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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Re-envisioning media literacy education as feminist arts-activism

Margaret McGladrey <sup>a,b</sup>, Madeline Oliff<sup>a</sup> and Emma Draper<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University, Medford, MA, USA; <sup>b</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, USA; <sup>c</sup>Williams College, Williamstown, MA, USA

### ABSTRACT

This project interrogates the premises of media literacy education – the predominant approach to equipping K-12 students to navigate the contemporary media environment – by moving it beyond teaching students to critique commercial media toward undermining ideological messages about health, violence, race, and gender embedded in media discourses. This participatory programme evaluation uses mixed-methods to assess the effectiveness of an alternative, performing arts education-based approach to media literacy called The Girl Project (TGP), a feminist artist-activist programme based at a non-profit community theatre in Versailles, Kentucky. The 12–18 high school-aged girls who participate in TGP every year are engaged in workshops by guest artists from around the nation to express what they think is important for their audiences to understand about their lived experiences as girls in a conservative sociopolitical environment.

The project employed “youth-adult partnership model” to programme evaluation that involved working with programme alumni as co-researchers to evaluate TGP 2017. In June 2017, a team of eight co-researchers comprising alumni from the 2014, 2015, and 2016 classes met to develop evaluation questions and make data collection decisions. Data collection included surveys and interviews conducted pre- and post-programme with participants, field notes of the co-researchers’ observations of workshops and rehearsals, and feedback from guest artists and audience members. The team met again in January 2018 to collaboratively analyse how the data answered their evaluation questions. The survey data allowed us to see that girls’ statistical scores on mental health and body confidence measurements significantly improved after their participation in TGP, meaning that girls are less vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. In talking with participants and audience members, we learned that TGP participation increases girls’ self-confidence and ability to set boundaries in friendships, family relationships, and romantic relationships.

### KEYWORDS

Media literacy education; girls’ studies; participatory evaluation; YPAR; feminist pedagogy; doing gender

## Introduction

Advocates of media literacy education (MLE) contend that teaching youth how to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media will provide a panacea of improvements to their health and well-being (Yildiz & Keengwe, 2015). A recent meta-analytic review of the effectiveness of 51 MLE interventions indicated that these programmes are generally successful in achieving media-related outcomes, such as participants' knowledge, criticism, and awareness of the influence of media and their perceptions of its realism (Jeong, Cho, & Hwang, 2012). However, this review concluded that MLE interventions do not significantly affect targeted behavioural outcomes, such as body image issues and disordered eating, risky sexual behaviour, violence, and alcohol, drug, and tobacco use. Although MLE programmes successfully teach students how to critique commercial media, they do little to undermine normative messages about gender, health, race, and violence embedded in media discourse.

This article presents a mixed-methods participatory evaluation of The Girl Project (TGP), an alternative approach to MLE created in 2012 by two arts educators, Vanessa Becker-Weig and Ellie Clark, that provides youth who identify as girls with creative tools and relational resources to challenge media misrepresentations of gender. The 12–18 high school-aged Kentucky girls who participate in TGP every year are engaged in workshops by guest artists from around the nation in artistic forms such as creative writing, poetry, dance, and sketch comedy. TGP also creates an ensemble-building context called the "closed container" modelled on feminist consciousness-raising groups where girls discuss current events and share stories in an intentional social environment governed by a "girl code" the participants establish during the first day of programming as their "constitution" to which they would like to hold themselves accountable. As the Research and Advocacy Director of TGP, the first author facilitates the closed container by using critical pedagogical techniques to introduce participants to concepts in intersectional feminism and then partnering with girls who want to lead discussions on topics of their choice. During a three-week writing and rehearsal process following the two-week workshop period in July, the artists and students devise and rehearse a script in which the voice of each participant is represented. The final public performances are written entirely by participants based on their workshop products (videos can be viewed on TGP's website, [thegirlprojectky.org](http://thegirlprojectky.org)).

## Intersections of peer and media culture in MLE

The theoretical assumption of MLE is that increasing students' ability to critique media messages fosters changes in behavioural norms. For example, objectification theory informs MLE to improve body image and eating, which was the most frequent target of programmes ( $n = 16/51$ , or 31%) included in the meta-analysis by Jeong et al. (2012). Objectification theory explains the relationship between media usage and gendered mental health disparities, positing that women and girls' lived experiences in a sexually objectifying culture inculcate self-objectification (i.e. viewing oneself from the perspective of a critical outside observer) and the internalization of media beauty ideals (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Internalization of media ideals and self-objectification increase body shame and anxiety and diminish awareness of bodily cues, which

lead to mental health problems that are disproportionately experienced by girls and young women, such as disordered eating and depression (Moradi & Huang, 2008). To disrupt the internalization process, MLE interventions have been designed based on inoculation theory, which suggests that education about how unrealistic media images are produced provides skills and information that will protect students against the adverse effects of media messages (Jeong et al., 2012). However, a review of 16 evaluations of classroom-based MLE programmes that have been conducted since 2000 revealed that only seven of these programmes were effective in improving body image on at least one measure, and these effect sizes were small ( $d = 0.22\text{--}0.48$ ) (Yager, Diedrichs, Ricciardelli, & Halliwell, 2013).

There are two major conceptual problems with existing MLE programming to address girls' body image and eating that will be considered in turn: (1) they seek to improve individual girls' ability to critique media ideals but do not equip them with relational resources to change gender expectations in their interpersonal and institutional social worlds; and (2) they do not engage youth as experts in the sociocultural dynamics they attempt to influence. First, MLE programmes attempt to change individual girls' psychological responses to media ideals but not the peer cultures in which their adherence to those media ideals are enforced. The importance of social interactions in the maintenance of traditional gender ideologies is underscored in the sociological theory of "doing gender" in which men and women's social competence is based on how successfully they align their appearance, attitudes, and behaviour with the normative expectations of their sex categorization manifest in media discourse (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The social assessment and enforcement of gender norms is central to both (re)producing and disrupting gender expectations (Hollander, 2013), with the implication that the influences of media culture and interpersonal environments on gendered mental health disparities are inextricably linked.

This distinction in the "target" of MLE is important to recognize in consideration of empirical evidence that the most powerful force socializing children into gender ideologies is their homosocial peer culture (Kimmel, 2012; McGladrey, 2015). Bystander intervention programmes leverage the influence of homosocial peer cultures on young men's adherence to gender norms to curb sexual and domestic violence (Katz, 2018). Although bystander interventions have been evaluated as effective in shifting gendered social norms (Katz, Heisterkamp, & Fleming, 2011), girls' peer cultures have not been the target of MLE programmes, which rely upon psychological models of individual attitudinal and behaviour change.

The second conceptual issue with MLE interventions is that they attempt to ameliorate social problems among youth without consulting young people themselves regarding their perceptions of the media and interpersonal factors that give rise to these problems. This study addresses this conceptual issue with a youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) project evaluating TGP as a case study of a MLE programme that foments critical consciousness (Freire, 2014) of social norms through performing arts education. Techniques from performance arts have been successfully deployed by teachers to promote youth literacy (Landay & Wootton, 2012) as well as by health educators to address a wide range of youth public health issues, including nutrition (Cheadle et al., 2012) and safe sex (Guzmán, Casad, Schlehofer-Sutton, Villanueva, & Feria, 2003). However, these and other public health programmes were evaluated based on their impact on audience

members, as the performances were written and delivered by adult actors, and the Performance Cycle model used in literacy programming begins with an existing text as a point of inspiration to which students respond. By contrast, although TGP is facilitated by a team of adults, participating girls set the agenda of topics discussed in the closed container and author the entire script.

## Methods

This study employed YPAR, a form of community-based participatory research that guides youth through an iterative process of collective research and reflection to investigate social problems affecting their lives (Ozer & Douglas, 2015). Central to YPAR is the imperative to design methods that allow youth to exert power in making decisions about key aspects of the research and action process (Ozer & Douglas, 2015). With YPAR, traditional research roles are reversed so that youth craft their own research questions, design strategies to collect data that answer those questions, and analyse and present their findings in ways they deem impactful, facilitated by adult co-researchers who offer technical assistance but defer to youth's priorities and judgements. This project drew from methods tested in a YPAR evaluation of Girls Inc. (Chen, Lazar Weiss, & Johnston Nicholson, 2010) to mobilize TGP alumni as co-researchers who co-produced a programme evaluation of TGP 2017. In June 2017 (before the summer 2017 offering of TGP), a team of 8 co-researchers, comprising alumni from the 2014, 2015, and 2016 classes who dubbed themselves the "PhDivas," met to arrive at consensus on their research questions (i.e. what do we want to know about TGP?) and determine the mixed-methods data they thought would best answer their questions. This four-hour training and planning session involved developing two research questions:

- How does TGP shape girls' feminisms, and how does TGP take audiences through the consciousness-raising journeys they have experienced in the programme? What benefits does TGP offer to participants and audiences?
- Who participates in TGP, who doesn't, and why?

The PhDivas then selected from a menu of options prepared by the first author for gathering quantitative and qualitative data to answer these two questions. The data collection tools selected by the PhDivas included pre- and post-programme surveys and interviews with TGP 2017 participants, field notes of the PhDivas' observations of TGP 2017 workshops and rehearsals, and qualitative feedback from guest artists and audience members. From five different options for validated instruments measuring constructs that are central to theories of media use and have been tested with youth populations, the PhDivas selected for use in the quantitative pre-/post-programme survey the Objectified Body Consciousness scale that measures self-objectification as a predictor of both negative mental health outcomes and diminished likelihood to engage in social activism (Calogero, 2013; Lindberg, Hyde, & McKinley, 2006). The baseline survey also gathered demographic information about the 12 TGP 2017 participants (age, grade, school, self-identified race/ethnicity, parental income range and educational attainment; see Table 1). The survey was administered via Qualtrics in late June 2017 (pre-programme) and in mid-September 2017 (post-programme). Additionally, the PhDivas refined questions



**Table 1.** Demographics of participants in The Girl Project 2017; pseudonyms were supplied by the participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Grade Entered in Fall 2017	Race	Sexuality	Socioeconomic Status	Parents' Marital Status	# of Brothers	# of Sisters	Birth Order
Chanel	14	10th	Black/African-American	Only attracted to males	Working-class	Married	1	0	Oldest
Chica	15	10th	Hispanic/Latina	Equally attracted to males and females	Prefer not to answer	Married	2	0	Oldest
Eva	16	11th	White/Caucasian	Equally attracted to males and females	Upper-middle class	Married	0	1	Oldest
Fauna	17	12th	White/Caucasian	Equally attracted to males and females	Middle-class	Married	1	1	Youngest
Grace	16	11th	White/Caucasian	Only attracted to males	Middle-class	Married	2	2	Youngest
Harper	16	11th	White/Caucasian	Equally attracted to males and females	Middle-class	Married	1	0	Oldest
Jamie	15	10th	White/Caucasian	Equally attracted to males and females	Poor	Never married	0	0	Only child
Jane	14	10th	White/Caucasian	Only attracted to males	Middle-class	Married	1	0	Youngest
Kristen	16	11th	White/Caucasian	Mostly attracted to males	Upper-middle class	Married	0	2	In the middle
Lydia	16	11th	White/Caucasian	Only attracted to males	Upper-middle class	Married	1	1	Oldest
Madison	15	10th	White/Caucasian	Only attracted to males	Middle-class	Married	0	0	Only child
S	15	10th	White/Caucasian	Mostly attracted to males	Working-class	Married	0	1	Oldest

\*The school each girl attends and the county in which they reside are not included here to reduce the likelihood of identifying individuals based on these data, but The Girl Project's 2017 class included girls attending 9 different schools in Fayette, Woodford, Franklin, Jessamine, Scott, and Montgomery Counties.

already used by TGP leaders to interview participants before and after the programme; questions elicited participants' thoughts on feminism, media culture, and social problems facing teenagers, and each participant completed two interviews that ranged from 30–60 min in duration. The PhDivas also developed open-ended questions fielded with guest artists and audience members after performances. Finally, the PhDivas learned how to take ethnographic field notes of their observations of TGP 2017 workshops, rehearsals, and performances.

Data collection addressing the second research question – who participates in TGP, who does not, and why? – was designed to mitigate our ethical and practical inability to include a control or comparison group. To the PhDivas, it seemed unethical to recruit girls into a control group without inviting them to fully participate in TGP, and no comparable MLE programmes existed locally that could have served as a comparison group. The PhDivas theorized that the most significant predictor of engagement with TGP – both as participants and as audience members – is through invitations by past or current participants, so the question of "who participates?" required an understanding of participants' social networks. As a result, the PhDivas decided to collect social network data during the post-programme interview about whom participants invited to attend their performances, which of these invitees attended, and why participants chose to include or exclude members of their networks in TGP. Social network data comprised not only the names and types of all relationships in which participants were involved but also demographic data participants provided about their network members' gender, age, political ideology, and religiosity.

Aside from contributing field notes as described above, the PhDivas did not collect data themselves, based on Chen et al.'s (2010) finding that the data collection phase was the most overwhelming for co-researchers and on the feasibility of minors administering informed consent to other minors. Instead, the first author served in the "research assistant" role, administering consent, collecting data, and preparing the data for the PhDivas' subsequent analysis (e.g. transcribing interviews, anonymizing data by replacing participants' names with their self-selected pseudonyms). One of the PhDivas (the third author) completed a Fall 2017 semester internship through her high school for which she transcribed hand-written audience feedback and made decisions about structuring the PhDivas' data analysis session. In January 2018 following the third author's plan, the PhDivas reconvened to collaboratively analyse their findings in terms of how the data answered their research questions. The PhDivas divided into two groups, one for each research question, and highlighted the data they thought answered their group's assigned research question before presenting their work to the full group. The second author is an undergraduate student who systematically coded the PhDivas' hand-written data analysis notes as the first author's research assistant. She did so by breaking down each research question into its constituent components and using NVivo software to code the PhDivas' highlighted data by question component (for example, for the second research question, she separately coded the PhDivas' highlighted data regarding: (1) who participates in TGP; (2) who doesn't; and (3) why?). Neither the second nor the third author were students of the first author during the project; the first author provided them training and guidance as the third author's high school internship supervisor and as the second author's employer.

## Findings and analysis

The data generated to answer the PhDivas' first research question – how TGP benefits and inspires gender transformations among participants and audience members – illuminate how TGP constitutes an alternative approach to MLE that builds not only participants' individual skills in critically assessing media discourse but also a community of peers and adults who share their feminist critiques of media ideals, which responds to the first conceptual problem with existing MLE. The data collected to address the PhDivas' second research question – who participates in TGP, who does not, and why – show the limitations of this kind of community-based operationalization of MLE, especially in socio-politically conservative contexts where feminist ideology is not widely perceived as an acceptable "antidote" to gendered mental health disparities associated with social norms in youth peer cultures. TGP's public performances take place in Kentucky, which tied with Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Florida, and Texas for the worst state for women in 2015 (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2017), evaluated using composite indices of employment and earnings, health, reproductive rights, and political participation. As will be discussed below, TGP participants must calculate the interpersonal risks of directly confronting their polarized social worlds in their performances, which somewhat circumscribes the effects of TGP to members of the feminist "choir" to whom they preach.

### *TGP's programme design elements*

In answering the question of how TGP shapes girls' feminisms, we must account for the structure and function of TGP. Participants used TGP as an outlet to discuss feminism; without TGP, participants did not have social spaces for these discussions to occur. More specifically, their conversations about feminism during TGP were personal, which Harper found more "meaningful to engage in," as sharing personal accounts led to strengthened trust among participants. As such, TGP's design afforded participants a forum in which they could share personal histories that, in turn, shaped their feminisms and fomented critical consciousness of the connections between girls' individual experiences and broader social realities.

TGP also presented alternative modes of learning. Compared with traditional classroom practices in high school settings, TGP is more student-driven, arts-based, and interactive, which elevated participants' interest in the content. As Jamie said, "I'm not used to creative people and teachers and any kind of instructor actually giving you the chance to open your mind to creative writing." Writing was emphasized as a transformative practice in one of the PhDivas' field notes, who observed connections between the final performance pieces and "the work they had done earlier in the writing process about defining and including intersectionality in their feminism."

While many participants showed growth in their feminist thinking thanks to TGP, others suggested areas for improvement in that mission. Kristen said that she "felt like we were being asked not to be angry about the things that we are talking about when we wrote specific pieces out of frustration that this is how things are, and then being asked to pull back and end with something hopeful." She struggled with messages TGP sent about balancing feminist expression with anger that adult educators feared might alienate audience members.

### ***Post-programme benefits for participants***

Nonetheless, TGP yielded a wide range of benefits for participating girls. First, paired t-tests of the survey data collected from participants before and after the programme revealed that their mean scores on the “body shame” and “body surveillance” subscales of the Objectified Body Consciousness scale were reduced to statistically significant degrees. Specifically, participants’ mean total scores on the body surveillance sub-scale dropped from 16.72 (with a mean item score of 4.18, somewhat agree) to 13.09 (with a mean item score of 3.3, somewhat disagree), which is statistically significant at  $p < 0.015$ , and their mean total score on the body shame sub-scale dropped from 14.1 (with a mean item score of 2.8, between disagree and somewhat disagree) to 11.1 (with a mean item score of 2.2, disagree), which is statistically significant at  $p < 0.025$ . These changes indicate that after completing TGP, participants were less vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and eating disorders, according to objectification theory, as body shame and body surveillance are predictors of these gendered mental health disparities. Moreover, participants described the self-knowledge, confidence, and leadership skills they gained from TGP in their post-programme interviews. They spoke about finding their voices in TGP, being more inclined to share their voices, and not being ashamed of contributing their voice to conversations and debates. Participants also gained writing skills from TGP; as Chica shared, “the writing was the hardest for me, but it was my favourite because I learned so much.”

Additionally, participants described in their post-programme interviews that the community TGP created was central to the benefits it offered. Nearly every participant praised the group of girls in TGP 2017; Jamie even went so far as to call the group a “family.” Participants said these connections were formed due to TGP’s intentional approach to relationship-building through the closed container and the girl code. Chanel described the importance of this kind of community for girls, saying, “Throughout the whole experience, I can say that this environment remained a positive environment for me. I think that’s something we need as girls today because I feel like today, we don’t have that.” The TGP community inspired participants to reframe their understanding of what friendship and romantic relationships can and should look like. Chica stated that her fellow TGP participants “are what I want my friends to be.” Furthermore, TGP provided participants with the opportunity to explore and prepare for their futures. Participants indicated that this opportunity arose from the role modelling offered by the network of adults who supported them throughout TGP.

### ***Audience and community outcomes***

TGP participants also have deployed the benefits they have gained from the programme to implement change in their social worlds. The network data illustrated that participants had overwhelmingly female and somewhat politically liberal social networks, substantiating the PhDivas’ concern that TGP “preaches to the choir.” But participants still used the performances to initiate conversations about feminism in their social networks. In fact, the PhDivas observed that the few members of participants’ social networks who did not already identify with feminism might represent TGP’s greatest opportunity for social change. For example, Harper reflected, “With conversations about TGP, mom would say,

'Yes, I can see that point,' or even me being like, 'Yes, I can understand where you're coming from.' Which is better than it was beforehand, where it would be like, 'No, I disagree because of this,' back and forth."

For others, the performances created a context for self-reflection on their feminist values. One audience member wrote on their feedback form that they and their partner "will talk with our own young daughter about many of these issues much earlier than we would have." While some walked away from these reflections pessimistically (for example, stating, "the pressures on young girls from media and families, school, friends are more destructive and overwhelming today than in my youth. The 24/7 availability of info can't be escaped"), most audience feedback evidenced hope (e.g. "It has confirmed what I believed but also given me [at age 56] more reason to be optimistic about Kentucky's future").

Beyond conversations with family members and friends, participants have taken their feminist activism into their school communities. For example, Jane relayed that in school, she has "never been really been afraid to talk about [feminism], but now I'm better educated. I'm well-informed and now I can go into an argument and know what I'm talking about and maybe just change someone's mind." Examples of participants' post-programme activism include initiating conversations about dress code policies with school administrators, volunteering for Fairness Coalitions, providing testimonials about comprehensive sexual education at school board meetings, and facilitating Gay-Straight Alliance and girls' empowerment groups at their schools.

### ***Constraints on TGP's broader impact***

Yet, data addressing the second of the PhDivas' research questions revealed the constraints of local gender dynamics on the relationship-centered outreach that characterizes community-based MLE like TGP. The PhDivas concluded from their analysis of the participant interviews, audience feedback, and network data that TGP's participants (both audience members and girls) are predisposed to feminist ideology. In the post-performance surveys, one audience member stated, "I would be less willing to bring someone that disagreed with my feminist views or was a feminist-hater." Many audience members were directly invited by participants, reflecting the personal and relational nature of TGP movement-building.

We turn to various interviews and network data to answer the question of who does not participate in TGP. The full network of the TGP 2017 class (constituting every relationship in participants' lives they named using standard name-generator techniques for social network analysis) was 73.3% female and 26.7% male. Audience feedback data showed that TGP's audience demographics mirrored the disproportionate "femaleness" of participants' overall networks, with 82% of audience members identifying as female and 15% as male. Participants' anticipation of their network members' reactions to messages regarding feminism and other progressive values embedded in TGP appeared to limit audience outreach. Five participants invited 100% of their networks to attend performances, while Harper extended invitations to only 40% of her network, excluding her brother and father because of previous unpleasant family conversations about women's rights. As Fauna reflected, "I think the people who I did invite, I just knew they wanted to support me, and they were already all at least somewhat liberal and feminist anyway." Thus, most

audience members were predisposed to TGP's messages because participants generally invited network members who already agreed with them to reduce the risk of relational backlash from sharing their feminist identities.

For example, Kristen's grandmother was in attendance, but she did not appreciate the performance itself, as "she said that she felt we like we focused a lot on gay rights whereas it should have been more on women's rights." One of the 24 men who attended the TGP 2017 performances was Madison's father. After the show, he said that Madison's participation in the programme was the "biggest waste of money," and he flung his arms out the car window and proclaimed, "I'm so empowered!" to mock her. These examples demonstrate that participants' worries about inviting network members who were not already predisposed to feminism were not unfounded in a conservative sociopolitical context like Central Kentucky.

After the data analysis process, the PhDivas requested that a member of the 2017 class provide a "member check" in Fall 2018 to assure that the PhDivas had represented their experiences accurately. This 2017 class member reviewed the more than 220 pages of data the PhDivas had generated and wrote the following: "Looking back at the project from over a year ago, I am overwhelmed by how much of our feedback was taken into account this year. Not only was our feedback incorporated in the next year of the programme, but it was also displayed incredibly honestly in the research. Ultimately, I have never seen such an honest review of any programme I have been a part of, academic, activist, or artistic alike."

## Conclusions

This study suggests that feminist arts-activism education provides a distinctly effective approach to MLE addressing girls' homosocial peer cultures. Echoing Katz's observation that programming targeting group-level social norms about gender "do not change men's beliefs about gender as much as they provide them with a structured opportunity to gain permission from other men to act" (2018, p. 13), the PhDivas found that before participating in TGP, girls felt like they could not share their voices, even if they feel like they should, and after TGP, girls felt that they both can and should share their voices because of the supportive community they had gained. Benefits for TGP participants included not only reductions in psychological issues targeted by traditional MLE programmes like body shame and body surveillance but also increased confidence, leadership capabilities, writing and creative skills, ability to plan for their futures, and efficacy in creating feminist social change. From their experiences, they gained a vocabulary and an opportunity to discuss feminism, which was possible because of the intentional intergenerational community created within TGP. Participants also benefitted from the guest artists and TGP directors as role models and mentors who helped them set professional and academic aspirations as well as higher expectations and boundaries in friendships, family relationships, and romantic relationships. For both participants and audience members, the TGP performances inspired conversations about gender expectations and U.S. media culture that reverberated long after closing night.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that the "inoculation" metaphor for MLE may be usefully extended to address the conceptual problem we identified with MLE that focuses

on improving participants' ability to critique commercial media without undermining social norms. In public health practice, individual inoculation cannot contain infectious diseases affecting populations; the "herd immunity" resulting from community-wide vaccination is the only way to avert epidemics. Applying this metaphor to MLE, individual "inoculation" to prevent internalization of media ideals is necessary but not sufficient in countering the anti-social norms MLE seeks to undermine. Herd immunity in MLE addressing body image and disordered eating requires the intentional formation of peer and intergenerational cultures that challenge self-objectifying media ideals by embedding feminist praxis into the interpersonal dynamics of the ensemble. However, as in public health, the effectiveness of herd immunity in MLE can be diluted by a form of "anti-vaccination" ideology that was apparent as participants selectively excluded more conservative members of their social networks from participation in their arts-activism for fear of relational reprisal. In this way, the study illustrates both the potential reach and the limitations of community-based MLE interventions.

Finally, student-led arts education as a platform for MLE helps mitigate the second conceptual problem with MLE we identified: that youth are not engaged as experts in the sociocultural dynamics MLE attempts to influence. Because TGP participants are the authors of the TGP story, the programme allows them both to critique media culture (as in traditional MLE) and to create their own cultural responses to gender ideology. For girls in conservative sociopolitical contexts, this kind of agency presents not only an empowering opportunity to express their voices in solidarity with each other but also potential risks to the relationships on which they depend as minors if family members do not share their feminist beliefs. As such, future MLE interventions should be designed in consideration of the theory of "doing gender," in which social actors calibrate their self-presentations according to their anticipation of situation-specific gender expectations, to establish creative communities like TGP where the consequences of deviating from gender norms are suspended, even if they cannot be totally eradicated in all the social contexts in which youth live, learn, and play.

## Notes on contributors

**Margaret McGladrey** is an applied sociologist committed to practice-based and participatory action research with governmental and non-profit partners in the arts, child welfare, education, and public health. After a postdoctoral fellowship with the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University, she became the inaugural Director of Program Capacity and Support for the Kentucky Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Network responsible for the evaluation and quality improvement activities of local CASA programs that train and guide community volunteers to advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children in family court. She continues to serve as the Research and Advocacy Director for The Girl Project.

**Madeline Oliff** is a senior at Tufts University. She studies Sociology, American Studies, and Urban Studies, intersecting at her passion for disrupting the inequities embedded in the urban public education system. Her involvement in this project as an undergraduate research assistant is thanks to the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts. Originally from Chicago, she has lived in Boston, Memphis, and Amsterdam, and one day hopes to visit Kentucky to see The Girl Project in action!

**Emma Draper** is a Tyng Scholar at Williams College, currently in her sophomore year. As an alumna of The Girl Project 2016, she served on the PhDivas research team while in high school at Paul Laurence Dunbar in Lexington, Kentucky.

## ORCID

Margaret McGladrey  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7822-1143>

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