

[SYNTH MUSIC PLAYING]

**SARAH BALDWIN:** From the United Nations Decade of the Girl Child to the White House's Let Girls Learn, investing in education for girls has become a global priority. And that's a good thing, right? Of course it is. But as always, the devil's in the details.

Which girls do we choose to teach? What subjects should they learn? What do governments and NGOs hope for when investing in girls' education? Perhaps more importantly, what do the girls themselves hope for when they sit down at their desks?

Shenila Khoja-Moolji asks these questions and more in her book, *Forging the Educated Girl-- The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia*. We talked about how educating girls in many parts of the world today is rife with political motivations, some of which serve these young people, and some of which don't. Khoja-Moolji is an assistant professor of gender studies at Bowdoin College. We started by talking about how this research has informed her work as an educator.

So, Shenila, thank you so much for coming in today.

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Thank you for having me.

**MOOLJI:**

**SARAH BALDWIN:** What is the title of your course?

**SHENILA KHOJA-** It's called *Saved by the Girl-- Politics of Girlhood in International Development*. And the other

**MOOLJI:** one is on feminist theory.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** So how are you finding your students receiving?

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Oh, they're-- I mean, they are really engaged and amazing. Most recently, the former first

**MOOLJI:** lady, Michelle Obama, she just inaugurated a global girls' alliance. It came last week. And so my students were-- they completely latched onto it. And they were analyzing it in class.

And so I was reminded of how it's still a very current, everyday issue to continue to think about. And so I was happy to see how they were engaging with contemporary cultural artifacts through it.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** That's great. I will never think of it the same way again. Especially I was thinking about-- you quote Ban Ki-moon as saying girls are an untapped natural resource. Which I probably last year would have thought yes, go.

And now it sounds rather sinister. You know, they're just like this tool of other agendas. And even Jim Yong Kim, you quote-- just kind of made me shudder.

At Brown, you studied international relations and economics. How did you come to this work from IR?

**SHENILA KHOJA- MOOLJI:** So after Brown, I went into investment banking for a few years. And then decided that I wanted to focus a little bit on thinking about education, and gender studies primarily. Thinking about Muslim women and men. So those are my big categories.

I ended up doing a master's in Islamic Studies and then went to Columbia. And I think in some ways, all scholarship is autobiographical. Because we're always thinking through objects, and we are part of them, and there is a very intimate relationship.

And so I'm from Pakistan. And I do have a very political and affective engagement with how Muslims are represented within the global north and within Pakistan, as well. I have a personal interest in thinking about minority communities, religious minority communities, class minority communities. And so I think in some ways then this allowed me to put a shape into some of my political commitments, too. To think through some of these ideas and the politics around it.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** So it's not a dispassionate, detached exercise at all.

**SHENILA KHOJA-** No.

**MOOLJI:**

**SARAH BALDWIN:** That's great. Can you talk a little bit about what you mean when you say your-- what is genealogy in the context of-- what is political genealogy?

**SHENILA KHOJA- MOOLJI:** So genealogy was a very interesting method for me to engage in the study of the educated girl, because I wasn't trying to excavate some essential qualities of this girl across the last 100 years. I don't think there is anything natural or truthful about the figure.

I was trying to look at how this figure is produced through entangled discourses. Who was talking about her? What is she supposed to know? Where is she supposed to get an

education? What is the purpose of that education?

And it's through those contestations that I find multiple articulations of an educated girl. Some of those raise to dominance, because the articulation emerges from spaces that are fairly powerful. So, the state, for example, is one such participant whose voice is the loudest, right?

And so my hope was to trace these different articulations and to show the underlying relations of power that prompt some of these ideas to gain dominance. And we imagine those ideals as natural, and as common sensical, and as given. Of course, girls are supposed to do xyz, right? But my hope was, as a genealogist, to show how these ideas shift. But also, how they are an effect of relationships of power.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Mm-hmm. I'm fascinated first of all by the cover of this book. I wonder if you could describe what we're looking at, here, and what the significance is?

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Sure. So you have a girl here in a yellow-orangish shalwar kameez. She's holding onto a photograph of the founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, but it's upside-down. And so people from that context often recognize the photo and the fact that it's upside down, and others-- I had a friend who thought that it was a cone of ice cream. And so, it was really funny.

**MOOLJI:**

But this particular image is painted by an artist from Pakistan. His name is Ali Azmat. He lives in Lahore. And because the book is about the figure of the educated girl in the context of colonial India and Pakistan, and how the state is entangled in the production of this idealized figure, I thought this particular image really stands out.

Because there is this indication of the state at play here. But also, she's wearing a shalwar kameez, and her expressions are fairly somber. So she is not that sort of girl who we can invest all our hopes in, who will lead us to progress. And it's not a celebratory figure of the girl that normally we see. And so that was another reason that I thought it would represent some of the themes of the book.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Well, it certainly draws one in right away. And then eventually, as we read, we start to understand why she's not exactly looking-- she's not exuding happiness and fulfillment. She's got a rather skeptical, and if not-- well, you say somber. I see maybe unhappy or a little resentful at all these burdens being placed on her, which we can talk about. Tell me about the times and areas that are in play here, and why you chose them?

**SHENILA KHOJA-** So I have been examining the convergence on the figure of the girl in the transnational

**MOOLJI:** development policy and practice for some time. I've been looking at girls' education and girls' empowerment campaigns, focusing in particular on representations of brown and black girls. And the ways in which a particular kind of girlhood is marked as successful, and all other girls are called on to reshape themselves through education to enact that form of girlhood.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Both within Muslim society and the international community?

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Yeah. I think I'm looking primarily at girls' education and empowerment campaigns. Those that

**MOOLJI:** take up the figure of Malala, for example, but also other campaigns, like Girl Effect, for example, Girl Rising, et cetera, that feature brown and black girls. And there is this idea around Muslim girls who need to reform and how they come to represent their societies and their nations.

But I'd been doing that for a long time. But for the book, I decided that it was also important for me to track this figure of the educated girl in other contexts as well, because it's not the first time that entities and organizations have talked about girls as saviors of their communities. And so I locate this book in the context of colonial India and Pakistan, looking at how a range of different social actors, including Muslim social reformers at the turn of the 20th century to the Pakistani state immediately after the independence of Pakistan-- so 1950s and '60s. And then the turn of the 21st century, how a range of different actors and institutions discursively produce this educated girl, and how she looks different across these three periods that I'm looking at in the book.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And you looked at a range of-- I'd say cultural artifacts, right? So what were the texts that you were exploring?

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Yeah, so I started with the writings of Muslim male social reformers, because when we think

**MOOLJI:** about the turn of the 20th century, there's lots of writing about women's educational reforms. And Muslim male reformers writing about it, debating on what sorts of education and knowledges should be accessible to women. Where should they get an education? Should they leave [URDU]?

Should they go to English schools? Do they need to create new Islami schools for girls? And so that was my first archive. But I was interested in looking at women's own participation in that discourse.

And so I looked at Urdu magazines. These are weekly magazines in which women wrote. And

women edited them, as well. They haven't really been archived until very recently.

And so I was in Pakistan. And went to libraries, and just pored over these women's writings to look at, OK, what were they thinking about these reforms that were--

**SARAH BALDWIN:** So what were they saying?

**SHENILA KHOJA-** So women were fairly-- so I expected to find something different, but women were also quite  
**MOOLJI:** divergent in terms of how they imagined the education landscape to be for them. And they were in line with male social reformers as well. And the distinction was in relation to the class of women.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Right, so class does come into play. Can you explain how that--

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Yeah. So there are women and there are male social reformers who thought about education  
**MOOLJI:** as a way to signal their social class. And that also meant sometimes reproducing practices of seclusion that would enable women to signal their social status as well. And so they wanted more funds for, for example, hiring female teachers-- [URDU]-- so that they could come home and they didn't have to leave home.

But there were those women who wanted to actually access English schools, Victorian schools that were already there. So that they could acquire multiple different sorts of knowledges. And then there were women who wanted-- who called on male reformers, actually, to do fund raising for establishing Islami schools for girls.

So there was this other critique in the archives, in the women's writings, that male social reformers were working so much for men's education. But they weren't investing enough efforts to advance schools and spaces for women.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And can you talk a little bit about women in lower and middle to lower classes saw education as one thing, and middle and upper-class women saw it in another way?

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Right. So that's towards the end of the book, so the turn of the 20th century. I did an empirical  
**MOOLJI:** study with girls in southern Pakistan. So I invited primarily girls from low-income families to investigate some of the ways in which schooling also introduces limitations in their lives. And I started with a very generic question around what does [URDU], or education, mean for you? And what does it do for you?

And predominantly girls from low-income families saw schooling as the pathway to what they called office jobs. An office job was a code for jobs that they imagined would keep them secure from harassment. Of course, we know that's not the case. But the assumption is that if you are well-to-do you are educated, but you would not be participating in the labor force.

And if you had to work, then you would work in these office jobs, which are being a program officer of an NGO. Being a teacher. Being a secretary. So all those kinds of jobs. And so they desired those sorts of jobs in order to figure out ways to still signal respectability, because they couldn't afford to stay at home. They weren't wealthy enough to stay at home.

But middle to upper-middle-class girls wanted an education to secure better marriage proposals. And some of the girls who were low-income, they kind of critiqued that sort of engagement with education. One of them was talking about how, oh, there are some girls who want to get an education so that they can insert doctor or engineer before their names. And that's all really they care for, because the idea is that you marry into a family that is wealthy enough, so you don't have to enter the labor force.

And so the World Bank has called this a gender paradox. But if we look at schooling and we think about concerns around marriageability and the class nature of work, of labor force participation, then it becomes more comprehensible to think about how girls engage with schooling and consume it differently. And social class plays a role there.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** So, you know, especially in the West-- maybe, I don't know. But we're so, I think, prone to thinking that the empowerment of girls just broadly is a good thing. And it's much more complicated. I mean, you're really complicating this question of something that we think is pretty straightforward. What are we to do with that?

**SHENILA KHOJA-** So I started off thinking about how the girls' empowerment discourse abstract girls from politics  
**MOOLJI:** and histories. And it shifts the burden of development and ending poverty onto these girls.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And ending terrorism.

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Right. all sorts of societal-- yeah. And so through my work, what I wanted to direct attention to  
**MOOLJI:** was this very complex and also historical landscape within which dispossession, displacement, poverty take hold. And how the solutions also have to be similarly complex and involve a political argument there as well.

Which doesn't mean that we shouldn't work for girls' education. We absolutely should. I think

girls should have access to education. But we have to do more. And so I wanted to introduce an and, and, and kind of argument, so that we don't stop there. Because there is a way in which this discourse can mobilize so many different entities across the global north and the south, whereby we can just focus on this iconic figure of the girl.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Right. It's so interesting how you pointed out something that I wouldn't have noticed if you hadn't serviced it, which is that Malala has been presented as this figure who is an exception. When she could just as well have been presented as representative of Pashtun culture. And their support of girls and women, and their defiance in the face of the Taliban. And I don't think I would have thought of that. Well, I mean, I think were so avid for that kind of heroic figure.

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Yeah.

**MOOLJI:**

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And I also thought it was so interesting how you really pointed out that Muslim girl and empowered girl are always seen as two different things.

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Right.

**MOOLJI:**

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And that's a really interesting thing to bring to light, I think.

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Yeah, because I think the Muslim girl becomes the other of the empowered girl. And so you

**MOOLJI:** invest in the empowered girl, but that also has implications for how we imagine Muslim girls. And how also we imagine the kinds of empowered agencies that can be enacted, right?

I think there is also a very strong undercurrent of resistance against local culture and local practices as a signal of empowerment, which is not really the case. If you look at actually Malala's autobiography, or the work that she's done in Pakistan, which she's fairly embedded in some of the local idioms. Which get erased when she's transformed into the hero.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And given a Nobel Prize.

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Yeah.

**MOOLJI:**

**SARAH BALDWIN:** So you're working on a new book?

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Yes. I have two new projects. And I think I'm going to work on the first one fairly-- I'm going to  
**MOOLJI:** prioritize one over the other. The second one's like a longer one.

So I'm trying to look at iconic figures that emerge after terrorist attacks, such as the figure of the terrorists, the figure of the soldier, in the context of Pakistan. And to examine how these icons become ways and in through which we imagine a gendered social order. And what kinds of possibilities open up, but also the ways in which, particularly, conceptions around masculinities constrict.

The second project is in relation to tracking the stories of women who were refugees due to the Pakistan, India, Bangladesh war in 1971. And I'm tracking a group of people, of women, who migrated from Takhar to Karachi to look at some of the ways in which they remade life. Because a lot of them had to come by themselves. Men didn't join them.

And so trying to see, instead of focusing a lot on trauma of partition, I'm also trying to look at, OK, once the refugees arrived in Karachi, what are some of the ways in which these women rebuilt their lives? And stories of reliance, and interdependency, and institutional support. So that's a much longer sort of project.

And my mom was one such refugee. So again, it's a very personal--

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Personal.

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Yeah. So I'm excited about that project.

**MOOLJI:**

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Very interesting. Well, I can't thank you enough for taking the time. I know you have a busy schedule today.

**SHENILA KHOJA-** Oh, thank you.

**MOOLJI:**

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Thanks for talking to us at Trending Globally.

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This episode of Trending Globally was produced by Dan Richards, Jon Maza, and Alex Laferriere. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin.

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