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## Corporate social responsibility and the neoliberalization of feminism

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The chapter examines corporate social responsibility projects that focus on women's empowerment as embedded in a historical moment characterized by a neoliberalization of feminism. It interrogates three axes of neoliberalization: (a) the inclusion of women into the paid labour force in the name of women's empowerment; (b) an ideological co-optation based on making feminism fit neoliberal doctrine, and the reformulation of gender equality as good for business and growth; and (c) the incorporation of gender equality into neoliberal rationalities and technologies of government, such as public-private partnerships and the production of new gendered subjectivities that flourish in liberal markets.

In the contemporary age of neoliberalism, the meaning of feminism is contested in a way that is illustrated by two vignettes conveying starkly different understandings of what is needed to overcome the subordination/oppression/inequality of women:

*At its April 2015 centennial meeting, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) published a new manifesto which identified the root causes of war as, among other things: "the capitalist economic system, involving the exploitation of the labour and resources of the many by the few, wantonly harming people and the environment, generating*

*conglomerates of global reach and unaccountable power” (Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 2015, p. 2). For WILPF, patriarchy and militarism are intrinsic to capitalism in its current form.*

*Two weeks later, at a fundraising event in support of a women’s programme in the US, Paula Shugart, President of the Miss Universe Organization (owned by Donald Trump), sang the praises of her organization, asserting that its mission is “to empower every woman to have the confidence to stand in any forum, anywhere and declare: ‘I am confident, I am secure, I am comfortable in my own skin. I am powerful ... and that’s what makes me beautiful’”. For Shugart, contemporary capitalism, paired with what some would call patriarchal practices, holds the key to women’s empowerment.*

The two vignettes convey profoundly clashing understandings of “feminism”. WILPF is an organization with roots in the early 20th century, which defines the problem as a combination of militarism, capitalism and patriarchy, and sees its purpose in critiquing, organizing and advocating against this system. Shugart is part of a movement among women business leaders, who have succeeded within the existing system but are recognizing that inequality is a problem and are supporting women’s empowerment in various forms. The contradiction Shugart lives as the leader of a company that sells a profoundly sexist product may be particularly jarring; yet her situation is not unique.

As commitments to corporate social responsibility have become the norm among large multinational corporations (MNCs), companies have identified gender equality as one of their causes. Not surprisingly, this “transnational business feminism” (Roberts, 2012) has no qualms with capitalism—and in some instances neither with patriarchy. Companies such as Hooters and Sam’s Club (a subsidiary of Walmart) are investing in women’s empowerment projects and styling themselves as advocates for women’s rights. Both have been the target of feminist activism, the first with respect to objectification of women (Hooters demands its serving staff wear revealing clothes and market the waitresses’ “curves” as part of the dining “experience”), the second with reference to pay inequities. Women’s empowerment is also on the agenda in the beauty industry: for example, Yves Saint Laurent and Avon brand themselves as committed to advancing gender equality. This may sound strange to feminists who have critiqued the industry for looking at women’s bodies through masculinist lenses, constructing them as always deficient and in need of enhancement. But there are also less overtly sexist companies—consumer product companies such as Unilever, Mondelēz and Coca-Cola, and garment companies such as Levi-Strauss—who have invested in projects targeting women and girls in their supply and marketing chains. Yet others, such as Nike and Goldman Sachs, have established partnerships with public entities to advance training and advocacy projects in support of women’s empowerment globally.

In this chapter I would like to situate this embracing of gender equality as part of corporate social responsibility historically, reflecting on the contemporary era

as marked by processes of neoliberalization, and suggesting that the burgeoning interest of businesses in gender equality amounts to a neoliberalization of feminism. Neoliberalism has become somewhat of an explanatory hammer that fits all nails (Larner, 2003), so reverting to neoliberalism to explain what is happening to feminism as its causes are adopted by businesses may appear somewhat tedious. But rather than using neoliberalism as a closed concept, I join those who have recognized its adaptability (Larner and Craig, 2005; Peck, 2008; Peck and Tickell, 2002). Like them, I explore not what neoliberalism is, but what it does, focusing on the processes of neoliberalization in the contemporary transformations of feminism, and probing as well the potential openings it offers for feminist transformations.

The neoliberalization of feminism has taken three forms. First, it has entailed the inclusion of women into the paid labour force in the name of women's empowerment. Second, feminism has been co-opted ideologically by making it fit neoliberal doctrine, reformulating it as good for business and growth. And third, gender has become a part of neoliberal rationalities and technologies of government, such as public–private partnerships and the production of new gendered subjectivities that flourish in liberal markets. Let me illustrate...

## **Co-opting feminism into neoliberal economic projects**

The transformation of feminism is linked to the transformation of Fordist capitalism, the economic project of deregulation, privatization and marketization pushed in the policies of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and picked up internationally in the World Bank and IMF's prescriptions for structural adjustment of economies in the South. Post-Fordism entailed the creation of a new international division of labour in which women played a key role. In the wake of trade liberalization, companies relocated production and assembly operations into the South, taking advantage of a female labour force, constructed as cheap and pliable, and circumventing labour regulations in industrialized economies (Benería, 2014; Elson and Pearson, 1981). The process set in motion a "feminization" of the global labour force, not only bringing women into the workforce, but also feminizing jobs by flexibilizing and informalizing them (Standing, 1989).

The neoliberal transformation ushered in by these policies happened in an era when feminism had established itself as a political force internationally. In the West, second wave feminism emerged in the historical period of "state-organized capitalism" and offered an economic, cultural and political critique of such capitalism. Nancy Fraser (2009) points out that this critique in part resonated with neoliberal critiques, and that feminism got selectively enlisted in the cause of a neoliberal transformation. The demands of women to enter the labour force (often

replacing expensive male workers) and the emphasis on self-determination over state tutelage (for example in the form of protective legislation and gender-biased welfare systems) all resonated with neoliberal ideas. The result was that capitalist processes seduced feminism allowing its liberal basis to become hegemonic (Eisenstein, 2009). Left-wing politics and class-based analyses that thrived in the early second-wave got lost, as feminists in the West turned to a politics of recognition, and struggles over distribution got drowned out by other issues (Fraser, 2000). All this resonated well with neoliberal prescriptions making possible the appropriation of women's labour and ideas by global elites, and providing legitimacy to the neoliberal transformation of capitalism: "In a fine instance of the cunning of history, utopian desires found a second life as feeling currents that legitimated the transition to a new form of capitalism: post-Fordist, transnational, neoliberal" (Fraser, 2009, p. 99).

The arguments of Fraser and Eisenstein have been criticized as nostalgic in that they yearn for a mythological pure and radical feminism of the past, and ignore that liberal feminism has always been dominant in the West (Funk, 2013). Their argument furthermore is somewhat Western-centric, disregarding the activism of Latin American, African and Asian feminist movements in taking on the effects of structural adjustment, denying feminist anti-systemic forms of resistance from the global South (Aslan and Gambetti, 2011). But the critique makes visible feminism as a contradictory social force in the restructuring of the global economy and the resonances between some feminist and neoliberal agendas. Among these, advancing women's labour force participation is a key issue, which has provided the grounds for an embracing of some feminist ideas by corporations.

For example, supply chain management projects, such as Business for Social Responsibility's (BSR's) HERproject, take on the reality of global assembly lines. The project connects MNCs with NGOs in countries where they have supplier factories in order to deliver healthcare services and increase health awareness among women garment workers. The project delivers health messages through peer-to-peer education, fostering group formation and reducing absenteeism and turn over. Styled as a win-win effort, the project is clearly beneficial for workers; but it is a far cry from the unionized factories in the North that the HERproject factories have replaced. Moving assembly lines to the South meant moving jobs, but not the political and social aspects of corporate responsibility. While unionized workers had a modicum of say in the rules of their employment in the North, the largely (but not wholly) non-unionized, feminized workforce in world factories depends on hand-outs from benevolent employers. Paternalism replaces unions and collective bargaining as the neoliberal equivalent of re-embedding an untamed free market economy.

## The ideological neoliberalization of feminism

Neoliberalism is not only an economic project, it also is an economic doctrine or ideology synthesized in the works of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and the Chicago School, combining a central valuing of private enterprise and the market with a deep suspicion of the state. The neoliberalization of feminism has meant that its ideas have been adjusted to fit this doctrine. These adjustments are taking place in universities, for example in the field of development economics, where researchers are busy showing that gender equality and neoliberal capitalism go together and elaborating how they relate (Kabeer and Natali, 2013). Adjustments also are taking place at other institutions that generate economic knowledge, such as the World Bank and the IMF. Feminist-adjusted neoliberal ideologies circulate in sites such as the meetings of the World Economic Forum, are picked up in influential foundations, such as the Clinton Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and are broadcast through the international press and social media.

In the field of development economics, the World Bank has taken the lead to produce evidence and establish the orthodoxy about the relationship between gender equality and economic development. Under the motto “gender equality is smart economics”, formulated in its 2007 Gender Action Plan, the Bank has proliferated research to argue that expanding opportunities for women and girls helps reduce poverty and spur economic growth (Prügl, 2016). It therefore advocates empowering women by giving them access to credit, land, education and health, and by helping them gain a voice in politics and resist gender-based violence. Suspending the question of the effects of policies of market liberalization on women and on non-market values more broadly, the Bank has successfully established that women can thrive in a liberalized economy—as long as they have access to resources and as long as discriminatory practices are eliminated. The problem of inequality is redefined as related to institutions, norms and culture; the liberal market mechanism is held harmless.

The logic for pursuing gender equality becomes a business logic as the intrinsic value of equality apparently fails to convince. Instead, gender equality is supported because it advances all kinds of social and private goods: it spurs economic growth, fosters development and reduces hunger; it enables better company management, a better understanding of customer needs and thus increased profit; it reduces excessive risk-taking and thus increases financial stability. Feminism is tethered to a logic that makes the market the measure of value.

Adjusting feminism to market logics invites a focus on individual women and a tendency to construct women as intrinsically different. This has allowed for interesting critiques. For example, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, proposals were rampant that excessive masculinity was at the bottom of the crisis and that a “healthy dose of oestrogen” would be part of the solution (Kay and Shipman, 2009; Prügl, 2012). The critique called out the masculinist bias of neoliberalism; however, the cost of this appropriation of feminism is heavy. It essentializes women

as different (from essentialized men), asserting that they contribute to financial stability by acting more prudently than men, and to poverty alleviation because of their presumed inclination to invest in their families (Griffin, 2013). This perspective tends to reduce gender to a heteronormative configuration of women and men, engaged in complementary sharing, forming “happy households”, and thereby stabilizing rather than disturbing existing gender binaries (Bedford, 2007, 2012). Moreover, in such market-adjusted feminism, gender remains an individual-level category. This is visible in the gender-focused discourse of the World Bank, which proposes to empower individual women by giving them economic opportunities or access to education and healthcare. Left behind is the critique of structures that marginalize unpaid care labour and non-quantifiable, non-marketable values (Razavi, 2012).

## Drafting feminism for neoliberal governance

The neoliberalization of feminism also has a governance dimension. This entails on the one hand institutional change in the relationship between feminist movements and the state, and on the other hand the incorporation of notions of feminine difference into what Foucault calls “governmentality”, i.e. a mentality to govern (Dean, 2009; Foucault, 1991; Gordon, 1991; Prügl, 2011). Neoliberal governmentality displays a distinctive rationality based on the logic of the self-regulating market. And it deploys distinctive technologies of government that seek to produce motivated, responsible selves with a capacity to operate in markets, including for example self-help groups, individual goal-setting and the promotion of entrepreneurship.

The theme of feminism co-opted into the institutions of the state is as old as the second wave itself, and it has reappeared massively in discussions over gender mainstreaming (Cornwall *et al.*, 2007; Lombardo and Meier, 2006; Prügl, 2009; Wetterer, 2002). However, something new seems afoot as state bureaucracies (at national and international levels) have been charged to implement neoliberal policies, have opened themselves up to working ever more closely with the private sector, and have adopted management by incentives. Kantola and Squires (2012) argue that what they call “market feminism” has come to replace “state feminism”, i.e. the alliances between women’s policy agencies and women’s movement activists, which in many countries had succeeded in making the state responsive to movement claims. Market feminism entails new institutional forms that offload the traditional responsibilities of the state to non-state venues, including public–private partnerships.<sup>1</sup> While these tend to be highly efficient in achieving their instrumental goals, they often fail to live up to feminist and democratic standards of inclusiveness, transparency and reflexivity (Prügl and True, 2014).

1 The notion of “offloading” of state responsibility is from Banaszak and Beckwith (2003).

According to Kantola and Squires (2012), market feminism has also changed the priorities of women's policy agencies, giving primacy to those feminist claims that resonate with market agendas. To use Foucaultian terminology, neoliberalized feminism draws on a new rationality of government. This does not only entail economic agendas, but more broadly, agendas of efficiency. Thus, gender mainstreaming has entailed the translation of feminist knowledge into "gender expertise", which is adjusted to the mandates of government agencies and international organizations, and which instrumentalizes gender equality for other goals (including poverty alleviation, peace-building, fighting corruption and terrorism) as experts make "the business case" for gender equality (Kunz *et al.*, 2015).

Policy agencies employ new technologies of government that make productive such neoliberalized feminist ideology. At the basis of this rationality are notions of individual freedom, choice and empowerment. This encompasses a discourse, which generates individuals as entrepreneurs of the self and favours the creation of external environments that lead individuals to self-monitor so that they conduct themselves in ways that respond to market principles. Feminist politics in this discourse becomes a matter of "responsibilization" (Bexell, 2012); that is, it becomes an ideology that calls on the subject to reform itself for the sake of a new transnational project of gender equality. Solutions are not to be sought in movement organizing or cultural politics, but in changing attitudes through capacity building; in giving women access to resources; and in fostering individual aspirations and entrepreneurial identities. Neoliberalism in this way constitutes a strategic project that thrives on the basis of biopolitical power; that is, of a power that constitutes dependable individuals that hold themselves accountable to norms of market-embedded gender equality.

CSR projects that focus on women's empowerment through entrepreneurship can be understood as neoliberal technologies of government. They include for example Goldman Sachs' 10,000 Women programme, which partners with business schools around the world to provide business training to promising women candidates, or Coca-Cola's 5by20 campaign, which seeks to empower 5 million women in their role as small entrepreneurs by 2020 (Prügl and True, 2014; Tornhill, Chapter 12, this volume). They also include various bottom of the pyramid marketing programmes whereby corporations draw on women entrepreneurs to gain a hold in difficult to access, often rural, markets. Unilever's Shakti programme is a prime example. Initially set up in India with the support of the International Finance Corporation, local NGOs, the Andhra Pradesh and other local governments, it has established a network of almost 50,000 "*Shakti Amma*" (empowered mothers) or "*Shakti* entrepreneurs", who sell Unilever products to rural consumers in India's hundreds of thousands of villages.

According to Dolan *et al.* (2012, p. 7, citing Appadurai) the *Shakti* network thrives on the basis of neoliberal ideas—disciplining women to become industrious and seeking to instil in them a "capacity to aspire". While thus an object of governmentality, the *Shakti Amma* is also one of its instruments, offering a private solution (Lifebuoy soap) to achieving a public health goal (increased hygiene) by convincing villagers to change their behaviours and buy her Unilever product (Cross and Street,

2009). The business case describes a win–win situation: the company enters a growing, difficult to access market, the *Shakti Amma* increases her income, and public authorities achieve a health outcome. Silenced is the opposition of traditional soap makers or of those demanding clean water rather than Lifebuoy to advance public health. The definition of women’s empowerment is thoroughly individualized, blind to the destruction of women’s solidarity groups through which Unilever recruits its “entrepreneurs” and who start to compete against each other, and blind to the redefinition of women’s empowerment, which encompasses the Unilever skin-whitening products, also in the *Shakti Amma*’s assortment (Cross and Street, 2009; Thekkudan and Tandon, 2009). The neoliberalized feminism of the *Shakti Amma* is no match for a capitalism that thrives off racialized and patriarchal values.

## Conclusion

Unilever’s *Shakti* project starkly illustrates the problematic effects of corporate social responsibility projects that uncritically embrace neoliberal capitalism and fail to question patriarchal and racist values. Claiming to empower women, such CSR projects hijack feminist politics that imagine empowerment as a collective strategy to overturn oppressive structures. Against such radical politics, they construct empowerment as an individual achievement that can flow from the paternalism of the employer or from the rewards that the market bestows on those who have developed an aspirational, entrepreneurial self. As such, they are blind to the racist and misogynist messages conveyed in problematic products, from Miss Universe contests that generate a feminine ideal that conforms to male fantasies to Light & Lovely skin whiteners that promise success based on overcoming blackness, and to sexist practices from scantily clad waitresses to low pay assembly lines and flexible workforces.

Neoliberalized feminism is not a closed system, however, and it is worth asking under what conditions it can contribute to transforming societies in such a way that multiple and intersecting forms of subordination are overcome. Facilitating organizing among garment workers can provide such an opening, as can various forms of job creation. But perhaps more important would be a transformation of corporations so that serving the public good becomes their core mission. This would mean recovering their origins as institutions serving public purposes, for which states have granted them privileges unavailable to private individuals—such as limited liability (see Ciepely, 2013). It also would mean a democratization of company governance that would enable the participation of stakeholders in the definition of company goals. In other words, it would mean a shift from a paternalist model of companies acting responsibly as they see fit to a democratic model in which companies are chartered for the public good. The codification of privileges for companies in international markets under neoliberal trade and investment regimes, and the reliance on the *noblesse oblige* types of CSR practice fall far short of the democratization of corporate governance necessary to define what women need and want in their diverse roles as company stakeholders.



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