Chapter 4

Action Sports for Gender Development

In this chapter, we discuss the rise in Action Sports for Development and Peace (ASDP) programs targeted at girls and women within the context of the "Girl Effect." We begin by describing the rise in ASDP programs, considering the potential of noncompetitive, informal sports (e.g., skateboarding, surfing, climbing) for gender and development. Following this, we critically discuss some of the dominant discourses in the justifications and narratives of many such initiatives, before raising some concerns about the rise of "missionary feminism" among action sport enthusiasts from the Global North. In the main part of this chapter, we then offer a case to highlight the efforts employed by an action sports nongovernmental organization (NGO) to provide girls and young women in Afghanistan with opportunities to participate in sport and education. Herein, we also consider the struggles and strategies being employed by local and international staff of the facilities in their everyday efforts to support young Afghan girls and women into and through their programs. In so doing, this chapter offers a nuanced, contextual understanding of the potential and challenges of ASDP programs targeting girls and young women in the Global South. In prioritizing the lived experiences of those passionate and devoted local and international staff involved in the "doing" of ASDP gender work, we come to better understand how deeply they value the opportunities in action sports and associated programs for improving the lives of girls and young women and the risks, reflections, compromises and contradictions they are willing to navigate in continuing this work.

Introducing Action Sports for Development and Peace

Since the mid- and late-1990s, action sports participants from the Global North have established hundreds of nonprofit organizations and movements relating to an array of social issues, including health (e.g., Surf Aid International – a nonprofit humanitarian organization dedicated to improving the "health, well-being and self-reliance of people living in isolated regions," particularly in

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popular surfing locations in Indonesia; see Thorpe & Rinehart, 2013), education (e.g., Skateistan – coeducational skateboarding schooling in Afghanistan, Cambodia and South Africa; see Friedel, 2015; Thorpe & Chawansky, 2016), environment (e.g., Surfers Environmental Alliance [SEA]; Surfers Against Sewage [SAS] – an environmental campaign group with a mission to rid the UK coastline of sewage; see Laviolette, 2006; Wheaton, 2007; Protect Our Winters [POW] – an environmental campaign group bringing together outdoor enthusiasts (particularly skiers, snowboarders, climbers) to advocate for education, awareness and policy change; see Thorpe, 2014), girls' and women's empowerment (e.g., Hera [Germany] and Skate Like a Girl [United States] are both focused on empowering young women and/or trans people through safe, supportive and inclusive opportunities to learn to skateboard); and antiviolence (e.g., Surfers for Peace – an informal organization aimed at bridging cultural and political barriers between surfers in the Middle East).

There is considerable variation within such action sport-related nonprofit organizations and social campaigns. Some ASDPs can be broadly categorized within the Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) sector since they use participation in action sports such as skateboarding or surfing as an "interventionist tool to promote peace, reconciliation, and development in different locations across the world" (Giulianotti, 2011a, p. 50). For many others, while the physical act of surfing or skateboarding plays an important role in uniting members of these groups and inspiring potential donors, the action sport is not directly being used as an interventionist tool. Rather, action sport participants from the Global North establish these organizations utilizing preexisting structures and connections within and across local, national and global sporting cultures and industries to raise awareness and fundraise for issues they deem to be socially significant (i.e., Surf Aid International). While some of these organizations remain at the grass-roots level and are relatively unknown beyond the local community or outside the action sport culture, others are gaining recognition from mainstream SDP, development and humanitarian organizations for their innovative efforts and creative strategies to create change in local and global contexts. Increasingly, ASDP organizations are sharing their resources and working together to improve their reach, develop more sustainable programs, and to develop best practices. Such networking and knowledge sharing is particularly evident in skateboarding (i.e., the Skateistan-driven GoodPush initiative) and surfing (i.e., Waves for Change and the Wave Alliance, focused on sharing resources and the development of surf therapy programs in local coastal communities).

Elsewhere, Holly has also explored ASDP initiatives that come from within communities themselves in conflict and postdisaster geographies, including young men using parkour in Gaza (Thorpe & Ahmad, 2015) and young Gazan men's digital entrepreneurialism and parkour skills to facilitate their own social mobilities (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2021), and local, community-led skateboarding initiatives in New Orleans and Christchurch following hurricanes and earthquakes, respectively (see Thorpe, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2020). Through such empirical work, she has argued for scholarship, policy and practice to move "beyond the 'deficit model' by providing space for local voices and prioritizing the creative grassroots strategies devised by youth to support their own recovery" (Thorpe, 2020a, p. 1). Drawing upon three case studies and a multimethod

approach (interviews with digital ethnography), Thorpe (2020) reveals informal sports (i.e., skateboarding, parkour) as critical resources taken up by youth within situations and systems where their specific needs are too often marginalized. By focusing on community-led initiatives in contexts of conflict and disaster, she reveals the social and cultural benefits of grassroots informal action sporting activities, particularly in providing youth with opportunities for valued forms of physical self-expression and escapism, social connectedness, and possibilities to redefine physical and emotional geographies (Thorpe, 2020). Arguably such insights also encourage a broader rethinking of the boundaries of what "counts" as Sport for Development work, with Thorpe (2016a) issuing a call for researchers to pay more attention to community and youth-led, grassroots initiatives rather than organizations and programs that very often are funded and led by (white, male) adults outside local (even national) communities.

While ASDP organizations are a relatively new topic of scholarly investigation, some researchers have drawn on psychological theories and concepts to explain humanitarian and empathetic responses among action sport participants (see Brymer & Oades, 2009; Wymer, Self, & Findlay, 2008). Yet such approaches have tended to oversimplify, decontextualize and romanticize the relationship between action sport participation and activism. Arguably, recent work by sociologists and cultural geographers offers insight into the nuances, tensions and contradictions operating within and across these organizations and the broader social context in which they emerge (see, e.g., Friedel, 2015; Laviolette, 2006; O'Connor, 2015; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2013; Wheaton, 2007). Adopting a critical development perspective that views development as a social construction shaped by the hegemonic workings of power, it is important to note that many ASDPs are underpinned by the same assumptions as other sport for development programs. To date, the founders of most ASDP organizations have typically been action sport enthusiasts (rather than experienced humanitarian/aid workers) from the Global North who have become inspired to create change when they observe poverty and inequalities during their sport-related travel, often in the Global South (see Thorpe & Rinehart, 2013). In their well-intended efforts to share "their" joy for a Western-defined sporting activity (i.e., skateboarding, surfing) with communities in the Global South, many such action sport participants are engaging in practices with neocolonialist underpinnings.

Thus, many action sports-related programs share critiques facing other SDP organizations. Indeed, much like the "sport evangelists" discussed by Coakley (2011), some ASDP leaders, staff and volunteers too often uncritically assume that action sport participation will automatically have a positive impact on "personal character development, reforming 'at risk' populations, and fostering social capital leading to future occupational success and civic engagement" (Coakley, 2011, p. 308; also see; Coalter, 2007). Like many SDP programs, some ASDP adopt the "dominant vision" described by Hartmann and Kwauk (2011), that is, they target marginalized young people with the aim of "equipping them with the tools of self-improvement and management" (p. 288), but in so doing are "recalibrating identities", bringing them in line with the values of the organizers and various other stakeholders (p. 292). Yet other ASDPs are working to adopt

what Hartmann and Kwauk (2011) term an alternative, "interventionist approach" with the aim of contributing to "more fundamental change and transformation" beyond the individual (p. 284).

ASDP: Points of Distinction

Elsewhere Thorpe (2015, 2016) has argued that action sports offer the potential for developing different skills and learning opportunities than the competitive, team-based sports often used in SDP programs (also see Thorpe, Ahmad, & Williams, 2018). In contrast to organized sports such as soccer and basketball, most action sports are not based on head-to-head competition (although competitions are popular among elite performers), thus offering opportunities for youth to gain a sense of achievement without having to compete against, and beat, another opponent. When ASDP programs are well-facilitated, participants can learn alongside one another and gain a sense of accomplishment based on their own skill development, rather than on beating the "opposition." For example, a novice skateboarder can get much satisfaction and joy from simply standing on the board and rolling a few feet along a flat surface; an intermediate skateboarder in the same space might be filled with pride when they successfully "ollie" (jump) the board a few inches off the ground; whereas an advanced skateboarder might get a sense of achievement from a 360-degree "ollie." When appropriately supported, action sports offer ample opportunities for individual empowerment through skills mastery (e.g., coordination, balance), as well as valuable social skills (e.g., communication, sharing of social space, understanding difference).

Another key difference is that many traditional sports require referees to control the play and discipline the players. Most action sports, however, are self-regulating, and thus participants often quickly develop an implicit understanding of the cultural etiquette for sharing the space. There is also a celebration of play, self-expression, and creativity in the use of space and movement in many action sport cultures, which may offer unique opportunities for skill development, communication, and respect between participants in developing nations or war-torn communities. According to one of the cofounders of a skateboarding NGO in Afghanistan, skateboarding is "a fantastic tool for communication": "We get kids from all different ethnicities building relationships with each other. So we've got Hazara kids with Tajik kids' skateboarding together" (cited in Kock & Sehr, 2011). Arguably, many current SDP youth programs could be redesigned to provide more opportunities for shared experiences based on noncompetitive achievement that respect individual differences, celebrate creative self-expression, and embrace peer-mentoring rather than hierarchical coach–athlete relationships in competitive environments that clearly distinguish the winners and losers and those with power/knowledge and those without.

Important for our discussion here – and in stark contrast to many traditional organized sports that were designed by men for men – most action sports developed in a different gender context. As such, women have been active

participants from very early in the development of many action sports, thus offering opportunities for alternative gender relations (Thorpe & Olive, 2016). While most traditional sports divide men and women into two separate and distinct groups, in many action sports, girls, boys, men and women often share the same space (e.g., the waves, a skateboard park, an indoor climbing facility), participating alongside friends and/or family members from both sexes and of varying ages and ability levels. As a plethora of feminist research on action sport cultures has shown, although these sports remain dominated by young men, girls and women (and non-binary) are actively navigating space for themselves, building communities of collective support, and working to expand stereotypes of who participates in these sports and why (see Thorpe, 2017, for an overview of this literature). Opportunities for shared participation has the potential for shifting gender relations, in some (not all) cases building respect for those from different social, cultural and gender backgrounds, as well as skill levels and age. Furthermore, many action sports (e.g., skateboarding, parkour) do not so explicitly privilege the male body (e.g., speed, upper body strength, physical force) as sports such as rugby, ice hockey or American Football. Rather, the gender-neutral traits of balance, coordination, personal style and the creative use of space are highly valued within action sport cultures, such that boys and girls (and non-binary youth) do not need to be separated in the learning experience (although, in some cultural contexts it may be appropriate) and can learn from one another, and come to respect one another through the joy of participating together.

Arguably, well-designed and critically considered informal, action sports programs can offer a valuable contribution to the SDP movement by offering empowering learning experiences, encouraging self-expression, creative thinking and developing a different set of physical and social skills among youth from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Of course, such development outcomes are not automatically based on the type of sport being utilized, and thus we cannot assume simple distinctions between ASDP and SDP organizations. But, with action sports developing in a different historical context to most organized sports and underpinned by a different set of cultural values, these activities may offer something unique to the SDP community. For example, Wheaton's (2013) analysis of skateboarding among street children in (postapartheid) South Africa, suggests that the "newness" of skateboarding was an important factor in its appropriation by young, Black South Africans because "it represented a rejection of the traditional colonial sports of rugby and cricket" (p. 108). The founder of a skateboarding ASDP organization makes a similar observation in regards to the potential for girls skateboarding participation in Afghanistan, explaining: "lots of sports here are seen as for boys [but] skateboarding was too new to be related to gender" (personal communication 2011).

While action sports may not be entrenched with the same histories of exclusion, marginalization and inequality as many traditional sports, it would be a mistake to romanticize action sports as offering a panacea for the field of SDP. As various sociologists of sport have shown, upper-middle class young, white, males have long dominated action sport cultures. Indeed, not dissimilar from many traditional sports, action sport cultures are often hierarchically organized, with

forms of sexism, homophobia and racism present, particularly among fratriarchal groups (see Thorpe & Olive, 2016). The key point here is that it is not necessarily the type of sport that distinguishes programs for youth development, but rather the educational, pedagogical and/or feminist vision underpinning such programs (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Thus, it is only when critically developed, contextually informed and appropriately supported that ASDPs can provide empowering learning experiences that encourage self-expression and creative thinking. These ASDPs can, in turn, help youth of diverse genders and from varying ability levels and socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds develop a different set of physical and social skills and competencies.

The Girl Effect in ASDP

Over the past decade, there has been a significant rise in the number of informal and formal ASDP programs focused on girls' and women's empowerment in contexts of poverty, conflict and systemic disadvantage. For example, Waves of Freedom proclaims to use "surfing as 'a tool for gender engagement and gender equity across cultures and to create self-empowered individuals who are active agents of change in their communities and beyond'" (cited in Thorpe & Chawansky, 2016, p. 136). Easkey Britton, an Irish professional big-wave surfer, founded this female-focused ASDP after she became the first woman to surf in Iran. In her own words, "I see surfing as a great leveller, a sport that Iranian women could claim as their own and use to empower themselves" (Britton, 2014, p. 1). Another example is the Bangladesh Surfer Girls Project which provides scholarships to orphaned and disabled girls selected from women-headed households in Bangladesh and offers "child friendly quality education and sports and cultural training opportunities" to help "prepare the girls for a better life as independent women" (cited in Thorpe & Chawansky, 2016, p. 140). In 2013, the organization offered 54 scholarships, with three surfing trips included in their curriculum. However, to critically understand the growth of, and operations within, such initiatives, it is important to locate them within the broader context of the "Girl Effect" in development.

As we discuss in the introductory chapters of this book, there has been a "turn to girls" and a "girl powering" of development since the mid-2000s (Koffman & Gill, 2013). Originally coined by Nike Foundation in 2008, the "Girl Effect" quickly became a key development discourse taken up by a wide range of governmental organizations, charities, and NGOs. Many of the critiques of the Girl Effect in development and SDP (see Chapter One) apply to ASDP initiatives aimed at "empowering" girls and women in the Global South through surfing, skateboarding, climbing and other action sports. As we have argued elsewhere, many such programs give little consideration of the broader forms of religious, cultural, national, and international power relations operating on and through girls' and women's bodies, or local girls' and women's own culturally specific forms of agency (Thorpe & Chawansky, 2016). Despite the best of intentions, as Sensoy and Marshall (2010) remind us, the processes and results of such activism

"can be tangled, complex, and reinforce the very power relations that these groups had meant to challenge" (p. 308).

The politics of girl-focused ASDP programs and media coverage of their activities (see Chapter 7) demand a "close examination of who represents whom, for what purposes and with what results" (Sensoy & Marshall, 2010, p. 309). Importantly, however, some women involved in such projects are highly reflexive of their involvement and critical of how their initiatives may be interpreted, consumed, even coopted, by those in the Global North. For example, Farhana Huq, cofounder of the Bangladesh Surfer Girls Project and Brown Girl Surf organization, demonstrates an acute awareness of the problematic tendency for those from Global North to uncritically frame "brown girls" as the "exotic other [s]" (Said, 1978) on boards, as Huq notes:

> There's always a lot of hype when people discover girls are surfing in such a poor region. All of a sudden, the Western world wants to come in and help everyone. While well intended, sometimes surfing is confused with being an answer to helping people overcome systemic poverty. … So it's great there are pictures of under-resourced girls popping up on surfboards, but we have to ask, then what?
>
> (cited in Carmel, 2014)

Here Huq demonstrates a critical understanding of the power relations and ethics involved in ASDP programs focused on girls and women from the Global South and the challenges of creating long-lasting social change in local contexts.

Yet such a level of awareness is not apparent across all female-focused ASDP initiatives, many of whom continue to assume positions as "the saviors of their 'Third World' sisters" (Sensoy & Marshall, 2010, p. 296). As Sensoy and Marshall (2010) suggest, if we view such initiatives as "political text mired in its social context and tied to historically bound colonial discourses and material power relations, then we can ask a different set of questions around 'whom do activists represent and how far the right to represent extends (Ignatieff, 2001, p. 10)'" (p. 309). Building upon the work of critical development and SDP scholars (i.e., Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011) and particularly those engaging with feminist postcolonial theory (i.e., Hayhurst, 2016), there is important work to be done that revisits the implicit assumption that those from the Global North providing access and opportunities for girls and women from the Global South to participate in action sports can lead to improved gender relations, female empowerment, and to healthier and happier lives. In the remainder of this chapter, we offer the case of an action sports NGO and particularly the work of local and international staff of its Afghan branches, to reveal the complex processes and reflections of those providing sporting and educational opportunities for girls and young women in the Global South. First, however, we place this case study in the context of Afghanistan.

Action Sports and the Girl Effect in the Context of Afghanistan

Following decades of internationalized civil strife, earthquakes and drought, Afghanistan remains the poorest country in Asia (Carmichael, 2016). Within Western discourse (i.e., media, policy), Afghanistan is commonly understood as a highly patriarchal society with a "history over the centuries of women's subjugation" (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003, p. 1), including their unequal treatment in the legal and education systems, governance and security structures and within sociocultural norms (Fluri, 2011; Moghadam, 2002; Partis-Jennings, 2019). But gender relations and women's rights in Afghanistan cannot be separated from broader international politics and armed interventions and associated struggles of representation (Kandiyoti, 2007b; Wibben, 2016). In October 2001 (following the September 11 attacks in the United States), Afghanistan became the site of global "war on terror" military intervention. At this time, the situation of women's status under Taliban rule was strategically used to symbolize to "western military powers a justification of war in the name of freedom of women" (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003, p. 1). In its focus on the Taliban as the source of Afghanistan's problems, the "war on terror" narrative contained a remarkable silence "about the crucial role the United States has played in creating the miserable conditions under which Afghan women were living" (Hirshkind & Mahmood, 2002, pp. 340–341).

Others argue against portrayals of Afghan women as victims (to the Taliban or global forces), instead recognizing Afghan women's agency and creative strategies to navigate lives within challenging conditions. For example, Rostami-Povey (2004) explains how Afghan women "organized around gender-related survival strategies… [and] worked together in groups and organisations, generating networks, norms, and trust in their communities" (p. 172) (also see Abu-Lughod, 2002). More recently, there has also been a rise of young Afghan women using social media to amplify their voices and for political purposes (Herman, 2015). But, as feminist scholars makes clear, the gender relations in Afghanistan must be located "in the nexus of global and local influences that shape the policy agenda" (Kandiyoti, 2007b, p. 169; Manchanda, 2014). According to Kandiyoti (2007b), "at the grassroots, the dynamics of gender disadvantage, the erosion of local livelihoods, the criminalization of the economy and insecurity at the hands of armed groups" are all factors that "combine seamlessly to produce extreme forms of female vulnerability" (p. 169). Just as we must be wary of Western constructions of gendered power relations that ignore the complex international and national forces that press upon Afghan women's everyday lives, we must also take care not to overlook Afghan women's agency within this context. With the politics of gender in Afghanistan playing out "against the background of a complex layering of influences," it is important to recognize gender relations as "a fluid and uncertain landscape, featuring old dilemmas and new challenges" (Kandiyoti, 2007b, p. 193).

Alongside the "war on terror" military intervention, Afghanistan became the site of a "liberal peace-building project" that incorporated a vast array

of international organizations (IOs) and NGOs, institutions, and donors (Partis-Jennings, 2019, p. 179). By 2006, there were "more than 800 international and indigenous Afghan NGOs operating humanitarian, reconstruction, development, and peace-building programs" (Olson, 2006, p. 1).

At the time of writing this book, the political situation was again changing rapidly in Afghanistan, particularly with countries such as the USA and Canada withdrawing troops. Many inside and outside of Afghanistan anticipated that the withdrawal of international military presence in Afghanistan would significantly impact the safety of Afghan girls and women, and the sustainability of organizations focused on girls and women's education, health and sport (Alizada & Ferris-Rotman, 2021; Gibbons-Neff, Faizi, & Rahim, 2021; van Bijlert, 2021). Many reports and news articles from the Global North reinforced the notion of the United States as a "savior" for Afghan women and thus made a strong case that US withdrawal would negatively impact the lives of Afghan women. However, a report produced early in the withdrawal process, based on semi-structured interviews with 23 women from Afghanistan's rural districts, revealed a more complex picture, with Afghan women mixed in their initial interpretations of the US–Taliban agreement and their hopes and fears for the future (van Bijlert, 2021). Since this report, the situation for girls and women – particularly those participating in sport and/or working for international NGOs – has become ever more urgent with many living in hiding and desperately seeking safe passage out of a country that they anticipate as being very dangerous for girls and women, with few future opportunities for their future education, sporting participation, or basic human rights. At the time this book had moved into production, many governments and organizations around the world were working to support safe passage for girls and women, athletes, and staff of international organizations (including sport-related SDPs), from an Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban.

Thus, it is important to acknowledge that this chapter (also see Chapters Five and Seven) draws upon a previously collected data set (2014–2019). Without the voices and perspectives of women living in Afghanistan at this time, we are unable to say more about the lived experiences of Afghan girls and women or SGDs working in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US troops. Any such analyses must prioritize the voices and lived experiences of Afghan women, while also remaining critical of Global North (and particularly North American) media narratives that reproduce particular framings of the Global North as the "savior" of Muslim girls and women, and dominant readings of Afghanistan in the context of complex geopolitical power relations.

The Case of an Action Sports SDP

Sport for Youth* (pseudonym) was part of the expansive landscape of international NGOs working in Afghanistan during the 2000s. It began as a (self-described) "independent, neutral, Afghan NGO" that provides action sports tuition, and art and language education, to urban and internally displaced youth in Afghanistan. Founded in the early 2000s by an action sports participant from

the Global North, Sport for Youth has continued to grow with two Afghan facilities. Sport for Youth also has programes in Asian and African countries. In this chapter, we focus primarily on the two Afghan facilities (Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif) that have been providing for more than 1,000 Afghan children and youth per week for more than a decade – almost 50 percent of whom are girls – and particularly the efforts by staff to support the development of Afghan girls' and young women's educational, social and physical needs.

Through our long-term research with the organization (see Thorpe & Chawansky, 2016, 2017), and Thorpe's ongoing role as an international advisor, we have come to develop a nuanced understanding of the organization's developments over time. Through a series of interviews with the founder, we recognize his approach to development as informed by a critical understanding of international development efforts in Afghanistan. Upon first arriving in Afghanistan, he quickly became concerned that existing NGOs "didn't seem to include Afghans themselves in the decision making processes," which resulted in development that "failed in the longer term when the money or expertise stopped flowing from external sources" (interview, 2014). Such critical observations informed his approach to Sport for Youth, and particularly his efforts to create a "local led campaign" that "*includes* women throughout the development process" (interview, 2014). In this way, the founder was initially motivated by feminist sentiments of empowering local girls and women to become leaders of their own society. Yet he also acknowledged the risks of offering girls sporting and educational opportunities in Afghanistan and detailed their strategies for minimizing risk to participants and staff:

> The key is that change isn't happening too fast…With [Sport for Youth], we want to be a hub for female empowerment, but at the same time we don't want to attract unnecessary attention to ourselves; it must be a home-grown initiative, it has to be a grassroots women's empowerment hub. It can't be something where there are outside values pushed onto young kids… we want them to create something that is also sustainable, something that works over the long run (interview, 2016).

Despite efforts to develop innovative approaches toward understanding and respect for the unique value systems, etiquette and practices within the Afghan context, the origins of Sport for Youth were based in some of the same neocolonial underpinnings of many other SDP programs operating in the contemporary neoliberal context (Thorpe & Rinehart, 2013; also see; Darnell, 2009, 2010; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). However, the organization has continued to reflect on the cultural and gendered assumptions underpinning their early work, with ongoing changes in their efforts to move toward best practice in/for the local communities in which they work. This process has been greatly informed by the voices and expertize of both local staff as well as international staff and volunteers.

For the first 10 years, international staff and volunteers led the Afghan programs, with support from local Afghan staff and students. However, in 2016 the organization transitioned from being run by international staff and volunteers to being entirely managed by Afghan staff, with international staff providing remote support from their European office. This change toward a more locally led model was inspired by a combination of factors. One key consideration was the organization's growing awareness about the neocolonial underpinnings of development work and Global North/South hierarchical structures inherent in Sport for Youth leadership models. Another key factor was increasing concerns about the high risks posed (to all) by international staff presence. This transition took many years to implement, including the development and support of local Afghan staff to take over the day-to-day operations of the two Afghan facilities. Similar processes were implemented in their other international programs (in Asia and Africa) following the success of the organizational transitions in Afghanistan.

Sport for Youth has continued to evolve and change over the past 15 years, and consistent efforts have been made to ensure opportunities for girls and women to participate in the programs and to obtain paid-work and leadership opportunities within the organization. Women play key roles as staff, managers and leaders across the organization (see Thorpe & Chawansky, 2017). In contrast to many development and aid organizations, (until 2021) women made up 50 percent of the management team and 50 percent of the full time staff at headquarters. Across the two facilities in Afghanistan, women constitute just fewer than 50 percent of staff (21 of the 45 positions), with local women holding a number of leadership positions. Sport for Youth has gained international acclaim for its work, including a long list of awards. While the organization works with boys and girls across three countries, much of the acclaim is focused on their work with Afghan girls which have long been the most visible aspects of their programming. In Chapter Seven, we discuss the affective power, as well as the risks and ethics, of such visibilities in more depth.

The remainder of this chapter draws upon 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews with international (7) and local Afghan (7) staff primarily conducted via Skype between early 2015 and mid-2017. With the aim to create space for the personal experiences of staff, interviews were conducted with two male and five women international staff who had worked for the organization for an average of 3.5 years. At the time of interviews, some were still working in Afghanistan, but due to the timespan of this project, other interviews were conducted when staff had left Afghanistan and were either working for the same NGO at the international office or at other facilities, or had moved onto other work. The further the participants were temporally and physically removed from Afghanistan and/or the organization, the more open the participants seemed to be in speaking about their experiences. At the time of interviews with local staff, five were still working for the NGO with two having recently migrated from Afghanistan. Perhaps not surprisingly, some seemed hesitant to be too critical of the organization for which they currently work or to place too much emphasis on the challenges and risks they navigate in their everyday working lives. As well as

limiting information on the organization, pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter in an effort to protect the identities of participants.

Of the international staff participants, all were in their mid to late 20s at the time of interviews and primarily from Australia, Canada, Germany, and the United States. Five were "white" and two were of mixed ethnicities, and all were highly educated (with undergraduate or Masters degrees in development, international relations, and/or education) with extensive experience traveling and working overseas, including conflict and postconflict countries. The local staff (four female and three male) varied more in age, ranging from 18 to late 50s, and came to work for the organization through two main routes: (1) as participants in the programs, into volunteer and then ultimately paid positions and (2) through applications for paid positions (i.e., community educator; finance manager). Many of those in the second category had higher education degrees and/or considerable experience working for other NGOs in Afghanistan. All participants were recruited (for the research) via an email invitation shared via organizational management. The invitation detailed the project and clarified that participation was entirely voluntary, there would be no consequences for (non) participation, and that all efforts would be made to ensure confidentiality throughout the project and anonymity in any published materials.

Informed by literature on SGD and ASDP and the desire to create space for the voices of those working behind the scenes (and particularly women working in action sport-focused SGD), each interview was over an hour in duration and focused on two key themes: (1) the efforts of the organization to use educational and sporting programs to cater to the unique needs of Afghan children and youth, and particularly girls, and (2) the personal experiences and reflections of the staff working in Afghanistan. There was much blurring across the two themes. A key line of questioning within the interviews was to explore how local and international development staff made meaning of the gendered complexities of development work differently based on their cultural, social and organizational positionality. In the remainder of this chapter, we present insights from these interviews, exploring differences between local and foreign staff perceptions and reflections of gender work in Afghanistan.

Afghan Staff: "The Important Thing is to Not Lose the Hope"

Each of the local staff expressed their commitment to the work they do and valued the contributions of the organization in improving the lives of children and youth in Afghanistan. In the words of Kaamisha, a local female staff member:

> The important thing is to not lose the hope. Accept that it may not change for you, but there is a big chance that if you keep working, it might change for your children or the next generation or the generation after. It keeps you going, despite the difficulties.

For all local (and international staff too), it was a deep belief in the benefits of their work for improving the lives of Afghan children that justified "the difficulties" involved in this work:

> We have lots of students from lots of backgrounds, like educated people, uneducated people, students that are going to school, students that are not going to school and from different cultures and religious background, and when they are working together, especially in our skate and create classes, when they are sitting with each other they are learning from each other. It's the good things that we see in our students' faces, this makes you see how important this is.

Despite the rewards, many of the local staff spoke of the challenges, particularly regarding Afghan girls' participation. As one young male staff member explained:

> Right now, to be honest in the current situation of Afghanistan, of course it is challenging for females to participate in all programs in all fields! But it's also a big problem and as important for men to participate because they both experience war and they've both lost whatever they had, so we are just trying to be shoulder to shoulder and work and gain whatever we want for ourselves and for females (Bahnam).

In such comments, we see the Afghan staff acknowledging the challenges in providing sport and education programs for children in a context of long-term war, conflict and extreme poverty. The reference to "shoulder to shoulder" approaches to change reflects the strategy to work together with staff and volunteers within Sport for Youth, along with key community partners and other NGOs focused on improving the health and well-being of children and youth in Afghanistan.

In their efforts to create "safe" spaces for their female participants, Sport for Youth staff provides female-only lessons with female Afghan staff leading the learning. The organization also provides free transport to and from the facilities and has appropriate prayer rooms available to their staff and students. Such initiatives are necessary for Afghan families to consider sending their daughters or sisters to Sport for Youth. As the following comments from local female staff suggest, the challenges for girls' participation varied greatly:

> Some families don't allow their girls to join with the boys' classes. Therefore, we prefer to separate classes. It's a big problem, because for the skateboarding classes, they bump into each other, touching each other, it's not allowed in our culture.

> Families are different. Not all the families have this idea that they keep their daughters at home and don't let them study. Just some of them, not all the families… have this kind of idea to keep your daughters at home to work. In my family, we are eight sisters and one brother, and my mum does all the housework alone. We all study, we all go to courses, we all go to school. Just some families they are coming from where they are living in some villages, not all villages, they have this idea that they don't like to let their daughters to study or to work outside. These families, they don't let their daughters go to the skate park – they just say we are alone and we need the daughter to help.
>
> Some of their fathers have this idea, religious belief, or just don't like their daughters to go to outside work or study or go to courses or continue their education.

In such comments, we see cultural, religious and economic factors intersecting to inform family decisions as to the opportunities for their daughters and/or sisters participation in sport and education programs. As one of our local staff commented, for some families, daughters are required to carry much of the domestic responsibilities, with such duties increasing with age:

> Just at the beginning of the year, one of our students, she was the oldest girl of the house and their mum and her dad didn't let her come to skateboard because no one was there to work with their mum and her mum has had a baby; she couldn't come any more to skate park because she had to take care of the baby, work with her mum. Things like this are very common (female staff).

Recognizing different family priorities and understandings of appropriate activities for girls outside of the home, local Sport for Youth staff work hard to communicate with families, telling and showing them that they are an NGO committed toward improving the lives of youth in Afghanistan, and that it remains deeply dedicated to providing a "safe" space for Afghan girls.

Similar to the work in Chapter Three that shows the importance of the family in girls' participation in SDP programs in Delhi (India), the family also played a critical role in Afghan girls' participation in the Sport for Youth programs. Some of our interviewees were involved in the important community work required to convince families to allow their daughters to attend Sport for Youth. This work included regular phone calls or visits to family homes. For example, Hamdiya, an older Afghan woman involved in speaking with families explained (via a translator):

> There are many families that say sport is not meant for girls. They are saying no, but when I am going there, talking with them, conversing with them, and explaining that [Sport for Youth] is a

> safe place, [assuring them that] no one is coming to watch their daughter or she is being abused. Also I explain that we are picking your daughter or your sister up from your home and going to [Sport for Youth], then after that when she is done with her classes then again we have transportation for them. So we are solving problems like this. When I visit the families I am giving a lot of information about [Sport for Youth], so after that they agree to send their daughters or sisters to [Sport for Youth].

Continuing, she acknowledges some of the challenges of "recruiting" more participants and meeting the expectations of Sport for Youth leadership:

> In some events we are calling families and children to come and join our event. We put on events so the families can come to see the programs and the building, to see that it is safe for their children. It happens a lot when the director says go out and survey [recruit] and bring this many students to [Sport for Youth]. It's harder for me to bring more girls, but I am trying hard because I have to complete the mission. I am working for [Sport for Youth] and I had to do that, so it happens sometimes.

In her efforts to recruit more girls into the programs, she often faced questions from the families about the presence of international staff and their intentions:

> I now hear… when you take my daughter to [Sport for Youth]… to a foreigner, that is a bit risky. They were asking that there is foreigners, so we can't send our children to [Sport for Youth] because we are not trusting you because you will sell my daughter, or if you don't then the foreigners will do it. But I explain that the foreigners come here and they are here to help and they are helping us, they are doing the project not for me, it's for your children, they are helping us. After that, they are sending their children.

Family concerns about the involvement of international staff and the motivations of the international NGO were lessened (but not entirely removed) as Sport for Youth transitioned to being entirely managed by local staff. Such concerns about the involvement with international NGOs are common in Afghanistan, particularly with the possible risks (i.e., Taliban attack, community accusations; see below) associated with interacting with international staff and foreign organizations.

Sport for Youth worked carefully to build trust among the communities within which they work. As two of the local women staff acknowledged:

> One of the good things that [Sport for Youth] is doing right now is that they do everything within the Afghan context. I grew up in

> Afghanistan, always wearing a headscarf, that's part of my culture. But all the international women staff that go there, they all wear head scarves. All the students, everyone, all the staff are required to wear appropriate clothes. Part of the success is doing everything within the Afghan context, and the internationals, they don't maybe use jokes or any American stuff.
>
> [Sport for Youth] main success to me is doing everything within the Afghan context. Even for the girls, they have separate days for the girls and separate days for the boys. For the girls, they provide the transport which makes it safe, and that's why the family let them. [Sport for Youth] has someone who goes to the families and talks with them, and invites them to visit the facility. The families always have a chance to participate in the celebrations and stuff that they have there. The good thing was that there was that chance for the family to see that their daughters are in a safe place. They are not doing things wrong, they're just playing the sport and getting the education. The one thing, the main thing was that the family felt respected being invited there and the support.

As a result of such efforts, some of the local staff had observed changes over recent years with families becoming more supportive of their daughters leaving the home for education:

> There has been change for the last years, like before many families would not allow their children to come out, especially girls. But right now they are coming, the girls are getting an education, their parents also want that their children should go and get an education, so I think changes have come. The NGOs have been working hard to build awareness of what they are doing and why, so right now the parents are getting a little bit open minded.

Despite signs of "progress," an ongoing challenge for local (and many international) staff was that, having witnessed the "positive" changes in their Afghan girl students (i.e., new skills, knowledge and confidence), they often felt disheartened when their students were married young and thus no longer able to attend the programs.

In Afghanistan, 57% of girls are married before the age of 19, but the most common ages for girls to get married are 15 and 16 years of age (Riphenburg, 2004). The social, cultural, religious and family expectations of married women often prohibited Afghan girls' continued involvement in the Sport for Youth programs:

> Of course it's harder. When a girl is coming here and then their families see a rich man they are just… girls to get married, because the guy's rich. It's very hard and everything is going back to the

> past. Like she's growing up and she's going back to the past. There was a girl studying Back to School. She was only 14, but there was a rich guy so the family just decided the girl will get married to this old guy. So it is happening… all the time (Hamdiya via translator).

As we discuss below, some of the international women staff similarly struggled with the contradiction that, while they were providing short-term opportunities for Afghan girls to gain an education, the organization was not in a position to challenge deeply entrenched socioeconomic conditions and cultural practices that mean (some) families marry their young daughters for money. Such instances were common, thus promoting local and international staff to question the long-term impact of their work.

Navigating Risk

As Thorpe (2020) has explored in-depth elsewhere, many of the local Afghan staff acknowledged risk as part of their everyday and working lives. For example, Ammoz acknowledged that managing risk was an important aspect of his job, as well an everyday part of life in Afghanistan:

> It's a risk in Afghanistan to walk on the road or to drive on the roads. So, every day we are worried and bring students by transportation and to take them back to home. It's challenging because everywhere a bomb blast can happen.

Despite such everyday risks, most local participants expressed high levels of confidence that the organization was working to ensure their own safety and that of fellow workers and program participants. During interviews, most local staff expressed strong beliefs that their organization was safer than other international NGOs in Afghanistan. For example, Amooz proclaimed: "We are safer than other international NGOs because we are working for children. If we worked for a political one, then we will not be safe." Most local staff (and some international staff) also mentioned the importance of an organizational strategy to limit the visibility of the organization in the local context and felt this approach was working well in preventing unwanted attention and/or attacks. As Bahnam explained:

> One of the policies of [Sport for Youth] is that we don't want to be too famous in Afghanistan. We are not giving too much interviews or stories about our organisation in any local media. That's why the terrorists are focused on those other foreign NGOs doing sport and education, because they are famous. And when we are not famous, they will not even touch you.

As suggested in this quote, the program's perceived "invisibility" within Afghanistan gave some staff a sense of safety. Of course, it is also possible that local staff may have overemphasized their feelings of safety, and avoided admitting experiences of fear, with concerns that the data may go back to the organization or that they may be considered weak in the eyes of the interviewer, the organization, or their communities more broadly.

Although local staff were largely unwilling to emphasize the risky nature of their work, most did acknowledge that working for an international NGO with a focus on girls' sport and education does pose some risks, particularly (though not exclusively) for women staff. They noted that such risks were heightened in the highly visible spaces between home and work:

> When the [Sport for Youth] car is going in front of my door, so people of course are thinking "oh, a car came from an NGO and [I am] going to an NGO and I am working there." So most of the people are thinking very bad of us (Farzaneh).
>
> Inside [the Sport for Youth facilities] it's safer, but outside it's not safe at all, especially for girls and everybody knew that we were the [sporty] girls. We would go outside and there had to be someone, a man from [NGO], a staff or student with us so that we were safe (Kaamisha).

Although few directly mentioned risks posed by the Taliban, some did acknowledge concerns that their work could draw unwanted attention from this group:

> Sometimes people are worried that the Taliban say that we are doing this, or we are doing that. Because it's a sport programme, some girls are coming along. These are the things that they don't like for girls (Asal).

Despite the very real risks posed by the organizational focus on sport and education for girls and young women's empowerment, only a few acknowledged such risks. Instead, most focused on the "invisibility" of their programs, thus helping maintain a *sense* of safety for themselves and their students inside the organizational facilities.

Many of the local staff mentioned that their family had initial reservations about their employment with an international NGO working in girls' sporting opportunities, but responses depended on the social status and education of families, as well as the gender of the staff member. Whereas local staff from poorer families typically embraced the financial opportunities in their employment – with the risks involved in such work considerably less than many other jobs that poor Afghan youth may find themselves in (i.e., selling trinkets on the street, soldiers, prostitution) – most families (of varying socioeconomic backgrounds) were concerned for their daughters' safety. As illustrated in the

following comments, families of Afghan women working for international NGOs were particularly worried about the risks this posed to their daughters:

> Now the security of Afghanistan is not so good. It's worrying for all the families of girls that they are going outside and working, especially with foreigners or international people, it is very worrying (Hesther).
>
> Families worry about you going to work. Mums really love their children… she would say: "Oh [daughter's name], you're going into this situation; please, please take care of yourself when you go to your job" (Asal).

Some of the women staff mentioned that their families were "highly educated" and supportive in their pursuit of a meaningful career but still had worries for their safety. For many of the Afghan staff interviewed, they had a strong sense of responsibility to their families, and it pained some that their working activities put such stress on their loved ones.

Importantly, local staff understandings of gender and risk must be contextualized within the cultural, physical, and political context of Afghanistan. Most of the staff interviewed grew up in a country that has been through various phases of sustained conflict and war, political instability, with high levels of poverty, unemployment, everyday violence, including varying forms of cultural, economic, symbolic, and physical violence toward women. As one of the female Afghan staff explained:

> There was an explosion at an American University in Kabul today. Many of the students are still stuck inside while there are fires going on. Even highly educated people are literally living in a battlefield. We're not participating, but we're living it. We leave the house, and we don't know if we'll come back. There could be a suicide attack in front of us and we could die. Every one of us, when we go to school or work in the morning, we don't know if we will come back… this is just how it is (Asal).

Despite initial hesitation, some local women staff offered glimpses into the risks they accept in working for an international NGO. For example, one local woman explained the increased levels of risk for any Afghan woman seeking new work, educational or sporting opportunities: "those security concerns are something that every female who is active in Afghanistan faces; some more, some less, it depends on how visible you are and how active you are" (Kaamisha). After some prompting, she confided that her decision to pursue graduate studies overseas was motivated by her desire for further educational and professional opportunities, but "there were also other security concerns that came into it that I had to leave the country." Rather than offering further detail into her own

experiences of risk, she continued by offering the following commentary on the dangers faced by "visible" girls in Afghanistan:

> So they draw a line for girls to be invisible all the time, not be in the picture. If a girl tried to cross that line and do something different, that means, especially for extremists, it means that this girl did it so other girls would do it too. So [the thinking is], let's do something to this girl so it's a lesson for other girls. It's trying to prevent a change to happen, a change that they can't understand. There can be threats to their family, and specifically daughters. It's very specific to that context, which is hard to understand, even for me sometimes… (Kaamisha).

Another local woman recalled receiving death threats during her previous employment with another international NGO:

> I was sitting at home and then one day these three women wearing burkas came to my house, like "are you [name]? You work for [name of organization], you are a spy!" Then me and my family, we all got so scared. I decided to quit the job because I felt like I might die or something (Farzaneh).

When faced with such risks to her own life and the safety of her family, she spent the following years actively seeking out opportunities to migrate.

Importantly, such risks are not only experienced by the female staff of Sport for Youth. Three of the local male staff discussed the implications of their involvement with an international NGO, particularly in regards to difficulties of returning home to their more conservative provinces:

> I can't go to my province anymore because they are thinking "oh, [name] is working with foreigners." It's challenging for me (Bahnam).

> I'm not allowed to go to my home province. If I go there, they will definitely kill me. … they just warned me to not come, because we are working for equal opportunity for male and female (Amooz).

These men also faced accusations from their families that working for an international NGO was compromising their Afghan identities, and this was particularly the case when Sport for Youth was still managed by international staff:

> Personally, for me, I really enjoy them [international staff]. I like learning new skills and learning different cultures. [But] in my family, if I learn something here and I share it at home, they would tell me "you have become a foreigner" (Faireh).

Another local male staff member discussed some of the strategies he and his colleagues adopted to minimize such accusations:

> We have to take control of our attitude, because we have our own tradition, our own culture. It will be a *bad* idea to bring other cultures to our culture. We have to control ourselves, so we're trying a lot to not do any foreign acting in our families. Not showing them too many of our new skills or new knowledge (Bahnam).

As suggested in these comments, both male and female Afghan staff members develop an array of practices – ranging from avoiding "foreign acting" to not returning to their home provinces – in order to manage family and community perceptions, and thus reduce risks (for themselves and their families) associated with their work for an international NGO with a strong emphasis on girls' education and sport.

In contrast to the international staff that had the option to terminate their placement, board a plane and return to their relatively safe and stable home countries in the Global North, local staff have fewer options. Through their involvement with the NGO, a few had opportunities to migrate – to study and/or work in other countries – but such routes of possibility are rare and increasingly difficult. As our previous work has suggested, risk in development work is always relative (Thorpe, 2020). For Afghan staff who have grown up amid high levels of everyday and exceptional risk, perceptions of what is a source of fear, stress or anxiety within their work environment must be understood within this broader context. As Kaamisha notes, the risks experienced by Afghan staff – and particularly girls and women – are "very specific to that context," and thus parallels between international and local staff experiences of risk cannot be drawn. Importantly, however, risk is also relational. For example, after working for a series of international NGOs before coming to Sport for Youth, one Afghan woman reflected: "This whole world situation, when you see it, it totally sucks. How difficult it is for women to do anything here. How you see some people are allowed to travel and some not. I want to be able to travel the whole world…" (Asal). Working together within the same organization, international and local staff observed, discussed and reflected on the distinctive conditions of each other's lives, complicating understandings of their own (always gendered) positions of risk, safety and vulnerability as always contextual and relative. In most instances, at the time of the interviews, both the local and international staff proclaimed that they considered the risks of their work worth taking as they deeply valued the opportunities they were creating for Afghan children and youth, and particularly Afghan girls (also see Thorpe, 2020). Herein we see interesting parallels with research by Darnell (2010, 2011) and Welty Peachey, Musser & Shim (2018) on SDP and volunteerism, and the meaning the volunteers place on their work such that they are willing to endure various risks, discomforts and uncertainties as they navigate "antinomies, liminality, and structural relations" in the field (Giulianotti, Collison, & Darnell, 2021).

However, with the devastating events in Afghanistan in 2021, working for an international NGO, and particularly one focused on girls' sport and education, meant that Sport for Youth Afghan staff members (and their families) and students faced extreme danger. In this context, the SDP closed all sites, limited all past and present visibilities of the organization's work in Afghanistan, and worked tirelessly to facilitate safe passage for their Afghan staff desiring escape. At the time of production, Sport for Youth had supported the safe evacuation of 145 people, all female staff (except three) and their families. The situation in Afghanistan in 2021 is a tragic but important reminder to all those working in SDP. The geopolitical environment can change very quickly, with international NGOs potentially exposing their local staff and students to unanticipated, life-threatening risk. These are the ethical responsibilities and moral challenges that all those working in/for international SDPs must consider with grave care.

International Staff: "There's Lots of Stuff That Comes Up That Is Really Difficult"

In contrast to Darnell's (2010) findings that "[SDP] interns interpreted difference as markers of under-development which secured the focus of the SDP movement on the under-development of others" (p. 396), each of the international Youth for Sport staff interviewed demonstrated complex understandings of the intersecting issues of gender, culture, socioeconomics and religion in Afghanistan. For example, Kristine's "attitude toward gender" is "not to focus so much on the differences", but rather she prefers to "acknowledge there are differences but also acknowledge that boys also have a hard time in different ways and are dealing with gender pressures as well." Although our research was focused on the Youth for Sport projects in Afghanistan, each of the participants had also worked across at least one of the other Sport for Youth sites (Asia and Africa) and discussed their cultural comparisons of gender relations evoked by their work in different contexts:

> When I'm talking to people about [Sport for Youth], there's often this assumption that there's so much less gender inequality in Cambodia than in Afghanistan. It's true that Afghanistan is a really extreme case in gender inequality, but it's also a really big problem in Cambodia. … The experiences of women are definitely different but they are both difficult experiences…Basically, they're both denied opportunities systematically (Hazel).

As illustrated, some international Sport for Youth staff demonstrated critical understandings of the unique, and similar, challenges for girls' sporting participation within and across particular countries. Not only do such understandings challenge Western perceptions of gender in Afghanistan but also prompt a heightened reflexivity of their roles and responsibilities in unique fields of development (see Thorpe & Chawansky, 2017).

Both the international male and female staff acknowledged that they continued to learn much from the local staff and appreciated working in an organization

that tried a range of strategies (i.e., building a prayer room, hiring a community facilitator) to build a safe environment for the local children:

> We put a prayer room in the facility, so the community could see that we were being respectful of the culture, so there was an Islamic prayer room. One of the rooms that was supposed to be a classroom, we actually just decided to turn it into a full time prayer room. Our skate instructors who were Afghan would take the kids in and do prayers before the classes, or sometimes after the classes, and we made a really big effort to show the community that this is what we were doing. Any time that we had people visiting we would show them the prayer room and they were all very impressed, they were like "oh wow, look at [Sport for Youth] and how much they are respecting our culture." So the prayer room was a big hit, actually and it worked out really well.
>
> The outreach workers were so important, and they worked with quite a big team. They would do home visits, and us foreigners weren't involved at all in that, which was appropriate that we shouldn't have been. We wouldn't have been able to bring anything to it anyway, because we were clueless about that sort of thing. They would find maybe a sympathetic teacher at a school and then she would bring some girls and speak to their families in person. The Afghan outreach workers played a really critical role.

Some of the international staff we spoke with, however, were less self-congratulatory, reflecting critically on some of the challenges and contradictions in their work. For example, one female staff member noted, "it's a constant leveraging of big and little pictures, and trying to keep priorities in check and affirm that we are actually doing something [valuable]. Then also, at the same time, having to think about it in more abstract terms when you have to do something on a smaller scale that goes against your values."

Each of the international women staff admitted some personal struggles with some of the cultural and gender differences in Afghanistan but spoke of their individual and collective efforts to better respect local cultural traditions and stay focused on the policies of the organization. As noted above, a particular issue they found challenging was the early marriages of some of their young female participants and staff. While Afghan girls were generally allowed to participate in the programs offered by Sport for Youth during their early childhood, the organization struggled to keep their female participants once they reach marrying age (typically 15–16 years old but often much younger). This caused some frustration and disappointment for international and local staff alike, but as the following comments from the founder illustrate, the organizational policy was to tread very carefully in such terrain and to respect cultural value systems:

> Most families will support their girls attending up until 11 or 12 years old, and after that it's definitely a bigger challenge the older they are. Many of our best female staff and students have left [Sport for Youth] to get married or have children. But this is not something that we have interfered with, as it is not our job to tell someone else what life decisions they should take…It's very important that we don't impose any values that are not appropriate in Afghanistan. It is extremely hard because not many people agree with that decision [girls marrying at young ages, sometimes to family members], but it's not our role to interfere in what the family decides or what she decides for herself. These are hard things to comprehend and hard things to swallow, but we've got to pick our battles (interview, 2016).

Each of the women interviewed spoke of the importance of ongoing conversations with their (local and international) colleagues to understand and respect the organizational policy, as well as to reflect critically upon their own assumptions about women's rights and to try not to impose these on local children and youth. For example, Clara explained: "There's lots of stuff that comes up that is really difficult. I was constantly trying to keep perspective of 'I have cultural stuff' and 'there is cultural stuff here'… But then there are things [child prostitution and/or violence] that happen and you're like 'No, that crosses a line.'" Melissa also revealed her thinking process on some of the cross-cultural matters the organization confronts: "I've really thought about this a lot… is it right to impose our ideas of right or wrong on the kids? We try hard not to, but some things [kids hitting each other] cross the line of human rights." Similarly, Hazel discussed her personal struggles to accept cultural traditions and practices that challenged her deeply embodied moral value systems:

> To hear men speaking on behalf of girls or women…it's difficult to deal with. We work really hard to fit into the cultural context… but it's difficult sometimes. I would consider myself a feminist, and I'm also a skateboarder and I'm interested in development, so for me to have someone speak that way is really difficult to handle.

In our interviews, a number of the women staff suggested that their personal feminist politics and perspectives had to be qualified in order to work within organizational policy. In such comments, we see the women staff critically engaging with issues of cultural relativism as they intersect with feminist values.

The international staff who worked for Sport for Youth in Afghanistan engaged in a variety of individual and collective strategies to help navigate the complex gender and cultural terrain of their working environments. Some of the women staff and volunteers experienced internal conflict between their own personal politics (e.g., feminist concerns about young girls' rights) and organizational policy (e.g., respect of cultural values and avoidance of fighting

individual battles of human rights). As illustrated in the case of Sport for Youth, future SGD research would do well to build upon and extend the early work of Giulianotti (2011) to critically explore how women working in the sector make meaning of and navigate feminist tensions at the personal, professional, organizational, and political scales. Furthermore, SDP (and ASDP) organizations could take up such findings by working to create an organizational culture, and physical and temporal spaces within the working week, where individuals can openly discuss their struggles, experiences and strategies for negotiating the cultural and gender complexities in distinct working environments. For many of the international staff of Sport for Youth, it was through conversations with their local Afghan colleagues that they came to deeper understandings of the complex intersection of gender, culture, international and local politics, religion and economics that defined the context within which they were working and prompting further reflection on their own assumptions, positioning and practices within this context.

Negotiating Critiques of Development Work

In calling for a postcolonial feminist approach to studying SDP, Hayhurst (2011) encouraged international staff and volunteers to work together with girls and women in the Global South to "build transnational solidarity, respecting difference and using a more 'egalitarian language of alliances, coalitions, and solidarity, instead of salvation'" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 789, cited in; Hayhurst, 2011, p. 546). Continuing, she argues that a "transnational, mutual solidarity needs to start from the embodied subject positions of those driving SGD initiatives" (Hayhurst, 2011, p. 546). Our interviews revealed the international staff working together with local staff in their attempts to break down hierarchies, build more equitable relationships, and design programs that are both culturally appropriate and meaningful to Afghan girls' lives. Through such relationships, each of our international interviewees had come to reflect critically (to varying extents) on their roles and responsibilities and expressed nuanced understandings of the complexities, contradictions and power relations inherent in their own and others development work. In so doing, the international staff of Sport for Youth were neither the oft-criticized "sport evangelists" who espouse only positive views of SDP work nor did they adopt extremely critical views. Instead, their ability to tread a reflexive middle ground aligns them with Caudwell (2007), Forde (2015), Hillyer (2010), Chawansky (2015) and Wilson (2014), all of whom have written about the political complexities of working in SDP spaces and who acknowledge the challenges in maintaining both critique and optimism in SDP work. Of course, having the opportunity to tread this middle ground is a position of privilege that also comes with responsibility.

Two of the international women staff interviewed for this project expressed highly critical understandings of their positions within postcolonial critiques of SDP and came to question some of the Western-centric assumptions underpinning development work. For example, Sarah described her work in Afghanistan as offering "some very interesting gendered experiences" that prompted "so many

questions about going to a space with the intention of creating this liberating programming while not being culturally imperialistic":

> I don't want to save these girls from Islam or anything of the sort, but at the same time it's where do you draw the line between culture and oppression? I don't think wearing a headscarf is necessarily oppressive, but I think when girls don't have a choice whether or not to wear the headscarf, it becomes oppressive. [My experiences of working for Sport for Youth] raised a lot of questions for me that don't just apply to Afghanistan, but just how I conduct myself in the world in general, respecting different ways of doing things and different cultures, and what is inherently moral and what's culturally moral and things like that.

Here Sarah demonstrates a tacit understanding of critiques raised by post-colonial feminists, particularly the "newly emergent discursive strategies that construct first world girls as the saviors of their 'Third World' sisters' as 'missionary girl power'" (Sensoy & Marshall, 2010, p. 296). Continuing, Sarah described her efforts at negotiating a position between critique and optimism:

> I do think cultural exchange can be a really powerful tool and is really important, especially something like skateboarding that virtually couldn't exist in Afghanistan without some kind of cultural exchange, but when does cultural exchange become cultural imperialism and indoctrination?

These quotes from Sarah are representative of the critical awareness among some of the interviewees of the colonial aspects of staff and volunteers from the Global North working in Afghan communities and how such tensions are experienced in different ways at various stages during and following their placements. Similarly, Hazel reflected critically on her personal struggles at various stages during her work in Afghanistan:

> At [Sport for Youth], it was always the question of how much am I allowed to impose my ideas… I wanted to come to you to give you this [action sport], because I think it's great. Then for me it was of course difficult if the girls stopped coming because they now had to get married and their husband, or their brother, didn't allow it.

Continuing, she added further detail to her reflective comments:

> It was like, now we taught them English and they know about the Western lifestyle and the jobs they are doing now [working at Sport for Youth], it was such a heart breaking situation to cope with [early marriage, or young women forced by families into prostitution] and I was angry… and that was really horrible for

> me to deal with. But that really made me think… what right do I have as a woman (it doesn't matter where I come from), to show them what I like? They taste this…let's say honeysuckle for a couple of months or a year, and then they have to go back to their reality. And then is it really their reality? … Sometimes I feel I should just go home and not come back, because it's like, what right do we have as a Western society to go and tell them how to live their lives?

For some women, such as Sarah and Hazel, these personal tensions ultimately contributed to their resignation, whereas for others they informed the sense of urgency to find new approaches to work with local girls and women to devise strategies toward more "egalitarian language of alliances, coalitions, and solidarity, instead of salvation" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 789). In so doing, the international staff of Skateistan were embracing Wilson's (2014) notion of the "middle walker" as they demonstrated the ability to be "sensitive to the problems with and potential of SDP" and actively negotiate the "very meanings of the terms that are the foundations of SDP the field" (pp. 23–24).

Conclusions

In this chapter, we mapped the rise of ASDP organizations and the impact of the "Girl Effect" in such programs. Following this, we offered the case of Sport for Youth, an ASDP NGO that uses action sport to support children and youth development in Afghanistan, as well as in Asian and African countries. Drawing upon interviews with seven Afghan staff and seven international staff and volunteers who have all worked for the Afghan facilities of Sport for Youth, we revealed the passion and commitment involved in their work, as well as their experiences of offering sport and educational programs for girls. In so doing, the second part of this chapter highlighted the need for researchers and SGD program leaders to create space for the lived experiences of foreign *and* local staff of SDP (and ASDP) programs because their perceptions of gender (and the complexities of doing gender work) are highly relational and dependent on the conditions of their lives, as well as their social, cultural, and gender positioning within the local (and their home) societies, within a particular NGO context, and in development work more broadly.