AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women Podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Sarah Bellows-Blakely, a junior research group leader in the history of science at the Margherita von Brentano Center for Gender Studies at the Free University Berlin, and author of the new book, *Girl Power? A History of Girl-Focused Development from Nairobi*. So first, could you introduce us to the context that we're talking about in this situation?

SBB: Absolutely. In 1989, 1990, UNICEF, or the United Nations Children's Fund, decides that it wants to gather information on girls' access to school in Africa. Part of the motivation for the study is the belief that girls lag behind boys in formal education in a lot of parts of the world, especially in Africa and what other people at the time call the Global South. So in order to carry out the study, UNICEF works with people at FEMNET, which is a pan-African women's non-governmental organization based in Nairobi, and then staff at FEMNET in turn hire a team of local researchers from across east and southern Africa who have various advanced degrees from PhDs, master's degrees, but have also linguistic and cultural competencies in the regions that they're studying. So the findings surprise some of the people working on this study. First, they find that in certain parts of east and southern Africa, girls actually are doing better in school than boys. This is particularly true in Botswana, where as long as there's been a formal education system in the country, more girls have been enrolled in it than boys. In about half of the region, girls are enrolled almost at the same rate as boys. Maybe there's a gap of 1, 2, 3% but in those regions in particular, it's closing the gap as schools get closer to having universal primary enrollment. So everybody's going to school, there's no gap. In some places, girls are getting higher standardized test scores than boys, and they're passing on to the next level at higher rates. In other cases, boys are faring better in terms of their test scores and retention.

To the extent that gender disparities to the detriment of girls do exist, the authors of the study have some disagreement, but there's some general consensus around what some of the authors call the three Cs, which is colonialism, capitalism, and Christianity. So almost all of Sub-Saharan Africa is colonized by various European powers from the late 1800s to the mid to late 1900s. This is when formal school systems in most of Sub-Saharan Africa are set up, but when the British, French, Portuguese, Belgians created these schools, they initially only wanted boys to go. Most schools only accepted boys. They were run by missionaries or by the colonial government, and so after independence happens, national governments are in this race to increase the percentage of girls in schools once they take over the reins. So the studies point this out, that newly independent governments in Africa are the ones actually pushing for girls to go to school, and where they've had money to send everybody to school, that's where the gap narrows. They also talk about the gender roles that capitalism and Christianity have either created or nourished on Sub-Saharan Africa, where women are educated in general to stay home, take care of children, take care of the home. Men are educated to work outside of the home in for-profit labor markets. These are gendered labor roles under capitalism that most of the world has become accustomed to by the mid-1900s. So the researchers who FEMNET hires and then the people FEMNET hires to compile this into a study say, "if you want girls to really be equal to boys in school, you need to address these root causes of the three Cs, and in particular you need to stop cutting funding to public education."

There's this huge crisis in the 1980s all over the world, especially in the Global South, where people start defaulting on their nationally held loans after the oil shocks of the 1970s, the economic recession of the '70s, and in response to this there's huge inflation. A lot of countries that used to be colonized took out loans in order to pay for things like public education. They were encouraged to do this by their former colonizers, by the United Nations system that's created after World War II. So they have these massive loans to pay for things like public education, then there's huge inflation, and suddenly they can't pay back the loans anymore. So the World Bank and International Monetary Fund come in in the '80s and say, "listen, we will repackage your loans for you, we'll give you lower interest rates on them, but in exchange you need to cut funding for things like public education." And so suddenly the programs that are helping close this gap between girls' enrollment rates and boys' enrollment rates in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the world is cut, and then the gap

slowly starts to widen again for a variety of reasons. So really the report says if you want girls to have equality to boys in public education, you need to fund public education through robust public spending.

So FEMNET sends this report to UNICEF. They send each of the individual country studies and they send an omnibus report consolidating it all. Before UNICEF publishes the report, it's edited. And I want to be careful, I don't want to say who edits the report, I don't want to be sued, but we know that FEMNET sends one version of the report to UNICEF. We know that UNICEF publishes a very different version of the report in 1992. So what does the new version of the report say? The new version removes dozens of pages of data that shows how varied girls' lives in east and southern Africa were. They remove a lot of the data showing the areas in which girls in some areas outperformed boys in schools, and in some areas were enrolled at higher rates than boys in schools. The revised report also removes analysis blaming gender-based disparities within formal education that hurt girls where they do exist on the three Cs of Christianity, colonialism, and capitalism. It leaves some of that language in, but it takes a lot of it out. And instead, the revised report adds in language saying that actually, local culture and patriarchy are to blame. It reinforces this long-standing patriarch that African men are just so sexist and they're so threatened by their daughters' and wives' successes, and that it's this kind of free-floating, timeless, has no root, Africa's just a patriarchal continent, and to the extent that patriarchy exists, there's not reasons for it rooted in capitalism, colonialism and Christianity, it's just because they're so patriarchal. It also removes evidence and analysis showing that structural adjustment programs, so these new loan packages that the World Bank and International Monetary Fund gave that required cutting spending on things like public education, are harmful to girls' education in Africa. Instead, the revised report actually says that these programs are good in the long run and that they haven't gone far enough, and it says, "oh, there's these corrupt African men leaders who just didn't implement them right, and if they'd only done it correctly, then the problem would be better." I'm summarizing here and using a sarcastic tone, but this is essentially what it says. So the study is doctored, and what the researchers who are hired in the region show through, they collect hundreds of pages of both qualitative and quantitative data, and then they add hundreds of pages of analysis, is that yes, patriarchy exists in formal education, but it has these structural and historical causes. The revised report strips that out and says patriarchy is universal, it's rooted in local culture, and cutting welfare state spending is a good thing.

So this is one event in our larger history that the book tells about a lobbying campaign that people between UNICEF and FEMNET carried out between the late 1980s and the mid-1990s in order to make universal this idea that if we just invest in girls, if we invest in their education, if we help empower them, if we help their self-esteem, that this can then drive development by preparing girls to enter labor markets as future women and drive their economies to prosperity. People at FEMNET and UNICEF lobby around this in a variety of ways during this time period, and as the eight-country study report shows, there are often really different views and interpretations about the extent of patriarchy, what causes patriarchy, how to solve patriarchy, and then the relationship between girls' education and economic development. But for me, what I didn't expect to find going into this research and what then becomes a core point of the book is if we want to understand how these kinds of programs promoting girl power in the name of economic development arose, we shouldn't just look at the ideas that are included in these programs, but we also should look at the ideas that get erased, how data gets doctored, how data gets manipulated, if some ideas are included and other ideas are cast aside. And so this is the starting point of the book.

AT: So you're really looking at not just this one report but how this report and what came after it led to what we see globally today. And from what I understand, a big interstitial point in that process is the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing. So how does that fit into this narrative?

SBB: Yes, absolutely. So in 1975, the United Nations launches the International Women's Year, and they have the first UN World Conference on Women in Mexico City. And this starts the UN Women's Decade. And then over the next 20 years, they have a total of four world conferences on women. The last one takes place in

Beijing in 1995. Well, I should say the last one to date, maybe there will be another one. And the 1995 World Conference on Women really sets the stage for policymaking not only on women's rights and the status of women, but on connected things like economic development. That year, more than 50,000 people from 189 countries in the world attended. Hillary Clinton, who was the First Lady of the United States at the time, gave a famous speech on "women's rights are human rights and human rights are women's rights." The proceedings of the conference are broadcast through television, print newspapers, the burgeoning internet to people all over the world. When I did interviews in Kenya, people remember hearing about this on the radio as nine-year-old girls riding in the car with their moms and dads. So this conference really has a global reach, and it has a massive influence on policymaking.

Originally, there was not going to be a special section on the girl child included in the outputs of the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995. At each of these UN conferences, the crowning achievement is that the delegates vote on an action agenda saying, "here is the framework that we want people who care about women's rights and connected issues to look at and to work with moving forward." It's called the Beijing Platform for Action. So originally, girls are mentioned in it, but they're not going to have a special section. Then at comparatively the last minute, a special section on the girl child is written into and formally adopted in the Beijing Platform for Action. And other scholars, including Heather Switzer, have noted that this really marks the moment when the idea that if you empower girls to believe in themselves and educate them to some extent, that they can drive economic development from a grassroots level and help address poverty. So this is when this idea of girl power, not only educating girls for the sake of educating girls, but educating girls in order to drive development and reduce poverty becomes hegemonic or dominant at a global level. And the special section on the girl child is included because of the lobbying campaign that people from FEMNET and UNICEF worked together to carry it out over the past six or so years. So it's really the lobbying campaign that gets it written in. Other people in the end jump on board to help out, but it's the work from FEMNET and UNICEF that make this happen.

AT: Now, I've noticed that a lot of academics use the term neoliberal, as you do in your work about the criticisms of this framing. But I don't think I've ever heard a non-academic use it. So my understanding, as someone who sort of falls into a gray area, is that it's basically saying we shouldn't be looking at things like girls' education as, "oh, this is how it will help the economy." It should just be an end in itself. And framing it in an economic development focus specifically and often exclusively is really problematic. Would that be an accurate assessment, and can you elaborate?

SBB: I'm happy to elaborate. This term neoliberalism or neoliberal capitalism is really controversial. Academics at the end of the day love to fight with each other. It's just one big set of debates and neoliberalism is something that always, if you have three academics in the room, there are 10 opinions about should we use this term and what is it? I use it in the book because it's shorthand for a connected set of things that people immediately recognize. So in the Global North, in the US, the UK, Western Europe, etc. neoliberal capitalism is often associated with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. It's a set of programs that come in in the 1980s that are used to cut public spending on welfare state programming, healthcare, public education, to either wholly or partially privatized services that used to be offered by the state, to deregulate other services that were heavily regulated by the state and to open up markets to foreign investment, particularly from wealthy multinational corporations. Within the Global South and including sub-Saharan Africa, neoliberal capitalism really gets adopted through these structural adjustment programs that we talked about a bit earlier, these loan packages that the World Bank and International Monetary Fund come in with and say, "okay, there's a debt crisis now, there's massive inflation, most of you hold your loans in the currency of the US dollar, there's huge inflation on the dollar, you can't afford to pay these loans anymore. It's taking up half of your GDP or half of your annual budget each year to just pay interest rate on these loans. We'll help you out. But if you want the loans, you have to implement neoliberal reforms of cutting state spending on various programs and opening

markets up for private for-profit investment from foreign investors."

In terms of how this impacts the view of girls' education, there absolutely is this growing belief, particularly within UNICEF in the 1980s, but some people within FEMNET also agree that, there's no question that neoliberal capitalism hurts girls within both of these agencies. At UNICEF, they say, "oh my gosh, we have a crisis" because there are now these cuts to welfare state programs like public education. It's causing a backslide in terms of gender equality and how girls are able to access formal schools. We need to do something. It's also causing an increase in poverty rates in some places and in other areas after World War II, poverty rates all over the world are declining. And suddenly, because of this series of economic crises in the '70s, and then these neoliberal reforms that are adopted in the 80s now, poverty rates are stagnant. So they're not improving anymore. Some places, they're getting worse. Mortality rates are increasing. More people are dying, UNICEF has robust data showing this. And so they say, we need to fix the problem. And some people at UNICEF say, if you want to fix the problem, stop neoliberal capitalism. And a lot of people at FEMNET agree with that. And they say, if you want to fix the problem, start with the roots of the problem. But then other people at UNICEF say, this is really politically not possible right now. The US is the top funder to UNICEF throughout the 1980s. And there's this attitude at UNICEF that there's no way that politically they will be successful if they argue against neoliberalism in the form of structural adjustment programs.

So they think instead, "we need another solution. What's another solution? Oh, well, we could just educate and empower girls." And there's some tension here because they're arguing against neoliberal programs that cut access to girls' education. But then they want the solution to be educating girls. And they never really reconcile these tensions. They say, okay, continue to cut public funding to education. And so now the solution will be, well just tell girls to feel good about themselves and to have more confidence. And if they have more confidence, then when they turn 18 and they take out a microfinance loan to start their own tiny little business, or when they start working in a for-profit market, if they believe in themselves, they'll make enough money to pull their economies and their communities up out of poverty by their bootstraps. So it's really this fantasy that through girl power, we can fix through structural high-level causes of poverty. And what initially becomes named as a problem stemming from neoliberal capitalism then gets totally twisted around and flipped and becomes the solution to it, if that makes sense. So I wouldn't necessarily say that it's only neoliberal to believe that if you educate girls, the economy will take off or that it will benefit. This is a view that has existed since before the 1980s in this neoliberal moment. But what becomes neoliberal is really this twisting and saying we can keep cutting welfare state programs. We can keep privatizing a lot of things and promoting the interests of multinational corporations, but we can solve poverty at the same time if girls believe in themselves and work hard enough as future women. That's the neoliberal fantasy of girl power.

AT: One of the things I think we're really coming back to over and over again is responsibility. Who is responsible for causing these issues and who is capable and therefore should be responsible for addressing them? And this has come up before in other episodes where, something like public health. If I put responsibility on you for your own health in whatever way that means, that means that the government and other people in power don't have to take responsibility even if they are better placed to do that. And so what I'm seeing here is that removal of who was responsible for causing these issues, well, it can't be us. It can't be, as you were saying, the "global north," but basically rich white countries, I sense is what that's a euphemism for. But it can't be Europe's fault. It can't be the U.S.'s responsibility because they have all the money. So not just removing that responsibility of, "okay, how did we get here? And who bears the responsibility for that?" But then this is another thing you see all the time where they have put it on girls and thus women to fix the structural inequality against them, which you see all the time in women's rights conversations where it's like, "here's how women can succeed in the workplace" by doing all these things that they shouldn't have to do. Or you give them unrealistic expectations. You see this in the U.S. in this idea that education is the answer. I know I certainly was raised to believe you go to college, you get a degree, and you're set. And particularly, I came out of college in the late 2000s. And that was definitely not the case. I had done three and a half years of unpaid internships

over the course of my early to mid-20s. And it still took me months to find a job that I had a Master's in by the end of that process. So this idea that if we educate girls, that's it, that's the whole answer, feels like it's very much putting that responsibility on the girls, while, like you said, ignoring all of these other problems.

SBB: Absolutely. You hit the nail on the head. There's, on one hand, a denial of history, of the historical factors, including colonialism, including how capitalist markets were imposed and grew through various parts of the world, including Africa, the structural high-level top-down causes. And I should say causes not only of economic inequality, economic injustice, poverty, high death rates, but those things also cause and or contribute to patriarchy and gender-based inequalities. And we've known this for a long time. People in the eight-country study that I talk about show it again, but people have been making these arguments for 100 years. This is part of, early, early feminist movements is pointing these things out, how gendered labor divides under capitalism and under imperialism uniquely and systematically hurt women and girls. So there's something particularly perverse about denying not only the history, but the present of it and these high-level structural causes that absolutely implicate the governments of the European countries that had formerly colonized many parts of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa. And then it's not like with formal independence that suddenly changes overnight. There are then neocolonial relationships formalized through different kinds of trade agreements, for example, or through these loans. A lot of newly independent countries take out loans from their former colonizers or from international organizations that their former colonizers are part of. And now those people are earning interest on the loans that these formerly colonized countries take out at their behest. So there's absolutely a continuing present of countries in the Global North, the US comes on board profiting from and extracting resources unequally from places in the Global South, including sub-Saharan Africa.

So on one hand, there's a denial of the reality of those structural causes and a lot of this girl power discourse and policymaking that then gets adopted. But then at the same time, as you've said, even more insidious is that they then flip the script and say, "what actually will fix it is not these top-down structural changes, it's bottom-up girl power. We want you to get an education, but we're not going to pay for it through robust public schools. You should just believe in yourself." And what this actually looks like in practice then is often driving girls in the Global South into very low-paid labor markets. So one of the corporate foundations that's been the most active in girl power development frameworks is the Nike Foundation from Nike Athletic Apparel & Shoes. You know who makes Nike Athletic Apparel & Shoes in the vast majority of their factories that a number of labor experts have called sweatshops? The majority, it's poorly educated women and girls in the Global South. So there's a very cynical use of girl power programs by the time that they're implemented in the early 2000s that actually drives more women in the Global South into global labor markets that are built on extracting their labor in ways that are very unfairly paid. And so there's a propping up of a global capitalist system on the poorly remunerated labor of women around the world, but in particular women of color in the Global South. And at the same time then denying that this is happening and saying, "oh, this is good for you. Isn't this empowerment?"

AT: So I never thought of UNICEF as shady until I read your work, because one of the things that you talk about is how UNICEF for many years, they've made excuses for why they cannot let anyone look at these records. So like you were saying, you were worried that, you don't want to say who changed it, but it went into UNICEF one way and it came out of UNICEF another way, but you don't want to get sued. And clearly they're, I'm going to say the nice word here is protective of this information, which feels like they have something to hide, which, honestly makes me wonder, how much worse can it be than what we already know?

SBB: I know. I grew up, maybe you did too, in the U.S. we would take these little UNICEF boxes around at school and put coins in them. (AT: Yes! The trick-or-treat for UNICEF!) Exactly. And so of course I grew up like many people did thinking UNICEF is this amazing organization. And I want to say UNICEF has historically

been a presence, still done really vital work, particularly a lot of their work around vaccines for kids all over the world, malnutrition. So I don't want to only dunk on UNICEF here. I will say going into this, I did not expect at all to run into these big structural hurdles in telling the UNICEF side of the story. Usually when you're telling a history of international institutions, specifically the UN system, and then their connection to actors based in the Global South, you go into the UN archives, you have all of this data, and then it can be harder to find historical archives from groups based in parts of the Global South, in part because making an archive, keeping the archive going over time takes a lot of money, and there's still this global inequality in how wealth is distributed. So a lot of local grassroots organizations, certainly in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, just don't have the money to make their archives. What was fascinating to me as I was researching this book, and I spent two years doing full-time research, and then a number of other years doing part-time research, is that it was almost exactly the opposite. FEMNET, the NGO based in Nairobi, that's a self-described pan-African women's NGO, has its own robust archive that it's created. They have a staff member whose job it is to curate and take care of it. It's in this lovely reading room. They were so generous in welcoming me there, helping me find what I needed to find, and then giving me free rein to go poke through things on shelves. And so initially when I found the unpublished report of the eight-country study, it was this dusty thing in the back corner of a shelf, and I thought, what is this? I'll take pictures of it just because I like to be thorough in my research. And then it wasn't until later that I was reading it, and I, in the meantime, had found the published version and started reading that. And then I went back to the digital pictures I took, and thought, no, I want to read the draft report first. And I was reading the draft report, and I was like, wait, this isn't the same thing. And so it was kind of an accident. And then I started comparing them paragraph by paragraph, side by side, and you feel like one of those paranoid detectives in a crime movie, the string and the pictures are up on the wall, and you're like, is this all in my head? And so then I very carefully laid it out side by side. So anyway, the FEMNET Archive was very accessible. They have a ton of stuff saved there. UNICEF, as it's a semi-autonomous United Nations agency, like UNESCO or like the World Health Organization, and it therefore maintains its own archive that's separate from the main United Nations repository. The UNICEF archive has been closed to outside researchers since I started researching this. I actually got a grant to go to New York City to the UNICEF archives to do research there, and I'd gone to their website, and it said, email so-and-so to make an appointment. So I get to New York, I email them to make an appointment. This is back in 2012, and they email me back and say, oh, the UNICEF archive is indefinitely closed due to restructuring. And I thought, what? How could a UN agency that's supposed to follow norms of open access and publicly sharing data be indefinitely closed? It's still today indefinitely closed due to restructuring. There's now a more visible thing on the website saying this.

AT: So just to be clear, it's the entirety of UNICEF's whole archive, like decades worth of documentation from what we thought was not a shady organization. All of it is off-limits to basically everyone.

SBB: Unless you work there. I've heard, this is not confirmed, but I have heard that if you work for UNICEF, you can access it, but to the general public, yes, it's closed. I also will say as a caveat, they have started to digitize some of their records, and they have what I'll call a curated archive. All archives are curated, but this is a very small selection of the documents that are in the archive on their website where they tell the story of their history. "Oh, here's our founding document. Here are key points." They also have hired a series of historians and other scholars, usually who have some type of internal connection to UNICEF, often they worked there in the past, to write internal histories of UNICEF that they then publish on the website. So they very much are controlling the narrative of what comes out about their organization, and there are, going by the size of the archives of all the other United Nations institutions created at the same time, hundreds of thousands of pages of documents in that archive that the public doesn't have access to. So that was shocking.
And then to compound this, UNICEF has offices all over the world. And in my book, the Nairobi office plays a huge role. That's in part because the Kenya offices are the second largest set of UNICEF offices in the world after the US-based offices. The Nairobi office in particular, it's the hub for the Kenya country office. It's, for the

last years, been the hub for the Somalia country office because war in Somalia makes it so that the office can't be in Mogadishu. And then it's also the office for the East and Southern African regional UN offices. So there's a regional set of offices there. It has a huge impact on UNICEF policymaking. And so I thought, okay, I can't get into the main UNICEF archive in New York, but that's okay. I spent most of the two years that I was researching this book actually in Kenya, in Nairobi. And I thought, okay, I'll go to the archives there. So I set up a meeting with UNICEF staff. It took a while to get this meeting through. I finally go in. It's a very fortified UN compound, security checks. I get in and I tell them who I am. I'd already explained this in the email and what I was looking for. And I try to be nice and generous and respectful to people in these interactions. And the staff members were lovely, but they said, "we don't have the records in the Nairobi offices. There was a huge scandal in these offices. And as part of an investigation into the scandal, we turned over all of our records to the government of Kenya. And we don't know what happened to them. We think the government lost them." And they're giving each other the side-eye during this. You can tell through body language, people are like," how much should we tell? And then one of them, we talk more about the project. And he says, "you should be really careful what you say about UNICEF. You should talk to their PR team before you publish anything because they could sue you if you say something they don't like." And he said it, I think to support me and try to help me out, but it just felt like this very sinister moment of like, where are the records? Why can't we access the records? But also I just didn't expect to find this going into the project. And it's scary, as a junior scholar who doesn't have job security to think, oh my gosh, can I even publish what I'm finding now?

So I try to be very careful about what I say. I try to only be factual. And I try to make clear, here's what we know from XYZ documents. Here's where I found them. Here's what we don't know. And maybe here's why, some reasons, potentially why we don't know it. I still don't fully know what's going on with the UNICEF records. I will say there was a huge scandal in the Nairobi offices in the 1990s, at the peak of this history that I'm writing about this UNICEF FEMNET lobbying campaign. The New York Times reported on it among other international news outlets. Millions of dollars were embezzled from the UNICEF funds. So there was a big embezzlement scandal. So who knows? Hypothetically speaking, or speculative, if the archives are closed in New York City and or usually think about that request that the Nairobi offices hand over their records to the government. Usually if you're an individual or an organization requested to hand records over, you would have copies of those records. If you have to hand over the originals, you would make copies or you would often keep the originals and hand over a copy. So why weren't there copies made? Maybe there were copies made. Maybe they're not available to the public. I have no idea. Hypothetically speaking, if this is to protect UNICEF's image, I think it really backfired because as a historian, the more information you get about an organization and the people within it and the very messy, complicated reasons why people do things, it almost always humanizes them. And it almost always makes their side of the story more sympathetic, even if you don't necessarily agree with what's going on. The total opacity and lack of information about what's happening on that side of things almost makes them seem more sinister and like the boogeyman in ways that I don't think need to happen. From the information I've been able to piece together, so the UNICEF executive board had to submit reports and still does to the United Nations, to the General Assembly. And so within the main United Nations archives, which are super accessible, those reports are archived. So I could find the UNICEF executive reports. The FEMNET archive kept a ton of correspondence and other documents from their work with UNICEF. I was going to all kinds of other organizations that also worked with UNICEF. And then I was using this very thin layer of documents that have been digitized on the UNICEF website. So I cobbled together my own patchwork UNICEF archive. And from that, what I gathered is UNICEF was under a lot of political pressure, especially from the US, which was its top donor during most of this period. The UNICEF leadership, so throughout this history, it's James P. Grant, who is an American. What he and the other top dogs're doing is often not what the lower level UNICEF staff want them to be doing. There are huge debates within UNICEF. A lot of women in the organization are saying, "you need to hire more women. You talk this big game about promoting women and girls equality, but within the organization, it's still very patriarchal. So practice what you preach." There are a lot of people of color, Black people in the organization saying, you talk a lot about the need for global equality and

the problems of imperialism. Again, practice what you preach. So there are these different levels of politics and layers going on at UNICEF that absolutely impact who's working on this lobbying campaign and at what level and what they're promoting.

There are also just openly dissidents working for UNICEF. One of my favorite anecdotes in the book, there's a medical doctor named Miriam Khamadi Were. She's a Kenyan medical doctor who's based at the UNICEF office in Ethiopia. And she goes to one of these global conferences where they're talking about girl power as a form of development. And she stands up and makes this fiery speech and says, "imagine a mouse inside of a cage and it's fighting to get free." I'm going to mince the exact quotation, but "Africa and its effort to fight out of poverty and for economic development is like the caged mouse, especially the girls - no matter how hard we scramble for freedom, we're still in the cage." And then she also uses these very evocative metaphors. She also says, "imagine a python strangling a girl to death while ordering her to sing." And then she compares Africa to the girl being strangled by the python. And basically says, "we can't pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, no matter how much girls and women are educated and believe in themselves and work, we can't fix these problems without high-level structural changes." And she's a UNICEF employee. So it would have been nice to get into different UNICEF archives to show more of these tensions and behind-the-scenes stories within the organization. As is, I just have a handful of anecdotes and a patchwork of information. And you always find unexpected things going into a project and the real opacity and being able to access the UNICEF side was just a shock from me going into this.

AT: One of the reasons that it's really interesting to me how you're talking about even people within UNICEF saying that UNICEF is not walking the walk, they're just talking the talk. And there's this interesting tension with, I do believe people want to do good, but I think there's also this idea that we have to appease powerful people in order to, say, get the money that we need to do the good things. And that can mean compromising your values, possibly your ethics, depending on what we're talking about. And UNICEF aside, which I can never look at the same way again, I'd like to talk more about FEMNET's role in this because they knew that, "okay, we turned in this report and what was published is very much not, in some ways directly contradicts what we know to be true and what we told them." So I'm curious, because FEMNET was involved. They continued this partnership. They were there at the 1995 conference. They were an active participant in all of this. So I'm very curious, to what extent is this tokenization of the women who were actually doing the work on the ground and what they're saying, versus how much do you think they were active and in agreement with this? Because as African women doing this activist work, they almost certainly knew that what they had found was not going to be popular with people in power. So I'm just curious about not just the dynamics of that partnership, but where do you think the women of FEMNET were coming from in this scenario?

SBB: When I would workshop this before the book was published, as I was writing it, the first question that I would almost always get was, oh my gosh, how did people at FEMNET respond to the eight-country study's report being doctored and manipulated before it was published? I explore this a lot or at length in the first chapter of the book after the introduction. I won't give away all the answers now because I hope people will read the book, but I'll say some of them. Initially, FEMNET's formal response to these revisions was silence. I don't even know how many people within FEMNET fully knew about the revisions. The initial report that was sent to UNICEF was more than a hundred pages. Same with the report that was published. I don't know how many people at FEMNET really closely read either report. And let me back up and say, I did a number of interviews. Every single person I interviewed about the relationships with UNICEF, editing reports, things like that, did not want to be named because they're afraid of backlash and repercussions. Within the world of women-focused work, development work in Nairobi, it's a small world. UNICEF is still a big player that can impact people's livelihoods and almost all the people in this story are still alive. I can't share a lot of specifics from interviews that I promised anonymity to. I can say people in the organization within FEMNET, many of them did know to some degree what was going on. However, they were stuck between a rock and hard place,

and here's where context is essential. FEMNET, its precursor organization called the African Women's Task Force was created in 1984. The Beijing Conference on Women, the fourth UN World Conference on Women, happened in 1995. The third World Conference on Women had happened a decade before and it was actually in Nairobi. And so the precursor organization to FEMNET is created in the lead-up to that. It's actually created because of a fight that a group of women from all over Africa have with people from UNICEF and other parts of the UN over who should have the authority to speak for African women going into this World Conference on Women in Nairobi.

There were two women, one was from the Caribbean, one was from the US, saying "we should have control over this" and a group of women from all over Africa said "absolutely not. Do you want to speak for African women? It needs to be women on the continent doing the speaking and doing the leading." And so they win the fight and then UNICEF actually changes its stance and supports the creation of the African Women's Task Force. So this big conference happens in Nairobi. It's hugely successful. The African Women's Task Force also has a very big impact on the conference proceedings and outputs. But then basically immediately afterward the government of Kenya that's led by Daniel arap Moi, who's the president, leads a backlash against the women's movement in Kenya. A lot of the members of the African Women's Task Force who then went on to lead FEMNET were surveilled. They had their financial accounts looked into. The government of Kenya at the time, it's a one-party state. Many people would say dictatorship. It's propped up by the US government among other people in a very contentious Cold War international climate. And there're increasing calls for that government and for one-party states all over the world to democratize. And so to cling to power, the Moi government becomes very suspicious of grassroots movements like women's movements and NGOs with strong international connections like the African Women's Task Force turned FEMNET. There are political killings, political disappearances, political imprisonments during this period. Wangari Maathai, who's this international prize-winning advocate for women and for the environment, founder of the Green Belt movement, she won a Nobel Prize. She is imprisoned at some point. There's a huge standoff with police at her house where they lay siege to her home. There are other NGO offices that are fire-bombed by people suspected to have connections or sanctioned by the government. So it's a very dangerous climate within Kenya for the organizers of FEMNET. They have a meeting in 1988 to formally turn the African Women's Task Force into FEMNET. That meeting happened years after they had wanted it to happen because they're under such rigid surveillance and suspicion from the government of Kenya. So for them, the relationship with UNICEF is a lifeline. They know, and they talk openly in their newsletters, that it's much harder for the government of Kenya to come after them if they have strong highly visible international partners like people at UNICEF who can vouch for them. And if they're imprisoned or disappeared, people at UNICEF will ask questions and that's not something the government of Kenya wants. So for FEMNET during this time, UNICEF is a lifeline.

Also literally, they're struggling for funding. UNICEF is FEMNET's main donor during a lot of the early years or certainly one of the main donors. And initially the government of Kenya won't allow FEMNET to register as a non-government organization. This is part of the suspicion and repression toward NGOs, which means that legally they can't raise money. And so they rely on a different organization, not on UNICEF, to siphon their international donations to, but in the meanwhile UNICEF gives them an office space. So FEMNET's first physical office is in the UNICEF compound in Nairobi. So this is very much a partnership, but it's a partnership laced with hierarchy and various forms of dependency. And so it's this position of being stuck between a rock and a hard place between donors like UNICEF and the Kenyan government where FEMNET's members are acting. There's a very real fear for their own survival and safety, and then there's this larger fear for the survival and safety of this organization.

So it's within that environment that initially there is silence around the editing of this report. And I theorize this in the book, I talk about this term of loud silences, that silence is its own kind of reaction. It's not no reaction, it's a choice to say nothing. And then I talk about how in other cases people at FEMNET use coded speech to criticize. So there's a published interview in a FEMNET newsletter where someone's interviewing one of FEMNET's founding members Njoki Wainaina and basically says "there could be great partnerships between

independent African governments like of Kenya and NGOs to push back against pressure from international donors who are pushing things like structural adjustment. What do you think about that? Wouldn't it be great if NGOs like FEMNET and the government of Kenya could work together? We would then be able to more effectively push back against these foreign donors and their priorities and the ways that they skew things." And Njoki Wainana very carefully chooses her words and she says something along the lines of, "I can't directly comment on that. What I can say is the government of Kenya is not known to support NGOs." And so she basically says, "yes, it would be great if we could work with the government to push back against these international donors, but our government won't do it." And then she says, "and unfortunately many NGOs have to go along with what donors want." And she specifically talks about structural adjustment programs and girls' education.

Other places in the newsletter, people have big debates of, they want us to go to these UN conferences to represent African women and say, "look, African women are finally included, but then they don't actually want to do the core of what we're calling for. At what point is our work just being co-opted?" And then other people saying, "well, but that's politics. Like, yes, you have a seat at the table, but you never get 100% of what you want and we're still having a positive influence. Look at X, Y, and Z." So there are debates within the organization about when does having a seat at the table push for change that needs to happen, even if it's not all of the change you want to happen versus other people saying, "yeah, we're being tokenized and co-opted, stop going to the table." I think it's essential to remember that FEMNET as a self-described pan-African women's organization, yes, based in Nairobi, but with connections to members all over the continent, has so many different viewpoints within it. And it's fascinating to see how these different perspectives come together to influence the organization's advocacy. So right after UNICEF publishes the doctored study, there's silence. Over the next few years, there are various forms of people speaking out and questioning the relationships between FEMNET, UNICEF, government of Kenya, and these very thorny, tangled relationships.

AT: Something else that occurs to me both as I'm reading what you've written, but also as we're talking, is how people in power use marginalized people as these ciphers, like a blank canvas, that "we can put whatever narrative we want on you that supports what we're trying to push." So, you mentioned Reaganomics, for example, or this idea that, "oh, it's not the rich white people's fault because of what they've been doing for decades/centuries. We just have to do the feel-good thing of helping girls go to school." And I think this is actually part of why Malala Yousafzai has become so popular. Not that she is not an absolutely incredible woman in all ways. Love Malala. Never going to talk shit about Malala. But she has this very direct narrative of, "I was pushing for girls' education and the bad guys tried to kill me for it. And I was airlifted out and saved by Britain," by one of the biggest colonial powers in history. And then went on to live in safety in the Global North, as we're apparently calling it, and write about her experiences and continue to do this work. So I do feel like a lot of times people just focus on, she did survive. She did make it out. She is safe now. She won a Nobel Peace Prize. And I just wonder how much of that is similar to what we're seeing here, where taking the focus off of who's really responsible and what are the larger systemic issues and what do we need to do about that? And just focusing on, "well, if we can just educate girls, that'll fix everything." It's a much simpler narrative and it's a much more palatable narrative. And it just seems like there's a lot of rich white people putting whatever narrative they want on much more marginalized people to push their own ends.

SBB: Yeah, there are some really powerful critiques of, not of Malala as a person, but of how educating girls in Afghanistan has been co-opted by the interests of imperialism and violence. So if you look at the larger war on terror and what long histories of US invasion in Afghanistan and before that Soviet invasion in Afghanistan have done to girls and women in the area, suddenly it becomes much harder to attach this feminist politics to what the US and its allies like Britain are doing there. But one of the foundational articles that I read when I was an undergraduate student is by Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind. I think it's called *Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency*. And it really beautifully breaks down how feminist groups in the

Global North, in the US and the UK, but that article is focused on the US, supported the US invasion of Afghanistan in the name of promoting the education of girls and women and how cynical and short-sighted this is. It's basically about the co-optation of feminism into the war on terror or by the war on terror. And that telling you simple narratives that feed back into white rescue savior complex actually justify a lot of violence. There's real violence that's happened in Afghanistan, including against women and girls, in the name of feminism. And I think about that sometimes with the book I wrote where there's a different kind of structural violence around how neoliberal capitalism, multinational corporations continue to grow on the continent, continue to exploit and really underpay the labor of all kinds of people on the continent, but including young women, some girls, and yet they attach this liberatory narrative of feminism to it. So there's a violence done in this name of girl power. There's a structural violence to it.

And a lot of scholars have shown this. And so I came in interested in, well, how did it get to be this way? What's the history of it? And there aren't that many histories of it before, but the histories that do exist generally tell a simple linear story of the usual suspects and the histories of neoliberal capitalism leading this. So you get the Royal Bank, get the International Monetary Fund. You get the Nike Foundation. Warren Buffett's NoVo Foundation has been a big actor in this girl power narrative. So, billionaire corporations, multinational companies coming on the scene especially after the 2008 financial collapse, when they're increasing calls to regulate multinational companies, then promoting these girl power initiatives becomes a way for them to try to publicly sanitize their brand and to fend off these calls for more regulatory oversight. Part of what I show in the book is, yes, those things happen. These multinational corporations and their philanthropic arms picked up on girl power and used it to their own ends, but they didn't invent it. Instead, it came in large part out of this lobbying campaign between the United Nations children's fund and a self-described pan-African women's NGO. And that to me was surprising. And so then I wanted to show how within this lobbying campaign that really started off as a protest in response to people saying "neoliberal capitalism, structural adjustment, cutting welfare state spending on public education is terrible for women and girls. We need to do something about it." And at FEMNET, the narrative stays the entire time, "we need this top-down change." A lot of people at FEMNET also call for bottom-up change by empowering girls, but a core red thread throughout FEMNET's advocacy up to Beijing is, "we need top-down change. We need an end to structural adjustment programs. If you want to meaningfully address both poverty and patriarchy on the continent, we have to talk about structural economic factors." Their calls for the top-down change, even though they're constantly making the argument, get increasingly sidelined and written out to the point that the version of the Beijing platform for action that's actually adopted, it's almost entirely absent from. And instead, what grew in its place was this narrative that girls all over Africa are oppressed because of local, timeless cultural patriarchy and those oppressive African men and boys. And if we want to fix that, we need to make girls feel better about themselves and girl power will help address poverty. So what really interests me is how certain narratives, forms of meaning, levels of change get written out or written into the process, into the document. So yes, there absolutely is this larger pattern of powerful people from the US, from UNICEF using or trying to use people at FEMNET to get through their own messaging and in parts, that absolutely happens. And there's also a story within the book of how FEMNET is trying to maneuver around this and how they're responding to it. So age-old debates about agency and even people in unequal oppressive situations have a capacity to act. I absolutely don't want to present FEMNET as if they had no capacity to act in this story, but there's no question that there are powerful forces distorting, tokenizing, subverting parts of their message at key times.

AT: I'm intrigued that you bring up how feminism is weaponized against women and girls, because we see this all over the place, right? It's not just in this context. We also see it in the idea of the supermom. She can do it all, meaning we don't have to support her. Or similarly calling African-American women, "oh, you're so strong." It's like, yeah, but she'd really like to not have to be so strong all the time. Or similarly to what we were saying about education, like this idea that yes, education is empowering, but it's not empowering enough for many people to overcome the systemic biases and barriers. Or the idea of the girl boss or being sex positive, like not

everybody wants to be sexually active, at least not to that extent. But there was this idea, I know when I was growing up that, if you're an empowered woman, you have to be like A Sex in the City character, right? And so there's all these ways that it feels like feminism is often weaponized the same way any idea of what women are or what women should be is weaponized against us. Anytime you say "all women should (fill in the blank)," it's gonna be harmful unless it's all women should have rights, goddamn it.

SBB: Yeah, absolutely. I absolutely unequivocally support girls and women's access to formal education, but because there's value, I think in education in and of itself, as long as it's not happening through a pedagogy that's harmful. There are some formal education systems or individual educators who promote racist ideas, patriarchal ideas, people at FEMNET talk about this. But so for me, the point of the book isn't to question education. It's, as you said, to question how narratives about empowering girls and women through education become just totally co-opted to support certain versions of capitalism, neo-imperial policymaking. And it absolutely is a broader pattern where within feminism, broader movements for various kinds of liberation, anti-racist action, anti-imperialist action, there are robust sets of literature about how different movements get co-opted, get twisted around, get subverted. A lot of people that I read take aim at this idea, the lean-in notion of feminism, that if you just meet challenges with confidence and instead of leaning away from a challenge, lean into the challenge that somehow this brings about equality. And for me, I'm in agreement with what a lot of people at FEMNET were saying, which was, if you're not talking about the structural roots of a problem, you're not going to solve the problem. That doesn't mean that other forms of action aren't also helpful and necessary at some points in time, but you can't talk about feminism or you can't even talk about inequality or patriarchy without talking about divisions of labor under capitalism and what that has done. You have to be talking about race and how the labor of Black and Brown women around the world, including in the Global North, often is underpaid, undervalued, and yet the backbone of a lot of labor markets.

AT: But it's also being done by the people upholding the structural inequalities in the first place. It's just that shifting of responsibility that we were talking about. So "if you just lean in," because that way, if you don't lean in, then it's your fault that you're not succeeding at work.

SBB: Right. Yeah. Yeah. The flipping of the story, flipping of responsibility onto the people being hurt or being marginalized through systemic oppression is absolutely a core theme of the book. It's insidious and it's essential to the story.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.