

# Western Nations' Use of the Malala Fund

By Austin Greitz

**ABSTRACT.** One of the fastest-growing feminist discourses over the past several years has surrounded the expansion of global girls' education movements. The story of the assassination attempt of Malala Yousafzai in October 2012 has helped to facilitate these discussions within the Global North, as has the subsequent founding of global girls' education organization The Malala Fund in 2013. This essay follows the story of the failed assassination attempt on Malala Yousafzai through the creation of The Malala Fund and focuses on how media in the Global North has used the images of Malala and The Malala Fund to reassert stereotypes of the Global South and to rearticulate the hierarchy of power which places the Global North as superior to the Global South.

Over the past several years, one of the most quickly-growing feminist discourses has been around the education of girls in the Global South, and on the role of the girl as a tool for economic and social change in communities within the Global South. Campaigns such as Nike's The Girl Effect, Plan International's Because I am a Girl, and even the United Nations Foundation's Girl Up campaign have all come into the limelight recently for their attention to the education of girls globally, and the positioning of girls' education as the key to the problems of global poverty and social injustices. While many of these sorts of campaigns are run by well-known and trusted political organizations (such as the United Nations, the White House, and the NoVo Foundation), and the focusing on girls' issues often seems to be commonsensical for outsiders, these girls' education programs in fact do little to create change and construct a biased image of the Global South. The turn to girls'

education as a solution to global poverty does not find any solutions, but in fact actually regurgitates some of the misconceptions held about the Global South that lead to the creation of these programs in the first place, and are thus used by the Global North in order to maintain the Global North/Global South dichotomy that pits Global North cultures as inherently superior to Global South cultures.

Perhaps the most well-known of the girls-as-solution-to-poverty campaigns is The Malala Fund. Created in the wake of a failed assassination attempt on Malala Yousafzai, a then-thirteen-year-old girl in Pakistan who championed for girls' education alongside her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, the Malala Fund's mission is to "work with partners all over the world helping to empower girls and amplify their voices; we invest in local education leaders and programs; and we advocate for more resources for education and safe schools for every child" (New Venture Fund, 2015). The Fund has programs for educating girls in Pakistan, alternative learning programs and safe space creation in Nigeria, education programs for Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, and information technology as well as life skill training for girls in Nigeria. The Malala Fund's work has gotten quite the recognition, as Malala herself has been awarded Pakistan's National Youth Peace Prize, the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, and the Nobel Peace Prize, all for her work on global girls' education (Biography.com, 2015). But although Malala certainly has worked to rectify serious issues and has acted with good intentions, the Global North has latched on to her story and her life's work and have presented them to the public again and again as examples of how inferior the cultures of the Global South are to those of the Global North.

One of the most notable aspects of The Malala Fund's mission is that it focuses on Black and Brown girls in the Global South, which helps to assert the assumption that global poverty lies in the Global South. By not working to aid poor girls in nations in the Global North, The Malala

Fund furthers the belief that all of the Global South lives in poverty, and that there is no development and no hope for girls in these nations. Even the origins of Malala's work are steeped in the re-assertion of these beliefs: a *New Yorker* article by Basharat Peer states that Malala's work for girls' education came in response to the Swat Valley's rule by Taliban head Maulana Fazlullah, an extremist who "banned TV, music, and girls' education" (2012). What is of note here is the description of Fazlullah—he was an extremist who took control of the Swat Valley, not an everyday political figure ruling the nation of Pakistan as a whole. It was not wrong of Malala to write against a tyrant who had taken her rights to education away, and in fact the act of voicing an opinion against such a powerful authority figure can be seen as incredibly powerful; but the manner in which her words and actions have been construed by news outlets in the Global North support the hegemonic hierarchy between the Global North and Global South.

Even before the failed assassination attempt, Malala Yousafzai had been a prominent figure in Global North news outlets' coverage of education in Pakistan. In 2008, BBC Urdu was searching for a schoolgirl from the Swat Valley to anonymously cover the growing influence of the Taliban in this region. When finding such a girl proved difficult, Ziauddin Yousafzai, a schoolteacher from the Swat Valley who had been in contact with BBC correspondents in Peshawar, suggested that his own daughter, Malala Yousafzai, be asked. She agreed, and under the pseudonym of Gul Makai, began to have her personal stories of life under Taliban rule published in both Urdu and English for the first half of 2009, which proved to be "just the sort of personal story the Urdu desk had been looking for" (Cooke, 2012).

That Malala's stories of everyday life under the Taliban were just what BBC were looking for comes as no surprise. Arab-American feminist scholar Mohja Kahf (2011) claims that "the Western stereotype of the Muslim woman as Victim" is reproduced everywhere in the Global

North (p. 111). Malala's personal writings for BBC perfectly reflect this notion, rearticulating the notion that Islam is a force which seeks to victimize women and silence their voices. By publishing the work of a young schoolgirl whom audiences of the Global North could sympathize with, BBC reasserted the stereotype of the Arab world (as Global North media tends to see "Arab" and "Muslim" as one and the same (Abdulhadi, Asultany, & Naber, 2011)) as a totalitarian and misogynistic landscape, which ultimately maintained the ideology that nations of the Global North had a duty to invade these nations and "liberate" them by introducing them to democracy. When Malala was shot by the Taliban three years later, this new story only intensified the narrative constructed by news outlets of the Global North; now, Malala had become a young Muslim girl who was *literally* victimized by Muslim extremists. Yet instead of portraying this attack as the result of complex factors including both the takeover of the Swat Valley by the Taliban and the interference of local politics by outside forces such as BBC, media of the Global North continued to reassert the same Islam-threatens-girls story that has been told thousands of times before.

Following the failed assassination attempt, Malala was flown to several treatment facilities across Pakistan and eventually to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, England (*Telegraph*, 2012). Today, Malala remains in England due to the threat of further militant action against her should she return to Pakistan. This fact points to yet another stereotype of Muslim women which Mohja Kahf (2011) details: "the Muslim woman as rebellious escapee from Islam" (p. 111). In November 2012, following her recovery from the October 2012 shooting, Malala Yousafzai founded The Malala Fund with her father and other supporters while still stationed out of England (Vital Voices, 2013). The organization, whose ultimate goal is to provide girls across the globe with safe access to twelve years of education, has been used by media outlets to further play up this stereotype, positioning the Taliban

and other extremist groups as examples of Islam, which stand in the way of human rights; and positioning The Malala Fund and other similar global educational programs as the Global North's response, a rebellious and freeing escape from the oppressive world of Islam.

Many of the responses from both inside and outside Pakistan mirror this criticism of The Malala Fund's mission, claiming that the organization functions as a tool of the Global North's neoliberal agenda. Freelance English journalist Assed Baig (2013) claims that Malala's story has been used so that "the Western world can feel good about itself as they save the native woman from the savage men of her home nation," a criticism which could be extended to the mission of The Malala Fund itself, which aims to empower women through education but does not recognize other issues facing women in the Global South, including the negative effects of globalization, military action by foreign powers, and environmental devastation. Many Pakistanis criticize The Malala Fund in this way, with many responding to a 2013 talk at the United Nations by Malala by asking such questions as "Why had Malala not spoken out about drones at the UN?" and "Why did everyone care so much about Malala and not the other girls murdered by drones?" (Shah, 2013). Still others argue that even outside of the ways in which Malala is portrayed in media in the Global North, Malala's activism itself is based off Western principles—an argument so common in her homeland of Pakistan that the nation did not acknowledge the first UN-designated Malala Day on July 12, 2013 (Yusuf, 2013). Yet still, the Global North successfully uses the image of Malala and the goals of her fund to create the very dissonance that Pakistanis seem to be protesting when they call out Malala's neoliberal positions.

Related to this idea is the idea of a sort of Global North savior in the context of global girls' education programs such as The Malala Fund. In a *New Yorker* article, Basharat Peer writes that Malala "was young but she was promoting Western culture in Pashtun areas" (2012). This

positioning of Western voices as right and all other voices as archaic or barbaric reflects a lack of what Pakistani feminist Shenila Khoja-Moolji (2015) refers to as the “work of hearing” (p. 1). Although The Malala Fund uses the voices of some of the girls that are centered in the Fund’s work, these voices are used to “re-amplify the already-established consensus around possibilities and limitations for girls in the global south, and often serve to reinforce the solutions/programs already in place” (p. 2). The Fund does not use the girls’ voices to direct their mission or to take into account more localized issues and solutions, but instead uses their voices to re-assert the Global North’s beliefs of limitation in the Global South. If The Malala Fund was accurately doing the “work of hearing,” then the solutions they offered would differ regionally, instead of being the single monolith that they are presented as across the globe.

Apart from The Malala Fund’s lack of input from the very people it aims to empower, the organization has also come under fire for its representation of the Global South. The Fund’s mission of allowing girls across the globe to safely attend twelve years of schooling seems, in reality, to only focus on the girls of the Global South, as the organization focuses on missions in Pakistan, Nigeria, Kenya, Sierra Leone, and for Syrian refugees. By not focusing on the education of girls in other underrepresented nations or populations, The Malala Fund works to paint the picture of the Global South as failing their youth in terms of education. Furthermore, the initial video displayed on The Malala Fund’s website, which features a majority of Black and Brown girls in headscarves, silently conveys to the audience that it is both Black and Brown girls, as well as Muslim girls, who are not receiving education and who must be saved by the well-educated Global North. It is for these reasons that media outlets of the Global North have latched on to the organization and helped advocate its message—because the images the Fund

conveys support the construction of the Global South as uneducated and culturally inferior.

It would perhaps not be as worrisome for the Global North to use the image of Malala and The Malala Fund in this way if the Fund only impacted education goals of nations across the globe in a minor way. But the usage of the Fund's image to reinstate the power relationship between the Global North and the Global South has repercussions reaching far beyond the sphere of education. The ability for NGOs to shape national foreign policy is extremely powerful (Kim, 2011; Pitner, 2000), and the Malala Fund is no exception. By displaying the Global South as uneducated and unable to work towards their own goals, the Fund is used by the Global North to ethicize policies (such as drone strikes) that place members of the Global South in harm's way all in the name of liberation as well as to ethicize those policies (such as global arms agreements) that take power away from the Global South by claiming that such nations are unfit to govern themselves. Furthermore, the popularity of organizations such as The Malala Fund allows for political climate to evolve in ways that can capitalize on the image of the Global South as uneducated and helpless—such as the racist and xenophobic climate witnessed in today's electoral politics in which Donald Trump is seen as a viable candidate.

Although the work of The Malala Fund has been shown to have several issues, that is not to say that the work of the Fund is not in some ways commendable or that Malala Yousafzai is not herself attempting to uplift her own community—and communities she sees as similar to her own—in what she believes is the best manner in which she can. What is evident, however, is that neoliberal thought permeates her fund's mission, and that critical reflection may be needed on the part of the program and its leaders if it is to be as beneficial as it can be to the communities it serves. In addition, it is necessary for the Global North to recognize what aims programs such as The Malala Fund serve, and to not use such programs to promote their own

agendas. Global education programs have before been challenged, and it is certainly possible for them to be challenged again, even at the level of recognition that The Malala Fund has. As a feminist scholar and a creator of a human rights education program, Shenila Khoja-Moolji (2014) has critically reflected on her own education program in Pakistan, taking note of neoliberal thoughts inherent in the program and the ways in which the program could be more efficient, stating “I, thus, disturb my own linear reading of the unfolding of [Women Leaders of Tomorrow] by reflecting on moments of resistances where participants not only interrogated its assumptions but also engaged in self-stylizations that produced new mutations of [human rights education]” (p. 103). The Malala Fund could take note of this practice and perhaps integrate some self-reflection into their own programs, thus affecting those they attempt to serve in ways more effective than they do now. In addition, taking the voices of those served into consideration will render it less likely for the media of the Global North to use The Malala Fund in its own reassertion of hegemonic hierarchies.

The privileging of the voices of the Global North and the reassertion of Global South cultures as inferior are some of the greatest issues within global education movements such as The Malala Fund, yet are simultaneously the very reasons that such movements gain global exposure. It is through the popularization of certain movements—such as The Malala Fund—that the Global North is able to rearticulate its moral and cultural superiority while seemingly advocating for a more equitable world. It is thus imperative that individuals be aware of the ends to which global education programs are used and promoted in media; it is only through this awareness that change can be brought about in the representation of global education programs and only then can the Global North/Global South dichotomy accurately be challenged.



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