“Girl” in Crisis: Colonial Residues of Domesticity in Transnational School Reforms

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Abstract

Investment in girls’ education is offered as a salve to the Global South that will alleviate poverty, prevent terrorism, and curb gender-based violence. Rather than treat this thesis and its evidentiary basis as axiomatic, we examine some of the conditions for the intelligibility of this crisis, prevalent in much international development and education reform discourse today. Archival study of transnational school reforms in Kenya Colony—specifically the Jeanes School in the 1920s and 1930s and Mau Mau prison camp reeducation in the 1950s and 1960s—makes visible how domesticity has offered a shifting biopolitical strategy, wherein acceding to one’s properly gendered roles was made a condition for economic and political maturity for racialized populations. We explore how residues of colonial domesticity persist in the exceptionalism of the girl, yoking the performance of “proper” notions of modern girl and womanhood as conditions for social progress and economic development.

Introduction

Manifold crises have emerged in the “developing world” in recent decades—economic, refugee, and climate, to name a few. The naming of a crisis is political. It unifies a disparate set of problems and reduces them to a few key variables; it establishes and legitimizes expertise; and it makes anticipated futures palpable, inciting and focusing interventions. Perhaps no crisis has captured the attention of international education and reform efforts today more than the concern and hope bestowed upon the girl. This “girl crisis” is evinced by global campaigns that highlight stark inequalities in girls’ school attendance, inequities in achievement, and their myriad vulnerabilities (see, e.g., Urban 2017; Plan 2019) and have been attested to by economists’ re-search (see, e.g., King and Hill 1993).

With calibrated concern for girls comes qualified optimism. If the crisis is addressed, coordination achieved, and benchmarks met, women and girls promise to unleash a cascade of social effects that will alleviate poverty, prevent terrorism, and curb gender-based violence (Girl Effect 2015). The World Bank expresses this logic succinctly: “Girls’ education is a strategic

development priority. Better educated women tend to be healthier, participate more in the formal labor market, earn higher incomes, have fewer children, marry at a later age, and enable better health care and education for their children, should they choose to become mothers. All these factors combined can help lift households, communities, and nations out of poverty” (World Bank 2019, para. 2). Educated girls are not only variables in “strategic development priorities” but serve as sources of resilience, strength, and opportunity. They have “superpowers” (Bridge 2019c), “limitless potential” (Girl Up 2019), and are “the most powerful force for change” (Girl Effect 2015). The risk and promise of girls operate in conjunction, figuring them as exceptional subjects of development.

Rather than take the girl crisis and its evidentiary basis as axiomatic, we seek to understand (a) how women and girls are configured as exceptional subjects of development and (b) how their education is given as key not only to their salvation but also to that of their families and nations. To do so, we deliberate on a colonial logic and set of practices that we describe as domesticity, which premised sexual differentiation as a quality of the sensitive and civilized subject capable of progress (Schuller 2018). In what follows, we consider how learning one’s properly gendered role became a condition for economic development and political maturity of racialized populations and how today’s reforms that seek to empower women and girls retain domesticity’s colonial residues.

**Historicizing the “Girl Crisis”: The Biopolitics of Domesticity**

In this study, we approach both the “girl” and “crisis” historically but not in the historicist sense of looking for their presumed origins. Rather, we explore the values, dispositions, and sensibilities that emerged during the nineteenth century and linked the development of the individual woman to racial evolution, national progress, and civilization. Our methodological strategy, consequently, is historicizing the discourses, actors, technologies, and practices that configure women and girls as exceptional subjects of education and development, assign what is “wild” and “domestic,” and prescribe the whys and hows of their proper education. We spotlight the strategies and tactics by

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2 The fear, hope, precarity, and salvation invoked by the naming of a crisis exceed the logic of capital or other “stage” theories of historical progress (Adams et al. 2009).

3 Historicizing is an intervention in critical studies of education (see Khoja-Moolji 2018; López 2018; Kirchgasler 2019) that seeks to destabilize the binary oppositions of a colonial past and neoliberal present in order to map the (dis)continuities in principles, theories, and practices of trans-national school reforms today and to make fragile the causality of the
which civilization was made dependent upon sexual differentiation between the sentimental woman and the rational man, and trace their continuities and discontinuities in present-day reforms.

At one level, the promise and peril embodied by the girl have drawn significant attention from across the social sciences and humanities. Recent scholarship has examined discourses and forms of affect generated by girl-targeted development campaigns, such as Girl Effect and Let Girls Learn, attending to how the girl-in-crisis is idealized as a potential neoliberal subject par excellence (Koffman and Gill 2013; Khoja-Moolji 2018). Ethnographic research has offered critical examinations of how corporations draw on feminist discourses to expand their reach and profit through development interventions targeting girls (Moeller 2018) and by translating empowerment discourses (Moore 2016; Switzer 2018). This literature has analyzed contemporary neoliberal articulations of girls and girlhood and their contestations, only briefly noting the historical conditions that have made the girl crisis intelligible. Likewise, our historicizing approach builds on scholarship focused primarily on forms of domestic education in schooling or as a school subject (Lomawaima 1993; Stambach 2000). Finally, our approach differs from historically inflected discussions that have emphasized conflicts between colonizers and colonized, in which the category “girl” is given as an ideological construction with divergent deployments (George 2014) and stress the historical specificity of the colonial period (Kanogo 2010). Instead, our focus on domesticity draws attention to the intimate and sentimental technologies of biopower (see Stoler 2002; Schuller 2018) that relate past and present through the multiple and mutable forms of subjectification these technologies entail (Desai 2020). Attention to domesticity spotlights how contemporary subject positions, manifest practices, and institutionalized dispositions discipline and tame what is constructed as wild and morally offensive, and promote “proper” forms of sexual differentiation as necessary for progress.

Our concern with domesticity dovetails with calls for the field of comparative and international education to examine the coloniality of its founding concepts and comparative methods (Takayama et al. 2017; Sobe 2018). We scrutinize domesticity as embodying the “coloniality of power” (Quijano 2000) that operates on bisecting planes: (1) the family with gendered divisions of labor, bounded by the site of the home; and (2) the race whose stock must be purified and improved and that is often rooted to a concept of present. This analytic of power has also been described as mapping the epistemic infrastructures of biopower (see, e.g., Murphy 2017).

4 Khoja-Moolji (2018) is a notable exception.
nation-as- homeland (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). Domesticity, as a
switching station for the nuclear family and a presumed civilizational destiny,
relates these distinct spatializations by seeking to reform homelife where it was
found wanting and to tame what was constructed as depraved and morally
offensive across metropoles and colonies as a biopolitical strategy to prevent
racial degeneracy. Our focus on domesticity attends to the pliable and intimate
forms of science and pedagogy that sought to coerce, instill, and cultivate
sentimental discipline within ‘uncivilized’ races. Schuller (2018) has argued
that principles of domesticity were rooted in neo-Lamarckianism that saw all
races as in distinct stages of unilinear development and whose evolution was
environmentally rather than hereditarily determined. Theories of race
betterment were premised upon a recognition that sexual differentiation was
found not only in physical but mental characteristics and that their development
represented civilizational achievements. “Woman” was reconstituted as a
biologically and racialized subjectivity. Specifically, the white woman’s
supposedly higher degrees of “impressibility” was argued as essential to
nurturing not only her direct progeny but to elevating the overall race (16).
Relatedly, school reforms for the so-called dependent races were to be directed
toward instilling the necessary sentimental discipline for their own uplift, in
which principles of sexual differentiation were given as essential.

An analysis of domesticity’s entanglement in education over the past
century could range quite broadly. In this article, we focus our attention on its
pedagogical articulations in education reforms traveling and translated into
Sub- Saharan Africa, and specifically Kenya, while also noting broader
transnational implications. The focus on Kenya is instructive of how political,
cultural, and historical judgments have continually located African countries
specifically, and the (post)colony more generally, as a differentially and
pathologically “wild” space according to presumably universal social scientific
standards and norms (McClintock 1995). These represented African women
specifically as the most primitive forms of animalistic atavism. The
pedagogical dimensions of domesticity within transnational school reforms
highlight how sexual differentiation was given as a symbol of civilizational
status and made its acquisition essential to racial progress. This historical
dimension provides analytical leverage to the last section of the article, in
which we consider how contemporary notions of girl and womanhood continue
to embody civilizing distinctions that differentiate social progress from
backwardness today through a correlational logic.

Our analysis takes the following itinerary. Observing Stoler’s (2009)
counsel to read “along the archival grain,” we examine educational surveys,
reports, and commentaries from the 1920s and 1930s that stipulate the importance of women’s education in homecrafts and hygiene. We attend to the anxieties and fantasies about what might happen if African girls and women were left untouched by educational reforms through a close study of the Jeanes School, a transnational school reform that sought to educate “wives” as home demonstrators in Kenya Colony’s native reserves, and linked US and UK philanthropy, missionaries, and educational expertise with Kenyan colonial administrators. Domesticity overspills folders in the archives marked “Education” and “Schools,” however, and later appears as prescriptions for rehabilitating so-called psychotic women during “Mau Mau”—a time of anti-colonial uprising in Kenya during the 1950s. The desire to “domesticate” Mau Mau establishes how the seemingly benign idealization of virtuous womanhood and homelife from the 1920s and 1930s inscribed boundaries of civility that, when breached, incited violent reaction, detention, and coercion against those found in violation. Historicizing domesticity allows us to reconsider how the contemporary desire to empower women and girls through schooling (in the form of “superpowered” girls and “supermamas”; Bridge 2017) reinscribes injunctions of domesticity as empowerment’s conditions of proof as evidenced by the goals, outcomes, and metrics of change schooling is to bring about. We conclude by noting that today’s reforms, which seek to give voice and empowerment, cannot disentangle their strategies and tactics from the historically freighted subject positions of “woman” and “girl.”

“Home”-Made: Domesticity in Colonial School Reforms

To understand how women and girls in the Global South have become priorities in contemporary international developmental, we begin in the early nineteenth century and consider comparative studies of human difference. Ethnologists and anthropologists, for example, portrayed Africa as a form of time travel into humanity’s prehistory. These racist studies depicted African women as irrational and hypersexual—Victorian representations of atavism at the bottom of a racial hierarchy (Gilman 1985; McClintock 1995). So-called developmental delay was explained by recourse to somatic causes—the African female body was described as having excessive genitalia that led to savage-like dispositions that exhibited primitivism (McClintock 1995, 41–42). At the same

5 Racialization, sexualization, and linkages to a developmental temporality have long and entangled histories. From the infamous examination and exhibition of Saartjie Baartman (disparaged as “the Hottentot Venus”), racial development was visibly read onto the female body. Schuller (2018) notes that studying women’s genitalia for visual evidence of racial
moment, neo-Lamarckian views of racial evolution held that the body was not biologically determined but the gradual product of deliberate and disciplined cultivation of emotional reflections, and that the regulation of habit and control of environment were key to both individual and racial development (Schuller 2018). While the African woman was marked as inferior to her white counterpart, focused intervention promised the possibility of other races attaining the norms of civilization-as-whiteness.

Domesticity anchored imperial projects to improve the racial stocks of colonizer and colonized through the valorization of motherhood (McClintock 1995; Stoler 2010). It fixated on women’s reproductive abilities and linked womb, home, and nation (see Thomas 2003). It entailed rules and standards of civilization that marked African homelife as lacking organization, hygiene, and proper kin configurations. Within a few decades, educating native women went from being ludicrous to colonial common sense. By the 1920s, for example, British colonial policy argued that the desired values of individualism, property, and the profit motive could be inculcated through “domestic science” or “hygiene,” and teaching women and girls to occupy their appointed sphere as guardians of the home. These qualities dovetailed with fears of disintegration, detribalization, or breaking “natural ties” between generations (Advisory Committee on Native Education 1925, 7).

Homelife, child rearing, and hygiene were proposed as educable domains of knowledge that promised to bring about civilization through comparative strategies that pathologized African family life and home structures (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). Consider, for example, the declarations and prescriptions about women and girls contained in Education in East Africa, a report commissioned by the Phelps-Stokes Fund. Education was
development was also deployed by early feminist doctors in the United States who argued that white women possessed a greater capacity for stimulation and development in both body and brain than either men or the sexually undifferentiated primitive. In this racialized logic, white women occupied civilization’s apex (over white men), while black women represented its nadir (104–9). Both examples highlight how “woman” became a biological and political category of salience and how sexual differentiation was made evidence of civilizational status.

6 In hinterland or heartland, domesticity sought to provide “backward” populations with the twinned concepts of “home” and “homeland” (see Stoler 2002). In this respect, colonial efforts can be understood as photographic negatives of school reforms in the United States and the United Kingdom, which saw a proliferation of courses on domestic science (Tolley 2002), general science courses adapted for girls (Kirchgasler 2019), and home economics, health education, physical education in the United States and elsewhere (see also Petrina 2006).

The Phelps-Stokes Fund, established in 1911, declared as its chief aim “the education of negroes, both in Africa and the United States” (Phelps Stokes 1911, quoted in Jones 1925, xxi). This presumed racial uplift was premised upon “essentials” such as “health and hygiene” and “home activities,” given that “in primitive society the influence of the home has been limited in
conceptualized as a universal quality that simply required “adaptations to people in various stages of civilization” (Phelps Stokes 1925, xxiv). The report’s author, Thomas Jesse Jones (1925), expressed the pragmatics of adaptation: “In the careful study of their community needs, [Natives] will find the proportion of Native customs to be continued and the adaptations of European influences that are worthwhile” (1925, 10). Defining “community needs” bespoke the assumption of Natives’ differing “potential” and “character,” in which “family life is potentially the most effective determinant” (13, emphasis in original). Adaptation required interventions regarding nutrition, habitation, and clothing. These, in turn, became the subject matter that was to constitute “education” for African women. Jones linked “civilized life” with women and girls’ “well-being” as a supposedly natural course of study: “These three elemental necessities of human life [nutrition, habitation, clothing], the most concrete expression of the responsibilities of women, would alone offer sufficient ground for the large expenditure of funds and the larger expenditure of thought and real concern for the well-being of Native girls and Native women” (Jones 1925, 340).

Rather than essentialize differences between man and woman in terms of psychology or physiology, the “sex relations” described above required no justification. They were constituted simply as “normal standards of civilization” (340) in which husband and wife were defined by distinct responsibilities and duties within a heterosexual, monogamous, and nuclear family—a moral order that would link both individual and population, and present and future generations.

The Jeanes School was paradigmatic of the education desired for African women. The school trained church mission-selected “men and wives” to receive 2 years of training in how to develop homelife and community welfare in the colony’s Native Reserves. Native Kenyan men were to be the

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8 The Jeanes School was a colonial translation of a US philanthropic social reform targeting rural Blacks in the Jim Crow South beginning in 1910. Called the Jeanes Visiting Teachers program in the United States, the reform had become well known among missionary and colonial networks by the 1920s, thanks to a sponsored visitation program. Jones formally recommended the model during his tour of African colonies for the Phelps-Stokes Fund in 1924, and the first Jeanes School was constructed just 1 year later on donated farmland outside Kenya Colony’s capital, Nairobi.

9 Following the imposition of Britain’s Crown Lands Ordinance of 1902, Kenya became a settler colony. The East Africa Protectorate claimed fertile lands from indigenous populations and offered these as 99-year leases to British citizens. Indigenous populations were removed and relocated to Native Reserves, where they were to provide a labor surplus for settlers’ farms.
public, rational face of the reform; they were trained to work as teachers in village schools, employing observational methods and survey instruments to diagnose symptoms of village “backwardness,” such as “moonlight orgies, dances, and other physical excesses” known to “all who are familiar with the pleasure-loving and joyous temperament of the African” (Jones 1925, 8). The wives, meanwhile, were tasked with learning and modeling the private qualities of refined sentimentality. As home demonstrators, they explicitly taught village women how to embody the respectable duties and sensibilities of the homemaker within the nuclear family, lessons that included hygiene, home-crafts, training in textiles, and other domestic arts (see Mwiandi 2006).

Making the “modern home” was more than physical construction; it demanded cultivation of gendered social roles within the partitioned physical space of the home as well as distinctions drawn between public and private life (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). The home and homelife Jeanes teachers and their wives were to model embodied desired forms of sexual differentiation. Homes were designed and built by the husbands using “modern” materials. Their right angles and mathematical proportions were to offer a striking appearance that would attract curious villagers (Mwiandi 2006). Yet the actual work of “social transformation” often fell to the Jeanes wives, who modeled the desired civilizing sentiments and would radiate change through their “influence” over village women (Jones 1925, 340). Or as Jones (1925) put it, “the woman not only presides in the dwelling, directs or controls the beginnings of life, but also holds the vital forces that make or unmake the individual and the social group” (340, emphasis added). In the Jeanes program, the home was a prosthesis of a desired form of womanhood that linked the home to the community and nation-to-come.

Likewise, the practices of domesticity were intended not only to impart the mechanistic rituals of homelife, but, as Schuller (2018) has argued, were a neo-Lamarckian effort to refashion the very nature of the body and of bodies to come. Jeanes wives learned skills that were supposed to impart civilizing values: sewing their own clothes, cooking “proper” foods, observing hygienic regimes, and nursing the sick; they were also expected to model proper forms of cleanliness, gardening, cooking, household management, and family care (see Benson 1936; Davis 1936). “To meet the African girl or woman at her starting point in the social order is the only way to lead her, without social disruption and personal disaster, into fuller partnership in the new life opening before African peoples” (Jones 1925, 341). In cultivating a common sensorial

(Lonsdale 1990).
repertoire, education in domesticity would improve the individual “soul” of women, which would be the inheritance of future generations.

Jeanes sought to first develop an awareness of how the proper performance of sexual difference was necessary for broader social progress. While noting that sex differentiation existed amongst colonial subjects, these forms were classified as primitive. Jones’s (1925) comment represents a common refrain among colonial reformers: “The arbitrary powers of the [African] man and the servility of woman in primitive society are both antagonistic to the realization of the standards of a civilized home” (27). Nowhere was this more evident than in concerns with hygiene, which merged Christian notions of sinfulness with early germ theory to make science a moral imperative and a civilizing practice (Peterson 2004). Jeanes wives held classes within their homes to instill new ideas about health and hygiene to villagers and demonstrated the use of soap and scrubbing the premises. Reformers sought to secure not merely African women’s assent but their active participation in these reform logics: “Drill and regimentation will not produce the result we want,” T. G. Benson (1936), one of the first Jeanes School principals, insisted: “we have to develop that sense of pride” (427). Winning the African women’s and girls’ “interest,” “desire,” and developing their “zest” for and “pride” in progress (419–20) was to transform their “soul.”

Early reforms highlight how anxieties about racial purity, miscegenation, and hierarchies traveled within the transnational coordination of school reforms and coincided with a flurry of state and nonstate interventions seeking to regulate female sexuality in both metropole and colony in the late nineteenth century. Colonial compulsions about hygiene, child rearing, and homelife weren’t just about removing dirt or the rational ordering of the home. Attending to the biopolitics of domesticity makes visible a thesis reiterated in the present: the African woman is a subjectivity developmentally behind and yet upon whom progress depends. In its colonial form, domesticity operated as an explicitly pedagogical discourse, promising a common set of practices, principles, and body of knowledge that would assuage anxieties about racial degeneration and offer a foundation for native self-betterment through the logic of colonial tutelage. Yet the same thesis that offered a recipe for progress would soon be wielded as a cudgel against political revolution and given as a justification for systematic detention and internment. To understand how, we now turn to examine domesticity’s deployment in counterinsurgency efforts during the Mau Mau uprising nearly 30 years later.
Hearts and Minds through Hearth and Home: Domesticating Mau Mau

Between 1954 and 1960, the British illegally detained between 80,000 and 120,000 Kenyans in prison camps and subjected approximately 1 million more to a program of “villagization” in response to an anticolonial uprising that became popularly known as Mau Mau (Anderson 2005; Elkins 2005). While Mau Mau historiography is complicated, contested, and difficult to summarize, certain facts remain beyond dispute: Mau Mau was confined largely to ethnic groups in the Mount Kenya area—primarily Kikuyu speakers—and gained its impetus from claims to alienated land that Kikuyu political organizations demanded be returned.  

Our interest in Mau Mau is not to offer a new interpretation of this conflict but rather to investigate how colonial social sciences of the period explained Mau Mau as a psychological affliction of Kikuyu speakers—what was termed mass “hypnosis” (see, e.g., Carothers 1954, 18)—that laid much of the blame on a pathologically disordered “African mind.” Through analysis that draws primarily (but not exclusively) on The Psychology of Mau Mau—a hastily commissioned report—and the memoirs of the Commissioner of Community Development and Rehabilitation during Mau Mau, we argue that the practices of domesticity were given as practical means of staunching the incipient uprising and undergirded notions of how to restore order. In this way, the report offers a springboard to explore the interstitial connections between the psychology of counterinsurgency and the pedagogy of school reforms. Attending to these connections highlights domesticity’s biopolitical character as a qualifier for what must be fostered for the population’s health and vitality and what can be designated for dispossession, detention, and death.

In approaching The Psychology of Mau Mau, what strikes the reader is how much the purported “explanation” for anticolonial uprising recapitulated decades-old anthropological, sociological, and psychological tropes about “the

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10 “What was Mau Mau?” remains a vexed question in historiography. Recent histories have reapproached the uprising as the emergence of a new moral economy among the Kikuyu—part of a longer narration of confrontations over ethnic identity and debates about sovereignty and freedom (see, e.g., Lonsdale 1990; Peterson 2004). Other histories have cast light on the militarization and brutality that characterized the British response to the uprising (Anderson 2005; Elkins 2005). While our analysis is indebted to both historiographical interventions, our focus is on the biopolitical strategies of counterinsurgency that sought to “rehabilitate” and “reeducate” the more than 1 million Kenyans interred behind barbed wire and trenches in more than 800 prison villages.

11 The report was authored by J. J. Carothers, a psychologist in the nascent colonial science of ethnopsychiatry (see McCulloch 1995). Ethnopsychiatry claimed an ability to speak about the properties of a singular “African mind.”
African.” The report foregrounds the African as “in transition” and caught between the now-familiar poles of “tradition” and “modernity.” These transitions are said to take numerous pathological forms including a familial domino theory. The African man is explained as “absent” from the family in the village due to searching for better paying work in towns, which in turn causes the African woman to develop “distressed perplexity” and “vague objectless resentment” and to neglect her children (Carothers 1954, 10). These factors are supposed to render the African woman particularly susceptible to Mau Mau leaders’ predations (15).

The report interweaves discourses of ethnopsychology and counter-insurgency with those of education and community development to call for the need to reeducate all Kikuyu speakers to recognize their proper roles, duties, and responsibilities as “parents,” first and foremost. This explanation makes homelife—and specifically the woman—prime targets for intervention: “Parents should have opportunities to learn matters of practical importance in their homes—housecraft, cleanliness (of persons, of homes, of food), general health and diet, infant welfare, and so on. Much is already being done in the way of Community Development, and the Medical Health Centres are doing valuable and fundamental work which is much appreciated by the people. These activities require only a considerable extension” (Carothers 1954, 25).

The report characterizes Kikuyu speakers’ political claims for land repatriation as evidence of widespread “native psychosis” that necessitates a vast “re-education” program to be made compulsory that would focus on domesticity and operate from prison villages and detention centers. Calling women to reoccupy their “natural” roles as “mothers,” the report undergirded British colonial counterinsurgency efforts, which sought to win hearts and minds through hearth and home, with women serving as the bulwark against future political agitation.

Nearly concurrent to the development of Carothers’s damning report, a former principal of the Jeanes School and Commissioner of Community Development, Thomas Askwith, was named to lead Mau Mau reeducation efforts. In line with Carothers’s recommendations, Askwith argued for the link between women and Mau Mau’s success and expressed conviction in the exceptional nature of women in reform efforts: “It is believed that at the present time [women] are keeping Mau Mau alive and [District Com- missioners] are making strenuous efforts to keep contacts with women to prevent further deterioration The women have, of course, far less knowledge than the men and have been easily swayed by the Mau Mau leaders. . . . Nevertheless, it is very likely that a detention camp for women will have to be set up, and that
will require appropriate rehabilitation probably based on civics, homecrafts, and agriculture” (Askwith 1953, in Askwith 1995, 107).

The call for reeducation and the focus on women was an almost word-for-word rearticulation of Jeanes School proposals 30 years earlier. Jeanes sought to provide sex-differentiated educational tracts in order to foster women’s “comradeship” with men in place of mere “subserviency” (Jones 1925, 341). Likewise, Mau Mau reeducation promised “women’s emancipation,” posing that “women’s inferior status in many tribes” would be improved through the expansion of women’s education and the creation of women’s clubs.

Whether in detention camp or prison village, the pedagogy of domesticity sought to arouse a “desire” for transformation, calibrated so as to respond to women’s supposedly unique “felt-needs” to induce participation in ways that recall the fixation on sentiments discussed in the Jeanes School (Askwith 1995, 143). Askwith observed how “the whole character of the people [women] seemed to have changed by their acquisition of bright colours” (144), and described how dressmaking allowed detained women “to deck themselves out and satisfy their unexpressed and possibly unappreciated desire for colour” (144). Likewise, acting in plays that stressed the importance of hygiene and nutrition were noted less for the information conveyed than the affects they generated. Singing, Askwith noted, “seemed to give [women] an emotional release and joy which was quite affecting” (144). These responses were imagined to offer a window into women’s collective psyche: “The change in women was in fact much deeper than some people realized. . . . In one district the Maendeleo [Progress] members even had the courage to denounce the witches who had dominated their lives for so long. . . . This in turn broke the bonds which bound them to reactionary conservatism and may well have been a factor which made the introduction of various community development schemes acceptable. Their influence was recognized by the terrorists during the Mau Mau and the Kikuyu clubs often with some trepidation and membership dropped considerably” (Askwith 1995, 145).

The argument for domesticity was nothing less than a struggle for the psychologized qualities of the Kenyan’s “soul” predicated on a civilizing logic. By activating women’s “natural” responses, Askwith (1995) proposed that

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12 While Askwith’s memoirs were published several decades after his time in the British Colonial Service, they include valuable verbatim transcripts of reports written during his 25 years of service in Kenya from which these quotes are drawn.

13 Askwith claims that by the end of Mau Mau, Kenya Colony counted approximately one thousand women’s clubs called Maendeleo ya Wanawake [women’s progress].
activities could then be introduced by district officers that would include instruction in child care and nutrition, owing to “mothers’ natural concern for the child and its welfare” (145). A curriculum of homemaking and motherhood within detention camps was hoped to foster qualities of “spiritual rehabilitation” not simply through Christianity, but through clubs, village improvement schemes, and so on, that would mark them no longer as wild and unpredictable threats but as responsible, self-governing citizens (Askwith 1995, 105–6). The desire to target women’s “natural” interests in order to direct them toward particular ends was a strategy for reestablishing order and consolidating control at a moment of colonial crisis.

The blueprints of Mau Mau reeducation make visible the outlines of an enduring biopolitical strategy during Kenya’s colonial era: women’s political subjectivities were conditioned by the performance of hygiene, home-craft, and childrearing that would be read as markers of not only their individual progress but as qualifications for the development and display of Kenyans’ capability for self-government. The dream of community development through the desired homemaker was opposed with its absence—expressed as fears of the pathological “African mind”—a product of a failed transition to modernity due to delinquent motherhood, whose culmination was Mau Mau. Dismissing the possibility of political consciousness among Mau Mau supporters and coding uprising as psychopathology, teaching domesticity promised to restore order in Kenya Colony by (re)instilling the “natural” qualities of African motherhood. We now turn to the question of how colonial residues of domesticity persist in contemporary school reforms through analysis of the correlations drawn between the performance of “proper” liberal girl and womanhood and economic growth.

Civilizing Correlations: Domesticity in “Supermamas”

Contemporary school reforms calling for gender sensitivity, equity, and empowerment appear a far cry from the paternalistic moralizing and sex-differentiated pedagogies that characterized educational interventions for women during the colonial era. No longer must education accord with men’s and wives’ distinct roles (as in the Jeanes School reforms); nor is it given as a strategy to rehabilitate shattered psyches (as in Mau Mau reeducation). Instead, the criterion for progress has been reconfigured as “gender,” which entails equalizing the participation of “all.” Gender equality can be attested to through parity in the number of boys and girls attending the same schools, receiving the same quality of education, and closing gender-based achievement
gaps. These desires for the recognition of difference within a logic of sameness can be found in reforms and initiatives that are described as “gender-responsive,” “gender-sensitive,” and affirmatively “seeking accountability” in the education of girl children (Bridge 2019b).

Gender equality and equity would seem to have left outmoded norms of sexual difference in the rear view. Today, progress is couched in terms of actuarial risk and economic potential. This orientation toward the future can be described as anticipation (Adams et al. 2009); anticipation displaces representational logic with probability, seeking to frame the present in terms of what will produce the best possible future and narrates a desired developmental trajectory for the girl: (1) she goes to school—one additional year increases her individual earning power more than twice that for boys (Levine et al. 2008; (2) she graduates and gets a job, as girls’ high school graduation rates correlate with higher gross domestic product (Chaaban and Cunning-ham 2011); (3) she has children and cares better for her family, as each year of her education is now associated with a reduction of her child’s mortality (King and Hill 1993). The correlational logic of anticipating the future differs in both modality and teleology from the forms of developmentalism that defined the social sciences of earlier eras. Rather than state the essential elements of a civilizing process in taxonomical fashion, the value of a girl today is a calculable factor with which individual, subgroups, and national economic growth can be associated, and through which a plausible thesis for reforms can be adduced from metadata (Murphy 2017).

Consider the recent efforts of a low-fee, for-profit school reform seeking to “empower” women and girls. Bridge International Academies enrolls more than 100,000 students in five countries, including Kenya, and defines their value in terms of the measurable and comparable learning outcomes they generate (Kirchgasler 2019). In its “turn to the girl” (Koffman and Gill 2013), Bridge joins a crowded field of development organizations striving to appeal to donor agencies, venture capital, and philanthropists’ ‘soft spot’ by foregrounding the girl as a subject to be empowered to make rational choices (see, e.g., Hindin and Fatusi 2009). To demonstrate its commitment to empowering women and girls, Bridge has embarked in recent years on an extensive media campaign, a dedicated section of its website, hashtag campaigns,

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14 While beyond the bounds of this article’s focus, it is worth noting that Bridge has drawn significant controversy in its decade-long existence, including investigative reports from major media outlets, such as the New York Times Magazine and Quartz, and qualitative studies funded by Education International, a global federation of teachers’ unions (see, e.g., Riep 2019).
blog posts, and video testimonials.

We scrutinize Bridge’s initiatives as a way to examine the residues of colonial-era domesticity that form and shape the articulations of goals, outcomes, and metrics of change that schooling for girls is now to bring about. As discussed above, the forms of gender sensitivity differ markedly from colonial efforts that sought to educate girls into the roles of wife and mother, such as in the curricula taught to Jeanes wives and later within domestic science education reforms in post-independence East Africa (see, e.g., Stambach 2000). Rather, the emphasis on gender is made visible in efforts to achieve parity in terms of enrollment and achievement. Bridge underscores that “enabling women and girls to flourish has underpinned the design of our approach to education” (Bridge 2018a, para. 1).

The desire for equal levels of achievement, according to Bridge, can be observed in the crafting of “gender sensitive” teaching materials. Bridge describes this as an effort in which “women and girls are portrayed in power positions . . . like female scientists, politicians, and lawyers” (Bridge 2018b, para. 5). At the same moment, the images of girls’ flourishing remain tethered to discourses of public health and a biopolitical calculation of the relative value of an educated woman. The desire for “female-focused education” is explicit: “The impact of investment into female-focused education is not exclusively economic but also social. Educated women are more likely to have less, and healthier children. They are also more likely to participate in the political process and make better decisions about their health, and the health of their children” (Bridge 2018b, para. 3).

Educated women are promised to be sexually regulated and sensible, using proper family planning techniques to procreate responsibly, and to make choices that enable them to raise healthy children. The desire to produce educated mothers is further emphasized in a circulating case story and related Bridge school policy on pregnant schoolgirls. Noting that sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates of adolescent pregnancies, Bridge concludes, “sadly, for many girls in Africa the reality is that they become children having children” (Bridge 2019a, para. 5). Deploiring unregulated reproduction dovetails with criticism of African governments’ indifference and outdated cultural taboos that shame pregnant girls and young mothers who would like to attend school; instead, Bridge (2019a) promises to “encourage girls that are pregnant to remain in school and actively try and persuade young mothers in our communities to return to the classroom” (para. 16). Bridge justifies this stance by linking a girl’s education to what it terms the “multiplier effect”: “It is clear that if the world is to prosper, then girls must be educated; our failure to ensure
this happens is one of the most damaging legacies of our time, with generational consequences” (Bridge 2018a).

The anticipation of girls as mothers-to-be dovetails with another Bridge program—to empower its students’ mothers as “supermamas.” Curiously, Bridge announces the supermama as not simply the name of its program but as an ethnographic discovery that emerged through interviews with Bridge parents: “We . . . found a powerful female archetype: we call her the ‘supa-mama’” (Bridge 2017, para. 10).

What we found was a powerful giant in the room—women. In every community we went to, we found ourselves immediately immersed into a world where women are driving education decision making. They do not accept poor schooling, they have dreams and ambitions for their children and they are making decisions that will enable them to be fulfilled. In communities across some of the most underserved and marginalized areas of Africa and India, women are choosing to invest in their children. They are ferocious advocates in their right to choose. (Bridge 2017, para. 7)

Bridge offers ethnographic sketches of the supermama as testimonial evidence of the transformed psychological state that also centers the voluntary character of participation. These sketches stress terms such as participants’ “right to choose,” “interest,” and “preferences.”

Notable is the restated desire, akin to colonial school reforms nearly a century earlier, that seeks not only women’s assent but their active participation and “self” direction in development efforts. In one ethnographic sketch, Bridge describes Lilian Wanyama of Ongata Rongai, Kenya, as properly exercising her privatized choice, taking a risk as a “founding parent” to send her children to the new Bridge school in her neighborhood. As a Bridge supermama, Lilian is described as inspired to start her own project within the schools:

A group of supermamas were so impressed by Lilian’s enthusiasm for education that they asked her to join their group—which advocates for quality education in their community. Right away, Lilian started a project for people to donate sanitary pads to girls in their community. Every Thursday she teaches girls at the school about cleanliness, how to use a pad and what to do when they realize a specific change is happening. The project has helped girls to be more confident in class and to stay in school without fear of discomfort or embarrassment. Other supermamas have joined Lilian’s cause and are now helping to grow the project to reach even more girls. (Bridge 2019d, para. 6–7)

Lilian is produced as an entrepreneurial subject, a ubiquitous subject-position of contemporary neoliberal regimes (Rose 1999), and her self-starting capacities are celebrated. Instead of passively awaiting the state or aid agencies to deliver a solution to a public health problem around menstrual hygiene,
Lilian is “solutions-oriented” and “takes initiative,” modeling the idealized subjectivity desired of Bridge’s mothers and girls. Lilian is valorized for not only mothering correctly but turning the qualities of motherhood into a community cause. Yet to describe this desired kind of female subjectivity as solely an effect of neoliberalism is to miss the residues of domesticity’s civilizing desires.

Lilian’s transformation, of course, is not wholly attributable to the “self.” Her transformation was catalyzed by Bridge providing her the “choice” to send her children to a school where she “sensed a motivation and pride in learning that she hadn’t seen in other schools” (Bridge 2019d, para. 3) and the possibility to develop the entrepreneurial skills of the supermama. Bridge activates Lilian’s “natural” maternal concern about “cleanliness” by providing her the tools to radiate these sentiments through “the community” in order to “reach even more girls.” As in the Jeanes School nearly a century earlier, the biopolitics of domesticity makes visible a desire not only for behavior change (i.e., following proper menstrual and general hygiene practices) but also an affective state (e.g., having “enthusiasm,” “motivation,” and showing “pride”) that are offered as windows to African women’s and girls’ psychologized “soul” and are given as qualifiers for idealized forms of girl and motherhood necessary for social transformation.

Presuming girls’ “superpowers” or the “supermama” as natural qualities or latent states romanticizes an African womanhood that is itself a colonial residue and smudges the ethnographer’s lens. Tropes that the girl possesses innocence and vulnerability that require external intervention to enable her flourishing continue to narrate tales of personal growth and change that circulate among volunteers, humanitarian organizations, donor agencies, philanthropists, and venture capitalists (Ticktin 2017). Our concern with domesticity’s colonial residues is not to indict how a for-profit corporation mobilizes a racist, sexist trope of the African woman but to question how this trope can be so easily recapitulated as evidence of a company’s “good works,” displayed for the consumption of donors, investors, researchers, and critics as the settled facts of the matter that require no further comment or justification.

**Domesticating the Girl and the Limits of “Superpowers”**

Our focus on domesticity directs attention to the ways borders separating inside and outside, home and wilderness, and foreign and domestic are invoked and rearticulated within shifting sets of inclusions and exclusions—matrixes of civilizational anxieties of what must be allowed to grow and what must be
tamed—both without and within. Domesticity places pedagogic and curricular reforms seeking to shape women and girls on a shared plane with affairs of the state, nationalist imperatives, and imperial geopolitics, and link the home to the colony- or nation- as-homeland. Contemporary clamor about the neoliberal qualities of the girl crisis often obscures the colonial history that has made women—and today, girls—exceptional figures of development and therefore, prime targets for education reforms.

As a labile and historically mutable expression of biopower, domesticity brings focus to a set of strategies and tactics that marked sexual differentiation as a keystone of civilization. It clarifies how the African woman and girl have long been configured as racialized, biological, and political subjectivities of peril and potential. It illuminates how norms and standards of decorum, childrearing, and homelife have been invoked to discredit political consciousness as amoral atavism. Today, the biopolitics of domesticity form the warp and weft of “proper” liberal notions of contemporary girlhood and womanhood as civilizing correlations whose display are given as conditional for social progress and economic development. These correlations seek to elicit women’s and girls’ motivation and pride as evidence of their volition, desire, and empowerment. An irony of today’s reforms seeking empowerment and voice for women and girls is that they reinscribe domesticity’s directives as their conditions of proof, now embedded in the goals, outcomes, and metrics of change that schooling promises to bring about.

Rather than take the girl crisis as the starting point for analysis, we find that reasoning about women and girls has traveled and changed over time while remaining rooted to a civilizing thesis we analyze as domesticity. Interventions focused on cultivating the potential of women and girls must reckon with the colonial entanglements that have presumed racialized sexual differentiation as the outcome of civilization and made progress contingent upon the perpetuation of the logic and practices of domesticity. Our work historicizing the “girl” and the “crisis” offers a way to scrutinize contemporary development interventions seeking to empower and give voice. These forms of recognition are not separate from but maintain commitments to this comparative logic—of raising women and girls up from their latent states—that remain connected to historical justifications for colonialism. These cannot be easily gainsaid, even as they are embodied and spoken by the face and voice of the Other.

References


