

Title: Disrupting Disempowerment: Feminism, Co-optation, and the Privatized Governance of Gender and Development

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Abstract

Longstanding debates about the relationship between neoliberalism and feminism have been given new vigor by the somewhat surprising emergence of an 'unabashed feminism' espoused by elite women in political, economic, and cultural institutions of the global North. Women and girls are now highly visible subjects of global development governance, but also 'poster girls' for a variety of neoliberal reforms: Has feminism been co-opted by neoliberalism? Reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of feminist accounts of neoliberal co-optation, this article suggests a path beyond the co-optation debate: Why does neoliberalism evince concern for gender inequality as a particular form of inequality, if it is broadly concerned with individual subjects? Empirically, it applies this conceptual debate to Bottom of the Pyramid development initiatives, focused on the Girl Effect Accelerator. The article argues that neoliberalism appropriates dimensions of feminism insofar as it represents gender inequality as a site of accumulation and mechanism for legitimizing the increased power accorded to the private sector in development governance.

Keywords: Feminism, neoliberalism, philanthrocapitalism, Girl Effect, development

Introduction

'There will be someone in our century who wins the Nobel Peace Prize for solving the problems of poverty. And in the process that person will become a billionaire.' – Andrew Zolli, executive director of PopTech ideas festival¹

Is there money to be made from eradicating poverty? The answer to this question currently animates a movement in global development in which a new generation of philanthropists and investors are racing to innovate an end to poverty. Girls and women play an especially important role in this new movement because they function as the visual and rhetorical centerpiece of a powerful development discourse that encourages the public to see gender inequality as an inefficiency and as a primary obstacle to full productivity. Girls and women, as abstract and idealized targets for anti-poverty interventions, have acquired such a high-profile status in development discourse through the popularization of the idea that gender equality will be a key driver of national economic growth, private sector profit, and global post-crisis recovery.

The trend to elevate girls and women as solutions to myriad economic problems bears some resemblance to feminist claims about the need to value women's work, enable women to generate independent income, and transform social norms through up-ending male-breadwinner models. But it is not quite the same as feminism – more like its 'uncanny double'² which endorses a package of

¹ Andrew Zolli quoted in Linsey McGoey, *No Such Thing as a Free Gift: The Gates Foundation and the Price of Philanthropy*, Verso, London, 2015, p65. Henceforth *No Such Thing as a Free Gift*.

² Nancy Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History', *New Left Review*, 56, March/April (2009), pp97-117, p114. Henceforth *The Cunning of History*.

neoliberal reforms in the name of women's empowerment. The troubled relationship between feminism and neoliberalism has a long history, of which the current trend for corporate-led global development governance is only the latest incarnation. This article addresses this relationship and feminist frameworks for analyzing it, theorizing a way to move beyond debates about co-optation.

The article proceeds as such: the first section outlines the changes in the governance of Gender and Development that form the political and economic context for the analysis. The second section deals with debates about feminism's co-optation by neoliberalism and considers alternative ways to address this question. The third and fourth sections consider concrete manifestations of the convergence between feminism and neoliberalism in the form of Bottom of the Pyramid development, taking the example of the Girl Effect Accelerator, a project of the Nike Foundation and venture capital investors. The article argues that rather than trying to assess the extent to which feminism has been co-opted by neoliberalism, we should instead ask why and how neoliberalism expresses a concern with feminism. Applying this framework to the Girl Effect Accelerator, and Bottom of the Pyramid development more broadly, the article argues that gender has acquired prominence in this field because it functions both as a space for profit-making and as legitimizing device for increasing corporate power in the governance of development.

Convergences

Over the past fifteen years, there has been a profound shift in the terrain of Gender and Development landscape. This shift is the result of the convergence of three significant trends in development: increased power of corporate actors, increased visibility of women and girls in policy, and a resurgence of interest in feminism. First, this context is shaped by the corporatization of development: corporations are increasingly powerful actors in global development, as the private sector is a growing source of development funding. In the context of financial crisis and austerity, states are facing intense public scrutiny and criticism of development spending commitments and they therefore welcome opportunities to partner with non-state funders. States and international development institutions also exist in a broader public management context in which states are expected to emulate corporate norms of efficiency and competitiveness. Conversely, corporations are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their commitments to socially responsible business, to demonstrate their positive impact upon the environments in which they operate, and to act as corporate citizens.³ As Wendy Brown argues, 'the conduct of government and the conduct of firms are now fundamentally identical; both are in the business of justice and sustainability, but never as ends in themselves.'⁴ In this context, global development is undergoing a broad change marked by an increase in the authority ascribed to corporate actors, an emphasis on the role of the private sector in

³ Bridget O'Laughlin, 'Governing Capital? Corporate Social Responsibility and the Limits of Regulation', *Development and Change*, 39(6), 2008, pp945–957.

⁴ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, New York, MIT Press, 2015, p27.

producing growth, and pressure upon public institutions to partner with and learn from the private sector.⁵

The second relevant trend is the gendering of development governance and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). After decades of feminist work in this area, gender is now a headlining buzzword in development discourse and gender equality is frequently cited for its role in the promotion of economic growth by public and private institutions alike. The goals of women's empowerment and gender equality are at the forefront of development agendas and national governments, where rhetoric about gender equality feeds into narratives of national competitiveness and post-crisis growth. In the public sector, the equation of women's empowerment with national growth and poverty eradication has been embraced, for example, by USAID and the US State Department as an especially important theme Hilary Clinton's time as Secretary of State.⁶

In the private sector, pressure on corporations to demonstrate their social responsibility efforts has given rise to a new range of partnerships, initiatives, and donations which aim to deflect criticism of their practices while capitalizing on resistance to unethical corporate practices.⁷ A rhetorical link between women's empowerment and growth is an important feature of these discourses, where firms cite gender equality issues as central to their social responsibility projects and primary competitiveness strategy. Moreover, considerations around branding and public relations are a significant reason that firms are looking to align themselves with gender equality issues. The Nike Foundation's emphasis on the empowerment of adolescent girls reflects efforts to erase brand associations between Nike and child labour, while the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women initiative sought to draw attention to Goldman's socially responsible endeavors in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis in which it was considered a major wrongdoer.⁸ Public and private-sector efforts to 'engender' development are not taking place along parallel tracks, but are producing new joint initiatives and hybrid networks, as well as a shared policy discourse of gender equality as 'Smart Economic' policy which is widespread across different institutions and sectors.⁹

The third trend is the somewhat surprising resurgence of feminism at the level of popular culture, politics and media. There has been a recognizable resurgence of the 'F' word in the broader public conversation; even the most notorious misogynists feel public pressure to express sympathy with the feminist cause, often with bizarre outcomes. For example, during the 2016 election cycle, Ivanka Trump went on a press tour where she declared: 'My father is a feminist... People talk about gender

⁵ Michael Blowfield and Catherine Dolan, 'Business as a Development Agent: Evidence of Possibility and Improbability', *Third World Quarterly*, 35(1), 2014, pp22–42. Henceforth *Business as a Development Agent.*; Peter Utting, 'CSR and Equality', *Third World Quarterly*, 28(4), 2007, pp697–712.

⁶ Mary McDonald, 2015, 'Imagining neoliberal feminisms? Thinking critically about the US diplomacy campaign, "Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports"', *Sport in Society*, 18, 2015, pp909–922.

⁷ Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve Lebaron, *Protest Inc.*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2014.

⁸ Elisabeth Prügl and Jacqui True, 'Equality Means Business? Governing Gender through Transnational Public-Private Partnerships', *Review of International Political Economy*, 21(6), 2014, pp1137–1169. Henceforth *Equality Means Business.*

⁹ Sydney Calkin, 'Globalizing Girl Power: Corporate Social Responsibility and Transnational Business Initiatives for Gender Equality', *Globalizations*, 13(2) 2016, pp158-172.

equality, but he has lived it...'¹⁰ In the current political and cultural context, a proudly anti-feminist stance is no longer politically tenable, but the form of feminism that can be widely embraced is a nebulous one. Today feminism is 'no longer despised', but instead has been 'given new life' in its re-articulation through the lens of individual empowerment, endorsing a constellation of values that includes the promotion of career ambition, the embrace of female sexual agency, and the emphasis on choice and opportunity.¹¹ Firms' efforts to align their products and services with gender equality and empowerment reflect this trend, where the resurgence of public interest in 'girl power' has been reflected in a wave of feminist-flavoured product marketing, charitable campaigns, and designer goods.¹² This feminist moment has produced wide-ranging effects that can also be seen in the daily experience of encountering cause-related marketing and international development campaigning. It is evident in the ubiquity of the 'Third World Woman' whose smiling face animates the posters of charity campaigns, packets of fair trade foods, and numerous other media platforms.¹³

At the convergence of these three trends – corporatization of global development governance, 'engendering' of Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, and resurgence of feminism in mainstream discourse – we see the proliferation of public-private partnerships for women's empowerment and gender equality. These partnerships take many forms, from joint funding of projects, to hybrid governance networks, to knowledge sharing forums, among others (*Equality Means Business*). In recent years, these partnerships have increased rapidly: some of the most high-profile ventures include the World Bank's partnership with the Nike Foundation, UN Women and Coca Cola, Exxon Mobil and the United Nations Foundation, Goldman Sachs and the International Finance Corporation, among others. There has been a related increase in CSR campaigns and branding campaigns to associate products with women's empowerment and social responsibility initiatives, some of which are not connected to joint public-private partnerships and instead take the form of corporate philanthropy. This shift is having a major impact on Gender and Development funding at the grassroots level. The Association of Women in Development reports that the current funding landscape for women's rights is characterized by an upsurge in private donors and a range of new requirements for organisations and projects who seek funding. By extension, the ability of NGOs to secure funding for gender equality projects today depends on the extent to which the goals of gender equality can be re-imagined as profitable and strategic investments for businesses.¹⁴

Feminism and Neoliberalism

¹⁰ Melissa Chan, 'Ivanka Trump Says Her Father Donald Is a 'Feminist' July 3, 2016. Online: <http://time.com/4392409/ivanka-trump-donald-trump-feminist/>

¹¹ Angela McRobbie, 'Feminism, the Family, and the New "Mediated" Maternalism', *New Formations*, 80-81, 2013, pp119–137. Henceforth *Feminism, the Family, and the New "Mediated" Maternalism*.

¹² Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill, "'the Revolution Will Be Led by a 12-Year-Old Girl": Girl Power and Global Biopolitics', *Feminist Review*, 105(1), 2013, pp83–102.

¹³ Ananya Roy, *Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the Making of Development*, London, Routledge, 2010. Henceforth *Poverty Capital*.

¹⁴ Angelika Arutyunova and Cindy Clark, *Watering the Leaves, Starving the Roots: The Status of Financing for Women's Rights Organizing and Gender Equality*, Toronto, Association for Women in Development, 2013, p34. Henceforth *Watering the Leaves*.

This emergent 'Business Case' for gender equality is characterized by governments, corporations, and related organizations asserting the importance of women's economic power (as workers and consumers) for growth. The 'Business Case' for gender equality (also known as 'Gender Equality as Smart Economics') essentially espouses the notion that gender equality should stand as a policy goal because gender inequality is economically inefficient and inhibits growth. This discourse has proven highly salient and is now espoused by a wide variety of organizations; the following excerpt from Deloitte's Gender Dividend report provides one representative example:

Women may well be the dominant source of economic growth in the near future—and organizations that are able to capitalize on the roles women play as economic actors will most likely have a competitive advantage as the world pulls out of the global recession. Fully integrating women into both the work-place and the marketplace can yield a significant return — what can be called the Gender Dividend... [Gender inequality] represents a large-scale underuse of talent that can have serious repercussions in terms of competitiveness both at the national and organizational level. In the talent-driven 21st century economy, it is a trend that can ill afford to be sustained and the risks of doing nothing are real.¹⁵

The eager embrace of 'Business Case' language creates a dilemma: increased visibility for gender equality issues is an important achievement, but the precise terms of this visibility matter enormously. The ease with which feminist language can be taken up to provide a pseudo-ethical gloss for private profiteering has provoked serious questions among feminist activists and theorists. This issue has been widely understood in terms of co-optation: the adoption of feminist language/ concepts within mainstream institutions and neoliberal ideologies is generally attributed to linguistic vagueness which allows for re-signification, the technocratic uptake of feminism as institutional 'gender mainstreaming' and the structural/ cultural restrictions within institutions that limit the space for transformative feminist change.¹⁶ Has feminism become just a popular rhetorical register for neoliberalism? Has its radical political edge been blunted through its widespread (if fragmented) uptake?

The apparent crisis of feminist politics has produced a widespread case of the 'co-optation blues' among feminists, who have seen the mixed effects of the professionalization of the movement.¹⁷ Where feminists enter governments and similar institutions, debates have emerged around the power of these feminist bureaucrats – 'femocrats' – in relation to conservative bureaucracies, prevailing

¹⁵ Deloitte, 2011. 'The Gender Dividend: The Business Case for Investing in Women', Deloitte Insights, Online: <http://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/Public-Sector/dttl-ps-thegenderdividend-08082013.pdf>. Accessed 10 October 2013.

¹⁶ Srilatha Batliwala, 'Taking the Power Out of Empowerment - an Experiential Account', in A. Cornwall and D. Eade (eds), *Deconstructing Development Discourse: Buzzwords and Fuzzwords*, Rugby, UK, Practical Action Publishing, 2011, pp111–122; Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock, 'What Do Buzzwords Do for Development Policy? A Critical Look at "participation", "empowerment" and "poverty Reduction"', *Third World Quarterly*, 26(7), 2005, pp1043–1060.

¹⁷ Sara De Jong and Susanne Kim, 'The Co-Optation of Feminisms: A Research Agenda', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Ahead of Print, 2017, pp1-17, p2. Henceforth *The Co-Optation of Feminisms*.

institutional cultures, and the women's movement.¹⁸ Where feminist groups have sought to influence powerful institutions from the outside and sought to transform themselves to capture greater resources, they have provoked debates about the 'NGO-ization' of the feminist movement.¹⁹ In the field of international development, parallel conversations have debated the merits and perils of institutional engagement, as manifested in various iterations of the 'Women in Development' framework and its successors.²⁰ The radical aims of the feminist movement may be softened once they are translated into the structure of mainstream institutions, but can feminists exert any influence if they choose not to engage? This sense of a radical movement having been diluted or corrupted through its embrace by neoliberalism is by no means unique to feminism. Indeed, as Boltanski and Chiapello argue, the new 'spirit of capitalism' is one which disarms opponents by absorbing them and legitimates itself in the terminology of its critics.²¹

In the feminist political economy literature, the effort to identify this 'uncanny double' of feminism has led to the diagnosis of many forms of 'neoliberal', 'transnational business' 'managerial', 'elite' or 'governance' feminisms.²² As I have written elsewhere, these critiques capture different dimensions of the phenomenon of neoliberal feminism: they aim to account for its corporate origins, its orientation to biopolitical power, and its relationship to institutions of governance.²³ They aim to demonstrate the continuities and breakages between feminism before co-optation and its neoliberal, marketized incarnation. Throughout these critiques of neoliberal feminism runs the argument that today feminism provides a new rhetorical register for neoliberal capitalism. In essence, co-optation narratives portray feminism as giving ideological cover to economic forces that widen inequalities and worsen working conditions in the majority world. For Nancy Fraser, neoliberalism 'cloaks its depredations beneath an enchanting, charismatic veil: invoking the feminist critique of the family wage, it promises liberation through waged labour in the service of capital' (*The Cunning of History*, pp111-2). In policy terms, feminist critiques of top-down state planning sought to combat women's poverty and misrecognition of their labour, but have instead been taken up to endorse labour market flexibilization and small-scale micro-lending schemes, among others, which take place outside of macro-structural anti-poverty policies. Hester Eisenstein has famously argued that feminist advocacy of the liberating power of work has produced a stratification of female employment and therefore taken up to push women into dangerous, degrading, and devalued factory work.²⁴ For Angela McRobbie, neoliberal feminism provides an 'empowering' gloss to class inequality by valorizing middle class motherhood (*Feminism, the Family, and the New 'Mediated' Maternalism*). Because arguments about the co-optation of

¹⁸ Jacqui True, 'Mainstreaming Gender in Global Public Policy,' *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 5(3), 2003, pp368–96.

¹⁹ Sonia Alvarez, 'Advocating Feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO "Boom"', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 1(2), 1999, pp181–209.

²⁰ Shirin Rai, *The Gender Politics of Development: Essays in Hope and Despair*, London, Zed Books, 2008.

²¹ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Verso, 2007.

²² Sydney Calkin, 'Feminism, Interrupted? Gender and Development in the Era of Smart Economics,' *Progress in Development Studies*, 15(4), 2015, pp295-307. Henceforth *Feminism, Interrupted*.

²³ Elisabeth Prügl, 'Neoliberalising Feminism,' *New Political Economy*, 20(4), 2015, pp614-631. Henceforth *Neoliberalising Feminism*.

²⁴ Hester Eisenstein, 2015. 'The Sweatshop Feminists', *Jacobin Magazine*. Online. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/06/kristofglobalization-development-third-world/> Published June 17, 2015, accessed July 1, 2015.

feminism often point to the adverse impacts of economic globalization on women, such accounts of the co-optation of feminism by neoliberalism have proven influential and provoked widespread debate in Gender and Development literature.

The extensive literature on feminism's co-optation identifies a serious empirical and theoretical problem, but presents a difficult conceptual pathway. Co-optation narratives are notoriously slippery, because they tend to rely on nostalgic notions of past purity in contrast to current compromise. Moreover, co-optation narratives risk reproducing a monolithic understanding of a social movement, in which there is less space for negotiation or strategic engagement (*Feminism, Interrupted*).²⁵ On what ground can we make an assessment about which forms of feminism are more or less authentic? The conceptual and political dilemmas posed by co-optation risk 'paralyzing' feminist analysis (*The Co-optation of Feminisms*, p2). As such, I propose to look at this question from another angle. Rather than starting with feminism and asking about the flaws in feminist theory or movement-building that allow for cooptation, we should start with neoliberalism and ask from where its concern with gender equality emerges. This approach responds, in part, to a framing of the feminism-neoliberalism puzzle articulated by Catherine Rottenberg. Rottenberg argues that given neoliberalism's erosion of liberal political principles like formal equality and solidarity, 'it is important to ask the question of why neoliberalism acknowledges and revives a discourse about continued gender inequality at all.' She goes on:

Why, in other words, is there any need for the production of a neoliberal feminism, which draws attention to a specific kind of inequality? Given that neoliberal rationality individuates subjects, eliding structural inequalities while instating market rationality, why is there any need for a feminist variant when a female (as opposed to a feminist) neoliberal subject might do the job just as well or better?²⁶

I interpret Rottenberg's discussion of the paradoxical neoliberal concern with gender inequality as an invitation to consider the manifestations of corporatized Gender and Development not in terms of co-opted feminism, but in terms of the expansion of neoliberalism into new spaces of accumulation. This provides a new way to examine *how* women came to be positioned as idealized neoliberal subjects and the implications of their complex visibility. An analysis along these lines is structured around a few questions, each of which moves away from asking how feminism was co-opted, and instead places the emphasis on neoliberalism's interest in and deployment of gender inequality:

1. How does neoliberalism understand gender inequality?
2. How does neoliberalism understand the role of women and girls in development?
3. How does neoliberalism's interest in gender inequality relate more broadly to changes in global development? To whom does it assign power in global development?

²⁵ See also Nanette Funk, 'Contra Fraser on feminism and neoliberalism', *Hypatia*, 28(1), 2013, pp179-196; Clare Hemmings, *Why stories matter: The political grammar of feminist theory*, Raleigh, NC, Duke University Press, 2011.

²⁶ Catherine Rottenberg, 'The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism', *Cultural Studies*, 28(3), 2013, pp 418-437, p431.

Clearly, as feminists addressing these questions have established, neoliberalism is not a monolith and must be critiqued carefully and specifically (*Neoliberalising Feminism*). By extension, the kinds of questions outlined above require exploration through concrete examples to understand the power relations at play. In the remainder of this article and using the conceptual framework outlined above, I address one concrete manifestation of this feminism-neoliberalism relationship: the Nike Foundation's Girl Effect Accelerator.

Bottom of the Pyramid Development

The changing role of the private sector in development has moved from a 'defensive' response to criticism – embodied in Corporate Social Responsibility – to a more aggressive stance asserting the role of business as a full-fledged 'development agent' (*Business as a Development Agent*, p25). As a result, new partnerships, financial instruments, and for-profit development initiatives have emerged under the guise of 'creative capitalism' and 'bottom billion capitalism.' Such initiatives re-imagine the role for the private sector in development as actors who are best-placed to tackle development challenges because they have the necessary technical skills and the right incentives to lead more effective development interventions than the public sector.²⁷ Bill Gates, a prominent proponent of this paradigm, explains it as such: 'It is mainly corporations that have the skills to make technological innovations work for the poor... There are markets all over the world that businesses have missed' (Gates quoted in *Poverty Capital*, p25). This perspective on business as a leading development agent, and the possibility for businesses to affect 'development' outcomes while increasing their profits, is encapsulated in the popular Bottom of the Pyramid model.

Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) development is an approach which has entered development by way of management literature, promoting the idea that the world's poorest should be viewed by corporations as consumers constituting a market, rather than mere recipients of aid.²⁸ Although the term does not describe any single formally coordinated project, it reflects a coherent set of efforts to re-conceptualize poverty 'as a frontier of profit and accumulation.'²⁹ Bottom of the Pyramid development imagines the world's poor both as profitable consumer groups to be accessed, as well as powerful entrepreneurs who can lift themselves out of poverty if given access to capital and resources. Conversely, they posit the claim that entrepreneurs and investors can address these social problems which earning return on investment – both social return and financial (*No Such Thing as a Free Gift*, p81). Bottom of the Pyramid initiatives are perhaps most closely associated with microfinance, but also include diverse fair trade, direct sales, impact investing and social entrepreneurship schemes (*Business as a Development Agent*, p23).

²⁷ Catherine Dolan and Kate Roll, 'Capital's New Frontier: From "Unusable" Economies to Bottom-of-the-Pyramid Markets in Africa', *African Studies Review*, 56(3), 2013, pp123–146. Henceforth *Capital's New Frontier*.

²⁸ Julia Elyachar, 'Next Practices: Knowledge, Infrastructure, and Public Goods at the Bottom of the Pyramid', *Public Culture*, 24(1), 2012, pp109–129. Henceforth *Next Practices*.

²⁹ Ananya Roy, 'Ethical Subjects: Market Rule in an Age of Poverty', *Public Culture*, 24(1), 2012, pp, 105-108, p106.

Women occupy a special place in this development paradigm. Women have historically acquired visibility in development policy through the argument that they are uniquely productive and altruistic subjects, and this discourse has been especially important in animating the current themes of the 'Business Case' for women (*Feminism, Interrupted*). While men living in poverty are often depicted as feckless, irresponsible, and risky subjects, women are conversely represented as resilient and flexible subjects who will readily 'downgrade' their work to provide for their families, while their husbands will stay at home.³⁰ This is particularly so in Bottom of the Pyramid initiatives, where women are represented as ideal entrepreneurial subjects, because they are understood as gatekeepers to their communities where they influence consumption choices and have the social networks to increase the sale of a product. This logic is most visibly at work in the direct sales networks which are so prevalent in Bottom of the Pyramid development; perhaps the best known of these initiatives is Hindustan Unilever's Shakti project, in which the firm has developed a network of 48,000 Shakti entrepreneurs who sell Unilever soap products in rural areas where the company would otherwise have little access to villages and consumers. Unilever celebrates these rural distribution networks as key tools in its fight against rivals for the 'next billion shoppers' (*Neoliberalising Feminism*, p622).

The Girl Effect Accelerator

'Bottom of the Pyramid' ventures focused on the purchasing power of women and girls encapsulate some of the most significant changes in global development theory and practice, representing the logical endpoint of the convergence between private sector-led development and girl-powered development. One such initiative, which is representative of and influential in shaping these trends, is the Girl Effect Accelerator which provides a space for ten selected startup enterprises to seek funding and mentorship to grow their businesses and, in doing so, benefit girls living in poverty.

The Girl Effect Accelerator is an initiative under the umbrella of the Girl Effect, a 'movement' fronted by the Nike Foundation (the charitable arm of global sports equipment manufacturer Nike Inc.) and supported by a variety of governmental and non-profit organizations including the NoVo Foundation, the UK Department for International Development, and the World Bank. Its stated aim is to reach girls living in poverty and give them 'the tools and access to the critical assets they need to achieve their full potential.'³¹ The Nike Foundation has been an influential player in the spread of the 'Business Case' for girls in development, which has been at the core of its message since 2008 when it launched Girl Effect campaign at Davos and the Clinton Global Initiative.³² As Nike Foundation CEO Maria Eitel explains, Nike arrived at the conclusion that girls were the best solution to poverty eradication even though they had long been 'invisible'; the need to invest in girls was not 'on the radar of the CEOs, government leaders and other influential people.' Eitel argues that the foundation has

³⁰ Sydney Calkin, "'Tapping' Women for Post-Crisis Development: Evidence from the 2012 World Development Report", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 17(4), 2015, pp 611-629, p621. Henceforth 'Tapping' Women for Post-Crisis Capitalism.

³¹ The Girl Effect, no date. Frequently Asked Questions'. Online: <http://www.girleffect.org/frequently-asked-questions-faqs/>. Accessed on January 4, 2016.

³² Sydney Calkin, 'Post-feminist spectatorship and the Girl Effect: "Go ahead, really imagine her,"' *Third World Quarterly*, 36(4), 2015, pp654-669. Henceforth *Post-feminist Spectatorship*.

tried to 'pick winners' in the same way investors do; in so doing, they've identified girls as a winning investment and as the crucial point of intervention for changing the direction of international development.³³

Initially, the Nike Foundation set out to remedy the under-valuation of girls in development by partnering with actors across the spectrum, from global development institutions to other non-profits and local NGOs in the global South. Philanthropic organizations formed an important piece of the Girl Effect's funding, although these philanthropic partners often represented the new wave of philanthrocapitalists in development funding (including, for example, Peter Buffet's Novo Foundation). Even when the Girl Effect was backed primarily by charitable organizations, its mission was to serve as a liaison between the public and private sector, in order to demonstrate to business the value of investing in girls. The highly visible Girl Effect campaign and its accompanying videos, for example, was initially pitched as a collaboration between the fundraising and marketing expertise of Nike Inc. and the charitable aims of the Nike Foundation, in order to create a 'catalyst to drive demand action.'³⁴

In 2014, the Nike Foundation, in partnership with a venture capital firm, launched the Girl Effect Accelerator. The Girl Effect Accelerator represents a continuation of the Girl Effect project, re-articulated through the structures and languages of the American tech industry and its focus on startups which 'disrupt' and 'innovate' to solve social problems.³⁵ In the parlance of the tech industry, an accelerator is a forum to 'accelerate' existing companies, where (within a limited timeframe) companies are given access to mentorship and funders to achieve a set of goals. The Girl Effect Accelerator provides these resources to ten selected startups whose work appeals to the aims of the Girl Effect. For this initiative, the Nike Foundation is partnered with the Unreasonable Group, the charitable wing of a venture capital firm (Unreasonable Institute) focused on social entrepreneurship. The Girl Effect Accelerator calls itself 'the world's first accelerator dedicated to impacting the lives of millions of girls in poverty.'³⁶

The Accelerator proposes to solve the problem of girls' invisibility in global development. Unlike other Girl Effect projects, the Accelerator is focused exclusively on private capital and investment, without public institutions as partners. In late 2014, the Nike Foundation and Unreasonable Group selected ten startup ventures for funding, on the basis of the following main criteria: 1) the startups are for-profit; 2) their annual revenue exceeds \$500k; 3) they demonstrate the potential to scale up; 4) they

³³ Maria Eitel quoted in Rahim Kanani, 2011. 'The Nike Foundation on Unleashing the "Girl Effect"', Huffington Post Online: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rahim-kanani/nike-foundation-girl-effect_b_850551.html. Accessed on December 3, 2013. Henceforth *Unleashing the Girl Effect*.

³⁴ Nathalie Kylander, *The Girl Effect Brand: Using Brand Democracy to Strengthen Brand Affinity*, Cambridge MA, Hauser Center for Nonprofits, Harvard University, 2011, p2.

³⁵ The media created in 2008-2010 for the initial Girl Effect campaign continues to feature prominently on the Girl Effect Accelerator's media, with its videos being featured as evidence for the Accelerator's claims. For example, its website asks: "Still need convincing? Watch this 3 minute video" which links to the Girl Effect "Clock is Ticking" video. See also *Post-feminist Spectatorship*.

³⁶ Unreasonable Media, 2014. 'Inaugural Girl Effect Accelerator Video.' Online: <https://vimeo.com/114992307> Accessed August 17, 2015.

are committed to the 'Girl Effect vision'; 5) their impact on girls is measurable; and 6) the majority of their teams live and work in the countries where they operate.³⁷ On the basis of these criteria, ten startups were chosen for the Accelerator project, which launched with a conference where the startups were matched with mentors, potential financiers, and a support network; subsequent investor gatherings will allow the ventures to attract funding from larger investment funds and philanthropists. In the longer term, the ventures will be evaluated on the investment they attract, the growth in their business, and their impact on girls, the measurement of which is tailored to each venture. The first round of startups selected for the Girl Effect Accelerator include off-grid electricity devices, low-cost healthcare products, and several mobile apps for banking, education, and direct retail, among others (see *The Girl Effect Accelerator* for a full list).

The businesses in the first round of the Girl Effect Accelerator (GEA) differ widely in terms of their size, scope, and success: on the smaller end, it includes entrepreneur Arunachalam Muruganatham of Jayashree Industries, who produce and distributes machines which allow for the manufacture of low-cost sanitary towels. They sell machines at low-cost directly to Self-Help Groups across India and have so far not accepted offers to sell the company to larger firms.³⁸ On the larger end, Bridge International Academies is an education startup which has attracted funding from Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Omidyar Network, UK Department for International Development, the International Finance Corporation, and Pearson Educational. It is already a major player in a global 'for-profit schooling bonanza' extolled by private equity investors in the USA for almost ten years (*No Such Thing as a Free Gift*, p133). Moreover, it is notable that while a few of the business supported through the Girl Effect Accelerator are gender-focused, like Jayashree Industries (sanitary products) and Soko (market access via smartphone for women entrepreneurs), many are not: the mobile banking and electricity startups in the GEA promise outcomes that will benefit girls and women as part of their broader impact on rural households and 'unbanked' communities.

The GEA is typical of the kinds of assemblages which have been analysed through the lens of co-optation. It represents many dimensions of co-opted feminism, as outlined above: the GEA uses feminist language and analysis on the effects of gender inequality to promote a new model of business as development authority. It can be understood either as a co-optation of feminism for private profit or as an incarnation of extreme neoliberal feminism which is centered on economic empowerment of the individual as a customer or entrepreneur. Yet, where does this analysis of co-optation lead? Nowhere does the GEA overtly profess allegiance to feminism or feminist political action; if it has co-opted feminism, it has done so through the limited appropriation of the feminist language (or equality and empowerment) and emphasis on the harms of gender inequality/ the beneficial outcomes of gender equality.

³⁷ The Girl Effect Accelerator, no date. Online: <http://girleffectaccelerator.com/>. Accessed August 10, 2015. Henceforth *The Girl Effect Accelerator*.

³⁸ Lakshmi Sandhana, 2012. 'India's women given low-cost route to sanitary protection', *The Observer*. Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/jan/22/sanitary-towels-india-cheap-manufacture>. Published January 22, 2012. Accessed August 15, 2015.

Moreover, the co-optation framework may be of limited use here because it relies on the idea of 'absorption into the policy structures that one has been fighting' feminists have sought for decades to put women on the development agenda and done so in part by emphasizing the potential economic benefits of gender equality.³⁹ This is not to endorse a reductive and economistic conception of gender equality, but to emphasize that analysis of feminism's relationship to neoliberalism should not erase the efforts of feminists within institutions who have worked to 'sell' gender to policy makers. This economistic approach to gender equality is a legacy of Women in Development models and has had important policy ramifications for decades (*Feminism, Interrupted*).

Taking the Girl Effect Accelerator as a concrete and current manifestation of convergences between feminism and neoliberalism, what would it mean to move analysis beyond the co-optation account? Drawing on the provocation outlined above, to consider neoliberalism's concern with gender inequality, the following analysis of the Girl Effect Accelerator is structured through the three questions introduced to address the relationship between neoliberalism and feminism: How does the Girl Effect Accelerator understand gender inequality, the role of girls in development, and the prevailing power structures in development?

1. How does the GEA understand gender inequality?

The dominant theme in the GEA and the clearest reason for its concern with gender inequality, as one among many forms of inequality, is that it understands gender inequality as a potential source of profit. The GEA identifies startups as the actors who are best placed to 'drive solutions into the hands of millions of girls around the world' and to do so in a way that generates revenues for investors (*Girl Effect Accelerator*). At the most basic level, therefore, the GEA represents gender inequality as a worthy site of intervention because it signifies a 'frontier of accumulation' (*Poverty Capital*, p23).

As such, the GEA envisions its entrepreneurs 'driving solutions' for girls by giving them access to purchase products and services, and thereby providing them with the opportunity to act as consumers and entrepreneurs. It is undoubtedly true that some of the startups supported by the GEA produce goods that could significantly benefit girls and contribute to their wellbeing – cheap, disposable sanitary pads produced by Jayashree Industries, for example, have been shown to have positive impact on women's health.⁴⁰ However, considering the GEA more broadly, its conception of gender inequality, and the kinds of interventions it proposes to address gender inequality, raise serious concerns about limits on current development thinking.

It is clear that the terms upon which development problems are articulated sets the boundaries for their proposed solutions; the ways in which the causes of poverty are imagined works to shape and constrain the interventions proposed to eradicate poverty (*Business as a Development Agent*). Dominant discourses around gender equality, as espoused in the Girl Effect Accelerator, attest to this.

³⁹ Myra Marx Ferree and Beth Hess, *Controversy and Coalition: The New Feminist Movement Across Four Decades of Change*, New York, Routledge, 2000, p141.

⁴⁰ Rosalind Petchesky, 'Human Rights, Reproductive Health and Economic Justice: Why They Are Indivisible', *Reproductive Health Matters*, 8, 2000, pp12–17.

Poverty, and gendered poverty in particular, is understood as a function of the market and especially as the inability of girls to access the market. It deploys a market rationale to re-imagine poverty as the absence of material resources which provides the opportunities for entrepreneurs to intervene with suitable products. The Nike Foundation's Executive Director for Global Innovation describes the entrepreneurs of the GEA as such: they are 'identifying a need, creating a best-in-class service or product and executing brilliantly.'⁴¹ Here, poverty and deprivation are re-framed in terms of a gap in the market where the need for a product or service can be identified.

As such, the representation of gendered poverty as the absence of particular material goods which can be addressed by entrepreneurs re-frames the problem on the entrepreneur's terms. Bottom of the Pyramid capitalism allows the supply to frame the interpretation of demand, raising the likelihood that the problems identified and the solutions offered 'accord more with the needs of capital than the needs of the poor' (*Business as a Development Agent*, p30). The reduction of broad, complex problems of poverty into needs which can be filled by a specific product are the frequent result of the Bottom of the Pyramid model. Dolan and Roll argue that BoP translates problems of hunger, environmental degradation and disease into market opportunities for yogurt, cook stoves, and bed nets (*Capital's New Frontier*, p130); similarly, the GEA translates the complex intersection between gender, race, and class inequalities into a market opportunity for private schooling, mobile banking, and solar energy. Gender inequality is thus translated into a market problem with market solutions.

2. How does the GEA understand the role of girls in development?

The Girl Effect Accelerator encapsulates significant changes in thinking about girls as drivers of development. Much of the rationale for the Accelerator and the wider Girl Effect 'movement' is premised on the claim that girls are 'invisible' to policy makers, investors, and entrepreneurs. This invisibility is articulated in terms of development funding: the Accelerator material frequently argues that only two cents in each 'development dollar' goes to girls, which represents a major missed opportunity. The language of 'development dollars' elides specifics about where this funding comes from and the source of this claim is not clear; nonetheless, it captures an observable phenomenon in development funding, where the recognition of the importance of gender in development is not addressed with clear goals or consistent funding (*Watering the Leaves*, p35). The GEA uses this claim about money spent on girls as a proxy for their invisibility in development and argues that its project will correct this oversight by making girls visible 'to the entrepreneurial, business, and investment worlds' (*The Girl Effect Accelerator*). Nike Foundation CEO Maria Eitel explains this broader rationale, with reference to the Nike Foundation's work on adolescent girls as development agents:

Adolescent girls have been invisible for a long time, so the first thing is really just this issue of finding ways to show the world why we need to invest in girls. That's where we were three

⁴¹ Shaifali Puri, Executive Director of Global Innovation at the Nike Foundation, quoted in Nike, 2014. 'Meet the Innovators Who Put Girls First in the Fight Against Poverty,' Nike News. Online: <http://news.nike.com/news/meet-the-innovators-putting-girls-first-in-the-fight-against-poverty> Published 14 November 2014, Accessed 17 August 2015. Henceforth *Meet the Innovators*.

years ago when GirlEffect.org was originally launched. At that time, we were putting a lot of effort into getting girls on the global agenda because they weren't on the radar of the CEOs, government leaders and other influential people (Quoted in *Unleashing the Girl Effect*).

Decades of feminist efforts to put girls and women on the development agenda have stemmed from similar observations about the way that gender is written out of development priorities – as an irrelevant social component, as a sensitive matter of cultural difference, or as an issue to be addressed *after* economic fundamentals. Although Maria Eitel's comments ostensibly reflect on the failure to put girls on the agenda, they are a sign of significant feminist success in this area, because her language echoes the longstanding claims of feminist activists. Yet, her comments also evidence the extent to which girls' visibility as subjects for development interventions has been premised on a re-conceptualization of girlhood and female agency. It has been successful to the extent that girls can be represented as potentially powerful consumers and entrepreneurs, rather than as citizens, rights holders, or subjects of equal moral value to men and boys.

This transformation is embodied in GEA's stated goal of 'unleashing the Girl Effect': by identifying adolescent girls as the most important point of intervention for development and business, the Girl Effect proposes to eradicate poverty by providing girls with more opportunities to participate in the formal economy. It advances the claim that girls are 'economic powerhouses' who, if given economic opportunities, will re-invest in their families and communities at higher rates than boys, 'creating a ripple effect that can lift entire communities out of poverty.'⁴² At the most basic level, the rhetoric of the Girl Effect is borne out by research: increased education, increased control over household income, and increased control over reproductive choices have all been shown to help create social change and produce more egalitarian gender relations.⁴³ Yet, the limitations on the stated mission of the GE lie in the narrow, blinkered way it interprets the data on girls and poverty, because it does so in a way that prioritizes the opportunity for profit-making. For instance, the GEA advances the goal of education for girls through supporting private, for-profit schools in the developing world. Bridge Academies' tuition fees average \$6 per month. If a girl's family pay to enroll her in a Bridge International Academy school, does this count as 'development dollars' spent on her benefit in the eyes of the GEA? The GEA's emphasis on girls' economic potential re-writes all dimensions of girlhood into a calculus about ensuring future productivity. Yet, there are important limits on the rhetorical power of making girls visible through their economic agency, not least because the case for making girls more economically productive continually renders their work in the formal economy visible at the same time that it compounds the invisibility of social reproduction.

Moreover, it is important to note that in the GEA, and Bottom of the Pyramid development more broadly, the focus on girls is not merely the product of the claim that girls are a uniquely 'untapped' market. It is the product of a set of beliefs and stereotypes about what it means to empower girls and women, as opposed to boys and men. The 'Business Case' for girls has found widespread success

⁴² The Girl Effect, 2012. 'Seven Things You Need to Know About Girls'. Online: <http://www.girleffect.org/media?id=3257>. Published December 11, 2012, Accessed August 10, 2015.

⁴³ See, for example, Naila Kabeer, 'Gender, poverty, and inequality: a brief history of feminist contributions in the field of international development', *Gender & Development*, 23(2), 2015, pp189–205.

(or at least widespread institutional uptake) by proposing a re-conceptualization of girls as powerful economic agents whose potential is 'untapped' by business and governments. This discourse relies on heavily essentialized images of girls and women as altruistic, resilient, intrinsically maternal figures whose natural entrepreneurial power can be unleashed through business training (*'Tapping' Women for Post-Crisis Capitalism*). In this way, BoP interventions actively work to construct markets of consumers, but they do so in gendered ways where women are preferred customers and entrepreneurs because of their role as 'gatekeepers of consumption' who will purchase products, develop brand loyalty, and disseminate new consumption norms in their communities (*Capital's New Frontier*, p133-4). Girls and women have acquired visibility in the BoP model, of which the GEA is one manifestation, insofar as they have come to be understood as risky yet morally responsible subjects who will produce return on investment.⁴⁴

3. How does the GEA understand global development? To whom does it assign power in global development?

Most significantly, the GEA demonstrates that neoliberalism evinces a concern with gender inequality in order to legitimize the privatization of power in development governance. Much of the GEA's representation of gendered poverty – and the 250 million girls living in poverty who are its targets – is based on an implicit critique of state-led development. By extension, it endorses the private governance of development and the re-alignment of development with corporate values and structures. To this end, the GEA re-states a common critique of development assistance: despite so many billions of dollars spent in aid, with little effect. The GEA claims:

Every year, more than \$120 billion is spent in international development assistance, yet this system has yet to produce the game-changing results we all desire for girls and the world. This program is designed to bring new problem solvers to the table: entrepreneurs. The Girl Effect Accelerator will support solutions that are measurably benefiting girls in poverty: market based solutions that are locally driven, aid-independent, financially sustainable, and that have the potential to be scalable globally (*The Girl Effect Accelerator*).

This critique of public failures in global development is therefore tied to an endorsement of the corporatization of development, on the assumption that the private sector can achieve results which the public sector cannot. This is a logic which is common to BoP development, which has employed a post-development critique of development failures to attack the state and seized upon opportunities to access the informal markets and social capital of the poor outside of state structures (*Next Practices*). The GEA presents a critique of development as unconcerned with girls (by allocating insufficient resources to them) and ineffective in creating change (by spending billions of dollars inefficiently). In doing so, it endorses the idea that the logic and values of the private sector must be applied in the area of global development, because investors demand returns and will not support inefficient ventures. Pressure on states and public development institutions to learn from the private sector and to use its methods is a widely observed phenomenon which explains, in part, the increase in public-private partnerships in development; moreover, the increased power held by corporations in global

⁴⁴ Ananya Roy, 'Subjects of Risk: Technologies of Gender in the Making of Millennial Modernity', *Public Culture* 24(1), 2012, pp 131–55.

development – both as sources of development ‘knowledge’ and funding – marks part of a shift in the role played by business. Business today is widely understood as the actor who is best placed to effect global development change, because today’s investors and their ‘demanding capital’ expect returns on investment and reward for their risks (*Poverty Capital*, pp26-7). This is a belief reflected in the GEA’s assertion that its entrepreneurs are the ‘new problem solvers’ who can correct for years of publicly funded ineffective development (*The Girl Effect Accelerator*). In the early years of CSR, firms responded defensively to accusations against them and sought to engage in projects to redeem their reputations. Today, as Linsey McGoey argues, there is ‘no longer any whiff of atonement or reparation’ when business acts as a development agent: ‘The only sin is insufficient expansion into untouched realms’ (*No Such Thing as a Free Gift*, p85).

The GEA, which often espouses a critique of the failure of state-led development, also envisions a model of development that can bypass the kind of infrastructure which the state would build in order to ensure universal provision of services. This is evident in the emphasis on the ‘leapfrogging’ potential of innovations. In the parlance of startups, ‘leapfrogging’ means creating a new technology which bypasses prior technology or eliminates the need for an older technology. For instance, mobile banking can be said to ‘leapfrog’ because it allows customers to manage money in previously inaccessible places and in doing so eliminates the need for bricks-and-mortar banks to be built in those areas. The GEA is premised on this kind of innovation: its entrepreneurs are lauded for ‘leapfrogging the absence of electrical grid systems, leapfrogging the absence of schools, leapfrogging the absence of banks’ (*Meet the Innovators*). Innovative technologies can bring about major improvements, but combined with attacks on state development and assertions that private sector motives are more conducive to achieving transformative results, the valorization of this kind of innovation raises concerns about state infrastructure and capacity. Innovative technologies can produce phenomenal results for those that can afford them, but a development model premised on providing desirable products to new markets is poised to replicate and deepen existing inequalities.

Conclusion

Feminism is currently experiencing a resurgence, at the level of public culture. In global development, the importance of gender equality has reached the status of rhetorical consensus issue, evidenced by the eagerness of a range of policy makers to espouse their allegiance to women’s empowerment and to push for economic policies which will unlock the economic power of girls and women. As Silvia Federici observes, politicians who espouse their devotion to women’s rights would be foolish not to do so, ‘since what they have in mind is our “right to work”, for our cheap labour is a cornucopia for the system.’⁴⁵ The suspect devotion of economic neoliberals, religious fundamentalists, and other anti-feminist groups feigned for the cause of gender equality has rightly prompted concern that feminism has been co-opted by neoliberalism and has been given its current rhetorical power through its reinvention in market terms.

⁴⁵ Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, PM Press, Oakland, CA, 2012, p65.

This trend has been notable in the corporatization of global development, where private sector actors have gained power through their embrace of the so-called Business Case for gender equality, manifested in social responsibility or core business initiatives to harness the much-touted economic power of women. The Girl Effect Accelerator, under the umbrella of the Nike Foundation's Girl Effect campaign, presents a notable example of the convergence between engendered development, corporate authority in the development process, and the proliferation of Bottom of the Pyramid projects which propose a new vision of development as connecting business with the 'next billion shoppers'. Whether through direct sales, microcredit, or social entrepreneurship models, girls and women sit at the heart of this project; more specifically, a set of assumptions about the role that girls and women can play in expanding the frontiers of private profit through opening and creating new markets in the global South undergirds this discourse.

As a result, feminist analysis of this trend has tended to decry this cynical embrace of the feminist political movement, stripped of its calls for redistribution, and reduced to calls for women to act as more productive, more efficient, more profitable economic agents. Much of this analysis has focused on the question of feminism's co-optation by neoliberalism and sought to appraise the weaknesses in feminist thought or action which allowed for this co-optation. Yet, as I have demonstrated throughout this article, there are practical and theoretical limits to the usefulness of this approach. In an effort to overcome the limitations of the co-optation, I have suggested that this dilemma should be analyzed in terms of neoliberalism's concern with gender inequality, as one specific manifestation of inequality; in other words, what is the *work* that gender inequality does in the broad context of neoliberal rationality and reforms?

Most immediately, gender inequality as conceived in the Girl Effect Accelerator project envisions girls and women as a new space for accumulation: as loyal consumers of their favourite brands, as entrepreneurs opening up new markets, or as borrowers in expanding webs of microcredit (and debt). Girls and women are positioned as ideal subjects for intervention because they are attributed a range of essentialized values like moral responsibility, altruism, materialism, and resilience which allow them to be represented as worthy subjects of risk and good investments. In the language of the Nike Foundation, deploying the investor's strategy to 'pick winners' and invest in them, girls have been recognized as winning investments to deliver returns for investors alongside a social return for their communities.

Most importantly, this incarnation of neoliberalism demonstrates interest in gender inequality in particular because it represents a site of expansion for corporate power. The dominant narratives of the Business Case for development, evident in the Girl Effect Accelerator, work to re-write gendered poverty as a failure of state-led development and a problem which can best (or only) be solved through the power of the private sector and profit motive. It imagines poverty eradication as contiguous with innovation and entrepreneurship, and female consumers as untapped markets in which innovative technologies can flourish. The effects of this discourse and its widespread uptake is worrying, not only for its demonstrable ability to imitate the language of feminism in promotion of neoliberal economic reforms, but because of its power to re-shape the development landscape and contribute to the increased power held by private firms and individuals in global development

governance. The implications of this shift in power relations is not only potentially anti-feminist, but profoundly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the editors of this special issue and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.