

# REBEL GIRLS

## INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



In *Rebel Girls: Youth Activism and Social Change Across the Americas*, Jessica K. Taft introduces readers to a diverse transnational community of teenage girl activists in the San Francisco Bay Area, Mexico City, Caracas, Buenos Aires, and Vancouver. Taft brings to life the voices of these inspiring activists who are engaged in innovative and effective organizing for global and local social justice, highlighting their important contributions to contemporary social movements and social theory.

*Rebel Girls* explores how teenage girls construct activist identities, rejecting and redefining girlhood and claiming political authority for youth in the process. Taft examines the girl activists' social movement strategies and collective political practices, detailing their shared commitments to process-based political education, participatory democracy, and hopeful enthusiasm. Ultimately, *Rebel Girls* has substantial implications for social movements and youth organizations, arguing that adult social movements could learn a great deal from girl activists and making clear the importance of increased collaboration between young people and adults.

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**SUMMARY:**

This introductory chapter argues that girls are important figures in contemporary processes and discourses of globalization and global citizenship. Teenage girls and young women in the Global South are a major source of labor for the global economy. In the Global North, business magazines identify the importance of teenage and “tween” girl consumption. Further, girls are also being targeted by a wide variety of social programs designed to encourage particular forms of “global citizenship.” Countless organizations, books, Web sites, and after-school programs around the world state that their mission is to “empower girls.” Girlhood is clearly important to global capital and global politics, and therefore also highly relevant to the study of social movements and political resistance. However, girls’ activism is an extremely under-explored scholarly topic, largely invisible in the academic literatures on both girlhood and social movements. After articulating the significance of studying girl activists, the introduction presents the five research sites, some methodological information, and an overview of the argument and following chapters.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. Why does the author choose to focus on girls?
2. Why does the author select these five cities?
3. If you were selecting cities to study youth activism today, where would you go?

**SUMMARY:**

This chapter deconstructs and analyzes the current institutionalized models of girls' empowerment and civic engagement, contrasting them with the practices, strategies, and social change visions of activist girls. It argues that empowerment, as it is currently articulated, is quite distinct from activism. Girls' empowerment tends to focus primarily on personal change, incorporating girls into the social order as it is, while girl activists seek to not just individually overcome the problems they see around them, but to change the social conditions that create those problems. The chapter also provides an ethnographic introduction to the girl activists as well as an analysis of their definitions of "activism" and "activist identity." It describes the goals of their activism, the tactics and strategies that they consider to be part of "doing activism," and the organizations, networks, and collectives within which girls practice their activism. Teenage girl activists define activist identity around three key features: activists, in their view, are people who want to make substantial changes to the social world, are engaged in various kinds of action to make those changes, including extra-institutional political tactics, and are part of political communities or collectivities taking such action. These activist identities exist outside and in contrast to three institutionalized discourses about girlhood, namely the widespread articulations of individualized girls' empowerment, formalized civic engagement, and youth apathy.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. How would you define activism?
2. Why do you think there are so many public narratives about youth as apathetic? What is the function of these narratives? How do you think they impact youth?
3. Why do these girls reject the claim that they are "extraordinary"?
4. What do you see as the difference between empowerment and activism?
5. Why do you think there are more programs for girls' empowerment than for girls' activism?

**SUMMARY:**

Girl activists often claim political legitimacy on the basis of their identities as youth. This chapter explores three key discursive tools that they use to authorize themselves and their youthful politics. The first of these is the argument that youth are equally capable of political participation (as compared to adults) and therefore have an equal right to democratic inclusion. In the second approach, girls argue that youth are different from adults, with their own perspectives, skills, and knowledge, and that this difference gives them a unique role and importance in social movements and political change. Finally, the third strategy girl activists use to authorize their political action is to argue that adults are not doing enough to create the kind of world that girls want to live in, and therefore it is their own responsibility, as young people, to make the changes that they hope to see in the world. Through these three inter-related sets of claims, girl activists claim the right of youth to be respected political agents in the present, not just in the future.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. Which argument for the legitimacy and authority of youth activism do you find to be most compelling and why?
2. What do these youth see as the problem with saying that they are “the future”?
3. How do you think the world would be different if youth were included as equals in political life?
4. Youth activists have many critiques of adults. Do you think these critiques are justified? Why or why not?
5. Why do you think girls authorize their politics on the basis of a youth identity and not a student identity? What might be different in their authorization claims if they focused on their identities as students?
6. Can you think of other social movements that use similarity and/or difference from the dominant social group as the basis on which they authorize their politics? What can we learn from comparing their claims to those of these young activists?

**SUMMARY:**

Collectively and individually, girl activists simultaneously remake and reject girlhood. Girls are the majority in many of their activist organizations, and when reflecting on this numerical dominance within youth activism, teenage girl activists tend to embrace their girlhood and to suggest that some aspects of their (socially constructed) identities as girls enhance their activist identities and practices. In these moments, they articulate many stereotypical ideas about girlhood but then take these characteristics into new social terrain, carrying them over into the world of activist politics, giving them a slightly different meaning. But, in other moments, these same girls suggest that becoming activists means that they are no longer girls and that the traits of girlhood and the traits of activism are instead diametrically opposed to one another. Activists are, in their view, concerned with important issues, care about other people, are confident, independent, and have knowledge about the world around them. Girls, on the other hand, are described as selfish, superficial, insecure, and ignorant. Being an activist, then, can also mean leaving “girlhood,” behind. This chapter explores these dual processes of redefinition and rejection, laying out some of the complexities of girl activists’ relationships to the category of “girl”.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. How does language matter to the process of thinking about girlhood in relation to activism?
2. Why do you think girl activists are so critical of “other girls” or “typical girls”?
3. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages to rejecting girlhood as an identity category?
4. Are there other social spaces in which being “girl-like” is seen as negative? Where? Why? What are the implications of this negative association with the category of girl?
5. What are some of the different meanings of “girl” being invoked by these activists? Where do these ideas about girlhood come from?

**SUMMARY:**

This chapter looks at three different approaches to political education used by girl activists, and discusses some of the major differences in their educational strategies, showing how each is rooted in its own localized political culture. It argues that North American girl activists tend to focus their educational activities on specific issues, while Latin American teens engage in wider-ranging discussions of political ideas and theories. Alongside these major differences, however, girl activists' political education practices across locations consistently emphasize learning new feelings, emotions, and desires in addition to facts, analysis, and knowledge. Their political education strategies are also generally non-dogmatic and process-based, focusing on ongoing learning and questioning rather than fixed answers. Girl activists' politics of learning encourages critical thinking and critical feeling, and it is deeply open-minded and open-hearted. Their emphasis on the ongoing process of political education is supported and shaped by their local political cultures and contexts, by their identity narratives, and by transnational social movement cultures that draw heavily on the ideas and theories of the Zapatista movement.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. How do girls' political education practices differ by city?
2. What are the implications of their different political education choices?
3. What kind of political education do you find to be most useful for engaging people in activism? Why?
4. How are girls' political education practices different from education done in schools? Why are they different?
5. How do girls' identity narratives relate to their pedagogical choices?

**SUMMARY:**

This chapter explores girls' practices for encouraging and increasing participation in their organizations and movements. Girl activists deploy a variety of practices that are designed to build political communities that are caring, pleasurable, and generally fun. After describing how these communities are also based on friendship, trust, and affection, the chapter turns to girls' organizations' decision-making structures. Many of these structures are intended to be egalitarian and horizontal, with shared leadership. Or, when girl activists find themselves in more hierarchical or vertical organizations, they are often quite critical of these dynamics. The chapter also addresses how girl activists in different cities confront and address issues of inequality and difference within their political organizations. Girls' identity narratives continue to play a role in their articulation of the reasons for these various organizational practices. The chapter also places girls' participatory practices in conversation with more widespread discussions about horizontalism within social movements and concludes by suggesting an important, but often unacknowledged, link between horizontalism and feminism.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. How are social movement discussions of internal inequality shaped by local histories and contexts?
2. What are some of the arguments for and against horizontalism?
3. How is horizontalism related to gender and feminism?
4. What do you think about the argument that politics should be pleasurable? Are there arguments to be made against "fun" as a requirement of political action?
5. How might other groups (not girls) with different identity narratives create political and organizational structures that mesh with their own identity claims? What might be other examples of these?

**SUMMARY:**

Girl activists willingly and boldly express their hopes and dreams, and they strive to make those hopes real through the creation of prefigurative alternatives. Girlhood is already associated with dreamy hopefulness, and the girls in this study embrace this association. Hope is the emotional and cognitive foundation of two distinct but related tendencies within girls' political practices: their utopian emphases on imaging how the world could be and their collective inclination toward creating practical alternatives, new communities, and innovative democratic institutions, rather than participating in the projects of governance or in the search for state power. After outlining girls' utopian visions and their prefigurative practices, the final section of the chapter then explores the uses and dangers of always "being positive," examining how differently situated groups of girl activists develop and maintain political optimism in the face of very real injustices, problems, and crises. Such optimism can be productive and motivating, but it can also lead to denial of difficulties, complexities, or political challenges.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. How does privilege relate to hope and optimism
2. The idea that we can "change the world without taking power" is very controversial within contemporary social movements. Why might this be the case? And what are your own thoughts on the subject?
3. Why do you think it is so difficult for activists to articulate a clear vision of the world they want to create? What makes critique conceptually easier?
4. Is there a difference between optimism, hope, and naiveté? What?



**SUMMARY:**

The conclusion re-states and develops the theoretical argument about the relationship between identity and strategy, emphasizing that it is by way of narrative and discourse that identities shape political practices. It then argues for the potential value of greater youth/adult collaboration within social movements, highlighting what girls could offer adult activists and what adults could offer girl activists.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. What does the author mean when she states that the relationship between identity and strategy is not an “essential” one? How does she think identity influences strategy?
2. How might girl activists benefit from more collaboration with adults
3. How might adult activists benefit from more collaboration with girls?
4. What are the barriers to adult-youth collaborations within activism and social movements?

## OVERALL REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the major differences in girls' activism in the five different cities
2. How do the examples of girl activists challenge more widespread ideas about girlhood?
3. How do the examples of girl activists challenge more widespread ideas about activism and activists?
4. How do the author's methodological choices influence the outcomes of her research?
5. Why are girl activists largely invisible in popular culture and public discourse?

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES OR ASSIGNMENTS:

Take an example of a movement and research/analyze how various identity narratives within that movement have influenced the movement's strategies and practices.

Compare and contrast the girl activists' ideas about girlhood with those found in another set of sources (girls' magazines, novels about girls, another scholarly study, etc.)

Find a current example of youth activism/youth organizing. Conduct research on that case and compare the identity narratives, strategies, and organizational structures with those found in Rebel Girls.

Read the mission statements of several different girls' organizations. Discuss how each one relates to the different paradigms of girls' empowerment vs. girls' activism.