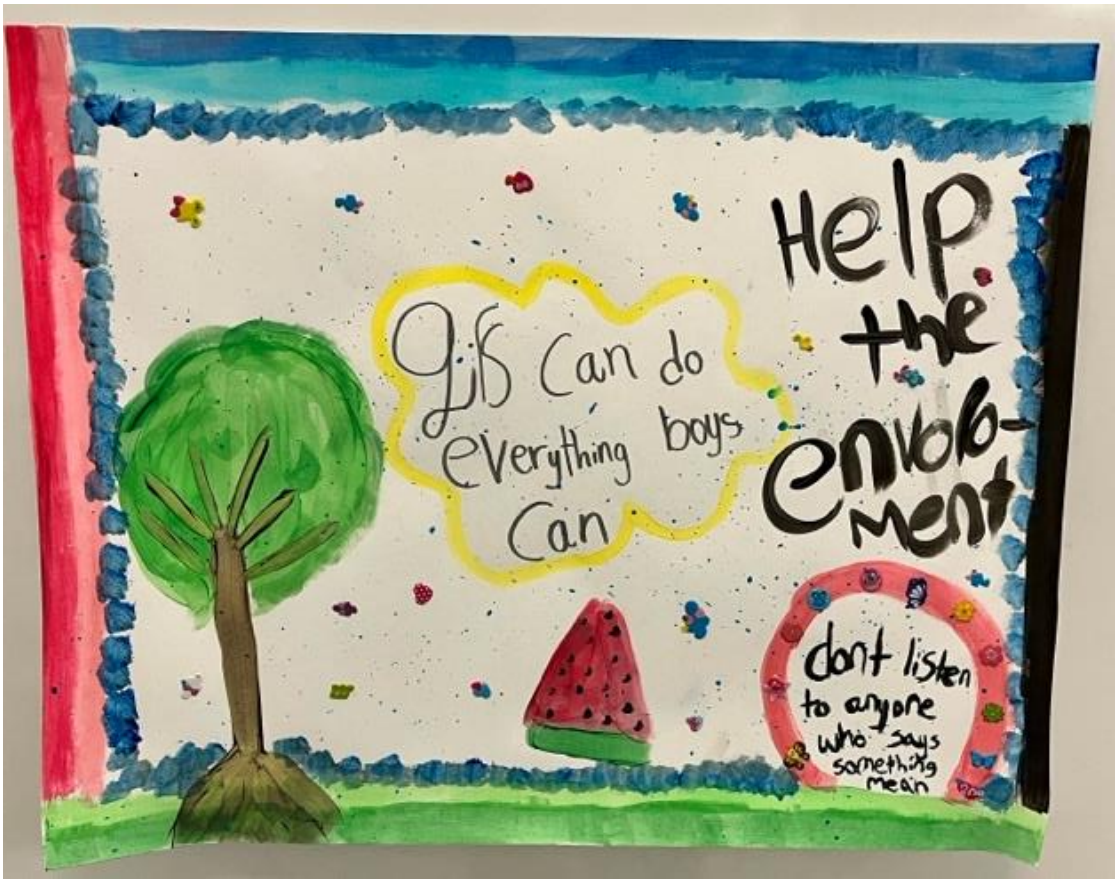

Figure 8. Winter's message about what girls are doing to create change.

Participants had a lot to say about how they are treated unfairly when compared with boys, drawing particular attention to the boys in their schools and in their families. Keila shared that in her family: "I want my brothers to do the dishes, but since I'm a girl, I'm supposed to do the dishes" and that she believes "it's kind of like…kind of like

sexist! ‘Cause they’re telling me to do things because I’m a girl, and they don’t have to do it because they’re a boy”. Isla cited the boys in her school outwardly saying that they are superior to girls: “Ummm, sometimes at my school, like boys say [they] can do things better than girls, and like…it’s not true…like, and…I don’t like that. But they won’t stop…doing it”, as did Zendaya: “in my classroom, umm….there's boys…that like, think that girls are like…ummm aren’t good enough and stuff”. In both private and public spheres, in their homes and in their schools, girls in this study were hearing – and resisting – messages that they were inferior to boys.

As the girls shared stories about how they were treated unfairly when compared to the boys in their lives, they also spoke about how they believed these disparities were rooted in what was expected of them because of traditional gender roles. They recognized that the sexism they experienced was part of a bigger story, one that has historically considered women and girls as inferior to men and boys. Serving as an expansion on what was explored in Chapter Five in which girls felt they were often struggling to navigate traditional gender roles, it was explained that these traditional roles are based on assumptions of women and girls as lesser than, which has effectively authorized their subordination.

Hearing, seeing, and experiencing the belief of girls as lesser-than when compared to boys posed a tricky conundrum for study participants. They identified that these realities were inherently unfair while simultaneously grappling with unrelenting messages of girl power heard in pop culture, their schools, and at home that tell them that they are powerful and capable of anything they set their minds to. Balancing the contradictory

ideas that girls are placed at a disadvantage because of their gender, which is a feminist issue, with the notion that "girls can do anything", a postfeminist idea because it negates sexism, effectively "[traps] girls between an idealized neoliberal girl subject who is told she 'runs the world' *and* the everyday realities of girls' lives, which include experiences of inequality" (Pomerantz et al., 2013, p.187). While potentially impacting girls more broadly in their lives, these contradictions, and this trap, also affects how girls can create meaningful social and environmental change. In what follows, I share how the girls articulated these challenges as they worked to create change in response to issues that they've seen and experienced in the world around them.

We've Experienced and Witnessed Social and Environmental Issues

> I don't even really know, 'cause there's never really been a time in my life where…there hasn't been something bad happening with the climate, like, there's always been something…like, worse about it. And I can't even tell 'cause like some of my, my grandparents about it in more rural, rural places, and like breathing in, breathing in the air from Toronto…like, the difference from when I go there to back to Toronto, like, you can feel the air quality difference. And just like, how polluted some of the cities are but like…I don't even know what life would been in completely unpolluted air would feel like.
>
> - Anne

Along with their articulation of sexism, some of the girls shared examples of the social and environmental issues that they are aware of through their lived experience. They shared information that they had about various issues with me, as well as some of the emotions that they felt when thinking and talking about each issue. In a description of her observations of the air quality in Toronto, Anne stated that she could not remember a time in her life when air pollution was not an issue. Similarly, Isla also shared her

observations of environmental pollutions when she stated, “in the ocean I saw garbage, and on the beach…and, on the ground around the road”, while Winter said:

> When I’m going somewhere I always like see garbage like on the ground and at my school we have the big grass and there’s some garbage there…and also like I always see pollution, like maybe like…when I’m going somewhere...like Toronto or somewhere like that, somewhere far, like when I’m going, I just see some like building…maybe like factories and like pollution coming into the air.

The girls knew about various environmental issues such as air pollution, littering, and climate change because they had witnessed and experienced them firsthand. Beyond seeing and experiencing environmental issues, however, some of the participants also had an awareness of political actions being taken to address them. Owl told me that she had intended on attending the #HandsOffTheGreenbelt protest with her mother, a protest to bring attention to how the Ontario provincial government had moved to privately sell protected farmland in 2022 (CBC, 2022). Anne had similarly shared that she had attended a #HandsOffTheGreenbelt protest in Toronto and had protested the development of new pipelines by signing petitions and attending rallies.

As I engaged in conversation with participants through each research activity, they also shared the knowledge that they had about different social issues that they had learned about from their families, in school, and through the news. Heart Sparkle, for example, told me that she was very concerned about the war that Russia had waged in Ukraine. She was directly connected to and affected by the war because her dad’s side of the family was Ukrainian. Heart Sparkle wanted to do something to support the people of Ukraine, so she decided to organize and host a fundraiser. She asked for the support of her dad to help her create small, wooden Ukrainian flags, that she then walked around and sold

door-to-door to the people in her neighborhood for a pay-what-you-can donation. She proudly told me that she raised $500 that she then donated to a Ukrainian aid agency.

In addition to her advocacy for the people of Ukraine, Heart Sparkle had also advocated in her school to keep the materials from Black History Month posted beyond the month of February, stating that "we should leave it up for a whole year…'cause it's more than just a month". When asked what message she would like to share with people about what girls are doing to create change in the world, Heart Sparkle stated that she would like to advocate for changes in how educational staff respond to bullying. In describing her message (figure 9), Heart Sparkle said:

> on the message, it was kind of just like, not a very long one, it says "students shouldn't have to feel unsafe at school". At the bottom I put "bullying has to stop". Okay, so, and, um, I put it on the top a bunch of fingerprints of my fingers all across because I thought this represents people's thoughts and feelings during school that's dark.
>
> Sometimes it can be like, okay, but then that turns really back to not good and like, sometimes a lot of people struggle really a lot in school, and, I thought that if my principal would have seen this, he would have like, taken it more seriously because for like, for countless of times kids have been to his office complaining about like other kids like hurting their feelings a lot.
>
> Nothing has really changed. Like, other than like all the announcements going like "be nice to someone," "smile," but that doesn't really help…anything. And I think a lot of teachers are forgetting how actually dangerous and harmful bullying can be.
>
> And how in the past, people have like lost their lives to it. Or it's gotten so bad that people have like, shut down completely. And…it's important to remember that at school.

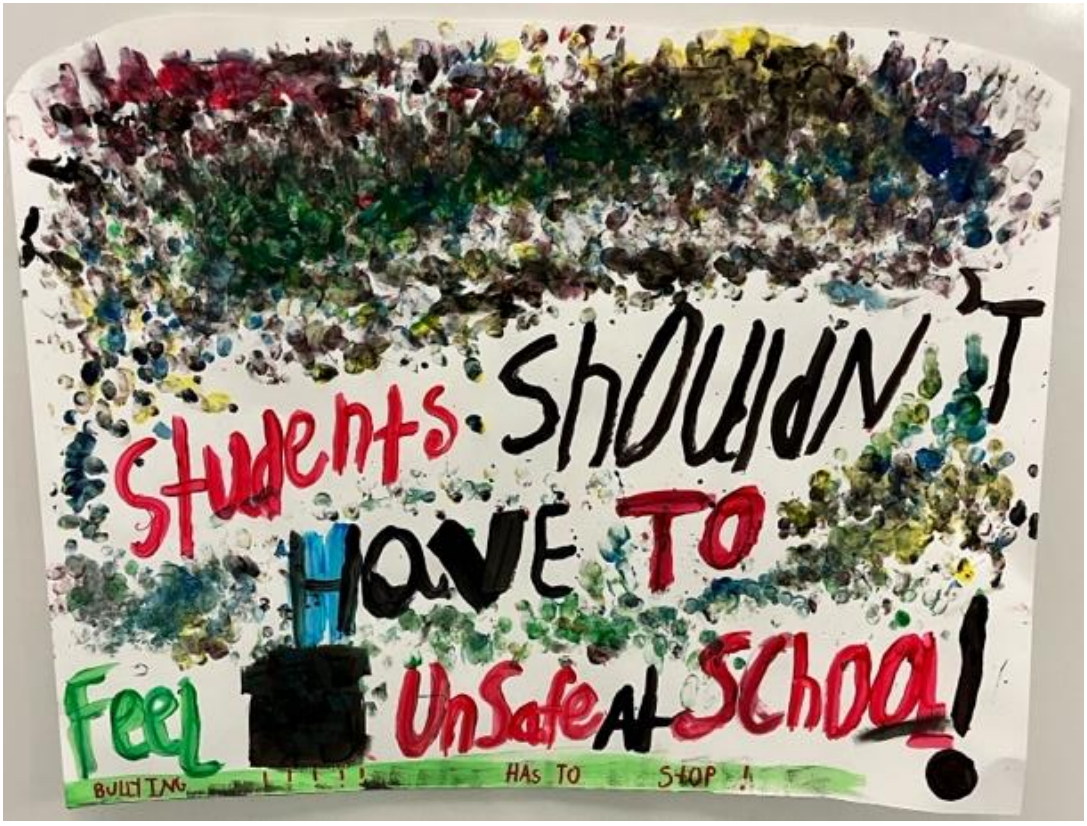

Figure 9. Heart Sparkle's message to people about what girls are doing to create change about bullying in schools.

Like Heart Sparkle, Isla also wanted to share a message about bullying, as well as to encourage people to help the environment. To describe her message to people about what girls are doing to create change (figure 10), she stated:

> the poster I made was about like helping the environment and stop bullying, um, so…we have to stop like throwing garbage, um, into the sea and stuff and…it hurts some of the animals there. And on the stop bullying part, there's a picture of these people, um, that…look different and, or some that want to play and they're just bullying and like laughing at them and saying they can't play….um, and who I want to share this with is like maybe my school or my neighborhood…and yeah.

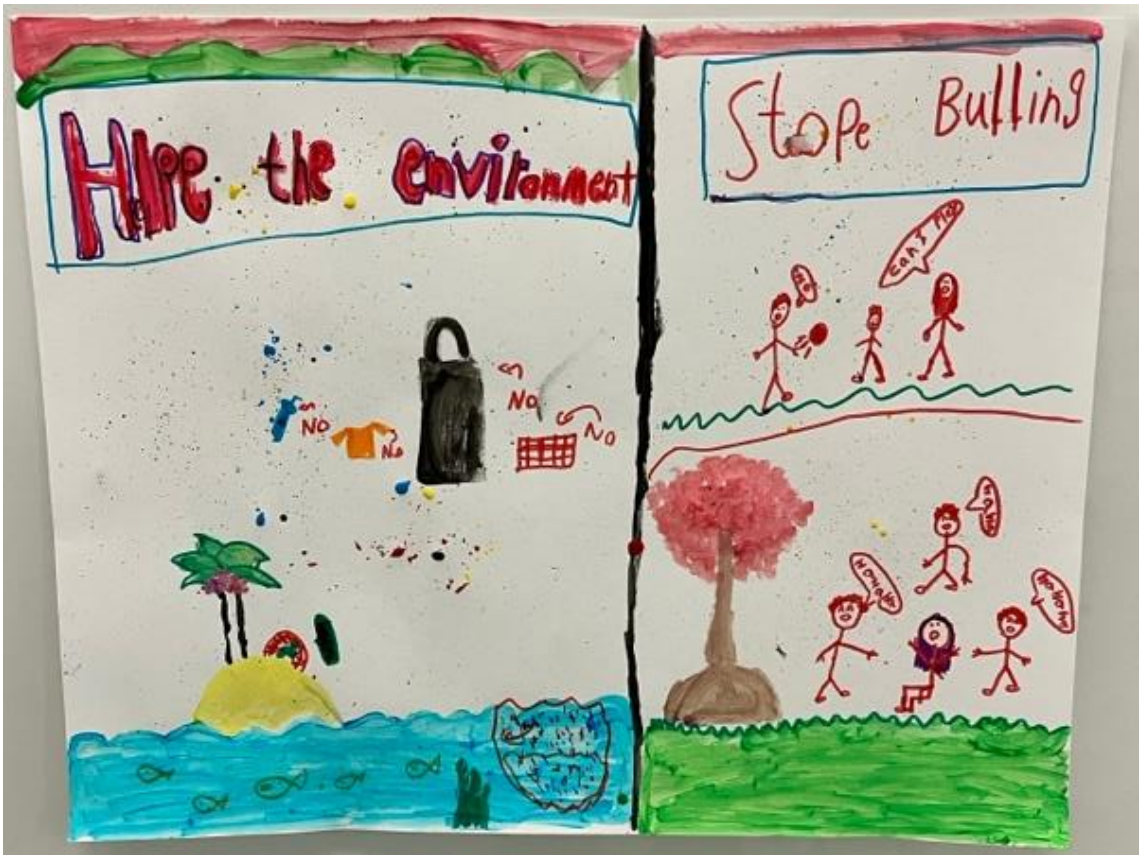

Figure 10. Isla's message to people about what girls are doing to create change about both bullying and environmental pollution.

Participants had an acute awareness of the world around them, knew which issues they'd like to see change, and had ideas for how to change them. They were aware of these social and environmental issues because they had experienced or seen them firsthand, learned about them from their families, schools, or from the news, and felt motivated to take action because they had visions for how their communities could be made better. They also shared, however, that they are often met with the doubt and resistance of teachers, media agencies, and other adults when they tried to create change.

These doubts were primarily rooted in what they perceived to be discrimination based on both their age as well as their gender.

We Know That People Doubt Us

> I think that people sometimes doubt girls is because other people think girls, um, are weak and can't do anything for themselves, and I need other people to help them. And I also think that, um, they think, other people think girls are useless, and they don't like...belong here.
>
> - Zendaya

Zendaya's statement about people doubting girls speaks explicitly to assumptions about what girls can do that are rooted in traditional and gendered expectations. Within the context of the gender binary, girls are positioned as inherently feminine and therefore possessing traits associated with femininity, such as being naturally nurturing, docile, and soft-spoken; these traits are often dichotomized to those of intelligence, strength, and confidence, which are associated with masculinity. For some girls, these assumptions had significant effects on how they felt they were perceived by others while engaging in work to create social and environmental change. As articulated by Anne while describing her message to people about what girls are doing to create change (figure 11):

> my poster, my message is so, sometimes when I get asked, when I'm like, well, I want this person to excel because they're girl, and people ask me, "well, what *do* girls do?"
>
> Sometimes, they're just like, well, I mean, I know all of these men who do all have these amazing, important, good things, but I don't hear anything about women, and it's usually meant in like, a bad way and like, what do we even do? We do nothing. We just go and cook and clean. The men do everything good. Um, so, uh, the thing that I wrote at the top is what do girls do? This is what we do.
>
> Um, and the photos that I put here, were, where we helped, well, Olivia Chow is an example of someone. She's our mayor. She's a girl. We build the world. We love. We help out with feminism. We stop climate change. We do Black Lives

> Matter stuff. Um, we make art, we make people happy. We help the LGBTQ community.
>
> And these are just like some of the things that we do. And that's kind of my answer to that question 'cause I get asked it quite a bit. Um, I would share the message with…I think especially in my school, because that's where I've heard lots of these comments, and also just Toronto!

Figure 11. Anne's message about what girls are doing to create change.

Anne's emphasis on "what *do* girls even do?" is an interesting question, and one that she felt that many people were thinking about. The doubt that people continue to have of girls' abilities, according to Anne, is influenced by sexist perceptions that are

rooted in traditional gender expectations, such as that girls should instead be cooking and cleaning. Again, it was noticed that girls are placed at a disadvantage because of their gender, even within the context of their working to create social or environmental change. It was articulated by the girls in this study that girls are not typically expected to be concerned with the matters of the world around them, most notably because of how girls are expected to be primarily focused on acting traditionally feminine, quiet, and docile. To be a 'good' citizen is to act in accordance with traditional beauty standards and to follow the status quo (Robinson, 2012), which is in direct contradiction to the ways one must act in order to influence change or to speak out against injustice.

> I'm not sure, I guess it's…kind of could be like, some kind of like a stereotype. Like, girls, like, "lady like", just like…you're supposed to be very polite…don't speak your mind. I guess that's kinda like, old. But I think some people still believe in that.
>
> - Owl

Participants, like Owl, pinpointed that people might not take girls seriously as powerful agents of social and environmental change because of harmful and sexist stereotypes that assert that girls should stay quiet and do as they are told. This is consistent with the messaging that girls shared about what they knew about traditional gender roles and the expectation that they continue to be primarily responsible for domestic duties within the private sphere. Anne also articulated that people might not take girls seriously for the work that they are doing to create change because of how girls are generally perceived:

> I think, yeah, I think sometimes it means that we're less noticeable to people…or people try to not notice us, specifically, so like if there was a little boy who wants to support something in this protest, they might go to them to make the

> views…the viewers who are more sexist or small minded, happy, so that those people continue watching rather than going to me or other girls at that same event who are doing same or like.

Anne specifically speaks to the ways in which girls are essentially rendered invisible in spaces that are concerned with social and environmental justice, often eclipsed by the involvement of boys who are doing the same work. In speaking about the viewers of news channels, however, she is also speaking implicitly about adults who have narrow ideas about what girls can, should, and ought to be doing. These perceptions are rooted in sexism, as stated by Anne and as explored throughout this chapter, but also in adultism, which is a "form of institutionalized oppression that deprives youth of opportunities for political agency and self-determination" (Hall, 2019, p. 1293). As explored in the theory chapter (chapter three), adultism is likened to sexism and racism in that it is an institutionalized political power structure that serves to oppress and marginalize certain groups of people, and grants inequitable social, cultural, and political power to adults over children (Smith, 2024).

Interestingly, and despite Anne naming that she has witnessed boys gaining more attention for their activist efforts, it is noteworthy that all of the famous activists are girls. The fame attributed to Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai, for example, have been granted massive international platforms for their activist efforts. There are no boy activists that have gained as much widespread attention or notoriety. This is a tricky tension that was revealed when Anne shared that all the boys at her local protests gain more attention than the girls; as she did so, she was also pointing to the contradictory nature of exceptional girl discourses. Girls are considered and platformed as exceptional

in contexts where the story is told that they have done it themselves as individuals and without the support of other people, systems, or institutions (Benigno, 2023; Bent, 2020; Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). Until a girl is platformed as exceptional – a neoliberal idea that champions individualism – it makes good sense that typical sexist dynamics continue to persist in the daily lives of every other girl in our communities. While a few 'exceptional' girl activists may have the attention of the masses, other girls working to create social and environmental change in their schools, communities, and beyond are still being overshadowed by the efforts of boys.

The girls identified that they and their social and environmental change endeavours were often not taken seriously not just because of their gender, but also because of their age. Tianna spoke to the idea that adults frequently acted surprised that a child might be interested in social and environmental issues. She had participated in three political campaigns, during which she canvassed in her neighborhood to support local political candidates. She shared that "I've been told by the other adults in, within that campaign, that the campaign groups, I've been told that it's very cool that although I'm still like…a child…uh…that I decide to be involved in those kinds of things…". The phrasing of this statement implies that children are not otherwise considered to care or be involved in politics.

The participants shared countless stories and created pieces of art about how they face doubt and resistance when they are trying to create meaningful change in their communities and beyond. They cited their gender, and one of the girls explicitly cited her age, as fuelling this doubt and resistance, which are ultimately informed by larger systems

of sexism and adultism. Experiencing doubt and resistance as they tried to create change was a stark contrast to the messages that they continuously received about the political power of girls, however, as well as what they thought and felt of their own capacity to create change. Navigating conflicting feminist realities and postfeminist ideals thus proved to be a tricky balance. Despite these challenges, they still felt passionate about working to make their worlds better, persisting through the challenges while looking to their families, friends, and collective histories for support and inspiration.

Working to create change despite the resistance that they felt they faced because of their age and gender is aligned with what critical citizenship scholars have written about children's citizenship (Larkins, 2014). As also explored in the theory chapter of this dissertation (chapter three), the actions of children cannot be thought of within the terms of "active citizenship" because children are not yet considered to be full citizens (Cohen, 2005; Larkins, 2014; Lister, 2007). Instead, and as the girls in this study had articulated themselves doing, children are often left to participate as citizens in spaces of their own making. By resisting what was otherwise expected of them regarding traditional gender roles, conventional beauty standards, and docility and quietness typically associated with girlhood, the girls were actively participating in the redefinition of what it might mean to be a girl. As they told me about the types of challenges they faced in doing so, they also spoke about other girls and women they were familiar with who had created change, which I explore further in the next findings chapter.

Chapter 7: Feminist Histories are Inspiring and Motivating

Throughout my research, girls shared with me many of the reasons that they were motivated to work towards social and environmental change. As explored in chapters five and six, some of these reasons were related to their lived experiences and witnessing social and environmental issues – issues that they perceived as needing to be addressed. They were motivated to work towards making their communities better because they deemed it necessary to do so. In what was, for me, additionally exciting and heartening, participants shared that they were further inspired to work for change so as to maintain the gains that had already been fought for by women and girls before them. This was an interesting juxtaposition to the postfeminist associations often attributed to girls; contrary to postfeminist messaging of individual action and success, they spoke of generational solidarity and collective action (even if not in those terms). They acknowledged that they have their current set of rights because of the activism and advocacy of girls and women that happened in the past, and they felt motivated to maintain and extend these legacies. Participants vehemently believed that girls and women deserve rights and fairness equal to that accorded to men, and some of them told of how they were involved in politics and campaigns so that they could influence change in these arenas. For many of the girls, this included involvement in strategies of community engagement such as educating people about the issues that were impacting them.

We Have What We Have Because Of The Women and Girls Before Us

> …being a girl can help us change the world because…we've already overcome, we know how to overcome challenges, and we're not oblivious to the problems.
> - Owl

In the first arts-based focus group, Owl shared that she believed that girls are well positioned to create social and environmental change because girls already have an acute awareness of the problems that exist in the world. She stated that this is due to their awareness of the changes wrought by the historical efforts of girls and women fighting for their rights, acknowledging the work and activism of the women and girls that had come before them:

> I feel like, being a girl like, it impacts us making change, because like, we…like…we…the girls of the past, they like started, they made changes, and I think it makes us believe we have the power to do the same.

Owl also spoke about the choices that she and other girls have resulting from this earlier activism, choices that in Canada have not historically been available to girls and women:

> I think the part about girls, I liked about being girl is, I know what other girls before did. They didn't have as many choices in the past to do anything…they didn't have any options, but now they made it so that we have options, we can do what we want.

Her knowledge of the histories of girls' and women's rights were incredibly motivating for Owl, who spoke multiple times throughout the study about this type of knowledge. She shared a deep admiration for the women engaged in hard-fought battles of the past, stating that "it does motivate me, like they did something to change it, and so I could too". As she spoke of this in the first arts-based focus group, many of the other participants nodded their heads in agreement, which ultimately sparked a conversation that honoured feminist activist histories. While not all the girls necessarily had the same degree and breadth of knowledge about feminist histories as Owl did, they seemed to agree on knowing that the work of girls and women before them had happened, that it

was important, and that it affected their lives as they now know them. Anne, for example, shared that she held the same sentiments as Owl, stating:

> I think um, very similar thing to what Owl said, like, yeah there's a lot of motivation. First of all, because there's so much change that we need to happen. And…it's really inspiring to know that it's already been done by at least one person even more, but just even if just knowing that one person has gotten a little bit of change, it gives some hope that you could do that too. And you could help with that. And that it's not impossible.

Anne also stated that she felt proud to be a part of a group that had created so much change in the past, knowing that girls and women have had to overcome many struggles to achieve what they have now:

> What makes me proud is…what we have overcome, and like, this group has had to overcome so many struggles in the past…and today, there's still so much more to improve on. But…I think it makes me feel really proud, and it feels empowering to know…how much this group has made change.

In response to Owl and Anne, Heart Sparkle similarly shared her belief that being a girl was a strength when it comes to creating change because of the collective histories shared by women and girls. She acknowledged that change has been and continues to be fought for on the basis of gender-based discrimination, but also on the basis of gender expression and race:

> um….what about about being a girl makes it helpful to change the world? Um, I think it's because, women have had a lot more discrimination than men, for like…different reasons, uhh…it could be race, it could be just because you are girl, you look too feminine, or if people assume you're being really feminine, but that will be like better because people know how much, uh, more challenging…challenges women have had to face than men, and they will probably listen to you more. So that's my opinion.

That the girls acknowledged that there are feminist histories to be honoured is a direct contradiction to the neoliberal notions of citizenship that underpin individualized

girl power and can-do girl discourses. This tension between feminist politics and postfeminist discourse is aligned with the findings explored in chapter six, during which the girls shared that they believed they could do anything they set their mind to while also acknowledging that girls face barriers because of gender-based discrimination. When the girls articulated their recognition of the women and girls who previously fought for their rights, they were also identifying that none of the rights that they have are the consequence of the hard work of one individual person. This recognition was profound for two reasons. First, and despite persistent girl power messaging that insists that individual girls have the power to change the world if only they try hard enough, participants were articulating that change does in fact take the concerted, sustained, and collective effort of communities of people. Second, participants were situating themselves, their own change efforts and those of contemporary feminist activists, within the greater historical context of feminist social movements. This knowledge about and connection to previous social movements has been written about by social movement scholars as essential to the continuation of activist work as it supports people to believe they too can create change (Choudry, 2015). Having knowledge of historical social movements, including feminist movements, creates opportunities for people to learn from past experiences while feeling a sense of connection to people who may view the world in the same way (Blake & Ooten, 2008; Choudry, 2015).

Despite the hard work undertaken by the women and girls before them, and in honour of all that had already been fought for and won, the girls recognized that it was important for them to continue fighting for change because there is still a lot that needs to

be done to achieve equality. They aligned themselves both with feminist histories as well as feminist futures in their proclamation of wishing to continue the fight for equality and shared that it was still required that they – and all girls of their generation – continue working for change for a myriad of reasons. Owl, for example, stated that there is still a lot of work to do. She said that:

> I feel like…I wish it was a thing of the past but still there's still some discrimination…we might have to work harder than boys just to do the same thing…to get recognized.

Like Owl, Heart Sparkle articulated that they must continue pushing for change because girls and women are still disadvantaged when compared to boys and men:

> I think it's better to create change for the next generation of girls because, even though throughout generations before us, it's gotten really bad, from better to like, now, which is like a lot better, but still, there is still things that need to be changed, and if we don't keep changing throughout time, then it's not going to get any better.

Heart Sparkle's concern for future generations of girls also aligned with what has been previously found in the literature about young women and girls' feelings of responsibility to work towards more equitable futures (Kennelly, 2014; Taft, 2014). Although this sense of responsibility is characteristic of how children often exercise citizenship – claiming responsibility for shaping societal social, cultural, and political futures is an indicator of children's political citizenship (Lister, 2007) – there is also a particularly gendered way of describing social and environmental change work as a 'responsibility'. In her work with young women activists, Kennelly (2014) theorized that this gendered sense of responsibility likely emerged at the crux of traditional gendered caretaking roles and neoliberal and postfeminist individualism. Girls and young women

have traditionally been socialized to take care of others within the private sphere; this responsibility to care, coupled with the neoliberal and postfeminist attitudes that shift collective responsibility onto the shoulders individual girls to create change, results in this uniquely gendered citizenship experience of responsibility (Kennelly, 2014; Taft, 2014). Although neither Kennelly (2014) nor Taft (2014) have explored these concepts with girls of younger ages, these same sentiments of gendered responsibility to care are glaringly apparent in what participants shared with me throughout this study.

To further demonstrate this articulation of a gendered sense of responsibility, and thus a gendered experience of citizenship (Taft, 2014), one of the primary feelings of obligation that the girls in this study had was to the next generation of girls. They wished to create more equitable circumstances with regards to gender-based discrimination and disadvantage so that the girls of the future do not have to experience the same struggles that they do. This was articulated by Owl, who said:

> I think we all have a responsibility to do that. But like, we've already like, the past, all the girls, they've already changed so much. It kind of feels like we should also do, we should also try and change, make better changes for the next generation.

Boys and Men Still Have More Opportunities Than Girls and Women

The passion that participants demonstrated when sharing their motivations to continue the legacy of the girls and women before them was in recognition of their knowledge that, in Canada, we have still not reached a place of gender equality. Both in their individual interviews and the arts-based focus groups, girls cited many instances in which boys and men are granted more opportunities than girls and women are. They referenced the many types of gender disparities that they had witnessed in their schools,

what they know about girls' participation in sports, and what they had seen in the norms of their parents' generation. Heart Sparkle, for example, shared in the first arts-based focus group that:

> …sometimes, um, I don't get the same opportunities as what men do. For example, like a sports team or…uh…other things, or like, like a work environment can be different, or like…more like pressure, or feeling like sometimes it feels, it's also like sometimes um, being a girl can also be more challenging because there's more challenges like…that men don't face.

Heart Sparkle also shared in that same focus group that "we've never had like…we've never had in my school like a female…umm…principal, only vice principal's been female. Or like, not as many females are allowed to do as much co-curriculars as boys can in our school". Winter related to and agreed with what Heart Sparkle had said, stating:

> it's close to the same thing that Heart Sparkle said, that like, maybe like a certain sports team, like some people might say like umm…girls can't play soccer, or something like that, but…even soccer isn't only for men or boys, so I just think that…that's kind of unfair.

The observations made by the girls about opportunities rendered unavailable to them because of their gender is consistent with what was shared in chapter six of this dissertation, which focused on the doubt and resistance that they faced when trying to catalyze change. Aligned with feminist theorizations of gender inequality, girls knew that life has always been generally harder for girls and women than for boys and men and shared many messages that they had received about the discriminatory ways in which girls are treated. They offered many criticisms of the advantages that were, in their minds, unfairly and disproportionately awarded to boys, questioning where these ideas had initially come from. Anne, for example, asked in the first arts-based focus group:

> I think…some of the things that I find confusing, is….like, where did all of this 'women…aren't as good as men'…like start? Because it has been going on for so long but like why would anybody ever have thought that in the first place? Like what was the reason? Ummm…and, uh, yeah, I also find it confusing sometimes why people like think that also, being a woman like means that you can only do these things and men can't do these things but you can only do it…yeah, like where did where did that start? How did it start that certain things are for certain people?

In response to Anne, Owl seemed frustrated with these prescribed gender roles and questioned why certain roles and jobs have been designated as 'men's jobs' or 'women's jobs':

> one thing like Anne said, like, why is it stay at home mom, why is it like housewife…there's nothing else about man, and why does most…I know people, they're trying to be more equal now, but still like…it's MAN but it's wo-MAN, like all the things just like consist…of men! Like they rule the world.

It was widely agreed upon by the girls that these discrepancies were unacceptable and that they needed changing. They believed that girls and women deserve fairness and equality and felt frustrated that this had not already happened. Representative of the belief in gender equality shared by participants, Anne articulated:

> I think, it's the discrimination that comes with it and people with sports and jobs and so many things, I could go on and on, they don't see women or girls in the same way that they see boys or men. And…it sometimes means that the opportunities are different, which changes…what you can do, and…that's what I find frustrating.

Girls Deserve Fairness and Equality

Throughout the course of my study, participants most consistently spoke about gender equality and how girls deserved equal rights and opportunities to boys. Alongside their lived experiences of social and environmental issues and their gendered sense of responsibility to their communities, this quest for gender equality was a primary

motivator for working to create change. The idea that girls should be understood as equal to boys was often spoken about as a given, as something that should be obvious. Winter, for example, stated quite plainly that "everybody should be treated equally and even boys should be treated equally and girls should be treated equally," while Dot said, "being a girl means to me that like…I'm treated fairly and have equal rights". Keila passionately recalled what she knew about some of the historical differences in men's and women's rights, particularly surrounding the right to vote, and cited these histories as an example of why the broader collective society should continue advocating for gender equality:

> It's important for them [boys and men] to like, for the things that we say in the morning, to treat others as you'd like to be treated, because back…back in the days, women weren't…women weren't allowed to vote, but if they thought about it, chances are you'd like to be treated…if you treated the ladies like that back in the days, and then now, what if the ladies started to treat you like that? Would you be happy? No. I doubt you'd be happy.

Building upon what was explored earlier in chapters five and six about how the participants found themselves having to navigate postfeminist messages which imply that gender equality has been reached (Pomerantz et al., 2013; Taft, 2004), the need for feminist advocacy and activism became even more clear when they spoke about the continued need to work towards gender equality. By identifying with both feminist histories and feminist futures, participants were temporally situated with the larger political context of continued calls for change. In addition to broadly drawing attention to the need for gender equality and equal rights for all girls, they also identified specific areas that they would like to see change. As I noted earlier in this chapter, Winter echoed Heart Sparkle who spoke about gender inequality in sports and employment in the first arts-based focus group. Winter identified and took issue with how girls are often not

granted the same opportunities as boys in sports. In the collage that she created (figure 12), Winter chose to answer the question: "What don't you like about being a girl?" and described her artwork as follows:

> So, um, I don't really know why I put this picture, but here it says all girls should be able to play sports that boys can, like girls can play soccer, like boys, like boys…like boys can. So no one should say soccer is not for girls. And I put these two stickers because this one says this one says be, this one says happy and I feel like be happy. And this one says loving you. And I said loving yourself because I think that like no matter what like people say about you that you should still love yourself, and for this, I put that because I thought that um, like girls should be allowed to wear like, whatever they wanna wear like dresses, that are like that, or any, anything they want to wear. And then for this I say girls, like the girls playing soccer, and I think that, that every girl that likes to play soccer should be allowed to play soccer, and this is girls being basketball so I also think that that like girls should be allowed to play basketball.

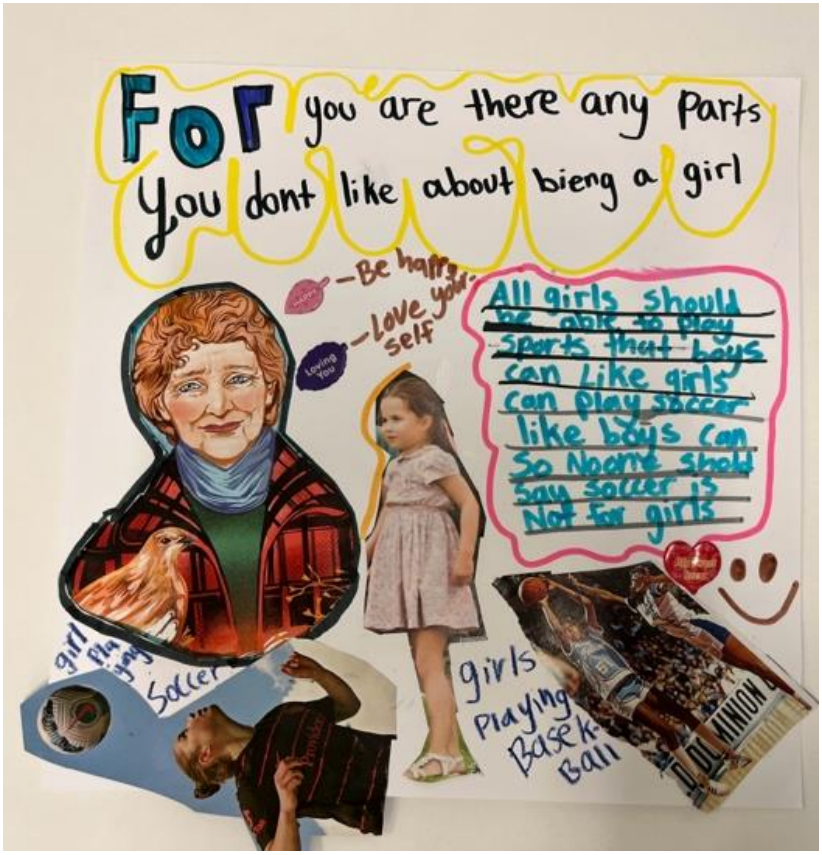

Figure 12. Winter's collage in response to her chosen question.

In answering the question about what she did not like about being a girl by creating a collage about girls being constrained from doing and having what they want – playing sports, being happy, loving themselves – Winter also identified a desire for girls to be free from such constraints like she understood boys to be. The need for continued work towards gender equality in many different areas was a primary focus of conversation and theme that emerged throughout the course of this research project. The girls understood and articulated that they were part of a larger struggle, one that had taken place throughout history and that continued to be necessary. In many ways, understanding their positioning within the context of this bigger story served as a source of hope; there was a strong sense of community and collective struggle as the girls spoke about their social and environmental change work. To push for the necessary changes required to someday achieve gender equality and other forms of social and environmental justice, they looked to and gained inspiration from those who had already worked to create change. They were very also encouraged by others in their lives that they felt were trying to do things differently.

> I feel like girls are like expected, while boys go and do whatever they want, we're just…waiting on them. But I feel like…at least some things have changed a bit, like I know my gym teacher, he's actually, he's really into co-ed, and he…tries to make it so it's not girls vs boys, but…at least…I feel like there's hope to know that some people get it.
>
> - Owl

Owl's articulation of her male gym teacher acting in support of gender equality in school sports by encouraging co-ed participation is consistent with the idea expressed elsewhere in this chapter about the collectivity required to work towards more equitable futures. Through this statement, Owl also gives nod to the notion that it is inspiring to

witness other people – such as her gym teacher – who are taking tangible steps to create change.

We're Inspired by Other People Who Have - and Are - Creating Change

As noted above, the girls spoke with gratitude for the women and girls who had fought for their current set of rights, expressing a sweeping admiration and deep appreciation for those who had worked for change before them. Zendaya, for example, stated in the second arts-based focus group that she felt inspired by what she had learned about Rosa Parks:

> Zendaya: Um, I'm going to say, uh, Rosa Parks, because she was a Black, um, lady who, um, like wasn't allowed in the bus, so she had to stay in the back? And she fought for like her rights so she can like…because the, I forgot the name, but it started with an S, sec...
>
> Alexe: Segregation?
>
> Zendaya: Yeah. She was…she tried to make, like, so like this one rule, so everybody can be included. Not only like white people.

In the same focus group, Heart Sparkle shared that she felt similarly about Rosa Parks, among others. She also stated that she had learned a lot about women's history – and specifically Black women's history – from her mother:

> Umm…well, at school, there's like a, International Women's Day, but I actually learned more about women's empowerment from…my mom, probably, about people like…Viola Desmond, Rosa Parks, Michelle Obama, a lot of women in power like had to make really, really big sacrifices to, um, make everybody else's, everybody else's lives, everybody else's lives easier.

In addition to acknowledging feminist and civil rights histories, the girls also expressed gratitude for and were inspired by contemporary figures and personal connections whom they witnessed engaging in social and environmental change work.

They saw that there were people around them who were continuing to push for change. Anne made connections between both past and present in the second arts-based focus group, saying that:

> Yeah, I mean, lots of names come to mind, but Rosa Parks is a big one. Sally Ride, um, people today, um, like I would say…Olivia Chow um, Kristen Wong-Tam uh, are two pretty big inspirations as well, 'cause they both worked towards queer rights, um…and…um, lots of other stuff too, that I really support. I could go on and on listing all of the stuff that they support that I agree with in talking about all of those people, but yeah.

Anne also spoke specifically about the New Democratic Party, a provincial and federal political party in Canada, sharing that she aligned with "I would say, um, lots of people from the NDP party. Um…and lots of people who are doing…um, like stopping homophobia, or at least helping to stop it, helping to gradually make it less and less". Similarly, and on a more personal level, Winter shared in her individual interview with me that she was inspired by the ways that her older sister was working to create positive changes in the environment. She said:

> I don't really know how to explain, but my older sister, because she also does like…stuff for like the environment, and she did like Girl Guides, so I wanted to do it too…so that's how she inspired me

For Heart Sparkle, some of this inspiration came from Greta Thunberg, a youth climate activist who has been identified several times throughout this dissertation and who first gained the attention of the world in 2018 during her "School Strike for Climate" (BBC, 2024). Heart Sparkle shared in her individual interview with me that:

> Greta Thunberg was a big influence for me. Because, um…the environment has always been something that was really important to me, and…when I saw that she went on strike for her school, and, I started reading about her a lot, and doing my, um…doing something called Heart Sparkle's Beat, that I used to do, where I wrote about really important people, in the world, like, that aren't really like,

> known…like, I can't remember his name, but there was this person, there's a really good movie called My Left Foot, and it's about this painter, who can only move his like, his left foot, and has made like really really cool things, but umm….I wrote about Greta Thunberg, and then I really started to get like, involved…and I thought it was really cool how she like, stopped doing school, and like…every single day sat outside of a like government building holding a sign just to try to like do things and she…is doing things and I thought that was a really big influence on me.

In the many conversations that I had with the girls, I learned about the various people that they looked to and learned from for inspiration as they engaged in their own social and environmental change work. Through their stories, I heard about historical and contemporary figures that they thought were important changemakers in the quest for gender, race, and climate justice. As I learned about the people that inspired the girls to create change, I also found myself inspired by the many things that they were doing to influence change themselves. To push the needle on pressing social and environmental issues and to carry forth the legacies of women and girls before them, participants were involved in large and small scale political and activist movements to influence change in their schools, communities, and worlds.

We're Involved in Politics and Political Movements So That We Can Influence Change

> I think, definitely, climate change is a big thing. It's definitely, uh, one of the things at the front of my mind, when I'm doing work like that. Umm….so was like, equality for…especially the communities that I'm in like, women, and also the queer community, especially. Um, but also a lot of BLM stuff is also very important. Umm….so that's a lot of issues that I like to bring to mind. Umm…also just like, who is in power…like, I've done lots of political work, over my years, I have many friends, like such as lots of MPPs and the mayor. Ummm…and, yeah, so…that, those are the main things that I like to work on.
>
> - Anne

As previous engagement in social or environmental change work was one of the criteria for participation in this study, central to many of the conversations that I had with individual girls as well as in the focus groups was what they had been doing to create change. The girls shared story after story about *how* they were trying their best to create positive change in their schools, communities, or beyond. The strategies that they used to create change included involvement in partisan politics, educating people in their schools about social or environmental issues that were important to them, advocating for change within their schools, engaging in protests, becoming involved in school initiatives and clubs, and working to create cleaner environments.

Following from their aforementioned reporting of being inspired by other women and girls who had created change before them, many of the girls shared that the political actions that they took were motivated by or in collaboration with other people in their lives. In addition to the *how*, they spoke clearly about their *why*. As explored earlier in this chapter, their 'why' was also often gendered, rooted in a sense of responsibility or in awe of other women in their lives. Tianna, for example, shared in her individual interview with me that she was incredibly inspired by her mom, who encouraged Tianna to become involved in political campaigns:

> like campaigning, canvassing…like my mom, my mom…it was usually, usually suggested by my mom. I campaigned for three different people. My mom were support…my mom was supporting them, and she would talk about them to me and talk about what they do…and what the campaigns are about, and then I decided, Oh! I'd really like to join this, so...I went on campaigns with her.

This encouragement led to Tianna having "campaigned for three people, for three different nominees". Similarly, Anne told me in her individual interview that she was

inspired by her parents and other adults whom she referred to as her "adult friends" to start becoming engaged in politics:

> …lots of my like, adult friends, as I call them…have done lots in politics. Like…our MPP's, or are workers for MPPs, so…doing rallies that they've been putting on or that they've been helping with…I've done a lot of that since I was really little. Or just like…canvassing...

While Tianna and Anne were the only girls in this study who had been involved in partisan political campaigns, many of the other girls who participated had worked to create change in their communities in other ways. These types of change were often not overtly connected to political movements but were more peripherally tied to social and environmental justice efforts more broadly. For Isla, this was primarily centred around environmental change, and she shared with me in her individual interview that

> the thing that I've been trying to do is like, stop the pollution from getting to the plants and animals…ummm so I've been like picking up garbage and things…and like telling other people about this…so yeah

and that "me and my friends sometimes with…if we see other people…if like…if we like see garbage on the ground or something, we tell them nicely to like pick it up". Winter, like Isla, told me in her individual interview that she worked with her friends to create a cleaner environment at her school:

> at school, like I think it was like…in grade 5, um I was helping to pick up garbage so we went to like the janitors office to get like a big bag and some girls in my classroom were picking up garbage, and so I started picking it up too, and they just like…at the end of recess, we just gave all of the garbage to Mr…the janitor.

Both Winter and Isla engaged in this type of work with the goal of reducing pollution. Winter stated this by saying "when I was picking up garbage, just trying to help the environment so that it's not dirty and so that there's not like…pollution".

The relational nature of the social and environmental actions taken by the participants in this study are consistent with what the literature says about how social relationships with peers and adults alike enable young people to think creatively and act boldly as they dream about what might be possible for the future (Assan, 2023; Torres-Harding et al., 2018). Participants gained inspiration from the women and girls that came before them and collaborated with those that they knew in their lives, they were able to engage in conversations and actions that explored ideas and narratives that differed from what they had likely come to know as the status quo. One of the most common ways in which they were working to create change was also, therefore, relational, as many of the girls shared stories about how they engaged in educational conversations with the people in their lives about the social and environmental issues that they believed needing changing. Dot, for example, spoke in her individual interview with me about how she spends time "helping other people, and like…teaching them". This idea of helping is gendered when considering gendered experiences of citizenship that value care (Lister, 1997, 2012). As Lister (1997, 2012) argues, those who have been traditionally responsible for providing care within the domestic sphere – girls and women – tend to expend these caretaking responsibilities to the public sphere, such as how they exercise citizenship.

In addition to the idea of helping, central to Dot's social and environmental change work, Owl shared in her individual interview that she believed in the importance of both teaching and learning with other people with the hopes that new ideas will emerge:

> Well, one thing, I believe, is to educate people…because if you try and do some big [political] movement, but people just don't understand about it, then it

> probably would just happen again. And if you educate some people, they can go off and educate more and more people, and then more people know about it. And everybody thinks differently. So…maybe they have their own ideas on how to like, stop it. Maybe something like better than what you thought of.

Like Owl, Tianna said that she engaged in educational conversations with the other members of a school club that she was a part of. The group intended to generate ideas and facilitate social and environmental change within her school, and as Tianna explained in her individual interview with me:

> we have little discussions about…how to improve, how to make the school better, how to improve…um, on things we might think we need to improve on, on what we might think the school needs to improve on…or just environmental stuff.

Educating and learning are often central to how young people typically engage with social and environmental change work (Assan, 2024). The sentiments shared by the girls in this study are consistent with the findings of Jessica Taft (2011), who found that girl activists often believed that promoting critical knowledge and 'raising awareness' was central to catalyzing meaningful social and environmental change. Like Owl and Tianna, Anne expressed her passion for educating people about different environmental and political issues, stating in her individual interview that she would often make presentations to her classmates and teachers at school:

> I've done lots of stuff on, like, I've talked about…like climate with my, with my school. I've done a lot about politics, which kind of goes into that when I'm talking about why certain people do certain things…like, my teachers have definitely realized that I enjoy presenting…to a class so I've done many speeches in front of my classes, my, my classes over the years, or, like slide presentations…to help them learn more, 'cause I want them to know more, even when my teacher wants to do it, but they just don't have time.

Providing a political education to those around them was a primary strategy used by participants to try and influence people to understand the issues that they cared about

as important. Educating others and engaging in conversations about important and sometimes controversial issues, however, also requires strong interpersonal skills. These skills are a significant political tool, despite not always being interpreted as such (Assan, 2024; Choudry, 2015). Anne, for example, shared in her individual interview with me how she would use what she referred to as the "empathy bridge" to help people to better understand her perspective. She articulated the steps that she used to have conversations with people who might not necessarily agree with her, explaining to (and educating) me:

> Anne: I talked about it, I…laid it out. Like…I went through with them…I didn't just say like, "this is good, so you should do it". I listed reasons why I thought it was good, and then I told them why I thought that it was good, like using the empathy bridge… to communicate with people.
>
> Alexe: Wow, okay, the empathy bridge, can you tell me about, a bit about that?
>
> Anne: It's like, you start off you, you need to include a message of hope, like the basis of it, you need to use empathy to be like, how it's affecting you…so that people don't feel alone. So, you like, bring up a topic so like…something's bad happening, I want to stop it. This is the reason why it's affecting me. And then you need to bring up like hope and ways…that like that and then, and then options to change it.

It was clear that Anne had learned some effective strategies for community organizing, such as how to have conversations with people who had different viewpoints than her own and was deploying these strategies in her everyday social and environmental change work.

Central to much of the work of the girls' social and environmental change work endeavours was the understanding that they needed to look to others in their lives for motivation, support, and to be an accomplice. Even when participants shared individualized actions that they had taken to create change, they also acknowledged that

they had been inspired by people in their lives to do so. They recognized that even though they felt a responsibility to strive towards more equitable futures, that they could not do it alone. They emphasized the need for support and allyship from adults around them in order to make meaningful and lasting change.

Chapter 8: Change Can Only Happen If We Try to Create Change Together

Of the four major findings in my dissertation, the final one drives home an overwhelming message of hope for better futures – but does so while simultaneously acknowledging that change can only happen if everyone works together. The girls strongly felt that, while it is important to speak up and that "girls voices need to be heard" (Winter), they cannot do their important social and environmental change work alone. Contrary to postfeminist narratives of girl power and the can-do girl that imply that girls alone can change the world if they try hard enough (Gonick et al., 2009; Harris, 2004b; Mauk et al., 2020; Pomerantz et al., 2013), participants asserted the necessity of community support, which is aligned with notions of collectivity that are central to feminism (Henry, 2006). They felt strongly that even though they felt motivated to create change and inspire better futures, this work required the support of their communities. Alongside the strong messaging that everybody needs to work together to create change, they shared that the communities that they are a part of *because of their gender* provide them with opportunities to connect over shared experiences, and that the sense of community emerging from that motivates them to continue creating change with and for each other. They were articulating a particularly gendered form of motivation to influence change, therefore, one that was rooted in solidarity through shared gender identity, relationality, and care.

In addition to their assertion that they wished to create change with the support of others, I found it particularly interesting that participants shared messages of a persistent hope for better futures. Instead of pessimism or feelings or anger or despair inspiring their

social and environmental change work, the girls in this study were trying to create change because they felt that it was possible for the world to be better. Seemingly rooted in a "politics of hope" (Taft, 2011, p. 152), they expressed their belief that if we all work together, change is truly possible. As they spoke about hope, however, they also recognized that the positive social and environmental changes that they were working to create were absolutely necessary. This sense of hopefulness, then, was extended to others who might choose to work alongside and in solidarity with them in their efforts. This included their work towards change and hopeful attitudes that influenced others in their lives to champion the causes that they cared most about. In this way, they acknowledged that they – and the broader collective "we" – have more power when we speak up and use our voices to create change together.

Speak Up, Use Your Voice

Alexe: "What do you think is important for other girls to know?"

Dot: "That their voices matter, and they matter."

In her individual interview, when asked what advice she would give to other girls who were wanting to start making positive change in the world around them, Dot shared a message that both girls and their voices matter. She believed strongly that girls should speak up and actively try to influence change, once confidently asserting that "being a girl means that you have a voice". Winter similarly spoke in her interview of this idea of girls needing to use their voices but stated specifically that this is necessary because girls otherwise aren't typically heard or listened to, and that one day girls might not be heard at all. Making plain her belief that girls matter, she said:

> Because it might get to a point where nobody even cares about girls, so it would be easier to start when sometimes their voices are still being heard, and there are still more good people in this world, they're still like…it's better that you start now, and don't when it's kind of too late.

Winter's concern that girls may someday lose their right to express their thoughts and opinions was, frankly, chilling. I write this dissertation at a particularly threatening historical moment; in the United States, for example, just south of the border from where I am located, human rights and civic freedoms are quickly being rescinded by the Trump administration. Efforts that have contributed to advances in diversity, equity, and inclusion have been de-funded and shut down, specifically targeting programs and initiatives related to gender and race equality (Mulvihill et al., 2025). Here at home, there has been a significant increase in regressive movements and anti-feminist ideologies reported across Canada (Neapole et al., 2025). There is a constant and growing rumble across Canadian dinner tables, in conversations with neighbours, at work, in classrooms, and beyond about the ideologies and policies from our southern counterparts having a slow but impactful influence on the happenings at home. This threat of rights regression is, in many ways, generationally unique; where many generations before them were in a position to push for progress, the girls in this study are likely the first generation in decades to fear that their current rights may be rescinded (Williams, 2024).

Although Winter did not speak about this social, cultural, and political resurgence of traditional gender roles and international shifts towards inequitable policy decisions, her worries that girls everywhere might someday lose the right to have their voices heard was not, upon reflection, an overstatement. She was articulating what we know to be a very real threat – and for some, a reality – to girls and women across North America

(Mulvihill et al., 2025; Neapole et al., 2025). Winter linked this idea of using her voice and speaking up to the concrete activist strategy of people speaking up to take action as a means of effecting social or environmental change. She stated that for girls to speak up, it means "…not keeping or staying silent. You know, like, girls aren't being heard. Taking action, talking, that like…girls voices need to be heard".

Like Dot and Winter, Heart Sparkle passionately stated in the second arts-based focus group that it is important for girls to speak up for themselves. Echoing Winter, Heart Sparkle made a connection between girls using their voices and taking action, particularly as it relates to advocacy to create change. When asked what she thought was important for the next generation of girls to know, Heart Sparkle shared that:

> I think it's important that um...to know that…it's kinda, for the next generation, you kind of, you need to keep advocating for yourselves and getting your needs to be met, because if they don't, then it's…gonna go back and keep going until like….you need to keep working at it. Because…it's important to…make sure that…your voices have to be heard, or else nothing is going to get any better.

There is an interesting similarity between what Winter and Heart Sparkle shared with me. Both spoke about the importance of using their voices and speaking up because, if they (and other girls) don't, then people might not listen to girls anymore and the world may not get any better. They both had the insight and could articulate that girls' rights are not a given; they have been earned over time by the hard work and advocacy of the girls and women before them and, given current threats, they could easily be taken away. This assertion is connected to the findings shared in chapter seven, during which the girls shared that they felt motivated to create change so that they could maintain the hard fought-for wins of women and girls before them. Maintaining the legacy of women's and

girls' rights – aligning themselves with historical and current feminist movements – is additional evidence of the tension between feminism and postfeminism that the girls grappled with throughout their participation in the study.

Connecting the use of their voices and the necessity to speak up against the very real threats to their rights (and their potential loss of rights) as well as the rights of other girls highlighted, again, their sense of community with other girls and women. Many of the girls spoke to these feelings of commitment to and community with women and girls as their motivations for creating change. Often rooted in explanations of shared identity, these girls articulated that it was important for them to work towards social or environmental change for the sake of each other.

We Keep Each Other Safe and We Do This for Each Other

Of all the girls who participated in this study, Anne was the most vocal about the idea and importance of community. In her individual interview with me, Anne shared that being a girl means that "…you're part of a community that will…support you, and it means that you're part of that community and the struggles, even if they're not directly…impacting you, you still go through them". She spoke to many benefits of being a part of a community, some of them being related to the receipt of support through shared struggle, and others being related to friendship:

> the best part to me [about being a girl] is having a community and knowing that I will always have at least one space…that…people have the same feelings, or at least have something in common with me. And it means that I can find spaces where…I can find people who are more likely to be friends with!

Isla shared similar sentiments in her individual interview, stating that what she really likes about being a girl is that she has "…friends that are like me. And…it's like, nice to have people that are like me".

As Anne spoke about the benefits of community, she noted how communities of girls and women often work to keep each other safe, particularly in instances where somebody may have experienced violence. She said that

> everybody kind of has each other's back in that community…and like, when someone's job or someone's like, or someone gets attacked…in the community of like women or girls, people, like respond to it, and help out.[1]

I thought that this response was an interesting one, particularly as I hadn't asked anything specifically about girls' or women's safety. Anne was not the only one who spoke about this however, as Keila also told me in her individual interview about how girls should work to keep each other safe from violence. As shared in chapter six, Keila spoke to an experience that she had in school where a teacher had separated the boys and the girls in her class, taking it as an opportunity to talk to just the girls about scenarios in which they might need to talk to an adult. She was vague in her description of this experience, but I interpreted it as her teacher taking time to talk to them about potential experiences of violence. She shared with me that her teacher had taken the girls into a separate classroom from the boys to have a conversation about potential experiences that they may have as they get older. Keila said that her teacher told the room full of girls that if "it [violence] ever happens in the school", they can go to her or to the office for support. From what

[1] This quote was also used on page 125 to illustrate girls' articulation of gender-based discrimination and violence

Keila told me about her understanding of the interaction; the teacher was providing them with information and knowledge about how to keep themselves and each other safe.

In recognizing the struggles that girls and women go through, and that these struggles also help to facilitate a shared sense of identity and community, Anne and Keila identified how girls might feel safer confiding in and sharing their experiences with other girls and women. This notion of women and girls acting in relationship with and taking care of each other is again aligned with gendered experiences of citizenship, as well as with feminist ways of thinking and doing more broadly (Lister, 1997, 2012). Instead of focussing on the struggles, however, and as the findings explored in chapter seven revealed, many of the conversations that I had with the girls were about how they felt that being a girl can be beneficial to their social and environmental change work – in large part due to the sense of community that can accompany being a girl. Anne beautifully bridged these discrepancies between the struggles that girls might face with the benefits of community that girls might find with each other by saying that

> how I would describe [being a girl] to someone else, is like, now you have an experience that's similar to this other group of people, and you could find, like similar things with that group of people and now you are part of that group. And you have support…from them, and you share the challenges, and you also share the good stuff that happens to that group of people.

Recognizing that girls and women are often in community with each other for a multitude of reasons seemed to be a strong motivator for the girls in this study to engage in social and environmental change work, which was explored in additional detail in chapter seven. This sense of community and connection to other girls and women, anchored by shared histories and collective struggle, seemed to serve as a source of inspiration for

participants to continue with their social and environmental change endeavors. Because of the struggles experienced by their communities, they knew that they needed to try to make things better. In many ways, and because of their connections to community, they felt obligated to work towards more equitable and just futures – and in doing so, they shared messages of optimism and hope.

We Have to Try (And We Have to Have Hope)

The message that "we have to try" was shared by many of the girls throughout this study. There were two different starting points from which this message originated; Winter and Heart Sparkle, for example, shared the idea that we need to try to create change because there are tangible, real threats to girls and women's rights. To this end, Winter said that

> I think that it's important to create change because like…if people now like think that like girls are weak or they belong in the kitchen or something like that, then later on, if like nobody creates change it's going to be worse, and like, so…that's why I think it's good to create change.

As stated by Winter in the second arts-based focus group and shared above, she believed that it was important to work towards change so that the rights of girls and women don't regress. This idea is related to the idea that girls and women are in community with one another, and that everyone should work together to make sure that the community remains safe and supported.

While Winter and Heart Sparkle expressed motivations to create change that were rooted in a fear of women and girls eventually having their rights and gains made revoked, some of the other girls were instead motivated by the notion of hope for better futures. This was the second starting point from which the message of "we have to try"

originated. Anne, for example, spoke explicitly to this idea of "hold[ing] out hope" in her individual interview, stating:

> I think that…even if the first 10 or 15 people who you go up to say "No, that's impossible," you need to hold out hope. You need to keep on trying to until you get one more person…who says 'yes' and then more and more and more. 'Cause that's the only way that you can give it up if everybody just, the first time that they got told "no, I don't think that that's possible, I don't think that you should", nothing would ever happen…to change bad stuff.

Anne's rooting of her social and environmental change work in tenants of hope is consistent with what Taft (2011) found in her research with teenage girl activists across North America. In what she refers to as a "politics of hope," Taft (2011, p. 152) articulates the hopefulness that underpins girls' activism as "an overt willingness to imagine and voice a utopian future" as well as the actions that girls may take to work towards a better world. Both in Taft's work and mine, however, notions of what these utopian futures might look like were not often articulated in concrete terms. In my research, I heard much related to the "language of the possible" (Taft, 2011, p. 155) such as about trying to "change bad stuff" (as stated by Anne above), "changing the world to make it better" (Isla), making "positive change" (Zendaya), and "making a difference" (Owl), but not so much about what exactly this better world might look like. They dreamed and spoke of better futures but did not often share with me what this meant or the steps that they could take to get there.

Although participants did not ever offer concrete plans to create long term change, they were nonetheless motivated to engage in day-to-day actions that they believed could someday create those more equitable futures. Owl, for example, spoke about the

importance of people continuing to push for change, even if it doesn't feel like progress is being immediately made:

> I think…I think it's important for them to know is that…they're doing like a great thing for the world. And if maybe people don't notice, at, at the first time, it's not really failure, you just maybe 'gotta work up to it.

For the girls who participated in this study, their utopianism was seemingly guided by the journey instead of fixation on an unknown utopian destination (Taft, 2011), and, as articulated by Taft (2011, p.154), "to be a utopian, in this context, is to be hopeful about the radical possibilities…and to actively engage in creating those possibilities, bit by bit".

Creating change "bit by bit" was a sentiment shared by Anne in relation to the importance to hope. Anne stated that she would like to create change so that the world is left better than she found it, and in the second arts-based focus group she told the rest of the participants that she would like to push for change to both maintain the gains made throughout history as well as to improve the state of the world for future generations. She said:

> Um, the world that I would like to leave behind is a better one…I mean, we have hundreds, we've had hundreds of years of work, and we're definitely not there yet. But as long as I leave it better, I'll be happy with what I've done….and I think the things that we should be doing, well, like for the future generations, just keep on trying, whatever way makes you happy, makes you feel like you've tried hard enough. So, if that's going out and picking up garbage, or if that's going to a protest, or if that's writing emails to important people, or if that's just changing some of your everyday decisions, like not eating meat, or switching to a bank that doesn't support like, pollution, even the smallest changes are a change, and one…one step in the right direction. It's always one step.

Within her monologue, Anne spoke to the idea that every action and every little effort counts; that everyone can contribute to creating change, no matter how big or small the action or motivation. This message shared by Anne is a hopeful one, as it asserts that all

people have the potential to create positive social and environmental change through everyday acts.

There is something inherently hopeful about this idea that people can create change through everyday actions, and the scholarly literature has found that this is, indeed, how children often participate as citizens (Percy-Smith, 2015; Taft, 2014). The girls were engaged in acts of their day-to-day to influence change within their spheres of influence, including with their peer, family, and school groups. Within the context of girls who are engaging specifically in social and environmental change work, Taft (2014) aptly notes that "girls' actual citizenship practices include a far greater range of engagements than those presented in the public celebrations of empowered girlhood" (p. 263). Identifying and paying attention to the ways that girls are working to create change in their everyday lives, including relationality and care, is a challenge to postfeminist can-do girl rhetoric that platforms the few select "exceptional" girls (Benigno, 2023; Bent, 2020; Taft, 2020). Recognizing that seeds for change are planted in the everyday honours the fact that the creation of meaningful social and environmental change often takes continued and sustained effort. This prolonged effort is something that is often erased when individual "can-do" girls are celebrated for achieving seemingly overnight success in their activist efforts, effectively de-politicizing what was likely a deeply political and long-term process.

The ways that the girls in this study expressed hope for equitable futures, as actioned in the everyday, is thus aligned with what former scholarship has found about girls pursing social and environmental change work in the spirit of hope (Bent, 2020;

Taft, 2011). In her individual interview with me, Tianna shared a similar, hopeful message to that of Anne, when she urged people to start working to create change wherever they see opportunities for things to be made better. Tianna encouraged people to "try, at least!" to create change in their communities, even if they felt unsure of where to start. Tianna stated:

> Well because most people I've met, they're like 'Oh I really…I really want…I really wish the environment was better', and this and this, but then they aren't really trying, trying to do anything to help it, so…if you want something…to…if you want something to be better, than it already is, you have to try, at least!

and,

> Yeah. Like I've met some people who are like 'Oh, uh, I think this thing needs to be better, this thing'…then…maybe instead of talking about it, uh…trying to make a change in it, is always…it always helps, and is usually the better option.

While it wasn't stated explicitly by any of the girls in this study, there was a general insinuation in their statements of "what do you have to lose?!" by putting a best foot forward and trying to improve current social and environmental conditions. Like Tianna said, trying is "usually the better option", and many participants seemed to believe that initiative and persistence were important traits to have while pursuing social and environmental change.

Aligned with the importance of hope, initiative, and persistence, Anne spoke about how we all just need to do the best that we can. In the second arts-based focus group, she shared that she believed it important to:

> …go to protests…telling the people that you know, and even the people who you don't, if we have a way to contact them….just try to get the word out there…trying to help when you can, so, signing pieces of paper so that things get in place to make it better. Always trying the best you can and taking the next step when other people won't.

In this instance, Anne was effectively speaking about strategies to share knowledge with people who might not be familiar with the social and environmental issues that she was concerned about. She articulated that she continues to invite and call people in to participate in creating change on the issues that she is passionate about, drawing attention to the fact that action is often more effective when taken on collectively. While all the girls in this study spoke about their actions being primarily rooted in tenants of hope, they also made a call for others to support them in their work; they believed, wholeheartedly, that there is power in numbers, and that we all have more power when we work to create change together.

We Have More Power When We Do It Together

> …if more people start, ummm…making positive change, it starts changing the world to make it better
>
> - Isla

The idea that the world will be made a better place if people come to work together was a sentiment shared by all the participants. Extending Isla's claim more explicitly to girls, Zendaya stated that "the more people who make positive change, the more girls don't feel insecure about themselves". Zendaya's ideas about working together to create change were specifically linked to social issues experienced by girls, such as disproportionately low levels of self-esteem and confidence when compared with that of boys (Boyce et al., 2008), and she thought that this might improve if more people took steps to change it. Keila, on the other hand, spoke about the need for more people to be working together to create change by weaving in an example about climate change. She

said that if she knew of somebody else who was working to impact climate change, she would offer to help:

> Like I'll ask them if they need my help, it's like…support them, or pitch in, with what they're trying to change...like "oh you want to change global warming? …umm…I don't know how, I'm 11 years old, so I don't know how to change global warming, but…I'll…maybe I'll help her!

Heart Sparkle believed that it was important for people to work together to create change. Interestingly, however, she emphasized the importance of people starting to engage in social and environmental change work when they are young. She spoke about people she knows who are working to make the world better: "…the more people the better. And it's better to do it at a young age". While she didn't provide further details about this statement, it is interesting to think about it within the broader context of citizenship and participation. From a critical childhood citizenship perspective, encouraging more young people to engage in social and environmental change work would require redefining what it means to meaningfully participate in decision making processes. In a society that effectively marginalizes the participation of children and restricts them from participating within traditional citizenship structures (Cohen, 2005; Lister, 2007; Taft, 2014), it is exciting to think about what Heart Sparkle might mean with her assertion that it's better to start creating change at a younger age. To engage in social and environmental change work is effectively discouraged within current parameters of participation because it has the potential to disrupt the status quo; for more young people to engage in social and environmental change work would require that there is greater collective action amongst groups of young people, and would perhaps also mean that

citizenship structures may need to shift to adapt to and take seriously the ways in which they participate.

To engage in social and environmental change at a "young age", Heart Sparkle acknowledged that she required the support of the adults in her life. Like Keila, who said that she didn't necessarily have the knowledge to "change global warming" because of her age, Heart Sparkle's experiences illustrated how she was limited by her age when it came to the actions that she could take. As shared in chapter six, she spoke in her individual interview about how she had initiated a fundraiser to raise money for the people of Ukraine when Russia had violently invaded the country in 2022. For her fundraiser, her stepfather helped her create wooden Ukrainian flags, which she then sold door-to door with the proceeds then going to Ukraine. To sell the flags door-to-door, however, Heart Sparkle had to enlist the help of her mother. She explained this to me by sharing "well, like, my mama just helped me like walk around because I'm not allowed to walk alone. We just walked around to sell the flags". There were certain things that Heart Sparkle was not allowed to do because of her age, likely related to concerns for her safety, necessitating the support of the adults around her to enable her to engage in the social change work that she had envisioned.

Heart Sparkle and Keila, however, also alluded to the need for adults to offer support by way of sharing knowledge, resources, and power that they don't otherwise have access to – again, because of their age. Such support – tangible, concrete support – was different from the other types of support that some of the girls identified when they spoke about looking for support from their communities. Support from community, and

particularly communities of girls and women, was articulated by many of the girls in this study as a type of moral support that would bolster their feelings of connection and motivation to create change.

Returning to the provision of practical supports, many of the girls also spoke about seeking out the support of others to help them specifically in their actions to create change as a means of effecting greater, more lasting change. Some spoke about this concept in vague terms, while others spoke about it more concretely. Owl, for example, stated in her individual interview that it might be helpful to have the support of others because "I'm assuming it could be kind of like a domino effect, like some people start, others will follow…and that could make a bigger impact". Anne similarly articulated in her individual interview how she would work to recruit the support of people around her, including friends, family, classmates, and teachers:

> I would say…start with asking your friends. Or…asking your parents, so asking your friends, if they want to help you even just spread the word around your class or ask your teacher. Like if you hear about something, or even just look on the news for something that you want to support so look through the articles and see if there's an issue, an upcoming issue that you're like, 'I agree with that we should fix that', or something that we should do with that. And start spreading the word.

The idea of "spreading the word" and garnering support by educating and engaging in conversation with others was common amongst participants as they spoke about the importance of having a broad and diverse range of people effectively on their side in order to effect change.

Winter, like Anne, shared the same ideas about the importance of having people agree with her cause in her individual interview. When she was speaking about the tactics

that she used to convince other girls at her school to support her in a schoolyard litter clean-up initiative, she explained to me that:

> I was trying to tell them like...examples of like how it's a problem that we all need to solve together…and I would like…convince them…tell them things that can help them with...to try to get them to like do it with me and work with me.

On this basis of what she shared with me, my understanding was that Winter would use her existing relationships with people to convince them that the issue that she cared about was important and then try to get them to support her in the actions that she was taking. She said that it was important to have the support of other people to make the work of social and environmental change easier. In the first arts-based focus group with the other study participants, Winter stated:

> I think that what makes it important is like having people to support you so that you can make it more easier a little, because if no one supports you then it's going to be a little more harder, but if you have people around you that say the same thing, it will be easier for them to think that's true and that things should change.

In the final arts-based activity of her participation in this study, Owl created art about and spoke directly to this idea that social and environmental change can only happen if we all work together. Owl could not participate in the scheduled second arts-based focus group but instead met with me individually at the McMaster University campus to explore what it meant to her to be a girl engaged in social and environmental change work. I first asked her all the questions that I had asked the other participants who joined the focus group (Appendix K). I then requested that she make a sign directed towards an audience of her choosing that sent a message about what girls are doing to create change. Owl's message was "Girls are working hard to make the world better, but

we all need to work together to save the planet and everything on it!". Owl's sign (figure 13) can be found below.

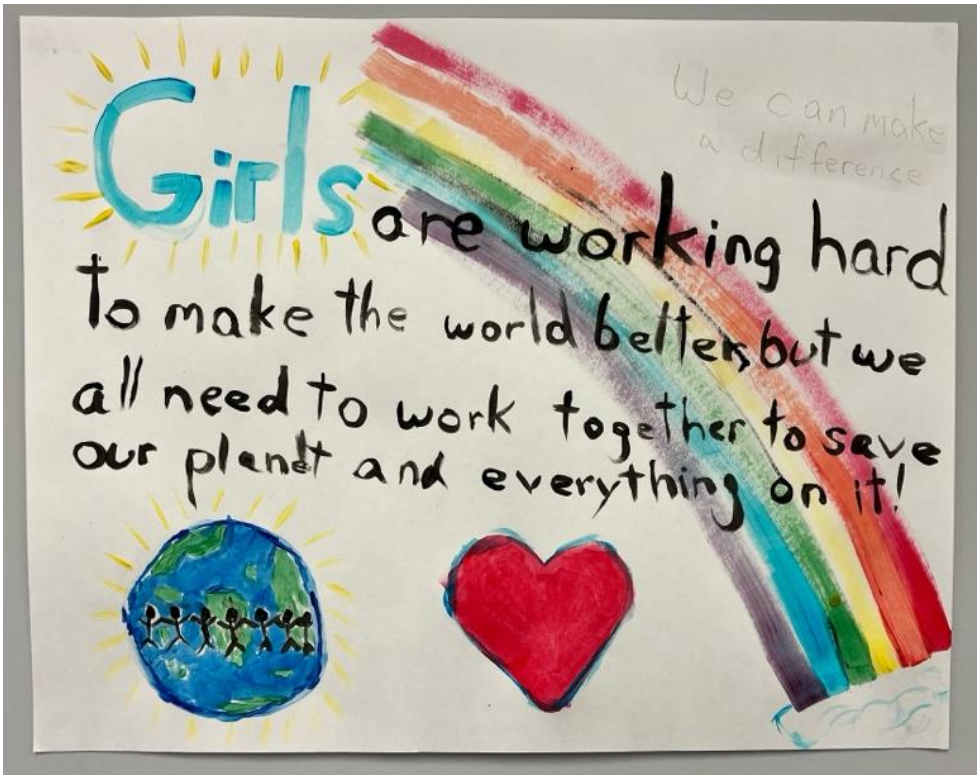

Figure 13. Owl's message about what girls are doing to create change.

When I asked Owl to further explain her message and the illustrations that she had included on her sign, Owl shared the following:

> …some people need to know that there are people making a difference – it's us, the girls – but, some people, they also just need like…a push, to like, help, because they could probably…they don't have to be girls, they could be some other girls, but they could be anybody. And…everybody has it in them, and they could bring like different things to the table. An idea!

The desire to pull in the support of family, friends, and community, as articulated by Heart Sparkle, Anne, Winter, and Owl, is an important and punctuating finding of this study. Contradictory to the neoliberal rhetoric of girl power and the can-do girl,

discourses that claim that girls can do anything if they try hard enough (Gonick et al., 2009; Mauk et al., 2020; Pomerantz et al., 2013), the girls in this study were adamant that they cannot create change in the world on their own. Despite their best efforts, they stated that they need the support of the people around them and beyond to really make meaningful change. For some, like Owl, Winter, and Anne, this desired support was rooted in the idea that the more hands and minds involved, the better. For both Heart Sparkle and Anne, however, the desire for support was additionally tied to the acknowledgement that children have limited privilege, power, and resources when compared to adults.

Despite their acknowledgement that they were limited in power because of their age, the girls in this study strongly believed that better futures are possible and that they have a role to play in ensuring that progress is made. They shared stories of trying to create change by seeking out the support of their friends, families, and communities, rallying behind the idea that all we have to do – at the very least – is try. Rooted in a politic of hope, they articulated how they worked to create change through everyday actions, leveraging their pre-existing relationships to create momentum for the social and environmental causes that they cared about. Simultaneously, however, the girls in this study recognized that they couldn't create change on their own. They were clear that they both wanted and needed the support of those around them because, at the end of the day, we have more power when we all work together.

Chapter 9: Discussion

In Chapters Five through Eight, I outlined my findings. This chapter will link the concepts explored to my theoretical framework of critical childhood citizenship. As articulated in the theory chapter, this critical childhood citizenship framework blends together theoretical concepts from both critical childhood studies and critical citizenship studies. By weaving together the study findings, in this chapter I will address the research questions about girls activism that inspired and directed this study: (1) How do girls between the ages of 8-12 years understand, describe, and experience their girlhoods?, and (2) How are girls working to create social and environmental change, and what motivates and inspires them to do so? While the research questions that directed this study were originally posed as two separate lines of inquiry, the study findings showcase the ways in which they are entangled – or, how and why gender and age matter when engaging in social and environmental change work. This chapter highlights this intersection.

The participants in this study taught me what it means to be a girl who is trying to influence positive changes, what types of barriers exist for them to do so, and how they work to subvert and resist structures and systems that have been historically designed to minimize their power. Three themes were threaded throughout my findings, all of which were rooted in my critical childhood citizenship theoretical framework. These key theoretical concepts include: (1) notions of 'good' and 'bad' citizenship, (2) girls' tenuous navigation of feminism and postfeminism while engaging in social and environmental change work, and (3) the gendered dimensions of girls' citizenship.

'Good' and 'Bad' Citizenship

In Chapter Five, it was revealed that participants had heard (and sometimes believed) some deep seeded ideas about traditional and stereotypical gender roles. What the girls told me about messages they received about girlhood were simultaneously interesting and troubling, particularly as they related to some sexist ideas about how girls and women are expected to behave. Hearing their ideas about gender and girlhood inspired me to think more intentionally about the relationship between their experiences of gender and their engagement with social and environmental change work.

As explored in Chapter Five, I heard from girls about what it means to be a "good woman" (Zendaya), that they know girls are supposed to be "polite…and dainty, and nice" (Anne) and that they had heard that "girls should be in the kitchen cooking and cleaning" (Tianna). The girls knew how they were expected to look, think, and behave based on Eurocentric beauty standards and traditional expectations of gender roles, many of which are rooted in sexist ideas about how women and girls ought to exist in the world. To act in alignment with these expectations would be to adhere to the status quo, which in other words, would be to act in alignment with what could be considered to be a 'good' citizen (Robinson, 2012).

While I heard many things from participants about the messages that they received about how girls are expected to exist in the world, and regardless of whether they had internalized these beliefs, I also heard many of them speak about how they resisted these ideas. As the girls shared that they had heard messages about girlhood that were aligned with traditional and sexist gender roles, they revealed that they were simultaneously

critical of them. After I had completed all the interviews and was reflecting upon what the girls had told me about their social and environmental change work, I realized that they weren't just engaged in overt actions to influence change on tangible issues; they were also working to influence what it means to be a girl, asserting that girlhood can mean, and be, an infinite number of different things. They weren't just engaged in politically motivated actions – who they felt they authentically were, and how they chose to express that, ought to also be understood as a political act.

As explored in Chapter Five, many of the girls either said that gender doesn't really mean much to them (such as Heart Sparkle and Tianna) or that they would like to express their own understanding of gender on their own terms (Anne, Owl, Winter). It is important to note that articulations of gender were all from a cisgender perspective because all of the girls in this study were cisgender, and that descriptions of gender may have been different if transgender girls had participated in the study. In the words of Anne, girls are expected to "not have a voice and to not…and hide and just like…wait for someone to ask you something". The docility and politeness (as articulated by Zendaya and Anne) expected of girls within the context of traditional gender roles is contradictory to what needs to be done to influence change. To create social and environmental change, one must assert their opinions, engage in sometimes difficult conversations with a diversity of people about complex topics, and engage in actions that are intended to alter the status quo. Virtually none of these things are possible when abiding by traditional gender expectations that require docility and quietness. It makes sense, therefore, that many of the participants were also actively distancing themselves from the expectations

of traditional gender norms – to influence social and environmental change in the ways that they were hoping to, resisting gender norms to create this distance was a necessity.

Interestingly, as girls who were working to influence social and environmental change, creating distance between themselves and the stereotypical and often sexist traits associated with girlhood is consistent with what Jessica Taft (2011) found in her research with teenage girl activists from across North America. While the girls in Taft's research effectively distanced themselves from notions of girlhood because being a teenage girl is associated with being "superficial, selfish, insecure, and ignorant" (Taft, 2011, p. 90), the girls in this study may have tried to distance themselves from traditional notions of girlhood because they knew that they had to behave differently than the limiting gendered expectations inflicted upon them to affect change. As articulated by Taft, "Being an activist can enable and empower girls to work against and outside of how girls "should be". Girl activists…use their activist identities, knowledge, and experiences to resist the pressures to conform to a narrow version of girlhood" (2011, p. 90). It may have been important for the girls in this study, therefore, to articulate their distancing from gendered expectations of 'good' girlhood to also assert their desire to be taken seriously as change makers.

This contradictory relationship between "girl" and "activist" (Taft, 2011, p. 90) is reflective of the masculinization of the political sphere. Women have historically been marginalized from political spaces. Children have never really been integrated into, or provided the opportunity, to participate in them. It is likely difficult for girls to see themselves as belonging in political spaces or as being politically influential because they

have not historically been represented in the political sphere. Through their resistance of gendered expectations, they are asserting that they ought to be taken seriously when they are working to create social and environmental change, while indirectly acknowledging that girls typically aren't taken seriously.

When thinking about gender and girlhood in relation to citizenship and activism, the girls in this study thinking critically about and sometimes creating distance between themselves and traditional expectations of girlhood is interesting for two reasons. First, in a society that heavily controls and regulates the lives and bodies of children (Robinson, 2012), to think critically about, and act in defiance of, gendered expectations is a profound act of resistance. This act of resistance and challenge to the status quo by the girls in this study begs the question about how children with marginalized gender identities may be acting as citizens. Second, distancing themselves from the gendered expectations that had been placed on them as girls – such as expectations of docility and quietness – may have created additional space to act in ways that are contradictory to what is traditionally expected of girls. In other words, perhaps distancing themselves from the gendered expectation of girlhood allowed them to instead be outspoken and confident in their social change work.

While the girl/activist contradiction articulated by Taft (2011, p. 90) is poignant for thinking through how girls may speak about and portray their social and environmental change work, it is also helpful for thinking about girls' engagement with the world as citizens. As explored in Chapter Five, in which I shared study findings about girls' navigation of traditional gender roles and expectations, participants shared that they

would really like to be able to define their own identities outside of what was expected of them as girls. To be considered a 'good' citizen, however, is often considered to abide by the white, middle-class, cisgendered and heterosexual status quo (Robinson, 2012). The girls in this study who were thinking critically about and resisting gendered expectations of girlhood were, therefore, acting in resistance to, and challenging the status quo in pursuit of, what they felt was more authentically them and which might offer greater opportunities for other girls, too, to look, think, and act in ways that are authentic. As articulated in Chapter Three, for children to deviate from the gendered expectations placed on them is a direct challenge to adultist systems of power that govern and surveill how they should look and behave. To challenge the status quo, including through gender identity and expression, is therefore to challenge dominant power structures and thus go against the grain of 'good' citizenship.

It is here that I point to the tension that girls experience when trying to influence social and environmental change work – on one hand, they must distance themselves from their identities as girls to be taken more seriously as activists and change makers, while on the other, any critique or challenge to their identities as girls positions them as deviant or 'bad' citizens. Making sense of this tension has been difficult, and as I write, I recognize and understand that it is because there is no easy way to articulate the space in between 'good' and 'bad' citizenship for girls. Girls simply cannot win. The girls in this study were navigating space somewhere in the grey, through which they may have been considered 'good' citizens by some standards and 'bad' citizens by others. It is perhaps because of this tension that girls' activism is so difficult to think about categorically –

and, perhaps, categorical thinking is not the point. The point instead is to recognize that despite girls' best efforts to create positive change in their schools, communities, and beyond, they will never be considered to necessarily be doing the right thing as prescribed by expectations of gender as well as by expectations of citizenship.

As the girls in this study grappled with gendered expectations while also working to create their own gendered realities, they were simultaneously navigating messages about what it means to be a successful, exceptional, activist girl. This may have also been why, as explored in Chapters Six and Seven, many of the girls in this study subscribed to rhetoric of "girl power" and the "can-do girl", sometimes aligning themselves with discourses that proclaim that girls can do anything if they work hard enough and apply themselves. In the next section, I write about discourses of girl power, the can-do girl, and how this individualistic/neoliberal version of citizenship works in contradiction to the collective action that girls often cited as necessary to catalyze meaningful change.

Feminism, Postfeminism, and Social and Environmental Change

While some of the girls spoke about traditional gendered expectations when describing messages that they had received about being a girl, many of them also shared messages that they had heard about how "special" (Owl) it was to be a girl. Some of them spoke about being a girl as "empowering", (Owl), that it means that "you can do anything" (Tianna), and that as a girl, "if you put your mind into it, you will accomplish it" (Dot). As discussed in Chapter Six, where I drew connections between the sentiments shared by the girls in this study and discourses of "girl power" and the "can-do girl", much of what girls shared was characteristic of postfeminist ideas (Mauk et al., 2020;

Pomerantz et al., 2013; Taft, 2004). Postfeminism asserts that there is no longer a need for feminism because gender equality has been achieved, which therefore means that women and girls should, theoretically, be able to do whatever they set their minds to (Pomerantz et al., 2013; Taft, 2004). Within the context of girls' activism, participation, and citizenship, these girl power discourses create interesting challenges for how girls are capable of catalyzing meaningful social and environmental change.

Intrinsic to discourses of girl power and the can-do girl, and as verbalized by many of the girls who participated in this study, is the belief that girls can do anything that they set their minds to if they just try hard enough. The main ethos of individual agency woven throughout postfeminist girl power and can-do girl discourses that champions girls' "choice, empowerment, and voice" (Harris & Dobson, 2015, p. 145). As articulated elsewhere in this dissertation, choice, empowerment, and voice can also be understood as neoliberal concepts that place responsibility and onus on individual actors for how their lives take shape, devoid of social, cultural, or political factors (Gonick, 2006). There is a strong relationship between postfeminism and neoliberalism, therefore, in that postfeminism is characterised by "neo-liberal indiviudalisation, personal choice, and the belief that structural inequities are personal problems" (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011, p. 549). Within the context of social and environmental change work, girl power and can-do girl discourses construct girls as ideal neoliberal subjects that can create change as individuals if they want to, despite the systems that make it difficult – if not impossible – for them to do so.

Relatedly, and perhaps not surprisingly, whenever I share with new acquaintances that my doctoral research explored the experiences of girls who are engaged in social or environmental change work I am met with some version of "oh! Like Greta!" Referring to Greta Thunberg, the now 21-year-old climate activist from Sweden, most people that I speak with about girls who are creating change are able to identify this one girl who has received global attention for her activism (Huang & Bent, 2022). Similar discourses surrounded Malala Yousafzai for her efforts to improve girls' access to education in Pakistan (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013), and X Gonzalez during the March for Our Lives to advocate for stronger gun control legislation in the United States of America (Bent, 2020). This platforming and celebration of extraordinary girl activists, or girls who have been deemed as extraordinary individuals by the popular media, has become the quintessential image of what it means to be a "successful" girl creating change.

While it may be heartening and exciting to hear about girls who are creating meaningful change in their schools, communities, and beyond, the story that is not told when platforming extraordinary, girl power, can-do girls is that of political struggle. By implying that social and environmental change work is possible by distilling actions down to simply trying hard enough, work that is innately political becomes quickly depoliticized. As brilliantly articulated by Emily Bent (2020, p. 798).

> The trope of the exceptional girl…contributes to popular beliefs that every girl can succeed because "equality is a done deal, the system is fair, and personal metamorphosis is the key" (Brown 2016 4). Girl-power scripts present safe, individually centered alternatives to doing the difficult work of collective social change and give the illusion that girl activists act on their own. In the process, these scripts undersell the role others play in their political efforts while overselling their individual skills and capacities as human capital investments (Rottenberg 2017).

If girls believe that they can do anything they set their minds to by way of postfeminist girl power and can-do girl discourses, then they likely see no need for community organizing or connections to broader or historical social movements. It is these things – the depoliticizing of the political and the individualization of what ought to be approached collectively – that negatively impacts how effective the social and environmental change work of many girls can ultimately be.

When I spoke with participants about the ways that they were working to influence change, some of them spoke of their involvement in partisan politics or of their awareness of large social movements such as Black Lives Matter. Many of them, however, spoke of the actions that they were taking as individuals to create change, such as picking up litter in their school yards or helping their friends who were struggling at school. While these actions are important and meaningful – as stated by Tianna, "even the small things matter" – I wonder how impactful they might have been had they been connected to community efforts or larger social or environmental change movements. To be connected to social and change efforts more broadly, however, requires some kind of knowledge about the work that is being done. This type of political awareness was not often expressed explicitly by the girls in this study, although perhaps not because of a disinterest in the issues. There may have been a confounding relationship between postfeminist ideas of girl power and the can-do girl and neoliberal citizenship that reinforces the belief that collective action is not necessary if girls instead just try hard enough to create change as individuals.

The influence of postfeminist girl power and can-do girl discourses in girls' social and environmental change work was glaringly apparent throughout the duration of my study. In addition to articulating that they could create change by trying their best, however, was an underlying motive for engaging in change work in the first place: care and responsibility towards their communities. These motives pointed to a uniquely gendered experience of citizenship, one that has been explored in the scholarly literature by critical citizenship scholars (e.g., Lister, 1997) and scholars who have otherwise studied girls' and young women's activism (e.g., Kennelly, 2014; Taft, 2011). The final key conceptual thread woven throughout this dissertation, therefore, is one about gendered nuance of citizenship.

Gendered Nuance of Citizenship

Looking after one-another is symbolic of feeling responsible to others and participating in a collective society and helping and educating others are two ways that children are believed to understand their responsibilities as citizens (Covell et al., 2008). Embodying care as a form of responsible citizenship, however, has additionally been found to be a particularly gendered experience, felt most weightily by those tasked with duties of care in the domestic sphere – women and girls (Lister, 1997). While children might assert their responsibilities as citizens through helping and educating others, girls may believe in and internalize the power of helping and care particularly so because of their gendered socialization (Kennelly, 2014; Taft, 2011).

This gendered responsibility to care for others was a conceptual thread that emerged most notably in findings Chapters Seven and Eight, through which some of the

girls shared why they felt it was important to engage in social and environmental change work. Isla, for example, shared with me that she believed she was aware of social and environmental issues because she was characteristically caring and that this caring therefore helped her to pay attention to the world around her (as per in Isla's vignette in Chapter Four). Similarly, and as explored in Chapter Eight, Anne spoke about how she believed that women and girls benefit from being part of a community based around shared gender identity because of the care and solidarity that is offered. Some of the other girls, such as Heart Sparkle and Tianna, stated that they wanted to create positive change so that the next generation of girls could experience something better. These ideas were reviewed more in depth in Chapters Six and Seve, where they indicated that they cared for the girls for the future and that they felt a sense of responsibility to those that were to come after them. It makes good sense that participants shared these sentiments when considering that girls' gendered socialization to care have been cited as reason for girls' sense of responsibility to work towards more equitable futures (Kennelly, 2014; Taft, 2011).

This sense of responsibility to care for others has been referred to in the scholarly literature as an ethic of care (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1998); the concept of an ethic of care has roots in feminist theorizing because of the traditional gendered responsibilities of women and girls to provide care in the domestic sphere (Papineau, 2025; Trono, 1998). A feminist ethic of care is centred around values of "empathy, reciprocity, and mutual concern" (Papineau, 2025, p. 488), and challenges individualism while emphasizing relationality. To care for others is therefore to recognize the importance of relationship,

community, and collectivity. Much of what the participants told me about their reasons for engaging in social and environmental change work was rooted in a sentiment of care, pointing to the emphasis of relationality over individualism. This again points to the tension that girls were navigating between feminism and postfeminism; they sometimes subscribed to postfeminist girl power and can-do girl discourses while articulating the importance of relationship in others.

While a feminist ethic of care was woven throughout much of what the girls told me about their social and environmental change work, tenants of relationality and mutual concern were particularly notable when they would speak about those in their life offering them support in their activist efforts. Many of the participants shared that they were often supported by their parents (Heart Sparkle, Tianna, Anne, Isla), siblings (Winter, Dot), friends (Zendaya, Anne) or teachers (Tianna, Winter) as they worked to create the changes that they wanted to see in the world. For many of them, this was because they recognized that, as girls, they were limited in the power and resources required to enact the sorts of changes that they were hoping to see in the world. As shared in Chapter Six, for example, Heart Sparkle spoke about requiring the support of her family members to move forward with her fundraiser for Ukraine. Her father helped her to create the wooden signs that she sold door-to-door, while her mother accompanied her while she walked around selling the signs because it was determined that Heart Sparkle could not safely walk around alone. Similarly, both Anne and Tianna had attended many political campaign activities and protests with their mothers. Much of what the girls told me about their social and environmental change work was centred around the relationships in their

lives, through which they articulated the many ways that they would lean on those around them for support.

While all the girls recognized that engaging in social and environmental change work was more easily accomplished with the support of those around them, Anne also shared her fascinating use of the "empathy bridge" to encourage others to see social and environmental issues as important and worthy of action, which is detailed in Chapter Seven. Anne told me that the empathy bridge was helpful for having conversations with people who may have differing views from her, ultimately using it as a tool to engage with her on sometimes sensitive topics. The use of the empathy bridge signalled an additional emphasis on relationality and care; to create change, it is important to have the support of others, support which may require relational effort and community building.

This emphasis on relationality and care is particularly interesting when considering the other threads of postfeminist and neoliberal feminist girl power and can-do girl discourses that were woven throughout this study. Despite neoliberal feminist and postfeminist discourses asserting that girls can do anything on their own if they try hard enough (a sentiment which many of the girls echoed throughout their participation), girls simultaneously shared many times over that they could only really engage in change work because they were in relationship with and cared about others. This is yet another tension that has seemed to emerge in the lives of girls who are interested in making their worlds better. They are socialized to care for and be in relationship with others, while neoliberal and feminist discourses tell them that they can and should do everything on their own.

Again, there is no straightforward path for girl activists – only a deep care for others and the motivation to create change so that others can experience more equitable worlds.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this study, I learned from girls about what it means for them to act as 'good' or 'bad' citizens, how feminism and postfeminism collide to influence their experiences of social and environmental change work, and about the gendered nuances of citizenship. This chapter offered an in-depth exploration of these theoretical threads, which were all conceptually rooted in my critical childhood citizenship framework. While all three of these theoretical threads offer a unique glimpse into the activist work of girls, what was additionally apparent were the complex tensions that girls are required to navigate throughout their social and environmental change work.

While the intention of this research was to learn about and highlight the work that girls are doing to make our social world and environment better, it was also carried forth with the fundamental understanding that adults hold more power to influence and make decisions in an adultist society (Wall, 2019). The findings from this research further showcase how girls are working to create change but that they need the support of others with more power and resources do to so; I take this as an opportunity to encourage other adults to reflect upon and think critically about what this support and allyship for girls may look like. With these reflections in mind, in the next and final chapter I offer concluding thoughts about the impact of the findings from this study, as well as offer some insights into contributions that this research makes to the field.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I offer reflections on and a summary of the limitations, methodological tensions, and key learnings from this study. I discuss how study findings and reflections on the research process may fit within and contribute to existing bodies of literature about girls' activism, children's participation and citizenship, child-centred research, and social work. Aligned with what was discovered in the study findings, I conclude by sharing some final remarks about this project.

Limitations and Methodological Tensions

While I believe that this study can make meaningful contributions to conversations about girls' activism, children's participation and citizenship, child-centred research, and social work, I also recognize that this study and the methods used have their limitations. In what follows, I share some of these limitations and methodological tensions as well as the possibilities that emerged throughout this research.

Limitations

To start, a notable limitation of this study was that it included a small sample size of nine girls. Despite the findings being reflective of the stories of those nine girls, the findings of this study are therefore not generalizable to a larger sect of girls who are working to create social or environmental change, including transgender girls. These sample size limitations were largely due to time and monetary resource restrictions. It was important to me and aligned with my values as a researcher to adequately compensate participants for their time and knowledge, which required a personal financial commitment to participant incentivization. Had this study had access to a greater pool of

resources, it would have been beneficial to perhaps recruit an additional cohort of girls to participate in this study and expand upon the time allotted for the data collection phase of the project.

Another potential limitation is that I analyzed the data in a way that effectively treated the participant group as a monolith. There are important demographic characteristics of the girl participants that may have contributed to the findings of this study. One of the criteria for participation was predicated on parameters of age; I made the choice not to mention the age of each individual girl throughout the writing of this dissertation, however, so as not to infer that what they said was because of their age. As we often don't write about adults in relation to how old they are – it's likely that nobody would write about me, for example, as "Alexe, age 34" – I did not want to reinforce the adultist idea that some girls may have said certain things or provided certain responses simply because they were younger or older in relation to the other girl participants. I felt it important to not to attribute participant data to their ages so that I did not reify adultist beliefs that discredit the knowledge of young people because of their age.

In addition to making the intentional choice not to identify the ages of individual girls in this study, I also chose not to connect their chosen pseudonyms to the information that they provided me with in their participation in the demographic survey. Therefore, while the group of girls who participated in this study were diverse in race, ethnicity, class, and ability, this diversity was not necessarily reflected in my analysis of what they had told me in their interviews or in the focus groups. As the participant group from this study was small, I did not want to risk potentially tokenizing the experiences of any of the

girls who participated in this study or incorrectly interpreting what they had told me in a very specific context. I unfortunately did not gather additional data on this throughout the course of this study, but it is noteworthy nonetheless. I continue to think and reflect about how the findings from this study may have been shaped differently had I asked explicit questions about aspects of identity beyond girlhood.

While the girls who participated in this study were diverse in race, ethnicity, and ability, there was near homogeneity in terms of their parent's educational background. During the recruitment stage of this project, as described in Chapter Four, I reached out to community organizations in the GTHA as well as to administrators in McMaster University's School of Social Work and the Gender and Social Justice Program. Perhaps coincidentally, perhaps because of my connection to McMaster University, three of the girls who participated had academic moms; mothers of three of the girls in this study had either completed or were in the process of completing their doctorate degrees. One girl's father had a doctorate degree. In total, at least one parent of six of the girls had a graduate degree, and at least one parent of eight of the nine girl participant had a bachelor's degree. The girls who participated in this study were thus from highly educated families and particularly came from families in which there were highly educated mothers.

The relationship between parents' educational background and their children's inclination to engage in social or environmental change work has not yet been studied. The fact that this pattern emerged while recruiting for this study has since encouraged me to reflect upon what this relationship might be and how this context may have influenced the findings from this research project. I am also cognizant, however, that higher levels of

family education tend to be linked with class privilege (Fenette, 2019), which very likely affected which girls were able to participate in this study. While I actively worked to make participating in this project accessible and inclusive, particularly with hybrid virtual and in-person options, to participate in a research study still requires time and resources on behalf of participants. The girls who attended the focus groups in-person, for example, were all brought to the McMaster University campus by one of their parents either by public transit or personal vehicle. To do this was contingent on one parent having the time and physical ability to being available to do so, indicative of the group of girls who participated in this study having – to at least some degree – a level of class privilege.

Having a critical awareness of the identities and lived experiences of the girls who participated offers important contextual foreground for thinking about the findings from this research project. Due to the small sample of nine girls, I cannot conclusively state that these factors affected their social or environmental change work. I instead offer these insights to draw attention to the fact that this research was embedded within broader systems of power and oppression that impact our lives, girls included. These considerations of power are additionally important for critical analysis of the methods used. The next section outlines the methodological tensions that emerged throughout the process of conducting this study, including limitations of the use of FPAR with children and the logistical challenges of engaging in participatory research with young people.

Methodological Tensions

While FPAR processes might attempt to address power differentials between adults and young people, it is also important to acknowledge that research does not exist

in a vacuum (Johnson & Flynn, 2021). As an adult doing research with children, and as a researcher working with participants, power hierarchies between the girl participants and I existed throughout the research process. Ongoing critical reflexivity and attention paid to the power dynamics between us was therefore one of the most important aspects of the project.

In relation to this careful attention to ongoing power dynamics within the participatory research relationship was the inevitable unequal distribution of roles and responsibilities throughout the research process, which is a key challenge with FPAR methodologies (Johnson & Flynn, 2021). Within the context of this study, encouraging participants to engage in a participatory way was challenging. One of the reasons for this was due to the time limitations of designing and conducting this study; as a doctoral research project, time allotted to engaging participants was largely dictated by my desire to complete the study in a timely matter. This limited the ways in which I was able to develop relationships with and engage participants from the early stages of the study design. Also notable is the fact that children often do not have full agency or control over their own schedules and are typically required to consider the needs and time commitments of other family members. The participants in this study, for example, were largely dependent on their families to coordinate research activity schedules and to make transportation arrangements. There were many external factors at plat that affected how girls could participate in this study, despite my best efforts to make research participation as equitable as possible.

While I also tried to make the research process accessible, there were additional limitations as to who could reasonably participate in this study. As the study incorporated multiple research activities, it may not have been accessible to potential participants who may have had large families or were from working-class or working-poor households, as they may not have had the financial or time capacity to facilitate ongoing participation in all the research activities. From a disability perspective, the research design also included many dialogical activities, which may have limited accessibility for participants who found engaging in prolonged conversation or conversations in groups more difficult. Despite there being a diverse representation of girls who participated in this study, there were still limitations to who could participate because of the research design.

Contributions to the Field

Despite the limitations of this project, I believe that this study has the potential to make meaningful contributions to the field. First, methodologically, this study offers new learnings and ideas for engaging children in participatory and arts-based research. Second, the findings of this study build upon and add to existing bodies of literature about children's citizenship. Lastly, the field of social work – in education, policy, and practice – could benefit from the theoretical underpinnings and findings from this study.

Contributions to the Girls' Activism Literature

As articulated throughout chapter two, the literature on girls' activism has historically focussed on the activism of teenage girls and young women. Throughout my community social work practice, however, I saw firsthand that girls of younger ages were also working to create change. This research showcases that, just as older girls are, girls

between the ages of 8-12 years are engaged in social and environmental change work to positively influence their schools, communities, and beyond. It is my hope that this research marks the beginning of more explicitly showcasing the activist work of younger girls, and that the literature on girls' activism continues to build upon the knowledge developed in this study.

Contributions to Child-Centred Research

Methodologically, this study contributes towards filling a significant gap with respect to participatory and qualitative, arts-based research with children. Building upon my critical epistemological orientation, which recognizes and aims to address power imbalances between children and adults, I was dedicated to engaging in research that centred children's perspectives, knowledge, and which offered flexibility and accommodated nuanced participation needs. These methodological choices were informed primarily by my former community social work practice experiences because there was not a lot of guidance in the literature about how to do participatory research with children.

Although it was challenging to wrestle with the nuances and complexities of engaging children in participatory ways, I also know that this research would not have been possible had I not offered the level of flexibility that I did. It was a constant and important reminder that the perspectives of children are often excluded in research for these very reasons – that research participation standards requiring a certain threshold of rigidity often cater to how some adults might participate in research. Centering the unique needs of children to participate in this process, which necessitated methodological

flexibility, created opportunities for girls who would have otherwise been excluded from this process to instead participate in this study.

What I refer to as methodological flexibility here is what I believe to be an important contribution to the field of child-centred research. Much of the current literature about centering children in research is focussed on methods that honour epistemological diversity, including the integration of multiple forms of data collection methods such as interviews, the arts, or play (Blaisdell et al., 2019; Danby et al., 2011; Irwin & Johnson, 2005). What is largely absent, however, is what is required on behalf of the researcher to make sure that the participation of children in research is possible in the first place. I am hopeful that the methodological flexibility that I undertook throughout this research project, characteristic of participatory methods, will encourage other researchers engaged in child-centred research to consider the broader contexts of children's lives in relation to their research participation.

Contributions to the Children's Citizenship Literature

As articulated in my discussion of theory in Chapter Three, the literature on children's citizenship has tended to assume gender neutrality. To assume gender neutrality in a patriarchal society, however, is really to presume that children's citizenship is enacted in a way that is de-facto male. By drawing attention to this gap in the literature, I hope to catalyze a more nuanced way of thinking about childhood, children, and children's citizenship. This research study was conducted with the intention of answering questions related to gendered dimensions of children's citizenship as related to girls' social and environmental change work. Thinking specifically about how girls experience citizenship

is important for ensuring that their participation can be included and considered equitably in future decision-making processes.

Contributions to Social Work

I realize that I did not explicitly write about social work throughout this dissertation other than to articulate my own ontological orientations. However, I see this study about girls' activism as relevant to the field of social work for multiple reasons. Within the realms of theory, practice, and policy, it is important for social work scholars and practitioners to reconfigure how we think about and work with girls.

Theoretically, I believe that social workers ought to start considering how concepts such as adultism and epistemic injustice influence their thinking about and practice with girls. Thinking critically about how these concepts affect social work practice and policy is an essential first step in addressing how girls' experience social workers and social policy. More specifically, learning to challenge adultist beliefs to instead listen to and take girls seriously is an important piece of the greater quest towards social justice that the profession of social work claims to work towards. This critical approach to working with girls has additional implications for community level social work practice and social work policy more generally; centering the perspectives of girls in community intervention and policy that are made about their lives would be a welcome shift in a direction that acknowledges how systems of power – including but not limited to age and gender – affect how girls interact with social work and social services.

Like the body of literature related to children's citizenship, the field of social work has historically approached practice with girls from a place of gender neutrality (Bernier,

2025). What this study has illuminated, however, is how the lived experiences of girls are undoubtedly affected by systems of gendered, adultist, and racial power. I would encourage those engaged with social work research, education, policy and practice to recognize and center these realities in their work. Social workers are often granted power over the lives of children that they work with; this research study offers ways to think about these power dynamics and highlights ways to work with girls that is participatory, collaborative, and that centers their voices in decisions made about their lives.

Concluding Remarks

The beginning of my doctoral studies journey marked my introduction to research. I began this process after years of practicing as a social worker in community programs with girls and identified primarily in a way that aligned myself as a social worker. I did not identify as a researcher and did not really understand what it might mean to do so; to me, at that time, being a social worker and being an academic researcher were dichotomous to each other, separated by fancy language and structure and prestige. I now understand that my experience and identity as a community social worker is what has uniquely contributed to my research identity. The years of experience that I had sitting on the floor with groups of girls in the basement of a community centre in Calgary significantly shaped how I conceptualized this research project from start to finish. While I had originally believed my lack of research experience to be a weakness, I have now learned it to be a strength. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to blend these perspectives and know that this project would not have taken the same shape had I not learned from girls in community in the years leading up to this doctoral research project.

Throughout this study, I have stayed true to my own history as a community social worker while integrating these experiences with my new identity as a researcher. I hope that my community practice roots have shone through throughout the writing of this dissertation. In Chapter One, I provided an overview of this dissertation, including a recount of what led me to pursue my research question, which was about better understanding the activism of girls aged 8-12 years old. A review of the literature pertaining to my research question was outlined in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three, I wove together theoretical concepts from critical citizenship studies and critical childhood studies to develop the theoretical framework for this study, henceforth referred to as my critical childhood citizenship framework. My methodological approach was outlined in Chapter Four, during which I provided detailed information about the choices that I had made about study design, methods, and analysis. This included an overview of FPAR, arts-based research, and the operationalizing of these approaches with the girls who chose to participate in this study. In Chapters Five through Eight of this dissertation, I shared the findings of this study while weaving through a critical analysis of each finding. In chapter Nine, I went deeper into discussion about the study findings, further bolstering my interpretation of the data with theoretical analysis. Lastly, in this tenth and concluding chapter of the dissertation, I considered the limitations, tensions, and possibilities of this project, as well as offered reflections about the potential contributions of this study to child-centred research, the girls activism literature, citizenship studies, and social work.

It is my hope that this work honours the stories of the girls that I have had the pleasure of knowing and learning from over the past eleven years of my life, and in

particular, the girls who participated in this study. This has been the most intellectually and creatively challenging journey of my life. It has also been the most rewarding. It is my dream that this work inspires others to take girls seriously as citizens and change-makers, to seek out and center their perspectives and knowledge, and to turn to them as collaborators and co-conspirators as we work towards more socially and environmentally just worlds. Our only option is to try, and we have more power if we try together.

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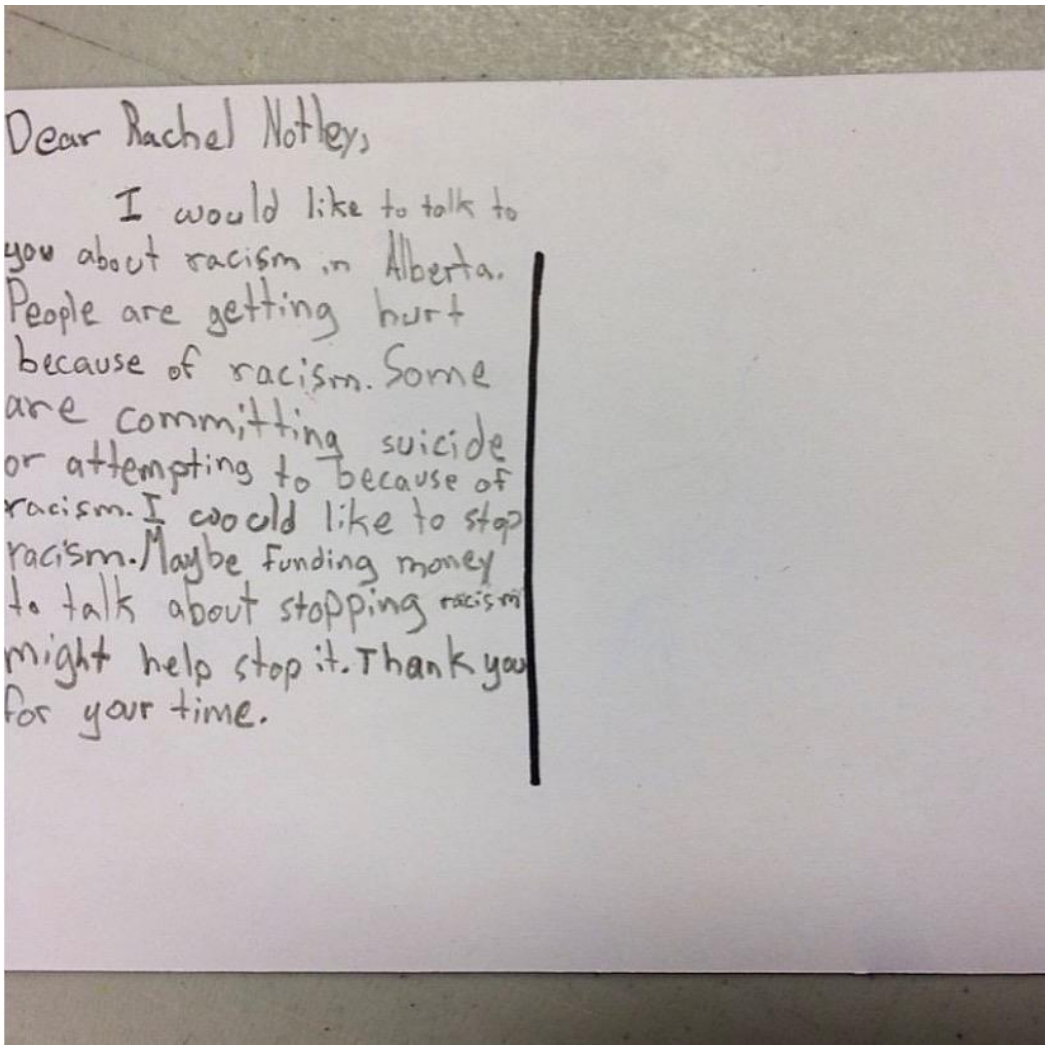
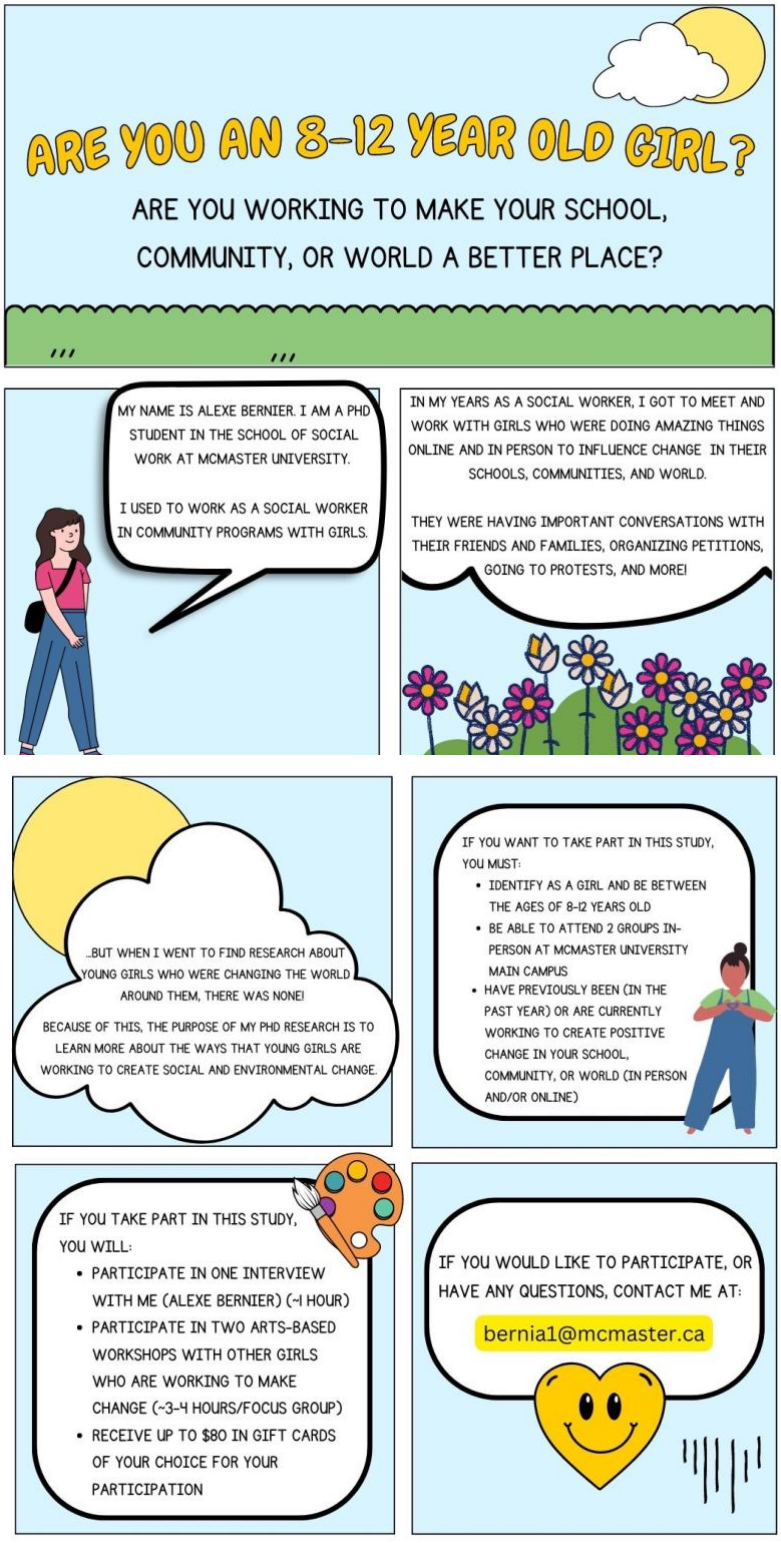
Appendices

Appendix A: Girl's Program Participant Postcard to Rachel Notley



Appendix B: Study Recruitment Poster

Appendix C: Study Recruitment Social Media Graphics




THIS RESEARCH IS DONE UNDER THE
SUPERVISION OF DR. ANN FUDGE SCHORMANS
(fschorm@mcmaster.ca)
McMaster
University
THIS STUDY HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE
MCMASTER RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD (#6495)

Appendix D: Study Recruitment Video Script

Video Script for Recruitment Video

Alexe Bernier BSc, MSW
PhD Candidate, School of Social Work, McMaster University

Study Title:
Exploring the experiences of young girls who engage in activism.

The following script will be used to create a video for recruitment. The student researcher (Alexe Bernier) will read the script into a video camera in an engaging way. The video will be uploaded onto MacVideo to enable closed captioning for the purposes of accessibility. The recruitment video will be shared with the Letter of Information and Consent.

Script:

Hi! My name is Alexe Bernier, and I am a student at McMaster University. I am doing my PhD in the School of Social Work with the supervision of Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans.

Before applying to go to McMaster, I worked as a social worker for five years.

For those five years, I worked in community programs with girls between the ages of 10-18 years old. As I worked in those programs, I worked with girls to strengthen their leadership and activism skills.

In that work, I got to meet and work with so many amazing girls who were doing amazing things to influence positive social and environmental change in their schools, communities, and world.

Both in person and online, I saw young girls having important conversations with their friends and family, organizing petitions, going to protests, and so much more!

But when I went to find research about young girls who were changing the world around them, I couldn't find any.

My research at McMaster is inspired by all of those girls that I saw doing incredible things to make their worlds better. That is what I'm making this video about.

I'm looking for girls who would like to participate in a research study with me.

To participate, you need to be between the ages of 8-12 years old and identify as a girl.

You also must be currently, or in the past year, working to create positive change in your school, community, or world, either in-person or online.

If you would like to participate, I will ask you to do one interview with me. The interview will take about one hour.

I will then ask you to participate in two arts-based workshops with the other girls who are participating in this study.
In the first workshop, I will ask you to make collages about what it means to you to be a girl. This workshop will be around 3 hours long, and I will make sure that we take breaks and have snacks.

In the second workshop, I will ask you to make a big sign that shares a message about what you'd like the world to know about how you are working to make the world a better place. This workshop will be around 4 hours long, and I will make sure that we take breaks and have snacks – and I'll provide a tasty lunch for us to share!

If you choose to participate, you will receive up to $80 in gift cards of your choice to thank you for sharing your time and your knowledge.

If you would like to learn more, or if you would like to chat about participating, please get in touch with me!

My email and phone number will be shown on the next screen.

Thank you so much, and I'll talk to you soon!

[***show a slide with:***
Alexe Bernier
bernia1@mcmaster.ca
xxx-xxx-xxxx]

[***show slide with:***
This research is being done under the supervision of Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans (fschorm@mcmaster.ca)

This study has been approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (#6495)]

Appendix E: Study Snowball Recruitment Script

Date: July 17, 2023

Email Snowball Recruitment Script

Alexe Bernier BSc, MSW
PhD Candidate, School of Social Work, McMaster University

Study Title:
Exploring the experiences of young girls who engage in activism.

Email subject line: Study Invite: Exploring the experiences of young girls who engage in activism.

Hello,
I'm emailing to tell you about a project led by Alexe Bernier, a PhD candidate from McMaster. She is conducting a study about young girls who are engaged in social and environmental change work. Prior to beginning her doctoral studies, Alexe worked in community-based programs for girls that were focused on strengthening girls' leadership and activism skills for nearly 5 years in Calgary, Alberta. She is keen to connect with the girls and their communities here in the Greater Hamilton Area!

This research is part of her PhD program in the School of Social Work at McMaster University. She is being supervised by Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans, who is also from the School of Social Work at McMaster University.

She is inviting girls aged 8-12 years old who have recently (in the past year), or are currently, working to creative positive social or environmental change either in-person or online in their schools, communities, or beyond to participate in this study. Participants will be asked to take part in one 45-60 minute interview with her that will take place either in-person or over Zoom, at the preference of participants. Participants will then take part in two separate arts-based workshops with other girl participants. The arts-based workshops will be 3-4 hours in length with food and refreshments provided, in-person at the main McMaster University campus. Girls will receive up to $80 in gift cards of their choosing for their participation.

I have attached a copy of her information letter to this email, which gives you full details about the study. I have also attached a link to a video version of her letter of information, which you may want to share with potential girl participants.

If you know a girl who is interested in participating, Alexe is happy to work out participation details with them and their adult parent/guardian. If you are interested in getting more information, or if you know a girl who would like to take part in this study, you are welcome to contact Alexe directly by using her telephone number or McMaster email address. **Tel: xxx-xxx-xxxx** or **bernia1@mcmaster.ca.**

You are also welcome and encouraged to forward this email directly to your contacts whom you think may know girls who may be interested. Alexe would be happy to provide you with additional information or to forward her recruitment materials to you so that you can send them to your contacts.

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (#6495). If you have questions or concerns about participant rights or about the way the study is being conducted you may contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
Gilmour Hall – Room 305 (ROADS)
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Appendix F: Letter of Information and Consent (Adults)

Date: October 19, 2023

Letter of Information/Consent

Study Title:
Exploring the experiences of young girls who engage in activism.

McMaster Research Ethics Board #6495

Student Investigator:
Alexe Bernier
School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(xxx) xxx-xxxx
E-mail: bernia1@mcmaster.ca

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans
School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(xxx) xxx-xxxx
E-mail: fschorm@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study: To explore the experiences of young girls who engage in activism through qualitative interviews and arts-based methodologies.

This study is about the ways that young girls are working to create social and/or environmental change either in-person or online in their schools, communities, or beyond. In this context, "young girls" are defined as girls between the ages of 8-12 years old. I use the language of "create social and/or environmental change" instead of the word "activism" because I know that the word "activism" might not resonate with many people, and the girls themselves may not define the types of work that they are engaging in as activism.

In this study, I therefore want to learn about: (1) young girls' own definitions and understandings of girlhood, and (2) the social and environmental change work that they are engaged in, what motivates them to engage in this type of work, as well as why they believe it is important.

Through individual qualitative interviews and then arts-based focus groups, I am hoping to learn about girls' own understandings of girlhood, what it means to them to be a girl, and what messages they hear about girlhood. I am also hoping to learn more about their activist practices, including the ways in which they are previously or are currently working to create positive change, which issues they are working to create change on, their motivations for taking action, and why they think this type of work is important. I am also hoping to gather what messages they might have to share about young girls who are engaged in social and/or environmental change work

I am doing this research under the supervision of Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans, and this research is being done as my PhD research project. With your permission, I will therefore use the data for this project in doctoral dissertation writing. I also hope to use

the data from this study for the purposes of academic publication, as well as for other knowledge sharing activities such as academic conferences. This data also includes photographs that I will take of your child's artwork to accompany and illustrate the findings from the interviews and focus groups. The photos of the artwork will be included in my doctoral dissertation as well as for the purposes of academic publication and other knowledge sharing activities.

At the end of this study, I will also be asking girls how they would like to share the findings from this study, co-creating ways to share the knowledge that we developed together.

What will happen during the study?

If your child chooses to participate in this project, she will participate in one interview (45 minutes to 1 hour in length) with me (Alexe Bernier), as well as in two arts-based focus groups (3-4 hours per focus group) with the other girls who are participating in this study.

For all of the research activities, including the interview and the arts-based focus groups, your child has the option of having a support person nearby. The support person will be asked to sign an oath of confidentiality to maintain the privacy and identities of the other participants.

Interviews

The interview will occur either in-person at McMaster University or another public location of yours and your child's choosing, or in an online format using Zoom teleconferencing technology. Your child has the choice to do her interview in-person or online, the date and time of which we can determine and schedule together so that it is convenient for her. If she chooses to do her interview in person, we will meet in a public location but in a place that can help us to keep our conversations private, such as in a rented private room at McMaster University or the Hamilton Public Library. With her consent, I will audio record in-person interviews using a voice recorder. If she does not consent to voice-recording, that is okay, and I will take hand-written notes instead. If she chooses to do her interview online, I will email a unique meeting link and password to you and your child so that she can join a Zoom video/audio chat on the selected date and time of her interview. During a Zoom interview, she may use her first name or a pseudonym of her choice, and she can choose to turn her camera off if she chooses to maintain her privacy. Only I will be conducting the interview with your child; my supervisor, Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans, will not be present for the interview.

At the beginning of the interview, I will formally introduce myself and reiterate the purpose of the project. I will review this letter with your child and go through the processes of obtaining her oral consent to participate in this study, which I will document. I will then announce that the interview is going to start being recorded for the purposes of research and ask for her verbal permission that this is okay. If she do not consent to recording, I will instead take handwritten notes throughout the course of our interview. Once we begin the interview, I will ask her questions about her own definitions and understandings of girlhood. Questions about girlhood are categorized into four sections: (1) what being a girl means to her, (2) where she learned about what it means to be a

girl, (3) messages she's heard about what it means to be a girl, and (4) what message she would share with the world about what it means to be a girl. Here are examples of the types of questions I will be asking:

1. What does being a girl mean to you?
2. Where did you learn about what it means to be a girl?
3. What messages do you hear about being a girl?
4. If you could share your own message about what it means to be a girl, what would you say?

Following the questions about girlhood, I will ask questions about the ways that she is working to create social and/or environmental change. Questions about social/environmental change are categorized into six sections: (1) the actions that she has taken to create positive change, (2) which issue she was working to change, (3) what motivated her to take action to create change, (4) what other people think about the actions that she has taken, (5) her understandings of the word and language of "activism," and (6) messages that she would share with other girls who are working to create positive change in the world. Here are examples of the types of questions I will be asking:

1. In what ways have you been trying to create positive change?
2. Which social or environmental issue were you trying to create change on by taking action?
3. What motivated you to take action and try to fix this issue/problem?
4. What do other people think about the action that you've taken?
5. What comes to mind when you hear the word "activism"?
6. If other girls wanted to start making positive change in the world around them, what would you say to them?

As stated earlier, with your child's permission, I will audio record these interviews. Interviews will be recorded for the purposes of written transcription, meaning that I will only keep the audio file until the dialogue from the interview has been typed out. The interview will be audio recorded either using a voice recorder or via Zoom. If it is recorded using Zoom, the recording will be temporarily saved to the cloud. The interview will be transcribed using Zoom transcription technology, and then I will re-listen to the audio recording to edit the transcription for accuracy. When listening to the audio recordings for additional transcription from either the voice recorder or where it is temporarily saved to the cloud, I will do so in a private office space with earphones. I am the only transcriber for this project.

If recorded using a voice recorder, I will keep the recording for a maximum of up to two months to account for the time that I might need to accurately transcribe it. If recorded using Zoom, the recording of the interview will be saved to the cloud for a maximum of 48 hours and will be deleted immediately after transcription. The remaining typed transcript will be completely anonymized, meaning that none of your child's personal or identifying information will be attached to that typed transcription.

Arts-Based Focus Groups

There will be two arts-based focus groups that will take place with all of the participants together after the individual interviews are complete. Each focus group will be scheduled at a date and time that works for all of the participants. The arts-based focus groups will occur in-person at McMaster University. There is also an option for your child to participate virtually via Zoom, in a hybrid focus group format, if she is not able to attend one or both of the workshops in-person. If your child is choosing to participate virtually, I will ask you to share your mailing address with me in advance so that I am able to mail you the necessary supplies for the arts-based portion of each focus group.

At the beginning of each focus group I will formally introduce myself and reiterate the purpose of the project, as well as share the agenda for the focus group (below). I will then announce that the first part of the focus group, the discussion component, is going to be audio recorded.

Interviews will be recorded for the purposes of written transcription, meaning that I will only keep the audio file until the dialogue from the interview has been typed out. When listening to the audio recording for transcription from the voice recorder, I will do so in a private office space with earphones. I am the only transcriber for this project. I will keep the recording for a maximum of up to two months to account for the time that I might need to accurately transcribe it. The remaining typed transcript will be completely anonymized, meaning that none of your child's personal or identifying information will be attached to that typed transcription.

First Focus Group: Girlhood and Collage
The first arts-based focus group will be 3 hours long and will be focussed on learning more about girls' understandings and definitions of girlhood. The first arts-based focus group will include the artistic practice of collage. The schedule for this first arts-based focus group will be as follows:

Portion of focus group	**Activity**
45 minutes	• Semi-structured focus group interviews
15 minutes	Snack and bathroom break/time for other potential interruptions
60 minutes	• Arts-based portion of focus group: Collage
15 minutes	Snack and bathroom break/time for other potential interruptions
45 minutes	• Semi-structured focus group interviews: Collage sharing

In the initial discussion component of the focus group, the semi-structured focus group interviews, I will ask the group of girls to discuss questions that I pose to them as a group. Questions in this first arts-based focus group will be about their understandings of

girlhood and will be informed by and developed from some of the initial findings from the interviews that were done with them individually.

Following the interview portion of the arts-based focus group, and after a brief break and snack, I will engage the group of girls in an arts-based activity of collage. I will ask each girl to create a collage that represents what it means to them to be a girl. I will provide a variety of collaging materials so that girls are able to engage with this activity creatively. Girls will have one hour to create their collages.

After creating their collages, we will take another short break. When the group resumes following the break, I will ask girls to each share their collages with the larger group of girls. As they share, I will ask that they speak to how their collage represents what it means to them to be a girl.

I will take photos of your child's collage, but it will be hers to keep and take home with her after the completion of the focus group.

Second Arts-Based Focus Group: Social/Environmental Change and Protest Sign Making

The second arts-based focus group will be 4 hours long and will be focussed on learning more about the ways that girls are working to create positive change in their schools, communities, and beyond. The second arts-based focus group will include the artistic activity of making protest signs. The schedule for this second arts-based focus group will be as follows:

Portion of focus group	**Activity**
45 minutes	• Semi-structured focus group interviews
15 minutes	Snack and bathroom break/time for other potential interruptions
60 minutes	• Arts-based portion of focus group: Protest sign making
30 minutes	Lunch and bathroom break/time for other potential interruptions
45 minutes	• Semi-structured focus group interviews: Protest Sign sharing
30 minutes	• Knowledge translation discussion
15 minutes	• Closing

In the initial discussion component of the focus group, the semi-structured focus group interviews, I will ask the group of girls to discuss questions that I pose to them as a group. Questions in the second arts-based focus group will be about how they are

creating social/environmental change. The questions in this second arts-based focus group will be informed by and developed from some of the initial findings from the interviews that were done with them individually, as well as some of the initial findings from the first arts-based focus group.

Following the interview portion of the arts-based focus group, and after a brief break and snack, I will engage the group of girls in an arts-based activity in which they make signs. These signs are intended to model the concept of protest signs, and I will ask each girl to create a sign that shares a message with the world about what they think people should know about the social and/or environmental change work (activism) of girls. I will provide a variety of sign making materials so that girls are able to engage with this activity creatively. Girls will have one hour to create their signs.

After creating their signs, we will take another short break. When the group resumes following the break, I will ask girls to each share their signs with the larger group of girls. As they share, I will ask that they speak to how their sign responds to the prompt about their messages for the world about girls who are engaged in social and environmental change work.

I will take photos of your child's sign, but it will be hers to keep and take home with her after the completion of the focus group.

Are there any risks to doing this study?

There are minor risks involved in participating that you and your child should be aware of and consider when taking part in the research process. Your child may feel uncomfortable when answering some of the individual interview questions about girlhood and/or about the ways that she has engaged in social and environmental change work. In the arts-based focus groups, participants may feel uncomfortable when speaking about their experiences of girlhood or about their activism. The risks of participating in the arts-based focus groups are also minimal, but girls may feel uncomfortable when speaking in a group of other girls about their experiences of activism. Some participants may get in disagreements about their experiences and perspectives of activism, which may also make themselves and other participants feel uncomfortable. Girls may also be concerned that they might be identified by their peers or community members by the information that they share.

I will reassure you and your child that her personal identifying information will be kept confidential, and that all findings will be anonymized. To alleviate any potential stress, anxiety, or discomfort, however, she does not need to answer questions that she does not want to answer or that make her feel uncomfortable. I am telling you both about the potential psychological and social risks so that you and your child can make informed decisions about the types of information that she chooses to share with the me that will feel most safe and comfortable for her. Moreover, she can withdraw from the study at any time without any sort of penalization or consequence. She may request to stop the interview at any time during the interview process, and she can also exit either of the arts-based focus groups at any time. I will take every necessary measure to protect her

privacy and confidentiality to avoid a breach in confidentiality and subsequent risks as outlined above.

I (Alexe Bernier) also have significant experience as a community social worker with groups of girls between the ages of 10-18, and am highly skilled in navigating and facilitating potentially difficult conversations with young people. If a conflict between participants does arise, I will intervene and have private conversations with the girls involved and work with them to find a way forward.

There are additional risks that come from doing the interview in this study via Zoom teleconferencing technology, as the cloud may be susceptible to data breaches. To manage this risk, I will send you and your child a unique Zoom link and password prior to your interview, which will only be available to you and your child. Additionally, interview recordings will be permanently deleted from the cloud 48 hours after the interview is complete.

Are there any benefits to doing this study?

If she chooses to participate in this study, your child may appreciate the opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives on girlhood and activism, as well as the opportunity to share these experiences and perspectives with wider audiences when we share our findings from this study. Girls may also benefit from connecting with other girls in the arts-based focus groups who are engaged in social and environmental change work.

Additionally, this study has the potential to benefits the scientific community and broader community at large. If your child participated in this study, she will contribute to the creation of new knowledge as we develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which young girls are working to create social and environmental change in our communities. As this is an under researched area of study, the findings from this study will help us to learn more about the different ways that young girls are participating as citizens through activism. This has potential to benefit society at large, as knowledge about the ways that girls are participating as citizens may bring attention to the ways in which decision makers can better to young people when they tell us what they want for their lives and their worlds. The involvement of participants in this study ultimately attends to questions of voice and representation in democratic citizenship policies and structures.

Are there any incentives offered for doing this study?

Your child will be eligible to receive up to $80 in gift cards of her choosing for participating in this study. She will receive a portion of this incentive at the end of each study milestone (at the end of the interview and at the end of each arts-based focus group). You will also be reimbursed for transportation and parking expenses related to participating in this research project. If you take public transportation, both you and your child will be provided with bus tickets to travel to and from each research activity. If you drive your child to the research activities, you will be reimbursed for parking costs accrued at the location of the research activity (either at McMaster University or the Hamilton Public Library). I will provide you with reimbursements via e-transfer.

Who will know what my child said or did in the study?

Every effort will be made to protect your child participants' confidentiality and privacy. I will not use her name or any information that would allow her to be identified, other than the fact that she is one of 8-10 girls in the Greater Hamilton Area that participated in this project. Your child is welcome to choose a pseudonym, or I will choose and assign one for her. Both yours and your child's informed consent will be documented via an oral consent log, which will be stored in a file on my password-protected personal laptop as well as my encrypted and password-protected MacDrive account, which only I will have access to. The oral consent log will be deleted three years after the research project has taken place. Dr. Fudge Schormans will not be present for the research activities, nor will she know what was said by your child in the interviews or arts-based focus groups. She will only have access to the anonymized data once audio recordings are deleted and transcriptions are typed with the your child's identifying information removed.

However, we are often identifiable through the stories we tell. Others, including peers and friends of girls who may know that she is engaged in this type of social and/or environmental change work, may be able to identify her on the basis of references she makes. Your child should keep this in mind in deciding what to tell me during the research activities.

The interview will be maintained in the form of the written transcriptions with no identifying information and will be deleted three years after the completion of the project. The reason for this retention length is that I will be using the de-identified data from this study for my PhD dissertation as well as for academic publication and conference attendances. I will also be asking the girls who participate in this research project how they would like the findings and knowledge generated from this study to be shared.

What if I change my mind about my child being in the study?

Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. It is her choice to be part of the study or not. If she decides to be part of the study, she can stop (withdraw from) the interview and the arts-based focus groups for whatever reason, even after giving oral consent or if she is part-way through the study. If she wants to stop being in the interview, she can tell me verbally, or if the interview is being conducted over Zoom teleconferencing technology, she can type it in the Zoom chat box function or exit the chat/hang up on the call. If she wants to stop being in either of the arts-based focus groups, she can tell me verbally. I will support her in connecting with her support person and/or adult parent/guardian so that she is able to leave.

If she decides to withdraw, there will be no consequences to her. If she withdraws prior to the beginning of the first interview, any correspondence with her will be deleted. If she does not want to answer some of the questions she does not have to, but she can still be in the study.

After your child completes her interview and then decides that she would like to withdraw her data from the study, she is able to do so up until February 1, 2024. This is because

after February 1, 2024, all the data will be deidentified and I will start data analysis. At the data analysis phase, it will not be feasible to remove her data. If she participates in one or both of the arts-based focus groups, I will not be able to be withdraw her data from that portion of the study. This is because of the nature of conversation and the ways that her data will be entangled with the data of other participants.

If your child wants to withdraw her data from the study before February 1, 2024, you or your child are welcome to contact the research team and request that we do so. There will be no consequences if she chooses to withdraw her data.

How do I find out what was learned in this study?

I expect to have this study and data analysis completed by approximately August 31, 2024. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

I will also be asking the group of girls at the end of the arts-based focus group how they would like to share the findings from this study. Please let me know how to best get in touch with you about this – either via email or phone.

How do I consent to my child being a part of this study?

You are able to provide either written or oral consent for your child to participate in this study. If you would like to provide consent in writing, the written consent form is below. If you would like to provide oral consent, please let me know and I will review the oral consent process with you.

WRITTEN CONSENT

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Alexe Bernier of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my girl's involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree that my child can participate in this study, she or I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until February 1st, 2024.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree that my girl can participate in the study.

_____

Name of Girl Participant

_____ _____

Name of Adult Parent/Guardian Signature of Adult Parent/Guardian

_____
Date of Signature

Questions about the Study: If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact either myself or Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans at:

Alexe Bernier
(phone number)
bernia1@mcmaster.ca

Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans
(phone number)
E-mail: fschorm@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
C/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Appendix G: Letter of Information and Assent (Participants)

Date: October 19, 2023

Study Title: Exploring the experiences of young girls who engage in activism.

McMaster Research Ethics Board #6495

Assent to Participate in a Study

Your parents/caregiver have allowed me to talk to you about a project that I am working on for McMaster University. The project is meant for me to learn more about how young girls are taking action to make positive change in their schools, communities, or world. I am going to spend a few minutes telling you about our project, and then I am going to ask you if you are interested in taking part in the project.

Who are we?

My name is Alexe Bernier and I am a student at McMaster University. I work in the Department of Social Work with my Supervisor Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans.

Why are we meeting with you?

I want to tell you about a study that involves girls like yourself. I want to see if you would like to be in this study too.

Why are we doing this study?

I want to find out a few different things. First, I want to learn about how girls understand and describe what it means to them to be a girl. Second, I want to learn about how girls are trying to create positive change in their schools, communities, or beyond, either in person or online.

What will happen to you if you are in the study?

If you decide to take part in this study, there are some different things we will ask you to do.

First, I will ask you to do an interview with me one-on-one. This means that it will be just me and you. We can either meet in person or on Zoom, depending on your choice. In this interview, I will ask you questions about what it means to you to be a girl, as well as questions about how you have been trying to create positive change.

While doing this interview all you have to do is try your best. If you have tried your best and do not know what to say or do next, you can guess or say ‘I do not know’. This interview will take about one hour.

Second, I will ask you to attend two different workshops with other girls who are participating in this study. These workshops will take place in person and are officially called “focus groups,” but I’m going to call them workshops. If it is too difficult for you to come do the workshops in person, that is okay. There is an option for you to join us virtually by using Zoom.

The first workshop will be about what it means to be a girl. I will create questions based off what you already told me in the individual interviews so that I can learn a little bit more. I will ask a few questions to the group and ask that you talk to each other about those questions.

After we have a conversation as a group, I will ask all of you girls to create a collage that represents what it means to you to be a girl. Once every girl has created a collage, we will share and talk about them with each other. I will take pictures of your collage, but it will be yours to keep and take home with you. This workshop will take 3 hours, but we will take a few breaks and I will provide snacks for you while you’re there.

The second workshop will be about how you have been trying to create positive change. This workshop will happen a week or two after the first workshop. I will create questions based off what you already told me in the individual interviews so that I can learn a little bit more. Just like the first workshop, I will ask a few questions to the group and ask that you talk to each other about those questions.

After we have a conversation as a group, I will ask all of you girls to do a different arts activity than the first workshop. I will give you a poster and ask you to create a big sign, as if you were going to a protest, that shares a message with the world about how you are creating positive change. Once every girl has created their sign, we will share and talk about them with each other. I will also take pictures of your sign, but just like the collage, it will be yours to keep and take home with you. This workshop will take 4 hours, but we will take a few breaks and I will provide snacks and lunch for you while you’re there.

After we finish the last workshop, I will talk to the group about next steps. We can decide if we want to share the things that we have talked about and discovered in our interviews and workshops with other people, and if we do, we can decide together how we’d like to share them.

In all of these different activities, the interview and the two arts-based workshops, you can have a person that you’re comfortable with around to support you. That person can be close by so that you can reach out to them at any time.

Are there good things and bad things about the study?

What we find in this study will be used to help me with my studies at McMaster University. I will use the things that we learn in this study to write up my big final project,

and I may use it in pieces of writing to be published or presented at conferences. This includes the pictures that I take of the art you create – these photos will be included in my big final project as well as other pieces of writing that might be published.

If you agree to be in this study, you might enjoy being able to share your experiences as a girl who is working to make our world better. You might also enjoy meeting other girls during the workshops who are doing similar things.

As far as we know, being in this study will not hurt you and it will not make you feel bad.

Will you have to answer all questions and do everything you are asked to do?

If we ask you questions that you do not want to answer then tell us you do not want to answers those questions. If we ask you to do things you do not want to do then tell us that you do not want to do them.

What will I get out of being in this study?

If you choose to be in this study, you can receive up to $80 in gift cards for your time. You will receive these gift cards at the end of each activity – the interview, the first workshop, and the second workshop. You can tell me what kind of gift cards you want so that they are for a place you like.

Who will know that you are in the study?

The things you say and any information we write about you will not have your name with it, so no one will know they are your answers or the things that you said or did.

The researcher will not let anyone other than themselves see your answers or any other information about you. Your teachers, principal, and parents will never see the answers you gave or the information we wrote about you.

Do you have to be in the study?

You do not have to be in the study. No one will get angry or upset with you if you don't want to do this. Just tell us if you don't want to be in the study. And remember, if you decide to be in the study but later you change your mind, then you can tell us you do not want to be in the study anymore.

If you do the interview with me and then decide that you would no longer like your information to be in the study, that is okay. You can tell me at any point before February 1, 2024 and I can delete what you told me in your interview. After February 1, 2024, I will not be able to delete what you told me. This is because after February 1, 2024, I will start seriously looking at what has been said in the interviews to figure out what it all means for my project. It will be too difficult to delete what you've said once I start that process.

I will not be able to delete your information if you participate in the workshops. This is because you and other girls will all be talking to each other, and what you said will be tangled up with what the other girls have said.

Do you have any questions?

You can ask questions at any time. You can ask now or you can ask later. You can talk to me or you can talk to someone else at any time during the study. Here is the telephone number or email address to reach me and my supervisor.

Alexe Bernier
(phone number)
Email: bernia1@mcmaster.ca

Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans
(phone number)
E-mail: fschorm@mcmaster.ca

If you have any problems with this study?

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact the McMaster Research Ethics Office at (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142 OR mreb@mcmaster.ca.

Tell them that this is project number 6495.

IF YOU WANT TO BE IN THE STUDY, YOU CAN AGREE IN WRITING OR BY TELLING ME.

IF YOU WANT TO AGREE IN WRITING, SIGN YOUR NAME ON THE LINE BELOW:

Child's name, printed: _____

Date: _____

Signature of the person explaining consent: _____

IF YOU WANT TO AGREE BY TELLING ME, I WILL ASK YOU THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS [Read the following questions from oral consent log and record]:

- Do you agree to do this study?

If yes:

- Once we start the research, we will use a fake name (called a “pseudonym”) for you. This is so that the information that you share isn’t recognizable to anybody else.
    - What would you like your fake name to be?
- When you and I do our interview together, I will ask you if it’s okay for me to record our conversation on an audio recorder. If you are not comfortable with me recording, I will take notes by hand. Is it okay for me to record our conversation on an audio recorder?
- At the end of each research activity – after your individual interview and after each focus group – I am able to give you a gift card for your time and knowledge.
    - Where would you like these gift cards to be for?
- Once we are done this research, we – including yourself as well as the other girls who take part – might want to share what we find with other people. Would you like to be a part of sharing what we learn from this research with other people?

Appendix H: Oral Consent and Assent Log

Date: July 18, 2023

Oral Consent Log
(for documenting oral consent obtained by telephone, online or in person)

Alexe Bernier BSc, MSW
PhD Candidate, School of Social Work, McMaster University

Study Title: Exploring the experiences of young girls who engage in activism.

Participant's Unique Pseudonym	Participant's name	Date of Participant Assent	Adult Parent/ Guardian name	Date of Parent/ Guardian Consent	Send copy of study results	Where to send study results, e.g. email, mail	Agree to audio recording for individual interview	Preferred choice of gift card(s) for incentive	Agree to be contacted about future knowledge dissemination activities

Important: Items in the columns above should be listed as consent questions on the Letter of Information.

Appendix I: Semi-Structured Qualitative Interview Guide

Date: July 3, 2023

Alexe Bernier BSc, MSW
PhD Candidate, School of Social Work, McMaster University

Study Title:
Exploring the experiences of young girls who engage in activism.

Information about these interview questions: Thank you so much for participating in this interview with me. This gives you an idea of what I would like to learn from you about how you understand and describe your own girlhood, as well as what I would like to learn from you about how you are creating positive change. The interview that I do with you will be one-to-one, so just between you and me, and the questions that I ask will be open-ended (not just "yes or no" answers). Because of this, the exact wording may change a little. Sometimes I will use other short questions to make sure I understand what you told me or if I need more information when we are talking such as: "*So, you are saying that …?*), to get more information ("*Please tell me more?"),* or to learn what they think or feel about something ("*Why do you think that is…?").*

5. **Girlhood:**
    1) What does being a girl mean to you?.
        - As a girl, what are some important things about you?
        - In addition to being a girl, what are some other important things about you?
            - Is the school that you go to important to who you are?
            - Is your age important to who you are?
            - Is your neighborhood important to who you are?
            - Is your family important to who you are?
    2) Where did you learn about what it means to be a girl?
        - Are there people that *show you* what it means to be a girl?
            - Who?
            - How do they show you?
        - Are there people that *tell you* what it means to be a girl?
            - Who?
            - What do they tell you?
    3) What messages do you hear about being a girl?
        - Where do these messages come from?
            - For example, from television, movies, social media
        - Do you agree with these messages? Why or why not?
        - Do the messages that you receive about being a girl match up with your own ideas about what it means to be a girl?
            - In what ways do they match up?
            - In what ways are they different?
    4) If you could share your own message about what it means to be a girl, what would you say?
        - Why do you think this message is important?
        - Who would you share this message with?

6. **Activism:**
    1) In what ways have you been trying to create positive change?
        - What action did you take?
        - When did you take action?
        - Where did you take this action?
        - Did anybody help you to take action?
            - Who?
            - How did they become involved with helping you?
    2) Which social or environmental issue were you trying to create change on by taking action?
        - What issue or problem were you trying to fix?
        - How did you hear about this issue/problem?
        - When did you decide that you wanted to take action on this issue/problem?
        - How did you (or would you, could you) convince other people that this issue/problem is important?
        - If you could picture the world without this issue/problem, what would it look like?
    3) What motivated you to take action and try to fix this issue/problem?
        - Why is it important to you that we try to fix this issue/problem?
            - Why does it matter that you take action on this issue/problem?
        - Why might it be important to other people that we try to fix this issue/problem?
    4) What do other people think about the action that you've taken?
        - What have other girls said?
        - What have adults said?
            - Who are some of these adults (e.g., parents, teachers, others)?
        - Have other people made comments about the actions that you're taking to make change?
            - If so, who?
            - And what do they say?
    5) What comes to mind when you hear the word "activism"?
        - Have you heard this word before?
            - If yes, what does it mean to you?
            - If no, what do you think it means?
        - Would you describe the actions that you have taken as "activism"?
        - Would you describe yourself as an activist?
            - Why or why not?
    6) If other girls wanted to start making positive change in the world around them, what would you say to them?
        - What do you think is important for them to know?
        - What advice do you wish you had before you had started?
        - Why do you think it matters that other girls start making positive change?

Appendix J: First Focus Group Interview Guide (Girlhood)

Alexe Bernier BSc, MSW
PhD Candidate, School of Social Work, McMaster University

Study Title:
Exploring the experiences of young girls who engage in activism.

[THE COMPLETION OF THE INTRODUCTORY SECTION OF THE FOCUS GROUP SHOULD TAKE APPROXIMATELY 10-15 MINUTES]

I) INTRODUCTION AND INSTRUCTIONS:

Hello, my name is Alexe. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group meeting. Just to remind everyone, this is the first of two arts-based focus groups that we're going to be doing together. In the first one today, I'm looking to learn more about how you describe and understand what it means to be a girl.

What is a focus group? A focus group is an interactive group discussion – or conversation – where we can gain lots of different ideas about a topic and members of the group can think about and comment on what others have said in the group.

[POINT OUT REFRESHMENTS if available, NAME TAGS if used – people should use their first name or pseudonym only].

In a minute, we will all introduce ourselves – first names only, or the fake name (also called the pseudonym) that you chose a few weeks ago before we started doing this research together. But first, I would like to walk you through the consent form that is in front of you.

Confidentiality: [READ ALOUD] **-** Before we begin our discussion, I want to spend a few moments talking about confidentiality. Then I will go over some basic ground rules for our focus group discussion today:

- Everyone's views are welcomed and important.
- The information which we will collect today will be connected to you as a group.
- When I write about this project, I will not say that a certain quote or idea belonged to any one of you in this group – I won't be using anyone's names.
- Even though I won't use names, because of the nature of small communities or groups, it is possible that people could link people in this room to quotes that we might use when we share this research. This is why we need to talk about *confidentiality* and what it means.
- We are assuming that when we learn about one another's views in this group, they remain a secret, only known by people in this room. It is very important that we keep this promise to each other. Because our group is small, once we share this research with people outside of our group, people might be able to tell who had a certain idea or said a certain quote just because of their views and opinions.
- Having said this, and having made these requests, you know that I cannot promise that everyone in this room will keep all our conversations to themselves.
- Because of this, I am asking you to only say things that you would be comfortable saying in a public setting. Hold back from saying things that you would not say in public.
- If you want to stop being in the focus group you can leave or stay and simply stop talking, but it will not be possible for you to pull out what you've already said from the flow of the conversation. This is because of the nature of the group discussion – what one person says can spark somebody else in the group to say something, and so forth.
- Anything heard in the room should stay in the room.

- All voices are to be heard, so I will step in if too many people are speaking at once or to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak.
- I may also step in if I feel the conversation is straying off topic.
- Here is what we will be doing today:
    - After we all introduce ourselves, I will ask a question to the group about what it means to you to be a girl
    - I will ask that we go around in a circle and each of you answer this question
    - If you have something to say in response to what somebody else has said, that's great! You can share those thoughts and ideas too. This is meant to be a conversation.
    - Once you've all had a chance to answer that question, I will ask another question and we will do the same thing again.
- You can expect the discussion part of this group to last about 45 minutes.
- After the discussion, we will take a break and have a second snack.
- Does anybody have any questions about this so far?
  [time to answer questions here]
- Once we come back from a break and a snack, I will ask each of you to make your own collage that addresses the questions that I had about being a girl that we already talked about. We will make collages for one hour.
- Does everybody know what a collage is?
- Does anybody have questions about making a collage?
  [time to answer questions here]
- After we make our collages, we will take another break and have a small snack.
- I will then ask that you share our collages with the group and describe how the collages that you've made answer the questions that I asked about being a girl.

Support People (if girls have brought support people with them)

- If you have brought a person along with you to support you while you're here, you can go to them at any time you need to. Just let me know!

Use of Tape Recorder

- I will use a tape recorder to make sure that I can have an accurate recording of what everybody says. Once the workshop is finished, I will listen to what's on the recorder and type it up on my computer. The typed-up version is called a transcript.
- I will keep the recording and the transcripts very safe. They will be kept on my computer in a file that is password protected, and only I know the password.
- Your names will be removed from transcripts. You will all have your fake names attached to your transcripts.
- Only me and my thesis supervisor, Ann, will have access to transcripts – Ann will only see the version with your personal names removed.

[AT THIS POINT, GROUP MEMBERS CAN QUICKLY INTRODUCE THEMSELVES –remind them that it is first names or "fake" names only'.]

II. INTERVIEW

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION BEGINS WITH THE FACILITATOR ASKING THE FIRST QUESTION. (YOU CAN PROVIDE PARTICIPANTS WITH THE QUESTIONS ON A SHEET OF PAPER, FLIP CHART OR SCREEN IF YOU WISH).

OPEN UP DISCUSSION FOR GENERAL RESPONSES OF PARTICIPANTS TO EACH QUESTION.

Introduction to questions: You might remember from the interview that I did with each of you that I asked you about what it means to you to be a girl. Today, we are going to return to that question but will take it a little bit further, and we're going to be talking about it as a group.

Interview questions:
[These interview questions were iteratively developed following the interviews with individual girls. It is likely that not all of these questions will be asked – depending on what participants discuss throughout the focus group, I will select which questions to ask based on relevancy.]

1) What does being a girl feel like?
   - If you had to describe what it's like to be a girl to somebody who has never been one, what would you say?
   - When compared with other genders, is it different to be a girl?
     - Why or why not?
2) For you, what's the best thing about being a girl?
   - What do you like about being a girl?
   - Are there things that make you proud to be a girl? If yes, what are they?
   - Are there some things that you're able to do because you are a girl?
     - If yes, what are you able to do because you're a girl?
3) How does being a girl make you special?
   - What about being a girl makes you special?
4) For you, are there any parts about being a girl that you don't like?
   - What are some of the worst things about being a girl?
   - Are there things that you aren't able to do because of being a girl?
     - If yes, what can't you do because you're a girl?
5) For you, what are some of the confusing things about being a girl?
   - What makes these things confusing?
     - Are there messages in the world about being a girl that are confusing?
       - If yes, what are these messages?
       - Where do these messages come from?
6) Based on what you know about being a girl, how are girls expected to act?
   - Or, how are girls expected to behave?
   - What do you think about how girls are expected to act?
   - Do you act in this way? Why or why not?
7) What about being a girl makes it helpful for you to make change in the world?
   - How does being a girl impact your decision to make change in the world?
   - What about being a girl makes it feel important for you to make change in the world?

III. WRAP-UP:

- REMIND PARTICIPANTS THAT "WHAT IS SAID IN THE ROOM SHOULD STAY IN THE ROOM".
- REMIND PARTICIPANTS THAT WE WILL SEE EACH OTHER AGAIN FOR THE SECOND GROUP.
- THANK THE PARTICIPANTS

Appendix K: Second Focus Group Interview Guide (Activism)

Alexe Bernier BSc, MSW
PhD Candidate, School of Social Work, McMaster University

Study Title:
Exploring the activist practices of young girls.

I) INTRODUCTION AND INSTRUCTIONS:
Hello, I know that we've all met before, but as a reminder: my name is Alexe. Thank you for participating in your first interviews and the first focus group with me. I have learned so much from you already about what it means to you to be a girl – I was a girl a very long time ago, so learning from you as current girls has been great!

I also wanted to thank you for agreeing to participate in this second focus group meeting. Like our last group, we are going to be building on the things that we talked about in your interviews as well as the last group. It is going to be a similar structure – first we'll have a discussion, then we'll make art, and then we'll share our art with each other and talk about. The topic today is different than what we talked about last time. Today, I'm looking to learn more about how you are working to create positive change in your schools, communities, worlds, or somewhere else!

What is a focus group? We went over this in our last focus group, so I am sorry for the repetition, but I want to make sure that we all understand and are on the same page. A focus group is an interactive group discussion where we can gain lots of different ideas about a topic and members of the group can think about and comment on what others have said in the group.

[POINT OUT REFRESHMENTS if available, NAME TAGS if used – people should use their first name or pseudonym only].
In a minute, we will all introduce ourselves – first names only, or the fake name (the pseudonym) that you chose a few weeks ago before we started doing this research together. But first, I would like to walk you through the consent form that is in front of you. This is the same as what we reviewed in our last group together.

Confidentiality: **[*READ ALOUD]* -** Before we begin our discussion, I want to spend a few moments talking about confidentiality again. Then I will go over some basic ground rules for our focus group discussion today:

- Everyone's views are welcomed and important.
- The information which we will collect today will be connected to you as a group.
- When I write about this project, I will not say that a certain quote or idea belonged to any one of you in this group – I won't be using anyone's names.
- Even though I won't use names, because of the nature of small communities or groups, it is possible that people could link people in this room to quotes that we might use when we share this research. This is why we need to talk about *confidentiality* and what it means.
- We are assuming that when we learn about one another's views in this group, they remain a secret, only known by people in this room. It is very important that we keep this promise to each other. Because our group is small, once we share this research with people outside of our group, people might be able to tell who had a certain idea or said a certain quote just because of their views and opinions.

- Having said this, and having made these requests, you know that I cannot promise that everyone in this room will keep all our conversations to themselves.
- Because of this, I am asking you to only say things that you would be comfortable saying in a public setting. Hold back from saying things that you would not say in public.
- If you want to stop being in the focus group you can leave or stay and simply stop talking, but it will not be possible for you to pull out what you've already said from the flow of the conversation. This is because of the nature of the group discussion – what one person says can spark somebody else in the group to say something, and so forth.
- Anything heard in the room should stay in the room.
- All voices are to be heard, so I will step in if too many people are speaking at once or to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak.
- I may also step in if I feel the conversation is straying off topic.
- Here is what we will be doing today. It will be similar to the last time we met, but just as a reminder:
    - After we all introduce ourselves again, I will ask a question to the group about the ways that you have been working to create change
    - I will ask that we go around in a circle and each of you answer this question
    - If you have something to say in response to what somebody else has said, that's great! You can share those thoughts and ideas too. This is meant to be a conversation.
    - Once you've all had a chance to answer that question, I will ask the next question and we will do the same thing again.
- You can expect the discussion part of this group to last about 45 minutes.
- After the discussion, we will take a break and have a snack.
- Does anybody have any questions about this so far?
  [time to answer questions here]
- Once we come back from a break and a snack, I will ask each of you to make an art project that addresses the questions that I had about creating change that we already talked about.
- The art project will be making signs that showcase a message that you have to the world about what you want people to know about how you are working to create change.
  [I will provide more information here about the materials that I have for the sign-making]
- Can everybody picture what I mean when I say that we will be making signs with messages on them?
- Does anybody have questions about making these signs?
  [time to answer questions here]
- We will make these signs for one hour.
- After we make our signs, we will take time for a break and to eat lunch together.
- Once we come back from our lunch break, I will then ask that you share our signs with the group, and describe how the signs that you've made answer the questions that I asked about the positive change that you have been working towards.
- You can expect this discussion part of this group to last about 45 minutes.

Use of Tape Recorder

Just like last time, I will use a tape recorder to make sure that I can have an accurate recording of what everybody says. Once we're done, I will listen to what's on the recorder and type it up on my computer. The typed up version is called a transcript.

- I will keep the recording and the transcripts very safe. They will be kept on my computer in a file that is password protected, and only I know the password.
- Your names will be removed from transcripts. You will all have numbers attached to their name which only I will know.

- Only I and my thesis supervisor, Ann, (will have access to transcripts (with your personal names removed) of this focus group.

[AT THIS POINT, GROUP MEMBERS CAN QUICKLY RE-INTRODUCE THEMSELVES –remind them that it is 'first names or "fake" names only'.]

II. INTERVIEW
FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION BEGINS WITH THE FACILITATOR ASKING THE FIRST QUESTION. (YOU CAN PROVIDE PARTICIPANTS WITH THE QUESTIONS ON A SHEET OF PAPER, FLIP CHART OR SCREEN IF YOU WISH).

OPEN UP DISCUSSION FOR GENERAL RESPONSES OF PARTICIPANTS TO EACH QUESTION.

Interview questions:

[The interview questions for the second arts-based focus group will be iteratively developed following the interviews with individual girls as well as the first arts-based focus group. An amendment will be submitted to the McMaster Research Ethics Board once the questions for the arts-based focus group have been developed.]

1) In our introductions, you all shared the kind of social or environmental change work that you are engaged in. I know I asked you this in your interviews, but just so that we can talk about it as a group, what specific issue or issues have you been trying to create change on?
    - What else would you like to get involved in?

2) From the interviews that I did with all of you, as well as in our last group together, some of you spoke about how being a girl influences the work that you do to create change. I would like to learn a little bit more about that. Do you think girls have a responsibility to create change?
    - Why or why not?
    - Where does this sense of responsibility come from?
    - Who are you responsible to?
    - How does this sense of responsibility influence the work that you do to create change?

3) Some of you in your interviews, as well as in our last group together, spoke about people creating change before you. You said that some people have done work in the past to make the lives of women and girls easier now. What do you know about other people who have done similar work before you?
    - Have these people inspired or influence the work that you do?
        - If so, how?
    - Were there large groups of people who did similar work to create change before you started?
        - If so, who?
    - Have these groups inspired or influenced the work that you do?

        - If so, how?
    - Are there people or groups around you currently that are doing similar work to you?
        - If so, who?
    - Do these people or groups inspire or influence the work that you do?
        - If so, how?

4) What do you think you should be doing to make things better for the next generation of girls?
    - Why do you think these changes are important?
    - How do you think you can make these changes?
    - What would you like the next generation of girls to know?
    - What kind of world do you hope to leave for the next generation of girls?

III. WRAP-UP:

- REMIND PARTICIPANTS THAT "WHAT IS SAID IN THE ROOM SHOULD STAY IN THE ROOM".
- ASK PARTICIPANTS ABOUT WHAT THEY'D LIKE TO DO WITH WHAT WE'VE TALKED ABOUT AND DONE TOGETHER (a conversation about knowledge mobilization)
    - This will include questions about:
        (1) How they'd like to be involved;
        (2) What type of knowledge mobilization activities they'd like to engage in;
        (3) How involved they would like to be (time commitment and availability).
- REMIND PARTICIPANTS THAT I WILL BE IN TOUCH ABOUT KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION AND/OR WITH THE FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY, INCLUDING A PROJECT SUMMARY.
- THANK THE PARTICIPANTS.

Appendix L: Oath of Confidentiality

Oath of Confidentiality

Study Title
Exploring the experiences of young girls who engage in activism.

(*Check the following that apply*)
I understand that as an:
[ ] interpreter
[ ] transcriber
[ ] audio assistant
[ ] photo or video assistant
[ ] research assistant
[ ] other (*Please specify*) _support person_____

for a study being conducted by Alexe Bernier of the Department of Social Work, McMaster University, and or under the supervision of Professor Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans, confidential information will be made known to me.

[ ] I agree to keep all information collected during this study confidential and will not reveal by speaking, communicating or transmitting this information in written, photographic, sound, electronic (disks, tapes, transcripts, email) or in any other way to anyone outside the research team.

[ ] I will tell the researchers as soon as I discover that I know any participant either as a family member, friend, or acquaintance or in any other way; so that the researcher can take the appropriate steps to manage or minimize any conflicts of interest that might occur because of any dual roles I may have.

Name: _____ Signature: _____
(Please Print)

Date: _____

Witness Name: _____ Witness Signature: _____
(Please Print)

Appendix M: Instructions for Participants (Collage)

Date: July 17, 2023

Alexe Bernier BSc, MSW
PhD Candidate, School of Social Work, McMaster University

Study Title:
Exploring the experiences of young girls who engage in activism.

These are instructions that I will offer to participants to explain the process of making collages in the first arts-based focus group about girlhood. These instructions will be provided after the interview portion of the first arts-based focus group (found in Appendix I – Focus Group Guide).

Collage Instructions (script):

- Now that we've had a great discussion about what it means to be a girl, we are going to make collages to represent some of the things that we've talked about.
- Collage is an art form where you take a bunch of different materials of your choosing – such as magazine clippings, pictures from books, and stickers – and arrange them on a piece of paper or poster board to create a new image.
- With a collage, you are essentially creating a piece of art by putting together different materials.
- To make a collage in this workshop, I am going to pass out a small poster board to each of you. You each get your own.
- This poster board will be what you create your collage on.
- I am also handing out scissors and glue to each of you. You all get your own pair of scissors and your own glue stick.
- You will see that I have brought with me some magazines, stickers, and old books. These magazines, stickers, and old books are all about different topics and different things.
- For the next hour, I am going to ask that you go through these materials and pick out things that you feel represent your answer to the following question:
    - [Collage question prompt here, which will be determined based on the preliminary findings from the individual interviews. I will write this question prompt on a whiteboard or large poster board for all girls to see].
- As you pick things out, you are welcome to use the scissors to cut them out of the magazines or books, or peel off the stickers.
- You can take the things that you choose and arrange and glue them onto your poster board. You can do this in whatever way it makes the most sense to you. There are no rules with this!
- You will also see that there are markers and crayons on the tables. If you would like to use those to draw or write on your collages as well, you are welcome to. Again, there are no rules with the collages!
- I also want to let you know that I have turned the audio recorded off for this portion. What you say while you are making your collages will not be recorded.
- Does anybody have any questions?
- If you have questions as you start your collages, you are welcome to ask me as they come up.

Appendix N: Instructions for Participants (Sign Making)

Date: July 17, 2023

Alexe Bernier BSc, MSW
PhD Candidate, School of Social Work, McMaster University

Study Title:
Exploring the experiences of young girls who engage in activism.

These are instructions that I will offer to participants to explain the process of making message signs in the second arts-based focus group about activism. These instructions will be provided after the interview portion of the second arts-based focus group (found in Appendix I – Focus Group Guide).

Sign Making Instructions (script):

- Now that we've had a great discussion about the ways that you've all been working to make positive social and environmental change, we are going to make art to represent some of the things that we've talked about.
- For this piece of art, I am going to ask that you make a large sign that shares a message with the world about what you are doing to create change in your schools, communities, or beyond.
- Another way to think about this is to think: if you were going to go to a protest that was led by other young girls, and you wanted to share a message with the world about young girls who are creating positive change – what would you want to say? What do you think people should know?
- To make these signs in this workshop, I am going to pass out a poster board to each of you. You each get your own.
- This poster board will be what you create your sign on.
- You will also see that there are markers, crayons, paint, paintbrushes, and stickers on the tables.
- Feel free to use whatever of these materials you would like to write your messages and decorate your signs. There are no rules about how you can make your signs!
- I also want to let you know that I have turned the audio recorded off for this portion. What you say while you are making your collages will not be recorded.
- Does anybody have any questions?
- If you have questions as you start making your signs, you are welcome to ask me as they come up.

Appendix O: Letter of Information/Consent for Follow-Up Survey

Follow Up: Letter of Information/Consent

Date: April 22, 2024

Study Title:
Exploring the experiences of young girls who engage in activism.

McMaster Research Ethics Board #6495

Student Investigator:
Alexe Bernier
School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(phone number)
E-mail: bernia1@mcmaster.ca

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans
School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(phone number)
E-mail: fschorm@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study: To explore the experiences of young girls who engage in activism through qualitative interviews and arts-based methodologies.

This study is about the ways that young girls are working to create social and/or environmental change either in-person or online in their schools, communities, or beyond. In this context, "young girls" are defined as girls between the ages of 8-12 years old. I use the language of "create social and/or environmental change" instead of the word "activism" because I know that the word "activism" might not resonate with many people, and the girls themselves may not define the types of work that they are engaging in as activism.

In the fall of 2023, your child(ren) completed an interview with me and participated in two arts-based focus groups. In the interview and in the focus groups, I asked her questions about: (1) how she defined and understood girlhood, and (2) the social and environmental change work that she was engaged in.

I now have a few more questions about who she is and what makes her, *her*. Through this survey, I am hoping to learn from her about things like her race and ethnicity, her family's educational background, and the types of conversations that your family might have at home as they relate to gender and social/environmental change.

Girls are directly affected by the political and cultural worlds in which they live. These additional questions will help me understand the experiences of girls who are engaged in social and environmental change work more fulsomely.

I am doing this research under the supervision of Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans, and this research is being done as my PhD research project. With your permission, I will therefore use the data for this project in doctoral dissertation writing. I also hope to use the data from this study for the purposes of academic publication, as well as for other knowledge sharing activities such as academic conferences.

What will happen during the study?

If your child chooses to participate in this portion of the study, she will be asked to complete a brief online survey. They survey includes multiple choice and short-answer questions.

The survey is being conducted using McMaster University's instance of LimeSurvey, a secure survey tool that is housed on McMaster University servers.

Are there any risks to doing this study?

There are minor risks involved in participating that you and your child should be aware of and consider when taking part in the research process. Your child may feel uncomfortable when answering some of the survey questions.

I will reassure you and your child that her personal identifying information will be kept confidential, and that all findings will be anonymized. To alleviate any potential stress, anxiety, or discomfort, however, she does not need to answer questions that she does not want to answer or that make her feel uncomfortable.

I am telling you both about the potential psychological and social risks so that you and your child can make informed decisions about the types of information that she chooses to share with the me that will feel most safe and comfortable for her. Moreover, she can withdraw from this portion of the study at any time without any sort of penalization or consequence. She can exit the survey window at any time. I will take every necessary measure to protect her privacy and confidentiality to avoid a breach in confidentiality and subsequent risks as outlined above.

Are there any benefits to doing this study?

This study has the potential to benefits the scientific community and broader community at large. If your child participates in this study, she will contribute to the creation of new knowledge as we develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which young girls are working to create social and environmental change in our communities. As this is an under researched area of study, the findings from this study will help us to learn more about the different ways that young girls are participating as citizens through activism. This has potential to benefit society at large, as knowledge about the ways that girls are participating as citizens may bring attention to the ways in which decision makers can better to young people when they tell us what they want for their lives and their worlds. The involvement of participants in this study ultimately attends to questions of voice and representation in democratic citizenship policies and structures.

Who will know what my child said or did in the study?

Every effort will be made to protect your child participants' confidentiality and privacy. I will not use her name or any information that would allow her to be identified, other than the fact that she is one of 8-10 girls in the Greater Hamilton Area that participated in this project. Your child has already chosen a unique pseudonym, and I will continue to use this pseudonym to identify her.

The interview will be maintained in the form of the written transcriptions with no identifying information and will be deleted three years after the completion of the project. The reason for this retention length is that I will be using the de-identified data from this study for my PhD dissertation as well as for academic publication and conference attendances. I will also be

asking the girls who participate in this research project how they would like the findings and knowledge generated from this study to be shared.

What if I change my mind about my child completing this survey?

Your child's participation in this survey is voluntary. It is her choice to complete the survey or not. If she decides to be part of the study, she can stop (withdraw from) the survey at any time by exiting the survey window. If she decides to withdraw, there will be no consequences to her. If she does not want to answer some of the questions she does not have to, but she can still be in the study.

How do I find out what was learned in this study?

I expect to have this study and data analysis completed by approximately August 31, 2024. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

I will also be asking the group of girls at the end of the arts-based focus group how they would like to share the findings from this study. Please let me know how to best get in touch with you about this – either via email or phone.

How do I consent to my child being a part of this study?

By continuing on to complete the survey, you are providing consent for your child to participate in this portion of the study.

WRITTEN CONSENT

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Alexe Bernier of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my girl's involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree that my child can participate in this portion of the study, she or I may withdraw from the survey at any time.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree that my girl can participate in the study.

Questions about the Study: If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact either myself or Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans at:

Alexe Bernier
(phone number)
bernia1@mcmaster.ca

Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans
(phone number)
E-mail: fschorm@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
C/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Appendix P: Follow-Up Survey Questions

Survey Questions

Date: April 22, 2024

Alexe Bernier BSc, MSW
PhD Candidate, School of Social Work, McMaster University

Study Title:
Exploring the experiences of young girls who engage in activism (MREB #6495)

These survey questions, as well as the information about the survey questions, will be uploaded to an online survey form using LimeSurvey.

Information about these survey questions: Thank you so much for participating in this survey. This information will help me to better understand the things that you shared with me in the fall. Please answer to the best of your ability. If you do not know the answer to a question, that is also okay!

1. What was the fake name (pseudonym) that you used in this study? If you can't remember, that's okay – you can provide your real first name.
   [short answer]

2. What do your parents do for a living?
   [short answer]

3. What education do your parents have?
   [short answer]

4. Would you say your family is working-class, middle-class or upper middle-class?
   - ☐ Working-class
   - ☐ Middle-class
   - ☐ Upper middle-class

5. In our society, people are often described by their race, racial background, and or ethnicity. For example, some people are considered "White" or "Black" or "South Asian." How do you identify your race/ethnicity? Please check all that apply.
   - ☐ African/Black (including African-American, African-Canadian, Caribbean)
   - ☐ East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Korean, etc)
   - ☐ European/White
   - ☐ Indo-Caribbean, Indo-African, Indo-Fijian, West-Indian
   - ☐ Latin, South or Central American
   - ☐ Polynesian (e.g., Samoans, Tongan, Niuean, Cook Island Maori, Tahitian Maaohi, Hawaiian Ma'oli, Marquesan, New Zealand Maori)
   - ☐ South Asian (e.g., Afghan, Nepali, Tamil, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Sri Lankan, Punjabi)
   - ☐ Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Thai, Cambodian, Malaysian, Filipino/a, Laotian, Singaporean, Indonesian)

- ☐ West Asian (e.g., Iraqi, Jordanian, Palestinian, Saudi, Syrian, Yemeni, Armenian, Iranian, Israeli, Turkish)
- ☐ Indigenous within Canada (e.g., First Nation, Metis, Inuit)
- ☐ Prefer to self-identify: _____
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ I'm not sure

6. Would you say you are somebody who has a disability? Or, has a doctor, another professional, or your parents told you that you have a disability?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No

7. Do you talk about what it means to be a girl with your parents? If so, when and how?
   [long answer]

8. Do you talk about creating social or environmental change with your parents? If so, when and how?
   [short answer]

9. Do you think there is anything about "you" that makes you more aware of these issues? What?
   [short answer]

10. Do you think there is anything about your group of friends that makes you more aware of these issues? What?
    [short answer]

11. Would you say that thinking about activist/political issues is common among girls you know?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

    11a. Why or why not?
    [short answer]