

# HEGEMONIC FEMINISM, NEOLIBERALISM AND WOMENOMICS: ‘EMPOWERMENT’ INSTEAD OF LIBERATION?

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**Abstract:** In this essay I reflect on a sample of a relatively new literature that has emerged in recent years on the growth of ‘womenomics’ and what Adrienne Roberts has called ‘transnational business feminism’. Are these developments a triumph for the influence of feminist activists around the globe? Or do we see them as yet another classic attempt by the agents of capitalist globalisation to contain the energies of women and turn them to the advantage of the bottom line? I look at some examples of TBF on the part of Goldman Sachs, Unilever, Levi-Strauss, and the Nike Foundation; at the debate among feminist scholars over whether neoliberal feminism is ‘really’ feminism; at the rise of the concept of ‘empowerment;’ and finally, at some elements that TBF leaves out of the picture, including the neoliberal assault on social reproduction; the extreme exploitation of women workers, from Walmart to Export Processing Zones; the retreat from class analysis under neoliberalism; and the continuing effects of ‘structural adjustment’ on countries in the North like Greece subject to the ravages of the international financial order. I conclude with a call to the international male left to be as welcoming and as creative toward the ideas and the activism of the international women’s movement as their corporate adversaries.

**Keywords:** Women and development; women’s empowerment; Marxism; capitalism; feminism; neoliberalism.

## INTRODUCTION

In this essay I want to reflect on a sample of a relatively new literature that has emerged in recent years on the growth of ‘womenomics’ and what Adrienne Roberts has called ‘transnational business feminism’.<sup>1</sup> If in the 1970s, we saw the growth of official feminism, femocrats, and state machinery for women, and in the 1980s, a surge of activities around women in development, the 1990s and the 2000s seem to have ushered in a new doctrine, that of so-called ‘womenomics’, meaning that investment in women and girls is now the key to ending poverty, hunger, and disease.

I extend the argument first put forth in my book *Feminism Seduced*.<sup>2</sup> In that study I argued that national governments and international financial institutions were making use of a certain kind of ‘hegemonic’ feminism, to

1. Adrienne Roberts, ‘The Political Economy of ‘Transnational Business Feminism’: Problematising the Corporate-Led Gender Equality Agenda’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 17, 2 (2015), pp209-231. Hereafter *Political Economy of ‘Transnational Business Feminism’*; Adrienne Roberts, ‘Financial Crisis, Financial Firms ... and Financial Feminism? The Rise of ‘Transnational Business Feminism’ and the Necessity of Marxist Feminist IPE’. *Socialist Studies/ Etudes socialistes*, 8, 2 (2012), pp85-108. Hereafter *Financial Crisis*.

2. Hester Eisenstein, *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women’s Ideas and Labor to Exploit the World*, Boulder, Paradigm Publishers 2009. Hereafter *Feminism Seduced*.

advance the view that the solution to poverty and underdevelopment was the fostering of education, training and jobs for women and girls. I called this substituting women for development. By this I meant that the highly successful path of state-led development, exemplified by China after 1949, Japan after the Second World War, and South Korea in the 1950s (not to mention the United States after the Civil War), was declared by the United States and other powerful industrialised countries to be obsolete. Instead, state-led development was discredited, and replaced by a new paradigm that required the coerced opening of national economies to an unlimited influx of foreign capital and manufacturing.

Under the rubric of neoliberalism, previously underdeveloped countries were no longer going to be permitted to govern their own economic development. Rather, they were forced to submit to the dictates of international investors, through so-called Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). The results of these policies in the 1980s were widely viewed as devastating for countries in the Global South, resulting in the decline of public health facilities, schools, and infrastructure, and a renewed rise in poverty and disease.

At the time, I argued that international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund had begun to produce an ideological case for SAPs, namely, the great advantages these policies provided for women and girls, from the creation of Export Processing Zones (EPZs) with predominantly female workforces, to the sharp rise in migration by women from countries such as the Philippines, whose provision of remittances was becoming a chief source of government revenues. I called this an ideological sleight of hand, in which women and girls were presented as the key to development. I quoted then UN General Secretary Kofi Annan as saying in 2006 that ‘the world is beginning to recognise that empowering women and girls is key to development’ (Quoted in *Feminism Seduced*, pp137-8).

Since that time, the claim that women and girls rather than state-led development are the key to ending poverty, has been extended from governments and IFIs to corporations.<sup>3</sup> As noted earlier, this set of ideas has been codified in the notion of ‘womenomics’. I develop this analysis below. But first, we need to ask: is this mainstream adoption of a certain version of feminist ideas a triumph for the influence of feminist activists around the globe? Or do we see this as yet another classic attempt by the agents of capitalist globalisation to contain the energies of women and turn them to the advantage of the bottom line? Presumably we should be neither surprised nor shocked that a world-wide movement of women, revived in the 1960s, and bringing its energy, idealism and vision of fundamental social change, should have been derailed by the defenders of neoliberal globalised capitalism.

Why has the worldwide women’s movement been unable to mount a serious challenge to the hegemony of neoliberalism? A movement to seek

3. My thanks to Maria Hengeveld for introducing me to this literature.

equality for the women of the world should have been part of the resistance to globalisation, with its attendant shredding of the safety net and devastation of the public sector. Instead, we have seen the rise of what I have called 'hegemonic' feminism, in a 'dangerous liaison' with capitalism. As I argued in *Feminism Seduced*, the revolutionary demands of the women's movement have been reduced by the dominant engines of capitalism to the most widely recognised meaning of feminism, namely, paid work for women, along with access to power for an elite few.

More broadly, myself, Nancy Fraser, and other scholars have pointed to a close relationship between the ideology of neoliberalism and that of mainstream feminism.<sup>4</sup> As the Keynesian state has been ushered out of history and replaced by the neoliberal state, the conception of government being responsible for the general welfare has given way to the notion of individual responsibility. The competitive individual is responsible for her own welfare, and any failures such as poverty and crime can be sheeted home to her individual inadequacies, rather than those of society as a whole. Indeed, in Margaret Thatcher's memorable phrase, 'there is no such thing as society'. Unfortunately a certain version of feminism, with its emphasis on individual achievement and competitiveness, is all too congruent with this set of ideas.

This interpretation of feminism - broad support for individual achievement in business, government, and other areas of society, and a dismissal of the collective goals of the women's movement - has received widespread acceptance as part of a broad imperialist agenda of cultural and economic domination by the United States and the other rich countries. We are told that the key to creating wealth and producing social justice is in fact the 'empowering' of individual women.

Advocates for this form of hegemonic feminism include Sheryl Sandberg of Facebook, who urges us to 'lean in' to corporate power, and journalists Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, who see the 'rescuing' of women in the Third World as a path to ending world poverty.<sup>5</sup> Government actors in the United States and in the European and other rich powers claim that advancements for individual women represent, indeed, part of the essence of the cultural and political superiority of the West, in contrast to the benighted areas of the world that are subject to the backward Islamic religion and indeed (in this interpretation, therefore) to terrorism.

In recent years, the rhetoric of mainstream media and of international institutions have instituted a broad claim: that one key to ending the persistent ills of the international economy lies with educating and advancing the 'rights' of girls and women, with corporations like Nike and NGOs like CARE featuring girls and women as the focus of their development efforts. It is not international capitalism, in this view, that has given rise to the extremes of wealth and poverty that we see currently. Rather, it is the failure to cultivate the talents and the potential of the women and girls of the world.

4. Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*. New York, Verso 2013.

5. Hester Eisenstein, 'The Sweatshop Feminists'. *Jacobin*, 2015. Online: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/06/kristof-globalization-development-third-world/> Hereafter *Sweatshop Feminists*.

## ‘TRANSNATIONAL BUSINESS FEMINISM’

This effort has given rise to a new pseudo-feminist ideology, which, as noted, Adrienne Roberts has termed ‘transnational business feminism’. In this view of the world, states, multinational corporations, nongovernment organisations, and international financial institutions have decided that the women of the world constitute an untapped resource. Once women are drawn into the operations of capitalist investment, the return on this enterprise will be enormous.

Another unexpected bonus for business in the incorporation of women is that (in an essentialist paradigm now widely accepted in business circles) the gentleness and non-aggressiveness of most women in comparison to their male counterparts will mitigate the insane risk-taking by primarily male heads of corporations and financial institutions that brought the world economy to the brink after 2008 (*Financial Crisis*).

Thus in the ideology of ‘womenomics’, a term first coined by the editors of *The Economist*, women in general represent the salvation of the world capitalist economy, as entrepreneurs and as consumers. As *The Economist* proclaimed, ‘Forget China, India and the Internet, economic growth is driven by women’ (Quoted in *Feminism Seduced*, ix). This doctrine presupposes that the ills of the capitalist world economy can be fixed by the incorporation of women into the regular operations of business. Women are being viewed as a kind of all-purpose tonic for the sputtering, uneven growth and the recurring crises of the world economy since the so-called recovery from the crash of 2008. In a particularly essentialist view of gender, ‘transnational business feminism’ “has emerged as a cure for the risk-taking, testosterone-driven masculinity associated with the excessive speculation leading to the global financial crisis while incorporating women in developing countries in capitalist markets and their ongoing expansion”<sup>6</sup>.

As Roberts argues, the ‘cure for the errant masculinity’ that contributed to the global crisis of 2008 is ‘a healthy dose of femininity ... In this framework, women are central to re-establishing the legitimacy of global finance while gender, framed as a predominantly cultural system that is related to yet separate from markets, becomes an explanation for their improper functioning. It is in this context that transnational business feminism has emerged as part of the cure for the ails (i.e. crises) of transnational business masculinity (*Financial Crisis*, p90).

Instead of a Marxist understanding, which would point to ‘deep structural contradictions and tensions’ within the globalised contemporary version of capitalism, ‘transnational business feminists claim to have discovered an easy fix: a healthy dose of estrogen’ (*Financial Crisis*). In fact, two authors of the ‘business case for gender equality that they call ‘womenomics,’ Claire Shipman and Katty Kay, have discovered an actual ‘asset-to-estrogen ratio’ - more women employed leads to higher profits, which they call ‘pink profits’

6. Elisabeth Prugl and Jacqui True, ‘Equality means business? Governing gender through transnational public-private partnerships’, *Review of International Political Economy*, 21, 6 (2014), 1137-1169. Hereafter *Equality means business?*.

(*Financial Crisis*). (These writers apparently fail to credit *The Economist* with the original use of the term.)

## GOLDMAN SACHS, UNILEVER, LEVI-STRAUSS, NIKE ET AL TO THE RESCUE

What are some examples of the new transnational business feminism? One of these is the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women Global Initiative. Begun in March 2008, this was an idea to increase the outreach of Goldman Sachs into the global community. 'It is no coincidence that this program was initiated with the unravelling of the global financial crisis, in which Goldman Sachs was considered to be a major culprit' (*Equality means business?*). Goldman Sachs believes that for a US \$100 million investment in businesswomen from the Global South the outcome will be 'more competitive, open and growing economies'. According to their figures, increases in women's labour market participation 'could lift incomes globally by 14 per cent by 2020 and 20 per cent by 2030' (*Equality means business?*).

What exactly is the 10,000 Women Global Initiative? It is a plan to increase the numbers of women in business internationally. In each of 20 countries, women are being admitted on a very competitive basis to a local business school, and the idea is that these highly trained women will then go on to found successful businesses in places such as Rwanda, India and elsewhere. As each woman acquires a business education, she will employ other women, and generate income for their communities. Thus, according to Goldman Sachs, '10,000 women is not a program, it is a movement' (p1146).

Yet another example is the Shakti project, which is an attempt by Unilever to expand its market in Southeast Asia. With the support of the International Finance Corporation, local NGOs, and local governments including that of Andhra Pradesh, the company has created a network of 48,000 *Shakti Amma* - translation: 'empowered mothers' - who sell Unilever products to rural consumers in villages throughout India. Parallel networks have been set up in Pakistan, Bangladesh, working with CARE International, and Sri Lanka, working with the national government. This network allows the Unilever subsidiary in India, Hindustan Lever, 'to reach millions of potential consumers in the countryside, where there is no retail distribution network, no advertising coverage, and poor roads and transport,' and where illiteracy is widespread. This Shakti network is allowing Unilever to beat out its competition, especially with Procter and Gamble.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of the women themselves, Prugl argues that while the Shakti Amma is 'an instrument of governmentality, redefining public health goals by virtue of corporate solutions,' through the work of selling especially Lifebuoy, Unilever's 'classic brand of soap,' nonetheless women thereby become 'a messenger for hygiene, hand washing and personal care and presumably contributes to enhancing community health. Her empowerment includes

7. Elizabeth Prugl, 'Neoliberalising feminism', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 20, 4, (2015), 614-631, p622. Hereafter *Neoliberalising feminism*.

training in public speaking to help her in her mission and to convince villagers of the benefit of such hygiene. By generating new consumer subjectivities she helps deliver health through private provision (*Neoliberalising feminism*, p622).

Through this mechanism, 'the company prides itself at giving income to rural women through entrepreneurship development, allowing women to support themselves, increasing their self-esteem, and their status in society ... Feminist ideas of women's empowerment are grafted onto an agenda of conquering global markets' (p622).

Another initiative cited by Prugl is the HERproject, initiated in 2007 with funding from the Levi-Strauss Foundation and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. Under the aegis of the Business for Social Responsibility, which is a global network of more than 250 companies set up after prodding from Levi-Strauss, this is a project which brings together multinational corporations with NGOs in the countries where they produce garments. The goal is to develop greater health awareness and practices among women garment workers. 'It trains factory workers, line supervisors, clinic nurses, and human resources staff to teach their peers about sexual and reproductive health, including family planning and prevention of sexually transmitted infections, but also about nutrition, hygiene, pre- and post-natal care, infectious diseases, malaria, and harassment and violence' (p625).

The company has helped to implement this program with nine of its suppliers in China, Egypt, India and Pakistan. The results are impressive: a study of a Levi-Strauss contractor in Egypt showed that for every dollar invested, the return was worth four dollars in reduced absenteeism and turnover rates, while women gained knowledge and access to health information and supplies like sanitary pads.

But womenomics is also an ideological project. Another fairly well-known example of the incorporation of pseudo-feminist principles by a major corporation is the Nike Effect. This is the 'brainchild' of the Nike Foundation, which 'after reshaping its vision to focus on the alleviation of global poverty in 2004, found that investment in girls allowed for the greatest impact' (*Political Economy of "Transnational Business Feminism"*, p221). The argument is that when a girl is given educational and economic opportunities, there is a ripple effect to her family, her community, her children and grandchildren. In 2005, Nike co-founded the Coalition for Adolescent Girls with the United Nations, publishing a report called *Girls Count* (Levine et al.). In 2007, Nike helped to launch the Gender Action Plan (GAP), along with the World Bank, and the governments of Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Italy and the UK. Entitled *Gender Equality as Smart Economics*, the goal is 'to support "gender equality and women's empowerment, primarily by increasing women's access to jobs, land rights, financial services, agricultural inputs and infrastructure"' (p223).

The pious goals of the Girl Effect stand in stark contrast to the track record

of the actual Nike Corporation in the exploitative employment of women in its notorious factories, as documented in *No Logo* by Naomi Klein some years ago, and by Maria Hengeveld in 2016.<sup>8</sup>

## IS NEOLIBERAL FEMINISM OK? THE DEBATE AMONGST FEMINIST SCHOLARS

As noted, a spate of articles in recent years has documented and discussed the rise of ‘transnational business feminism’ (among other names), and a debate has emerged as to whether these developments represent, in fact, an advancement of women and a genuine form of feminism, or rather a co-optation of the women’s movement in favour of a shiny new way to present capitalism in a favourable light.

In a discussion of what she terms ‘neoliberal feminism,’ Elisabeth Prugl has urged feminist scholars to stop wringing their hands, in effect, over the co-optation of feminism by neoliberal capitalism, and instead to ask the question, what is lost, but also what is gained by this new incorporation of gender into the concerns of the world’s ruling elites?

She summarises the new names that have been given to what she terms neoliberal feminism:

Squires and Kantola (2012) refer to it as ‘market feminism’, Eisenstein (2009) as ‘free market feminism’, ‘hegemonic feminism’, ‘imperial’ and ‘managerial feminism’. Roberts (2012) calls it ‘transnational business feminism (TBF)’, Halley (2006) talks about ‘governance feminism’, Elias (2013) about ‘post-feminism’, and McRobbie condemns it as ‘faux-feminism’... Critics differ in what they do not like about this transformed feminism, but for all it is somewhat suspect, far removed from the challenges of power that underlies [sic] the contentious politics of feminist movements (*Neoliberalising feminism*, p615).

These critiques, says Prugl, are, in effect, naïve, although she does not use this word. Those of us who are critical of these new initiatives are indulging in what she calls ‘nostalgia’ for a lost world, for ‘socialist feminism and for the originary purity of a radical movement feminism’ (p615). In a world that has been transformed by globalisation, and in which forms of governance have been radically changed, not only at the state level, but through international organisations, NGOs, and private businesses, it is a mistake to indulge in ‘yearning’ for ‘the feminism of the past,’ with its ‘often’ exclusionary character in relation to Third World women.

And indeed, says Prugl, there never has been only one feminism. ‘How do we know when feminism becomes “faux”? How do we know whether market feminism is backlash or feminism?’ The critiques she cites might be ‘trenchant,’ but ‘they in a sense do not go far enough: they remain trapped

8. Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, Picador, New York 2000. Maria Hengeveld, ‘Nike’s Supply Chain Doesn’t Live up to the Ideals of its Girl Effect Campaigning’, *Slate*, 2016. Online [http://www.slate.com/articles/business/the\\_grind/2016/08/nike\\_s\\_supply\\_chain\\_doesn\\_t\\_live\\_up\\_to\\_the\\_ideals\\_of\\_its\\_girl\\_effect\\_campaign.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/business/the_grind/2016/08/nike_s_supply_chain_doesn_t_live_up_to_the_ideals_of_its_girl_effect_campaign.html).

in backward-looking imaginaries' (p615). As she puts it, rather than wringing their hands over the co-optation and de-railing of the revolutionary movement for women's liberation, we should examine the various examples of business feminism, and review them carefully for possible openings that can actually benefit individuals or groups of women. 'I propose to talk not about a new type of feminism, but about the "neoliberalisation of feminism", recognising the diversity and shifting nature of various feminisms and the fluidity of their boundaries' (p615).

This sounds like a reasonable proposition, and indeed it would be simpleminded to dismiss all of the initiatives recently documented on behalf of women and girls, without a close examination of the impact of these programs. Yet it is hard to avoid the impression that the claims of Nike, Goldman Sachs, and other such organisations to advance the cause of women and girls do not arise from the purest of motives.

In contrast, Sylvia Chant and Caroline Sweetman argue that the 'smart economics' focus on women and girls, to the exclusion of men and boys, sets up a paradigm focusing on individuals, to the exclusion of considering the structural discrimination that stands in the way of advancing the interests of women as a collective.

Even if we accept that smart economics amounts to an efficiency approach with elements of empowerment bolted on to the side, the programmes with which it is associated rely on a much smoother and easier transition between individual 'economic empowerment' and engaging with the social and political structures which in reality constrain individuals and women as a collective marginalised group. These structures discriminate on grounds of gender, race, and class, as highlighted in gender and development writing since the inception of the field ... Smart economics seeks to use women and girls to fix the world. It may be well overdue to hear how important women and girls are for economic survival, stability and growth, ... [but] [i]t is less welcome to women who are already contributing vast amounts to both production and unpaid reproduction to be romanticised and depicted as the salvation of the world.<sup>9</sup>

9. Sylvia Chant and Caroline Sweetman, 'Fixing women or fixing the world? 'Smart economics,' efficiency approaches, and gender equality in development', *Gender & Development*, 20, 3 (2012), pp517-29.

Indeed, I would argue that, unless one takes the position that using a form of pseudo-feminism to bolster profitability and to further legitimise the increasingly perilous form of globalised capitalism that we are living under is a defensible point of view, I cannot agree with Prugl that neoliberal feminism, as she terms it, is a benign development.

## FROM WOMEN'S LIBERATION TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Let us take a closer look at the term 'empowerment' for women. We can recall that in the early days of the 'second wave,' in the United States and



Europe (the late 1960s and early 1970s), women joined consciousness-raising groups in order to study and to overcome what were widely seen as the deleterious effects of 'patriarchy'. The goal of C-R was to examine and bring to consciousness, and then to public awareness, the many elements in social life that, in the language of the time, caused women to be 'oppressed'. (It is worth noting that the term 'oppression,' widely used in the social movements of the 1970s, was in sharp contrast to the term 'exploitation,' the classic Marxist term for the stealing of value from workers by factory owners, according to the labour theory of value.) In the feminist literature of the time, at least in the United States, the goal of C-R was to overcome the obstacles posed by abusive husbands, sex discrimination in the workforce, and legal barriers to equality, all of which could be overcome, in theory, via individual and group activism.

Ostensibly the goal of the women's liberation movement, soon rechristened as feminism by the mainstream media and the new academic discipline of Women's Studies, was to overcome patriarchal controls and win women equality within all of the institutions - marriage; education; the workforce; the government - that previously had upheld a patriarchal order where women were confined to the realm of wife and mother, and treated as second class citizens. The many legal and cultural victories of that period, not the least of which was the Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade*, decided in 1973, gave women in the United States at least a shot at equal treatment with their male counterparts.

At the time debates within the US movement took place within a widespread questioning of the capitalist system as a whole. The social movements of the 1970s included a revival of Marxism and a challenge to the materialism of the American 'way of life'. Within this framework, socialist and Marxist feminists argued that the coming revolution against capitalism required the incorporation of women's issues and needs into the agenda of white male revolutionaries. In this context women's 'liberation' (from patriarchy) constituted a precondition for the participation of women in the struggle for a revolutionary, non-capitalist future.

But as the giant machinery of ideological incorporation and de-fanging of revolutionary aspirations went into high gear, the meaning of women's liberation, now feminism, began to be reshaped. The ideas of 'liberal' feminism - equal access for women at all levels of society, but most especially in the workforce - became synonymous with feminism *tout court*, and the radical edge of the movement, along with the revolutionary program of groups like the Black Panthers, were silenced or brutally crushed. Above all the potential alliance of women in a broad anti-capitalist movement was no longer on the agenda. Now women's liberation meant 'empowerment'.

In recent years a celebration of a form of empowerment 'feminism' has become a mainstream phenomenon in the United States. Beyoncé is a feminist; Oprah Winfrey is a feminist; Miley Cyrus 'told *British Cosmopolitan*

10. Andi Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to Covergirl, The Buying and Selling of a Political Movement*, New York, PublicAffairs 2016, p170. Hereafter *We Were Feminists Once*.

that she is 'a feminist in the way that I'm really empowering to women ... I'm loud and funny, and not typically beautiful'.<sup>10</sup> And in fact, as Andi Zeisler notes, satirically,

as a catchall phrase that can be understood to mean anything from 'self-esteem-building' to 'sexy and feminine,' to 'awesome,' empowerment has become a way to signify a particularly female way of being that's both gender-essentialist - and commercially motivated. Over the last two decades, a partial list of everything that has been deemed empowering by advertising campaigns, pop culture products, and feminist rhetoric includes the following: High heels. Flats. Cosmetic surgery. Embracing your wrinkles. Having children. Not having children. Natural childbirth. Having an epidural ... By the time [the] satirical newspaper *The Onion* announced 'Women Now Empowered by Everything a Woman Does' in a 2003 article, it really did seem that 'Today's woman lives in a near-constant state of empowerment' (*We Were Feminists Once* pp169-170).

What then is the meaning of empowerment? It seems to convey an idea of giving women choices, and in the rhetoric of the new transnational business feminism, it points to an improvement in the lives of women which will in turn bring the benefits of reducing poverty, increasing access to healthcare, and generally serving to cure the ills of an ailing, slowing world capitalist economy. But as Anika Cakardic points out, in commenting on the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women annual conference in 2016:

When the World Bank launches an initiative with a slogan 'gender equality as smart economics,' it precisely demonstrates how the system uses and commodifies social struggles for its reproduction. In this concrete case by promoting women's empowerment as a resource for creating the surplus value. As stated by Adrienne Roberts in many of her [analyses], [the] project of transnational business feminism is being developed by a coalition of states, financial institutions, the UN, corporations, NGOs and others who definitely sustain the neoliberalisation of society in its capitalist form.<sup>11</sup>

Cakardic goes on to say that:

CSW is an opportunity to further affirm the macroeconomic framework that creates oppression and exploitation. In that spirit let us not forget the recently developed partnership between Coca Cola Company and UN Women to accelerate women's economic empowerment. Is this feminist? Is this promising a change for women and girls everywhere? Is this green? No. It is called capitalist reproduction. Capitalism in its finest. (*UN as an intersectional polygon without class perspective*).

11. Anika Cakardic, 'UN as an intersectional polygon without class perspective', 2016. Online <http://www.criticatoc.ro/lefteast/un-intersectional-polygon-without-class-perspective/> Hereafter *UN as an intersectional polygon*.

Thus empowerment actually means the incorporation of women into the structures of capitalist power, whether as entrepreneurs or as low-wage workers.

## WHAT DOES TRANSNATIONAL BUSINESS FEMINISM LEAVE OUT OF THE PICTURE?

Let us ask the question, what does the new business feminism leave out of the picture?

First, the prospect of hundreds of thousands of women entrepreneurs being drawn into the capitalist economy leaves out the realities of women's lives in the realm of social reproduction. To cite Adrienne Roberts on this point,

The roots of gender inequality are not found in women's exclusion from production per se, but rather in the material and ideological separation of production from social reproduction, in the sexual division of labour that this separation helps to solidify and in the devaluation of the work of social reproduction that is primarily done by women (*Political Economy of Transnational Business Feminism*, p219).

On the one hand neoliberal capitalism has drawn increasingly on the underpaid labour of women across the globe. But on the other hand the structures that give support to these women, ordinarily both workers and mothers, have been stripped away. The neoliberal model of privatisation has been tearing away for several decades at the accumulated institutions which helped families to reproduce the labour force.

The arguments now being made by writers who draw on the concept of social reproduction constitute a powerful critique of the contradictions that make the lives of women (and men) increasingly precarious. In the growing renewal of literature on social reproduction, drawing on the original work of Lise Vogel, and being extended by Sue Ferguson, David McNally, and other writers, attention is being drawn to the impact of neoliberalism on the very structures and institutions that make it possible for women and families to thrive.<sup>12</sup>

Writers like Tithi Battacharya have pointed to the range of institutions - schools; day care centres; hospitals and other health care organisations; libraries; leisure facilities - and of financial arrangements - pensions and other social benefits; that make the day-to-day business of social reproduction possible. These are the 'myriad capillaries of social relations extending between workplace, home, schools, hospitals - a wider social whole, sustained and co-produced by human labour in contradictory and yet constitutive ways'.<sup>13</sup>

At the very moment when neoliberal ideology proclaims the 'empowerment' of women, overwhelmingly interpreted as the entry of more and more women into low-paid precarious work, the institutions that could support this shift are

12. Sue Ferguson and David McNally, 'Social Reproduction Beyond Intersectionality: An Interview', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 31 October 2015. Online <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/social-reproduction-beyond-intersectionality-an-interview-with-sue-ferguson-and-david-mcnally/>

13. Tithi Bhattacharya, 'How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 31 October 2015, p4. Online <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/how-not-to-skip-class-social-reproduction-of-labor-and-the-global-working-class/>

less and less secure. A major example here, if we look at the United States, is the underfunding of child care. This applies both to the women who require child care if they are going out to work, and to the women who provide the care. Not many people will remember that in 1971, a proposal to create a network of federally funded child-care centres, with subsidised payments for low income families, passed the House and the Senate, only to be vetoed by then President Richard Nixon as a 'Soviet'-style measure. Not much progress has been made since that time. Yet child care workers are among the lowest paid in the entire United States workforce. 'According to a 2016 report by the University of California at Berkeley's Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, their median wage is less than \$10 an hour, and 46 percent receive public assistance such as Medicaid or food stamps'.<sup>14</sup>

14. Elizabeth Palley, 'Feminists Need to Focus on Child Care' *The Independent*, #223, 10 April 2017. Elizabeth Palley and Corey S. Shdaimah, *In Our Hands: The Struggle for U.S. Child Care Policy*. New York, NYU Press 2014.

In the United States, public education is under attack from charter schools; the welfare system is barely functioning; the principle of secured pensions and the Social Security system are under constant ideological and political assault. While Obamacare claims to provide broad health care coverage for families which previously were excluded from health insurance, the model is actually a neoliberal project that bolsters the profits of health insurance companies, while the politics of Republican opposition have limited the availability of the program to the states that are willing to accept exchanges.<sup>15</sup>

15. See Howard Waitzkin and Ida Hellander, 'Obamacare: the neoliberal model comes home to roost in the United States - if we let it', *Monthly Review*, 68, 1 (2014), pp1-18.

Thus the work of social reproduction falls more and more on the shoulders of individual families and especially of women in their traditional roles of wife and mother. In this context, the drawing of more and more women into an underpaid workforce, or into entrepreneurship through schemes like microcredit, simply serves to rip away the social fabric rather than to restore it.

Second, there is a clear class bias to the new transnational business feminism. It leaves out of the picture the massive numbers of women drawn into the *maquiladoras* on the Mexican border, the sweatshops in Bangladesh, the Haitian Export Processing Zones and other low-paid and exploitative locations around the globe where pregnancy tests, long working hours, regular and violent sexual harassment of workers, are all features of the EPZs that fuel the production of electronics, sneakers, electrical appliances, clothing, and other products for the consumption of the prosperous Western countries. Poor working conditions and dangerous, even life-threatening events like the notorious 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh, are regular features of these factories (See *Sweatshop Feminists*).

16. See Robert Greenwald, 'Walmart: The High Cost of Low Price', Brave New Films, 2014. J. Halley, *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 2006.

Similarly in the United States the 'big box' store model exemplified by Walmart has practiced the art of paring away at worker compensation, to the point that in recent years high numbers of Walmart employees, 72 per cent of whose hourly employees are women, have been depending on public assistance and other social programs for their survival.<sup>16</sup> To be sure the push to increase wages at Walmart in 2015 and 2016 has had some successes. But there is evidence that management is already working to undermine these gains.

Average hourly pay has gone up since Walmart announced early last year that it would increase wages to at least \$10 an hour for its army of part-time and full-time workers. ... The employees more critical of the company say Walmart - the biggest private employer in the United States - has found more subtle ways to keep the reins on its workers' paychecks. The retailer has cut merit raises, for example, and has introduced a new training program that can keep employees at \$9 an hour for as long as 18 months. ... 'I fear that Walmart's plan is more about delaying an actual wage increase than providing real training,' said Stephanie Luce, a professor of labour studies at the City University of New York'.<sup>17</sup>

17. Rachel Abrams, 'Some Walmart workers criticize new pay policy', *The New York Times*, 4 June 2016.

Perhaps the training that the 10,000 women of the Goldman Sachs Global Initiative are even now receiving in business schools across the globe will teach them how to run such companies even more cheaply, efficiently, and ruthlessly.

Third, the concept of women's empowerment in effect conceals and covers over the class nature of capitalism. This may seem an obvious point, but it is worth reinforcing. The incorporation of  $x$  number of women into projects of the kind we have been describing in no way cancels out the distinction between owners of the means of production and those who have to sell their labour. In some ways we could argue that the focus on gender is an ideological sleight of hand, obscuring the still relevant fact that women form both part of the ruling class, and of the working class, not to mention women in the fast growing 'precariat' around the world. It is no doubt part of the ideological project of this new incorporation of 'feminism' to continue the highly effective erasure of class consciousness that has been so much a part of the neoliberal project. As Rosemary Hennessy has noted, 'the retreat from class analysis ... in the eighties and nineties [seems] one of neoliberalism's most effective ideological weapons'.<sup>18</sup>

18. Darko Suvin, 'What is to be done? A first step', *Socialism and Democracy*, 30, 2016, 1105-127. (Hennessy, cited in Suvin, p104).

Finally, the project of women's 'empowerment' leaves out the macroeconomic picture, and in particular, the continuing effects of 'structural adjustment' on countries subject to the international financial order. In the 1980s, the economic progress of many Third World countries after the end of World War II was brutally ended through the process of structural adjustment, in which debt was used as an instrument to pry open the economies of Africa, Latin America, the former USSR, and elsewhere.

Countries were forced to end their attempts at state-led development and instead turn their efforts to offering cheap labour to multinational corporations, in many cases primarily a female labour force, and to divert state funds from education, housing, health care and other government services, in favour of debt repayment and export industries. This restructuring of the world economy undid the progress of the 1960s and early 1970s, and is widely viewed as a major cause of the rapid spread of diseases like HIV/AIDs in countries such as South Africa and elsewhere.<sup>19</sup>

19. See Michel Chossudovsky, *The Globalisation of Poverty and the New World Order*, Shanty Bay, Global Outlook 2003.

The ruthless restructuring of Third World economies in the 1980s and

1990s has now spread to the North, with developed countries such as Ireland and Greece, and former Soviet states like the Ukraine, undergoing the same harsh austerity measures. As with the structural adjustment policies that impoverished the Global South in the 1980s, the austerity policies being applied most brutally perhaps in Greece seek to recoup the loans issued during the 1990s with policies that not only increase taxation, but also propose to cut the pensions of workers, and to sell off any remaining state assets such as ports and railroads, to compensate the lenders, primarily state governments and banks of rich states such as Germany.

This is straight out class warfare, taking away the pensions from working class and middle-class workers to pay off bankers and other rich lenders for their ill-conceived lending policies. The mainstream press reports these manoeuvres with a straight face, as though it were intelligent social policy to in effect steal from workers to fatten the portfolios of the rich and powerful. As Michael Hudson vividly describes the process:

They're using finance as the new means of war. There is a war going on in Europe but it's not a military war anymore. They're now using finance instead of war and they're using finance to say, we can grab your country. We can put you out of work. We can control you and we don't have to kill you, we can just make you immigrate by taking away your pensions and taking all your money. There's a land grab just as if it were an invasion to grab Greece's ports, to grab Greece's railroads, and to grab everything else. This is war.<sup>20</sup>

20. Sharmini Peries and Michael Hudson, 'The Financial Invasion of Greece', *Counterpunch*, 24 May 2016, p2. Online <https://www.counterpunch.org/2016/05/24/the-financial-invasion-of-greece/>

It is crucial for feminist analysts to point out the contradiction between flashy and highly publicised initiatives that ostensibly focus on the rights of girls and women, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the macroeconomic operations of the global financial institutions that systematically and cruelly destroy the capacities of nation-states to feed, clothe, house, educate and provide work to all of their citizens.

Finally, Adrienne Roberts has pointed out, with considerable irony, that the capitalist world of corporations, governments, NGOs and international financial institutions has welcomed a certain form of feminism with open arms, while the left, broadly speaking, has had a much harder time acknowledging, let alone incorporating, feminist principles. 'The *Socialist Register*, for instance, though never being a panacea [sic] for feminist scholarship, recently published two back-to-back editions on the global crisis [in 2011 and 2012] ... which consisted of a total of thirty chapters, only one of which was explicitly focused on gender relations ... Marxist international political economy accounts of the global financial crisis 'have remained largely silent on questions of gender' (*Financial Crisis*, pp86-7).

How ironic that the neoliberal capitalist establishment should have taken to embracing 'feminism' while the inheritors of the long tradition of socialist

and communist theory and practice, from Marx and Engels to August Bebel to Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg, has in the current scene had such a hard time bringing Marxism and socialism together with feminism! Yet it is only in a broad alliance of left forces with the collective force of women in social movements, from the Zapatista women in Chiapas to the MST in Brazil, to welfare activists and the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, among many other groupings, that there is any hope of stopping or slowing the capitalist juggernaut that is leading the world to near certain economic, and indeed ecological, disaster. Maybe we can hope that in the coming years, those rising forces on the left in both the ‘developed’ and the impoverished countries can see fit to be as welcoming and as creative toward the ideas and the activism of the international women’s movement as their corporate adversaries.

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