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Elisabeth Prügl

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Neoliberalising Feminism

ELISABETH PRÜGL

There recently has been an avalanche of critiques of the way in which feminism has gone to bed with neoliberal capitalism and become an instrument of governmentality. In this paper, I look at these phenomena as processes of a ‘neoliberalisation of feminism’. I illustrate such neoliberalisation by introducing women’s empowerment projects run by transnational consumer products companies, typically in partnership with public development actors. Under the label of ‘corporate social responsibility’, these companies invest in women in their supply and marketing chains, seeking to empower them within a neoliberal rationality of government. The paper is an effort to go beyond the critiques of feminism as co-opted. Rather than inventing new feminisms or taking a break from feminism – as some have suggested, I propose that it is more fruitful and necessary to examine, in concrete contexts, the way in which select feminist movement ideas are being integrated into neoliberal rationales and logics, what is lost in the process and what is perhaps gained.

Keywords: neoliberalism, feminism, corporate social responsibility, public-private partnerships

In the early 1980s, Zillah Eisenstein predicted that liberal feminism had a radical future, that the contradictions of women moving into the workforce would make private subordination untenable and public discrimination visible, generating a push towards structural change (Eisenstein 1993). Thirty years later, feminists of all stripes, including Eisenstein (2007), are throwing up their hands in despair: liberal feminism and individualist solutions to gender oppression are thriving as feminism is walking the halls of corporate and state power. But rather than challenging capitalism, it appears to have gone to bed with capitalism, mixing at the meetings of the World Economic Forum in Davos as much as in the annual meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It engages women and men in business, academia, and government and speaks a new language of gender balance and equality as an asset for business and economic

There is a certain nostalgia in these critiques – for socialist feminism and for the originary purity of a radical movement feminism. Such nostalgias are problematic for various reasons. First, the desire to go back to the origins tends to ignore a world changed by globalisation, in which forms of governance have been massively transformed, including not just states, but – in particular in the South – international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and increasingly also private businesses. Second, the hankering back to socialism tends to forget that class politics have always been too narrow, ignoring in particular the workers in informal sectors and in homes that make up a significant portion of the global labour force. Third, and relatedly, the yearning for the feminism of the past forgets its often exclusionary character and its blindness to the constellations of problems faced by ‘Third World women’. Finally, nostalgias for a pure movement feminism run into severe problems of definition. There has never been just one feminism and the movement continues to be polyphonic. How do we know when feminism becomes ‘faux’? How do we know whether market feminism is backlash or feminism? While the critiques put forward are trenchant, they in a sense do not go far enough: they remain trapped in backward-looking imaginaries.

This paper is an effort to push forward the work of feminist critics. Rather than inventing new feminisms or – as some have suggested – to take a break from feminism (Halley 2006, Zalewski 2010), I propose that it is more fruitful and necessary to examine the way in which select feminist movement ideas are being integrated into neoliberal rationales and logics, what is lost in the process and what is perhaps gained. Thus, 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. I show the contradictory outcomes of the neoliberalisation of feminism by introducing women’s empowerment projects run by transnational consumer products companies, typically in partnership with public development actors. Under the label of ‘corporate social responsibility (CSR)’, these companies invest in women in their supply and marketing chains, seeking to empower them within a neoliberal rationality of government.

The first project is Unilever’s Shakti project, which works to develop women’s entrepreneurship through bottom-of-the-pyramid (BoP) marketing. The second is the Levi Strauss & Co. sponsored HERproject, which seeks to connect
multi-national corporations (MNCs) with local NGOs to run women-focused health-care programmes in MNC supplier factories. Both projects involve public–private partnerships and are framed as empowering women. Both are located in industries that have thrived on economic liberalisation, creating a global market for consumer goods on the one hand and making possible international assembly lines and cheap sourcing on the other. Both also are embedded in efforts of CSR, which emerged in parallel with the dismantling of the welfare state, substituting for it voluntary actions of businesses and drawing on a sense of ‘noblesse oblige’ in order to counteract the worst effects of market liberalisation (Kinderman 2012, Marens 2012).

While the majority of international public–private partnerships focus on health and environmental issues, multi-nationals have discovered women’s empowerment as a worthy cause. Examples include Goldman Sachs’ 10,000 Women initiative, which partners with business schools around the world in order to bring business training to women entrepreneurs and help them scale up their operations; the World Economic Forum’s Women Leaders and Gender Parity Program which seeks to make visible gender gaps in economic and political spheres, increase the number of women in decision-making, and provide a forum for discussing gender equality issues; the Nike Foundation’s effort to popularise The Girl Effect, proposing that investing in girls’ health and education, and giving them economic opportunities has ripple effects to their brothers, parents, the community, their children, and grandchildren (Bexell 2012, Roberts 2012, Grosser and van der Gaag 2013, Pru¨gl and True 2014). Companies, including Yves Saint Laurent, Avon, Kraft, and Coca Cola all have invested in projects targeting women and girls and deploying the feminist idea of women’s empowerment. Rather than dismissing these efforts a priori as instances of co-optation, I approach them as sites of an indeterminate encounter of feminism and neoliberalism. Expecting to find co-optation, I look in addition for meanings of empowerment they may proliferate and openings they may provide to contest gendered power relations.

How feminism is being neoliberalised

Neoliberalism has become somewhat of a master variable, an explanatory hammer that fits all nails, used to account for a multiplicity of contemporary phenomena, and largely replacing other master concepts such as capitalism, modernity, and globalisation (Larner 2003). Highly politicised, neoliberalism often appears as a compelling causal force for a variety of outcomes largely judged to be negative. Reverting to neoliberalism as an explanation of what has gone wrong with feminism thus may appear somewhat tedious. But the spacious character of the concept also is an opportunity – providing room for interpreting in a new way the transformations of feminism observed by critics.

In order to make neoliberalism methodologically useful, it is necessary to transcend the reification of the concept, recall the indeterminate way in which doctrines circulate and are resisted, and the process aspect of any class and governance project. Indeed, neoliberalism as a doctrine comes in multiple forms and as a project has shown a tremendous capacity to transform and adapt. Thus, Peck
(2008) illustrates the very different trajectories of German ordoliberalism and Chicago-style neoliberalism, and the differences in actually existing neoliberalism. Peck and Tickell (2002) identify, in the heartlands of neoliberalism (i.e. the USA and the UK), a shift from a project of rolling back the state in the 1980s to an aggressive form of re-regulation (in the form of policing the poor) in the 1990s. Larner (2003) in addition recalls the diverse forms neoliberalism takes in particular contexts. The variety of lived neoliberalisms leads Peck and Tickell (2002) to suggest that contemporary research focus less on describing the uniform effects of neoliberalism than on exploring varied processes of neoliberalisation, a suggestion I take up in this paper by looking at the neoliberalisation of feminism.

What does it mean for feminism to be neoliberalised? It is possible to identify at least three different meanings of the term neoliberalism in academic discourse (Larner 2000, Ferguson 2009). First, neoliberalism is a political project associated with the politics of Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and the Bretton Woods institutions that entails deregulation, privatisation, and structural adjustment, which in a post-Cold War context could be generalised globally. Second, neoliberalism is an economic doctrine or ideology synthesised 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. Finally, neoliberalism is also a cultural formation, a ‘rationality’ in the Foucaultian sense ‘linked less to economic dogmas or class projects than to specific mechanisms of government’ (Ferguson 2009: 171). These mechanisms are distinctive in that they apply private market forces to public governance while vice versa inserting themselves into the most intimate realms of privacy by creating responsible subjectivities.4

The different meanings of neoliberalism resonate in feminist critiques of contemporary feminism, describing three different facets of its neoliberalisation, i.e. (a) the co-optation of feminism into neoliberal economic projects, (b) the integration of feminism into neoliberal ideology, and (c) the interweaving of feminist ideas into rationalities and technologies of neoliberal governmentality.

Co-opting feminism into neoliberal economic projects

Scholars have traced the transformation of feminism as linked to the transformation of Fordist capitalism. In this narrative, feminism encounters neoliberal initiatives of deregulation, privatisation, and marketisation as a social force and finds itself discursively co-opted. For example, Fraser (2009) suggests that second-wave feminism emerged in the historical period of ‘state-organised capitalism’ and offered an economic, cultural, and political critique of such capitalism. But these different strands of critique got separated (helped by a disproportionate feminist focus on culture) and selectively enlisted in the cause of neoliberalism. The turn to a politics of recognition, women pouring into the labour force replacing expensive male workers, the emphasis on self-determination over state tutelage, and the disproportionate attention in international struggles on violence against women at the expense of fighting poverty – all this resonated well with neoliberal prescriptions. Feminism’s elective affinity with capitalism, including
a shared distrust of traditional authority, facilitated its co-optation into capitalist projects. The result was an enmeshing of feminist ideas with neoliberal agendas and feminism 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: 99).

Fraser’s interpretation is supported by Eisenstein’s (2009) historical account of the co-optation of second-wave feminist ideas for global elite projects. Eisenstein argues that capitalist processes have seduced feminism allowing its liberal basis to become hegemonic. Left-wing politics and class-based analyses that thrived in the early second-wave have been lost, making possible the appropriation of women’s labour and ideas by global elites.

But Fraser and Eisenstein become victims of a nostalgia for a lost imagined left project. Indeed, Funk (2013) has suggested that Fraser and Eisenstein misrepresent second-wave feminism, generalising from the socialist feminist critique to all feminism, when in fact liberal feminism has always been hegemonic. For liberal feminists gender equality could be accomplished within the parameters of capitalism. Feminism thus did not need neoliberalism to flourish though neoliberalism may have needed feminism. And while some feminists may embrace neoliberalism, this is certainly not true for all (Funk 2013).

More sensitive to international diversity and variation within feminism, Roberts (2012) lifts the historical materialist argument to the international level. Drawing on the notion of social forces like Fraser, she identifies TBF, as a coalition of public and private forces, including feminist organisations, capitalist states, regional and international funding institutions, NGOs, and transnational corporations, ‘that converge on promoting women’s equality, particularly in the Global South’ (Roberts 2012: 87). Roberts argues that TBF became especially virulent in the aftermath of the 2008/09 financial crisis, when it emerged as a cure for the problems caused by ‘transnational business masculinity’ (Roberts 2012: 88; see also Elias 2013). Proposals that excessive masculinity was at the bottom of the crisis and that a ‘healthy dose of oestrogen’ would be part of the solution were rampant in the business press at the time, and the myth of Woman as the other that completes Man emerged as a trope to explain the crisis (Kay and Shipman 2009, Prügl 2012). Roberts identifies TBF and its emphasis on giving women in the South access to finance and credit as a facilitator of ongoing primitive accumulation.

The ideological neoliberalisation of feminism

Both Roberts and Fraser identify a feminist-inflected neoliberal ideology that supports this new constellation of social forces. At the international level, this ideology takes the form of ‘the business case for gender equality’, first formulated in the World Bank’s gender action plan. Under the motto ‘gender equality is smart economics’, the Bank argues that expanding opportunities for women and girls helps to reduce poverty. It advocates empowering women by giving them access to credit, land, education, and health, and by giving them a voice in politics. The Bank has sought support for this agenda from the private sector, working in
particular through the International Finance Corporation and by welcoming public–private partnerships (Bedford 2009). It launched at the World Economic Forum in Davos a Private Sector Leaders Forum, seeking to enlist companies in helping to realise the Bank’s gender action plan (Bexell 2012). Many took up the invitation with their own initiatives or in participating in public–private partnerships.

The key proposition adopted in these circles is that gender equality is a valuable goal because it facilitates achieving all kinds of social 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. Critics have interpreted these propositions as an ideological co-optation of feminist ideas. They have challenged in particular the following aspects of neoliberalised feminism. First, this type of feminism abstracts from embodied individuals to fit women into models of economic man, so that gender empowerment is reformulated to a micro-level operation of giving women access to assets and opportunities. The hope is that women will perform just like the standard rational economic actor in the market. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, it essentialises women as different, acting more prudently than men and more likely to invest their earnings to improve the lives of their families (Griffin 2009). Second, this type of feminism reduces gender to a heteronormative configuration of women and men, engaged in complementary sharing, forming ‘happy households’, and thereby stabilising rather than disturbing existing gender identities (Bedford 2007, Bedford 2012). Finally, gender remains an individual-level category. Thus, in the 2012 World Development Report, women and men find themselves facing institutions and discriminatory rules. But there is no notion of gender divisions of labour structuring markets, of labour markets incorporating gendered definitions of skills, or of the need to valorise unpaid care labour (Razavi 2012). Neoliberalised feminism may provide arguments for gender equality and the empowerment of women, but it retains ideological commitments to rationalism, heteronormativity, and genderless economic structures.

Drafting feminism for neoliberal governance

The neoliberalisation of feminism also has a governance dimension. This entails on the one hand an institutional change in the relationship between feminist movements and the state and on the other hand the ideological recruitment of notions of gender identity into technologies for the governance of the self.

The theme of feminism co-opted into the institutions of the state is of course at least as old as the second-wave itself, and it has reappeared massively in discussions over gender mainstreaming (Wetterer 2002, Lombardo and Meier 2006, Cornwall et al. 2007, Prügl 2009). But something new seems afoot as state bureaucracies (at national and international levels) have been charged to implement neoliberal policies, opened themselves up to working with the private sector, and 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 have succeeded in making the state responsive to movement claims. Market feminism has changed the practices and priorities of women’s policy agencies, giving primacy to those feminist claims that resonate with market agendas. This is not just a matter of ideas. Market feminism is linked to the emergence of a new form of governance, one that off-loads state power to civil society, that draws on an increasingly transnationalised network of gender experts, and that entails the professionalisation and transnationalisation of movement activists.

To use Foucaultian terminology, neoliberalised feminism draws on a new rationality of government and employs new technologies of government. The basis of this rationality is notions of individual freedom, choice, and empowerment. It 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 ‘responsibilisation’ (Bexell 2012), i.e. 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 organising or cultural politics, but in changing attitudes through capacity building; in giving women access to resources; and in fostering individual aspirations and entrepreneurial identities. In other words, solutions lie in the responsibilisation and empowerment of women and men. Neoliberalism in this way constitutes a strategic project that thrives on the basis of biopolitical power, i.e. of a power that constitutes dependable individuals that hold themselves accountable to norms of market-embedded gender equality.

This neoliberal rationality is particularly salient when feminist ideas have been inserted into mainstream political and institutional life. Gender mainstreaming and diversity management are two technologies that originate in feminist ideas and have entered government bureaucracies and private companies (Prügl 2011). Public–private partnerships in addition help diffuse feminist ideas into new contexts of development (Prügl and True 2014). These technologies have helped adapt feminist ideas to neoliberal rationalities, making new gender identities and gender difference productive for outcomes ranging from economic growth to business profit. Feminism in this way has become a governing force that operates through networks and the production of expert knowledge and that thrives on principles of holding accountable. It stands next to movement feminism and has been criticised for depoliticising feminist struggles, dramatically altering the political work of social movement activists that see themselves transformed into gender experts, surrogates for civil society, and subcontractors of the state (Alvarez 1999).

In sum, the neoliberalisation of feminism takes at least three forms: the integration of women and notions of gender equality into economic restructuring, the integration of feminism into neoliberal ideology, and the associated change in rationalities and technologies of governance. It is difficult to imagine a feminism untouched by the historical transformations – economic, cultural, and political – that have been described as neoliberal, and it should not surprise to find feminist ideas creatively appropriated in such processes. However, such appropriations are part of broader struggles and operate within discursive formations
that proliferate multiple meanings. Indeed, scholars of governmentality have insisted that neoliberalisation yields a diverse range of outcomes, contradictions, and sometimes even openings for ‘progressive’ agendas (Peck and Tickell 2002, Larner and Craig 2005, Newman 2012). It allows room for activists to ‘work the spaces of power’ (Newman 2012), for a repurposing governmental techniques (Ferguson 2009), and even for a re-imagining of monolithic capitalism to include innovative forms of social economy (Bergeron and Healy 2013).

Adopting this stance, I discuss in the following two profoundly different women’s empowerment projects run by private corporations, sometimes with public support. I illustrate the way in which these projects neoliberalise feminism, but also problematise a narrow interpretation of these projects as instances of the co-optation of feminism. What potentially productive contradictions do they set up? What alternative meanings do they open up? What spaces do they carve out for feminist politics?

Corporate women’s empowerment projects and the neoliberalisation of feminism

Unilever’s Shakti Project and the Levi Strauss & Co. funded HERproject are both CSR efforts targeting the empowerment of women. Both are located in the highly globalised consumer products sectors, and both consider women’s empowerment a gain for women and for companies.

Despite these similarities, the two projects differ in their goals, the social forces they activate and respond to, and the economic and cultural contexts in which they operate. The Shakti project seeks to expand the market for Unilever products in South Asia’s countryside, whereas the HERproject seeks to stabilise MNC supply chains and reduce NGO criticism of labour practices in the manufacturing of clothing. The Shakti project is embedded in an international struggle over markets, opposing Unilever to its most important competitor, Procter & Gamble. In contrast, HERproject is embedded in an international struggle over labour conditions opposing NGOs and MNCs (including Levi-Strauss). Finally, the two projects operate in different economic and cultural environments and target different types of women: the Shakti project works with rural women embedded in economies of small-holder production and petty trading; the HER-project works in an industrial setting with women who have migrated into cities for jobs in world market factories. Different economic and cultural resources, and the involvement of different social forces circumscribe the conditions of the neoliberalisation of feminism in the context of these projects.

Unilever’s Shakti project

Unilever’s Shakti project is a direct-marketing operation initially set up in India with support of the International Finance Corporation, local NGOs, the Andhra Pradesh, and other local governments. It has established a network of 48,000 ‘Shakti Amma’ (empowered mothers) or ‘Shakti entrepreneurs’, who sell Unilever products to rural consumers in India’s hundreds of thousand villages. The project allows Hindustan Lever (Unilever’s subsidiary in India) to reach millions of
potential consumers in the countryside, where there is no retail distribution network, no advertising coverage, and poor roads and transport. It creates a distribution network and name recognition for Unilever products in a context of significant illiteracy. South Asia and other emerging markets are a strategic focus for the company, accounting for 54 per cent of its turnover in 2011, with sales growth particularly high in personal care products (Chief Executive Officer’s Review 2011). Competition for these markets is fierce, and Unilever’s distribution networks provide it a key weapon against international competitors, in particular Proctor and Gamble, in the fight ‘for the next billion shoppers’. According to the Economist, the Shakti network is helping Unilever win the race in India (Fighting for the Next Billion Shoppers 2012). Unilever has initiated parallel networks in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, working with CARE International in Bangladesh and with the national government in Sri Lanka. 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 (Companies Leading the Way n.d., India: Creating Rural Entrepreneurs, n.d.). Feminist ideas of women’s empowerment are grafted onto an agenda of conquering global markets.

Women have of course long constituted a target for consumer product companies as customers. What is new in the case BoP marketing is the understanding that marketing not just to women but through women can advance gender equality together with a range of other development goals, including poverty reduction and public health. Expanding global capitalism into the countryside and tying rural consumers to the products of multi-nationals thus becomes a means for providing a public good. And an ideology of neoliberalised feminism facilitates this understanding. This ideology defines empowerment as entrepreneurship and creates ambitions to succeed financially among rural women. According to Dolan (2012: 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’. In this sense, the Shakti Amma embodies neoliberal governmentality: she is the product of an effort to govern women in the countryside.

But the Shakti Amma also is an instrument of governmentality, redefining public health goals by virtue of corporate solutions (i.e. health-care products) and producing change in the behaviours of villagers. Lifebuoy, Unilever’s classic brand of soap, is the Shakti Amma’s tool in this mission, itself reconstructed into a public good (Cross and Street 2009). By developing a market for soap she becomes a messenger for hygiene, hand washing and personal care, and presumably contributes to enhancing community health. Her empowerment includes training in public speaking to help her in her mission and to convince villagers of the benefits of such hygiene. By generating new consumer subjectivities she helps deliver health through private provisions.

What are the outcomes of this project? How does it re-shuffle power? First, the market rewards those who aspire, and for the most part the link to Unilever indeed enabled the Shakti Amma and their families to improve themselves. According to an independent evaluation, the Shakti Amma’s earnings increased significantly; they were ‘almost twice the amount of their previous household income’
Shakti Amma interviewed also stated that they were happy to be part of the project: being able to contribute to family expenses had increased their self-confidence and knowledge of their surroundings. They benefitted from training for public speaking and felt that they had gained respect and recognition in their villages.

But wealth and self-confidence may not always translate into changing power relations within households. Although dealerships may have been in the names of the women, limitations on women’s mobility made it necessary to have male relatives involved, and indeed it was often husbands who actually ran the operations (Thekkudan and Tandon 2009: 21 and 28). As has previously been reported with regard to micro-finance schemes, empowerment defined as providing material resources does not automatically translate into changed power relations within households or enhance women’s agency to generate change (Cornwall et al. 2008).

The meeting of neoliberalised feminism and rural society may also have yielded pernicious effects outside households. First, installing Unilever direct marketing in rural villages has generated tendencies towards a monopoly for Unilever products. Thus, an early effort to create a Unilever marketing network in Kerala failed because of community opposition: indigenous soap manufacturers feared that their cottage industries would be destroyed. Meanwhile, in Andhra Pradesh, many traditional shopkeepers have become Shakti entrepreneurs, limited to distributing Unilever products only and presumably making it much more difficult for local producers or international competitors to find outlets for their products.

Second, the direct-marketing networks are generating unprecedented competition not only with traditional shopkeepers but also between women and are fraying community solidarities. The projects have gained entry into villages through self-help groups – the outcome of years of local organising supported by governments and NGOs – and Shakti Amma market to co-members of self-help groups often at discount prices. However, the more group members are recruited into the Unilever network, the more groups are being destabilised as members begin to compete against each other (Thekkudan and Tandon 2009).

Third, while the Shakti project may have increased incomes of individuals, claims that personal care products deliver public health are more tenuous. When resisting the Unilever project in Kerala, community leaders argued that enhancing public health and hygiene did not need Lifebuoy soap, but that communities needed access to safe, affordable drinking water. Furthermore, the controversy over anti-bacterial soaps in the West has not prevented Hindustan Lever from retaining the anti-bacterial agent in Lifebuoy on the South Asian market. And while soap may be a relatively useful product, what about other items in the Shakti Amma’s assortment, such as the skin-whitening product Light & Lovely? The company insists that by whitening their skins, women are able to feel good about themselves – another form of empowerment (Cross and Street 2009).5 Defining public health through a corporate lens yields racialised solutions driven by corporate interests.

The Shakti project seems to confirm all that is wrong about the neoliberalisation of feminism: it puts feminism in the service of corporate market expansion and...
masquerades its private gains as an investment in public goods. It does so with neoliberal technologies: creating entrepreneurs and consumers desiring global products; freeloading on networks generated through public development efforts (Goldsmith 2011); destroying social solidarities while setting women up against each other in competition over a limited market; and redefining the health needs of women and families to fit corporate agendas.

There seem to be few cracks in this interpretation, which suggests a thorough co-optation of feminist ideas into neoliberal logics. Social forces contesting these processes and alternative discourses appear weak next to the determination of MNCs to conquer markets and their skilful appropriation of feminist discourse. Yet, it is worth asking questions to unsettle this interpretation. If individual women do earn more income (even with husbands taking over operations in some cases), if they do become more self-confident and do increase their status in the community, in what way might such individual gains affect the relation of social forces? What was the shape of previous power relations in the community and how does the arrival of Shakti Amma destabilise these? And if the Shakti Amma emerges as leaders concerned about peoples’ health and care needs, how do they translate corporate messages into local contexts on the one hand, and how do they exercise agency and reinterpret local health needs on the other? And if the answers to these questions point to a re-shuffling of power relations, how do neoliberal logics limit the changes produced? Neoliberalised feminism may indeed yield pernicious results in the Shakti network, but narrow forms of empowerment may proliferate new meanings and unintended effects.

Levi Strauss & Co. and the HERproject

The counterpart to BoP marketing is supply chain management. The movement to source products from low-wage economies around the world in the 1980s rang in the notion of an end of Fordism and of a new international division of labour (Fröbel et al. 1978). Women in the South played a star role in this restructuring as companies drew on a mostly female workforce that was celebrated for its ‘nimble fingers’ (Elson and Pearson 1981). Levi Strauss & Co. was the main manufacturer of jeans at the time and like other companies joined the movement to relocate its manufacturing activities from the USA to factories in the South.6

Compared to the rest of the apparel industry, Levi Strauss & Co. has long been a leader in bringing CSR to its suppliers. Thus, the company introduced a workplace code of conduct in 1991, becoming the first multi-national apparel company to assume responsibility for the labour practices of its subcontractors, and indeed terminating contracts with more than 30 suppliers at the time. While persistently refusing third-party monitoring throughout the 1990s, it made history in 2005 by joining Nike and making publicly available a list of its suppliers, allowing watchdog NGOs and unions to hold them accountable for the labour practices of their subcontractors (Doorey 2011). In yet another innovative step, the company in 2011 engaged in a wide-ranging consultation with stakeholders and developed a plan moving from supply chain management to ‘supply chain engagement’. In other words, it replaced a technology of surveillance and disciplining with neoliberal methods intended to change the commitments, aspirations, and
identities of its suppliers and their employees from passive compliers to active partners (Improving Workers’ Well-being 2012; Lubber 2012).

The model for this new approach is provided by the HERproject, which was initiated in 2007 with core funding from the Levi-Strauss Foundation and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. It is coordinated by Business for Social Responsibility (BSR), a global network of more than 250 companies established in 1992 with leadership from Levi Strauss & Co. and others with a mission ‘to build a just and sustainable world’ (Bartley 2009, Our Mission, n.d.). The project connects MNCs with NGOs in the countries where they have supplier factories in order to deliver health-care services and increase health awareness 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 postnatal care, infectious diseases, malaria, and harassment and violence. Levi Strauss & Co. has supported implementation of the programme with nine of its suppliers in China, Egypt, India, and Pakistan (Yeager and Goldenberg 2012: 26).

As is typical with CSR initiatives, a win/win scenario drives the project. A return-on-investment study for a Levi-Strauss subcontractor in Egypt showed that the programme delivered four dollars in return for every dollar invested in the form of reduced absenteeism and turnover rates. Managers also saw other benefits such as reduced error rates and reputational benefits vis-à-vis foreign contractors. Workers in turn showed increased health awareness and supervisors noted behavioural changes, including more use of workplace health services (Yaeger and Goldenberg 2012: 30).

Like the Shakti project, the HERproject speaks the language of ‘empowering women’ but does so with regard to health. According to the project administrators, the target population consists of young female migrants from the countryside with low education, limited knowledge of health issues, and cut off from female relatives who could provide information on such issues. Empowerment in this context becomes a matter of providing information about how to deal with health issues in an urban context. A good portion seems to be about simple behaviour change, such as using sanitary pads during menstruation and making these available through the company clinic. In this sense, the project defines health as a purely individual matter. But unlike the Shakti project, the HERproject does not reduce feminist ideas to a purely individual level. The health approach takes the workers not only in their narrow economic role; it also views them as mothers and partners in relationships. Changing their behaviour regarding reproductive health, nutrition, and care for children affects their relations outside the factory and has a broader impact in society. Moreover, engaging with issues such as domestic violence and sexual harassment is invariably political, questioning patriarchal power.

The HERproject also differs with regard to the technologies by which it delivers behavioural change. Like the Shakti project, it educates. But unlike the Shakti project, it develops a peer-to-peer method of teaching that establishes links among women workers. It responsibilises through a social methodology and generates spaces to problematises gendered power relationships in a way that can increase women’s agency for change. Moreover, the group method
needs leaders and thus the development of leadership skills is built into the methodology. The expertise learnt comes from the outside, but the peer-to-peer mechanism also allows for the development of bottom-up knowledge, solidarities, and links with civil society organisations. In the words of a peer educator from a Levi Strauss & Co. supplier in Ismailia, Egypt: ‘This project provided us with knowledge which gave us power. It enhanced our self-confidence and built more trust between us and other workers’ (Investing in Women for a Better World 2010, Yaeger 2011: 9).

What then can we say about the way in which this project changes power relations? Like with the Shakti project, there is individual gain: women and presumably their families are healthier. And this individual gain matches the needs of factories for reliable and committed workers. In this sense, neoliberalised feminism oils the wheels of globalised capitalism. But the particular form in which feminist ideas have been integrated into the HERproject also opens up possibilities for a repurposing of its technologies: the fostering of solidarities between women workers and the cultivation of women leaders creates infrastructures for change, both in families and in factories. Nothing in a curriculum on reproductive health or even gender-based violence pre-ordains such an outcome. Indeed, the groups formed through the HERproject could be seen as competitors for unions or organisations more independent of management as much as they could become their allies. But it would be a mistake to dismiss the HERproject as just another instance of feminism seduced.

Conclusion

Corporate women’s empowerment projects constitute an instance of the neoliberalisation of feminism. They would not be thinkable outside the material realities of globalisation, the internationalisation of production and the competition over emerging markets. In this environment companies use a version of feminism to gain an advantage over competitors in a struggle over market share and to earn legitimacy as they counter the critiques of social forces that challenge them on the public impact of their operations. Women’s empowerment projects help MNCs capture markets by harnessing women’s business acumen; they help them stabilise their supply chains by optimising women’s labour power; and they help them develop a reputation as good corporate citizens in a globalised economy. In this way, the neoliberalisation of feminism entails the incorporation of movement goals into a political and economic project of globalising markets.

This material incorporation has effects for feminism as its language is fitted ideologically to business agendas. The projects surveyed use the feminist language of women’s empowerment, empty it of elements of collective struggle, and reformulate it as entrepreneurship development and creating health awareness. Empowerment becomes a matter of shaping responsible selves, women that become internally driven to improve themselves. In the case of BoP marketing, they become entrepreneurs and consumers enmeshed in a global market; in the case of supply chain engagement, they become healthy workers and active partners in development.
The neoliberalisation of feminism finally entails a particular machinery of governing women in global markets. It tends to replace movements with expert networks that re-define what the goals should be of women’s empowerment. It furthermore deploys a set of technologies encouraging a change of individual behaviours and identities, from training courses on hygiene to the market mechanism that rewards the properly entrepreneurial Shakti Amma.

The outcomes of the neoliberalisation of feminism are not univocal. Both projects have contradictory effects in terms of the way in which they redirect power, strengthening some social forces and weakening others. In the Shakti project, monetary gains, increased respect for individual women (and possibly women in general) parallel a colonisation of community relations by neoliberal market logics and a weakening of some traditional groups. In the HERproject health and nutrition gains parallel the subordinate incorporation of women workers into factory life. In the midst of these contradictory outcomes, the challenge is to find sites where the feminist meaning of empowerment can be recovered and where neoliberal technologies open up spaces for change from the bottom. The peer-to-peer education implemented in the HERproject may provide such an opening. Empowerment may take on a different meaning in this context: it may become more than giving wealth or health to individuals, but may become a way to strengthen women’s ability to define their interests and act in concert to advance them.

Thus, feminism encounters neoliberal economic projects, discourses, and technologies in multiple ways, and different encounters yield different results. The challenge for scholars is to better understand the conditions under which neoliberalised feminisms provide openings to challenge oppressive power relations.

Notes
1. Efforts to define what is true feminism have run into trouble previously. See, for example, the debate among feminist historians over labelling different historical forms of women’s activism feminism (Offen 1988, DuBois 1989, Cott 1989), or the debates in the context of the UN women’s conferences over what issues were properly to be considered feminist (Tinker 1981, McIntosh 1981, Tinker and Jaquette 1987). The only credible way to solve this question is to think of feminism as a historically situated social movement, which is feminist to the extent that people associated with this movement and its ideas call themselves feminists (Mansbridge 1995). Whether bureaucrats, diversity managers, or CSR officers seeking to advance gender equality or empower women call themselves feminists is an empirical question. Preliminary evidence from ongoing research suggests that few of those seeking to advance the status of women in business call themselves feminists, whereas the evidence is mixed for gender experts in international organizations (Prügl and True 2014, Thompson 2013).
2. The key text on bottom of the pyramid marketing is Prahalad (2006).
3. Figures from the UN Fund for International Partnerships are indicative. As of December 2007, the Fund had contributed a total of $1.028 billion to the work of the UN, the bulk (almost 60 per cent) went to children’s health, followed by the environment (16 per cent) and women/population (13 per cent). Whereas children’s health work was concentrated in only 72 projects, the much smaller share of funds for work on the environment and women was spread out over a much larger number of projects (135 and 94, respectively), reflecting perhaps the transversal character of these issues. See Thematic Financing, Webpage of the United Nations Office for Partnerships at http://www.un.org/partnerships/financial_contributions.html, Accessed 24 January 2013.
4. For a historical overview of the economic, political, and cultural trajectories of neoliberalism, see Centeno and Cohen (2012). For a discussion of ideological currents in neoliberalism, see Peck 2008.
5. Note moreover that scientists question that any product applied to the surface of skins could ever achieve a
whitening effect, and money spent on whitening agents is likely to be a total waste (Karnani 2007).

6. Neoliberal restructuring also meant a loss of the company’s monopoly position in the jeans market as
competitors successfully developed both more upscale and low-end products. Despite a partnership with
Wal-Mart since 2002 and associated efforts to streamline its supply chain and reduce costs of production,
Levi Strauss has had difficulty reversing its continuing decline in earnings and profits (Levi Strauss & Co.

7. HER stands for Health Enables Returns.

8. The project received additional major financial support in March 2013 from the Dutch government.

9. HERproject has been implemented in over 150 factories across 9 emerging economies and, in addition to
Levi Strauss & Co., works with large garment distributors, including among others Li & Fung (a Hong
Kong-based MNC), Marks & Spencer, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Timberland. There are plans underway
to expand the methodology to the agriculture and horticulture sector in sub-Saharan Africa, targeting

10. As the project’s manager recounts from her visit to Bangladesh: ‘There are the strangest myths and miscal-
culations around women’s health. Women were missing two or three days a month when they had their period
because they didn’t know what to do. Culturally, they had been told that it’s shameful’ (Gunther 2012). But
the problems may also be more practical. In the words of the HERproject country manager for Bangladesh:
One of the most common problems we encounter when we go into factories has to do with menstrual hygiene.
In the villages the girls sometimes use cloths that they wash and reuse. But in the towns they live in slums
with narrow alleys and dark rooms and there is little opportunity to hang the cloths to dry (Female Factory
Workers Get Health Education). Apparently a substitute women use for cloth is textile waste piled up on
factory floors, which may be dirty or full of mould and insects, leading to rashes and infections. Providing
subsidized sanitary napkins from the factory nurse is a simple solution.

11. Indeed, Compa (2008–2009) recounts two instances in Mexico and Sri Lanka, where interventions from
brand name buyers enabled the establishment to democratic trade unions.

Notes on contributor

Elisabeth Prügl is Professor of International Relations at the Graduate Institute of International and Develop-
ment Studies in Geneva where she directs the Institute’s Programme on Gender and Global Change. Her research
focuses on gender politics in global governance, in particular in the areas of labour, agriculture and development.
Recent publications include Transforming Masculine Rule (Michigan 2011), ‘If Lehman Brothers had Been
Lehman Sisters . . .’, International Political Sociology (March 2012), and Feminist Strategies in International
Governance, co-edited with Gülay Caglar and Susanne Zwingel (Routledge 2013). She is spending the
2014/15 academic year as a Fellow at the Women and Public Policy Program of the Harvard Kennedy School.

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**Neoliberalising Feminism**


629


