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The conclusion of the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and subsequent commencement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) enables the opportunity to assess and change shortcomings in previous tactics for sustainable development in majority world countries. With gender being central to the lives of all people, the influence that social perceptions of gender have on countries’ wider development cannot be ignored. This work draws upon current research to analyse barriers to development regarding gender, poverty and education in Ethiopia, a typical ‘lesser developed’, or ‘majority world’, country. The exploration then goes further to evaluate the role of Non-Governmental Organisations in the achievement of the SDGs, using a case study of one NGO, ‘Girl Effect’, who work to change perceptions of gender in Ethiopia. The research finds issues of gender to present perhaps the biggest challenge to the achievement of the SDGs with its wider influence on other issues, such as the problems explored regarding poverty and education, presenting further barriers. The responsibility of addressing these worldwide issues therefore falls to every individual person across the globe and consequently NGOs, Governments, and citizens themselves are essential in changing attitudes towards gender with an approach that is individual to each country and each culture they work in.

Key words: gender, poverty, education, development, Ethiopia
Introduction

Perceptions of gender impact all human beings, both influencing and being influenced by all experiences an individual has. Therefore, “gender remains central to development” (Desai and Potter, 2014, p.385) and inequalities impact all other aspects of development including poverty, education and health. The Global Gender Gap Report shows worldwide gender inequity; however inequalities are greater in lesser developed countries such as Ethiopia, a sub-Saharan African (SSA) country (World Economic Forum, 2015). As Seebens and Wobst (2008, p.104) state, gender inequality in SSA countries is particularly concerning because it has “fallen behind the development of other regions in the world”. Huggins (2015) highlights the importance of ‘human capital’ to a country’s development; each person’s level of education, skills, health and knowledge, all of which are central to all development assets, influenced by each other and greatly swayed by perceptions of gender. This paper explores how perceptions of gender in Ethiopia can present barriers to girls, regarding poverty and education, and critically explores the approach of the NGO ‘Girl Effect’, who work to combat them.

This exploration is appropriately timed due to the conclusion of the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015, and the subsequent commencement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Starting in 2000, the MDGs comprised of eight development targets; an “overarching development framework for the world” (United Nations, 2015, p.4). However despite successes, “the poorest and most vulnerable people are [still] being left behind” (United Nations, 2015, p.8). Replacing this framework, the SDGs will be implemented from 2015 to 2030 comprised of 17 goals and 169 targets (Sustainable Development, 2015). The aim is to “eradicate poverty and hunger, restore human dignity and equality, protect the planet, manage natural resources, promote economic prosperity, and foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies” (Britto, 2015). It is important to explore the impact of gender influences within SSA countries so that Governments, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and citizens can together support the SDGs, make changes to benefit communities, and ensure the vulnerable are no longer left behind. As an educator, exploring childrens’ experiences in Majority World countries can prevent our thinking becoming restricted and “enables us to take a more balanced and critically reflective view of education, care and child well-being in the UK” (Huggins, 2015, p.218).
Why Ethiopia?

As Figure 1 shows, Ethiopia is a sub-Saharan, land-locked country located in the Horn of Africa (Sola Rey, 2015). With a nation that speaks over 80 languages (Girl Effect, 2016) and a population of over 100 million people, the 13th highest in the world (Worldometers, 2016), Ethiopia has been used as a case study because it has a large, diverse population which exemplifies many of the issues discussed regarding poverty, education and cultural concepts of gender. However, it must be noted that although Ethiopia exemplifies these issues, not all individuals are subject to restrictive gender barriers, not all individuals live in poverty and not all individuals receive little education and therefore no ‘sweeping generalisations’ can be made.

Furthermore, despite years of political uncertainty, including wars and tensions with Italy, Eritrea and Somalia, Ethiopia’s ruling party, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front, is now a relatively stable political power, winning an “overwhelming victory” in general elections in 2015 (BBC News, 2016). Ethiopia’s relative political stability allows for the conclusions and solutions explored to be applied to similarly developed
countries. Ethiopia is considered a ‘lesser developed country’, ranked 174th out of the 188 countries listed in the UN’s Human Development Index (UNDP, 2015). With human capital – the level of health, education, skills and knowledge people possess – being central to development (Huggins, 2015), concepts of gender are therefore also central to development. This suggests the prevalence of underlying gender inequalities within Ethiopian culture. Although Ethiopia has developed positively from a comparatively low starting point recently, for example with life expectancy going from 43.4 years in 1998 (UNDP, 2000) to 64.1 in 2015 (UNDP, 2015), there is still a long way to go as far as improving the opportunities and lives of all citizens.

However, the positive progress evident since the implementation of the MDGs can be explored and then used to provide lessons for other countries with the introduction of the SDGs. The SDGs, particularly goal 5 which aims to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (Sustainable Development, 2015), are of particular importance to countries such as Ethiopia, where gender inequalities are prevalent. In 2015, Ethiopia ranked poorly, 124th out of 145 countries, for gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2015). In real terms, this inequality is evident in the high percentage of females in the agriculture labour force and the low percentage of females in education as compared to males (Appiah and McMahon, 2002). This highlights the importance of the SDGs and the need to transform the concept of gender within Ethiopia to further improve development. However, it must also be noted that changing attitudes regarding a concept that is central to development, and promoting positive transformation in development areas such as poverty and education, is not an easy task. Beliefs and perceptions which are so deeply ingrained into a culture make change difficult and there are many barriers to the achievement of the targets and goals of the SDGs (Girl Effect, 2016).

**Gender; the influential and unavoidable barrier to Majority World development**

Social perceptions of gender present perhaps the biggest challenge to the achievement of the SDGs. For all individuals, “discrimination on the grounds of sex and gender starts from their very birth” (United Nations Human Rights, 2014). Societies place expectations of behaviour onto individuals, dependent on gender and based upon tradition, often disadvantaging girls (WorldFish, 2014). Oxford Dictionaries (2016) defines gender as “the state of being male or female (typically used with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones)”, showing that perceptions of gender are learned and shape societies. No society in the world allows women the same opportunities as men (UNDP, 1995). Women face barriers in
“access to work, economic assets and participation in private and public decision-making” (United Nations, 2015, p.8).

Ethiopian girls face social barriers preventing them from accessing many services and opportunities, for example, a third of girls are left unable to read (Girl Effect, 2016). Girls are also at risk of female genital mutilation, a ‘tradition’ believing girls are “born wrong” (Moran, 2015); resulting in ‘cutting’ them to prevent shame. This can lead to repeated infections and prevent women from feeling sexually empowered, thus highlighting girls’ role as purely reproductive. Furthermore, girls are at risk of child marriage, something that is “rooted in unequal gender status and power relations” (United Nations Human Rights, 2014). In 2010, the Amhara region of Ethiopia had one of the highest child marriage rates globally, with 52% of girls married by age 15 (UNFPA/Pop Council Gender Survey, in Girl Effect, 2016). Ethiopia was more recently ranked 18th worst worldwide with “41% of girls married before the age of 18” (ICRW, 2015). Child marriage rates in Ethiopia are far higher than the ‘developing’ world average, where one third of girls are married before the age of 18 (ICRW, 2015).

Poverty is often used to justify the practice, because girls in poverty often have few options except marriage (International Labour Organisation, 2006) and marry older men for economic benefits, thus undermining “the agency and autonomy of girls” (United Nations Human Rights, 2014). Girls from poor backgrounds are twice as likely to marry before the age of eighteen as wealthier girls (ICRW, 2015). Marriage robs girls of their childhood (Kate Gilmore in United Nations Human Rights, 2014) and the early sexual activity exposes girls to risks. Pregnancy remains central in the causes of death in girls aged 15-19 worldwide and their older, more sexually experienced husbands increase their risk of contracting HIV, leaving SSA girls between 2 and 6 times more likely than boys to contract HIV (ICRW, 2015). Child marriage also violates Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that “men and women of full age” (United Nations, 1948) have the right to marriage, entered into with the free and full consent of the spouses.

In 2015, the unique needs of girls were addressed within the SDGs (Girl Effect, 2016). Child marriage presents a barrier to the achievement of SDG5 – the achievement of gender equality and female empowerment – because it puts girls at risk and restricts their educational, work and marriage choices. With eliminating “all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation” (Sustainable Development,
2015) a specific target, unless perceptions of gender are transformed, for the SDGs cannot be achieved.

With the overall aim of the SDGs being to end global poverty, it is important to understand how gender influences can greatly affect poverty itself. Extreme poverty is defined when an individual is living on less than US$1 a day, regardless of global location (International Labour Organization, 2006). However, African countries often exhibit some of the highest occurrences of poverty and their average levels of income consistently frequent the lower ends of rankings (Seebens and Wobst, 2008). Although upwards of one billion people worldwide have been lifted out of poverty between 1990 and 2015, sub-Saharan African countries' poverty rate, as a whole, did not decrease below the 1990 rate until 2002 (United Nations, 2015). Despite an acceleration in the rate of poverty decline since the introduction of the MDGs, high poverty rates in SSA countries continue, with "more than 40 per cent of the population [living] in extreme poverty in 2015" (United Nations, 2015, p.15). Gender inequalities add further complications to issues of poverty and its eradication. Approximately "70 per cent of the 1.3 billion people living in extreme poverty … are women" (UNDP, 1995, p.4) and this therefore prevents the achievement of the SDGs unless attitudes towards women's education, employment and gender norms can be altered to help them lift themselves out of poverty.

Furthermore, individuals living in poverty are at risk. The low financial capital that poverty stricken families have can force children into labour, rather than education, in order for their families to survive. As such, poverty can be both a cause and a consequence of child labour; with the child unable to escape poverty because of poor educational attainment, due to needing to work to survive as a child. The term 'child labour' refers to all children under the age of 18 "engaged in harmful employment, whether they are school-age or older" (UNICEF, 2005, p.7) with girls in particular being at risk of working rather than going to school (International Labour Organization, 2002). The worst types of work for children to be employed in are those that enslave children or subject them to prostitution, illegal activities or hazardous conditions and present the most risk to the children exposed (International Labour Organization, 2002).

Due to the need for some children to work and the existence of exploitive forms of labour, children are also at further risk of child trafficking: "the act of recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation ... either within or outside a country" (UNICEF, 2006, p.9). With child labour often being a
necessity for the poorest children and their families, NGOs and communities must support these working children, ensuring their safety in working environments and facilitating access education projects that are flexibly designed to accommodate them (International Labour Organization, 2002) so that children can lift themselves out of poverty, breaking the cycle.

Education’s value to developmental growth “has been well-established through numerous empirical studies” (Seebens and Wobst, 2008, p.103), benefitting individuals by increasing their health and earning power. Educated people have more choices regarding work, increased even by only the ability to read and write (Seebens and Wobst, 2008). Many countries “fail the third Millennium Development Goal of reducing gender disparities in … schooling” (Seebens and Wobst, 2008, p.103), particularly SSA countries, who fall behind similarly developed regions. In Ethiopia, girls’ access to schooling remains restricted, due to reasons often “rooted in economic circumstances” (Seebens and Wobst, 2008, p.103). Low incomes and high poverty rates are both causes and consequences of girls’ poor education. With time spent in school being an indicator of performance, girls’ lower school attendance, around eight hours per week less than boys (Seebens and Wobst, 2008), suggests that parents value girls’ education less than boys’. The MDGs saw the school enrolment rate rise, but high numbers of drop-outs impede progress. The International Labour Organization (2006, p.27) concur, concluding that when poor families must choose which children to educate, “girls tend to be excluded first” due to the prospect that daughters will marry into a new family, giving her obligations towards them instead. Consequently, under 50% of Ethiopian girls finish primary school (Girl Effect, 2016).

Furthermore, when girls menstruate, many schools do not have the necessary private and sanitary facilities to host them. In Ethiopia, boys’ use of girls’ facilities and poor water supply can prevent girls managing their menstruation in school and influence parental decisions regarding girls’ attendance (Sommer et al., 2015). When in school, girls may be sexually harassed by their teachers or male pupils (Seebens and Wobst, 2008) due to cultural attitudes towards girls, and this can further push them out of education. Equal education is hugely important as it “bears a number of implications for the development prospects” of SSA countries (Seebens and Wobst, 2008, p.104). Girls’ education positively impacts the health of future generations through increased awareness of illnesses (Seebens and Wobst, 2008) and with Ethiopian women constituting 86% of the agriculture labour force, it directly impacts labour productivity and poverty rates (Appiah and McMahon, 2002). If all Ethiopian girls completed school, “it would add almost US$4 Billion to the country’s economy” (Girl
Effect, 2016) and educated girls are also more likely to marry later (ICRW, 2015). Therefore, education protects girls from child marriage and is key to achieving the SDG’s aim of eradicating poverty. As concluded by Tuwor and Sossou (2008, p.377), “education will improve economic growth and quality of life and empower the people, especially girls and women, to make informed decisions”. However the large number of children in Ethiopia, where median age is 18.4 years (Worldometers, 2016), make this difficult. The sheer number of school-age children puts pressure on schools to be able to accommodate increasing numbers of students and so Governments and NGOs must find solutions to suit communities, allowing for the ever increasing number of children.

‘Girl Effect’: A case study of an NGO working in Ethiopia

An NGO is defined as,

‘Any non-profit, voluntary citizens’ group which is organized on a local, national or international level ... NGOs perform a variety of service and humanitarian functions, bring citizen concerns to Governments, advocate and monitor policies and encourage political participation through provision of information’. (ngo.org, no date)

NGOs are therefore greatly important in the implementation of global targets, such as the SDGs, within communities. They work to remove ‘invisible barriers’ by working with local people to provide suitable solutions to the individual needs of a given community. ‘Girl Effect’ is an NGO founded in 2008 by the Nike Foundation, along with over 150 partners in 90 countries. Originating from a belief in investing in girls, the work of the Girl Effect movement has “positively impacted the lives of millions of girls” (Girl Effect, 2016). Girl Effect’s main aim is to facilitate girls’ access to the key assets that they need, in order for them to achieve their full potential now and in the future. They want to “change the world for girls and enable girls in their unique capacity to change the world” (Girl Effect, 2016). In Ethiopia, Girl Effect works to break the cycle of poverty by creating “lasting perception change [through] harnessing media in innovative ways” (Girl Effect, 2016) to positively shift girls’ view of themselves and how they are viewed by others.

Release of the video ‘The girl effect: the clock is ticking’, highlighted girls’ needs in SSA countries (Girl Effect, 2010). Aimed at more developed countries, it successfully raised awareness of issues and encouraged support. Perception change is critical in order to produce an environment where girls feel empowered to challenge socially constructed barriers that restrict them from what they need, and therefore lift themselves and their families out of
poverty. Girl Effect recognised that girls were seemingly left out of the MDGs and I concur, because whilst including gender-based targets, such as the aim to achieve equality regarding the enrolment rate of girls and boys worldwide (United Nations, 2015), the MDG’s failed to address individual cultural factors and gender inequalities that severely impact the lives of girls. Together with 508 girls living in poverty and 25 leading development organisations, Girl Effect therefore created the Girl Declaration to address these factors, and then embedded it within the SDGs in 2015 (Girl Effect, 2015).

The five goals and seven principles of the Girl Declaration aim to create a better future for girls, with the further aim to end global poverty and ensure the needs of girls are now heard (Girl Effect, 2015). In 2013, together with the UK Department for International Development, Girl Effect launched ‘Yegna’ (yen-ya) in Ethiopia; a radio drama, music and talk show. The name ‘Yegna’ means ‘ours’ in Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, and the weekly shows feature real-life role models and characters to convey “powerful messages on health, welfare, domestic violence and education” (Girl Effect, 2016). Despite difficulties due to the deeply embedded nature of gender norms within societies, the aim is to engage all people in conversations about girls and create lasting social change using simultaneous methods at a pace that is right for the community. The use of the media to create change is one of great importance in today’s increasingly technological world. Yegna has been shown to work positively in Ethiopia, with 76% of girl listeners saying it inspired them to continue their education and 65% of both male and female listeners saying Yegna made them change their thinking about girls’ issues (Girl Effect, 2016). Whilst the use of the radio can be questioned due to its inability to reach all girls and all communities, potentially being limited to richer, more urban areas of Ethiopia, the positive shift in social attitudes towards girls is undoubtedly a step in the right direction. Further questions can be raised regarding Nike’s own use of child labour and poor conditions within their workforce in majority world countries and also where the funding for the ‘Girl Effect’ movement originates and the consequent influence this has.

Since the 1980s, Nike has been criticized for alleged poor working conditions and breaches of human rights within their factories in developing countries, with further scandals including child labour being uncovered in the 1990s (Locke et al., 2007). However, whilst initially Nike bosses took a defensive position regarding the allegations, arguing that the responsibility was that of the individual companies running the factories, by 1992, Nike began taking measures to end child labour and improve the health and safety of workers within the
factories supplying their products (Locke et al., 2007). The work of Girl Effect may therefore be considered a continuation of Nike’s efforts to counter their negative, defensive image and improve the lives of all individuals in majority world countries. Furthermore, the 150 partners involved with Girl Effect, along with Nike, all contribute to the funds supporting Girl Effect and this can raise suspicion over whether each investing company has influence over where money is spent and which work is carried out. However, the presence of a permanently employed workforce combined with the large number of supporting organisations gives assurance that the work done is not influenced by, but rather supported and agreed with by all of the organisations. At the very heart of the Girl Effect movement is the want to continue to help communities to help themselves by working together to find solutions that work for everyone (Girl Effect, 2016). “The starting point for everything Girl Effect Ethiopia does is to understand what it means to be a girl in Ethiopia” (Girl Effect, 2016) and then using this understanding to improve the lives of all Ethiopian people.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper argues that by “marginalizing half of its human population” (Tuwor and Sossou, 2008, p.377), Ethiopia is unable to lift millions of people out of a life of poverty (WorldFish, 2014), and therefore presents challenges to the achievement of the SDGs. By exploring the topics of gender, poverty and education in Ethiopia, a wider understanding of potential barriers is enabled, allowing for guidance towards better implementation of the SDGs within in the UK also. In SSA countries, girls are still excluded from education and opportunities and therefore can be denied all but poverty. The long-term benefits of educating girls and shifting gender norms cannot be overlooked when the issues that ‘human capital’ can improve are currently so extensive, for example the high rates of poverty in SSA countries. Seemingly small steps, such as all girls completing primary school, can benefit future generations, producing “adults who are healthier, more economically productive, and raise children who tend to stay longer in school” (Tuwor and Sossou, 2008, p.376). In order to create lasting social change in Ethiopia, the gender norms that limit opportunities for women must be understood, and then transformed (WorldFish, 2014), at a pace suited to the community. Issues of gender, poverty and education must be understood as interlinked, with each’s problems influencing the others, and therefore a simultaneous approach, such as that employed by ‘Girl Effect’, must be adopted to achieve consistent and suitable development.

However, solutions and ideals effective in more developed countries must not be imposed upon, or assumed to be suitable for developing countries. NGOs and Governments
must work together to “respect and support what local communities identify as their needs and wishes” (Huggins, 2015, p.228). This is something ‘Girl Effect’ can be seen to do in the way their approaches are tailored to the community; for example through the creation and development of the Yegna radio shows with specifically Ethiopian communities at their center. In order for the SDGs to be implemented effectively, girls’ ability to be a “force for change” (Girl Effect, 2016) must be recognised and the critical role of boys and men too in changing attitudes, must also be understood. Girl Effect achieves this with the use of the Yegna radio show, aiming its content at both genders and all ages. Furthermore, the impact of the SDGs must be continuously monitored by multiple organisations to ensure that the most vulnerable are not left behind in the development process and that practices both reach and benefit those who need them most. The United Nations (2015, p.11) acknowledge this need, stating that “only by counting the uncounted can we reach the unreached”. Worldwide, it is essential that countries acknowledge their role in supporting the transformation of gender perceptions, poverty and education. After all, “it’s no big deal. Just the future of humanity” (Girl Effect, 2008).

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