UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Girl Incorporated. Corporate Empowerment Programmes for Women Workers: What Drives them and Who Benefits?

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King's College

June 2022

This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Declaration

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

Abstract

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The past two decades have seen a surge in partnerships between multinational corporations and women's rights organizations professing to empower women and girls in the Global South. This trend – dubbed 'Transnational Business Feminism' (TBF) by feminist political economist Adrienne Roberts (2012) – has generated a lively debate amongst feminist social scientists around the ideological characteristics, limitations, benefits and effects of these alliances, and the extent to which they signal the 'co-optation' of certain feminist strands. This dissertation identifies and addresses three gaps in the TBF literature, namely: the perspectives of influential feminist groups participating in TBF projects; the effects of these initiatives on their beneficiaries in the Global South; and the rise of supply chain focused TBF projects targeting women workers.

A contribution to this debate, this dissertation examines the logics, functions, and effects of worker-focused TBF projects from the perspectives of those who design these projects in the Global North, and explores the effects of such projects on two groups of women workers in the Global South. What lies behind the rise in supply-chain focused TBF partnerships? How do feminist professionals who design and promote these projects make sense of the impact, limits, and ideological implications of their work? How might the experiences of some small groups of beneficiaries illuminate the broader politics of TBF? These are the main questions animating this dissertation.

A qualitative case study methodology is used to answer these questions. The selected case studies are the New York based United Nations agency UN Women, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) in Washington DC, and the partnerships of these organizations with fashion corporation The Gap (Gap) and the household goods company Unilever.

Data has been gathered through: in-person and online interviews with feminist professionals in the United States, India, and the United Kingdom; group interviews with Gap workers in India, and phone interviews with former Unilever tea workers in Kenya. Additional interviews were held with feminist professionals at CARE International, Women Deliver, Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) and the UN Global Compact. Textual data has been obtained through the websites, social media pages, promotional literature, and annual reports of the organizations under study, Freedom of Information requests at the European Commission and court records capturing workers testimonies. I have gathered additional data by attending multiple TBF-related webinars and conferences.

Acknowledgements

I'm indebted to dozens of people who helped me bring about this work. First and foremost, these are the women workers who trusted me with their stories, fears, and hopes, without knowing, fully, where I would be taking their words. I am also grateful to the women's rights professionals who so generously opened up to me, while balancing conflicting narrative pressures.

I want to thank my partner, for his endless patience and pep-talks, and my baby-boy for privileging me with a most gentle pregnancy. You (baby, not partner!) always seemed to know exactly when I needed some gentle kicks of encouragement. They helped me gain perspective, take pride in the dissertation's strengths and be OK with its weaknesses.

For this dissertation's strengths, I owe a massive thanks to the excellent and brilliant support, guidance and kindness of my supervisor, Maha Abdelrahman, and advisor Emma Mawdsley. Thank you for standing by me and for showing what it means to supervise with such care, humor, and dedication, and for turning messy thoughts into coherent arguments.

Finally, to my family and friends, who I will not name here: I owe you.

Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction

In the Summer of 2015, I sat down with Megan, the 'adolescent girls advocacy officer' of a leading transnational youth NGO, in her Manhattan-based office to discuss her organization's relationship with the Nike Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the transnational athletics corporation.[1] The interview was part of a journalistic article I co-authored about the growing role of multinational corporations (MNCs) in the gender and development field. Megan's organization was one of dozens of Western NGOs that received funding from Nike at the time. Their goal: to promote and implement the foundation's widely popular 'Girl Effect' campaign, a development intervention that seeks to transform adolescent girls in the Global South into "the most powerful force for change on the planet".[2] The key idea behind the 'Girl Effect' is that investing in the self-esteem and entrepreneurial competencies of girls through education, business training, social clubs, micro-credit, savings accounts, and girl-power themed media campaigns unleashes their potential to solve the problem of poverty. Advocates claim that this is because, compared to their male counterparts, girls invest larger shares of their income back into their families, which drives economic growth in general (Moeller 2018; Wilson 2015).

Under Nike's leadership, the idea of girl-power as 'Smart Economics' has come to underpin the philanthropic and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) agendas of a growing number of MNCs. In turn, girl-powered 'Smart Economics' has influenced the gender and development policies of some of the world's most influential development organizations (Hayhurst 2013; Moeller 2018; Roberts 2015). Over the past decade, MNCs such as Uber, Levi Strauss, Benetton, Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan, Walmart, Johnson and Johnson, Coca Cola, Avon, ExxonMobil, General Electric, Starbucks, Gap, and Unilever have all established partnerships with public development actors, such as feminist NGOs and UN agencies. Grounded in the logic that women are an untapped resource for development, these partnerships make the 'business case' for

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[1] Megan is a pseudonym
[2] Nike Website. Girl Effect. https://news.nike.com/girl-effect Accessed 21 June 2022.

investing in women and girls and seek to 'empower' them through market integration. Investing in girls and women, the story goes, is good for business *and* for society. As a result, numerous professional feminists, such as Megan, at NGOs, UN agencies and other development institutions now dedicate their energies and expertise to such projects.

Recent feminist scholarship has begun focusing on this new current of corporate-led feminist alliances. Adrienne Roberts (2012) has, in fact, coined the term Transnational Business Feminism (TBF) to capture this phenomenon. Roberts (2016, p. 74) describes TBF as "a particular Western version of liberal feminism that sees the expansion of capitalism as something that can be harnessed for progressive social change and women's (economic) empowerment" and involves alliances between corporations, development institutions and women's groups, including the World Economic Forum (WEF), the World Bank, UN Women, and feminist NGOs. A key feature of TBF is that it "seeks to work through neoliberal capitalism rather than to challenge it, in contrast to critical feminists working within the socialist, Marxist, post-structural and/or post-colonial traditions" (Roberts 2016, p. 74) and pursues change through market integration and changing cultural norms (Eisenstein 2017).

To Megan, the economic and cultural logics of the 'Girl Effect' for development seemed a matter of common sense. "If girls just have a chance to come together once a week to talk about their lives", she told me, "this could change everything". When I asked her how she measures such impact, she explained that "plenty of evidence" proves that "girls reinvest their incomes back into their communities". What Megan did not mention is that the Nike Foundation does not evaluate its success through rigorous monitoring and evaluation (M & E) measures, researching the economic or educational advances of their beneficiaries. Rather, it uses uninstructive data, such as anonymous quotes, anecdotes, and self-reported behavioural changes (Moeller 2013).

I wondered if Megan saw any problem with the embrace of market solutions amongst proponents of the 'Girl Effect'. Such market triumphalism has operated in tandem with broader neoliberal policy regimes – characterized by deregulation, privatization, market expansion, weakening labour protections and a deep suspicion of the state – that have boosted the power of MNCs and

shaped global inequalities for the past half century (Chang 2002; Harvey 2007; Hickel 2017; Mies 2014).

I asked Megan what, in her view, the role living wages, employment rights, and social safety nets play in women's empowerment, hinting at the silence on these matters in discussions of the 'Girl Effect'. She noted that they are important issues, but quickly added that "labour rights are not part of my field". The sincerity of Megan's faith in Nike's strategies and objectives was indisputable. Even though she wished that the 'Girl Effect' would frame girls' empowerment as an end, rather than an instrument for growth, she expressed great comfort with her alliance with Nike. "This investment language", she said, "that's just how it is these days".

Conversations, like this one with Megan, sparked my interest in the intersection of neoliberalism, feminism and corporate social responsibility, and the rationalities that underpin corporate-led 'empowerment' alliances. Building on Robert's (2012) concept of TBF, this dissertation aims to untangle how feminist professionals like Megan imagine, pursue, and speak about feminist progress, and how their corporate alliances transform, entrench, and shape unequal power structures.

1.1 Research Question

This dissertation investigates the logics, functions, and effects of the TBF regime in two ways. Firstly, it focuses on the feminist professionals working for organizations participating in TBF programmes, who help design and popularize these programmes – a group I will refer to as business feminists. The first research question is thus: How do business feminists make sense of the impact, limits, and ideology of their corporate partnerships? This entails two sub-questions: a) How do business feminists navigate the ideological biases and contradictions of these programmes? b) How does it shape their feminist politics and praxis, and ability to promote a progressive feminist politics?

Secondly, it offers insights into how such projects are experienced by different groups of beneficiaries. This dissertation is particularly interested in the impact of TBF on women workers, an interest that stems from TBF's growing focus on workers. Programmes such as the 'Girl

Effect' targeted women and girls outside companies' core operations and envisioned their beneficiaries primarily as schoolgirls or (aspiring) micro-entrepreneurs. However, firms increasingly centre their 'empowerment' efforts around the women who directly contribute to the companies' profits and business success, often as workers at their subsidiaries or external suppliers. As I discuss in Chapter 2, the shift toward workers has largely been overlooked in TBF scholarship, even when such a focus can contribute important insight to the literature. How do women at the bottom of corporate supply chains experience the empowerment efforts directed at them? While it is beyond the scope of this project to answer this large question through sustained empirical inquiry, it nonetheless sheds a light on workers' perspectives with TBF by exploring programs in two different supply chain settings: an Indian apparel exporter and a Kenyan tea plantation.

The women's organizations at the centre of this study are UN Women and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). Given the dominance of US based actors in this space, my analysis also focuses on this context.

Drawing on scholarship in feminist theory, intellectual history, cultural studies, political theory, political economy, and gender and development, the set of conceptual tools deployed in this thesis is diverse. It engages with long-debated political theories on capitalism, freedom, inequality, and feminism; critical analyses of global capitalism and neoliberal trade and development policies; worker-focused analyses of the recent 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR) regime, and recent theories on neoliberal cultural hegemony. The dissertation grounds its key arguments in theoretical work by Wendy Brown (2015) and Mark Fisher (2009) on neoliberal ideologies, adapting Fisher's concept of 'capitalist realism' to develop a new conceptual tool – Feminist Capitalist Realism (FCR) – to analyse the ideological dimensions of TBF.

1.2 Research Contribution

This project is situated within a broader body of scholarship concerned with the ideologies and impact of corporatized gender politics. As Chapter 2 discusses, this debate is led by feminists across the social sciences, with different views on the emancipatory potential of TBF.

Dominating the debate is the question of whether 'women's empowerment' alliances between powerful corporations and feminist development actors support the women's movement or derail it. A common concern among critical commentators is that corporations might use TBF to neutralize critiques of corporate power and buttress the neoliberal political economy in which they accumulate their profits (Eisenstein 2017; Moeller 2018; Prügl 2015; Roberts 2015; Tornhill 2019).

The rich and insightful scholarship generated thus far is impeded by two key shortcomings, discussed in detail in Chapter 2. The first omission is that the literature has largely overlooked the proliferation of TBF programmes in corporate supply chains. The second omission is the lack of *empirical* queries into the experiences and perspectives of TBF's participants and beneficiaries. As a result, little is known about the views and experiences of women such as Megan who help design and implement TBF projects and, crucially, the women and girls in the Global South targeted by these efforts. Addressing this gap, the dissertation offers an investigation into the logics and functions of supply-chain focused TBF projects, and offers insights into the effects of two high-profile TBF programmes on some of their beneficiaries.

In doing so, it takes note of Michaele Ferguson's (2017, 224) observation that much critical scholarship on neoliberal feminism attributes "extraordinary powers" to the ideology of neoliberalism, but leaves the concept "relatively undertheorized and undefined". In that sense, the debate reflects the same "imprecision" that marks both "popular debate and academic scholarship" on neoliberalism, and seems to assume the concept to be self-evident (Jones 2012, 10). Yet, far from representing a straightforward or static school of thought, free-market economics has given rise to different schools of thought this past century (Jones 2012; Slobodian 2018) and has had different implications across contexts. As an overarching concept, this incoherence makes neoliberalism is "impossible to grasp", observes political scientist Wendy (Brown 2015, 49) since it "ranges and changes temporally and geographically". Hence, it is imperative that analyses on TBF and its supposed neoliberal origins specify which components, expressions and strains of neoliberal thought they see at work and focus on. Given the interest of this investigation in production regimes, labour, globalisation, supply chains and CSR, it pays specific attention to neoliberal thought and histories relevant to this context.

In sum, this project explores the ideological foundation of TBF, the political economy in which the project has taken root, the visions and logics animating business feminists, and its effects on two groups of workers.

1.2.1   Case Studies

This dissertation adopts a qualitative methodology using case studies. I have selected two organizations that have positioned themselves at the forefront of TBF through their active and sustained support for and participation in corporate-feminist alliances: The New York-based United Nations agency, UN Women, and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), headquartered in Washington DC. Over the past decade, both organizations have strongly supported the 'Smart Economics' discourse that underpins TBF, frequently framing big business as a solution to women's marginalization. The organizations were chosen due to their prominence in the gender and development sphere, their influence in the discourses that circulate in this field, and their capacity to set standards for how women's empowerment is understood and practiced. Notably, the directors of both organizations were recently listed among the most influential gender policy advisors in the world.[3] Both UN Women and the ICRW have collaborated with big firms on supply chain focused programmes, aimed at 'empowering' women workers, and claim these initiatives significantly improve their beneficiaries' lives. This dissertation focuses on two of the most prominent supply-chain focused partnerships undertaken by these two organizations in the past decade: 1) the PACE programme, ICRW's collaboration with Gap, and 2) UN Women's Global Women's Safety Framework with Unilever.

The ICRW

The ICRW is among the most visible and prominent transnational women's rights groups in the US, advertising itself as the "global expert on women's empowerment and gender equality".[4] The ICRW was founded in 1976 as a not-for-profit (501.c) and is based in Washington DC, with two regional offices in Uganda and India. The institute's mission is to advance "gender equity,

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[3] Apolitical Website. Gender Equality Top 100 2019. https://apolitical.co/lists/gender-equality-100/. Accessed 20 June 2022.

[4] ICRW Website. ICRW Advisors https://www.icrw.org/icrw-advisors/ Accessed 21 September 2021.

inclusion and the alleviation of poverty worldwide".[5] The organization works "with non-profit, government and private sector partners to conduct research, develop and guide strategy and build capacity to promote evidence-based policies".[6] The ICRW has significant influence within domestic US politics, with board members advising the current Biden administration on gender and development questions, [7] and at the UN, where the ICRW's much publicized 'feminist foreign policy' campaign pushes UN leaders to prioritize women's rights globally. [8]

The ICRW has been an early pioneer of a corporate gendered approach to development. In the early 2000s, the ICRW served as a key advisor to the Nike Foundation in creating the 'Girl Effect' (see Chapter 3). Since then, the ICRW has offered gender expertise to dozens of firms, including Goldman Sachs, Unilever, Exxon Mobile and Primark. In 2017, the organization launched ICRW Advisors, a consultancy arm dedicated to providing corporations – especially Fortune 1000 firms – with tailored expertise on gender and women's rights issues. Led by a former Walmart executive, Advisors focuses on "Economic Empowerment, Employment and Enterprises [and] Women in the Value Chain". [9] Over the past five years, corporate advisory work has become integral to the ICRW's activities and messaging. The women's institute presents this line of work as separate from its development practice, but its private sector projects and brochures feature prominently on its general website and are frequently advertised through its social media channels. For the ICRW, "gender equality and women's empowerment throughout the value chain is not only the right thing to do for today's private and public sector

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[5] ICRW Website. ICRW Honors Visionary Leaders. https://www.icrw.org/press-releases/icrw-honors-visionary-leaders/. Accessed 20 June 2022.

[6] LinkedIn. ICRW Profile. https://www.linkedin.com/company/international-center-for-research-on-women-icrw-/?trk=similar-pages_result-card_full-clickandoriginalSubdomain=do. Accessed 19 June 2022.

[7] ICRW Website. ICRW Board Member Jennifer Klein to co-chair White House Gender Policy Council. https://www.icrw.org/news/icrw-board-member-jennifer-klein-to-co-chair-white-house-gender-policy-council/ Accessed 26 June 2022.

[8] ICRW Website. Feminist UN Campaign. https://www.icrw.org/feminist-un-campaign/ Accessed 20 June 2022.

[9] The Global Director of ICRW Advisors previously worked as the "Director [of] Dignity of Women at Walmart.org, the philanthropic hub of Walmart", according to the ICRW website, where she "focused on mitigating inequities for female workers in factories and farms in global supply chains and enhancing Walmart's ESG [Environmental and Social Governance] efforts". See ICRW Website. Economic Empowerment https://www.icrw.org/issues/economic-empowerment/ Accessed 21 Sept 2021.

leaders, but it makes business sense: it can increase productivity, enhance growth, reduce risk and positively impact brand and goodwill".[10] Through such alliances and discourses, the ICRW has established itself as a pivotal player in the TBF regime and helped normalise the 'business case' discourse for women's empowerment.

Among the organization's earliest and reportedly most successful supply chain programmes is PACE, the 'Personal Advancement and Career Enhancement' programme with fashion company Gap which forms the focus of the case study in Chapter 5. In recent years, the ICRW appears to have intensified its collaboration with brands, retailers and employers in the global garment and footwear sector. The garment sector features in three of the organization's ten "highlights of 2020".[11] The first celebrated the decision by Gap-owned fashion brand Banana Republic to partner with the ICRW for its 'Notorious Necklace', an accessory honouring the late US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who passed away in 2020. Banana Republic and the ICRW advertised the necklace to feminist consumers, with proceeds supporting the ICRW's work.[12] The second 2020 garment "highlight" was the launch of the ICRW's online 'Gender equity in textile, clothing and footwear manufacturing resource hub,' a Nike-funded "self-diagnostic tool" that manufacturers can voluntarily use to "learn how to better integrate gender within manufacturing facilities to enhance business success, employee well-being, gender equity, and women's economic empowerment". Third was the ICRW's study in partnership with the Kenyan Association of Manufacturers, examining gender-based barriers in the industry, which found that "women's participation is crucial to heighten creativity, innovation and inclusion in the sector". The visibility of fashion, apparel, and textile corporations in the ICRW's private sector work reflects the broader prominence of this sector in the TBF space, as I demonstrate throughout the dissertation.

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[10] ICRW Website. ICRW Advisors. https://www.icrw.org/icrw-advisors/. Accessed 21 September 2021.

[11] ICRW Website. ICRW celebrates top 10 moments of 2020. https://www.icrw.org/icrw-celebrates-top-10-moments-of-2020/. Accessed 21 September 2021.

[12] The campaign made no mention of the working conditions in which these necklaces were produced. When I queried Gap about the production location, a manager responded that this could not be disclosed.

UN Women

UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. Headquartered in New York City, with field offices and regional bureaus globally, it was launched in 2011 as a merger of previously dispersed UN efforts dealing with women's and gender issues. UN Women's central mandate is the economic empowerment of women and girls – through research, policy advice and broader standard setting processes. The organization actively promotes corporate feminist discourses, frequently using conferences or promotional materials to position the private sector as a crucial supporter of women's advancement. The organization has a dedicated Private Sector Team, led by CEOs of firms like Unilever, Gucci and L'Oréal, devoted to assisting businesses and philanthropies identify "partnership structures to achieve their goals in alignment with UN Women's objectives".[13]

To promote women within global supply chains, UN Women's main tool is the *Women's Empowerment Principles* (WEPs). Developed with the UN Global Compact, the WEPs are a voluntary "code of conduct…designed to orient thinking and find concrete action on gender equality and women's empowerment" (Gregoratti 2018, 214). As discussed in more depth in Chapter 4, a key aim of the WEP effort is to maximize the number of CEOs signing a letter of endorsement to express their commitment to the WEPs principles. UN Women receives funding from a range of WEP signatories, including Benetton, Chanel, Coca Cola, Unilever, and Uniqlo.[14]

One of UN Women's main corporate partners is the household goods corporation Unilever. For Unilever, the most significant of their agreements is a self-improvement guide for companies in the tea industry: the 'Global Women's Safety Framework' (UN Women 2018). Based on Unilever's expertise and UN Women's guidance, this document suggests guidelines for how to

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[13] UN Women Website. UN Women Launches Private Sector Leadership Advisory Council. 2 June 2014. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/6/private-sector-leadership-advisory-council-launched. Accessed September 2020.

[14] UN Women Website. UN Women Annual Report 2019. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/UN-Women-annual-report-2019-2020-enpdf. Accessed 24 June 2022; UN Women Website. UN Women Annual Report 2018-2019. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Annual%20Report/Attachments/Sections/Library/2019/UN-Women-annual-report-2018-2019-enpdf Accessed 24 June 2022.

protect women tea workers from gender-based violence. This Safety Framework is the case study I focus on in Chapter 6.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Data Collection

This dissertation undertakes a primarily qualitative study of women's organizations. Its analysis is grounded, firstly, in textual materials, including public and private documents, obtained from corporate websites and social media sites, and through web searches and alerts, social media, and professional contacts. It also draws on a Freedom of Information request submitted to the European Commission to obtain information about UN Women's CSR work in Asia.[15] Secondly, I draw on qualitative empirical research, predominantly semi-structured interviews of both individuals and groups during fieldwork, alongside participant observation in webinars, talks, and other public meetings. In this respect, I undertook two two-month visits to the US, specifically New York and Washington DC (in 2018 and 2019), where I interviewed seven people, and a two-month visit to India (in 2019), where I organized and conducted five group interviews with a total of 26 women workers in and around New Delhi and Bangalore, and 1 interview with a feminist NGO professional. These individual and group interviews were complemented with 13 remote interviews over telephone, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams between 2019 and 2021.

Semi-Structured Individual Interviews

In examining the perspectives of business feminists, I aimed to interview at least 10 professional feminists at ICRW and UN Women each, but this proved more difficult than I had anticipated. The TBF world is marked by confidentiality concerns and secrecy, as scholars of TBF have noted (see Chapter 3 and 4). It offers little transparency to outside researchers, especially when the politics of the researchers are perceived as potentially critical (Moeller 2018; Allison, Gregoratti, and Tornhill 2019). In my efforts to interview business feminists, I regularly encountered such barriers.

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[15] The European Commission has funded various CSR-related UN Women projects. Hence, information on these programmes can be obtained through the Commission's Freedom of Information mechanism.

With the ICRW, for example, I had significant difficulty in accessing the eight individuals that I eventually interviewed. I had initially attempted to set up interviews with US-based ICRW staff by email. This halted in 2018, when the ICRW contact stopped responding to my messages. Our correspondence only resumed when I registered for a TBF-related event at the ICRW's Washington DC offices and emailed the contact person to ask if we could plan some interviews on the day of the event or shortly after. This approach proved successful: I interviewed five staff members in the office the day after the event, later followed by two remote interviews over Zoom. In India, my repeated efforts to interview ICRW staff at their New Delhi office initially proved unsuccessful. I could only interview two staff members remotely months later, when I had returned to the UK. and was introduced per email by a senior ICRW colleague from the US headquarters. Unfortunately, my multiple attempts to interview former ICRW staff members who had worked on Gap's PACE programme were unsuccessful.

My efforts to interview staff at UN Women were unsuccessful. Initially, I tried a similar approach to the ICRW. After failed attempts to establish email contact, I attended a TBF-related event in late 2018 at UN Women's New York headquarters. Here, a helpful UN Women representative gave me multiple email addresses of colleagues best suited to speak about corporate partnerships. One of these colleagues proved initially helpful and we briefly spoke over the phone. Here, she made it clear that if UN Women were to grant interviews for my research, it was important that this research presented the organization positively. I could not commit to this wish in the interests of unbiased research. After multiple emails over the next months, she eventually informed me that UN Women had declined to participate. This, it seems, is a wider problem: other scholars have encountered similar barriers, such as Sofie Tornhill (2019) in her investigation of UN Women's work with Coca Cola.

Given the importance of interviews to my research, UN Women's reluctance to speak presented quite a setback. I had to complement my ICRW interviews with other – more scattered – sources and gather 'insider' perspectives at UN Women through other means, such as webinars and internal records. I thus interviewed representatives of other non-profit development groups, with my 7 respondents largely drawn from senior positions at Women Deliver (1 interviewee), the UN

Global Compact (2), Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) (2), CARE International (1) and, finally, an NGO in India (1) that, due to confidentiality concerns, will be anonymized. These organizations were selected because each has a) played prominent and visible roles as partners in the TBF regime, b) partnered with global corporations – often fashion brands and retailers – on projects designed to 'empower' female workers, and c) continue to amplify and promote the 'business case' for women's equality and empowerment.

During these semi-structured interviews, I asked respondents to speak about the origins, vision, goals, and impact of their TBF programmes, and the challenges and opportunities these projects bring. I also asked about their organization's work with global apparel companies and their views on the main sources of (dis)empowerment for female workers in this industry. All interviews were recorded, with written consent, and transcribed manually with software assistance (by Otter AI). In total, I carried out 15 individual interviews with business feminists: 8 with ICRW staff and 7 with other organizations.

Conference and Webinar Observations

To complement my interview data, I attended multiple conferences, events, and webinars, organized by UN Women, the ICRW and related organizations to promote their TBF collaborations. My observations there added important insights on the pressures, logics and limitations business feminists navigate in their corporate work, and the ways in which corporations exercise control over this space.

Worker Interviews

My second set of interviews sought to investigate how a group of women workers in India perceived the impact of Gap's PACE programme, which they had taken part in. A high-profile women's empowerment initiative, PACE involves the ICRW, but also other TBF actors, such as CARE International and the anonymized Indian NGO. To this end, I undertook fieldwork in India (September-October 2019), where I set up interviews through NGO and union contacts I had previously established through journalistic work I had done on the garment sector. These contacts helped me arrange multiple informal interviews with local NGOs and workers' unions, and formal group interviews with workers who had taken the PACE programme at factories

owned by Gap-supplier Shahi Exports (Shahi). Shahi, more so than any other Gap supplier, is central to the story of PACE: the company was the first to run the programme in its factories and has been the site of several studies and much media coverage about the programme. My analysis of PACE, presented in Chapter 5, thus draws on five group interviews with a total of 26 garment workers employed by Shahi Exports in Bangalore and in Faridabad, an industrial district in the National Capital Region (NCR) of Delhi. One follow-up Zoom call took place in London with a worker from Bangalore in January 2021. In Bangalore, worker interviews were held at the office of the Garment Labour Union (GLU) and in Faridabad, at workers' homes. The interviews were held in Hindi and Kannada, facilitated by skilled interpreters affiliated with civil society organizations and unions. My reliance on interpreters means that the quotes attributed to workers do not reflect workers' words verbatim.

During these group interviews, women were asked about their jobs, their PACE classes and if the programme had bettered their lives. The interviews were guided by three main questions, which asked: If you could change two or three things about your job, what would they be? What do you recall about your PACE classes? Did you benefit from these classes and if so, how? The process of collecting, interpreting, and analysing this data presented challenges. First, due to workers' long workweeks (of at least 48 hours) and care responsibilities at home, they had limited time. Group interviews of between four to seven participants mostly took place immediately after they finished their shift and lasted between 1-1,5 hours. The challenges presented by these short time slots are discussed in the next sub-section on ethics.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic over 2020 disrupted my plans to travel to Kenya for fieldwork on the UN Women and Unilever case study. This study therefore relies quite heavily on textual data, as described below, and only incorporates two individual interviews with former Unilever workers, who used to work for the company as tea pluckers. These workers were subject to traumatic experiences, having been violently attacked at Unilever's tea estates late 2007, and having taken their case to the London High Court in 2015 to claim reparations from their former employer. I conducted interviews with these workers by phone in August 2020, facilitated by a local interpreter known to the interviewees and introduced to me by the law firm that had represented the workers in court. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter –

which involved sexual and other violence – the interview questions were open-ended and, as discussed in the sub-section below, were preceded with multiple assurances around confidentiality.

Other Interviews

In addition to the core interviews above, I also conducted individual interviews with several figures related to the case studies. These included a barrister from the UK law firm Leigh Day, who represented former Unilever workers in a legal dispute with the company; a female trade union leader and former garment worker, who co-founded the GLU and represents Shahi workers; and two Shahi managers, who played key roles in implementing the PACE programme at Shahi factories.[16] Around 20 additional background interviews and informal conversations with representatives from worker rights groups, women's rights groups, corporate foundations, and UN agencies have contributed to the direction, parameters and focus of this thesis, but are not included or cited in the analyses.

Documents and Records

This dissertation relies on a diversity of public and private records, obtained through several research methods and contacts. These materials enabled me to examine the logics, methods and contradictions built into TBF programmes at a more structural and institutional level. Public documents and information include annual reports, programme evaluations, brochures, website information, financial records, and social media statements by the ICRW, UN Women, Gap, Unilever, and others. Private materials include: three lobbying letters sent by Shahi Exports to a government body in India; an internal presentation by UN Women; programme details and evaluations by UN Women on its European Union funded CSR work in Asia; and an unpublished draft research report prepared by the ICRW for a group of fashion brands on the working conditions of garment workers. My case study on UN Women and Unilever primarily relied on legal records provided by lawyers who represented former Unilever workers and their families. Totalling over 200 pages, these records document a dispute between the 217 Kenyan

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[16] As the next sub-section on ethics elaborates, I decided to exclude the interviews with Shahi managers from my analysis after the company lodged a formal complaint against me with my university.

claimants and Unilever, including witness statements by workers and managers, and court submissions by Unilever.

1.3.2   Positionality and Ethical Considerations

Feminists have long challenged the notion of 'neutral' and 'value free' research, drawing attention to the ways in which a researcher's social position, underlying value systems and relationship vis-à-vis the research subjects shape the parameters and outcomes of her research (Haraway 1988; Harding 2009; Mohanty 2003; Simandan 2019). Positionality, in other words, shapes research outcomes (Hoskins 2015). Rather than obscuring such factors, feminists insist that such subjectivity necessitates reflection and transparency (Rofel 1999). As Sandra Harding (1995, p. 2) has noted, it might appear "paradoxical" but the pursuit of "strong objectivity" requires precisely the "kind of conscientious socially situated production of knowledge" characteristic of critical feminist methodologies.

Certainly, for feminist researchers based in the Global North producing knowledge on women in the Global South, such reflexivity if critical. Post-colonial scholarship reminds us that women's rights research and campaigns from the North have, historically, often applied Northern, liberal notions of freedom and empowerment on women from the South, resulting in racialized, ahistorical and apolitical narratives around liberation that depict women as hapless and often voiceless victims waiting to be liberated or 'saved' (Abu-Lughod 2002; Khoji-Moolji 2018; Mohanty 1988; Spivak 1985).

In this section, I discuss how my PhD project has been shaped by its academic positioning, my class position as a researcher, and my work as a journalist publishing stories critical of CSR and corporate-led empowerment efforts. These different factors have shaped my analysis in different ways, presenting both opportunities and limitations in the areas of access, trust, confidentiality, and credibility.

Research Positioning

Research projects, especially in the humanities and social sciences, are frequently shaped by deep ideological positioning, although this is usually left implicit (Moeller 2018). As Chapters 3,

4, and 5 elaborate, this can be revealed by exploring the parameters, contours, and methodologies of the research. As such, this project is also not 'value free'. It has been shaped more by critical perspectives on CSR, neoliberal politics and corporate power – as expressed in, for example, the work of Marxist feminists, political economists and labour rights scholars – than in the business literature and depoliticized scholarship on CSR and TBF. Indeed, the very questions from which this project emerged attest to my scepticism toward the emancipatory potential of TBF. Had I shared the optimism of the TBF discourse, and uncritically accepted its impact claims, there would be no need to interrogate its logics or second-guess its impact. This critical awareness is therefore a way of producing more rigorous scholarship, for example by interrogating the basic assumptions presented in the literature, or paying extra care to issues around trust and confidentiality in interviews.

Research Ethics, Trust, and Confidentiality

Trust matters a great deal in qualitative research and is therefore important to reflect on. While often hard to gauge its presence or absence, trust impacts on interview data. In this study, it was present throughout the data collection process, and shaped outcomes in complicated ways. At times, this impact was obvious and clearly expressed, for example through conditions of confidentiality and anonymity; at other times, it was difficult to ascertain. Confidentiality mattered to the workers, who feared their jobs or safety could be at risk if they were identifiable, and to the business feminists who disclosed information perceived as sensitive, controversial, and potentially damaging to their organization. I endeavoured to mitigate these concerns through anonymization and the use of pseudonyms, alongside additional measures depending on the nature of the respondents' concerns.

For the workers in India, the presence of union and NGO representatives known to them provided the assurance of a safe environment. They spoke freely, allowed me to record the interviews, take photos of their company ID cards and even took photos with me, seemingly unburdened by fears that these would reach their employers. Similarly, with the two Kenyan workers, the support of an interpreter known to the interviewees helped to build trust and assure them that their identities would not be revealed in my research.

Nevertheless, there were deeper ethical concerns in the interviews with workers in Kenya, given that the subject of the conversations involved sexual and physical violence the workers had experienced on Unilever tea plantations. Post-colonial feminists teach us that such subjects risk re-traumatizing survivors or can cause other harm, especially where the interviewer does not share a language and culture with her interviewees (Picozza 2021). To mitigate these risks, I broached this question with the interpreter prior to the interviews, and with the lawyer who had represented the women in court. We agreed that the interpreter would inform the respondents, at the outset of the interview, that they were free to pause or skip questions at any point or end the interview if they so wished. I also kept the questions deliberately open and avoided probing unnecessarily. Thankfully, the interviews ran smoothly, and no interventions or interruptions occurred.

Amongst the second group of respondents – the business feminists – confidentiality concerns were manifested and accommodated differently, due to the subject matter of the interviews and the more privileged social economic status and class position of this group. Some worried that the disclosure of certain information could cause them problems within their organization, or expose them, or their organization, to lawsuits. Others wanted to ensure that their testimonies would not hurt their organization's relationship with corporate partners or violate any Non-Disclosure Agreements they had signed. To accommodate these concerns, I confirmed in advance, through a consent form, the basic confidentiality arrangements governing the interview. I broached the topic again when beginning the interviews, explaining that they could move certain comments off the record at any point during the interview. I also offered for them to choose their own pseudonyms and terminology describing their role at their organizations to reduce identifiability. The limitation of strongly focusing on confidentiality was, first, that potentially revealing insights could not be included in the analyses and second, that transparency around sources is curtailed. Overall, however, my commitment to interlocutors' confidentiality has benefited this project, as respondents generally seemed comfortable speaking openly.

Still, it is important to note, as I have done earlier in this chapter, that the premise of my questions betrayed a certain scepticism about the TBF project which, undoubtedly, affected respondents' engagement with the research. To cultivate an atmosphere where business feminists

felt comfortable to share their individual perspectives on TBF – be it positive, negative or a mix of both – I communicated the interview questions in advance and gave some background on the broader scholarship my research falls into. Often, this entailed explaining that scholarship on TBF is divided on its merits and that a key objective of my project – and thus my interview with them – was to add the perspectives of practitioners to these discussions. Undoubtedly, some respondents may have nonetheless felt reservations with the premise of the questions and, perhaps, articulated their answers with caution. Overall, however, I believe that some of the most insightful interviews took place precisely because respondents felt safe to share their reservations with someone who did not take the claims of TBF for granted.

On one occasion, an interviewee felt that I had 'betrayed' them and filed an ethics complaint at my university to disrupt my research. This interviewee was a senior manager at Shahi Exports, and although not a business feminist themselves had nevertheless been closely involved with the roll-out and evaluation of Gap's PACE programme at the company. I had interviewed him and one of his colleagues to better understand how PACE proponents view the programme and gather information on the programme's practical implementation. The complaint arose out of a commitment I had made prior to the interviews not to cite my interviews with the managers anywhere else beyond my dissertation. Aware of my past media publications on workers' rights and CSR, the Shahi manager wanted to ensure that my interview with him served a strictly academic purpose. Several months after these interviews, I wrote a journalistic story about Gap and the PACE programme for *The Nation Magazine,* a US publication. The Shahi manager asserted that I had violated my promise, but his claim was incorrect. The article incorporated no testimonies from Shahi managers, and only perspectives from Shahi workers, who I had interviewed independently from management. As such, after an investigation by the university, the complaint was found baseless and dismissed. In response to the Shahi manager's accusatory emails, and evidenced loss of trust, I immediately offered to withdraw the interviews from my dissertation, which I have done.

Removing the interviews from this dissertation has had a negligible impact on my findings. The interviews would not have changed the substance of my argument and analysis of the PACE programme (see Chapter 5). This is because the interviews primarily reiterated publicly available

perspectives on PACE, present in CSR documents, or detailed how PACE is run and organized at Shahi specifically. The complaint itself, however, was a decidedly unpleasant experience. While I felt confident that I had not breached any procedural or ethical line, as was alleged, the process was stressful and intimidating. Yet, as I discuss below, it also strengthened my grasp of how knowledge production about CSR and TBF takes place, and my own positionality therein.

Positionality

The Shahi complaint underscored critical elements of my personal positionality within the research project. For one, it reminded me of the relatively easy access I enjoy because of my university affiliation: local NGOs or trade union representatives typically find it much harder to arrange meetings with management. On the other hand, the complaint also highlighted the enormous social distance between myself and the workers my study is concerned with – a social distance rooted in my structural privilege as a white, middle-class researcher from the Global North affiliated with an elite academic institution – and how my comprehension of their lived realities, and thus my ability to capture deeper meanings and contexts relevant to and conveyed during our interviews, is structurally limited by this distance. What I experienced as 'intimidation' is minor relative to the physical threats and violence that workers and workers' rights advocates in supply-chain production countries like India face. I believe this contrast is indicative of how my structural privilege has shaped my research in both positive and negative ways.

The complaint also illuminated how corporate bodies exercise control over knowledge production in and about the CSR and TBF regime, discussed further in Chapters 3-5. Research in these spaces is structured especially around proving *positive* impact (Moeller 2013; Tornhill 2019). The apparent shock by the Shahi manager that I had interviewed workers at his company without managers' consent speaks to the normalisation of corporate-led research and collaborative fact-finding that the CSR regime helped bring about.

While my journalistic work had interfered with my research in the context of the complaint, it has overall benefited this project. This work provided me with networks and helped me gain

access to sources who saw me as credible due to my publications. For example, some people cited my past articles on workers' rights as a reason to grant me an (informal) interview or put me in touch with insiders at the UN, willing to offer me insights on the internal politics of corporate partnerships at the UN. These conversations helped me sharpen my focus and abandon certain queries that proved unfeasible.

Key Limitations

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic meant I had to abandon plans to interview current and recent Unilever workers in Kenya. As a result, my Unilever case study only incorporates two worker interviews, carried out by phone. These workers gave important insights into the context in which the TBF project in question – the Global Women's Safety Framework by Unilever and UN Women – emerged. However, they had no direct experiences with the implementation of this initiative, a topic I had liked to explore. As a result, this case study relies heavily on written worker testimonies and does not examine workers' direct experiences with TBF.

In India, the short timeframe available to interview workers presented data collection challenges, especially in engaging with workers' concerns. The first question – 'if you could change two or three things about your job, what would they be' – generated numerous stories, grievances and reflections that were too varied, specific, detailed, or inconsistent to distil into a robust analysis. These ranged from illegal wage violations to egregious hygiene problems at factories. Ideally, I would have followed up on these issues and tried to corroborate them, but that was simply not possible within the time available. My research design, in other words, could not properly accommodate the women's answers. Consequently, the analysis of their problems, as presented in Chapter 5, reduces their grievances to the relatively small set of widely shared issues and could be generalized and sufficiently corroborated. This limitation also has ethical implications, in that it fails to do justice to the stories they entrusted me with and does not convey the individualized experiences women shared with me.

1.4 Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters, each dealing with different aspects of TBF. The initial chapters 2, 3, and 4 focus on the historical and ideological foundations of TBF – with a special eye to questions of globalisation, corporate value chains and the garment industry – and examines how business feminists understand this line of work. Chapters 5 and 6 concentrate on the effects of TBF on two different groups of workers.

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 situates the dissertation in broader scholarship on TBF and neoliberal forms of feminism, highlighting how it contributes to this field. It provides an overview of the main features of the TBF regime, the key actors involved, and the types of programmes it produces. It then outlines the key debates in the literature, focusing on 'sceptics' who see TBF and related business feminisms as detrimental to the women's movement, and those who see important openings for progress in these structures. Within these debates, it suggests two main omissions – namely: insufficient attention for the proliferation of TBF programmes in corporate supply chains, and a lack of empirical queries into the experiences and perspectives of TBF's participants and beneficiaries – and discusses how this project addresses them.

Chapter 3 addresses the historical and ideological backdrop of TBF with an exposition of its intellectual foundations, focusing on the US context. Drawing on scholarship in intellectual history, political theory, political economy, post-colonial feminism and Marxist feminism, it clarifies how this dissertation understands neoliberalism. More specifically, it discusses how neoliberal ideals around freedom, empowerment and development have, over the past half-century, converged with feminist ideals, international development strategies and notions of 'corporate responsibility', contributing to a culture of 'capitalist realism'(Fisher 2009) that views living wages, collective bargaining, and a more egalitarian social order as either utopian or impractical.

Chapter 4 unpacks the logics, impact, and limits of TBF partnerships, from the perspective of business feminists who, through their organizations, participate in them. It identifies a Feminist Capitalist Realist (FCR) mode of reason through which business feminists rationalize and justify

TBF's neoliberal biases and limitations. FCR is marked by an inability to imagine an alternative to corporate hegemony, which means it considers corporate consent, or 'buy in', as crucial to the realization of effective efforts to 'empower' women workers in global value chains. Driven by a sense of realism about the power of corporations, FCR functions as a 'filter' in which emancipatory ideals are adjusted to align with corporations' strategic commercial needs. The resulting vision of corporate responsibility and the empowerment of women workers is marked by epistemic and ideological compromises, divorced from the priorities and demands of TBF's supposed beneficiaries, and obscures questions around power and conflict. Focusing on language, expertise and transparency, this chapter argues that through TBF partnerships, corporations reshape how feminist professionals imagine, articulate, and work towards progress.

Using FCR as an analytical tool, Chapters 5 and 6 explore how two high-profile worker-focused empowerment programs, designed within the ideological, practical, and strategic limits of TBF, have unfolded in in two different settings. Chapter 5 assesses the impact of the PACE programme, a Gap-ICRW partnership to empower garment workers, from the perspective of several participants in India. It finds that the pragmatic compromises embedded in PACE, especially its power-blindness and commitment to boosting workers' productivity, facilitated adverse effects in a context shaped by uneven power relations and conflicting economic interests. Rather than 'empowering' workers and improving their lives, PACE exacerbated and legitimated the exploitation workers faced on the shopfloor, while distorting knowledge production about the sources of women's subjugation and their economic struggles.

Chapter 6 takes us to Unilever's tea plantations in Kenya. This chapter critically examines the Global Women's Safety Framework: a Unilever-UN Women corporate self-improvement guide to improve the safety and well-being of female tea workers. It shows how the pragmatic and strategic considerations at the core of FCR reasoning sets up a logic and incentive structure that complicate the ability of business feminists to show solidarity with women workers and can even put them in a position where their TBF projects – and the discourses they generate – work against the interests of the women they claim to serve.

Finally, Chapter 7 summarises the arguments of the thesis, situates them in the broader literature and suggests directions for future research.

Chapter 2. Girl Bosses and Corporate Gender Politics

In examining the Transnational Business Feminism (TBF) regime, this dissertation is particularly interested in the rationalities and logics that underpin and power these alliances, the ways in which they affect the lives of their beneficiaries in the Global South, and whether they bolster the feminist movement, as its proponents profess - or derail it. This chapter situates the project in wider scholarship on TBF and neoliberal feminism and outlines its intended contribution to this field. Section 2.1 discusses the main features of the TBF regime, its key actors, and the types of programmes emerging from it. The following Section 2.2 presents key arguments in the debate on TBF and related streams of neoliberal feminism, predominantly in the United States. Section 2.3 demonstrates this dissertation contributes to these discussions, followed by brief concluding remarks.

2.1 Corporate Empowerment: Principles, Programmes and Participants

Walmart, Nike, Benetton, Unilever, Exxon Mobile, Uniqlo and Goldman Sachs are a diverse group of corporations. Nevertheless, two commonalities stand out. All are multi-billion-dollar firms with controversial social and environmental records, and all have in recent years teamed up with development institutions and feminist non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to 'empower' impoverished women and girls in the Global South. The recent upsurge in such corporate-led feminist alliances signals how powerful multinationals increasingly invoke ideals of social and gender justice in their corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies and philanthropic endeavours (Eisenstein 2017; Allison, Gregoratti, and Tornhill 2019; Gregoratti 2018). This has given rise to a controversial new 'wave' that Adrienne Roberts (2015) has labelled Transnational Business Feminism (TBF). Led by big business, TBF is a politico-economic project anchored in a distinctly pro-market worldview centred around values of competition, efficiency, individualism, entrepreneurship, and economic growth (Roberts 2015).

2.1.1 TBF Ideological Foundation

The ideological bedrock of the TBF project is the 'business case' for women's empowerment, also known as 'Smart Economics'. This case claims that women's equality and advancement – understood primarily as market integration and equal representation in labour markets– deliver high returns on investment, both commercially and socially, and thus provide firms with lucrative 'win-win' investment opportunities (Moeller 2018; Prügl 2015). Women, this theory goes, are 'untapped resources' for growth and profit, whose productivity and profit-generating potential as entrepreneurs and wage labourers is stunted by harmful social norms that block their access to the market (Roberts 2015, 2016). This is a doubly missed opportunity, it is argued, since women tend to spend their incomes more altruistically, productively, and responsibly than men, which yields better socio-economic outcomes for their families and communities (Murphy 2020; Koffman, Orgad, and Gill 2015). Since the mid-2000s, TBF has become a significant phenomenon, with many notable multinationals prominently advertising their feminist partnerships – and the various 'business cases' behind these initiatives – on their websites.

Few individuals have done as much to popularize the notion girl-power as anti-poverty solution as Maria Eitel, a senior Nike executive and public relations (PR) expert who, in the early 2000s, created the most widely analysed and influential TBF initiative to date: the Nike Foundation's 'Girl Effect'. The 'Girl Effect' catalysed the broader TBF regime and, therefore, has thus been the reference point for many critiques of TBF (Hayhurst 2013; Hickel 2014; Moeller 2013; Roberts 2015). Under Eitel's leadership, Nike created girl-power themed projects with numerous development institutions and NGOs – including the World Bank, the United Nations Foundation, the UK. government (Moeller 2018) and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). These achievements brought her praise from then US President Barack Obama, who in 2009 lauded Eitel for her passion for social justice and "community service".[17] In a revealing essay on the 'LeanIn.org' website, Eitel recalls how she was inspired to launch the 'Girl Effect' after a visit to an unspecified developing country, and her engagements with young women and their families there:

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[17] The White House Website. President Obama Announces Intention to Nominate Maria Eitel to be Chief Executive Officer for the Corporation for National and Community Service. 21 April 2009. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/president-obama-announces-intention-nominate-maria-eitel-be-chief-executive-officer. Accessed 20 June 2022.

"Reaching young girls in developing nations wasn't an easy task. When we tried, we were told: "Oh, she's out in the field", "She's tending the sheep", or "She's at the market". It was clear "she" wasn't in school, "she" wasn't available, and "she" certainly wasn't valued. Most often her family would ask, "Why would you want to talk with her?" That's when we knew we were onto something".[18]

Eitel's statement encapsulates TBF's pre-occupation with cultural norms as the main enemy of women's dignity, potential and emancipation (Moeller 2018). In the theory of the 'Girl Effect' and comparable programmes, patriarchy is presented as the key social relation explaining economic inequality and the main barrier standing between poverty and prosperity. If women were encouraged to develop their potential as market actors, in this telling, they could 'fix' all kinds of social problems, from hunger and poverty to climate change (Murphy 2013; Switzer 2013). If culture is depicted as the main enemy of progress, it can be overcome through progressive education and women's incorporation into the global marketplace (Roberts 2015).

2.1.2 TBF Core Actors

The proliferation of the TBF regime, and its attendant girl-power ideology, has been enabled and promoted by actors in the worlds of business, politics, global finance and development, academia, and feminist non-profits, each playing a different role in the TBF ecosystem (Roberts 2015; 2016). As a company, Nike played a central and pioneering role by crafting coalitions with actors across all these spheres and introducing women's rights groups to new forms of business collaborations (see Chapter 4). Nike's influence among women's rights advocates in the Obama administration can be seen in leaked emails by then Global Ambassador for Women's Rights Melanne Verveer and the office of then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. This correspondence reveals that both Verveer and Clinton's office were so impressed with Eitel that they intended to establish closer relationships between the White House and the Nike Foundation.[19] Verveer and Clinton are among the global elites who have publicly backed corporate-led empowerment

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[18] Lean In Website. Maria Eitel. https://leanin.org/stories/maria-eitel#. Accessed 8 September 2021
[19] Wikileaks Website. Emails between M. Verveer, H. Clinton and C.Mills. August 2010. https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/?q=Maria+Eitelandmfrom=andmto=andtitle=andnotitle=anddate_from=anddate_to=andnofrom=andnoto=andcount=50andsort=0#searchresult. Accessed 19 June 2022.

alliances, praising companies such as Walmart, Nike and Gap for their 'game changing' philanthropy [20] and the millions of jobs they create for women (Calkin 2015, 301; Tornhill 2019). Other elite actors and institutions to have pushed the TBF narrative include: the World Bank, the World Economic Forum (WEF), the UN Foundation and the UK Department for International Development (DFID), who have all contributed funds to the 'Girl Effect'; NGOs such as Plan International, CARE International, Save the Children, the ICRW and Business for Responsibility (BSR), who, as a next section discusses in more detail, design, implement, evaluate and assist corporations in their TBF projects; and UN agencies such as UN Women, The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the UN Global Compact, who have collaborated with corporations on TBF-themed projects and accepted their philanthropic donations. As with Nike's 'Girl Effect', many of these programmes originate in and are driven by actors based in the US.

2.1.2 TBF Programme Typology

Early TBF projects, including the 'Girl Effect', took a predominantly philanthropic approach and targeted women and girls outside companies' own supply chains (Tornhill 2019). More recently, there has been a surge in supply-chain focused TBF projects, which profess to 'empower' women workers at companies' subsidiaries and suppliers, either through educational programmes that teach workers certain skills or attitudes, or self-improvement materials with guidelines on how to support women workers. Overall, most TBF projects can be divided into four different types: 1) awareness campaigns, 2) research, 3) educational resources for corporate self-improvement, and 4) life and skill-training for women and girls.

Awareness campaigns are designed to educate the broader public, or more specific groups, on the importance of gender equality. Several are targeted towards the public at large. The Unstereotype Campaign, co-founded by UN Women and Unilever, for instance, advocates

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[20] Walmart Website.Walmart Launches Global Women's Economic Empowerment Initiative. September 2011. https://corporate.walmart.com/newsroom/2011/09/13/walmart-launches-global-womens-economic-empowerment-initiative. Accessed 21 June 2022.

against negative stereotyping in advertising campaigns.[21] Similarly, Benetton and UN Women ran the 'END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN NOW!' advertisement campaign that incorporated anti-violence messaging into the brand's commercial advertisements.[22] Several corporations have also run consumption-driven awareness campaigns, targeted to their own consumer base, to donate the proceeds of specific items to women's rights groups. These include Banana Republic's 'notorious necklace', named after the late US Supreme Court Judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg,[23] and a special edition lipstick by make-up brand Elizabeth Arden,[24] the proceeds of which were donated to the ICRW and UN Women, respectively. The WeCare project by IKEA and UN Women seeks to improve the division of unpaid care and reduce violence against women in households connected to IKEA's operations in China by raising "public awareness" on both issues in this country and stimulating companies to "play their part in [progressive] transmitting attitudes and social norms" [25]

Research-oriented TBF projects take different forms, including studies, reports, and advocacy papers. Many examine the gender-specific barriers women face in the world of work and wider society, such as Levi Strauss and C & A, who have deployed the research services of the ICRW and BSR for a study on conditions in the garment industry.[26] Others evaluate the impact of TBF projects, including Goldman Sachs (Prügl and True 2014) and Gap, who have hired the ICRW to study and evaluate the impact of their programmes (see Chapter 3 and 5).

[21] Unilever Website. Launch of Unstereotype Alliance set to eradicate outdated stereotypes in advertising. 20 June 2017. https://www.unilever.com/news/press-and-media/press-releases/2017/launch-of-unstereotype-alliance-set-to-eradicate-outdated-stereotypes-in-advertising/. Accessed 21 June 2022.

[22] Benetton Group Website. United Colors of Benetton and UN Women: End Violence against Women Now! 24 November 2014. https://www.benettongroup.com/en/media-press/press-releases-and-statements/united-colors-of-benetton-and-un-women-end-violence-against-women-now/. Accessed 21 June 2022.

[23] ICRW. Banana Republic Reissues Notorious Necklace Honoring Women's Euality and Supporting ICRW's Mission. https://www.icrw.org/news/banana-republic-reissues-notorious-necklace-honoring-womens-equality-supporting-icrws-mission/. Accessed 21 June 2022.

[24] Elizabeth Arden Website. Elizabeth Arden, March on. https://www.elizabetharden.co.uk/march-on.html. Accessed 21 June 2022.

[25] UN Women Website. Bringing gender equality home and taking it to work: UN Women partners with IKEA in China. 22 December 2020. https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2020/12/bringing-gender-equality-home-and-taking-it-to-work. Accessed 21 June 2022.

[26] Business for Responsibility (BSR) Website. Empowering Female Workers in the Apparel Industry. Three Areas for Business Action. June 2017. https://www.bsr.org/reports/BSR_Empowering_Female_Workers_in_the_Apparel_Industry.pdf. Accessed 21 June 2022.

A third type of research simply reinforces arguments for a 'shared value' approach towards women's rights based on collaboration, and includes the various papers, policy briefs, case studies and brochures published by Women Deliver, BSR and the ICRW in collaboration with corporate partners. Often, such analyses contain a strong PR element for the businesses involved: a recent publication by the ICRW and Nike, for instance, on the practices of Nike suppliers in Turkey and Egypt, reads like a promotional brochure for these companies. Based solely on managers' accounts and annual reports, the report is full of praise for the companies' "people first" philosophy and progressive feminist attitudes.[27]

A third and highly prominent stream of TBF work comprises the learning tools and educational assistance that women's groups and NGOs offer companies to better meet the needs of women. This includes the ICRW's "high level trainings", where staff train corporate executives on the gendered barriers women face in the workplace and society, or teach them about the commercial gains associated with gender diversity and empowerment.[28] For example, the ICRW's early work with Gap involved giving workshops to senior Gap managers on how female garment workers for Gap suppliers in Asia are "adversely affected in the workplace" vis-à-vis male workers, and how gender norms can undermine how "prepared" these women are for factory jobs.[29] Other ICRW trainings focus on more strategic aspects of gender politics and aim to convince management that investing in women, as key "assets" of their organizations, will improve their "fluency in equity and leadership".[30] Educational TBF work often takes the form of guidance documents and self-assessment tools. These projects assume that companies lack the information or know-how to 'do the right thing' and will improve their practices once equipped with such tools and knowledge (see chapters 4 and 6). Such ideas also underpin the work of the UN Global Compact, which frequently partners with UN Women on TBF projects (Gregoratti 2018). The Global Compact spends most of its energies and resources on learning, dialogue, knowledge-

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[27] ICRW Website. ICRW Advisors Case Study. Enhancing Gender Equity within Textile, Clothing, and Footwear Manufacturing. October 2020. https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-Case-Study-on-Yesim-Apparel-and-Textiles.pdf. Accessed 21 June 2022.
[28] Interview Annika Washington DC January 2019.
[29] Zoom Interview Betty June 2020.
[30] Interview Annika Washington DC January 2019.

sharing, and exchanging 'best practices' among companies.[31] Emblematic of this approach are the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), a non-binding code of conduct developed by UN Women and the UN Global Compact to encourage gender equality and women's empowerment. Equality, in the WEPs is "broadly understood as expanding the opportunities for women's inclusion and professional development in a safe, gender-aware and violence-free workplace" (Gregoratti 2018, 214).

More recently, the ICRW has designed a learning tool for companies in the garment and footwear industry, funded by Nike. This "Self-Diagnostic Tool" enables manufacturers to minimize the 'gender' gaps' in their factories and, accordingly, enhance "business success" and "employee well-being".[32] The tool has been rolled out in the supply chains of Puma, Primark, Gap, C & A and Inditex, which owns the popular Zara fashion brand.[33] Many of these companies report their use of this tool or the WEPs on their websites as evidence of their progressive commitment to the rights of women in their factories. Another good example of a self-improvement product is Unilever's 'Global Women's Safety Framework', which is the subject of Chapter 6.

A different but related type of learning initiative targets behavioural change in women, instead of companies. This rapidly growing stream of TBF work covers the life and skills-training programmes, professing to equip women and girls with attitudes and soft skills to improve their earnings and overall well-being. These programmes are particularly noticeable in the world of fast fashion, where life-skills training programmes, targeting female garment workers, have proliferated in recent years. BSR's HER Project facilitates such trainings for dozens of brands, including Chanel, Burberry, Primark, Levi Strauss and Co, Target, Amazon, Abercrombie and Fitch, PVH (owner of the Tommy Hilfiger and Calvin Klein brands) and VF Corporation (which

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[31] Interview Tara New York City January 2019; Interview Amy New York City January 2019.

[32] ICRW Website. Gender Equity in Textile, Clothing and Footwear Manufacturing Resource Hub.. https://www.icrw.org/gender-equity-in-textile-clothing-and-footwear-manufacturing-resource-hub/ Accessed 20 June 2022.

[33] ICRW Website. ICRW's top moments of 2021.20 December 2021. https://www.icrw.org/icrw-top-10-moments-of-2021/. Accessed 21 June 2022.

owns the North Face, Timberland and other major brands).[34] Benetton and Uniqlo have hired UN Women and CARE International to develop and run similar trainings,[35] whereas Gap has a longstanding partnership with the ICRW and CARE International for its PACE programme, an initiative that will be analysed in Chapter 5. The recent surge in this type of initiative is indicative of the growing dominance of apparel brands in the TBF space, as noted in Chapter 1.

A more traditional form of TBF training targets not workers, but low-income businesswomen and micro-entrepreneurs. Such entrepreneurial training has been the preferred choice for Avon (Scott et al. 2012), Coca Cola (Tornhill 2019), ExxonMobil (Scott et al. 2012, 544), Goldman Sachs and Procter and Gamble, whose programmes profess to have improved the business potential of millions of women across the Global South and helped them enter corporate value chains (Allison, Gregoratti, and Tornhill 2019; Prügl and True 2014). Unilever's Shakti project, which encourages female micro-entrepreneurs in India to sell Unilever projects also falls in this category (Prügl 2015).

2.2 Making Sense of Corporatized Feminism: The Debate

In studying the logics and effects of the TBF regime, this dissertation situates itself in two closely related, partially overlapping bodies of literature. These assess 1) the origin, ideological nature, and impact of TBF projects, and 2) the emergence, ideology, and cultural manifestations of a distinctly neoliberal kind of feminism that primarily targets educated professional women in the US. This section delineates the main concerns and arguments animating these debates and explains how this dissertation contributes to them.

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[34] Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) Website..HER Project Companies. https://herproject.org/partners/companies. Accessed April 2022.

[35] UN Women Website. In Bangladesh, women garment workers gain confidence, promotions and better futures. 4 May 2018. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/5/feature-bangladesh-garment-workers-gain-better-futures. Accessed 28 June 2022. UN Women. Fast Retailing and UN Women Sign Global Partnership to Empower Female Workers in Apparel Industry. 28 June 2019.https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2019/06/fast-retailing-and-un-women-sign-global-partnership. Accessed 20 June 2022.

2.2.1 Co-optation as Setback

The literature on TBF is dominated by critical feminists – a group I will refer to as 'sceptics'– who have questioned the proliferation of alliances and challenged their emancipatory potential. Drawing from the fields of political economy, historical materialism, anthropology, sociology, and development studies, these scholars have conceptualised the corporate embrace of women and girls in the Global South in different ways. Indeed, there is variance even in basic categorisation and conceptualisation: whereas Roberts (2015) sees a *pseudo*-feminist ideology at work in TBF, others speak of a *post*-feminist phase (Elias 2013) and "post-feminist fables" (Switzer 2013). Eisenstein (2009, 2017) sometimes uses the label 'free-market feminism' to refer to such pro-market visions on gender justice. At other times, Eisenstein refers to 'hegemonic feminism,' a designation that captures the dominant 'common sense' power this ideology has taken on, especially in the US (see Chapter 3).

In scrutinizing the sudden interest of corporations in the women's cause, these scholars have pointed out how the gender equality discourse pushed for by these firms serve a strategic and ideological function. The 'business case' narrative, they point out, marginalizes visions on gender justice that are at odds with free-market values and seek to confront and restrain – rather than 'harness' and sustain – corporate power (Eisenstein 2017; Moeller 2018; Allison, Gregoratti, and Tornhill 2019; Tornhill 2019). Sceptics thus argue that corporations, backed by state and development elites, use their feminist projects to 'co-opt' feminism by neutralizing its anti-capitalist critiques and placing it in the service of corporate market expansion (Hayhurst 2013; Hickel 2014; Roberts 2015; Switzer 2013; Wilson 2015). They show that rather than promoting progressive development outcomes that curb unequal economic power relations on a systemic level, corporatized feminism seeks to create 'expert' knowledges about both 'gender' and development (Roberts 2015, 209) that "financializes" girls and women into market tools (Murphy 2013, 1) to ultimately consolidate corporate hegemony (Moeller 2018). Due to the visibility, influence and breadth of its alliances, Nike has, as noted earlier, been the target of many of these critiques (Hickel 2014; Moeller 2013; 2018; Roberts 2015; Switzer 2013; Wilson 2015), though Unilever, Coca Cola, Goldman Sachs and Mastercard are also discussed (Allison, Gregoratti, and Tornhill 2019; Eisenstein 2017; Tornhill 2019; Calkin 2015).

A central concern is how TBF's selective adoption of feminist ideals serves to defuse more radical visions of equality. For instance, Geographer Kalpana Wilson (2015, 218) interprets the success of 'Smart Economics' as evidence of the ability of neoliberal capitalism to appropriate radical ideas, as they "emerge from movements with a transformative agenda" and incorporate them into dominant narratives. This strategy she argues, "is also always a strategy to undermine and defuse critical concepts which challenge the basis of the existing order, and to derail or marginalize resistance which is informed by them (Wilson 2015, 218). Similarly, anthropologist Kathryn Moeller (2018, 209) argues that corporatized feminist projects demonstrate how corporate capitalism is "actively incorporating progressive feminist claims into its new hegemony" while shaping the "terrain of struggle in its own image".

Some sceptics also argue that TBF reinscribes and deepens women's exploitation. An exemplary scholar of this approach is Adrienne Roberts (2015), who coined the term "Transnational Business Feminism". For Roberts, TBF represents a dangerous phenomenon that places feminist energies and emancipatory goals at the service of a hegemonic neoliberal world order that, far from empowering women, reinforces and naturalises their exploitation both in the home and in the workplace. In this regard, Roberts' critique of the WEPs is worth quoting in depth. The WEPs, writes Roberts (2016, 72):

> "are problematic for a number of reasons, including the ways in which they legitimise the growing power of corporations, and naturalise and normalise the fusion of gender equality to participation in the capitalist market economy. That is, while they may improve the economic situation of some women in the short term, they fail to consider decades of feminist research suggesting that entry into capitalist labour markets may fuel gender and class inequalities by adding paid work to the vast amounts of unpaid work already performed by women, and by integrating women into labour markets that are becoming increasingly precarious for both men and women"

In demystifying the corporate gender myths and doctrines undergirding corporate feminist projects, most scholars rely on discursive analyses of corporate statements and promotion materials, which they critique with ideological, materialist, and political economy arguments (Eisenstein 2017; Koffman, Orgad, and Gill 2015). Sceptics have thereby highlighted the

disjuncture between marketing and reality: for instance, that a corporation like Nike has gained legitimacy as an women's empowerment expert through its philanthropic endeavours while the company's profits hinge on the exploitation of women in their supply chains (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020; Hickel 2014; Moeller 2018). Several sceptics have approached the issue through ethnographic research on girl and women's empowerment programmes in Egypt (Sweis 2012), South Africa (Dolan and Johnstone-Louis 2011; Tornhill 2019), Uganda (Hayhurst 2013) and Brazil (Moeller 2013; 2018). These empirical studies found that the programmes are out-of-sync with local needs, obscure the root causes of poverty, use weak evaluation methods, and overemphasize entrepreneurship and self-reliance as desirable and worthy values.

The fundamental concern with TBF projects and discourses, as it emerges from these analyses, is that it hides how capitalism hurts women. Not only does it erase systemic structures of domination and exploitation, such as "structural adjustment, debt, tax evasion, labour exploitation, financial crises and corruption in the global governance system" (Hickel 2014, 1356), TBF also obfuscates the complexity and variety in girls' lives, experiences, and priorities by essentializing them into a monolithic type (Banet-Weiser 2015; Hayhurst 2013). Moreover, as Sweis (2012) and Murphy (2013) have argued, by discursively insisting that social and cultural norms are obstacles to women's market integration, TBF shifts blame for poverty and inequality to women's families, brothers, and communities. As such, these corporate empowerment narratives not only render invisible the neoliberal capitalist policies and structures that form the root cause of poverty and inequality worldwide – including gendered divisions of reproductive work – worldwide, but also misrepresents boys and men as categorically unworthy aid recipients (Chant and Sweetman 2012; Sweis 2012). The effect is that feminist ideals are used to entrench a "neoliberal common sense that fails to consider the ways in which neoliberalism itself may work to reproduce gender inequality, and to limit critical feminist praxis that seeks to promote an alternative to neoliberal finance-led capitalism" (Roberts 2016, 75). Against this backdrop, when NGOs and UN organizations endorse these programmes and narratives, they not only provide MNCs with a 'social license to operate' (Moeller 2018), they also help naturalise and depoliticize the capitalist social order.

Questioning the emancipatory potential of corporatized visions of gender justice aligns these sceptics with a broader, and sometimes overlapping, school of anti-capitalist feminist thought (also discussed in Chapter 3). Anti-capitalist feminists lament how the US women's movement has become too comfortable with neoliberal ideals and power structures (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser 2019; Eisenstein 2010; Fraser 2015).[36] They argue that neoliberal capitalism has "seduced" feminism (Eisenstein 2009) and hijacks the women's emancipatory goals to "further intensify accumulation" (Farris and Rottenberg 2017), warning that the "dangerous liaisons" that are being formed between neoliberalism and the women's movement are advancing decidedly anti-emancipatory agendas (Eisenstein 2005). Most prominent in this debate is Nancy Fraser (2013), whose harsh portrayal of feminism as "neoliberalism's H&M" is a key reference point in discussions on TBF and co-optation. Fraser argues that, overall, mainstream feminism has substituted its former materialist analyses with a form of gender reductionism that obscures class inequality and uncritically celebrates the individual advancement of women within a system that is in want of structural critique and transformation. Fraser offers a narrower version of Eisenstein's (2017, 37) class-based critique of liberal, 'hegemonic feminism', which she blames for encouraging "badly paid jobs and precarity for the majority of women" along with "access to power for an elite few".

These 'elite few' are a key target of the anti-capitalist feminists. Catherine Rottenberg's (2014) book on the rise of neoliberal feminism in the US, for instance, uses the lens of cultural studies, to make sense of a new capitalist-feminist dynamic. Rottenberg observes how, since 2012, a growing group of high-power businesswomen and celebrities, including Beyoncé, Emma Watson, Sheryl Sandberg and Ivanka Trump, have proudly declared themselves feminists and, in doing so, both popularized a feminist identify and infused it with anti-emancipatory meanings. This dynamic is perhaps best captured by the term 'Lean In' feminism, introduced by Sandberg (2013) in her best-selling manifesto '*Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*'. As Rottenberg (2014) argues, Lean In feminism idealizes women's individual elevation into corporate boardrooms and other high-power places, and uses a distinctly pro-business vocabulary. In the media, the distinctly individualist and pro-business ideology at the heart of

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[36] This group of critics does not necessarily identify MNCs as actors shaping this process or address the international political economy of corporate supply chains.

Lean In feminism has also been dubbed 'Girl Boss feminism'. This term emerges from Sophia Amoruso (2015), the female founder of the Nasty Gal fashion brand, who unironically wrote an autobiography entitled *#Girlboss*. Building on the exploding popularity of the genre of CEO memoirs in recent years (Bloom 2018), but injected with feminist themes, Amoruso's best-selling book tells the story of how she became a 'girl boss' and why she "inspires women everywhere to join the *#GIRLBOSS*movement".[37] The success of Amoruso's book exemplifies how, in our current cultural moment, the entrepreneurial values of capitalism are bound up with progressive neoliberal ideals around emancipation (Fraser 2013).

For critical feminisms, the pursuit of individualized self-realization as a measure of feminist progress – expressed through happiness, balance, and business success – has little to do with more traditionally feminist concepts, such as equal rights or social justice (Rottenberg 2014). This neoliberalized version of feminism equates a gender-balanced ruling class (a 'Feminist Fortune 500') with emancipation, while virtually erasing the needs of low-income women and the importance of state services to alleviate women's 'double shifts': the burden of productive and reproductive work women are expected to shoulder.

Elites are not only 'remaking' feminism by drawing attention to themselves and proposing neoliberal values; they are also proposing specific mechanisms of individual and social change. Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (2017), for instance, critique the 'confidence culture' at the heart of this discourse, which tells women that empowerment, success, and independence depends primarily on their personal ability to overcome gender-based self-limiting beliefs. By emphasising women's self-regulation, rather than structural change, confidence, Gill and Orgad (2017) argue, functions as a disciplinary technology to enforce acceptance of a system that is fundamentally unjust. 'Confidence Culture' locates the sources of problems and solutions "within a newly upgraded form of confident subjectivity, thus rendering insecurity and lack of confidence abhorrent" (Gill and Orgad 2017, 2).

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[37] See blurb on Amoruso's book on bookselling website https://www.amazon.co.uk/Girlboss-Sophia-Amoruso/dp/0241217938 Accessed 20 June 2022.

The individualized and psychological solutions that such 'confidence' focused feminisms prescribe to solve social and political problems also frequently turn up in the 'women's empowerment' agenda that dominates global development discourses. In this sphere, development elites imagine empowerment "as a transition from dependency to self-sufficiency and threatened by psychological and cultural restraints rather than material conditions" (Tornhill 2016, 528). One effect of such individualized rhetoric is that it translates "social demands [into] individual 'disadvantages' that can be overcome by market measures and consensus-based governance" (Tornhill 2016, 537). Both TBF projects and the broader 'girlboss' discourse are underpinned by unrealistic expectations that attitudinal changes can overcome societal barriers and structures of exploitation and that "to speak of oneself as a successful business owner itself is…a transformative act" (Tornhill 2016, 537)

Ideologically, the sceptics' arguments echo older critiques by Marxist, socialist, post-colonial and other critical feminists who have long challenged 'culture-only' explanations of gender inequality, such as Asoka Bandarage (1984), Chandra Mohanty (2003), Diane Elson (1988), Maria Mies (2014) and Janet Halley (2006). Amongst these authors, feminism's ability to effectively push for a more equal and just world economy hinges on its willingness to "radical[ly] critique and reject...all capitalist and neo-liberal principles" (Mies 2007, 274), break its links with "non-emancipatory agendas" (Farris and Rottenberg 2017, 10) and confront corporate power and imperial trade relations (Mohanty 2003). Legal scholar Janet Halley (Halley 2018, 1) coined the term 'governance feminism' to highlight her concern about feminism's relationship with power structures, arguing that the incorporation of "some feminists and feminist ideas", but "by no means all" into powerful institutions at the state and global level necessitates a careful examination.

These critics hold different views on who or what, exactly, is to blame, even while broadly agreeing on the regressive effects that neoliberal ideology, elite influences, and corporate pressures have had on feminism's radical potential. Wendy Brown (2016, 76), for example, has challenged Halley's concept of 'governance feminism,' suggesting it offers "too big and broad a brush for getting at the problem". In Brown's view, the problem is not about feminism per se than with the broader power structures in which feminist visions traffic and take shape. Looking

to NGOs as an example of a space of co-optation, Brown (2016, 76)argues that while some organisations "are operating according to what they think of as feminist principles or doing feminist work" might indeed be "terrible", they are "rarely [terrible] because they're feminist" and "more often because they're colonial, racist or neoliberal".

Conceptual variations notwithstanding, the sceptics share a belief that this new, business-led 'wave' of feminism legitimates a capitalist world order that only benefits a small elite of women and, as such, is far from a progressive development.

2.2.2 Co-optation as Oversimplication

As a dynamic movement, linked to broader political and ideological outlooks, the feminist movement has produced a rich variety of ideological streams with contesting and evolving ideas on the meaning of equality, freedom, and gender justice (Cobble 2021). In that light, it is unsurprising that the critical readings of neoliberal forms of feminism, as described above, have been challenged by feminists from different persuasions. Typically, their arguments: 1) take issue with the sceptics' vague, confusing, or totalising 'co-optation' narratives and their lack of clarity who, exactly, is being co-opted and how, 2) deem the sceptics' critique of neoliberal feminism and TBF too dogmatic and ideological, and 3) urge sceptics to consider the benefits TBF projects might bring to women in the Global South, even when their ideological premises are problematic.

The contributions of Sydney Calkin (2015) and Michaele Ferguson (2017) fall in these first two categories. As Ferguson (2017) notes, the 'co-optation' literature ascribes gigantic power to the corruptive potential of neoliberalism, without properly engaging with the origin, features and doctrines of the ideology or the sources of its legitimacy. This mode of analysis, judges Ferguson (2017) sets up an unhelpful dichotomy between a fantastic 'pure' pre-neoliberal feminism and its pro-capitalist, regressive double. Consequently, it not only simplifies what neoliberalism is, but also renders "unintelligible how feminists and feminist ideologies have enabled, invited and accelerated the rise of neoliberalism" (Ferguson 2017, 225). The critiques of these two scholars on the dominant co-optation narrative is that it leaves critical question of agency and complicity unanswered. Is feminism complicit or a victim? "Where are these 'neoliberal' feminists? What

kinds of power do they possess and what vision of gender justice do they (fail to) articulate?" (Calkin 2015, 299). According to Calkin (2015) and Ferguson (2017, 221), the literature reduces feminists to "mute bystanders" who "in the face of an overpowering neoliberal agency" cannot "imagine themselves as agents of political and ideological change". This reductive reading also "mis-recognises the efforts of feminists working within institutions for progressive outcomes" (Calkin 2015, 299)

Nancy Fraser has been the main target of pushback of this kind, as her analysis is judged by some as misrepresenting the women's movement diversity and, by others, as unhelpfully vague and ideological (Aslan and Gambetti 2011; Funk 2013). Aslan and Gambetti (2011, 130), for example, see a "causal and empirical negligence" at work in Fraser's analyses. From their standpoint, Fraser's conviction that feminism at large has abandoned its "integral systemic analysis" and insistence that the feminist movement must "engage in self critique [and] reactivate its emancipatory potential" betrays a troubling superficiality, as she does not even bother to "specify who did the abandoning, when, and under which circumstances". Fraser writes with urgency about the "fragmentation of the movement", Aslan and Gambetti (2011, 130) note, "but the culprits remain unidentified" in her story. Particularly problematic about such simplified and US centric portrayals, from the standpoint of Aslan and Gambetti (2011, 137) and others is that they portray "demands formulated by the second-wave of a particular class in the North as being those of the entire feminist movement", which completely erases how feminist alliances around the world, and in particular in the Global South, are pushing back at corporate power and neoliberal economics (Aslan and Gambetti 2011; Funk 2013). The feminist movement, they argue, has always been comprised of multiple strands with competing visions on what liberation and justice entails and how to achieve it (Calkin 2015; Funk 2013). Even if Fraser's "observations were true" argue Aslan and Gambetti (2011, 131) "it is of utmost importance to emphasize that they apply only to a specific fragment of the feminist movement and cannot be said to represent the whole".

Similarly critical of oversimplified co-optation narratives are Kate Grosser and Lauren McCarty (2018, 1), who have argued that "despite the significant challenges to their agendas, far from being co-opted by neoliberalism, feminist social movements remain robust, existing alongside

and developing new strategies to contest the neoliberalization of feminism in a variety of innovative ways". Referring to interviews with women's groups in the UK and Australia, they argue that some women's groups "see CSR as an alternative regulatory compliance process when it comes to equalities law, and as a process of business accountability" and use these openings for feminist gains (Grosser and McCarthy 2018 .6).

2.2.3 Co-optation as Opportunity

The heavy ideological accent and anti-capitalist tone of 'neoliberal co-optation' and anti-TBF arguments has motivated others to fault the sceptics for an ill-guided ideological nostalgia that keeps them "trapped in backward-looking imaginaries" (Prügl 2015, 615). From this perspective, critics such as Eisenstein, Fraser and Halley romanticize socialism and social democracy, and overstate the radicalism and socio-economic outcomes of Keynesian economics and class-based politics (Calkin 2015, 299; Prügl 2015). By renouncing CSR and market friendly approaches to empowerment on ideological grounds, Fraser and other sceptics appear to hold on to an ideal of feminist purity without considering the gains that neoliberal expressions of feminism, including TBF, might deliver to impoverished and low-income women (Prügl 2015; Scott et al. 2012). Even when the wins that can be accomplished within this paradigm are not as far reaching, structural or encompassing as most feminists would like them to be, the argument goes, it is misguided to dismiss them as useless or regressive without seriously considering the small gains they bring women (Prügl 2015; Scott et al. 2012).

Prominent in this line of argument is Linda Scott, a business school feminist at the University of Oxford who, as an adviser to Walmart and Master Card, is herself a player in the TBF project. Even before critical scholarship on TBF emerged, Scott (Scott et al. 2012, 544) pushed back at what she viewed as the "anticapitalist attitude" that characterizes feminist scholarship since the 1970s. In a paper co-authored with Catherine Dolan, Mary Johnstone-Louis, Kimberly Sugden And Maryalice Wu, Scott calls such critiques unhelpfully ideological. The "market-unfriendly politics" of certain feminists, it is argued, makes it "difficult for [other] feminists to develop theory or praxis that engage[s] in a positive way with market activity" (Scott et al. 2012, 546). As such, Scott and her co-authors encourage feminists to adopt a "pragmatist feminist perspective" that recognises how market mechanisms – especially entrepreneurship – "can be

harnessed for feminist purposes" by for example, improving women's incomes, credit scores or confidence (Scott et al. 2012, 544).

Pragmatism, for Scott et al. (2012, 564), refers to a feminist politics that does not "predetermine judgment of outcomes based on an overriding ideology and values each step toward justice as an important one". Importantly, then, pragmatism is understood as "not ideologically bound" to capitalism or any other system (Scott et al. 2019, 546).

A 2017 report by Scott shines a light on how she imagines such a neutral, balanced praxis. Her report draws on an Exxon Mobile- funded event she helped organize at Oxford University that year. The aim of the event was to gather corporate executives from such firms as Goldman Sachs, Exxon Mobile, Walmart, Mastercard, Coca Cola, Marks and Spencer and PwC and learn from their years of experience with (organizing and implementing) women's empowerment partnerships. The main argument Scott (2017, 4) puts forward for pragmatically and positively engaging with these companies as partners is that, due to their reach and power, "economic empowerment of women can simply not be achieved without them". An uncritical endorsement of the 'expertise' these executives allegedly possess on the subject, Scott's report (2017, 11) echoes the collaborative 'win-win' ethos of the TBF project, and repeats doctrines that, as discussed before, critical feminists consider problematic, reductive and – indeed – deeply ideological. It, for example, repeats the claim that "women spend earnings in a way that improves the well-being of children and communities" (Scott 2017, 11) and features a quote by a Goldman Sachs executive boasting that the bank's "research shows that narrowing the gender gap in employment in emerging markets could push income per capital as much as 20% higher by 2030" (Scott 2017, 12). Scott positively praises the empowerment projects of these companies and cites their optimistic self-evaluations and impact claims at length, suggesting these TBF projects have benefited millions of women. Scott's conclusions are significant because they betray the same trust in corporations – their impact claims, aspirational statements, and self-evaluations – as the broader TBF project does (Gregoratti, Roberts and Tornhill 2018). To some, this unapologetically pro-market approach to empowerment is refreshing. In the media, Scott's "practical and pragmatic" stance has been praised by The Guardian, where feminist

author Caroline Criado Perez (2020) lauded her for having "little time for hand-wringers of any variety" and focusing on "Getting Things Done".

Political economist Elizabeth Prügl (2015) approaches the subject from a similar practical angle, albeit through a more critical lens. Dismissively, she takes note of the "avalanche" of essays arguing how "feminism has gone to bed with neoliberal capitalism and [has] become an instrument of governmentality" (Prügl 2015, 615). Citing both TBF focused texts and broader debates on neoliberal feminism, Prügl (2015, 615) broadly agrees with Fraser, Eisenstein and Roberts on the ideological limits of CSR-driven feminist initiatives, but contests their dogmatic pessimism, insisting that the ongoing "neoliberalisation of feminism" – a term she uses to accentuate "the diversity and shifting nature of various feminisms and the fluidity of their boundaries" – makes a diversity of feminist approaches possible, each seeking and creating different avenues and openings for women's advancement. Approaching TBF projects "as sites of indeterminate encounter of feminism and neoliberalism", Prügl (2015, 614, 616) proposes that, instead of condemning corporate-led 'empowerment' programmes on ideological grounds, "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". As such, she implores feminists to carefully review individual projects for openings that could benefit individuals or groups of women. Taking her own advice to task, Prügl analyses two prominent TBF projects that emerged under the banner of CSR and 'purpose and profit' banners: Unilever's Shakthi project, which encourages female micro-entrepreneurs in India to sell Unilever projects and the HER Project, a garment sector focused training programme involving Levi Strauss and other major brands that seek to improve labour and health standards in their supply chains by offering garment workers factory-based life and health training sessions (Prügl 2015, 621) Drawing on corporate self-evaluations from the HERProject, Prügl argues that these projects – notwithstanding their narrow definition of empowerment, their ideological pro-market biases and return on investment logics – are likely to create openings for solidarity and opportunity among participants. While these projects may not promote empowerment beyond "individual gains" such as higher incomes, health, or self-esteem, Prügl finds such improvements significant enough to conclude it would be a "mistake to dismiss the HERProject as just another instance of feminism seduced" (Prügl 2015, 626).

A more middle ground position is taken by Magdalena Bexell (2012) whose analysis of 'business case' based partnerships between United Nations bodies and corporations identifies mostly risks, but also some opportunities. She calls the "absence of a human rights discourse [in these projects] striking", given the participation of UN bodies, and insists that rights claims should always trump "other claims, such as those of utility or productivity". Of particular concern to Bexell (2012, 403) is how the 'win-win' claims guiding these projects conceal unequal power relations and boost corporate PR efforts. The "power to claim rights", Bexell (2012, 403) contends, "distinguishes having a right from being the beneficiary of someone else's good will, reputation concerns or risk management". Thus, Bexell (2012, 403) concludes, while these programmes may improve "individual women's economic situation in the short term" they fail to "challenge the gendered structures of the global economy". Calkin (2015, 295) expresses a similar ambivalence, noting that as flawed and reductive the 'co-optation' framing may be, "the transformations wrought by neoliberal compatible feminisms [nonetheless] present troubling challenges for feminists concerned with intersectionality and the links between gender and economic justice".

Combined, what these competing views on TBF and neoliberal feminism suggest is that the debate needs to be thickened with analytical clarity empirical evidence and ideological specificity.

2.3 Literature Gap

Given that the TBF project appears to be accelerating and has now ostensibly reached and empowered millions of women in the Global South – including an increasing number of supply chain workers – it is important to study the conditions in which this trend is unfolding, the change it may, or may not, bring about and the grounds on which it may be challenged. I argue that these questions can only be addressed adequately if we centre the actors who drive, legitimate, promote and benefit from the TBF project. In that light, the main omissions in the TBF literature that this thesis identifies and seeks to address can be clustered into three domains: 1) the perspectives of beneficiaries within these projects 2) the perspective of business feminists who participate and support the project, and 3) the proliferation of TBF in supply chains.

2.3.1 Workers

In the first section of this chapter, I observed a rapid proliferation of worker focused TBF programs in corporate supply chains. However, the literature on TBF has, thus far, paid little attention to workers experiences, focusing more on corporations' philanthropically minded initiatives (Moeller 2018) or, to a lesser extent, on projects that draw women into their supply chain as precarious 'bottom of the pyramid' entrepreneurs to sell their beauty products (Scott et al. 2012) sodas (Tornhill 2019) and household good products (Prügl 2015). This scholarship has largely overlooked that, as labour rights scholar Mark Anner (2018, 76) has noted, "CSR programmes have become an increasingly common component of employment relations practices in global supply chains" and that women and gender focused initiatives constitute a growing share of these programs. By emphasizing the realms of philanthropy and trade, both sceptics and pragmatists imagine the TBF beneficiary as a recipient or an entrepreneur, but not as a worker with a direct or indirect labour relationship with such TBF champions as Unilever, Nike, Coca Cola or Gap. As a result, the dominant question guiding the TBF debate asks to what extent such philanthropy and market integration 'helps' women in a meaningful way, but it has not asked what demands women might be making on these companies as *workers,* and how TBF projects might strengthen or weaken these demands. In sum, the TBG literature would benefit from contributions that scrutinize worker-focused programs, the impact claims they make, and shine a light on how workers themselves make sense of these initiatives in different contexts.

2.3.2 Business Feminists

Another key question this dissertation addresses is what logics, rationalities and vision of change motivate business feminists to partner with corporations on TBF initiatives, how they assess the impact of these projects and if and how these ideals relate to neoliberalism. Thus far, scholars who view TBF as detrimental to feminism and see a dangerous process of co-optation or seduction at work have not paid much attention to the role that elite feminist groups have played in building and legitimising the TBF project. As a result, little is known about the reasons, motivations, rationalities, and material pressures animating these groups and their perceptions around the benefits and risks associated with corporate partnerships. The literature generally

depicts TBF (and broader co-optation processes) as being driven by corporations and enabled by passive, undefined feminist organizations, but this portrayal omits the centrality and agency of feminist actors (Calkin 2015; Ferguson 2017). Yet, interesting questions arise when we take the role of feminist partners seriously. How did the first TBF projects originate? How do the feminist groups participating in these projects view their impact and successes? How do they make sense of the visibility and sometimes contradictory positions of CEOs in TBF discourses? Questions such as these are, I contend, imperative in thinking through the project's ideological foundations, power dynamics and emancipatory potential. Sydney Calkin (2015, 304) has made a similar point, arguing that the debate on the "co-optation of feminism" would benefit from an engagement with those "feminists (and non-feminist 'gender experts') working within transnational business initiatives and navigating the contradictions therein".

An important article on the difficulties facing TBF research by Katherine Allison, Catia Gregoratti and Sofie Tornhill (2019) sheds a light on why such work is currently lacking. In this text, the authors recount their efforts to interview elite TBF groups – notably Goldman Sachs, Coca Cola and partners such as UN Women – but faced hostility, secrecy, distrustful attitudes and other barriers. These TBF actors refused to grant the researchers interviews and denied them access to program details and evaluation materials. These TBF programs "revealed themselves as hypervisible" Allison et al. (2019, 120) write, "yet largely inaccessible and also as deeply protective of their practices and of the knowledge produced about them". Kathryn Moeller (2018), whose anthropological research focused on Nike, also observed "a distinct anxiety that becomes manifest when corporations and corporate foundations have to deal with activists, academics or journalists" (cited by Allison, Gregoratti, and Tornhill 2019, 120). These research experiences illuminate "the concrete workings of power relations within TBF programs" and spotlight the necessity for research that seeks to overcome such barriers in creative ways (Allison et al 2019, 121).

2.4 Conclusion

This thesis is attentive to the argument that the debate on TBF and neoliberal feminism would benefit from more specificity when it comes to their accounts of neoliberalism (Ferguson 2017).

As noted, scholars overwhelmingly identify 'neoliberalism' as the ideological essence of TBF, but broadly fail to specify which neoliberal doctrines, exactly, they see at work in the initiatives they study, and how these ideas are adopted, reproduced, mobilized, legitimised or, indeed, challenged by the business feminists involved in designing or implementing these programmes. As intellectual historian Soren Brandes (2020,8) reminds us, "only if we concern ourselves with neoliberalism's distinctive sources of legitimacy can we take full account of neoliberal rule and develop strategies to engage with it". Applied to the two focus areas of this thesis – the perspectives of business feminists and the worker-focused TBF programs they help design – this requires a detailed look at the ideals around freedom, change and equality that lie underneath the discursive surface of these programmes, and the historical and political context in which they gained legitimacy. An attempt at such specificity, the next chapter clarifies how this thesis understands neoliberalism, and spotlights those (elements doctrines and debates) it considers most relevant to the various focus of this thesis: global supply chains, free trade, corporate social responsibility, and the convergence of neoliberalism and feminism in the gender and development field.

Chapter 3. Neoliberalism, Naturally

A key feature of the discourse concerning Transnational Business Feminism (TBF) (Roberts 2012), is that it treats corporate power and the structures of contemporary capitalism as a timeless, benign and, crucially, *apolitical* phenomena, and depicts distinctly neoliberal solutions to poverty as neutral and value-free (Eisenstein 2017; Roberts 2016).This portrayal mirrors how, in the words of Marxist feminist Maria Mies (2007, 74), "capitalist and neo-liberal principles…nowadays have infected all countries and all life". The purpose of this chapter is to tease out and 're-politicize' those aspects of neoliberalism I consider critical to the larger task of this thesis: to explore the effects of TBF programmes on women workers in corporate supply chains; and examine the perspectives of the feminist professionals who design, implement, and promote these programmes for their corporate partners. What, exactly, are the 'neoliberal' origins of corporate gender politics? How do they frame and articulate questions around workers' rights, global supply chains, gender justice, and corporate responsibility? How have feminist and labour rights scholars made sense of these ideas? And what explains their hegemonic power today?

Drawing on a wide range of scholarship – including intellectual history, political theory, political economy, post-colonial feminism and Marxist feminism – it examines first, how free-market politics shape labour conditions in global value chains and second, how key doctrines of this ideology have become ubiquitous in influential corners of the gender and development field. Focused primarily on the US context, it shows how neoliberal values around gender, freedom and development have, over the past half century, converged with feminist ideals, international development strategies and a corporate-led 'corporate responsibility' regime, contributing to a culture of 'capitalist realism' (Fisher 2009) that views living wages, collective bargaining, and a more egalitarian social order as either utopian or impractical. As such, it sheds a critical light on the ideological climate in which feminists design and make sense of worker-focused empowerment programmes and the structural sources of (dis)empowerment faced by women workers in corporate supply chains.

The chapter begins with a theoretical discussion on the intellectual foundations of neoliberalism, zooming in on the school of thought most pertinent to TBF: the Chicago School of Economics and the ideas of Milton Friedman. It explains what a 'moral economy' meant to Friedman and how he understood the meaning of freedom, voluntarism, and social responsibility within such a system. Section 2 discusses the US feminist movement known as the 'second wave' and examines how this movement's hegemonic strand converged with the neoliberal revolution that, in this country, took off in the 1960s. In this section, I will analyse the ideological and economic forces that shaped feminist discourses during this time, discuss the role that corporate philanthropy played in the popularization of certain feminist ideals, and trace the origins of the 'business case' for gender equality. Section 3 turns to the subject of free trade, globalisation, and structural adjustment and presents contesting feminist visions of what it meant for women in the Global South to be included in the global capitalist economy through factory jobs. Section 4 examines how in the 1990s, reports about sweatshop conditions in these factories inflamed demands for more ethical capitalism and how corporate and political elites managed to integrate these sentiments into a corporate social responsibility (CSR) regime, based on market values. Section 5 contextualises the rise of CSR in a broader cultural shift and discusses how political and cultural theorists have conceptualised the naturalization of free-market logic in our current capitalist moment.

3.1 Intellectual Foundations of Neoliberalism

Far from representing a straightforward or static school of thought, neoliberal and free-market economics has given rise to multiple, competing, philosophical streams in the last century (Jones 2012; Slobodian 2018; Whyte 2019). Particularly on themes relevant to the TBF debate, such as gender discrimination, CSR, trade unions and the welfare state, neoliberal thought is highly divided (Jones 2012; Slobodian 2018). Adding to this definitional complexity is the fact that the interpretation and implementation of neoliberal policy prescriptions have taken many different forms over the past half-century, which means that the concept of neoliberalism "ranges and changes temporally and geographically"(Brown 2015, 49). This section clarifies how this thesis understands neoliberalism. In doing so, it zooms in on the school of thought it considers most

pertinent to TBF – the Chicago School of Economics of the 1960s, and in particular, the ideas of Milton Friedman – and their understanding of freedom, competition, capital mobility, philanthropy, trade unions and the 'business case' for CSR.

In 1962, the University of Chicago Press published the book *Capitalism and Freedom* by a rising star from that school's economics department, Milton Friedman. A self-identified liberal and exponent of free-market capitalism, Friedman used the book to argue against the Keynesian New Deal politics of the post-war consensus. In it, he asserted that the solidaristic ideals of these political-economic systems formed an attack on Americans' individual freedoms and were destined to fail in their purported egalitarian objectives (Friedman 1962; Jones 2012) "A society that puts equality before freedom will end up with neither," Friedman (1978, np) argued, whereas "a society that puts freedom before equality will end up with a great measure of both". The ideology of Friedman, often deemed the most influential free-market advocate of the twentieth century, and the Chicago School came to be known as neo-liberalism, a term that signifies its ideological position between nineteenth century *laissez-faire* liberalism on the one hand and the interventionism of Keynesian social democracy and New Deal liberalism on the other(Jones 2012; Klein 2007). His outlook built on the work of influential European neoliberals, such as Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises. He shared their overall vision on trade, freedom, individualism, and market supremacy, but differed on issues of policy, methodology, trade unions, monopolies, and acceptable levels of social welfare (Slobodian 2018; Jones 2012; Whyte 2019). The ideas of Friedman, and the Chicago School are, I argue, key in understanding the rise of TBF. That is because no neoliberal thinker of such stature has expressed such distinct views on the topic of corporate responsibility or played such a fundamental role in normalising free-market ideologies in and beyond the US.

3.1.1 Freedom, Competition and The Human Right to Capital Flight

While the neoliberal ideas of the Chicago School are often framed as efficiency focused (Jones 2012), Friedman stressed that his political philosophy was primarily about the construction of a *moral* society, one where values of freedom and fairness triumphed over oppression and coercion (Sören Brandes 2019; Whyte 2019). The core argument of *Capitalism and Freedom*, notes historian Sören Brandes (2019, 73), is that free-market capitalism is "the only economic

system consistent with freedom" and thus "ethically superior" to socialism and social democracy. The "basic case for freedom", Friedman once told a broadcaster, "is moral, not prudential" (Brandes, 2019, 73). The term 'freedom', as invoked by Friedman and his Chicago School colleagues, thus carried a specific ideological meaning, referring primarily to the right of individuals "to buy in the cheapest market around the world [and] to sell in the dearest around the world" without political interference.[38] Drawing on the concept of 'the invisible hand' by the moral philosopher Adam Smith, *Capitalism and Freedom* thus made a moral case for selfishness, understanding morality primarily as "the sentiments about right and wrong action and… the system of informal rules of conduct that guide the action of individuals" (Whyte 2019, 11).The market's competitive forces, Friedman (1980, 29) explained, incentivise the individual to pursue their rational, individual best interest and induce them to be productive and self-reliant, which promotes social welfare "more effectually than when he really intends to promote it".

Historian Quinn Slobodian (2018) has argued that freedom, for neoliberals, also meant the freedom of capital to go where it wants and leave when it wants. The "human right of capital flight",[39] as he dubs this principle, remains foundational to neoliberal visions of freedom. In this outlook, the proper role of government is fiercely to protect private property rights, support the market's autonomy and expansion, and ensure its 'proper' functioning through minimum regulation, price controls, tariffs, and labour protections (Harvey 2007; Panitch and Gindin 2012; Slobodian 2018).

Historians have noted how Friedman and many of his colleagues portrayed corporations primarily as passive actors and, accordingly, did not consider questions of corporate monopoly relevant (Jones 2012; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). Writing about the Chicago School, Van Horn and Mirowski (2009, 155) note that:

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[38] Milton Friedman. 'Free to Choose' Video Series, Part 1. https://bipps.org/blog/milton-friedman-quote-of-the-day-4 Accessed 23 June 2022
[39] Quinn Slobodian. 'Making Sense of Neoliberalism'. 15 March 2018. https://harvardpress.typepad.com/hup_publicity/2018/03/making-sense-of-neoliberalism-quinn-slobodian.html Accessed 23 June 2022.

"Corporations, in particular, were inevitably characterized as passive responders to outside forces. In economics, the only market actor accused of misusing power was the trade union, which was uniformly treated as illegitimate, whereas any other instance of market power, as in the case of monopoly or oligopoly, was either treated as harmless and temporary or attributed to some nefarious state policy"

This statement underscores the divide between neoliberal individualism on the one hand and Marxist and Keynesian thinking on the other, and their opposing conceptions of what a moral economy requires. Whereas political economists in the Marxist and Keynesian traditions generally considered the state, trade unions, regulation, collective bargaining, living wages, and price controls as essential vehicles to secure a free and prosperous society, neoliberals like Friedman argued that such measures distorted the 'magic of the price system' and were, ultimately, coercive. Generous welfare payments, collective bargaining and minimum wages drive up the price of labour, Friedman argued, and thus cause unemployment (Harvey 2005, 62). A critic of collectivism, Friedman often pointed out that it was market competition, instead of the state or unions, that ultimately protects workers and ensures fair wages. [40]Strong and militant union movements are, in this neoliberal paradigm, thought to undermine the competitive advantage of their nations and thus seen as a threat to their prosperity (Slobodian 2018). Rather than fostering a climate of individual responsibility, cooperation, productivity, and self-reliance, the 'social liberalism' of the post-war consensus, Friedman (1962) judged, incentivised idleness and entitlement. These ideas on individual freedom and responsibility and their attendant anti-collectivism are bedrocks of Chicago School thinking (Harvey 2007; Jones 2012; Klein 2007).

3.1.2 Voluntarism, Philanthropy and the 'Business Case' for Corporate Responsibility
For Friedman, it was the largely unregulated phase of American capitalism known as the Gilded Age that most resembled his free-market utopia. In public lectures, the economist celebrated this period for the immense wealth it produced and the private charity and philanthropy that blossomed alongside it. The wealthy businessmen who built schools, libraries, hospitals, and animal protection centres during this time personified Friedman's (1980, 24) conviction that a free market needs no government coercion to take care of its weakest and that "[v]oluntary cooperation is no less effective in organizing charitable activity than in organizing production for

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[40] *Milton F*riedman. 1978 Lecture 'Who Protects the Worker'. (2016)

profit." The idea that private charity constitutes a more just and effective solution to inequality than state-managed social welfare remains, as the sociologist Alessandro Bonanno (2017, 127) has noted, a key feature of neoliberal politics. Friedman contrasted such voluntarism with the coercion of state-regulated redistribution, arguing that the former brought out the best in individuals, rewarding those who took responsibility for their own lives, while the latter was both oppressive and unjust.

Friedman's endorsement of individual responsibility stands in stark contrast to his suspicion of the concept of '*social* responsibility'– understood as the moral responsibility of individuals and businesses to look after the welfare of their broader communities and environment, which he considered to be a dangerous ideal. In *Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman railed against what he viewed as an increasingly popular notion that business leaders, especially those leading publicly traded corporations, had any such 'moral' duties, arguing that:

> "[f]ew trends could so thoroughly undermine the very foundations of our free society as the acceptance by corporate officials of a social responsibility other than to make as much money for their stockholders as possible. This is a fundamentally subversive doctrine. If businessmen do have a social responsibility other than making maximum profits for stockholders, how are they to know what it is? Can self-selected private individuals decide what the social interest is? Can they decide how great a burden they are justified in placing on themselves or their stockholders to serve that social interest? Is it tolerable that these public functions of taxation, expenditure, and control be exercised by the people who happen at the moment to be in charge of particular enterprises, chosen for those posts by strictly private groups? If businessmen are civil servants rather than the employees of their stockholders then in a democracy they will, sooner or later, be chosen by the public techniques of election and appointment."

In 1970, after a decade of intensifying anti-corporate protest (Soule, 2011), Friedman (1970) made this case against CSR more forcefully in a *New York Times* opinion piece, compelled, he wrote, by the widespread "talk of social purpose" he observed among business leaders concerned about the prevailing anti-corporate climate of the time. Friedman cautioned these executives that such talk may "gain them kudos in the short run" but that it "helps to strengthen the already

prevalent view that the pursuit of profits is wicked and immoral and must be curbed and controlled by external forces." Once such a view gains validity, Friedman (1970) warns:

> "the eternal forces that curb the market will not be the social consciences, however highly developed or the pontificating executives; it will be the iron fist of Government bureaucrats. Here, as with price and wage controls, businessmen seem to me to reveal a suicidal impulse."

Where private charity donations were concerned, Friedman conceded, businessmen were free to donate to whichever cause they pleased. However, as agents for the corporation, they lacked the mandate and the expertise to concern themselves with anything other than maximising financial returns. Any dollar spent on environmental causes or support for "the hardcore unemployed" reduced profits and was thus tantamount to and equally as coercive as taxation (Friedman 1970).

The only scenario in which a corporation's social efforts can be justified, in Friedman's view, is when it contributes to the firm's bottom line. Friedman (1962;1970), thus, argued for a 'business case' approach toward social responsibility, though he appears not to have used this term. In his view, social expenditures were acceptable when they, for example, enable stockholders to minimise corporate taxes or, through their humanitarian symbolism, "make it easier to attract desirable employees." "In the present climate of opinion," he wrote in 1970, "with its widespread aversion to 'capitalism,' 'profits', the 'soulless corporation' and so on, [corporate responsibility] is one way for a corporation to generate goodwill as a by-product of expenditures that are entirely justified in its own self-interest" (Friedman 1970). By contrast, any social or environmental agenda that cost money ought to be avoided.

3.2 The Convergence of Neoliberalism and Feminism

This section shows how the breakthrough of neoliberal politics in the US converged with the 'second wave' of the women's movement in this country and how, in the eyes of socialist feminists, feminism's hegemonic stream aided the naturalization of neoliberal politics in the 1970s and 1980s. This history shows that feminists have, for at least half a century, related to neoliberalism, corporate power and 'business case' logics in conflicting ways and shows that

– far from being a recent phenomenon – corporations have a longer history of using philanthropy to promote market-friendly feminisms, at the expense of more labour-centred perspectives.

3.2.1 The Neoliberal Revolution

When Friedman first published *Capitalism and Freedom* in 1962, the book attracted hardly any attention from the press. According to *Financial Times* columnist Martin Wolf (2006), most economists in the 1960s regarded Friedman's belief in the free market and rejection of Keynesian ideas as "evil, misguided or, more often, both." As Friedman's former student Gary Becker, once summarised that period, free-market advocates like them felt like "warriors in combat with most of the rest of the profession" (Klein 2007, 108). Moreover, Friedman's portrayal of corporations as 'passive' and benign market actors (Jones 2012) appeared out of step with the public mood at the time, which, as Friedman himself had disapprovingly observed in his *New York Times* opinion piece, was distrustful of big business (Soule 2009).

This began to shift in the 1970s, when an economic downturn, stagflation, political unrest, an oil price spike, and an expensive military operation in Vietnam led to widespread discontent with the post-war order, amplified distrust of big government, and weakened the legitimacy of Keynesian economics as a blueprint for prosperity and peace (Harvey 2007; Mazzucato 2019). Protests by a variety of social movements spotlighted the sexist limits of the post-war order – the subject of the next section – and its racist and imperialist foundations (Fraser 2013) .In this context, neoliberal advocates and think tanks aggressively and effectively promoted their ideas as a sensible alternative, often backed by corporate funding (Klein 2007; Phillips - Fein 2009; Jones 2012).

The Mont Pèlerin Society, a 'neoliberal thought collective' of which Friedman was a prominent member, played a critical role in connecting different knowledge-making institutions – from the media and think tanks to universities – to amplify and normalise neoliberal logics among policymakers, politicians, and the broader public (Mirowski 2009; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Jones 2012). As the American face of this 'new' economic paradigm, Friedman's popularity soared in the 1970s. Appearing in national and international newspapers, television shows and magazines, including a 1973 interview with Playboy, Friedman was asked about his opinion "on

everything from a cure for the common cold to the market value of a letter signed by John F. Kennedy," he once recalled (Friedman 1998, 454). When he won a Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 1976, it signalled how once-radical ideas on privatisation, austerity, competition, and monetarism had gained credibility in many parts of the Global North. According to Friedman's student Gary Becker, Friedman's media appearances had played a decisive role in the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980 (Brandes 2019; Klein 2007). Reagan's promise to bring back voluntarism and take on 'big government' evidenced how the 'counter revolution' of free marketeers had taken on political power. The results included dramatic cuts in taxes and welfare programmes such as rent subsidies and food stamps, rising poverty, and unemployment (Brown 2015; Eisenstein 2009; Harvey 2005).

3.2.2 The Feminist Revolution

The neoliberal revolution coincided with what became known as the 'second wave' of feminism: the US women's movement that gained clout in the 1960s by exposing the patriarchal character and built-in sexism of the Fordist welfare state (Eisenstein 2009; Fraser 2013). Political theorist Nancy Fraser (Fraser 2013, 3–4) credits the movement for expanding the "boundaries of contestation beyond socioeconomic distribution to include housework, sexuality and reproduction" and extending the welfare state's "egalitarian ethos from class to gender".
For too long, feminists argued, left-wing progressives had defined social struggle along narrow class lines and obscured the role that gender played both in and outside the household (Eisenstein 2009; Fraser 2013; Watkins 2018). The movement's rallying cry 'the personal is political' highlighted that the lines between private and public were more blurred than commonly assumed and that women's individual struggles were rooted in political-economic institutions and structures.

The feminist movement was fractured into different strands, each relating to the new neoliberal consensus in a different way. Feminist scholars have named and defined the divides of the 'second wave' in different terms, but typically distinguish two broad streams: a liberal stream, personified by the co-founder of The National Organization for Women (NOW), Betty Friedan, which primarily advocated for reforms to extend male-only privileges to women and ensure equality in employment and careers (Watkins 2018, np) and a more radical current that

campaigned for structural changes in how society was organized and pushed for stronger working-class and anti-racist politics (Cobble 2021; hooks 2014; Fraser 2013; Taylor 2017).

The key claim put forward by the movement's liberal stream was that society's relegation of women to the domestic sphere and the expectation that they find fulfilment in the home deprived them of the sense of achievement, self-development, and independence that men enjoyed through their careers. As such, the movement promoted a notion of 'work as liberation' (Eisenstein 2009; Watkins 2018). These liberal advocates have been dubbed 'anti-discrimination feminists' and 'equal opportunity feminists' (Eisenstein 2009; Watkins 2018), designations that reflect the movement's primary objective and strategy, namely, to integrate women into existing capitalist structures and realise full participation and meritocratic advancement in the workplace (Bandarage 1984; Eisenstein 2010). Socialist feminists have applied the label of 'hegemonic feminism' to this strand of the women's movement, because, then and now, it represents the "feminist politics with the most influential programme, the most professional infrastructure and the greatest resources at its disposal" (Watkins 2018, np). This hegemonic status means that "all other feminisms", including more radical and labour-centred visions, "will be in part defined" by the politics of the liberal, anti-discrimination vision (Watkins 2018, np).

More radical feminist streams judged the individualistic ideals guiding the liberal feminists and the transformative potential of their politics as inadequate and too accepting of the political-economic status quo. Building a good and just society, they argued, required more fundamental changes. Positioned in this second camp were the 'women's liberationists' (Watkins 2018), 'full rights feminists' (Cobble 2021), and African American feminists, who believed the main demands of liberal feminism spoke primarily to the aspirations of White middle-class women, eager to pursue professional careers, but was less sensitive to the need of African American and working-class women and the urgency for collectivist, anti-racist politics (hooks 2014; Taylor 2017). Their priorities included communal childcare, an expansion in state-funded social services, living wages, and collective bargaining rights (Cobble 2021; Eisenstein 2009; Watkins 2018). The Combahee River Collective, a Black, socialist, feminist organization founded in 1974 highlighted how a focus on anti-discrimination obscured factors such as class and race (Taylor

2017). They aimed to struggle "against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression," with an understanding that "the major systems of oppression are interlocking".[41]

It is worth emphasising, as Watkins (2018) has done, that women's liberationists did not necessarily *oppose* the incremental changes associated with the liberal agenda or deny the importance of labour participation in workplace equality. On the contrary, as the editors of an influential radical periodical stressed at the time, they deemed it "inhuman and cruel to condemn as 'reformist' anything which eases suffering" (Watkins 2018, np). Still, in their view, a truly feminist society capable of ensuring a dignified life for all required a more fundamental overhaul of existing capitalist structures.

Mont Pèlerin Feminism

Whereas, as mentioned, feminist scholarship typically distinguishes two broad emancipatory visions in the second wave, Susan Watkins has identified a third vision of gender equality that developed around that time. This third version, which Watkins refers to as 'neoliberal feminism', was associated with the US branch of Mont Pèlerin. This stream of neoliberal feminism, precedes and differs from the neoliberal feminisms, as discussed more recently by scholars such as Rottenberg (2017) and Roberts (2015) (See Chapter 2). Nonetheless, as I hope to show in the next sub-section, this rarely discussed current offers important context to the historical origin and legitimacy of the latter, and its use of the 'business case' (TBF).

Overall, the Mont Pèlerin Society was conservative when it came to gender issues, explains Watkins (2018). Friedman, for example, portrayed the family as the basic unit of society, arguing that childcare ought to remain a parental, and, in effect, a woman's, responsibility (Watkins 2018). Even so, observes Watkins:

> "[w]hile some Mont Pèlerin Society members held deeply reactionary views on social questions, the American branch was eager to position itself on the side of progress,

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[41] Blackpast Website. THE COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE STATEMENT 1977. https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/ Accessed 23 June 2022.

against outdated 'obstacles'—trade unions and red tape, of course, but also racist, sexist or homophobic bigotry and prejudice—to the smooth functioning of a free market. In The Economics of Discrimination, Friedman's star student Gary Becker demonstrated, through a blizzard of marginal-utility equations, that discrimination was economically harmful to those who perpetrate it, not just to its victims; a non-discriminatory market would always be more efficient. Though writing with African-Americans in mind, Becker argued the framework was just as applicable to sex discrimination: employing women was economically beneficial" (Watkins 2018, np).

Discrimination, in Friedman's view, functioned as tariffs did: They distorted the market's natural function and undermined prosperity. In *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962, 110), he argued that:

"It is often taken for granted that the person who discriminates against others because of their race, religion, color, or whatever, incurs no costs by doing so but simply imposes costs on others. This view is on a par with the very similar fallacy that a country does not hurt itself by imposing tariffs on the products of other countries. Both are equally wrong. The man who objects to buying from or working alongside a Negro, for example, thereby limits his range of choice. He will generally have to pay a higher price for what he buys or receive a lower return for his work."

Equal treatment, in this vision, is commercially more attractive than discrimination. Applied to gender discrimination, non-sexist firms were thought to outcompete sexist ones, an assumption that renders government interference not only unnecessary but counterproductive. It was on these grounds that neoliberals opposed equal-pay legislation which, they argued, "denied women the freedom to compete at a lower wage" (Watkins 2018, np).

Again, a 'business case' could thus be made for pursuing a social goal, in this case, equal treatment, but this business case looked different from the one Friedman had formulated to guide employers on CSR activities. Whereas Friedman's corporate responsibility argument rested on a *moral* and *conditional* 'win-win' formula that said companies *should* only 'do good' *if* it pays off, his case for gender and racial equality was supported by a (supposedly) scientific, unconditional argument that dictated that equal treatment *will* pay off. Notwithstanding these differences, the upshots of both versions of the business case were similar, namely, that doing

good need not, or should not cost anything and that regulation would only harm the cause. Indeed, in Friedman's (1962, 111) view, affirmative action legislation "clearly involves interference with the freedom of individuals to enter into voluntary contracts with one another" and was thus inadvisable. (Chapter 4 returns to Friedman's outlook on corporate responsibility and gender equality and relates it to the phenomenon of TBF).

When in 1968, President Lyndon Johnson called women "one of the largest untapped resources for the great tasks of this Nation," he conveyed the optimistic notion shared by liberals and neoliberals alike: that workplace equality promotes efficiency and prosperity. [42] This statement revealed how an instrumentalised and financialised logic had crept into a social issue whose fulfilment could, and in the opinion of socialist feminists *should* be defended on the grounds of equality and human rights, irrespective of costs (Eisenstein 2009; Watkins 2018).

3.2.3 Converging Ideologies and Philanthropic Pressures

The hegemonic, liberal strand of feminism deviated from its 'Mont Pèlerin counterpart' on questions around regulation. But with the ascendancy of what became known as 'identity politics' and the 'cultural turn' (Chibber 2017) in the following decades – where feminist theory "integrat[ed] with poststructuralist and postmodern modes of thought" and demands for justice were increasingly couched in language of recognition instead of distribution (Eisenstein 2009, 11; Fraser 2013) – they came to converge on several fronts (Fraser 2013; Watkins 2018).

According to Fraser (Fraser 1995, np) this meant that by the 1990s – a period some associate with a third wave of feminism – "[c]ultural domination [had] supplant[ed] exploitation as the fundamental injustice" and the U.S feminist movement was characterized by a narrow focus on gender identity that elided bread-and-butter issues and "dovetailed all too neatly with a rising neoliberalism that wanted nothing more than to repress all memory of social equality" (Fraser 2013, 5). Consequently, themes associated with class politics, such as the right to a living wage,

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[42] Lyndon B. Johnson's remarks at the Federal Woman's Award Ceremony on 14 March 1968. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-federal-womans-award-ceremony-0 Accessed 25 June 2022.

strong public services, and collective bargaining, were marginalised, while a more individualist politics took over. Thus, in Fraser's (2016, np) words, "[w]hat had begun as a needed corrective to economism devolved in time into an equally one-sided culturalism"

While the feminist movement pursued a different kind of freedom than corporations did, its emphasis on labour market equality and reservations with class politics, critics argued, had allowed its ideals to be 'co-opted' in service of the free-market revolution (Eisenstein 2009; Fraser 2013). One area in which this is visible is in the principle of a 'living wage' or family wage. As Hester Eisenstein (2009) observed, liberal feminists were right to condemn the family wage as a patriarchal construct that justified women's unpaid housework. However, it was a wage norm that at least acknowledged the need to support dependents, whereas, in the "low wage economy that replaced it, no such concept remained" (Eisenstein 2009, 117-118). The movement's failure to defend principles such as a living wage and the need for expanded social services has led Eisenstein (2009, 132) to suggest it might not be "hyperbole to speak of a marriage made in heaven between corporations and the mainstream women's movement". While the movement could have been a powerful force in pushing back against the neoliberal revolution, it instead got entangled in a "dangerous liaison" with this new ideology (Eisenstein 2005, 487). The notion of women as 'untapped resources' for economic growth was emblematic of this danger.

An insightful analysis by Watkins (2018) reveals that the convergence between mainstream feminism and corporate agendas did not unfold entirely organically. She points to the immense amounts of financial support that corporations and corporate foundations, the Ford Foundation, in particular, bequeathed to the women's movement since the early 1970s. This supported the institutionalisation of equal-opportunity approaches in universities, NGOs, and the media, Watkins (2018, np) argues, making the US feminist movement the best-funded in the world and giving "it a huge advantage over more radical strands, both at home and abroad." The Ford Foundation's material support, Watkins (2018, np) adds, "was critical in providing [the mainstream feminist movement] with a well-resourced institutional basis, lifting their representatives above the ferment of store-front women's centres, mimeographed newsletters, bookstores, crèches, and refuges for battered wives, into air-conditioned eyries in dc [sic] or

Manhattan, backed by dedicated research centres at top universities." One of the organizations backed by the Foundation was the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), which it helped to establish itself as a research institute. [43]

However, according to Watkins (2018), the Ford Foundation's backing was, from the beginning, conditional upon the movement's willingness to adapt to the foundation's ideological preferences. Watkins (2018, np) writes that in exchange for funding:

> "the donors exacted a price. New groups seeking grants were steered towards working either through affirmative action—helping individual women, especially young women, or people of colour, or disadvantaged women, or women from disadvantaged countries, to succeed within the system—or criminal justice: active cooperation with the police, the courts, the immigration authorities…… The foundations' preference for novel projects helped to drive a deeper segmentation of feminist practice, with campaign groups under pressure to promote their speciality as a unique selling point with its own 'organizational niche'. Instead of bringing different communities of women together, as the early movement hoped to do, the donors' application processes encouraged them to compete against each other in the fight for funds. Later, these processes would become familiar across the world under the name of ngoization [sic]."

The triumph of liberal equal-opportunity feminism over more solidaristic visions of women's liberation was thus "driven by from outside, by the active intervention of…philanthropic foundations" (Watkins 2018, np). As such, the mainstream movement's convergence and interdependence with corporate free-market projects have caused "a major shift in the [US] feminist imaginary" (Fraser, 2013, 4), "seduced feminism" into supporting neoliberal capitalism (Eisenstein 2009, 1) and institutionalised an agenda that sought to integrate women into a "mainstream" that was "itself reshaped by Friedmanite neoliberal policies in response to the long economic downturn" (Watkins 2018, np).

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[43] Ford Foundation Website, 'What the evolution of gender can teach us about equality' 14 June 2022. https://www.fordfoundation.org/news-and-stories/stories/posts/what-the-evolution-of-gender-can-teach-us-about-equality/ Accessed 17 June 2022.

3.3 Neoliberalising Development, Corporate Globalisation and Sweatshops

Concentrating on the international dimension of neoliberalism, this section shows how liberal ideals around women and development in the Global South helped normalise neoliberalism as an international system of accumulation and labour control. It uses insights from Marxist, feminist, and post-colonial scholarship to highlight the structural causes of labour rights violations in corporate supply chains. Worker-focused TBF programmes aim to improve these problems, and yet as previously discussed, there are strong current disagreements among feminists about the emancipatory potential of market integration. This section shows how these current disagreements are rooted in much older divides.

The neoliberalisation of the world economy since the 1970s has been marked by privatization, deregulation, austerity, corporate monopolization and a hostility to labour unions and redistributive social policies (Bonanno 2017; Gindin and Panitch 2013; Harvey 2005). Globally, neoliberal policy reforms have greatly boosted the power and mobility of corporations, structurally weakened organized labour, gutted social services and welfare, and exacerbated the divide between rich and poor (Hickel 2017).

3.3.1 Labour Control and Globalising Garments

Since the late 1970s, International finance institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) embraced Friedmanite free-market politics as a recipe for the development of the postcolonial world. Under their tutelage, the 'Washington Consensus' emerged as the paradigm for development, lauding export production as a key development strategy and encouraging or forcing postcolonial countries through debt and loan conditions to accept Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) (Chang 2002; Harvey 2005; Hickel 2017). SAPs typically required privatisation, deregulation and the flexibilisation of labour markets, which in practice, often meant restricting labour rights (Hickel 2017). Tighter control of labour, the argument went, would boost countries' profile as reliable export-processing destinations, and attract corporate investments (LeBaron et al. 2018; Safa 1981). Hence, Global South governments made labour laws more restrictive and erected Free Trade Zones that offered foreign investors tax holidays, subsidised credit, import duty exemptions – and critically, union bans (Safa 1981). In effect, these zones helped to "encase" the global market from democratic

and collective pressures in the name of development (Slobodian 2018). The mushrooming of Free Trade Zones, which surged from 80 in 1975 to over 3,000 in 2000 (LeBaron et al. 2018, 32) has played a key role in the creation of a 'global value chain world' (Mayer and Phillips 2017) : a term that relays how global production networks – led and controlled by powerful lead firms such as Nike, Apple, Walmart, Unilever or Gap – have turned into capitalism's main organizational form and now channel an estimated 70 percent of global production drawing in tens of millions of Global South workers into the supply chains of global corporations (Bair 2017).

Marxist social scientists have conceptualised this new trade architecture as a "regime of accumulation" (Gindin and Panitch 2017). They argue that the discourse of free trade and development has justified "the competitive profit-seeking of capital owned by the few" (Frank 1979, 43) and expanded the power of a small capitalist elite (Harvey 2005). Pointing to the gap between the neoliberal ideology of freedom and "actually existing neoliberalism" (Peck et al. 2018, 4), such scholars have demonstrated that enhanced freedom and mobility for capital created decidedly disempowering realities for workers (Bair 2017; Kumar 2020; Mies 2007).

As early as 1980, Marxist scholars argued that the "new international division of labour" led to "structural unemployment" in the Global North and caused super exploitation in the South (Frobel et al. 1980). Workers in global market factories, they argued, were paid wages that were roughly ten times lower than workers in the North and worked much longer hours (Frobel 1980; Fuentes 1983; Elson and Pearson 1981).

Low wages were no 'natural' feature of Southern production countries but were intrinsically linked to the institutionalised repression of trade unions. As a feminist political economist, Katie Quan (Quan 2007, 254) observed, the preference by global buyers for repressive regimes stemmed, in large part, from the simple fact that "union costs are higher" since investments in collective bargaining, factory safety and decent wages ultimately cost money. In other words, the competitive forces that Friedman claimed *protected* workers instead compelled capital to seek out places where workers could barely protect themselves from exploitation and abuse.

One sector that exemplifies these problems is the global textile and apparel sector, which, due to low entry barriers and start-up costs, enjoys a high level of mobility (Kumar 2020; Safa 1981). Labour scholars have pointed out that the sector's spectacular financial performance has been predicated on "predatory purchasing practices" (Anner, 2019, 705) and a systemic avoidance of unions (Appelbaum and Lichtenstein 2016; Bair, Anner, and Blasi 2017; LeBaron 2020). Global brands and retailers, they argue, exploit their global monopsony position: a supply chain dynamic that features a gigantic pool of suppliers at the bottom of the chain competing for the business of a small, consolidated group of buyers at the top (Kumar 2020) and resulting in a 'sourcing squeeze' that has intensified since the late 1990s (Anner 2019). According to Anner "buyers' squeeze down on price, their obsession with speed to market, and the dramatic fluctuations in order volumes directly contribute to below-subsistence wages, forced overtime, union avoidance, and extreme, sometimes violent pressure on workers to meet unrealistic production targets" (cited in Hengeveld 2020).

Labour control is a key consideration for global brands and retailers in their selection of suppliers (Anner 2015; Bair, Anner, and Blasi 2017; Mayer and Phillips 2017). It is often thought that pricing determines purchasing choices but, as Anner (2015, 292) has argued, "that argument cannot explain why China continues to dominate apparel production while its wages are four times higher than Bangladesh". According to Anner (2015, 292), "[b]uyers in apparel global value chains want not only to keep costs low but also to reduce the likelihood of disruption to supply chains caused by worker organization and mobilization." This helps explain why the sector is known to 'cut and run' in response to workers organizing, a tactic that effectively uses the high mobility or, indeed, freedom of capital in this sector as a disciplinary technique (Collins 2003; Kumar 2020). The International Labour Organization (2000, 74) has denounced such relocation threats and actions as an "insidious…and underhand form of harassment" that takes advantage of the fact that workers typically have no means to challenge such threats legally. Predatory pricing, cut-and-run practices, union repression: these factors powerfully contest the Friedmanite idea that capital's 'human right to capital flight' (Slobodian 2018) somehow protects workers. Instead, they illustrate how the antagonistic relationship between capital and labour plays out in a new global value chain world. By systematically avoiding unions, the sector has "accomplished a perverse form of time travel", argue Nova and

Wegener (2016, 18), where they recreate sweatshop conditions long eradicated in the US through unions and protective regulations "for millions of twenty-first-century garment workers".

3.3.2 Women and World Market Factories

A striking feature of the 'world market factories' that sprung up across Asia and other parts of the Global South in the 1970s was that they mostly employed young, impoverished women (Frobel 1980). Indeed, as Fernandez Kelly (cited by Bair 2010, 204) has pointed out, an essential feature of the new international division of labour "from a feminist perspective is the fact that the relocation of light manufacturing, including garments, was accompanied by a widespread mobilization of female labour, since the qualities most valued in export-processing work – docility, dexterity, and cheapness – turned out to be, in countries as diverse as Mexico and Malaysia, associated with the same population: young women".

Transnational feminist voices, academics, and development organizations held contesting views on these developments. Those aligned with the development agenda of the World Bank and the UN generally viewed women's mass entrance into factories as a sign of progress toward gender equality and evidence that women were successfully 'integrated' into the development process (Mies 1994). During the UN's first world conference on women in Mexico in 1975, the UN for the first time proclaimed such 'integration' a key development objective (Mies 1994; Elson and Pearson 1981). Boosting women's productivity and competitiveness as wage workers or micro-entrepreneurs became a key objective in the new transnational 'gender and development' discourse (Moeller 2018). Known as Women in Development (WID), this school of feminist thought had its roots in the anti-discrimination philosophy that had defined the hegemonic strain of a second wave in the US, as discussed in Section 3.2.2. Concordantly, WID largely pursued equality within the existing and rapidly neoliberalising capitalist system, treating women's subjugation as a largely cultural phenomenon that could be tackled through education and inclusion (Bandarage 1984). Export-processing jobs in world market factories, in this view, could provide women with an independent income, liberate them from the confines of the private sphere, and thus upset patriarchal relations of control and oppression (Elson and Pearson 1981).

Unsurprisingly, Marxist feminists, political economists and postcolonial feminists found this approach unsatisfactory. They faulted WID for reproducing the shortcomings of liberal second-wave feminism and for pursuing a vision of gender justice that was too compatible with the politics of neoliberalism and structural adjustment. WID, they argued, isolated gender inequality from other forms of oppression, ignored women's unwaged reproductive labour, marginalised women's demands for social welfare, lacked a class analysis and failed to deliver a materialist critique of global capitalist trade relations and corporate power (Bandarage 1984; Mohanty 2003).The "naïve use of concepts of development and gender" in the liberal development discourse falsely suggested that these concepts "can be separated from capitalism", argued Maria Mies (1994, 107), when, in reality, they were interlinked.

The concerns of these WID critics can roughly be clustered around three themes: structural adjustment, labour rights, and ideology. WID's emphasis on 'work as liberation', critics argued, rendered women's unwaged reproductive labour within the home invisible at the same time that SAPs were intensifying this burden and forcing women to engage in "production for money instead for life" (Mies 1994, 109) by increasing women's dependence on waged work (Eisenstein 2009; Mies 1994; Watkins 2018). As Watkins (2018, np) put it, ongoing neoliberal reforms meant that the global machinery of gender was "thus constructed over the top of worsening conditions for women across much of the world". For many critics, the problem with WID was not that it was too moderate in its demands, but worse, that its demands risked *intensifying* women's immiseration by placing an 'empowering' gloss over an imperialist capitalist global order (Bandarage 1984; Mohanty 1988; Safa 1981).

By pushing for economic integration without confronting the exploitative terms under which such integration happened, these critics judged, WID reinforced capitalist-imperialist structures and trade relations and legitimised abusive labour conditions. WID's apparent acceptance of Free Trade Zones missed how "ironic" it was that in the name of improving poor women's lives, "many governments have actively reduced the ability [of these women] to protect themselves against the most blatant forms of exploitation" (Elson and Pearson 1981, 90). This disconnect was one of the reasons that Cynthia Enloe (2004) urged feminists, especially those working across borders from the Global North, to adopt a fierce 'curiosity' in their engagement with

global power structures and critically scrutinise ideological and essentialising narratives making claims about women's lives and needs.

Ideologically, WID was faulted for foregrounding culture as the source of women's subjugation. By prescribing culture-focused education and equal-opportunity measures, such as "affirmative action and attitudinal change strategies, such as assertiveness training and achievement motivation" WID revealed its belief in "the inherent viability and goodness of … the capitalist system", portraying inequalities not as structural matters shaped by material interest and conditions but as "deviations from an otherwise just and equitable social system" (Bandarage 1984, 495–96).

Such critiques of WID gave rise to what became known as the gender and development (GAD) approach. Rooted in socialist feminist thinking and aspects of Marxism, the GAD approach linked oppressive relations of production with those of reproduction, emphasizing the social construction of gender as the foundation to both (Rathgeber 1990). By emphasizing the global political economic structures that shaped women's relationship with development and the role of class and reproductive labour, GAD thinkers sought to shift transnational feminist solidarity away from market-centered WID thinking towards a perspective that, rather than relying on sweeping generalizations and one-size-fits-all development models, was attentive to, and capable of confronting, the macro structures that underpinned women's struggles and exploitation (Rathgeber 1990; Wilson 2015). Crucially, GAD stressed the need for women to organize themselves for a more effective political voice (Rathgeber 1990). By looking at "the social construction of production and reproduction as the basis of women's oppression", GAD sought to look at "the totality of social organization, economic and political life in order to understand the shaping of particular aspects of society" (Young 1987, 2).

While GAD's ideological foundation was radically different from WID and presented a powerful counterforce at the discursive level, it failed to shift the practice of women and development away from its liberal bias. In fact, with the neoliberalization of the global economic system in the 1980s, the discourse of WID, with its individualized notions of empowerment and reliance on the market grew stronger, rather than weaker (Eisenstein 2010).

Another problematic dimension of WID feminism was how it failed to challenge, and even reproduced, inequalities between the Global North and South. By universalizing liberal Northern models of empowerment and emancipatory ideals, and failing to confront the domination of the North over the South in, for example, capitalist trade relations, such liberal feminism ended up entrenching what post-colonial scholars and other critical feminists identified as a neo-colonial relationship (Khoja-Moolji 2018; Mohanty 2003).

3.4 The Rise of CSR and the Moral Neoliberal Economy

The emancipatory contradictions built into the structures of global apparel chains, as explained above, exploded into the public discourse in the early 1990s, when a string of damning reports revealed child labour, workplace violence, poverty wages, wage theft, and excessive overtime to be the norm in the sector (Ross 1999). The revelations ignited an anti-sweatshop movement that united trade unions, feminists, and religious groups in their demand for more ethical capitalism. In the US, anti-sweatshop alliances targeted firms that would later become prominent actors in the TBF world: Walmart, Gap, and more than any other brand, Nike. Demanding improvements in the areas of living wages, workplace safety working hours, and collective bargaining, the anti-sweatshop campaigners were part of a larger global justice movement that protested the effects of neoliberal globalisation and the power that corporations had gained under this new world order (Klein 2000; Ross 1999). In this climate of dissent and solidarity, notes anthropologist Dina Siddiqi (Siddiqi 2009, 154), the "third world sweatshop worker" became "iconic of the excesses of the global expansion of flexible accumulation in the late twentieth century".

In response to these demands, corporate and other elites set up a regime of CSR policies and partnerships in the late 1990s.

3.4.1 Responsibility Versus Accountability

CSR refers to the voluntary system of self-regulation that emerged out of neoliberal logics in which corporations, typically in partnership with UN agencies, NGOs and other partners, claim to improve their social and environmental records (Anner 2018; Utting 2005). The promise of

the CSR "movement" is to "harness the global reach and resources of transnational corporations in the service of *local development* and social improvement" (Rajak 2011, 1).

The language, vision and strategies used by the CSR movement are distinct from corporate *accountability* campaigns: Whereas the former relies on individual voluntary commitments and gently encourages corporations to improve their impacts through learning, collaboration, and goodwill, the latter takes a more antagonistic and forceful approach (Utting 2008). Corporate accountability strategies tend to advocate for binding rules and regulations to regulate corporate conduct and use 'naming and shaming' to push corporations to address and remedy violations in their supply chains (Utting 2008, 965).

Labour rights scholars have argued that the primary concern of CSR is managing companies' reputational risks rather than structurally improving working conditions (Nova and Wegemer 2016). This, they argue, is why CSR programmes were initially often housed in companies' public relations (PR) departments and avoided union-related terminology (Lichtenstein 2016). The proliferation of the CSR regime normalised many of the 'common sense' values and silences that later came to characterize the TBF discourse: It stresses the importance of corporate leadership and casts demands for living wages, collective bargaining, and a more equal distribution of profits as utopian and off-limits. Hence, in making sense of TBF's weaknesses and silences, the history of CSR and the critiques it has received offer instructive lessons.

We can trace the origins of TBF at least partially to the anti-sweatshop campaigns against Nike. In his memoirs, former Nike CEO Philip Knight (2018, 828) admits that the 'Girl Effect', widely seen as catalysing the broader TBF regime, directly grew out of the "so-called sweatshop controversy", and the reputational pressures brought on by the campaigners. Nike hired not a labour rights expert but a PR professional, Maria Eitel, to counter the damaging press and revamp the Nike brand. As discussed in Chapter 2, Eitel's creation of the 'Girl Effect' in the early 2000s allowed Nike to gain credibility among women's rights groups, UN agencies, and even in the White House. As significant to Nike's reputational recovery was Eitel's broader CSR

work at Nike. By Eitel's own account,[44] and that of CSR scholars (Ballinger 1998;2011; Locke, Qin and Brause 2007), Nike played a leading role in the creation of the social auditing regime that is to this day used to monitor working conditions in global supply chains (discussed in more detail in Section 3.4.3).

3.4.2 CSR and the Corporatization of NGOs

While the CSR project has broad support within powerful sections of the academy (Kolk 2016; Locke, Qin, and Brause 2007; Roome and Louche 2016; Ruggie 2014; Zadek 2007), it has received considerable scrutiny from scholars across social science disciplines. In that sphere, CSR is widely recognised as a self-serving political project intended to protect the reputations and business models of multinational companies (MNCs), avoid binding regulation, expand the reach and legitimacy of the market, and further marginalise labour (Banerjee 2008; Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014; Dolan and Rajak 2016; Fleming and Jones 2013; Rajak 2011; Sklair and Miller 2010). Feminist scholars have noted that these voluntary codes of conduct paid insufficient attention to gender inequality, including reproductive labour questions (Gregoratti 2018, 211).

The term 'corporatization', originally used to refer to the corporations taking control of government services, is increasingly used to describe the ideological and material effects that CSR-driven corporate partnerships have on NGO partners (Busa and King 2015; Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014). Political scientists Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve LeBaron (2014, 1) understand the "corporatization of activism" as a process in which MNCs, backed by political elites, use the rhetoric of CSR and partnerships with NGOs to contain opposition to the neoliberal rule and by which, relatedly, NGOs are increasingly coming to look and act like corporations. As observed by the sociologist Bonanno (2017, 175), CSR deliberately shifts notions of resistance from the sphere of labour to that of the market, thereby "creating a situation in which the idea of the superiority and desirability of the market is shared by dominant and oppositional groups alike". Indeed, CSR was, in many ways, designed to mystify the concept of 'opposition' and, as the anthropologists Dinah Rajak and Catherine Dolan (2016) have observed,

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[44] Maria Eitel, LinkedIn Profile." She played a key role in establishing industry standards of CSR". https://www.linkedin.com/in/mariaeitel/ Accessed 24 June 2022

has been immensely successful in doing so. According to Rajak and Dolan (2016, 21-22), the success of MNCs in shaping dominant approaches to development and change "in their own interest" is a direct outcome of "the currency" afforded to them by CSR "to forge (or compel) collaboration from diverse corners, where previously we would have expected to find combatants".

While CSR supporters and participants frame the incredible expansion of the CSR regime as evidence that capitalism is taking the direct path on its ethical journey, critics view the project and "its untenable win-win ideology" mostly as a "step backwards because it has the consequence of actually solidifying the myth that large corporations (and the consumer culture that goes along with it)" are sustainable (Fleming and Jones 2013, 7). As anthropologist Dinah Rajak (2011, 239) phrased this sceptical position in her ethnographic study of Anglo-American, the "moral economy of CSR represents, not an opposition to the contemporary world of corporate capitalism, nor a limit to it, but the very mechanism through which corporate power is replenished, extended and fortified".

3.4.3 Erasing Labour

An overlapping body of work has studied the efficacy of CSR in improving working conditions in the apparel sector. In this industry, CSR has taken the form of social or 'ethical' audits, which are now the main instrument for global buyers to monitor their suppliers (LeBaron and Lister 2016). The ethical audit system is based on neoliberal principles of self-regulation and profit-driven competition: In it, private inspection firms compete to win contracts that allow them to check manufacturers' compliance with basic labour standards. This oversight system has attracted broad critique from labour rights scholars and political economists, who argue the system relies on a paternalistic check-list approach that ignores the importance of unions and a living wage, treats workers as third-party actor (Anner 2012; Anner, Bair, and Blasi 2013; LeBaron 2020). The system is so secretive that even workers do not have access to basic safety information about their factories (Hengeveld 2020).

A chief reason that CSR has failed to detect and remedy the abuse, exploitation, and dangerous working conditions that pervade this sector is that the vast majority of garment workers lack

union representation on the shop floor (Mezzadri 2017) and often do not "feel free enough to speak up and point out CSR transgressions without fear of reprisal" (Lichtenstein 2016, 102). As a worker protection system controlled by capital, the social auditing system is said to have been designed to produce misleading information about factory conditions (Nova and Wegemer 2016). By ignoring the structural root causes behind violations, as discussed in the previous section, the system creates "an illusion of effective governance and buy in to incremental improvements" but does more "to cover up labour problems than…to fix them, or even bring them to light" (LeBaron 2020, 14). The problem, critics stress:

> "is not technical, it is economic and political; in a price-driven, hyper-competitive, high-pressure industry like apparel, self-policing doesn't work. The result is perpetuation of a status quo where exploited workers are killed en masse with appalling regularity" (Nova and Wegener 2016, 25).

The most cited and deadly CSR failure in this industry is the collapse of the eight-story high Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh in 2013, which housed manufacturers who produced Benetton, Gap, Walmart, and other well-known brands. Just months before the collapse, which killed over 1,100 workers and maimed thousands more, social auditors had deemed the building safe, despite obvious construction risks (Appelbaum and Lichtenstein 2016). Despite these systematic and glaring failures, the CSR industry has been remarkably successful on the ideological front. By integrating activist demands for more ethical capitalism and creating a global industry of corporate self-regulation, CSR has, in significant ways, managed to redefine the meaning of what a more ethical system would look like. The vision of ethical fashion that was naturalized under the CSR regime is one where living wages are utopian, unions are irrelevant, and questions of distribution are off-limits.

3.5 Capitalist Realism

The rise of CSR and the 'corporatization of activism' (Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014), as described above, are critical to understanding the ideological environment and structures wherein business feminists design and construe their empowerment programmes and partnerships. However, these processes took place in a much broader cultural shift affecting not just the world of NGOs or activism but societies as a whole, wherein neoliberal values were "massively

naturalised" (Fisher and Gilbert 2013, 90). If notions around market superiority, entrepreneurship and philanthropy were still treated with scepticism in the 1960s and, critically, recognised as part and parcel of a broader political project, today they have taken on 'common sense' status and are widely seen as fixed features of society (Brown 2015). Cultural and political theorists have pointed out that the depoliticization of neoliberal politics has been accompanied and enabled by business lexica and discourses that render solidaristic and egalitarian forms of politics beyond the realm of the 'realistic', leading to a world where "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (Fisher 2009, 1).In making sense of the language, logic, and emancipatory limits of TBF – a central task of this dissertation – the insights of these theorists offer helpful reference points.

3.5.1 Neoliberal Rationalities

Political theorist Wendy Brown (2015) has used the terms 'neoliberal reason' and 'neoliberal rationalities' to grapple with these ideological effects. Brown's conceptualisation of neoliberal reason is, I argue, essential in understanding how the 'business case' for 'women's empowerment' has taken on hegemonic status in the gender and development field over the past decade.

As a "normative form of reason", neoliberalism has now "established an order of truth", Brown (2015, 118) explains, that reconceives ideas around fairness, equality, and justice in market logic and values human beings based on their individual capacity for self-investment, competitiveness, reliance, and productivity. Neoliberal reason, writes Brown (2015, 17), expresses itself through "vocabularies, principles of justice, political cultures, habits of citizenship, practices of rule and above all, democratic imaginaries" anchored in the presumed superiority or inevitability of neoliberal rule. Closely corresponding with Friedman's ideas on market superiority, neoliberal rationality entails a 'common sense' acceptance that politics and the public are best organized through business principles, and that philanthropy by wealthy capitalists represents a viable strategy to promote welfare and reduce inequality (Brown 2015). Consequently, corporate practices, principles and values have been exported and universalised to all spheres of life, including government and the non-profit sector (Brown 2015). Far from bringing about a fairer, freer, and more moral society, as predicted by Friedman, the naturalisation of neoliberal

principles, in Brown's view (2015), represents a major threat to basic democratic and solidaristic principles.

Thinkers such as Mark Fisher (2013) and Leslie Sklair (2016) have offered equally critical readings. Their work has emphasised how the ostensibly 'realistic' and 'pragmatic' character of neoliberal attempts to fix social ills betrays a dangerous and pervasive sense of fatalism about the impossibility of meaningful change. According to Fisher (2017, 90-91), neoliberalism's presentation of the current political order cultivates a mindset that accepts wide inequalities 'as just the way things are', believes that "[t]here's no point fighting the inevitable" and casts as utopian, naïve or impractical any political vision that seeks to overturn neoliberal hegemony in favour of a more egalitarian political alternative. In making sense of this ostensibly pragmatic but fatalistic mindset, Fisher coined the term "capitalist realism". The chief belief underlying capitalist realism is that "whether we like it or not, the world is governed by neoliberal ideas, and that won't change" (Fisher 2017, 90). Sociologist Leslie Sklair (2016, 334) has added that such 'realism' represents "yet another triumph for capitalist hegemony". By "labeling opposition to capitalism as irrational protest, and support for capitalism (and especially capitalist consumption)" as a sensible, 'common sense' political orientation, neoliberal ideologies push us to pursue justice and improvements within the limits of the existing political-economic order (Sklair 2016, 334).

A key insight that emerges from this body of work is that the resilience and legitimacy of neoliberal politics, in the US and other Northern nations at least, depends, in significant ways, on the public's acceptance of a depoliticized, neoliberal "order of truth" (Brown, 2015, 118). The 'realism' at the heart of neoliberal hegemony, as conceptualised by Fisher (2013), marginalises the question of what a moral economy could, or should, look like and subtly disavows the solidaristic and redistributive ethos of the welfare state. As such, it cements and entrenches a political order that benefits a small class of elites at the expense of the majority of working people. This means that neoliberalism serves a profoundly *political* function, even though it discursively presents itself as a conflict-free, neutral, and pragmatic orientation (Bloom 2017; Bonanno 2017; Eisenstein 2010; Harvey 2007; Sklair 2016).

3.5.2 Business Lexica and Cruel Optimism

In dissecting TBF's vision of what an ethical and feminist global economy looks like, this dissertation pays particular attention to language and terminology as expressions of ideologies and power. On this subject, Brown's work has been particularly insightful. Brown has underscored the role that language, discourse, and silences play in defining the contours and horizons of change, and the terms, limits, and strategies with which transformation is imagined and debated. The erosion of class consciousness, she argues, is a good example of how neoliberal reason, through its depiction of society as a collection of individuals, has reshaped such terms. Such individualised marketised lexicons, Brown (2015, 127) argues, have discursively reduced "public life...to problem solving and program implementation" and leave absent "deliberation about justice and other common goods, contestation over values and purposes, struggles over power [and] pursuit of visions for the good for the whole". In this way, neoliberal reason replaces "liberal democratic-justice concerns with technical formulations of problems, questions of right with questions of efficiency, even questions of legality with those of efficacy" and normalises an instrumental, self-interested, competitive approach to life (Brown, 2015, 131). Eschewing the language of collectivism, class relations, struggle, and solidarity, the neoliberal lexicon promotes a form of self-reliance that tasks individuals with "undertaking the correct strategies of self-investment and entrepreneurship" to provide for themselves and their families but expects them to do so "in the context of power and contingencies radically limiting their ability to do so" (Brown 2015, 134).

The massive cliff between the emancipatory promise of neoliberalism and its realities betrays what philosopher Laurent Berlant (2011) has dubbed a 'cruel' kind of optimism. Berlant (2011, 1) uses the term 'cruel optimism' to describe how neoliberalism presents people with "unachievable fantasies" of upward social mobility, while severely restraining their ability to realise such promises. The concept of cruel optimism illuminates the incredible success of neoliberal advocates to recast "the question of social justice… in personal, atomised terms" (Rottenberg and Farris, 2017, 11) and convince people to blame their economic hardships on themselves. (The concept of cruel optimism will return in Chapter 5).

3.5.3 CEO Society

The "pervading logic of competition" that inheres in neoliberal culture, with its fetishisation of individual productivity and entrepreneurialism, has created what Bloom and Rhodes (2018, 4) have dubbed a 'CEO Society': a conceptual place where the figure of the CEO stands "as our greatest prophe[t]" and most "productive action her[o]" whose "life lessons and business strategies can be applied to other sectors and all spheres of life to pursue any goal". In the CEO Society, argue Bloom and Rhodes (2018, 5), "values of competition, instrumentality and exploitation" trump "principles of tolerance, justice, cooperation, deliberation, equality and collective transformation" and MBA degrees are thought to equip people with skills to lead not just companies but entire countries. A key feature of the CEO Society is a "dominant logic which holds that the world will be rescued and sustainably developed by their forward thinking and singular ability for action and achievement." Workers, by contrast, occupy only a marginal place in the CEO Society. In fact, as Boom and Rhodes (2018, 34) note, the notion that "firm performance could be attributed exclusively to the actions of CEOs" is the "false premise" at the heart of the CEO Society. If workers are recognised as value creators, it is "assumed that [this value] was just an extension of the might and will of their leader". The "social ideal" of the CEO Society, warn Bloom and Fleming (2018, *), is a dangerous one, as it "puts us in thrall to the very people and values most responsible for our disempowerment."

The profit-driven, competitive, hierarchical firms that these CEOs lead function as important generators and disseminators of market rationalities, both as employers, since seven out of ten members of the US labour force work for a corporation, and as cultural actors (Freese 2020, 3) As legal scholar Barbara Freese (2020, 12) has insightfully noted on this subject, MNCs "let individuals act with relative anonymity and limited liability" and "are steeped in a justifying market ideology that limits responsibility" for the harm they cause abroad through the "highly divided labor, management and ownership" that typify global value chains. The ideological function of the CEO Society is similar to how critics understand the function of CSR: It serves to protect the powerful from "being seen as exploitative creators of inequality" (Bloom and Rhodes 2018, 11).

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed those elements of neoliberal ideology it considers most pertinent to the TBF project and the political-economic backdrop against which this project has emerged. Focusing on the US context, it has shown how the dominance of neoliberal reason has come to justify exploitation and inequality at the expense of solidarity and egalitarianism and linked these rationalities to the rise of the CEO Society, the CSR regime and corporate-led attempts to self-regulate their supply chains. As such, it has shown that the rise of corporatized feminism cannot be understood in isolation from the rise of the CSR regime and the CEO Society in which it is embedded. This not only helps us understand the ideological context and structures in which business feminists operate, but also illuminates the root causes of the supply chain problems their worker-focused programmes aim to address.

Chapter 4. Feminist Capitalist Realism

Despite the 'avalanche' of critiques on corporate-led women's empowerment programmes (Prügl 2015), we know very little about the perspectives of the feminist professionals that participate in these partnerships – a group I refer to as business feminists. This omission is remarkable, given the central role these women's advocates have played as architects and endorsers of the Transnational Business Feminist (TBF) regime (Roberts 2012) and its distinct, pro-market vision on gender and corporate social responsibility (CSR). To address this gap, this chapter aims to unearth the vision and logics that animate these feminists, the challenges they encounter in their TBF projects and the ways in which these corporate alliances impact their organizational culture and praxis, focusing specifically on their position vis-à-vis women workers in corporate supply chains. This chapter uses Mark Fisher's (2009) thinking on 'capitalist realism' as a tool to conceptualise their viewpoints and as a reference point to the broader ideological context in which these women's rights advocates operate. As such, it coins the term 'feminist capitalist realism' (FCR) to theorize the mode of reason (Brown 2015) in which TBF projects – including their ideological biases, silences, and limitations – are construed, negotiated, and rationalized. I will outline the key features of FCR in this introduction, then elaborate on it further throughout the chapter.

Feminist Capitalist Realism (CFR) refers to a rationality that sees no alternative to the neoliberal capitalist system and the profit-seeking incentives this produces and believes that any improvements in corporate business models thus require the voluntary 'buy in' of these firms. The FCR mode of reason is informed by key tenets of Milton Friedman's political outlook – specifically, his views on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) – but is infused with the fatalism, characteristic of capitalist realism, that depoliticizes these ideals (see Chapter 3). Hence, it imagines progress against a horizon of corporate consent that aims to channel corporations' selfish drives for feminist ends, while leaving existing power structures intact. If capitalist realism functions like a filter through which we imagine our worlds, possibilities, and futures, as Fisher (2009) argued, FCR can be seen as a filter through which the lives, potential and futures of *others* – namely, women and girls in the Global South – are imagined. Since these 'others' are typically women of colour, FCR risks compounding the neo-colonial narrative that has historically characterized Northern expressions of transnational feminism (see Chapter 3).

FCR's voluntary conception of change is exemplified by the notion that 'corporations are so powerful, they simply *have* to be involved' and that you 'have to be at the table' with corporate executives to effect change. From this standpoint, fighting for change is less about construing an independent vision of justice, shaped and guided by the demands of its supposed beneficiaries than it is about harnessing whatever improvements corporations deem permissible. These rationalities, as I will demonstrate, entail notions of pragmatism, expertise, professionalism, and discretion that copy corporate norms and cultures, normalise secrecy, and detach 'empowerment' goals from the needs of their intended female targets.

This chapter's main insight to the debate on TBF is that corporations, through their TBF partnerships, are reshaping women's rights agendas and imaginaries at influential standard-setting organizations in a way that legitimates global accumulation regimes. The resulting vision on feminist CSR frames corporations strictly as allies, redirects blame for exploitative business practices to other societal forces, such as patriarchal cultures and consumer behaviour, and renders questions around collective bargaining, power, and redistribution irrelevant.

This chapter consists of five sections. The first section provides an overview of the rise of Transnational Business Feminism (TBF) collaborations at two of the most influential feminist actors in this space: the ICRW and UN Women. It examines how these organizations have framed this stream of work and discusses their relationship to other organizations in the CSR field. Using the lens of FCR, Section 4.2 disentangles the vision, logics and rationalities that animate business feminists to support and participate in TBF projects. Section 3 section looks at the ideological and epistemic compromises corporate partnerships necessitate. It examines how through TBF programmes, corporations contribute to the 'corporatization' of their feminist partners, looking specifically at the effect of TBF on feminist language, expertise, and transparency. Section 4.4 unpacks some of the challenges and paradoxes feminist organizations navigate as a consequence of their corporate partnerships, and the internal pushback their corporate alliances have generated, followed by a brief conclusion.

4.1 The Corporate Turn

This section provides a background of the rise of TBF at two organizations central to this study: ICRW and UN Women. It examines how both organizations – but especially the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) – have responded to corporations' surging interest in feminist CSR, how they have framed their growing engagements with big business over the years, and how this stream of work relates to other organizations in the CSR space.

4.1.1 Feminist Consulting and Educational Services

As noted in Chapter 1, the ICRW is among the most visible and influential feminist development NGOs to endorse and promote the TBF project. The organization's TBF journey began in the early 2000s when it began working with the Nike Foundation on what would later become the 'Girl Effect'.[45] In elite development institutions and media outlets, the 'Girl Effect' was uncritically celebrated for its gendered approach to fighting poverty, which held that investing in the earning potential of adolescent girls delivers high development returns (see Chapter 2). Critical scholars, by contrast, critiqued the campaign for promoting neoliberal ideologies that instrumentalized girls as tools for development, ignored structural causes of poverty and presented Nike – a company that just a few years earlier was vilified for its sweatshop practices – as a benign development expert (Eisenstein 2017; Hickel 2014; Moeller 2013; Murphy 2012). One of these critics, the anthropologist Kathryn Moeller (2018, 149), has made the important observation that the "expertise and credibility" of the ICRW, as a key partner to Nike, played a pivotal role in the rise of the 'Girl Effect' and in Nike's transformation from sweatshop villain to development expert.

Less attention has been paid to the fact that, conversely, Nike transformed the ICRW as well, as it inaugurated a shift in how the women's institute engaged with big business.[46] In the words of Betty, a long-time top executive at the ICRW, Nike was the "first corporate foundation that came to us to ask advice on how to structure their philanthropic giving around women and girls" and set the ICRW on a "very deliberate path" toward corporate advisory work.[47] Typically, such

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[45] Remote Online Interview Betty London June 2020
[46] Remote Online Interview Betty London June 2020.
[47] Remote Online Interview Betty London June 2020.

work involved assisting companies or their foundations in designing, implementing, or evaluating women's empowerment initiatives. Soon after Nike, the ICRW was hired by apparel giant Gap and megabank Goldman Sachs to, respectively, help design and evaluate PACE – Gap's 'Personal Advancement and Career Enhancement' initiative, which provides garment workers with skills training – and '10.000 Women', a business education project launched by Goldman Sachs in 2008 to help women entrepreneurs in the Global South "foster economic growth" through their businesses.[48] These firms reached out to the ICRW at a time where "caring" evolved into a "market niche" for big business (Brown 2015, 27) and companies increasingly adopted feminist rhetoric in their efforts to position themselves as 'purpose-led' firms (Moeller 2018; Roberts 2015). In line with business school academics such as Linda Scott (2012), the ICRW saw the corporate embrace of women in the Global South as an opportunity to 'harness' corporate power to accelerate gender and development agendas. The sentiment at the time, Betty recalled, was that "if we could influence a corporation [of such scale] to do good for women, the amplification would be enormous". Serving these first high-profile firms made Betty and her colleagues feel:

> "completely, just wow-ed that we… had been able to influence these giants and direct their funding. That's what we're all about, right? We either want policy change, we want services and programme optimization, and we want to influence investment" [49]

To scale up this line of work, the ICRW formalized and consolidated its status as a business-oriented service provider. In 2017, it officially founded ICRW Advisors,[50] a separate arm of ICRW dedicated fully to "global strategy consultancy" for companies.[51] The language used by ICRW Advisors to describe its services made no secret of the fact that its relationship with corporate partners was defined by a "patron-client" dynamic: an uneven power relationship between funders and non-profit beneficiaries that, under NGO-ization, has given great influence to private donors to shape the agendas of NGOs (Bonanno, 2017, 217). In contrast to NGOs that

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[48] Goldman Sachs Website. 'Goldman Sachs 10.000 women launches online education partnership with Coursera'. 21 May 2018. https://www.goldmansachs.com/media-relations/press-releases/current/coursera-launch-may-21-2018.html Accessed 20 June 2022.
[49] Remote Online Interview Betty London June 2020.
[50] ICRW Website. Our History. https://www.icrw.org/icrw-our-history/ Accessed 24 June 2022.
[51] ICRW Website. ICRW Advisors. https://www.icrw.org/icrw-advisors/ Accessed 11 April 2022.

frame their development strategies as unaffected by the preferences of their donors, the ICRW's TBF work *embraced* such client-centric logics by emphasizing how their anti-poverty and empowerment strategies follow clients' preferences

Dozens of corporations and corporate foundations have now hired the ICRW for services that range from "research, learning, training and programming" to "gender diagnostics, applied research, initiative design, strategic guidance and impact measurement".[52] Among these companies are Pepsi, Shell Foundations, Puma, PwC, Inditex (owner of the Zara fashion brand), Exxon Mobile, Unilever, Levi's Strauss and C & A.[53] Fighting poverty with companies such as these sometimes looks more like the brokering of a business deal than a humanitarian effort. As Betty explained:

> "Each grant or contract, it has parameters. It talks about intellectual property, it talks about arbitration, everything you can imagine. You just have to be very savvy about what these clauses are, what they need, how to use and leverage them and to influence informally, right?

Over time, the ICRW's corporate advisory work took on an increasingly prominent role within the broader organization and, as we will see later in this chapter, came to shape the organization's internal culture and public profile. The organization solidified its corporate turn in 2021, when it opened a for-profit consultancy company in India, called ICRW Advisors Private Limited, dedicated to servicing the corporate sector in this country with gender expertise.[54]

UN Women, the UN agency for gender equality and women's empowerment, has benefited in similar ways from the corporate embrace of certain feminist ideals. But unlike the ICRW, it positions itself less as a service provider than an educational partner, offering practical guidance

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[52] ICRW Website. ICRW Asia announces establishment of private limited company to engage with corporate sector. 6 August 2021. https://www.icrw.org/press-releases/icrw-asia-announces-establishment-of-private-limited-company-to-engage-with-corporate-sector/ Accessed 24 June 2022.
[53] See figure 1 in Section 4.2.1
[54] ICRW Website. ICRW announces establishment of private limited company to engage with corporate sector. 6 August 2021 https://www.icrw.org/press-releases/icrw-asia-announces-establishment-of-private-limited-company-to-engage-with-corporate-sector/ Accessed 20 June 2022.

to companies on how to better meet the needs of vulnerable women in their supply chains. As noted in Chapter 2, UN Women's flagship TBF initiative is a set of voluntary guidelines, called the 'Women's Empowerment Principles' (WEPs) which it launched with the UN Global Compact in 2010. Grounded in 'business case' logics, the WEPs stress the commercial benefits companies can glean from women's empowerment and equality – understood primarily in terms of equal representation and workplace equality – and, consistent with the Global Compact's wider work, seek change through dialogue and learning (Gregoratti 2018, 214). A central objective of UN Women's CSR work is to expand the number of CEOs to sign the WEPs and declare their intent to voluntarily implement the principles in their organizations.[55] This faith in voluntarism and top executives has led feminists to critique the WEPs for its top-down model of change and lack of enforcement mechanisms (Prügl and True 2014).

UN Women has received funding from a range of WEP signatories, including Chanel, Uniqlo, Alibaba, Unilever, Benetton and Uniqlo,[56] Revlon, Procter and Gamble, GlaxoSmithKlein[57] and Coca Cola and supported these companies with various programmes designed to improve the economic situation and safety of the women in their supply chains. For outsiders, is difficult to ascertain the terms, dynamics, and conditions of these projects.

As discussed in Chapter 1 and 2, UN Women has been secretive about its private sector work (Allison et al. 2019) and indeed, was unwilling to participate in this study. What we do know is that UN Women, the ICRW and other TBF actors do not operate in a vacuum. Instead, their work builds on and overlaps with the work of other CSR organizations dedicated to supporting corporations to voluntarily improve their social and environmental impact, such as the UN Global Compact and NGOs such as CARE International and Business for Social Responsibility (BSR). The next sections draw on interviews with representative from all these organizations,

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[55] Women's Empowerment Principles Website. The Women's Empowerment Principles. https://www.weps.org. Accessed 20 June 2022.

[56] UN Women Website. UN Women Annual Report 2019. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/UN-Women-annual-report-2019-2020-enpdf. Accessed 24 June 2022.

[57] UN Women Website. UN Women Annual Report 2018-2019. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Annual%20Report/Attachments/Sections/Library/2019/UN-Women-annual-report-2018-2019-enpdf Accessed 24 June 2022.

and from Women Deliver (another prominent US based feminist non-profit and TBF advocate) to deconstruct the vision on change and impact that prevails in this sphere.

4.1.2 Vision of Change

This section sets out the vision on feminist corporate responsibility, as conveyed by my respondents, and the logics that drive their work. It adapts Mark Fisher's (2009) concept of capitalist realism to feminist capitalist realism (FCR) to capture the mode of reason informing their views. FCR refers to a neoliberal 'common sense' rationality that views corporate rule as a given and accepts that improved corporate behaviour – especially concerning women's empowerment and gender equality – hinges on the voluntary 'buy in' of these companies. Contrary to theorists such as Milton Friedman who, as discussed in the previous chapter, argued that competitive market focuses protect workers, business feminists displayed an acute awareness of the detrimental impact such profit-driven forces can have on women, workers, and broader society. They noted that "capitalism has not been good to women"[58]… that markets drive firms toward "harmful labour practices"[59] and that "at the end it is all about profit for them and those at the bottom are the ones that are exploited".[60] But rather than seeing these problems as reasons to confront and push back at corporate power structures, as for example Chandra Mohanty (2017) and Maria Mies (2007) do, respondents conveyed a fatalistic resignation to the global social order. Accepting corporate power as an inevitability, they conceived corporate responsibility in strictly voluntary and collaborative terms. These feminists saw their role as positive moral influencers, striving to make their corporate partners more ethical and feminist against a 'realist' horizon of corporate consent. Within this "field of reason" (Brown 2015), persuasion and partnership were seen as the only viable methods for change.

This collaborative ethos dominated respondents' rationale for taking part in TBF work. They explained that "you have to be at the table to influence things"[61]…that "it is in the space of

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[58] Remote Online Interviews Maggie London March and June 2019.
[59] Personal Interview Paige Washington DC January 2019.
[60] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.
[61] Personal Interview Paige Washington DC January 2019.

dialogue where change happens"[62] and "realistic and achievable"[63] solutions are designed. The notion that corporations "are so powerful, they *have* to be part of the solution"[64] captured the sense of 'pragmatism' that guided their vision. [65] They thus echoed Linda Scott's (2012, 4) position, discussed in Chapter 2, that the "economic empowerment of women simply cannot be achieved without the engagement of the private sector" due to the "central role" business plays "in the everyday operations of the world economy". Change was thus imagined against a horizon of corporate consent that aims to harness corporations' selfish drives for feminist ends.

The job creation potential of multinational firms was cited as a chief motivation to participate in corporate empowerment projects. Many respondents viewed the working and living conditions of the women working at the bottom of firms' supply chains as a key area for potential impact. The garment sector is seen as a particularly promising industry to "positively impact the lives of millions for women", the ICRW explains on its website, due to the sector's status as "one of the biggest employers of [supposedly] low-skilled women workers" (parentheses added). [66]

4.1.3 Activist Corporate Insiders and Invisible Unions

When explaining the objectives of their TBF work, many respondents conveyed an individualist, top-down understanding of change. They depicted corporate boardrooms and CSR departments as the principal sites where the battle for a more ethical and feminist capitalism is fought. These spaces are home to corporate insiders with "activist mindsets"[67] who "care a lot"[68] and "are really the change agents within these companies", respondents explained.[69] These insiders "perform a really important function trying to help change the company from within"[70] by having "difficult conversations" across the company;[71] "persuade [colleagues] to think

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[62] Remote Online Interviews Maggie London March and June 2019.
[63] Personal Interview Amy New York January 2019.
[64] Personal Interview Amber Washington DC January 2019.
[65] Remote Online Interview Emma November 2020.
[66] ICRW Website. Empowering female workers in the apparel industry. https://www.icrw.org/research-programs/empowering-female-workers-in-apparel-industry/ Accessed 24 June 2022.
[67] Remote Online Interviews Maggie London March and June 2019.
[68] Personal Interview Tara New York January 2019.
[69] Personal Interview Amy New York January 2019.
[70] Personal Interview Amy New York January 2019.
[71] Remote Online Interview Anna October 2020.

differently"; get "buy in" from more senior colleagues; [72] and "push the envelope from within".

Positive change, in this vision, is thus designed, negotiated, and enacted by individual executives, who attempt to inculcate a purpose-led spirit into their firms through persuasion. For example, Betty, the top ICRW executive who has overseen the ICRW's corporate turn, explained that "the most important thing for [the ICRW] is *who is our champion in house* and *how serious are they* and *how much power do they have within the corporation*".

The ICRW has manifested its faith in top managers in its 'Champion of Change' awards, a prestigious annual honour bestowed on leaders who have shown "courage and determination" in driving "gender equality and social inclusion". Winners of this award include Goldman Sachs chief Lloyd Blankfein, former Unilever CEO Paul Polman, the Exxon Mobile Foundation, Gap and other corporate giants.[73] Teaming up with champions high up in the firm under a shared vision of win-win outcomes, was seen as a vital element of 'moral influencing'. As Amber, an ICRW manager explained her position:

> "Companies are comprised of, you know, hundreds of thousands of people who ultimately are trying to do the right thing but are constrained by what they have to deliver, constrained by responsibility to shareholders, whatever it may be, so [the question is] how can you meet them where they are in terms of, like, trying to create that impact?" [74]

The same top-down vision was enshrined in internal UN Women documents detailing the organization's main strategies to improve conditions in the garment sector. The main partners listed in these documents are employers and trade groups, and the UN agency cites the creation of a "pool of women leaders capable of leading corporate supply chains" as a central tactic to meet the needs of women workers. Worker organizations and unions are rarely mentioned as relevant institutions in these and other TBF projects; their structural disempowerment apparently accepted as a given. This fits with the language and vision on change enshrined in the broader

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[72] Remote Online Interview Anna October 2020.
[73] ICRW Website. Champions for Change. https://www.icrw.org/champions-for-change/ Accessed 20 June 2022.
[74] Personal Interview Amber Washington DC January 2019.

CSR regime where, as Kumar (2020, 38) has argued, corporations arguably avoid "union-related terminology" in their CSR vernaculars as part of a "conscious effort… to make unions and collective action appear old fashioned and irrelevant".

Such neglect of unions betrays the ideological foundations of the TBF project: it may not explicitly critique unions and collective bargaining, as Friedman had done, but by ignoring the role of unions in improving working conditions, TBF renders them similarly irrelevant. Instead, purpose-driven executives – and CEOs in particular – emerge as the central agents of change. In that sense, TBF exemplifies the managerial spirit and culture of the 'CEO Society' (Bloom and Rhodes 2018), which also looks to top executives for moral leadership and socio-economic solutions (see Chapter 3). Respondents deemed the disproportionate power of such top executives to make a positive a positive impact through individual moral choices as uniquely opportune, even when the system in which they operate impels them to pursue the opposite. The mode of reason that emerges from the data, then, is distinctly neoliberal: it replaces "class conflict" with "collaboration", imbues "the market with ethical potential and social responsibility", normalises "market metrics", and reformulates questions around "the nature of justice" with 'practical' solutions that emphasize "participation, consensus…efficiency, equitability [and] inclusiveness" (Brown 2015, 49, 127). It also reproduces the racialized, neo-colonial feminist narrative, in which those in the North speak – and even 'negotiate'– on behalf of those in the South (Spivak 1985; Mohanty 1988).

4.1.4 The Pragmatic Business Case

Emblematic of such neoliberal logics is the 'business case' for women's empowerment. This is the central premise underpinning the broader TBF ideology, which weds feminist goals to companies' commercial agendas (Roberts 2015). During interviews, business feminists indicated that they view the business case primarily as a strategic tool to channel corporations' self-interested impulses toward feminist ends. The underlying acceptance of corporate hegemony – that there is no alternative to corporate power – is what renders the business case pragmatic. As a partnership manager from CARE International explained, the 'win-win' formula is "kind of grounded in the reality of what is going to drive business to make change", adding that she saw

herself as "quite a realist" when it came to CSR.[75] Accepting that the most viable path to a more ethical economy runs through the profit motive, the corporate empowerment programmes she works on typically seek to "drive greater productivity", reduce absenteeism or create other 'win-win' outcomes. Expressing a similar sense of realism, Gemma, from the ICRW, noted that she did not care if her clients' interest in TBF projects came "from a good place" or if they were simply using these projects to attract and retain employees, respond to "allegations [of] sexual harassment in their factories", or desire them for other PR purposes.[76] For Gemma, "at the end of the day, they are doing *something* and I can help them with that".[77] These comments illustrate the difference between the 'surface' ideology of TBF – as it appears on the websites and brochures of corporate empowerment projects – and the underlying rationalities of FCR. Whereas TBF portrays 'the business case 'for women's empowerment – the idea that what is good for women is good for companies – as rooted in evidence and promotes this doctrine unreservedly, FCR views such instrumentalized logics with scepticism, recognises its ideological nature, but promotes it for pragmatic reasons.

It illustrates how the 'moral' business case, made by Milton Friedman half a century ago, has been de-politicized over time. Whereas Friedman, as discussed in Chapter 3, implored companies to only invest in social, or altruistic causes if these aligned with their private, commercial interests, business feminists take this profit-first rationale for granted, seemingly accepting that the only way to make companies more social, is by making sure it pays off.

This sense of realism is also visible in how the ICRW pitches its consultancy services to its clients, which constantly highlights the commercial benefits of TBF. For instance, in a webinar for companies that I attended in late 2021, senior ICRW representatives stressed that the institute's corporate responsibility work uses "market-based theories of change" to use gender as "an opportunity for value creation" and "optimize" their clients' businesses.[78] Another example of how 'common sense' Friedman's for-profit horizon has become in the gender and

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[75] Remote Online Interview Emma November 2020.
[76] Personal Interview Gemma Washington DC January 2019.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Webinar on Women's Empowerment: From the C-Suite to the Factory Floor – Challenges and Opportunities. Organized by BSR, UN Women and amfori. Attended online 25 June 2020.

development field is an educational brochure by Women Deliver and BSR, titled 'Women's Empowerment in Global Value Chains'. Funded by the government of the Netherlands, the brochure advises businesses on how to better support women workers. It recommends companies begin by "establishing the business case" and "set their priorities" within this 'win-win' frame.[79]

As noted earlier, the types of projects that are forged within these logics often claim to bring firms productivity improvements, reputational benefits, or both. An example of a productivity focused 'win-win' programme is life-skills training for garment workers, such as the PACE programme by Gap (see Chapter 5).[80] Amber from the ICRW believed that the brands running such programmes as leaders for recognising:

> "that by building the wellbeing of workers in the supply chain, [they are also] increasing the productivity of those particular factory settings... so that's shared value, right? It has a financial and a social impact". (Personal Interview Amber Washington DC January 2019)

A good example of a reputation-focused TBF initiative is the prevention of gender-based-violence in the workplace. The potential brand damage associated with sexual assault allegations, respondents explained, motivates firms in high-risk sectors where "the issue can blow up any time"[81] to invest in initiatives that minimize "that reputational risk and says 'hey, we're making things better'" [82] More generally, feminist rhetoric and TBF partnerships can help companies recruit and retain talented staff. During a UN Women webinar for businesses in late 2020, a senior UN Women representative – a woman who had recently left Unilever, her employer for over a decade, to join the UN agency in a senior CSR role – explained these benefits. She encouraged companies to approach women's rights as Unilever does: as a business opportunity that can benefit rather than hurt the bottom line, and to use their TBF partnerships to

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[79]Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) Website. Report by BSR and Women Deliver. Women's Empowerment in Global Value Chains. 2017. https://www.bsr.org/reports/BSR-Report-Womens-Empowerment-Supply-Chains.pdf Accessed 4 January 2022.

[80] Personal Interview Amber Washington DC January 2019; Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.

[81] Personal Interview Annika Washington DC January 2019.

[82] Remote Online Interview Emma November 2020.

attract young talent, many of whom "want to understand [they are] in a good company".[83] Her statement shows how, under TBF, some fifty years after US President Lyndon Johnson called women "one of the largest untapped resources for the great tasks of this Nation", the efficiency logics associated with the liberal current of the 'second wave' of US feminism– as detailed in Chapter 3 – had morphed into a decidedly corporatized argument, emphasizing not the public benefits that women's advancement brings but the private profits it can deliver to corporations.

Though motivated by a sense of pragmatism, this embrace of free-market logics actually *inhibits* the ability of feminists to advance bold, progressive change (Roberts 2016). As Roberts (2016, 69) has argued and this chapter underscores, the assumption that "there is no alternative to neoliberal finance-led capitalism", as amplified in the TBF discourse, "poses important limits to critical feminist praxis". The next section discusses one such limit. It shows how TBF confines feminists to a praxis where, notwithstanding the evidence, corporations are always depicted as the solution to women's subjugation and poverty, and never as the problem. The pressure to view corporations as allies makes it hard for business feminists to display the "feminist curiosity" (Enloe 2004, 3) that a robust, fact-driven approach on corporate responsibility requires.

4.1.5 Allies, Culprits and Incurious Feminists

Thus far, this chapter has demonstrated how corporate values built-into TBF programmes are reshaping how women's rights agendas are formed and articulated at leading standard-setting organizations such as the ICRW and UN Women. Key to these adaptations are strategic considerations on where corporations' commercial interests are perceived to overlap with feminist aims. One consequence of this 'win-win' logic is that it denies the possibility of corporate power as the *source* of problems, which makes it uniquely ill-equipped to make sense of situations where corporations are actively complicit in women's oppression and exploitation. Indeed, the ideological limits and commercial goals built into TBF programmes make it nearly impossible for business feminists to adopt the 'feminist curiosity' that Cynthia Enloe (2004, 3)

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[83] Webinar on Women's Empowerment: From the C-Suite to the Factory Floor – Challenges and Opportunities. Organized by BSR, UN Women and amfori. Attended online 25 June 2020.

believed essential in gender and development work – a curiosity that begins with "taking women's lives seriously…listening carefully, digging deep, developing a long attention span [and] be ready to be surprised". To examine this tension, this section contends that TBF impels business feminists to adopt a decidedly *incurious* position toward corporate power – one that conceives of corporations and their executives solely as allies, disregards any evidence that challenges this notion, and shifts blame for corporate exploitation away from the corporation to other sectors of society.

Corporations, through their TBF projects, provide business feminists with various incentives to approach CSR through an ally-frame – a term I will continue to use throughout this dissertation – which casts questions around corporate exploitation, extraction, and power imbalances as inherently unproductive. It leads to a feminist vision wherein fighting for justice is less about construing an independent vision of justice, shaped and guided by the demands of their beneficiaries, than it is about harnessing whatever improvements corporations deem permissible.

This helps explain why the TBF discourse is strategically blind to the systemic realities of accumulation (Eisenstein 2017; Roberts 2015; Tornhill 2019). One way in which business feminists rationalize this disconnect is by separating a company's CSR or philanthropic work from the social and environmental records of its broader business model: an artificial distinction that I will refer to as the 'CSR-vacuum'. Betty, the top ICRW executive, gave an insight into how her organization has maintained a moral distance from the social impact of their clients, explaining that when the ICRW:

> "took Exxon [Mobile] on board as a client…. we wanted nothing to do with Exxon as an extractive industry…but if Exxon was going to invest tens of millions of dollars through its corporate foundation in women and girls, we wanted to direct that funding… [and] wanted it to be as evidence informed and metric driven and impact oriented as it could possibly be" [84]

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[84] Remote Online Interview Betty London June 2020.

The rationale for separating companies' philanthropic endeavours from their broader business models, as Betty presented it, was thus anchored in a sense of impact-focused pragmatism, aimed at maximizing feminist gains within a reality beyond their control and scrutiny. Of course, corporations also offer material incentives to feminist partners to focus solely on their positive potential. Maggie, a senior representative of Women Deliver, explained this dynamic:

> "You know you have to be very careful [with critiquing a company] because you can't... return to the company and ask for funds. It's not an easy thing if you want to be critical and really push, it becomes very difficult and I may be a bit of the record here...or maybe I don't have to be off the record, no! I think this is a known fact that it's very challenging to receive money from a company and then be publicly critical". [85]

One effect of the ally-frame is that exploitative and extractive corporate practices are blamed on other factors – a dynamic that might resemble the pressures faced by corporate managers, working for firms with known harmful impacts. Such managers are often incentivized to "heap blame on the consumers of their products...or society more generally" which has the "effect of shifting the uncomfortable spotlight of moral accountability away from the corporation" (Freese 2020, 15). Such a 'shifting effect' was apparent during discussions on the garment industry, in particular, where respondents expressed a keen awareness of the poverty pay, abusive management styles and excessive production pressure that plague this sector – referring to a "culture of abuse on the factory floor"[86]... "crazy hours"[87] and "verbal abuse and shouting" – but often laid the blame for these problems with consumers or macro-economic forces beyond corporations' control. This contradicts literature on garment supply chains which, as discussed in Chapter 3, overwhelmingly finds that lead firms are in control and, in many cases, 'dictate' conditions in their chains (Anner 2019 ; LeBaron 2020). The portrayal of corporations as passive actors, who respond rather than drive market conditions, echoes the outlook of Friedman and his Chicago School colleagues, who, as noted in Chapter 3, conceived of corporations in similarly passive terms (Jones 2012).

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[85] Remote Online Interviews Maggie London March and June 2019
[86] Personal Interview Delhi October 2019.
[87] Personal Interview Amber Washington DC January 2019.

Some respondents held the market – understood primarily as consumers and investors
– responsible for labour rights problems, and saw their clients as, essentially, powerless but filled
with good intentions. Among them was Paige from the ICRW, who pointed out that consumers'
"constant [demands] for cheaper clothes and new fashion every three months" drives "apparel
companies to certain labour practices that are detrimental to labour rights".[88] Speaking about her
client Gap, Paige argued that the company lacked the power to effect change:

> "The macro-economics are not going to change with Gap alone. I mean, that's what
> they're saying. They say we can't change this whole thing because we'd go out of
> business". [89]

Similarly, her colleague Amber blamed the market for problems in the garment sector,
explaining that "it's not necessarily the company wanting to do that, but it's just the nature of the
market…I guess there are some Catch-22s in this space".[90] Maggie, from Women Deliver, too,
saw consumer behaviour as key. In Maggie's view,

> "we should be outraged at the discrepancy between the price that we pay for our
> garments and what the women at the other end of the value chain have been paid for her
> labour and the role that we play in fuelling this, and we [as women's rights groups] need
> to make the challenges understandable to people".[91]

Others attributed sweatshop conditions to the forces of patriarchy. Gender inequality, they
explained, places garment workers "in a position…where they have no choice but to take up
work that is unskilled" and exposes them to abuses. In Annika's words, "if there is a manager
who is using violence or emotional abuse or something to try to motivate or, like, threaten
[women workers] that comes from a larger societal acceptance of that kind of wrong dynamic".[92]
Her colleague Gemma made a similar argument, stating that "the structural problem [in the
garment industry] is a non-gender equitable society".[93] The same argument turned up in the

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[88] Personal Interview Paige Washington DC January 2019.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Personal Interview Amber Washington DC January 2019.
[91] Remote Online Interviews Maggie London March and June 2019.
[92] Personal Interview Annika Washington DC January 2019.
[93] Personal Interview Gemma Washington DC January 2019.

previously mentioned ICRW webinar in late 2021. During this event, a senior ICRW staffer discussed her organization's work with Nike and other fashion brands and noted that:

> "An important point here that we stress with these suppliers [of the brands] is they're not the ones who have created the harmful behaviour that exists within the factory setting, the sexual harassment or other gender inequitable structures these are things that come from gender inequitable structures and discrimination that exist in society. However, they can have a really powerful role to play in changing these structures and when they do it can help them with employee retention and productivity and also improve the lives of their workers" [94]

In this telling, eradicating sexual harassment and violence by supervisors – a pervasive problem that, in early 2021, allegedly cost a South Indian garment worker by the name of Jeyasre Kathiravel her life [95] – is less about redressing power asymmetries than it is about cultural change.[96] Problematically, this reading absolves factory managers and their buyers of any responsibility for such violence. In a manner typical of the TBF discourses, gender inequality is (thus) framed as both the problem and solution to the exploitation women face in their workplace (Eisenstein 2017; Moeller 2018) Employing a similar logic, Amy, from the UN Global Compact, argued that patriarchal norms had played a paramount role in the enormous loss of life caused by the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh in 2013. "Instead of these women having to listen to male managers", Amy explained, "if they were actually more empowered, then the managers may [have] not ordered them back in". She said she "absolutely" believed that this power imbalance was rooted in gender.[97]

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[94] ICRW Webinar. EVENT: The Private Sector's Pivotal Role in Advancing Gender Equity. 18 November 2021.

[95] The Guardian. Worker at H & M supply factory was killed after months of harassment, claims family. 1 February 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/01/worker-at-hm-supply-factory-was-killed-after-months-of-harassment-claims-family Accessed 20 June 2022.

[96] See also this report by the Asia Floor Wage Alliance. Unbearable harassment: The fashion industry and widespread abuse of female garment workers in Indian factories. May 2022. https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/from-us/briefings/unbearable-harassment/?utm_source=linkedin_bhrrC &Amp;utm_medium=socialandamp;utm_campaign=GBVHbriefingandamp;utm_content=launch%20post Accessed 10 June 2022.

[97] Personal Interview Amy New York January 2019.

Here we see how the injustices of patriarchal oppression can be mobilized, or indeed 'co-opted' to sustain a tactically 'incurious' narrative of corporate responsibility, wherein corporations are placed outside the realm of guilt. By accepting the uneven power structures that corporations exploit and perpetuate for commercial gains as "legitimate, timeless, and inevitable", to borrow from Enloe (2004, 3), this account ends up fortifying these structures. While the gender reductionist narrative is right in highlighting the urgency of patriarchal oppression, it fails to recognise how gender oppression intersects with, and is intensified by class-based and other forms of domination.

4.2 Experts and Professionals

As argued throughout this chapter, TBF partnerships enable corporations to influence how their feminist partners imagine, articulate, and speak about feminism, resulting in a mode of reason that I have dubbed FCR. This section is about the types of expertise cultivated by FCR, and how this shapes the feminist praxis of feminist groups.

Social expertise is never neutral (McGoey 2019), certainly not when it concerns the lives of others (Moeller 2018). As anthropologist Tania Li (cited by Moeller 2018, 156) has astutely noted, when development elites profess to possess "expertise" about the lives of other women and make claims about "what is best for them", they make a "claim to power". Certainly, in the transnational sphere of TBF, where those who design, implement, and partake in corporate empowerment projects occupy various class and geographical positions, the concept of expertise is imbued with questions of power, representation, and credibility. Who is seen as 'credible'? What voices are given a podium? Whose perspectives are foreclosed? What vocabularies are used to articulate feminist objectives? This section argues that TBF partnerships foster a politics of expertise that reveres business know-how and lexicons, marginalizes labour perspectives, and suppresses debate and transparency. Through their feminist alliances, corporations are creating a world of insiders and outsiders, based on their willingness to adhere to pro-business ideologies, and actively contribute to the corporatization of influential feminist groups.

4.2.1 Language

The ICRW's corporate turn involved significant organizational adjustments. To effectively capitalize on firms' surging interest in selected feminist ideals, the women's institute increasingly adopted the "model of the contemporary firm" in its own operations, including business-like cultures and language (Brown 2015, 22). Betty was among those ICRW staffers who viewed such internal restructuring as pragmatic, believing it would help the organization meet its mission of fighting poverty and empowering women. As Betty recalled:

> "The first step was really the board discussion because of their fiduciary and strategic role in helping to shape the direction of the institute and that involved bringing in voices for the board to hear from and build consensus around different kinds of initiatives… and over time we began to bring in new voices and perspectives, so folks from the corporate sector on our board and in our staff…. Usually, [people] had mixed experiences but could speak to both sides of the house, as we use to say" [98]

Goldman Sachs played a catalysing role in this internal transformation process, according to Betty, as the bank's '10.000 Women' project taught the ICRW how to "more deliberate[ly]" articulate women's rights through the language of finance and adopt a business-friendly culture and public presence. According to Betty, "it was then that we learned to speak [of women's rights] in terms of a business case". Nowadays, the idea that 'investing in women yields high returns' is a mainstream dogma within development discourse, as noted before, but for the ICRW, said Betty, "it really started then". As Betty explained, Goldman was

> "receptive to a rights-based argument…but it did not carry any weight in terms of influencing the folks we were working with, because they had to report directly to Lloyd Blankfein… so they basically had to make that [financialized] argument because Goldman Sachs was putting a 100 million dollars into this and their thing is 'what is the return on investment?' So we brought in staff with very different profiles, who had worked in the private sector but who understood more of women's empowerment and concepts, and basically, we built our own capacity to do this work".

[98] Remote Online Interview Betty London June 2020.

The sense of practicality conveyed in Betty's statement reveals a de-politized understanding of language that starkly contrasts to the more critical view, held by feminist scholars such as Chandra Mohanty (2003) and Kathryn Moeller (2018). For the latter, the vocabularies used to articulate gender questions are no neutral tools but reflections of underlying values and power structures and, therefore, require careful dissection.

Notwithstanding such concerns, the seemingly uncritical adoption of corporate vocabularies seems to have paid off for the ICRW. As the women's institute developed its fluency in business speak and brought more corporate executives onto its board of directors – at the time of writing, 60 percent of board members represent the consulting or finance industry –, [99] the organization's portfolio of corporate clients mushroomed (see figure 1). The webinar in November 2021 (cited earlier) demonstrated the progress the institute has made in integrating corporate lexicons and investment logics into their work. During this seminar, organized with and for companies, ICRW representatives promised to help clients sharpen their "purpose-driven brands", make them "more gender smart", provide them with "evidence-based actionable insights that drive business value" and "unlock greater brand affinity and broader consumer market capture". [100] By hiring the ICRW's gender equality trainers, they told their audience, companies can learn how to "leverage their core business to drive social goals through core sourcing risk mitigation [and] strategic philanthropy". During interviews, respondents endorsed the profit motive – and the vocabulary that goes with it – in similar ways, framing their projects as "gender opportunities" and "value propositions" that seek to maximize their clients' "diversity dividends".[101]

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[99] ICRW Website. Board of Directors. 10 out of 17 Directors represent the finance or consulting industry. https://www.icrw.org/icrw-board-of-directors/ Accessed 25 June 2022.

[100] ICRW Webinar. EVENT: The Private Sector's Pivotal Role in Advancing Gender Equity. 18 November 2021.

[101] Personal Interview Gemma Washington DC January 2019; Personal Interview Annika Washington DC January 2019.
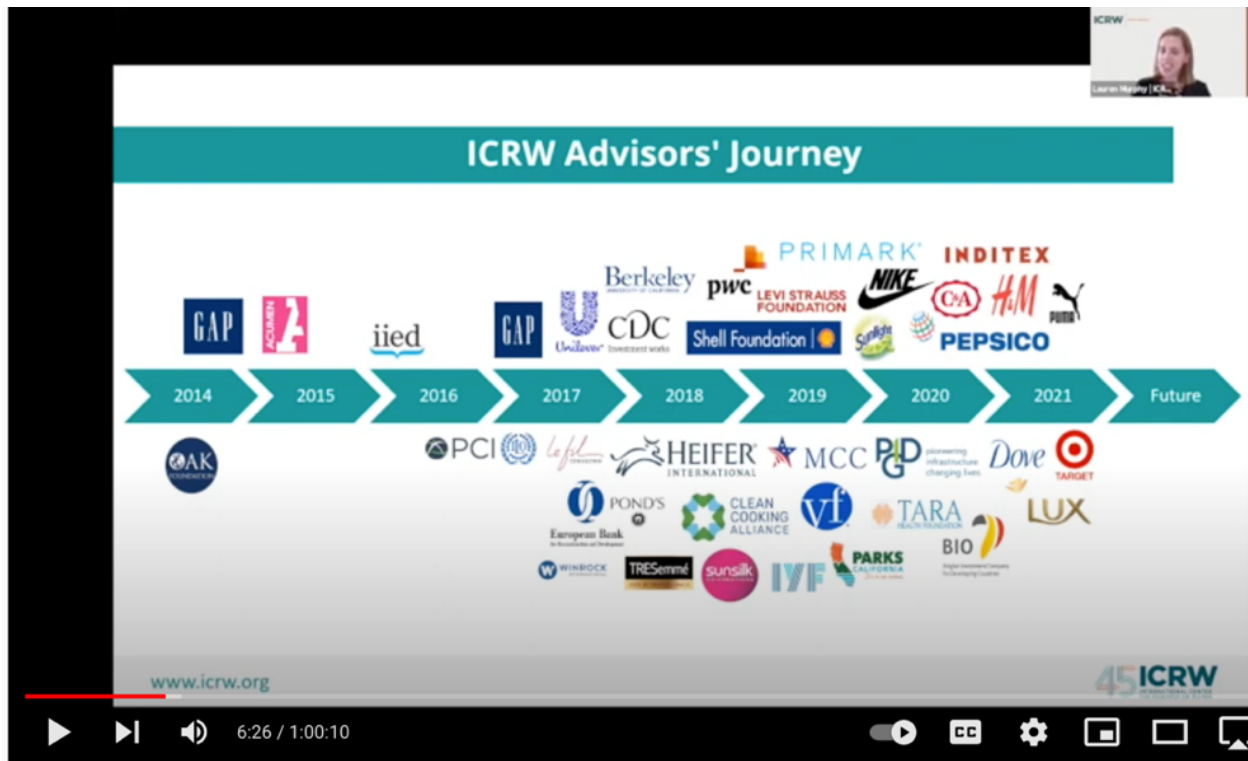
Figure 1. A slide from an ICRW webinar displaying dozens of recent corporate clients

4.2.2 Expertise

A strong command of investment lexicons is one element in a larger package of expertise that business feminists deemed crucial for effective corporate empowerment work. They broadly shared Linda Scott's (2012) position that the professional experiences of corporate managers can significantly improve the efficacy of feminist development efforts. Hence, women's rights advocates operating in this space must "be able to speak to both sides of the house"…"be savvy"[102] with contract clauses and "speak their [partners'] language".[103] As Maggie, from Women Deliver, explained:

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[102] Remote Online Betty Interview London June 2020.

[103] Remote Online Interviews Maggie London March and June 2019; Personal Interview Annika Washington DC January 2019; Remote Online Betty Interview London June 2020.

"The thing to understand is that in order to do that work, having the research that you require on a particular firm, engaging in dialogue, creating the space for dialogue that brings in the right actors at the right time and the right space and preparing people for that requires resources... and people with particular skills. You need basic partnership skills to do that, it's not something that anyone who wakes up one morning can just do… You need listening skills, it's engagement, it's knowledge of the mechanic of partnerships and the process of partnership and it makes a very big difference when you have a company that has somebody with that skill and aptitude and you have an NGO that could put forth a person with those skills. It creates a very different outcome". [104]

Such expertise was thought to reside in candidates with big business backgrounds. UN Women has manifested its apparent reverence for corporate know-how through, among other things, its decision to launch a Private Sector Advisory Council in 2014[105] – where CEOs of Goldman Sachs, Unilever, L'Oreal, Gucci and others advice the UN agency on their CSR work – and its hiring choices. The UN agency has, as noted earlier, hired a former Unilever manager to lead its CSR work in Asia. Similarly, the ICRW has appointed a former Walmart executive to head its consultancy work and, as mentioned earlier, has a largely corporate board of directors. [106]

At the same time, the stated reason for corporations to hire business feminists is that these groups possess expertise that corporations lack. The ICRW, for instance, advertises its decades of insights and expertise in feminist development work as its main selling point. Likewise, during interviews, respondents stressed their role as educators and "knowledge partners" to their partners. [107]

Discussions on the garment sector shed a light on the politics of expertise at work in these collaborations. They suggested corporations in this sector reward a particular *type* of knowledge, namely: a knowledge that, in line with the progressive neoliberalism (Fraser 2013) of CSR,

[104] Remote Online Interviews Maggie London March and June 2019.
[105] UN Women website. UN Women Launches Private Sector Leadership Advisory Council. 2 June 2014. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/6/private-sector-leadership-advisory-council-launched Accessed 23 June 2022.
[106] ICRW website. ICRW welcomes Lauren Murphy as Global Director of ICRW Advisors. (no date) https://www.icrw.org/news/icrw-welcomes-lauren-murphy-as-global-director-of-icrw-advisors/ Accessed 24 June 2022.
[107] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.

defines female garment workers by their identity as women, not as workers. This was evidenced by how frankly respondents spoke about their lack of labour rights, living wages and broader supply chain dynamics. For instance, they noted that living wages and supply chain structures were not part of their "expertise" or "speciality",[108] said they lacked the "background" to meaningfully comment or suggested that "you probably have better insights in these issues". Paying attention to such expertise gaps is important, because it illuminates how, as McGoey (2019) has pointed out, corporations and other powerful actors can use "an honest expert" for regressive ends, "not by exploiting her knowledge but by relying on her ignorance". McGoey (2019, 11) writes that

> "[t]his is because if the expert doesn't know something, it becomes plausible to insist that a phenomenon is not real, regardless of how many non-experts insist that it is. Experts, in other words, can be useful authorities on ignorance".

Applied to the context of TBF and the garment industry, we start to see how global brands can exploit an absence of labour rights expertise among their partners to displace questions of power, workers' self-determination, accountability, and collective bargaining. Revealingly, the only respondent with a labour background – Angie, an independent researcher who has worked with the ICRW on a corporate-led project in the garment sector – had her expertise rejected by corporate clients. As Chapter 5 discusses in more detail, Angie carried out research for a small group of well-known brands into conditions of garment workers in different production countries. Far more critical than the typical TBF research document, her report cited evidence and studies around harmful purchasing practices, inefficient CSR schemes and noted the importance of collective bargaining and unions.[109] Her report, in other words, clashed with the ally-frame that TBF is designed to uphold and consolidate. The clients, Angie said, rejected the report and found another well-known TBF group readjust it with the rosy "gosh isn't CSR great?" line that they had, apparently, expected. [110] Her experience offers a rare insight into how

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[108] Remote Online Interview Anna October 2020
[109] Remote Online Interview Angie New York City January 2019
[110] Remote Online Interview Angie New York City January 2019.

the politics of expertise play out in TBF coalitions and the 'empowerment' narratives feminists are allowed to tell.

4.2.3 Discretion and Secrecy

The secrecy for which TBF has been critiqued (Allison et al. 2019) is an outgrowth of the for-profit interests encapsulated in the 'win-win' formula, which means that companies' commercial needs override transparency and accountability concerns. This section shows that for business feminists, participation in TBF alliances requires a sense of discretion that not only normalizes secrecy, but also separates them from feminists who work outside these structures.

As discussed in the Chapter 1, it took considerable time, effort, and persistence to plan interviews with TBF actors for this study and, with UN Women, proved ultimately unsuccessful. To be sure, this apparent reluctance need not be related to the subject of my study. Still, the experiences of other TBF scholars suggest that these barriers are indicative of a more structural transparency problem (Allison et al. 2019; Moeller 2018). Their largely unsuccessful efforts to interview elite TBF actors, and the "blockages, hostile relations and miscommunications" they experienced during their research, highlight the walls that 'outsiders' – those who study corporate empowerment on their own terms – run into while evaluating the features and effects of TBF partnerships (Allison et al. 2019, 55). The "power of TBF", they reflected, "manifested itself through the management of visibility, shifting accessibility, legal protection and control of distinct forms of knowledge production" (Allison et al. 2019, 55). In a frank interview with Moeller (2018, 52), a Nike Foundation staff member gave an insight into why corporations involved in TBF projects might want to erect such barriers:

> "Given [Nike's] history of being attacked by radicals…and even by moderate/middle of the road folks, we need to be extra careful. Any word or phrase could be taken out of context, and we could be attacked for it".

These are no trivial concerns. Indeed, for a public facing firm such as Nike, whose performance is closely bound up with its brand image, maintaining control over its public image is of paramount importance. During interviews, my respondents demonstrated a keen awareness of

their partners' strategic branding needs. They took care to balance their confidentiality commitments toward their clients with their efforts to advance my understanding, as a researcher, of their private sector work. Sometimes, they offered contentious information off-the-record. Other times, they used non-specific language to describe recent or upcoming projects, explaining they could not share any details due to confidentiality concerns.

The ICRW's work with Gap offered a good example of the contradictory effects such secrecy can cause. Multiple ICRW representatives named the PACE programme as one of the ICRW's most successful TBF projects. They could not, however, say too much about it since PACE is a "proprietary" programme which Gap keeps "close to its chest"[111] and only makes available to selected, trusted partners.[112] As an outsider, I saw a paradox in this secrecy: if the PACE curriculum had improved the lives of hundreds of thousands of women, as the ICRW and Gap claimed, could the fashion brand really expect the ICRW — a women's rights institute committed to solving poverty and empowering women – to hide this information and deny other women the chance to use it to their advantage? Indeed, a few ICRW staffers voiced frustration at what they felt was needless secrecy: they had preferred to make more PACE-related information public than Gap allowed.[113]

Overall, however, respondents voiced an understanding of the transparency limits placed upon them by their clients. As a BSR manager explained, "trusted places" are essential in creating positive CSR outcomes, adding that her clients know that "we are with them on their journeys" and "we don't go out and expose anyone". Likewise, Maggie from Women Deliver offered an in-depth explanation as to why she regarded the creation of "safe spaces…for dialogue…engagement, sharing and learning… where corporate partners become allies" to be essential in "brokering" successful partnerships and creating "that very complex space for dialogue and trust building".[114] As Maggie explained:

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[111] Remote Online Interview Betty London June 2020.
[112] Personal Interview Anonymous NGO Delhi October 2019; Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.
[113] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020; Remote Online Interview Pooja August 2020.
[114] Remote Online Interviews Maggie London March and June 2019.

> "Let's say we were to kick around a topic [such as] the prevention of gender based violence and what a company might be able to do… it's about creating a space where experts can come in and speak and where you can create a space under Chatham House rules [sic] where [corporate executives] can actually share, express and learn, and do it in an environment where they are not being criticized but where information is being shared and you're attempting to help everybody for the better [and] find ways to collaborate"[115]

Maggie's comment lays bare how, under TBF logics, reputational needs supersede values such as transparency and accountability, while debate is cast as inherently unproductive. Dialogue, in this view, appears to look more like an exchange of best practices among likeminded, 'discrete' elites than the type of open debate and contestation that, as Brown (2015) argues, are at the heart of democratic values and processes. The expertise that is cultivated at 'the table', then, is only available to those whose sense of pragmatism sufficiently aligns with that of their corporate partners.

UN Women's supply chain work with Benetton illustrates the accountability gap such logics can create. In 2014, the UN agency enthusiastically announced Benetton would fund UN Women to run a skills training programme for garment workers at Benetton suppliers in India and Bangladesh – a programme that, according to UN Women, helped women gain "confidence, promotions and better futures".[116] Benetton, furthermore, announced its intention to develop a 'living wage road map' with UN Women, setting out a path to implement living wages at its suppliers within the next five years.[117] Yet seven years on, the websites of both organizations offer no information on what happened to these plans since their launch. UN Women would not clarify, on the record, the status of its Benetton projects, but an internal UN Women presentation

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[115] Remote Online Interviews Maggie London March and June 2019.

[116] UN Women. In Bangladesh, women garment workers gain confidence, promotions and better futures. 4 May 2018. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/5/feature-bangladesh-garment-workers-gain-better-futures Accessed 20 June 2022.

[117] Business and Human Rights Resource Center. Benetton to embark on living wage roadmap for women in textile and garment supply chain. 23 February 2015. https://www.business-humanrights.org/fr/dernières-actualités/benetton-to-embark-on-living-wage-roadmap-for-women-in-textile-garment-supply-chain/ Accessed 20 June 2022.

suggests the life-skills training programmes were, for unclear reasons, cancelled prematurely.[118] And while the results of the living wage roadmap remain a mystery, Benetton's excited announcement – that it would work to ensure "fair and proportionate" wages for wages – remains unchallenged.[119]

Despite their professed commitment to dialogue and shared learning, TBF coalitions are thus highly selective in who they allow to take part in such conversations and learn about their projects (Alison et al. 2019; Moeller 2018). As such, they create a world of insiders – those deemed professional, practical, and discrete enough – and outsiders, who lack such sensitivities.

The exclusionary nature of TBF, I argue, has its roots in the reputational concerns and 'realist' understanding of corporate power that inhere in TBF projects, which render debate as inherently unproductive and normalise secrecy. Such secrecy is certainly not unique to the world of TBF. Rather, it fits the broader philanthropy-driven world of non-profits which, as critics have noted, is largely shielded from public scrutiny (Bonanno 2017) and characterized by a "debate avoidant professionalism" (Fong and Naschek 2021, 121). Within the world of CSR, the 'social audit' system exemplifies the accountability problems such secrecy can cause (see Chapter 3). This system claims to exist to protect workers safety and conditions, while denying these same workers access to the reports that discuss the state and safety risks of their workplaces (Nova and Wegemer 2016).

4.2.4 Vague Goals

Partnering with corporations also requires a particular way of framing goals and objectives. Arguably a reflection of firms' competition-fuelled drive to minimize obligations and liabilities, corporate-led 'empowerment' projects tend to articulate the goals of their programmes in opaque

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[118] Internal UN Women presentation 'Career, Capital, Confidence'. This project was supposed to last 3 years ended after 1.5 years. (A UN Women rep has confirmed off the record that Benetton pulled funding for this project).

[119] Business and Human Rights Resource Center website, via Just Style. Benetton to embark on living wage roadmap for women in textile and garment supply chain. https://www.business-humanrights.org/pt/últimas-not%C3%ADcias/benetton-to-embark-on-living-wage-roadmap-for-women-in-textile-garment-supply-chain/ Accessed 23 June 2022.

ways that shun concrete, measurable commitments. Their evaluation methods have been critiqued for overemphasizing programme participation rates and reported psychological changes, while failing to gauge meaningful material gains (Moeller 2013, 2018; Tornhill 2019). More concretely, this means that TBF programmes are unlikely to pursue wage increases, union contracts or binding safety accords: commitments that are concrete, material, and measurable, and can be used to hold companies to account. Instead, they fixate on women's self-confidence, awareness, engagement, and potential as evidence of economic advancement, and on companies' professed commitment to 'include' and 'create opportunities' for women in their business models.

A key goal of UN Women's TBF work, for example, is to "enhance the capacity of private sector companies" to promote "decent work opportunities for women". The UN agency tracks its success, amongst other things, by documenting the declared interest and aspirational goals, as expressed by its corporate partners. Internal documents show that the UN agency reports on its CSR successes by listing how many CEOs have signed up to, plan to sign up to, or attended events relating to the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) and counting the number of 'communication products' made available to corporate partners. Having access to information on what good practices look like, the presumption seems to be, will induce well-intended companies to improve themselves, but need not be checked.

The ICRW displays similarly commitment free language on its website. Rather than calling up companies to protect and fulfil women's basic rights, it urges firms to "better engage women" both "in their value chain" and their "sales and marketing efforts" and ensure they "have every opportunity to unlock their full potential".[120] The terminology of TBF, then, renders 'progress' itself a fuzzy concept.

Interviews revealed that this ambiguity is not limited to textual materials but also manifests in how business feminists speak about the impact of their work. During interviews, respondents

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[120] ICRW Website. Social Investment with a gender lens. https://www.icrw.org/research-programs/social-enterprise-investment-with-a-gender-lens/ Accessed 24 June 2022. (This language also appears I the ICRW's Gender Smart Investing Resource Hub. https://www.icrw.org/gender-smart-investing-resource-hub/healthcare/ Accessed 24 June 2022).

often described the feminist objectives of their clients in non-specific language of inclusion, engagement, potential and choices. Betty, for example, described Gap's PACE programme as an expression of the company's "wish to be meaningfully and productively involved in moving forward issues of women and girls", a statement so vague that it could mean anything.[121] Others spoke of companies' efforts to "engage women in a better way"[122] and help them "influence some of their life decisions". [123]

Taken together, the corporatized approach to language, expertise, discretion, and goal setting, as encouraged by TBF partnerships, thus sets up a 'mode of feminism' that, notwithstanding its impact-focused rhetoric, is ambiguous, opaque and, ultimately, unaccountable.

4.3 Epistemic Tensions and Ideological Compromises

Scholars of the political economy of non-profits have argued that the uneven power dynamics between funders and non-profits affords the former a degree of influence over the ideological positioning and goals of the latter (Bonanno 2017; Fong and Naschek 2021). Corporate funding, in particular, is understood to promote market-friendly solutions (Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014; Fernando 2011; Gardner 2016). This power dynamic also impacts TBF work, explained Paige from the ICRW, as the parameters of these programs always "depend on what the client wants" and the "sphere of influence" they grant their feminist partners.[124] This section explores this tension. It shows that business feminists must navigate several emancipatory and epistemic tensions and compromises in their TBF work, resulting from the commercial goals built into these projects and the leverage that corporations, as clients and funders, have over their goals and strategies. These compromises, I contend, impel business feminists to promote flawed ideologies on pragmatic grounds, divorce 'empowerment' goals from the priorities of their supposed beneficiaries, and reconceive basic rights as gestures of philanthropic goodwill.

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[121] Remote Online Interview Betty London June 2020.
[122] Personal Interview Annika Washington DC January 2019.
[123] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.
[124] Personal Interview Paige Washington DC January 2019.

4.3.1 Business Case Ambivalence

The business case exemplifies the limits and compromises TBF projects necessitate. As discussed in Chapter 2, the financialized logics of this 'Smart Economics' formula have been widely condemned by feminists worried that "empowerment and rights lose their intrinsic value [when they] become instruments to obtain other goals" (Bexell 2012, 403). Respondents expressed different degrees of scepticism toward the business case. Overall, they recognised its ideological bias, but justified this on pragmatic grounds. Those with only minor reservations noted that "the pressure to make the business case at every step presents some limitations"[125] and "is not always comfortable"[126] but remains "very much in alignment with our mission".[127] One challenge of having to find solutions within the 'win-win' frame, according to Annika, is that the evidence base underneath it is still quite "thin".[128]

This thinness is visible in the type of research cited in TBF discourses as proof that empowerment pays off for companies. Such studies often track how gender diversity in corporate boardrooms and other senior positions improves firms' performance (Gregoratti 2018; Moeller 2018; Roberts 2012), a context quite different from – and arguably irrelevant to – women workers at the bottom of the chain. This mismatch likely results from the fact that "there are no randomized controlled trials" looking at the business case for, say, women farm workers, respondents explained, and while investments in workplace safety are fairly easy to justify on 'win-win' grounds – as ill or injured workers cause obvious productivity losses – beyond that, "the business case gets muddier". [129] At that point, "you have to come at the argument a bit differently" respondents explained,[130] and make a more ideological pitch why "on the long run this is good for you" and helps you "be the best". According to Annika from the ICRW, this involves persuading companies that:

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[125] Personal Interview Annika Washington DC January 2019.
[126] Personal Interview Paige Washington DC January 2019.
[127] Personal Interview Annika Washington DC January 2019.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Remote Online Interview Emma November 2020.
[130] Personal Interview Annika Washington DC January 2019.

"Do you want to be a modern company? Like, do you want to be investable and do you want to be attractive [to employees], then get out ahead of these issues before your competition does!"[131]

Even those who conveyed strong reservations about this competitive, instrumental frame said they saw it as a practical necessity. They called the business case "ideologically appalling…fundamentally flawed"[132] and "unpalatable"[133], but noted that they had "come around to it"[134] and "re-orient[ed] their thinking",[135] believing that it "can actually be leveraged to really bring more investment into this kind of work" and help them "move ahead" with their mission.[136]

The disconnect some of these feminists felt between their own principles and the for-profit logics imposed on them resembles the ambivalence that, according to Mark Fisher (2009), lies at the heart of capitalist realist reasoning. Capitalist realism, he argued, pressures individuals to pragmatically separate their "inner subjective attitude[s]" about capitalism from "the beliefs we exhibit and externalize in our behaviour" (Fisher 2009, 13). TBF appears to encourage a similar bifurcation among its feminist participants: it impelled them to publicly endorse a premise that they privately disavowed.

4.3.2 Rights or Charity

The pressure to align corporate agendas with feminist advancement means that 'empowerment' is increasingly divorced from the needs and priorities of their supposed beneficiaries. Discussions on the garment sector illustrated this disconnect. As discussed in Chapter 3, the literature on textile supply chains has shown that wages, collective bargaining, and workplace safety – issues that are not obviously compatible with a business case frame – are persistent priorities for workers across production countries (Anner 2015; Bair, Anner, and Blasi 2017; Kumar 2020; LeBaron 2020). When asked what a business case for wages or safety might look

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[131] Personal Interview Annika Washington DC January 2019
[132] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.
[133] Remote Online Interview Pooja August 2020.
[134] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.
[135] Remote Online Interview Pooja August 2020.
[136] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.

like, respondents offered inconsistent and primarily theoretical answers. Optimistically, some believed that a business case for living wages in this sector could 'check out', noting that brands "are leaving money on the table when they don't pay workers a living wage" [137]… are "shooting themselves in the foot"[138] and "forego a great opportunity to set themselves apart with consumers".[139] Others expressed more hesitation and signalled they had not yet given the topic much thought. Amber, for example, explained that:

> "I'm not speaking to this with, like, expertise background but I guess you could spin it in a way that would say it's an investment that will increase the quality of life for their employees, which might have impacts on the productivity. Yeah, I don't know. I mean, that would be an interesting study actually". [140]

Her colleague Gemma noted that "this is not something that we have worked on" but ventured that companies' "fiduciary duties" towards their "shareholders" might render potentially costly improvements, such as the payment of living wages "a conflict of interest". Regarding safety and working conditions, she noted that "in theory, I would think safer factories would [deliver a return in investment] because it would help…retention or productivity". At the same time, she said she was aware that fire escapes and other safety investments

> "do cost money and probably limit [profits] in some ways, because if you're totally altruistic about it and want to do everything to help everybody…".

Evidently, Gemma had not fully fleshed out her thinking on this issue. Nonetheless, her reference to altruism is significant, because it underlines how the rationalities associated with

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[137] Remote Online Interviews Maggie London March and June 2019.
[138] Personal Interview Amy New York January 2019.
[139] Personal Interview Annika Washington DC January 2019.

   This optimistic notion contradicts the more persuasive position, shared by many labour scholars, that better wages and conditions necessitate a more equal distribution of value – a change that would, inevitably undermine the corporate profit share (Quan 2007; Nova and Wegemer 2016), as discussed in Chapter 3.
[140] Personal Interview Amber Washington DC January 2019.

TBF make women's basic rights – in this case, their right to a safe workplace and a living wage – dependent on "someone else's good will, reputational concerns of risk management" (Bexell 2012, 403). As corporate assessments of what reasonable and desirable change entails gain in relevance, women's own demands come to matter less. One respondent, a senior ICRW representative by the name of Paige, even believed that pressuring companies to meet workers' demands could be counterproductive. Speaking on the topic of living wages, she explained that:

> We wouldn't have these partnerships if we were constantly saying, well…. until wages change, this is always gonna be a problem…You have to be at the table to influence and you can't be at the table unless… unless you have these partnerships that allow you to push a little bit here, a little bit there…it's not one strategy".

Fighting for change within the parameters of TBF, then, is not about construing an independent rights-based vision of what a 'moral supply chain' ought to look like, or the demands and priorities of the women who toil in them. Rather, a more charitable interpretation of solidarity informed these projects; one where benevolent corporate executives ultimately decide what outcomes are permissible.

4.3.3 Internal Disenchantment

While the ICRW's corporate turn has thus generated internal adjustments and support among some staff members, it has left others disenchanted, disillusioned and worried about the institute's reputation. Non-profits such as the ICRW are "ascribed a superior moral status" in society, as they are expected to work for "the common good" (Fernando 2015, 16).Declaring a tycoon such as Lloyd Blankfein an ally to the feminist cause, when former employees have described Goldman's company culture as one where people are "completely money obsessed" and "callously… talk about ripping their clients off" can jeopardize this reputation (Freese 2020, 208 - 209). Indeed, Betty, the top ICRW executive, recalled "a lot of [initial] scepticism amongst our staff about working with the private sector", as some were concerned that corporations simply tried to "pinkwash" their corporate misbehaviour "through some kind of cachet approval from an organization like the ICRW".[141] The ICRW's "journey [to] where we are today", she

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[141] Remote Online Interview Betty London June 2020.

added, involved quite some "creative and philosophical tension in house".[142] One of her colleagues recalled feeling uneasy when Blankfein was given the Champion of Change Award, as "it started to look transactional in terms of giving awards to people and then wanting to do business with those people".[143] Given how a seal of approval from the ICRW can "raise someone's profile", she added, "I think it's an area where our intention can be misconstrued".[144]

The website Glassdoor.com, where individuals can anonymously review employers, suggests some former staff members left the ICRW feeling disenchanted with the organization's institutional changes. At the time of writing, the ICRW's page is dominated by negative posts that echo critiques more commonly associated with the corporate world. Reviewers lament the "huge wage gap" between senior and junior staff, the "unreasonably hefty" salary of the CEO – over $ 370,000 for calendar year 2019- 2020[145] –, the organization's "lack of a clear vision" and fixation on "image rather than fixing real problems" which, they claim, have led to a "mass exodus" of "senior leaders" and other "good people" who are "leaving in droves". [146] One reviewer recalled a board member telling staff:

> "that Millennials don't know how to work hard and that when she was a hedge fund manager she worked 16 hour days and staff should be willing to do that too" [147]

While it is impossible to ascertain how representative these sentiments are, they provide an interesting glimpse into the alienating effects that 'corporatization' processes can have on those with more critical perspectives.

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[142] Ibid.

[143] Personal Interview Paige Washington DC January 2019.

[144] Ibid.

[145] ICRW Website. Form 990 2019-2020, page 8. https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ICRW-990-2021.pdf Accessed 24 June 2022.

[146] Glassdoor Website. International Center for Research on Women. https://www.glassdoor.co.uk/Reviews/International-Center-for-Research-on-Women-Reviews-E31580_P2.htm?sort.sortType=ORandsort.ascending=trueandfilter.iso3Language=eng Accessed 10 December 2021.

[147]Glassdoor Website. Review from Anonymous employee, Washingtin DC. 7 July 2019. https://www.glassdoor.co.uk/Reviews/Employee-Review-International-Center-for-Research-on-Women-RVW27843464.htm

4.3.4 Pragmatic Paradoxes

Those who choose to work within the TBF paradigm have to navigate various 'pragmatic paradoxes'. As noted earlier, many business feminists rationalize the ideological biases of their work on grounds of impact maximization, thereby echoing the professed pragmatism of scholars such as Linda Scott (Scott et al. 2012). Having a seat at the table, they reasoned, affords them leverage over corporate behaviour which outsiders lack. However, this self-image as 'powerful insider' came apart during interviews, where respondents described their influence in decidedly more modest, and even pessimistic terms. Some expressed great scepticism about corporations' willingness and ability to improve voluntarily, despite this being the foundational premise underneath the whole TBF project.

Again, the subject that brought these contradictions to the fore was the garment industry. Discussions about this sector revealed a sense of powerlessness among respondents about their influence on the sector. This powerlessness sharply contrasted with the official impact narratives of their organizations, which claim to have changed the lives of millions of garment workers. A BSR representative, for example, said she was under no illusion that her organization's life-skills programmes were "fixing the whole system" but saw them as only "piece of the puzzle". [148] Her statement was noticeably more modest than her organization's website, which claims that these trainings are on track to "improve the well-being, confidence, and economic potential of 1.6 million women workers by 2022"[149] through "the most powerful tool available to them… education". [150] Similarly, an ICRW employee who has worked on Gap's PACE programme – the life-skills training initiative that in 2020 was allegedly on course to change a million lives by 2022 – noted that the programme's attempt to "promote women's ability to influence some of their life decisions" was, in her opinion, valuable but "definitely not…transformative". [151]

Some rationalized the limitations of their TBF work by pointing out that consumer demands, fiduciary duties and other broader economic pressures constrain more meaningful

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[148] Remote Online Interview Anna October 2020.
[149] BSR Website. 17 July 2018. Join Us to Empower 1.6 Million Women Workers through HERproject by 2022. https://www.bsr.org/en/our-insights/blog-view/empower-1-6-million-women-workers-through-herproject-by-2022 Accessed 20 June 2022.
[150] BSR Impact Stories. https://ciyuan.bsr.org/impact/stories/herhealth Accessed 20 June 2022.
[151] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.

transformations, noting that "of course, companies can always do more" but "helping them move a few steps forward seems valuable" nonetheless. Such relativism marks a stark departure from the notion that 'corporations are so powerful, they have to be part of the solution' and that 'harnessing' their power and reach, in the interests of women, presents a viable route to a better system. Particularly revealing in this regard were comments by Betty, the top ICRW initiative, about change and moral leadership in the garment sector. Whereas Betty initially voiced a highly optimistic view about the transformative potential of TBF in this sector, she later proved deeply sceptical about the potential of voluntarism. In Betty's view, positive change in the sector:

> "is going to be consumer led is my guess.... people like my daughter who will no longer buy from certain vendors, because she wants to know 'how many slaves have touched this? who is making my jeans?' That's going to shape what the apparel sector does... and that may be a very naïve understanding on my part, I'm sure you're far more read into what the various forces are, but that's how I experience it in my household and our buying power… and my daughter as someone who is very rights focused and very confident in her power as a consumer". [152]

Strikingly, Betty seemed to imply that she viewed *external* activism and reputational threats – the same 'outside' pressures that, as explained in Chapter 3, drove the anti-sweatshop campaigns in the 1990s and prompted the business led CSR regime – as more potent forces for change than the voluntarism-driven *insider* approach that her own organization endorses and legitimates. This seemingly contradictory position, I contend, reveals a pragmatism paradox at the heart of FCR reasoning: In lieu of an independent emancipatory vision, based on rights and the priorities of its supposed beneficiaries, corporate empowerment projects require so many compromises that, in the end, , it is far from obvious what 'progress' or 'empowerment' even mean. The following exchange with the ICRW's Paige on her organization's vision on the impact of TBF work captures the shaky and ambivalent foundations underneath TBF's professed pragmatism and bold impact claims:

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[152] Remote Online Interview Betty London June 2020.

Paige: "Some forward-thinking companies like Unilever have deep thoughts about 'what are we making profits on' why are we here? And what is our business for in the world? So we recognise the value, they recognise the value and it has translated, I think, in substantial change'

Me: "Do we measure such change in a robust way?"

Paige: "No we don't measure it in a robust way. It's a complicated question because they would need a lot of, you know… and the evidence would probably be mixed. Some initiatives I've seen a lot of impact, and others less so. … [On the aggregate] that is all yet to be seen. That story is still being told. Our longest standing collaboration has been with Gap and I think that their programmes and factories can drive, does drive positive impacts for women workers…It's still very new, we're still experimenting".

4.4 Conclusion.

This chapter has illustrated how corporations, through their TBF alliances, are reshaping feminist imaginaries in ways that legitimate and naturalise the global social order and the power of corporations therein. I argued that business feminists at the forefront of TBF rationalize the epistemic limits and ideological biases of their corporate empowerment projects according to a mode of reason I have dubbed Feminist Capitalist Realism. Driven by an impact focused sense of pragmatism, FCR functions as a 'filter' in which emancipatory ideals are adjusted to align with the reputational, productive, and broader strategic needs of corporations. The resulting vision on change and progress imagines corporations solely as allies, reveres business know-how, displaces questions of labour rights, power, conflict and exploitation, and measures 'progress' in illogical, opaque ways. Thus, FCR contributes to the naturalisation of neoliberal ideologies but is, in important ways, shaped by *pragmatic* considerations on what kind of change strategies are realistic and achievable.

Chapter 5. Power and Productivity

Scholarship on Transnational Business Feminism (TBF) has thus far paid insufficient attention to the growing number of initiatives targeting women workers at the bottom of corporate supply chains. As a result, very little is known about these programmes and, crucially, how women workers experience these interventions. Certainly, in the context of this dissertation – which is particularly interested in worker-focused programs – this omission raises pertinent questions. How do women workers experience these empowerment efforts? Do the compromises, silences, and ideological limitations built into these programmes, as discussed in Chapter 4, affect them at all and if so, how? Agreeing with Tornhill (2018) that the perspective of TBF beneficiaries should be central to scholarly TBF assessments, this chapter takes us to India to explore these questions empirically, among workers in two Indian cities who took part in the same CSR empowerment programme. It examines what happens when a 'win-win' TBF programme conditioned by the rationalities of feminist capitalist realism (FCR) is applied in the 'real world', how it affects its beneficiaries, and the knowledge created about their lives and needs. Specifically, it assesses the impact of one of TBF's most popular and longstanding initiatives – the Personal Advancement and Career Enhancement Program (PACE) – from the perspective of some of its participants in India. Launched in 2007 by US fashion corporation The Gap (Gap), PACE is a life-skills training programme designed to improve the well-being of female garment workers in Gap's supply chain and boost their employers' financial returns. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) has played a critical and longstanding role in the creation, design, and evaluation of PACE, and has frequently praised the programme's life-changing impacts.

This chapter has five sections. After this introduction, Section 5.1 delineates the principles, strategy, evolution, professed successes, and structure of PACE, the programme's main actors, and the ideologies it conveys. The second section examines the social impact of PACE from the perspective of workers, finding their experiences to be decidedly less positive than the success story as told by Gap and the ICRW. Section 5.3 focuses on the business benefits of PACE and shows how the programme's productivity aims have intensified worker exploitation. The fourth

section scrutinises the knowledge production processes behind the impact evaluations cited as evidence of PACE's successes. The final section offers some conclusions.

5.1 PACE: Origin, Principles, and Claims of Successes

Premised on the doctrine of 'doing well by doing good' (Rigillo 2015), Gap launched PACE in 2007 to provide life-skills training to women making Gap apparel in India, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Vietnam, and other mostly Asian countries. The overarching social goal of PACE – the 'doing good' part of the equation – is to equip these garment workers with the skills, confidence, and attitudes to move into better-paid "management or supervisory roles at factories…move forward in work and life… and better lead in their families and communities" (ICRW 2013, 3-4). As the ICRW (2013,6) explains in a brochure on PACE, "when women earn more, they tend to invest more time and resources in their children, helping them grow into healthier and better educated adults who can contribute to the well-being of their communities".

Poverty wages are an endemic feature of the garment industry (Anner 2019; Kabeer, Huq, and Sulaiman 2020; LeBaron 2020; Mezzadri 2017), a problem that PACE only implicitly acknowledges. Rather than identifying low pay as a source of economic hardship for workers and arguing for decent wages, PACE pursues empowerment in a manner typical of TBF programmes: it frames women's supposed skill deficits as the problem, thereby making women "directly responsible for their own value [and wages] in symbolic as well as in material terms" (Tornhill 2016, 538-539). Concretely, this means that instead of pursuing fair and living wages for all, PACE promises to equip workers with the skills to compete for better-paid roles in the factories where they work and spend their wages more efficiently. In the words of an NGO representative who helped implement PACE in India, a key function of the programme's "behaviour change" approach is to give women "the confidence to manage their finances" and help "those who have the potential to do that" climb the factory ladder.[153,] Echoing the competitive and individualistic politics of Chicago School neoliberals, as detailed in Chapter 3, PACE thus reifies a neoliberal ideal of empowerment, wherein "every woman provides for herself and has no need for… communal solidarities" (Mohanty 2013, 974).

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[153] Personal Interview Anonymous NGO Delhi October 2019.

The principal business objective pursued by PACE – its 'doing well' goal – is to convert women's behavioural and skill improvements into efficiency gains that reduce turnover, improve productivity, and thus advance their employers' financial returns (ICRW 2013). As an ICRW employee explained to me, PACE was designed to address the huge attrition problem Gap had observed in its supply chain. "Women would come to work and then leave work and this was just happening rampantly," she explained, costing their employers significant time and resources.[154] PACE was designed to, among other things, mitigate the problem of high turnover by helping women deal with what they termed the "culture shock" of entering a highly demanding and target-oriented work context where they are expected to handle the multiple burdens they have to bear as working women.[155]

Organisationally, PACE reflects the supply chain structure of Gap's core business model. The company outsources the design, implementation, and evaluation of PACE activities and evaluations to external partners, but controls these processes from the top. As Gap's principle "knowledge partner," the ICRW has from the outset played a crucial role in the creation of PACE: the women's institute has educated Gap managers on the intersections of gender and poverty in production countries, helped design the PACE curriculum, and carried out impact evaluations at factories where PACE has been implemented. Some NGOs in the PACE chain are international and local non-profits supporting Gap in the design and delivery of training, while other key partners are the manufacturers who supply Gap products and employ or hire the women targeted for PACE. The main role of these factory managers is to host the training sessions and accommodate impact evaluation studies on their premises.[156]

As noted in Chapter 4, PACE is a "proprietary programme", the contents of which Gap keeps "close to its chest" and only shares with partners such as NGOs and manufacturers.[157] This means that the details of the PACE programme – such as the number of hours, content, training

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[154] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.
[155] Personal Interview Anonymous NGO Delhi October 2019; Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.
[156] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.
[157] Remote Online Interview Betty London June 2020.

materials, and graduation requirements – are not easily available. Combined online information and interview data suggest that PACE courses are supposed to last nine months – with weekly sessions between 60 and 90 minutes – [158] but in practice, they often end prematurely as a result of workers dropping out, quitting their jobs, or other reasons (ICRW 2013). Given that factory managers appear to exercise some control over the implementation process, including over the content of the programme and the selection of trainers, it is safe to assume that the programme is not uniform across factories.

During the course, external trainers employed by one of Gap's partner organisations visit factories on a (usually) weekly basis to educate classes of roughly 15 women on managerial topics – problem-solving, successful task execution, and time and stress management – as well as life skills such as financial planning, self-esteem building, hygiene, and nutrition. To evaluate the social and business impact of these classes, researchers from the ICRW or other partners visit some of these factories just before and after women enrol in the programme (ICRW 2013). [159]

Shahi Exports (Shahi), an India-based supplier to brands such as Gap, Uniqlo, and H&M, and, according to its website, the largest garment exporter in the country, is arguably the most visible and enthusiastic adopter of PACE.[160] A self-described 'purpose-led' business, committed to the empowerment of its women workers, Shahi was the first company to run PACE training in 2007.[161] Since then, it has built its own in-house team of PACE trainers and claims to have trained over 60,000 women in the past 15 years.[162] During this time, Shahi has accommodated multiple ICRW-led evaluations. The company has also made its factories available to economists and business scholars from prestigious US universities such as Harvard, Yale, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T). Between 2013 and 2017, these academics studied the impacts of PACE through randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in Bangalore-based Shahi plants. There, they reviewed human resource records and surveyed over 2,000 women, before

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[158] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.
[159] Remote Online Interview Pooja August 2020
[160] Shahi Exports Website. https://www.shahi.co.in Accessed 25 June 2022.
[161] Shahi Sustainability Website. https://www.shahi.co.in/sustainability/#personal-advancement-career-enhancement Accessed 25 June 2022.
[162] Ibid.

and after taking PACE, on things like extraversion, self-regard, "levels of psychological distress," optimism, hope, perseverance, financial decisions, and "if they expected to be promoted in the next six months" (Adhvaryu et al. 2018).

The overall findings of these studies have been decidedly positive, as Section 5.4 discusses in more detail. In '*Advancing Women, Changing Lives*'– the ICRW's flagship PACE evaluation that covers five manufacturers in India, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and China – the women's institute finds that the "carefully calibrated win-win dynamic" of PACE has made the programme a major success.[163] Praising Gap for "better[ing] the lives of the women who make our clothes",[164] the ICRW (2013, 3) study calls PACE an "effective, sustainable and scalable model that yields high returns for women, their families, and the businesses where they work." This study forms the basis of the success claims Gap has made about PACE on its website and in press releases. These press releases have been cited and republished by a slew of influential media outlets, including *Bloomberg*,[165] *Vogue*,[166] *Forbes*,[167] and *The Financial Times*,[168] who celebrate PACE for its "pioneering business model" and its strategic philanthropy. In 2011, former US president Bill Clinton called the life-skills programme an "exemplary approach to economically advancing women worldwide" at a gathering of the Clinton Global Initiative.

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[163] The reference seems to have been removed, but Gap still cites the ICRW on this phrasing. See Gap Inc Website. https://www.gapinc.com/en-us/articles/2013/report-p-a-c-e-changing-women-s-lives. Accessed 25 June 2022.

[164] ICRW Facebook Post. One Million Lives Changed. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10153654059842937 Accessed 24 June 2022. In 2015, the ICRW praised Gap in a Facebook post for the eight years it had worked "to better the lives of the women who make our clothes" and for the company's "pledge to educate **#1MWomen** across the world through the Gap Inc. P.A.C.E. program [to ensure that one] by one women will gain the skills and confidence to change the course of their lives". The text in the short accompanying video –"One million women, One million stories, One million lives changed"– shows such a high level of confidence in PACE's effectiveness as to suggest the planned empowerment has already taken place.

[165] Bloomberg News. 500,000 Women and Girls Complete Gap Inc.'s Global Education and Life-Skills Training Program. 24 February 2020. https://www.bloomberg.com/press-releases/2020-02-24/500-000-women-and-girls-complete-gap-inc-s-global-education-and-life-skills-training-program Accessed 25 June 2022.

[166] Vogue. Gap: Setting the P.A.C.E .11 October 2016. https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/bc/gap-setting-the-pace Accessed 25 June 2022.

[167] Forbes. Introducing P.A.C.E.: Empowering Female Workers Around the World. 31 January 2013. https://www.forbes.com/sites/pace/2013/01/31/introducing-p-a-c-e-empowering-female-workers-around-the-world/ Accessed 25 June 2022.

[168] Gap Inc website. Gap Inc. P.A.C.E program Wins 2010 Social Innovation Award. 1 April 2010. https://www.gapinc.com/en-us/articles/2010/04/gap-inc-p-a-c-e-program-wins-2010-social-innovatio

PACE, Clinton told the audience, proves that "if women get their fair share" it benefits entire societies and produces "widespread prosperity". [169]

However, as with other high-profile TBF projects (Moeller 2018; Roberts 2016; Tornhill, 2019), the huge impact claims made about PACE are often contradictory. One reason why the programme is unlikely to affect the broad-based change it professes to bring about is that it does not address any of the structural causes of poor working conditions in the garment sector. As discussed in Chapter 3, these include monopsony supply chain structures (Kumar 2020), predatory purchasing practices, and union oppression (Anner 2019; Lichtenstein 2016; Mezzadri 2017). Moreover, the expectation built into PACE that only those workers with managerial 'potential' will reap its benefits suggests its impact can only be limited to a relatively small group of workers. Indeed, there are limits to the number of supervisors and managers a garment exporter can absorb in its leadership ranks. The factory workforce of Shahi, for example, is made up of 97 percent machine operators and only 3 percent frontline managers,[170] which suggests the company could likely only offer a fraction of its reported 50,000 PACE graduates a better-paid role. In short, the structural limitations built into PACE seem hard to reconcile with the life-changing impact proponents the programme claims to have had on workers' lives.

The critical feminist literature on global development and neoliberalism, as surveyed in Chapter 2 and 3, helps us to contextualise the various ideological currents at work in PACE in the broader neoliberal landscape. It shows how PACE, with its development rhetoric, for-profit goals, and reliance on work promotions as a path to higher incomes, links the 'lean in' spirit of neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg 2014) with the dated Women in Development (WID) discourse and the corporatised 'business case' logic of the more recent TBF phenomenon. By depicting individual advancement as workers' most sensible path to a decent wage, PACE mixes the 'confidence culture' (Organ and Gill 2017) and girl boss ideals of hegemonic US feminism with the cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) of neoliberal culture and the racialised, corporate-led self-help promise that typifies TBF (Eisenstein 2017; Moeller 2018; Tornhill 2019). PACE brings these

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[169] https://www.icrw.org/news/former-president-clinton-recognizes-gap-inc-s-p-a-c-e-program/ Accessed 25 June 2022.

[170] Personal Correspondence with Shahi..8 April 2021.

interconnected ideologies together in the 'world market factory' of the Global South, effectively telling workers to locate both the source and solutions to their economic problems within themselves and not in the asymmetrical power relations that define their industry (Mezzadri 2017). Notwithstanding its radical rhetoric, the emancipation story produced by this cocktail of paradigms is both dated and regressive. It reifies the essentialist and monolithic stereotypes that typified the WID approach (Mohanty 1988) and uncritically repeats the sexist and racialized trope of 'low-skilled' women, long used to justify the exploitation of female garment workers (Elson and Pearson 1981; Enloe 2004).

Anthropological studies illustrate how PACE's universalizing assumptions about garment workers flatten the "variations within the experiences of labouring women" and the different motivations and desires that women bring with them to the factory (Ruwanpura 2011, 199). Whereas some might accept garment jobs purely to earn an income, for others – such as a group of Trinidadian garment workers in an ethnographic study by Prentice (2012) – learning how to sew might be critical to their process of self-making. Some might, as PACE argues, withdraw from work due to their inability to deal with the work pressures, but others might leave their jobs for reasons unrelated to the conditions at work. A study by Carswell (2016, 134) with female garment workers in South India illustrates how changes in women's households, including "new expressions of patriarchy", shaped women's availability for work. The static, one-dimension picture of 'the garment worker', as produced by PACE does no justice to the diversity within this category of workers.

Despite these limitations and a wealth of feminist scholarship critical of such ideological biases, recent years have seen a surge in PACE-liked initiatives. Often dubbed worker well-being programmes, these training courses replicate PACE's model, formula, and goals, providing life-skills training to garment workers with explicit 'win-win' objectives. Major brand owning companies and retailers, including Walmart, Levi's Strauss, Benetton and Uniqlo, have adopted such education programmes over the past years, suggesting they now represent a central tenet of the sector's CSR and ESG strategies (which is short for Environmental, Social and Governance).[171] The aid groups and women's rights organizations at the forefront of this trend

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[171] See Chapter 2.

are the ICRW, UN Women and Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) who help design, implement and evaluate these programmes. UN Women, for example, has worked with Uniqlo and Benetton on programmes that aim to increase workers "productivity and soft skills" and offer those with "demonstrated leadership potential… training on advanced life skills including supervisory skills" and the opportunity to "achieve their dreams". [172] BSR's HERProject – described by a senior representative as solving "problems of productivity and retention" and improving workers' "relationships and agency and self-control and decision making and other parts of empowerment" – has now reached 1.8 million workers. [173]

Gap, for its part, has now allegedly made its (previously proprietary) PACE curriculum available to selected industry peers – including owners of the brands Abercrombie and Fitch, Calvin Klein, and New Balance – and claims to be on track to "strengthen the livelihoods of millions of women and their families around the world." [174] In light of this surge, the dearth of empirical feminist queries into the impacts and power effects (Fleming and Jones 2013, 6) is troubling. Given its long history, high-profile supporters, and apparent role as a TBF pioneer, PACE thus presents an excellent case study for such an inquiry.

How does a 'win-win' empowerment formula engineered by corporate and development elites in the Global North play out on the factory floors thousands of miles away? How do the ideological biases, compromises, and silences built into its theory of 'empowerment' affect the women in whose name the programme was created? These questions are explored in the next section.

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[172] Uniqlo Website. Career Building Training for Women. https://www.uniqlo.com/jp/en/contents/sustainability/people/diversity/gender/bangradeshproject/ Accessed 25 June 2022; UN Women Website. In Bangladesh, women garment workers gain confidence, promotions and better futures. 4 May 2018. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/5/feature-bangladesh-garment-workers-gain-better-futures Accessed 25 June 2022.

[173] Remote Online Interview Anna October 2020

[174] Bloomberg News Website. 500,000 Women and irls Complete Gap Inc's Global Education and Life Skills Programme. 24 February 2020. https://www.bloomberg.com/press-releases/2020-02-24/500-000-women-and-girls-complete-gap-inc-s-global-education-and-life-skills-training-programme Accessed 25 June 2022.

5.2 The Reality of PACE

Drawing on group interviews with a total of 26 female workers at Shahi factories in Bangalore and Faridabad, this section examines workers' perspectives on PACE's 'doing good' promise. Overwhelmingly, these female workers described a different reality from the promotional reports cited earlier. Far from transforming their lives, they highlighted how PACE failed to engage with the structural conditions of the work floor, such as abusive management styles, unrealistic production quotas, and poverty pay. The inability or unwillingness of PACE trainers to engage with the workers' priorities led workers to view the programme as largely meaningless, frustrating, and sometimes condescending.

When asked if and how PACE had changed their lives, a few workers noted some benefits. One worker in Bangalore, for example, recalled a useful class on social entitlement, which had taught her about certain government benefits.[175] Most workers, however, valued PACE for the temporary relief the training sessions offered them away from the factory floor.[176] Notably, none of the interviewees said PACE had made any meaningful difference in their lives or made them feel more empowered or in control at work. On the contrary, they felt profoundly powerless in improving their working conditions and pay. Malathi (not her real name), a South Indian woman in her mid-30s, attended PACE in 2019 and was most outspoken on this issue. When we met in the autumn of 2019, she had just entered her twelfth year of employment at a Shahi-owned factory in Bangalore.[177] Malathi's assessment of PACE captured a position widely shared among interviewees, which was that the programme ignored their priorities of low wages, excessive production pressure, and culture of abusive management. According to Malathi, she and other female workers were constantly insulted and shouted at by factory supervisors expecting her to produce in eight hours what she believed should take 11. When we spoke again over Zoom nearly one and a half years later, Malathi told me that since the outbreak of Covid-19, Shahi

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[175] Group interview Bangalore 7 September 2019.
[176] Group interview Bangalore 7 September 2019; Group interview Bangalore 19 October 2019; Group interview Delhi 27 September 2019; Group interview Delhi 13 October 2019.
[177] To protect Malathi's identity, I use a pseudonym and do not cite the exact Shahi factory (plant number) where she works.

raised the daily production goals even further to compensate for lost orders and income.[178] These circumstances caused her extreme headaches and stress and a feeling of despair over having no choice but to accept the daily indignities. "I have to continue [working at Shahi]," Malathi said, "because I have to take care of my children." [179]

5.2.1 Work-Floor Abuse

In both Bangalore and Delhi, female workers cited work-floor abuse as a major source of humiliation and disempowerment and felt unable to protect themselves from exploitation and mistreatment. Like the other women interviewed in Bangalore, Malathi is affiliated with the Garment Labour Union (GLU), a garment worker-led union in Bangalore.[180]

The workers told me their managers routinely berate them as useless and lazy in front of their colleagues and use slurs like "donkeys" and "piece of shit" on the pretence of motivating them to work harder. Asking for leave days could trigger additional abuse, workers from both cities said, such as being told that "this is not a charity organisation".[181] This unrelenting production pressure has caused serious health problems. Scared of angering their bosses, many women told me they tried to avoid taking bathroom or water breaks and often rushed through lunch, resulting in headaches, nausea, dizziness, exhaustion, and workers regularly collapsing on the factory floor.

In Delhi, workers said supervisors' pressure to forego the use of bathroom and drinking breaks significantly undermined their health.[182] In Bangalore, women experienced similar pressures but faced an additional problem; the toilets in their division were rarely cleaned and many of them did not lock properly.[183] "They are only clean when buyers come to visit," said Malathi. Most

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[178] For more information on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted suppliers, see the website of the Worker Rights Consortium https://www.workersrights.org/issues/covid-19/ Accessed 24 June 2022.

[179] Zoom Meeting Malathi London February 2021.

[180] However, as we will see later, her status as a union member does not offer her much protection at work.

[181] Group interview Bangalore 7 September 2019; Group interview Bangalore 19 October 2019; Group interview Bangalore 22 October 2019.

[182] Group interview Delhi 27 September 2019; Group interview Delhi 13 October 2019.

[183] Group interview Bangalore 7 September 2019; Group interview Bangalore 19 October 2019' Group interview Bangalore 22 October 201.

other times they stink so badly that "those of us who work close to the toilets have to hold our noses." Complaining is pointless, according to Malathi, as she believes her managers would simply tell her "it's not our problem." In Bangalore, some supervisors used sexualised and vulgar insults to intimidate workers, accusing workers of coming to work "only to show off your body", or to "play with your pubic hair".[184]

The prevalence of work-floor abuse is well understood within the TBF world. As mentioned in the previous chapter, business feminists from the ICRW, BSR, and another NGOs involved in PACE were well aware of the "culture of abuse"[185] and "crazy hours"[186] that pervade the sector.[187] PACE, however, does not acknowledge this problem – an omission that felt unpalatable to Malathi. In her view, PACE could support her and her co-workers more effectively if it focused on teaching "our supervisors to respect us and recognise that we have human feelings". She even broached the topic in a PACE session but was told to not make a big deal out of it. According to Malathi, the trainer said to her:

> "In your family, you have your husband, your father, or your mother yell at you, and you don't feel bad when they do… you don't take it seriously. Similarly, you should consider supervisors part of your family and don't get stressed from what they tell you".

Other workers recalled PACE trainers advising them to deal with abuse by "asking other workers to help you finish your work" or "nicely ask the supervisor to please stop shouting [but then] give him the numbers he asked for". Workers were, in other words, told to simply accept their abuse – a message that contradicts the supposedly emancipatory spirit of PACE.

The 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) built into PACE was acutely felt by these women. Particularly poignant were the experiences of Indira, a woman, in her mid-20s who joined Shahi when she was 18. When asked which class most stood out to her, she talked about a session that dealt with sexual harassment. According to Indira, the PACE trainer at Shahi had instructed the

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[184] Group interview Bangalore 7 September 2019.
[185] Remote Online Interview Anna October 2020.
[186] Personal Interview Amber Washington DC January 2019.
[187] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.

group to "adopt a preventative attitude", meaning that "if a supervisor or another man asks for our phone number, we should step back, tell him we don't carry a phone, and keep it to ourselves".[188] These instructions contradicted the government-mandated sexual harassment training that Indira had previously taken at Shahi, where she learned to use the company's complaint system.[189] Indira had found that training empowering, a sentiment shared by some colleagues in Bangalore, who said it gave them the courage to lodge a grievance. For Indira, PACE reversed these gains. Being told to "show restraint and not talk to colleagues" in the event a male colleague came on to her "instilled fear" in her, she said, and made her more hesitant to speak out.[190] Two other women who said they attended this same session confirmed Indira's account of the training. Given how rife sexual harassment is in the Indian garment industry, such counter-productive messaging can lead to serious problems. (The problem has been documented in multiple reports by local unions and NGOs and made headlines globally in 2021, when 20-year-old Jeyasre Kathiravel, who made clothes for H&M, was reportedly raped and killed by her supervisor after he had harassed her for months).[191]

The negative and demeaning experiences faced by Indira, Malathi, and their colleagues, as outlined in this section, illustrate the problems that can arise when 'empowerment' programmes are detached from their beneficiaries' priorities and demands. For the women, 'doing good' meant confronting and redressing a problem that PACE discursively denies even exists: the uneven power dynamic between workers and managers. The PACE *theory* is blind to the sweatshop conditions that flow from this asymmetry. The PACE *practice*, as described by the workers, tells workers to simply accept them.

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[188] Group interview Delhi 13 October 2019.

[189] See Human Rights Watch for more information about this regulation. https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/14/no-metoo-women-us/poor-enforcement-indias-sexual-harassment-law Accessed 10 May 2022.

[190] Group interview Delhi 13 October 2019.

[191] Sexual violence is pervasive across the garment industry. In January 2021, 20-year-old Jeyasre Kathiravel was reportedly raped and killed by her supervisor after he had harassed her for months. Kathiravel made clothes for H&M at a factory owned by Eastman Exports, a large Indian exporter that also supplies The Gap. Since that tragic death, more than 90 groups have urged H&M, The Gap, and other clients of Eastman Exports to sign on to a binding contract to end gender-based violence. Gap has thus far refused to commit to such an agreement.

This seeming contradiction – CSR is supposed to improve, not worsen work – resonates with studies by anthropologists and other social scientists that found points of disconnect between the ideals with which CSR programmes were designed and how they were received on the ground (De Neve 2012; Siddiqi 2020; Khan and Lund-Thomsen 2011). One study that stands out examined how workers in the South Indian garment hub of Tiruppur engaged with ethical audit regimes (De Neve 2012). Rather than pursuing jobs at firms known to be compliant with audit norms, many workers in this study avoided these companies, feeling that the strict regulations would "rob them of control over their own labour, freedom and dignity at work" (De Neve 2012, 21). Instead, many workers opted for "noncompliant, flexible workshops" (De Neve 2012). Like PACE, these types of ethical audits apply "generic codes to heterogenous networks" (Ruwanpura 2011, 201) and promote a "universal" ethics characteristic of a "neoliberal form of indirect rule" (Dolan 2010, 39).

Another example is the factory safety agreement negotiated by Bangladeshi unions, international union federations, labour groups and global buyers in the wake of the Rana Plaza collapse. While hailed by many NGOs in the Global North as "a game changer and new model for Corporate Social Responsibility" for how it improves factory safety, the agreement created new anxieties among some workers, worried that the new safety requirements might force their employers to shut down their factories (Siddiqi 2020, 379). The safety agreement may have moreover, have widened the gap between politically connected Bangladeshi union federations and more radical (Ashraf and Prentice 2019). Notwithstanding these ambiguities, the dominant narrative around this safety initiative is a positive one, an outcome that reflects the "deeply asymmetrical" relationship between Northern labour groups and workers in the South (Siddiqi 2020, 372).

5.2.2 Poverty Wage

Remarkably, none of the women I spoke to seemed aware that, as discussed earlier, a key objective of PACE is to raise their wages through promotions. For Malathi, the path to a decent wage that PACE purports to open up was neither realistic nor appealing. While she had no shortage of confidence, assertiveness, or wits, she expressed no desire to reinvent herself as a supervisor or manager. Rather, she wanted Shahi to pay her a wage high enough to take care of

her family. For that, she needed her wage to be doubled, she said, to about $249 a month.[192] The notion that their employer underpaid them was universally shared among workers, with multiple women noting that the large volumes they produced daily rendered their poverty wage unfair. Their wish was not to elevate themselves from their colleagues (through promotions) but for Shahi to share its gains more evenly and pay all workers a fair wage.

The idea that financial skills and better saving habits could ease their economic struggles seemed fantastical to the workers. When I asked them to describe their PACE financial planning classes, they used the word "optimistic".[193] One woman noted that "they make it seem really easy to save money".[194] Another recalled telling the trainer that their wages were too low to set money aside, only to be told that "everyone can save, even if it's just 10 rupees [$0.14]" - a comment she found demeaning.

Workers' frustration with their low wages and PACE's 'optimistic' and sometimes patronising pedagogy fitted a broader theme that recurred throughout the interviews, namely that PACE expected workers to individually solve problems that their employer caused or exacerbated. In Delhi, the subject of insufficient toilet and water breaks prompted a young woman to note that "there is a discrepancy between what [the PACE trainers] teach us about health and what management does". Malathi voiced similar frustration:

> "It's good that we learn about healthy diets and cleanliness, but we can't practice most of it. The special cleaners that I need to scrub the floor properly and the calcium supplements and vegetables I want to give my children, I just can't afford them".[195]

The resignation that PACE trainers allegedly displayed toward workers' poverty wages echoed the fatalism of the broader FCR paradigm towards unequal and exploitative power structures (see Chapter 4). Garment jobs, in this telling, are not low-paid because of an unequal distribution of surplus, but because the skills they require are of inherently low value. In *'Advancing Women,*

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[192] Group interview Bangalore 7 September 2019; Zoom Meeting Malathi London February 2021.
[193] Group interview Bangalore 19 October 2019.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Group interview Bangalore 7 September 2019.

Changing Lives', the ICRW goes along with this framing, describing garment workers as "young, undereducated [and] low-skilled".[196] In the eyes of the women's institute, the financial difficulties faced by many of these women stem from their lack of skills, "exposure" and confidence, as these factors limit women's options to jobs that, in this (uncritical) telling, happen to be low-skilled and thus low-paid.[197] Feminists have critiqued such essentialised notions of 'cheap labour' for decades. Cynthia Enloe's personal reflections on this subject are particularly pertinent. In *The Curious Feminist*, Enloe (2004, 2) writes that:

> "'[F]or so long I was satisfied to use (to think with) the phrase "cheap labour". In fact, I even thought using the phrase made me sound (to myself and to others) as if I were a critically thinking person, someone equipped with intellectual energy. It was only when I began, thanks to the nudging of feminist colleagues, to turn the phrase around, to say instead "labour made cheap", that I realized how lazy I actually had been. Now whenever I write "labour made cheap" on a blackboard, people in the room call out, "By whom?" "How?" They are expanding our investigatory agenda. They are calling on me, on all of us, to exert more intellectual energy".

When we apply such 'critical curiosity' to PACE and the Gap value chain, we see that it is not just Gap who, through its purchasing practices keeps women's labour 'cheap', but also 'regional sweatshop lords' (Mezzadri 2017) such as Shahi. This is made evident by three private letters that Shahi sent to the state government of Karnataka in 2018, home to Shahi's factories in Bangalore. In these letters, Shahi urges the government to cancel the then-planned minimum wage increase for garment workers. If the weekly minimum wage would be raised from $27 to $39, as planned, Shahi would "shift their factories…to other states".[198] The increase was never

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[196] The ICRW describes garment workers as "young, undereducated [and] low-skilled" women who lack the "exposure" and skills to effectively manage "their time…the stress of relationships…and plan for their futures". Gap promises to make these women "bolder, braver and able to negotiate their problems more effectively"[196].

[197] The ICRW (2013, 6) describes garment workers as "young, undereducated [and] low-skilled" women who lack the "exposure" and skills to effectively manage "their time…the stress of relationships…and plan for their futures".

[198] Letter 1 dated 17 January 2018 from Shahi Exports Pvt. Ltd to the Secretary of Labour, State Government of Karnataka, Bangalore; Letter 2 dated 22 January 2018 from Shahi Exports Pvt. Ltd to the Secretary of Labour, State Government of Karnataka, Bangalore ; Letter 3 dated 28 February 2018 from Shahi Exports Pvt. Ltd to the Minister for Labour, Government of Karnataka, Bangalore

realised, an outcome that unions have attributed to successful lobbying efforts by the industry and has led to mass protests by garment workers in Bangalore.[199] The letters offer powerful evidence against the collaborative and conflict-free outlook through which the feminist capitalist realist (FCR) paradigm understands change in the garment industry, and buttresses the notion, held by Malathi and her colleagues, that they were exploited. In that light, it is revealing that an Indian business ratings agency has identified Shahi's "ways of managing labour costs" in 2018 – the year it sent the lobbying letters – as one of two main reasons why the manufacturer had made such a large profit that year. A second factor was Shahi's handling of worker protests and strikes, which is the topic of the next section.[200]

5.2.3 Union Marginalisation

Excessive production pressure, abusive and unhygienic working conditions, and sexualised harassment are, as noted, pervasive throughout the garment industry (Siddiqi 2009). As discussed in Chapter 3, such sweatshop conditions are compounded by management's hostility to unions in the sector and the predatory purchasing practices of lead firms, characterised by falling prices and order deadlines that are short and shifty.[201] As political economist Ashok Kumar (2020, 3) has noted:

> "Unionization in 'sweatshops' is a Sisyphean task. Workers – decomposed and dispensable – organize on their own intuitively and with great difficulty, given the circumstances. But when they demand recognition as unions or take strike action, the factory owners retaliate – often viciously".

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[199] Industriall Global Union Website. Karnataka Garment Workers Demand Agreed Minimum Wage. 19 September 2019. https://www.industriall-union.org/karnataka-garment-demand-agreed-minimum-wage Accessed 25 June 2022.

[200] India Ratings and Research Website. India Ratings Affirms Shahi Exports… 8 May 2019. https://www.indiaratings.co.inpressRelease?pressReleaseID=36929andtitle=India-Ratings-Affirms-Shahi-Exports-at-'IND-AA-'%2F-Positive%3B-Limits-Enhanced Accessed 10 February 2022.

[201] These practices place a 'sourcing and lead time squeeze' on their suppliers who, in turn, transfer this pressure to their workers and compel them to meet unrealistic production targets (Anner 2012; 2018). Over the last twenty years, while CSR regimes boomed, the prices paid to suppliers have dropped, a development that has been linked to worsening conditions, abuse and hostility to collective bargaining.

Despite its widely advertised commitment to worker well-being, Shahi appears to be no exception in this regard. Shahi does not, for example, recognise GLU or other unions. In Bangalore, GLU members such as Malathi even have to hide their union affiliation at work, they said, since their status as union members could prompt managers to "target" them with discriminatory practices.[202]

In 2018 – the same year Shahi sent out the aforementioned lobbying letters – the manufacturer made headlines after an investigation by the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), a US worker rights NGO affiliated with labour unions, found that managers at a Bangalore-based Shahi plant – a different plant than where my interviewees worked – had threatened and physically assaulted workers who tried to bargain collectively, and initiated a petition for higher wages and cleaner water.[203] According to the WRC, managers suspended and made death threats to several pro-union workers, berated them as "whores" who deserved to be assaulted and killed, and instructed their colleagues to beat them up.[204] After sustained international pressure and bad press, the company reinstated the workers and fired the managers who had initiated or directed the violence and abuse.[205] The conflict highlights the problem with FCR's pragmatic blindness towards class conflict, power asymmetries, and exploitation: it renders the violence faced by women invisible – a topic discussed in more detail below – and contradicts the argument that unions and other labour rights organisations have made: that workers need self-representation, collective bargaining, and binding accords with employers, so that they can shift the balance of power in their workplaces in their favour (Anner 2018; Kumar 2020; Mezzadri 2017).

More generally, Shahi's anti-union attitude and lobbying actions speak to a broader ideological divide between neoliberal understandings of ethical business – with its emphasis on individual participation, consensus, efficiency, and inclusiveness within existing power structures (Brown,

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[202] This experience of union repression is shared by other Gap workers, as documented in a 2018 investigation by Global Labour Justice (GLJ) and the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA). https://globallaborjustice.org/gap-gbv/ Accessed 20 June 2022.

[203] Worker Rights Consortium Website. Shahi Exports Pvt. Ltd. WRC Factory Investigation. 2018. https://www.workersrights.org/factory-investigation/shahi-exports-pvt-ltd/ Accessed 27 June 2022.

[204] Ibid.

[205] Shahi responded to the allegations by stating that it could not find any proof of the allegations and cited its commitment "to improving worker welfare." https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/19/india-clothing-factories-shahi-exports-wrc-watchdog

2015) – and labour-driven ones that seek to shift the balance of power in favour of workers. While the former portrays "unions and collective action [as] old fashioned and irrelevant" (Kumar 2020, 38), erases questions of labour exploitation and domination (Roy 2012, 108) and is committed to the idea that sweatshop conditions can be eradicated on voluntary terms, the latter considers collective bargaining and binding commitments as essential ingredients for change.

It is important to note, as Salmivaara (2018, 332) has done, that the failure of CSR programs in the garment sector to recognize "power imbalances" and engage with "trade union rights" is "not a coincidence but intended". That is because, as Chapter 3 has also argued, the disempowerment and vulnerability of garment workers in the Global South is no unfortunate side-effect of corporate business models, but the foundation of their success (Ashraf and Prentice 2019, Salmivaara 2018).

5.3 Business Benefits

As part of its 'doing well by doing good' promise, TBF programmes promise participating companies different kinds of commercial benefits. As Chapter 4 explained, the 'doing well' component is born out of a sense of pragmatism, as business feminists perceive it necessary for mobilising the corporate 'buy in' needed to get women-focused CSR projects off the ground. This section investigates how the main commercial goal of PACE – which is to raise women's productivity – plays out in practice. It finds that the programme's business goals subsumed its social objectives, reinforced the production pressure placed on workers, exposed them to unpaid overtime, and exacerbated their exploitation.

According to the ICRW, PACE has delivered Shahi significant financial returns. However, the claims made by the women's institute on these successes raise arguably more questions than they answer. Like other TBF programmes – discussed in Chapter 4 – the metrics used to measure impact focused more on behavioural indicators than material ones. At Shahi, the ICRW, for example, found that PACE delivered:

- a "165% rise in [workers' ability] to guide their peers when they make a mistake"

- a "three-fold increase in being able to talk to their senior managers about disagreements with their direct managers"
- a "10% increase in arriving on time for work"
- other "positive changes in the work environment, such as women's improved communication, willingness to help others, and seeking suggestions to improve work performance".

One reason to treat these claims with scepticism is that, as the ICRW admits in '*Advancing Women, Changing Lives*', it did not use control groups in these measurements, which complicates causality claims.[206] Another is that, if the climate at Shahi is only half as intimidating as the workers describe, one might wonder how a 'willingness to help others' can be credibly measured.

More robust are the aforementioned RCT studies, run by scholars from US universities in collaboration with Shahi management. The results of these studies were published in a paper titled '*Soft Skills to Pay the Bills*' and other publications, and have been cited by Gap, the ICRW, and Shahi as powerful evidence of PACE's success. The authors found that PACE helped workers "maintain motivation to achieve hourly and daily targets", made workers "20 percent more productive", and delivered Shahi a net return of 258% just eight months after participants completed their PACE course (Adhvaryu et al. 2018). The significance of these findings is not, however, straightforward or uncontested. Within a neoliberal mode of reason, where efficiency and productivity gains trump basic questions of rights and justice (Brown, 2015), they might signal an important step forward, but Malathi and her colleagues held a different view. Their accounts painted a deeply problematic picture of how these results were achieved and suggested that the programme's business gains undermined the 'empowerment' gains they were designed to be aligned with.

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[206] The ICRW (2013, 13) report notes that: "[b]ecause P.A.C.E. is a workplace-based program where the intent is for participants to share their learning, none of the site evaluations included a factory-based control group (women who were working with the same factory and had not participated in the program) with whom to compare the outcomes. Nevertheless, the researchers observed a consistent pattern of positive changes in both social and business outcomes across all six sites, which provides a high level of confidence in the reliability of the findings".

5.3.1 Sunday Classes

The overall content and spirit of their PACE classes made it evident to the workers that the principal purpose of PACE was not to help but to extract more production out of them.[207] Sessions on problem-solving or communication skills, they said, in practice often meant "how to cooperate with your supervisor and be nice with management and listen to them," leading workers to believe that PACE's main goal was to make them "better workers".[208] "It's like telling us *give us our targets*," one woman said, "but in a really nice way". [209]

Another question worth asking is *when* – or in whose time – PACE delivered these impressive returns. In Bangalore, women said that in the past, Shahi organised PACE sessions on Sundays, their only day off. Workers did not get paid for this time, but instead were given lunch and, when classes involved games, had a chance to win prizes. According to Anita (not her real name), a former garment worker who founded and directs the Bangalore-based GLU union, some workers attended Sunday sessions purely for the lunch, since for many "that is the only good meal they get in the whole week".[210] Asked how she learned about these Sunday sessions, Anita said women used to cancel their union training, also organised on Sundays, citing PACE as a reason. PACE, in other words, competed with the union for workers' time and attention.[211]

According to Gap, Sunday sessions were common in the early years of PACE, but are now the exception.[212] The company contends that participation in PACE is voluntary, suggesting the programme's unpaid Sunday classes comply with India's labour law, which requires companies to pay workers double for overtime work. Malathi said she only attended one Sunday session since "it is the only day I have with my children" and she was not aware PACE would take place

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[207] Group interview Bangalore 7 September 2019; Group interview Bangalore 19 October 2019; Group interview Bangalore 22 October 2019; Group interview Delhi 27 September 2019; Group interview Delhi 13 October 2019.

[208] Group interview Delhi 27 September 2019.

[209] Group interview Bangalore 22 October 2019.

[210] Personal Interview Anita (GLU) September 2019; Sunday classes were also noted by the anonymous PACE NGO partner in Delhi: Personal Interview Anonymous NGO Delhi October 2019.

[211] Personal Interview Anita Bangalore 7 September 2019

[212] In an email to me, Gap admitted that "in the early years of P.A.C.E. program implementation, one session per module was conducted on Sundays in an effort to cover 3-4 hours of learning content for larger groups", but that Sunday classes are now the exception.

in her free time when she initially signed up for it. While Malathi felt comfortable dropping out of PACE's Sunday classes, one of her colleagues believed that "once you sign up, you *have* to attend".[213] This is a troubling suggestion, given how pervasive overtime violations are in this sector. Labour scholars have observed that workers often accept excessive and unpaid overtime out of fear that refusing to do so might lead to reprisals (Appelbaum and Lichtenstein 2016). Against this backdrop of fear and force, it stands to reason that scheduling PACE classes outside working hours, notwithstanding the programme's ostensibly voluntary nature, renders it a risk factor for overtime violations.

Nirmala, an India-based representative of the ICRW, found Sunday classes "absolutely unacceptable" and noted, with frustration, that her organisation "had no power to do or say anything about it" to Gap.[214] Her comment, I argue, underscored how little leverage business feminists often have over their corporate TBF partners**,** a topic that Section 5.4 expands on. Nirmala felt slightly more comfortable with the 50/50 division she understood to currently be the norm at PACE suppliers and appears to be the rule at Shahi.[215] Under this arrangement, classes take place at the beginning or end of the working day and are equally split between work and off-work time. Still, Nirmala said, the question of timing remained tense due to its detrimental effects on workers' productivity and the pressure placed on workers to meet their daily quotas:

> "I remember one of the early conversations we had with Gap… what was an issue not just for the factories but also for the women if you ask them to do eight hours of work and then ask them to stay back for half an hour or come half an hour early to work…[that] doesn't [always] work for them and you don't want to give away your half an hour for the training because, essentially, it impacts your productivity" [216]

What is suggested here is that employers, despite the structural productivity gains PACE reportedly brings them, are not always willing to make the initial investments required for such

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[213] Group interview Bangalore 7 September 2019.
[214] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020
[215] The RCT study mentions this 50/50 split, and the anonymous PACE partner in Delhi also understood this to be the norm. (Personal Interview Anonymous NGO Delhi October 2019, 14:30 minutes)
[216] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020

results. Perhaps this is unsurprising in an industry where "failure to maintain labour discipline" presents an "existential threat to producers" (Kumar 2020, 5). It does, however, raise serious questions on how PACE, and PACE-like programmes, might incentivise employers to schedule the training outside working hours. Indeed, in a context of highly unequal power relations, rampant unpaid overtime, and a weak union presence, there is a real risk that empowerment programmes of this kind end up worsening workers' workloads and increasing their risk of overtime violations.

These questions gain urgency, given that, in contrast to Shahi, many manufacturers appear to consider such programmes more as a burden than a business opportunity. According to my respondents, factory managers often worry about the time and resources that these programmes require and how they might disrupt the production process. [217] As an NGO representative involved in PACE[218] explained, now that "every [brand] has different programmes… this is adding to the production stress" in factories, where production is already like "clockwork" and it can be "challenging to pull out people from their production work and have an interactive session with them".[219] A 2020 study by the Royal Holloway University of London into the perceptions of factory managers on PACE-like programmes suggests these concerns are widely shared (Alexander et al. 2020). Of the 31 Bangladesh-based factory managers interviewed for this study, 30 said they viewed these programmes more as a burden than a profitable opportunity and that they ran them reluctantly "to please the buyers" (Alexander et al. 2020, 18).

A study on the perceptions of soccer ball suppliers in Siolkot, Pakistan, on the CSR policies of their Northern buyers found a similar disconnect (Khan and Lund-Thomsen 2011). Rather than embracing the norms and values of CSR standards, suppliers perceived them as being imposed on them by buyers. Unhappy about the costs and the patronizing moral character of these standards, many saw CSR as "part of the wider historic project of Western imperialism in the developing world" (Khan and Lund-Thomsen 2011, 73). These shortcomings reflect the wider top-down nature of CSR standards. As other studies into the effects of CSR on supply chain

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[217] Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020; Remote Online Interview Pooja August 2020; Personal Interview Anonymous NGO Delhi October 2019.
[218] Personal Interview Delhi October 2019
[219] Personal Interview Delhi October 2019

workers have found, "the universal rights and values incarnated in standards are largely a priori formulations that have been developed with little [if any] consultation with producers or Southern stakeholders who represent them" (Dolan 2010, 39).

5.3.2 Extra Exploitation

Notwithstanding such scepticism among manufacturers, the ICRW and RCT evaluations nonetheless reinforce the claim that employers stand to gain significantly from PACE. In fact, these studies *only* prove the programme's business impact. When it comes to its *social* goals – empowering women and raising their wages – the evidence is ambiguous and contradictory. The meaning of empowerment, in these studies, is emptied of its material dimension, imagined purely in terms of behavioural change, psychological adjustments, and earning 'potential'. In a widely published Gap press release from 2020, the President of the ICRW cites "150 % in self-efficacy and 100 % increase in workplace influence" to illustrate how PACE is changing women's lives.[220] Other success indicators took the form of self-esteem (49 %) and work efficacy (119 %) gains (ICRW 2013). Similarly, Shahi boasts that PACE has improved the "self-esteem" and "efficiency" of tens of thousands of its workers, allowing these women "to unlock their true potential and fulfil their dreams" without any reference to wage gains. [221] Thus, both Shahi and the ICRW depict women's behavourial and psychological changes – originally framed as means to achieve wage gains and better savings outcomes – as markers of empowerment, and as evidence that PACE is 'changing lives'.

It appears that only one study – the aforementioned RCT research – has thus far assessed PACE's impact on wages, yet their findings contradict, rather than affirm, the idea that PACE has realised its wage improvement goals (Adhvaryu et al. 2018). The authors found that PACE participants only made 50 cents *per month* more than their peers, leading them to conclude that a

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[220] Business Wire Website. 500,000 Women and Girls Complete Gap Inc.'s Global education and Life Skills Training Program. 24 February 2020. https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20200224005180/en/500000-Women-and-Girls-Complete-Gap-Inc.'s-Global-Education-and-Life-Skills-Training-Program Accessed 20 June 2022.

[221] Shahi Website. Blog post. https://www.shahi.co.in/blog/?p=662 Initially accessed 1 May 2021. By 25 June 2022, the language has been changed.

"substantial wedge" existed "between productivity and wages" (Adhvaryu et al. 2018, 1). What can be inferred from these findings is that Shahi has not shared the financial gains of PACE with its workers. Or, from a labour-focused perspective (Kumar 2020), workers apparently could not convert the returns generated by PACE into wage gains. In this sense, PACE vividly illustrates an important root cause behind poor wages in the sector, which is workers' lack of power to demand a fair share of the value their labour produces (Kumar 2020). The authors nonetheless frame the programme as a success. Echoing the ICRW's optimism, they argue that women's demonstrated improvements in "self-regard" and "optimism" about their career potential display PACE's positive social impact.

This paradoxical reading of the findings mirrors the broader ideological divide in CSR scholarship and practice, as noted earlier. On the one hand, characteristic of the RCT studies, mainstream analysis of business labour relations maintains a largely "individualistic moral understanding of corporate responsibility" (Kumar 2020, 52) and "renders ethics into a strategic management issue" (Fleming and Jones, 2013, xiv). This position has its roots in the 'moral' business case for corporate responsibility, as advocated by Milton Friedman (1962; 1970) and discussed in Chapter 3, which holds that CSR is only justifiable if it makes "money for the firm[s]" (Fleming and Jones, 3). On the other hand, a Marxist or political economy perspective emphasises "the underlying logic of capital – competition and exploitation – and the agency of workers to collectively change their own conditions" (Kumar 2020, 42). It gives a central role to unions as vital institutions for change (Kumar 2020, Appelbaum and Lichtenstein 2016). The implementation of PACE in India suggests that when the former approach is implemented, and its 'win-win' premise meets a less harmonious reality, its 'doing well' goals risk eclipsing their social objectives. In the case of PACE, the programme's business goals overrode its social objectives, reinforced the production pressure placed on workers, and increased their risk of overtime violations. As such, it supports the theories and empirical studies by critics of CSR, who have argued that CSR programmes can worsen workers' exploitation when they are not led and monitored by unions (Anner 2018; Mezzadri 2017).

5.4 Knowledge Production

If the power dynamics in Gap's supply chain subverted PACE's empowerment goals, as discussed in the previous section, they also affected the research processes set up by Gap to measure PACE's impact. Knowledge-making is central to the neoliberal project. As discussed in Chapter 3, since at least the 1960s, the popularisation, institutionalisation, and naturalisation of neoliberal ideologies have greatly relied on the work (and support) of knowledge and opinion makers at think tanks, universities, and the media (Harvey 2005; Jones 2012; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). Under NGOisation and philanthro-capitalism, NGOs and foundations are increasingly critiqued for playing a similar role (Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014; Fong and Nacschek 2021), contributing to a reality wherein "every form of life and knowledge" is now subordinated "to the logic of the market" (Federici and Linebaugh 2018, 380).

Feminists have played a prominent role in exposing the ideological foundations of ostensibly value-free research. This is, some say, because feminism is, at its core, a "critique of knowledge formations" and thus closely attuned to the social hierarchies that are inherent in, and are reproduced by, research (Obler et al. 2021). Indeed, feminism's insistence that "neutrality, in the sense of freedom from *all* social values and interests, is neither possible nor desirable" (Harding, 1995, 9) has rendered its methodological approaches suitable to the task of untangling the hidden ideological functions research can serve. Against that backdrop, Chandra Mohanty (2013), writing about neoliberalism in academia, has persuasively argued that "the will to critique" free-market biases in feminist research is critical in resisting neoliberal hegemony.

In TBF scholarship, this will to critique is evident in, for example, the work of Kathryn Moeller (2018) and Adrienne Roberts (2012), who have both pointed out that research – including, but not limited to, programme evaluation studies – is a central tenet of the TBF project. The production of "new knowledge about the social relations of gender and the gendered dimensions of markets and economics", notes Roberts (2012, 87- 88), provides the "epistemological underpinning for the politico-economic project of TBF". Universities, and business schools in particular, are "deeply embedded in the construction of [TBF's business case] framework" (Roberts 2012, 92), as the previous section has also illustrated.

Applied to PACE, such a will to critique helps us with questions such as: Who controls the parameters and methods of the research? What questions are left out? What is the relationship between the researcher and the researched? How do the power dynamics between them determine outcomes? Guided by questions such as these, this section finds that the methodologies and partnership arrangements used by Gap to evaluate PACE produced unreliable outcomes, deepened the instrumentalisaton of women – both ideologically and in practice – and may have caused its research subjects, women workers, additional anxiety. These problems, I will argue, illustrate how corporations, through TBF projects, can 'co-opt' feminist NGOs to produce and legitimate gendered knowledge projects that not only mystify and individualise the systemic causes of women's exploitation and suffering but might cause them additional stress.

Gap has, as mentioned, structured its PACE evaluation studies in a similar way as its core business: by outsourcing it to various external actors. As Gap's main 'knowledge partner', the ICRW played a principal role in this process, depending primarily on its team in New Delhi, which led and coordinated these evaluations.[222] Its 2013 flagship evaluation study *Advancing Women, Changing Lives* combined years of PACE assessments from five different countries (ICRW 2013). For these assessments, researchers surveyed and interviewed workers and managers about workers' productivity, work performance, retention, mindset, and self-esteem, both before and after the workers took PACE. '*Advancing Women, Changing Lives*' vindicates PACE's 'win-win' theory of change, stating that:

> "From improving female garment workers' lives to boosting vendors' performance, the programme has proved to be scalable and sustainable with the potential to advance tens of thousands more women – and change even more lives – across the globe"

In stark contrast to the grim accounts offered by Malathi and her colleagues, the workers' voices presented in the report echo the "privatised notions of agency" characteristic of neoliberal market rationality (Mohanty 2013, 974). The report is full of quotes validating PACE's original premise: that production inefficiencies are caused by workers' deficient skill sets and attitudes. Evading any "critique of power", these quotes reinforce the "flattened" and "generic concepts of

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222 Remote Online Interview Pooja August 2020; Remote Online Interview Nirmala London July 2020.

difference" that typify (neo)liberal depictions of women in the Global South (Mohanty 2013, 973). Some examples of women's testimonies are:

> "Earlier, if there was a mistake in my work, I never explained it (to the supervisor), but now I have started explaining it by saying "Sir, I need to make this change or that change." He likes this and says "I respect you for this." Earlier I never used to talk with confidence and used to talk whichever way I felt like. But now I explain things to him properly." —PACE Graduate, India (ICRW 2013, 17)

> "I always hid my mistakes because I was afraid the line leader would blame me, and I never helped anyone else when I had free time. Now I help others and we all work together to complete our orders on time." – PACE Graduate, Cambodia (ICRW 2013, 19)

> "Before, I ignored minor mistakes, but now after the class, I see to it that everything is fine, and I feel more comfortable doing so. If it is wrong, I notify the mistake to the captain and go to the office to fix the mistake." —PACE Graduate, Vietnam (ICRW 2013, 18)

> "In the past, I did not put a lot of effort into my work, but now I try harder. For example, now I sew much more than the number of shirts I could sew earlier." —PACE Graduate, Cambodia (ICRW 2013, 18)

How to make sense of this selection of statements? What do we need to know about the interview process that generated these quotes and the context in which they were extracted and selected? What might such queries tell us about the broader workings and effects of TBF? None of the former and current ICRW representatives listed on the '*Advancing Women, Changing Lives*' study were available to speak about the study. Likewise, my requests to interview CARE International about their experiences evaluating PACE were repeatedly declined. However, interviews with three former ICRW-affiliated researchers – Nirmala, Pooja and Angie – and the direct involvement of the first two in evaluating PACE in India – sheds a light on the pressures, power dynamics and ideological parameters in which '*Advancing Women, Changing Lives'* was manufactured.

5.4.1 The Pressure to Prove

If Malathi and her colleagues were acutely aware of PACE's for-profit goals, so was Pooja, an India-based ICRW researcher with extensive PACE evaluation experiences. According to Pooja, the evaluation process was dominated by metrics aimed at validating the 'business case' for PACE.[223] A dedicated and seasoned women's rights advocate, Pooja found Gap's fixation on "the numbers and ROI and all of that" rather frustrating.[224] The research questions had to be "justified over and over and explained to Gap", she said, in part because they could not "push the boundaries too much" with Gap's suppliers.[225] This led to a research design that used metrics quite different from those the ICRW "would ideally push for".[226] Financial and productivity returns overshadowed the, for Pooja, more relevant question of "what was actually happening to the women". [227]

Pooja felt her influence over the research design and processes was severely limited. Far from encouraging her to adopt a fierce "feminist curiosity" towards other women's lives (Enloe 2004, 1), Gap seemed to have decided a priori what kinds of outcomes it deemed desirable and permissible. Within a FCR paradigm, where the 'buy in' of corporate clients is understood as necessary in getting 'empowerment' projects off the ground, these restrains are easy to justify. But, as critical feminists would note, they lead to flawed knowledge-making processes that distort the truths about women's lives and needs (Moeller 2013). As for Gap's evaluation process, its outcomes were heavily shaped by its subcontracted structure, the lack of trust between research actors, the hostile and high-pressure environment in factories, and the nature of the research questions. Pooja experienced many of these limitations first-hand.

5.4.2 Subcontracted Data and Weak Ties

In addition to the pressure for positive results, a second factor that undermined Pooja's sense of control over the quality and relevance of the data resulted from the fragmented structure of the evaluation process and the weak ties between research actors in this system. The subcontracted

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[223] Remote Online Interview Pooja August 2020
[224] Remote Online Interview Pooja August 2020
[225] Remote Online Interview Pooja August 2020
[226] Ibid.
[227] Ibid.

structure of the evaluation studies meant that evaluations in countries other than India were particularly challenging. That is because India-based factories, such as Shahi, could be visited and studied by the ICRW team. In other countries, they primarily relied on external partners, Pooja said, who did not provide consistently strong data.[228] Pooja recollected an occasion when Gap asked her team to analyse data that one of its other non-profit partners had collected in Cambodia. Upon reviewing these materials, Pooja found a "huge mix-up" in baseline and endline data had taken place, which rendered the data useless. Dismayed by the situation, she recalled conveying to Gap that "your entire sample is mixed up" and will not give an "accurate reflection of what it is you are measuring".[229] Gap responded with "anxiety", Pooja recalled, asking her:

> "why has this not changed and why has that not changed? And we were like 'because your entire sample was mixed up it is impossible to measure change'"

Even when her team could pick its own research partners, data quality remained a concern. The geographical and sometimes cultural distance between Pooja's team and the subcontracted partners, and the conditions in which these partners had to gather their data, presented a host of practical problems. Finding suitable partners in countries they had little knowledge of proved "incredibly difficult", for example. It meant that the ICRW ended up working with local NGOs it "sometimes barely knew" and that lacked an organic connection or existing relationship with the workers. Typically, Pooja would meet these partners at the research site a few days before the evaluation began. There, she would train them in the PACE methodology before returning to Delhi, where she would later receive the data. While some of the transcripts sent to her were "really good", Pooja often found herself looking at interview data she could barely make sense of.

> "I remember writing some of these [evaluation] reports and I'm like I have to explain this data somehow and the people from Gap are going to ask me for every data point 'why has this not shifted' 'how do you explain this?' And I know nothing about that context, right? Even if I read up and get the literature and all of that, I don't know enough about that particular factory, you can only guess...we have very sparse transcripts... and there

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[228] Ibid.
[229] Remote Online Interview Pooja August 2020

is this pressure that you have to show change and sometimes there is no change"[230]

The research process, then, reflected the same fickleness and weak ties that characterise the relationship between suppliers and buyers in the apparel industry (LeBaron 2020), causing its own set of accountability problems.

5.4.3 Hostile Research Sites and Nervous Workers

The climate within factories affected the research process in an equally detrimental way. According to Pooja, interviewing workers "inside the factories" where managers had often created "an environment…based on fear" influenced women's answers.

> "There have been very few factories where we conducted research where women were comfortable. They're constantly unsure of what are these people going to ask me?"

The oppressive environment in many of these factories made them stressful and sometimes outright hostile research locations. Pooja recalled traveling to Myanmar once for a scheduled baseline evaluation, only to find that "the person in charge [at the factory] was absolutely pissed off" because the evaluation would "slow down production".[231] According to Pooja, she was sent back to Delhi before the research could even begin and only returned to Myanmar ten days later, once the issue had been resolved. But by that time "the researchers were not feeling very comfortable" with the work, as management made them feel like "intruders" and the "interviews were rushed". [232]

Critical literature on CSR, union reports, and journalistic reporting have long noted that interviewing workers in their place of work, without union protection and trusted relationships might impel workers to give strategic answers and thus produce unreliable evidence (Anner 2012; Hengeveld 2020; Lichtenstein 2016). This method of interviewing may, moreover, inflict stress on workers, for example, if they believe their answers might displease their bosses. Shahi

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[230] Remote Online Interview Pooja August 2020
[231] Ibid.
[232] Ibid.

is no exception to these problems. According to Malathi and her colleagues, their managers routinely coach them in advance of interviews with social auditors or brand representatives, and instruct them on what they can and cannot tell their interviewers. While CSR actors have dismissed these problems as technical short-comings that can be fixed with methodological tweaks, labour scholars (as discussed in Chapter 3) have argued that these flaws are built into the design of the system and serve a very specific goal: to ensure that the most egregious violations do not come to the surface (LeBaron and Lister 2016; Nova and Wegemer 2016).

Pooja was attuned to such concerns: to her, workers' discomfort and the lack of trust between the researchers and the researched seemed evident. Yet '*Advancing Women, Changing Lives*' makes no reference to such reservations or concerns. In fact, neither one of the two key studies held up by Gap as evidence of PACE's positive impact – the ICRW's evaluation and the RCT-based paper '*Soft Skills to Pay the Bills*' – takes account of how the power asymmetries of the factory floor, the absence of a strong union presence and the likely lack of trust between workers and their interviewers might have shaped the evidence they extracted from workers.

5.4.4 Intrusive and Divisive Research Questions

The question of trust is particularly pertinent to the '*Soft Skills to Pay the Bills*' study, due to the profoundly personal and arguably intrusive nature of its survey questions. The paper's methodology section reveals that workers were asked to open up about deeply personal and sensitive issues, from "conscientiousness, extraversion, locus of control, perseverance, and self-sufficiency" and mental health questions such as "hope/optimism" and "self-esteem" to their work ethic and job performance (Adhvaryu 2018, 10). Other survey questions centred on workers' anxiety and depression levels, what age they expected their children to get married, and if they "expected to be promoted in the next months" (Adhvaryu 2018, 23, 26). Guided by a diagnostic tool known as the 'Kessler Psychological Distress Scale', the researchers quantified workers' mental health both before and after taking PACE and compared these results with a control group (Adhvaryu 2018, 10). Notably, the study found no evidence that PACE improved workers' mental well-being, stating that "levels of psychological distress are unaffected by treatment" (Adhvaryu 2018, 30). But the question of how the study *itself* might have affected workers' stress levels – no trivial question given the nature of the questions, the literature on the

topic and Pooja's experiences – is not explored. The survey also contained questions that could be seen as divisive. For example, researchers asked workers to "imagine a ladder with six steps representing the worst to best worker on their production line" and compare their own performance with these colleagues (Adhvaryu 2018, 14). Again, it is not hard to see how such questions could cause tension and anxiety in a work context governed by fear.

The subcontracted nature of Gap's evaluation studies, the context in which the studies took place, the fixation on financial returns, and the intrusive-nature of the research questions all raise serious questions about the objectivity, quality, and reliability of the research. Feminist insights on neoliberal culture and knowledge-making teach us that individualised behaviour-focused 'empowerment' narratives can serve as techniques to locate the source of women's economic struggles inside themselves (Moeller 2013). The PACE evaluations, as described in this section, show us that the adverse effects arising from such research technologies go beyond the realm of the abstract when they are applied to women working in conditions of hyper-exploitation. In such a context, they not only misrepresent and depoliticise women's disempowerment but may actively worsen it.

5.4.5 Co-optation, Powerlessness and Knowledge Production

Whereas think tanks were a key vehicle for the dissemination and legitimation of free-market ideologies in the post-war era, as discussed in Chapter 3 (Harvey 2005 ; Jones 2012), the spread of NGO-isation has meant that non-profit organisations are now increasingly pulled into structures that, controlled by capital, curtail research and advocacy agendas along neoliberal lines (Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014; Fong and Naschek 2021). The uneven power dynamics between NGOs and their corporate sponsors structurally limit the abilities of NGOs to follow their independent agendas (Fong and Nasheck 2021), a tendency that, as discussed in Chapter 4, also affects the TBF world. Indeed, the sense of powerlessness, as expressed by Pooja and Nirmala around the implementation of PACE – in particular, the programme's Sunday classes – and the 'study' of PACE, offer a powerful illustration of how such dynamics and pressures affect feminists working within TBF structures. This section explores such powerlessness in relation to knowledge production and co-optation. It argues that the uneven power dynamics built into PACE, and similar TBF programmes with a research component, render feminist groups

susceptible to a form of 'co-optation' that from a Marxist, post-colonial, and critical feminist position, undermines progressive change by legitimating neoliberal power structures. At the same time, this can be seen as constructive – even pragmatic – when viewed through the lens of FCR.

Among the interviewees who said they lacked the leverage to push back against what they viewed as problematic practices was Angie, an independent researcher with a background in political economy and labour rights, who has worked with the ICRW on a large research project on working conditions in the garment industry. The research report was commissioned by two major fashion brands and required her to travel to different continents to identify key issues facing women workers. Due to Angie's concern for retaliatory steps, this analysis cannot name the brands or the other TBF actors involved in the study, nor cite directly from the report in question. After a year of extensive research, interviewing unions, industry actors, workers, and CSR bodies, Angie produced a draft report that, consistent with the broader literature, found serious workplace abuses and problems, including how managers used "violence and harassment as a disciplinary technique for workers". Referencing critical academic studies on the garment industry, Angie's report placed her findings in the context of a failing CSR regime and harmful purchasing practices by buyers, which, Angie wrote, contributed to the problems she identified.

A key recommendation offered by the report was that brands "work more with unions [and] work on issues around violence". However, to Angie's "extreme disappointment", the brands were unsatisfied with the content and told Angie they would give the draft report to another NGO partner to radically edit and finalise it.

> "They said it was gloomy, so I said 'let's sit down and work out how we can use what we have to produce something that's meaningful' and they said 'we don't have time for that'"[233]

Angie came to believe that these brands had hoped for a product similar to '*Advancing Women Changing Lives*'. They "really wanted something that they could use to sort of lobby internally

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[233] Remote Online Interview Angie New York City January 2019.

with their CSR side of the house that was more like the Gap report", she said. The antagonistic realities, violent management styles and sober view of CSR enshrined in her report did not fit this purpose at all. To ensure that the edited version of her report was not "absolutely insipid" and anodyne and retain some of its focus on violence and collective bargaining, Angie spent months assisting the NGO tasked with fixing her work. Overall, she feels she failed to accomplish this mission, as the end-product looked nothing like the draft she submitted, replacing many of the grim realities Angie documented with "a sort of euphoric [messaging that said] gosh, isn't it wonderful? CSR can really change everything!" According to Angie:

> "I tried to influence that document as much as possible but there were very, very clear limits. And they wanted something that was glossy that was easily read that they could use to sort of lobby internally".[234]

Angie, like many other researchers and NGO professionals, was not allowed by her client to own the research process, an outcome that exemplifies the power of big business to ensure its strategic needs are met within partnership structures, and that made Angie concerned about the possibility of producing rigorous research with integrity in the field.

In effect, Angie was protesting a process of co-optation in the sense that she resisted complicity in a knowledge production process that was supposedly neutral but was, in reality, heavily curated by capital to meet its strategic needs. In doing so, she rejected the paradigm at the heart of FCR reasoning – that the compromises necessary for TBF projects can be justified on the grounds of impact – and recognised that such a compromise would, in this case quite literally, erase and distort the violence and subjugation women workers faced. This chapter aims to show that the structure of TBF projects such as PACE does not make it easy for business feminists to offer such resistance, presenting them with different kinds of pressures to produce legitimate knowledge projects that not only mystify the systemic causes of women's exploitation but might even cause their beneficiaries additional workplace stress.

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[234] Ibid.

5.5 Conclusion

Unpaid Sunday classes, demeaning 'life skills' classes, hostile research environments, curated research outcomes: PACE offers a powerful illustration of the problems that can arise when a power-blind theory of change that insists on 'win-win' outcomes and is divorced from the priorities and needs of its beneficiaries is brought to life in a context shaped by power asymmetries and conflicting economic interests. The framework of FCR helps unearth the rationalities through which these problems arise, unfold, and are rationalised. If, after all, change is believed to hinge on corporate 'buy in', it makes sense that clients control the research process and, when necessary, massage the outcomes to meet their strategic preferences. When there is 'no alternative' to corporate-led change, it is pragmatic to ignore contentious topics such as anti-union discrimination, workplace abuse, and poverty wages. From this perspective, life-skills programmes such as PACE might not solve women's largest problems but surely they are better than nothing? This chapter has used empirical evidence from one group of workers to challenge such assumptions by showing the unintended side-effects that initiatives designed with such logic can present to women workers and professional feminists within TBF structures.

The findings presented in this chapter have implications not only for the empowerment training programmes currently proliferating in the global garment industry but for TBF programmes more broadly. They offer a critical insight into the debate on TBF, namely that if women are denied the chance to shape the goals and methods of the programmes that purportedly empower them and are instead expected to participate in programmes that are 'cruelly optimistic' in their promises and strategically ignorant (McGoey 2017) about the power dynamics and structural forces that shape their disempowerment – as so many TBF programmes are (Eisenstein 2017; Moeller 2018; Roberts 2015; Tornhill 2019) – the key question guiding TBF students should go beyond how (in)effective, inclusive or pointless these programmes may or may not be. Rather, as this chapter has evidenced, it should also investigate how such programmes might *worsen* women's exploitation and oppression and stunt the ability of professional feminists to effectively support them.

Chapter 6. Conflict and Reputation

Milton Friedman's vision on corporate social responsibility (CSR) acknowledged a general tension between 'doing well' and 'doing good'. As Chapter 3 discussed, Friedman believed that business leaders had to prioritize profits over social goals, arguing that such altruistic or social endeavours are only justified when they enhance the private, commercial interest of the company. However, such 'win-win' scenarios were, in his view, an exception.

By contrast, the discourse of Transnational Business Feminism (TBF) (Roberts 2012) portrays this 'win-win' alignment as the norm. Speaking solely of 'gender opportunities', 'gender dividends' and 'shared value', TBF's triumphant ideology lacks the vocabulary to articulate questions of conflict (See Chapter 4). It depicts corporate supply chains as harmonious and collaborative structures, where businesses and workers work collaboratively to achieve shared growth and 'empowerment' goals. This vision ignores the fact that conflict and struggle are at the heart of capital production, as Marxist and feminist political economists have long argued (Eisenstein 2009; Quan 2007) and puts workers and businesses in constant struggles over power and the division of resources. Since contemporary global value chains are defined by highly unequal power relations between capital and labour, as discussed in Chapter 3, corporations such as Nike, Unilever, Gap, or Walmart are frequently confronted with workers' demands for a more equal distribution of resources.

The collaboration-driven ideology of TBF ignores and, indeed, refutes the existence and relevance of such conflicts. This silence is partly reflected in the TBF literature: while scholars have criticised TBF discourses for lacking a class analysis and side-lining questions of corporate domination and exploitation (Roberts 2015; Tornhill 2019), they have not yet examined how individual companies' TBF programmes relate to past and ongoing worker struggles in their supply chains. Yet such conflicts can generate vital clues on the function and effects of TBF programmes, even when – or perhaps *especially* when – companies depict these conflicts as unrelated to their CSR work. This is particularly true for the type of worker- focused empowerment programme this thesis concentrates on.

This Chapter explores how TBF's blindness to such conflicts affect its model of change and shapes the ability of business feminists – the feminist organizations participating in TBF programmes – to support women workers involved in such conflicts. Using the lens of Feminist Capitalist Realism (FCR), it examines the second case study of this thesis – Unilever and UN Women – and connects the aims and principles of a TBF programme created by these two organizations to a labour dispute between Unilever and a group of Kenyan tea workers. This TBF programme is called the Global Women's Safety Framework ('The Framework') and aims to improve the safety and well-being of female tea workers (UN Women 2018). The Framework is a good example of a TBF project that was launched amidst a heated labour dispute but makes no reference to this conflict. The conflict in question also concerns the safety of tea workers: it involves a legal case against Unilever by a group of Kenyan tea workers who claim the company owes them reparations for failing to protect them from brutal workplace violence.

In the analysis that follows, I find that the stories of the workers expose important flaws in the Framework's principles and model of change. I also find that Unilever's TBF partners have largely ignored the tea workers' campaign for justice. Instead, they amplified a narrative around Unilever's moral leadership that directly contradicted the workers' efforts to hold Unilever to account.

Based on these findings, the Chapter argues that the pragmatic and strategic considerations at the core of FCR reasoning sets up a logic and incentive structure that complicates the ability of business feminists to show solidarity with women workers and can even put them in a position where their TBF projects – and the discourses they generate – work against the interests of the women they claim to serve.

The Chapter is divided into five sections. Section 6.1 describes Unilever's position in the TBF world and its relationship with UN Women and introduces the aims and principles of the Framework. Section 6.2 and 6.3 detail the dispute that preceded the launch of the Framework and evolved in parallel to its creation, from the position of the Kenyan workers who initiated it, and exposes major contradictions between Unilever's professed stance on women's safety and its

actual treatment of workers. Against this background, the fourth and fifth section tackle the main question driving this analysis by examining how UN Women and Unilever's other TBF partners have dealt with these contradictions, finding that these groups overall ignored the workers' campaign. The concluding section reiterates the broader point of this chapter: that the effects of TBF can only be understood when they are linked to the supply chains of their corporate sponsors, and to the conflicts that arise therein.

6.1 Unilever, UN Women and TBF as recruitment tool

In November 2020, a senior representative of UN Women by the name of Jessica (a pseudonym) co-hosted a webinar for businesses interested in collaborating with UN Women on women's rights projects. Jessica, who leads UN Women's CSR work in Asia, had recently joined the UN agency after a decade long managerial career at Unilever, the household goods giant known for such brands as Lipton Tea, Dove, Axe, Knorr and Magnum ice cream. Her career move symbolises the close relationships Unilever has established with feminist and development actors in recent years. The company appears to have replaced Nike as the most visible and popular TBF actor, boasting partnerships with various well-known feminist groups, UN bodies and development organizations – including Oxfam, CARE International, Women Deliver, the ICRW and UN Women. [235]

Many of these collaborations were forged under the tutelage of the firm's former CEO, Paul Polman. Under Polman's leadership (2009-2018), Unilever positioned itself at the helm of a global movement of feminist corporations committed to drive change for some of the most vulnerable women in the world, particularly in the Global South. With his vocal support for gender and social equality, and frequent moral appeals to fellow business leaders to place

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[235] Some examples of these partnerships:
Oxfam Website. How Oxfam Worked with Unilever to Enhance its Social Impact. https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/how-oxfam-worked-with-unilever-to-enhance-its-social-impact-621120/ Accessed 25 June 2022 ; Women Deliver Website. Why Championing Paternity Leave Empowers Men, Women and Business. https://www.unilever.com/news/news-search/2019/why-championing-paternity-leave-empowers-men-women-and-business/?navids=tcm%3A244-50553-4 Accessed 25 June 2022; CARE International Website. Corporate Partnerships, Who we Work With. https://www.careinternational.org.uk/get-involved/corporate-partnerships/who-we-work-with/Unilever Accessed 25 June 2022.

'purpose above profits', Polman has come to personify the spirit of the 'CEO Society' (Bloom and Rhodes 2018), an achievement made visible by the faith that various UN bodies and elite feminist groups have placed in his leadership. In the past decade, Polman has sat on the board of the UN Global Compact,[236] served as an advisor to both UN Women[237] and former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon,[238] and pocketed the UN's prestigious 'Champion of the Earth Award' in 2015.[239]

In the world of TBF, Unilever is widely seen as the paragon of ethical capitalism. During interviews, business feminists described the company and its former chief executive as exemplary leaders who have proven "ready to make the investment, to be exposed and walk the journey",[240] and praised them for being "completely straight forward and honest" about the "challenges" they face and the "help" they need from feminist partners to drive change".[241] A top executive at the ICRW expressed her admiration for Polman's achievements by arguing that the garment industry needs a corporate leader as committed as Polman for conditions to improve. The question for the apparel sector, from her point of view, was "who is that person going to be?" [242] Her comment exemplified the individualized, top-down vision of change that, as detailed in Chapter 4, characterizes the broader FCR outlook on corporate responsibility. When Alan Jope took over from Polman as Unilever CEO in 2019, he vowed to honour his predecessor's feminist leadership. Invoking a racialized version of the business case, he promised to prioritize the needs of women in the Global South, arguing that the "immutable laws of intersectionality

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[236] UN Global Compact Website. https://www.unglobalcompact.org/about/governance/board/members Accessed 10 April 2022.

[237] UN Women Website. Private Sector Leadership Council Launched. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/6/private-sector-leadership-advisory-council-launched Accessed 10 April 2022.

[238] UN Website. Secretary-General appoints advocates to build widespread support for the Sustainable Development Goals. https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/secretary-general-appoints-advocates-build-widespread-support-sustainable-development-goals Accessed 26 June 2022.

[239] UN Environment Programme Website. Paul Polman – Entrepreneurial Vision https://www.unep.org/championsofearth/laureates/2015/paul-polman Accessed 26 June 2022.

[240] Remote Online Interviews Maggie London March and June 2019

[241] Remote Online Interview Betty London June 2020

[242] Ibid.

mean that the better job we do for women of colour, the better chance we have of progressing gender equality everywhere". [243]

While Jope framed the business case in the language of *societal* returns, the company has also proved attuned to the *commercial* and *reputational* benefits of progressive social and gender politics. Polman, in particular, has often emphasized how such causes help the company recruit and retain talented millennial staff, many of whom "don't want to work for big corporates anymore" due to widely shared anti-corporate sentiments. [244] According to Polman, the desire of the millennial generation to work for organizations with "a strong social purpose" presents a challenge to companies, because "trust is low in business and trust in CEOs is even lower". Certainly, for a company like Unilever, a positive social image is no given. Over the years, the company's been accused of aggravating the climate crisis and condoning labour violations in its factories and plantations in Asia and Africa, alongside other problematic business practices.[245] CSR and TBF projects, then, offer the company an instrument to maintain and restore trust in its moral compass.

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[243] Unstereotype Alliance. UN Women launches new UK chapter of advertising alliance to fight gender-based stereotypes in the industry. 31 July 2020. https://www.unstereotypealliance.org/en/stories/in-the-news Accessed 28 December 2020.

[244] YouTube video recording. Unilever CEO Paul Polman: Pursue Your Purpose. Stanford Business School. 20 May 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3M_FVerkkE Accessed 20 March 2019.

[245] The following reports and articles give an insight into these problems:

- Bloomberg News on Unilever and Palm Oil deforestation: https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2021-palm-oil-deforestation-climate-change/ Accessed 20 March 2022.
- Break Free from Plastic on Unilever as polluter. https://www.breakfreefromplastic.org/2021/10/25/the-coca-cola-company-and-pepsico-named-top-plastic-polluters-for-the-fourth-year-in-a-row/ Accessed 20 March 2022.
- Business and Human Rights Resource Center on Labour Rights Violations. https://www.bhrrc.org/en/latest-news/adding-insecurity-to-life-dutch-unions-challenge-unilever-shareholders-on-repressive-employment-practices-behind-csr-spin/ Accessed 20 March 2022.
- Business and Human Rights Resource Center on Palm Oil and Deforestation https://www.bhrrc.org/en/latest-news/response-from-unilever-regarding-sourcing-from-palm-oil-companies-linked-to-human-rights-abuses/ Accessed 20 March 2022.
- Business and Human Rights Resource Center on Environmental Damage; https://www.bhrrc.org/en/latest-news/india-civil-society-raises-concerns-over-censure-of-iim-bangalore-professor-in-connection-with-statements-about-hindustan-unilevers-environmental-record/ Accessed 20 March 2022.
- Investico Journalism Platform on Labour and Environmental Harms in Unilever's supply chain. https://www.platform-investico.nl/artikel/inside-unilevers-sustainability-myth/ Accessed 20 March 2022.

It is a vision of CSR that Milton Friedman would have approved of. As discussed in Chapter 3, the economist believed corporations should only invest in social causes if it makes "it easier to attract desirable employees" or benefit firms' performance in other tangible ways (Friedman 1970, np). With a reported 90 percent of Unilever employees feeling proud to work for the company, Polman's vision appears to have been successful. [246]

During interviews, business feminists endorsed this reputation-driven approach to TBF. They depicted the PR benefits of TBF as a neutral and harmless feature of business, which can be leveraged to advance feminist agendas (See also Chapter 4). A top executive at the ICRW pointed out that in her view, Polman's keen awareness that, as a company, "you're not going to get the [best] kind of talent" if "your company is not meaningfully engaged in creating change" is what made him stand out as a leader.

During the previously mentioned UN Women seminar, Jessica – the former Unilever manager now working for UN Women – repeated these recruitment-focused logics. In persuading business leaders to collaborate with UN Women, she encouraged the executives to approach women's rights as her former employer does – as an opportunity to bolster their competitive position – and use these projects to attract young talent, many of whom "want to understand [they are] in a good company".[247] Her comments suggest that UN Women, too, considers positive corporate PR an uncontroversial aspect of TBF work. In that light, it is not surprising that Unilever advertises its projects with UN Women, and their stated aim to empower millions of women, prominently on its website, alongside the company's other TBF initiatives.

In terms of substance, most of these joint programmes follow a neoliberal, efficiency-focused logic and pursue gender diversity and cultural shifts, rather than more structural change. They, for instance, seek to eradicate gendered stereotypes in media advertising; teach men how to be

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[246] Unilever Website. Unilever Annual Report and Accounts 2019. Page 16.
https://assets.unilever.com/files/92ui5egz/production/1e37dec387a6647bd6bd1c8d1bc8a86cd0135ed7.pdf/unilever-annual-report-and-accounts-2019.pdf Accessed 26 June 2022.

[247]Webinar on Women's Empowerment: From the C-Suite to the Factory Floor – Challenges and Opportunities. Organized by BSR, UN Women and amfori. Attended online 25 June 2020.

better allies; diversify leadership in the start-up sector; or educate women and girls to "dream bigger and be bolder". [248]

One of Unilever's most consequential TBF projects of this kind is an elaborate safety manual it co-created with UN Women between 2016 and 2019. This manual – titled the Global Women's Safety Framework ('The Framework') – aims to protect women plucking tea on plantations in Kenya, India and other countries from gender-based violence and empower them economically. A self-improvement tool for tea producers, the Framework was born out of the recognition that an "empowering" workplace, free of gender-based violence, increases workers' productivity, reduces sick leave and absenteeism, helps "[r]etain and attract women workers and consumers" and is thus necessary for companies to "prosper" (UN Women 2018, 14). Published in 2018, the Framework extensively draws on Unilever's experiences in Kenya and India, where, according to the manual, the company has rolled out a range of new programmes since its partnership with UN Women began in 2016. These programmes include education programmes for "management, employees, village elders and specialised groups such as medical personnel", a new grievance mechanism and weekly discussion groups to encourage women workers to report and discuss problems (UN Women 2018, III).

The Framework promises to "empower" five million women in Unilever's own supply chain, "raise standards across the wider tea industry" and thereby enable women to "be productive at work, support their families and fuel their economies".[249] Concordant with the TBF ideology – discussed at length in Chapters 2 and 4 – the document makes no mention of the important role that living wages play in protecting women from domestic and workplace violence (LeBaron 2021). It features no living wage guidelines or information on how much Unilever's tea workers

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[248]This quote comes from a paper by the ICRW and Unilever, titled, 'Opening Up Possibilities for Girls' which has now been removed from the Unilever website. This link refers to the paper and its previous online location https://www.youthpower.org/resources/opening-possibilities-girls-report-supporting-young-women-journey-new-horizons Accessed 24 June 2022.

[249] UN Women Website. Unilever and UN Women announce a global partnership to improve women's safety in the tea industry. 15 December 2016. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/12/unilever-and-un-women-announce-a-global-partnership. Accessed 24 June 2022.

get paid for their labour. Instead, it emphasizes culture, gender inequality and broader political-economic factors – the normalisation of violence in households, substance abuse, low education levels and male control over decision-making and assets – as the main factors that put women at risk (UN Women 2018). Overall, the Safety Guide and Unilever's other TBF projects depict the company as one that goes beyond its legal duties to meet the needs of workers, and their families. However, as the next section shows, not everyone familiar with the company's practices shares this view.

6.2 "The company is so big, I assumed they would protect us"

Feminist critics of corporate gender politics have persuasively argued that the 'business case' obscures the violent and extractive sides of corporate profit accumulation (Bexell 2012; Eisenstein 2009, 2017; Moeller 2018; Roberts 2015; Tornhill 2019). For the optimistic 'win-win' formula to appear credible, argues Tornhill (2019, 5) it requires that certain "experiences" – experiences that expose the exploitation, precarity and domination that inhere in corporate business models– "must be suppressed". I have argued, in Chapter 4, that a 'CSR vacuum' – an artificial separation between a company's CSR projects and wider business practices – helps to insulate such realities from the TBF narrative and thus facilitates such credibility, both at the level of discourse and rationality. Hence, scholarship concerned with the ideological and empirical effects of TBF stands to benefit from studies that bring such realities back into the picture. Particularly interesting to this dissertation – which is interested in the sphere of labour – – are the experiences and perspectives of workers, labouring in the supply chains of firms that champion TBF.

In that light, the Global Women's Safety Framework by Unilever and UN Women is an interesting initiative. It is a good example of a TBF project that was launched in the middle of a heated conflict between a corporation and a group of workers (many of them women), but, despite its obvious relevance and relationship to the Framework, makes no reference to this dispute. This section recalls this conflict from the perspective of several workers caught up in it, foregrounding the experience of a woman named Anne.[250] It describes how Unilever failed to protect them from ethnic violence from their own colleagues and neighbours in late 2007 and

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[250] I am using pseudonyms to protect the workers' identities.

how this led the workers to launch a legal case against Unilever in late 2015, shortly before Unilever announced the development of the Framework with UN Women.

The workers argue that Unilever failed them in several ways. According to them, the company: placed them in a highly dangerous position (in 2007) due to their status as ethnic minorities; ignored warnings about impending violence; denied workers' requests to leave the plantation; prioritized the security of managers and company property over workers' safety, and cut workers' wages at a time they had lost most of their belongings and faced enormous medical bills. Their stories not only contradict Unilever's reputation as a feminist champion – showing the company has violated many of the moral principles it claims to hold dear – but, as we will see, raises serious questions about the credibility of the Global Women's Safety Framework, the model of change it represents, and the negative effects that the reputational function of TBF – as detailed in the previous section – can have on the women these programmes claim to benefit.

6.2.1 Life and Work at a Divided Plantation

Back in 2007, the image of Unilever as a caring and reliable employer felt accurate to Anne Johnson. Anne and her husband Makori were among the roughly 2,000 residential workers who, at that time, lived on Unilever's hilly plantation in Kenya's southern Rift Valley with their families, totalling an estimated 100,000 residents. Stretching across 13,000 hectares of land, the tea estates, which bordered the town of Kericho, resembled a company town, with on-site shops, schools, health clinics and social facilities. The Johnsons had plucked tea for Unilever Tea Kenya, a subsidiary of Unilever Plc. in London, for over a decade.[251] They hailed from the Kenyan county of Kisii, some two hours away from the plantations, but felt at home at the estates. In fact, for their children – two teenage daughters and an eleven-year-old son – the Unilever tea estates were the only home they knew. Still, life as a tea plucker was not easy, and both Anne and her husband made long days for low pay. According to Anne, "we reported for work at 6:30 in the morning and often finished 12 hours later". Unilever paid ten Kenyan shillings per kilo of tea leaves plucked, which meant that Anne and Makori usually worked seven days per week for an average weekly wage of $37 and $52 respectively. This meant they

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[251] Remote Interview Anne London August 2020.

never had quite enough money to pay their bills, let alone to save money for unexpected expenses.[252]

The Johnson's ethnic identity as Kisii's presented additional challenges at the plantation. As Kisii's, they were a minority in a region where the population mostly belonged to an ethnic group called the Kalenjins, many of whom considered Kisii's to be 'foreigners' and looked down on them. This hierarchy was visible on the tea estates. Whereas Kisii workers – representing roughly half of the plantation's residents – and other minorities primarily worked as tea pluckers, the Kalenjins held mostly better paid managerial and supervisory roles.[253] These ethnic hierarchies produced tensions and left many Kisii's feeling like they were treated as second-class residents. [254]

These tensions intensified in the last weeks of 2007, when impending Presidential elections exacerbated the perceived differences between the Kalenjins and the largely migrant workforce of tea pluckers.[255] The local population, including many Unilever managers, overwhelmingly backed Raila Odinga, presidential candidate for the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), whereas Kisiis' such as Anne were thought to be loyal to Odinga's main contender: Mwai Kibaki, who led the Party of National Unity.[256] For Kisii workers, the tea estates became a deeply politicized and hostile place in this period. Anne, for example, recalled how team leaders allocated her work to colleagues who, unlike her, were presumed to be loyal to Odinga. Other colleagues ignored her when she tried to make small talk.[257] Some managers organized pro-Odinga rallies and strategy meetings on the estates, which deepened the politicized atmosphere.

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[252] Remote Interview Anne London August 2020.
[253] See HTML version of Handed Down Judgment by the High Court of Justice Queen Bench Division London, http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2017/371.html Accessed 26 June 202; Remote Interview London Leigh Day Barrister September 2020; Witness Statement 12, p. 2.
[254] Remote Interview Anne London August 2020; Witness Testimony no. 4,5,6,11 and 13.
[255] See HTML version of Handed Down Judgment by the High Court of Justice Queen Bench Division London, http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2017/371.html Accessed 26 June 2022.
[256] Ibid. Remote Interview Anne London August 2020; Remote Interview Mary London August 2020.
[257] Remote Interview Anne London August 2020.

Distressingly, some ODM supporting colleagues threatened to physically assault Kisii workers in the event Kibaki won the race,[258] telling them "Kisiis would be killed" and that they "should start moving away before blood was shed".[259]

Mary, a Kisii working mother who was in her mid-thirties at the time, recalled how co-workers inquired about the value of her family's possessions, implying they might steal them.[260] These threats were echoed in flyers, strewn across the residential areas of the tea estates, with hate-filled xenophobic slogans such as "foreigners go home". Many Kisii workers feared "something bad may happen after the election", said Anne, though her own worries were mitigated by her faith in Unilever as a responsible employer. "The company is so big", she recalled reassuring herself at the time, "I assumed they would protect us".

6.2.2 A Violent Crisis

Anne's faith in Unilever was shattered soon after Kibaki was declared the winner, in the early evening of Sunday 30 December.[261] Armed with kerosene jars, clubs, machetes and other weapons, hundreds of men from Kericho stormed the plantation to attack its 'foreign' inhabitants.[262] They specifically targeted Kisii's and other minorities presumed to back Kibaki, whose homes they marked with an X, before looting and burning them.[263] Workers were viciously beaten and gang raped and watched co-workers set on fire by men screaming that "this wasn't [their] land and that [they] should be killed or should leave".[264] The plantations' ethnic diversity made it one of the hot spots in a nationwide crisis of post-election ethnic violence that would claim the lives of at least 1.300 people. It is unclear how many plantation residents were

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[258] See HTML version of Handed Down Judgment by the High Court of Justice Queen Bench Division London, http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2017/371.html Accessed 26 June 2022.

[259] Witness Testimony Worker no. 4 and 13.

[260] Remote Interview Mary London August 2020.

[261] See HTML version of Handed Down Judgment by the High Court of Justice Queen Bench Division London, para. 22 http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2017/371.html Accessed 26 June 2022.

[262] See HTML version of Handed Down Judgment by the High Court of Justice Queen Bench Division London, para. 22 and 28 http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2017/371.html Accessed 26 June 2022.

[263] See HTML version of Handed Down Judgment by the High Court of Justice Queen Bench Division London http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2017/371.html Accessed 26 June 2022

[264] See HTML version of Handed Down Judgment by the High Court of Justice Queen Bench Division London, para. 27-39 http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2017/371.html Accessed 26 June 2022; Witness Testimony Worker no. 5, page 5; Witness Testimony Worker no. 7, page 5-6.

killed, raped and permanently disabled in the week following the election. But at least eleven residents were killed, fifty-six women were raped, and thousands of homes were burned. [265]

Anne and her family were not spared by the assailants. When the news of Kibaki's victory came in, Anne was preparing supper with her family. Moments later, she heard people screaming outside and knew her family was in danger. "We quickly locked our doors", she said. Shortly after, at least four men armed with machetes and clubs broke into the Johnson's small home. According to Anne, they forced her husband Makori and their 11-year-old son into the bedroom, where they raped Makori. In a separate room, the attackers raped and assaulted Anne and her teenage daughters. After the invaders left, the family hid in the tea bushes for three nights before, covered in mud and blood, they made their way to the police station in nearly Koiwa, where dozens of other survivors had gathered. From there, police drove them to Kisii where they kept a small plot of land and have stayed ever since. [266]

With most of its workforce now absent and its residential estates ruined, Unilever closed the plantations till mid 2008, forcing its workers on unpaid leave.[267] Seven years later, in late 2015, Anne and 217 other workers, former workers and family members of residents killed by the assailants – including 59 rape victims – filed a legal case against Unilever Tea Kenya and its London-based parent company, Unilever Plc, in the English High Court in London, asking the court permission to sue both companies within that jurisdiction. They demanded reparations for what they believed constituted negligence.

6.2.3 Unpaid Leave, Colleague Complicity and Ignored Warnings

In their legal case, the workers raise three main reasons for why they believe the company owes them reparations. First, the company actively worsened workers' suffering by placing them on unpaid leave after it shut its plantations down. By cutting their wages, workers argued, Unilever abandoned them at a moment they had lost most of their belongings and were saddled with high medical and other expenses. According to the workers, Unilever paid them a once-off amount of

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[265] The numbers of killed people who were raped and killed are those who took part in the legal case.
[266] Remote Interview Anne London August 2020.
[267] Witness Testimony Worker no. 4, page 9-10; Witness Testimony Worker no. 5, page 6; Witness Testimony Worker no. 6, page 8; Witness Testimony Worker 14, para 31.

roughly $110 to compensate for their losses, a payment that, for many, barely exceeded two months' wages and did not even begin to cover their expenses.[268] The letter Unilever sent to announce these payments suggests that the amount was set and paid for by Unilever's corporate headquarters in London, a sign of the parent company's involvement in the process.[269] It tells the workers that:

> "[o]n behalf of the entire Unilever Tea Kenya Ltd family, we thank Unilever for their understanding, material and moral support and we hope that this timely gesture will go a long way to bring normalcy back to our employees and their families".[270]

Workers argue that the attacks left many of them destitute, robbed their children of a future, and that Unilever's compensation was woefully inadequate to cover their losses.[271] One worker – a man who claims Unilever refused to pay any of his family's medical bills – testified that the "wages I did not receive and the money which was stolen from my home I could have used to educate my children", most of whom left school after the attacks. Permanently disabled and suffering from chest pains, the man said he "still cannot do any meaningful work that can support my children and my wife". [272]

Back in Kisii, Anne also could not afford the hospital costs for her relatives. Makori suffered internal bleeding and their eldest daughter, also severely injured, got weaker by the day. In the months that followed, both of them died in their mud house in Kisii.[273] Anne told me she never returned to the plantation because she can't leave her son, now in his mid-20s. "He developed very bad seizures and panic attacks after what happened and needs constant care", she said. Severely traumatized and unable to afford the psychological treatment they need, her son and

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[268] Witness Testimony Worker no. 4, page 10; Witness Testimony Worker no. 6, page 9; Witness Testimony.

[269] Anne kept this letter and shared a copy with me.

[270] Ibid.

[271] Remote Interview Mary London August 2020; See HTML version of Handed Down Judgment by the High Court of Justice Queen Bench Division London. http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2017/371.html Accessed 26 June 2022.

[272] Witness Testimony Worker no. 4, para 28, 31 and 34.

[273] I have copies of their death certificates.

daughter both stopped going to school. "We live off gifts from relatives and neighbours and the little maize we grow on our land".

A second reason why the workers believe Unilever owes them compensation is that, according to them, the company's own employees participated in the attacks. Rather than investigating these claims and taking action, the company simply denied complicity of any staff members. As a result, workers say, some of them still work alongside the people who have attacked and robbed their families. In their witness testimonies, multiple victims identified their attackers as colleagues, sometimes stating both their names and role within Unilever.[274] This included a woman who had watched colleagues "armed with pangas [machetes] and rungus [clubs]" roam the tea estates the night before the Presidential winner was announced, "threatening the Kisiis that if ODM does not win they will be forced to leave".[275] The woman claimed that the next morning, five colleagues, all of whom she knew by name, assaulted her. According to her, the men "started beating me with a metal rod on my back and on my legs and were going to rape me" but stopped when "a Kalenjin neighbour who was a male nurse intervened to stop the attack". Another worker, a man who is permanently disabled after six men attacked him with machetes, clubs and swords and whose wife was raped by others, also recognised a colleague among his assailants. As for Anne, she does not know if the men who attacked her family were colleagues. "They spoke the local language", Anne testified but "they blindfolded us so we could not see who they were".

According to the workers, Unilever did not expel these men but rehired them, when the plantations re-opened, and expected their victims to work alongside of them.[276] In an apparently unanswered letter[277] to the then CEO of Unilever, Paul Polman, in 2018, workers who had returned to the plantation, described some of the disappointment, indignation and anxiety they

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[274] Witness Testimony Worker no 6, page 5; Witness Testimony Worker no 7, page 7; Witness Testimony Worker no 5, page 5.

[275] Witness Testimony Worker no 6.

[276] Witness Testimony 15 para 14 and 183; Remote Interview London Leigh Day Barrister September 2020; Remote Interview Mary London August 2020.

[277] According to Anne it was unanswered. and there is nothing on the internet suggesting he did. Letter: Kituo Cha Sheria Website. Kenyan Tea Workers Confront Unilever Tea Kenya Ltd (UTKL) over their Human Rights Record and Alleged Failure to protect the Tea Workers. 8 October 2018. https://kituochasheria.wordpress.com/2018/10/08/ Accessed 26 June 2022.

experienced as a result of Unilever's inadequate and careless handling of the crisis, explaining that:

> "Unilever just wanted us to go back to work as if nothing happened [and those of us who did] were told we must not talk about what happened. We are still scared that we will be punished if we speak about the violence.

> Unilever says that after the violence every employee was given "compensation in kind" to offset our lost wages and that we were given replacement items or cash to buy new items to replace our stolen property…but those who were too afraid to return got nothing and only some of those who returned were given KES12,000 [$110], a little more than a month salary, and a little maize, which was then deducted from our salary. We were told that if we saw people with our belongings we should say nothing"

For many Kisii workers, the complicity of their own colleagues was not entirely surprising, given the threats they had received in the run up to the election. Importantly, they believe that both Unilever Kenya and Unilever London had also been aware of these threats but refused to take the necessary steps to intervene and keep workers safe.

Unilever's supposed knowledge of the existing threats was a third important reason why Unilever, in the workers' view, owes them reparations. Unlike Anne, who had kept quiet about the leaflets and the menacing atmosphere on the estates, multiple Kisii workers reported the threats they had received to their managers but were met with indifference and hostility. In response to the workers' concerns, managers made derogatory comments of their own, dismissed the workers by stating that "it's just politics" or, astonishingly, instructed them to lobby and vote for Odinga, adding that the workers would be "forced to leave" if they did not.[278] While many workers felt unsafe, abandoning the estates during the election was, for most, no option. According to the workers' lawyer, management used various reasons to deny workers' requests to leave the plantations during election week. Anne was among the workers who had asked her manager permission to travel to Kisii for the elections, where she was registered to vote, but was

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[278] See HTML version of Handed Down Judgment by the High Court of Justice Queen Bench Division London, p. 26 http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2017/371.html Accessed 26 June 2022; Witness Testimony Worker no. 6, page 4-5; Witness Testimony Worker no. 7, page 2-6; Witness Testimony Worker no. 5, page 3-4; Witness Testimony Worker no. 4, page 5; Witness Testimony Worker no. 11, page 4.

turned down. Another worker recalled that Unilever supervisors:

> "did not want us to go home because most of us were registered to vote locally. The only reason I was in the Kericho area at the time of the post-election violence was because of my work on the estate"[279]

Four former managers at Unilever Tea Kenya supported workers' claim that the company had been aware of the grave risks the workers found themselves in. In their witness testimonies, they wrote that the company's top management, including the then managing director, had discussed the possibility of violence in several meetings but only ramped up security for its senior personnel, factories and equipment. Among them was an estate manager who said that senior management had been aware that "there would be unrest and that the Plantation could be invaded".[280] They had discussed the need for extra security in at least three meetings in December, he said. But management took measures only to "secure company property, factories, machinery, stores, power stations and management housing" while "no thought was given to increasing the security of the residential camps in order to protect the workers". [281] According to this manager,

> "It would not have been difficult to ask the Government to deploy policemen or the General Service Unit [a government military unit trained in subduing violence] from other areas of Kenya before the attacks took place. I believe this would have easily repelled the attackers, who only had crude weaponry. [The company] could also have advised management to automatically permit leave to minority tribes who were at risk. What I find shocking is that they increased security around important installations, including management housing, but they did not consider the need to do so for their own workers"[282]

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[279] Witness Testimony Worker no. 4, page 6-8.
[280] Witness Testimony Manager 13, para 9.
[281] Another Unilever manager corroborated this claim: Witness Testimony Manager 14.
[282] Witness Testimony Manager 13, para 14.

Meanwhile, Unilever Kenya's managing director and other senior executives went on holiday before election day, according to the former managers, and the company evacuated the remaining managers and expats on private jets once the violence broke out.[283]

From the workers' point of view, Unilever's parent company in London shared blame for the negligence that resulted in workers' death, injuries and losses. The company should have been aware of the dangerous position the workers were in, since international outlets such as the *BBC*, *Reuters*[284] and *Al Jazeera*[285] had all reported on the impending violence. In the words of their lawyer, Unilever thus "created a situation where [these employees] were sitting ducks – at risk because of their ethnicity". [286] The workers believe Unilever should accept responsibility for these failures and compensate them financially. Anne captured their sentiments well when she said that "the company promised they would take care of us, but they did not so now they should pay us so we can rebuild our lives".

6.3 Conflicting Truths

The workers saw the UK legal system as their only viable route to justice. A case in Kenya was financially unfeasible, since they lacked the pro-bono legal support they received in the UK,[287] and dangerous, since, workers feared, it could unleash retaliatory violence by their colleagues and others.[288] Possibly more crucial in the workers' choice to pursue a suit in England was their conviction that Unilever's London headquarters shared responsibility for what happened. During

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[283] Witness Testimony Manager 14, para 4; Witness Testimony Manager 13, para 13; Witness Testimony 15 (barrister), para 14.
[284] Reuters.EU condemns pre-election violence in Kenya. 21 December 2007. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kenya-election/eu-condemns-pre-election-violence-in-kenya-idUSL2120415120071221 Accessed 26 June 2022.
[285] Al Jazeera. Kenya pre-election violence soars. 7 December 2007. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2007/12/2008525121516850482.html Accessed 26 June 2022.
[286] Remote Interview London Leigh Day Barrister September 2020; In their analysis of the case, legal scholars Van Ho, Kadel and Vastardis (2018) reached similar conclusions, arguing that Unilever should have known that "[g]iven that many of the residents at the tea plantation were brought in from other regions, there was a heightened risk of ethnic violence affecting the workers".
[287] The law firm did not charge the workers for their services, as it acted under a 'no win no fee' agreement. (Personal correspondence September 2020).
[288] Remote Interview London Leigh Day Barrister September 2020; Witness Testimony 5, page 8; Witness Testimony Worker 6, page 12; Witness Testimony Worker 7, page 15; Witness Testimony 15 para 63 and 183.

the two and a half years the case would take – it was rejected in the Summer of 2018 – Unilever articulated its position in court documents, press releases and public responses to human rights NGOs critical of the company's approach. This short section examines Unilever's response to this case and the arguments it invoked to block the case from proceeding. In doing so, it lays bare the profound disparities between Unilever's professed feminist values and reputation in TBF circles on the one hand, and, on the other, the company's treatment of women, whose stories and demands for accountability and justice do not fit the voluntarism-driven, reputation-focused logics of the business case. These disparities, I will argue, expose important contradictions and weaknesses in the Framework and in the broader model of change it represents.

In its response to the workers' legal action, Unilever adopted a tone and position that radically differed from the compassionate and humanitarian rhetoric the firm disseminates in its CSR communications. In court documents and press statements, the company insisted it owed the workers nothing and refuted many of the workers' allegations and experiences as untrue or baseless.[289] The attacks were completely unexpected, Unilever maintained, its own staff played no role in the attacks, and the company had adequately compensated workers for their losses and medical expenses. Yet the evidence underneath these statements proved weak and sometimes raised more questions than it answered. The company, for example, argued it had provided furniture, cash, counselling, and medical care to all workers who had returned to the plantations – a group that, according to Unilever comprised 93 % of "affected residents" – but withheld any details on what numbers and figures underpinned this claim and if women such as Anne, who had not returned to work, had received any assistance (Unilever 2018). The account of a former manager, who testified in support of the workers, suggests the company had never gathered this information. According to him, Unilever never seriously assessed whether it had "responded properly to the attacks". There had been no "substantial after-action investigation, no accounting".

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[289] See HTML version of Handed Down Judgment by the High Court of Justice Queen Bench Division London, p. 27 http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2017/371.html Accessed 26 June 2022.

Unilever also pushed back against the idea that its London offices shared responsibility for the mayhem that had befallen its subsidiary. If the workers believed they had a case against Unilever, the company insisted, they should make that case in Kenya, not England. The main reason why the head offices had no duty toward these workers, Unilever argued, is that it was not involved in the safety and health policies of its subsidiary. (Under UK. law, parent companies can only be held liable for negligence claims involving their subsidiaries if, among other things, the headquarters played an active and controlling role in their operations, which then creates a 'duty of care' (Van Ho et al 2018). [290]

While Unilever insisted its headquarters had adopted a 'hands off' approach toward the safety and health policies of its subsidiary – thereby contradicting its CSR image as a highly involved company – managers who testified in support of the workers argued the opposite. According to these managers, Unilever's head offices were, in fact, so involved with the daily operations of its subsidiary that employees in Kenya risked dismissal or other sanctions if they failed to comply "with the policies and procedures [that were] cascaded down by [Unilever] Plc".[291] Unilever denied these claims but refused to provide the workers' lawyers with the relevant safety protocols and internal policy documents that the former managers had cited.[292] In doing so, the company ensured that a crucial piece of evidence could not be taken into consideration by the judge. [293] In its efforts to convince the judge to reject the case, Unilever downplayed workers' concern about retaliatory actions and financial viability and made the unrealistic suggestion that the workers "band together" and "raise funds from friends and family" to fund their legal counsel in Kenya. [294]

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[290] Under UK law, a parent company can only be held liable for the health and safety breaches of its subsidiaries if it exercises a high degree of control over their safety and crisis management policies….. Under UK law, there are only limited circumstances under which the duty of care of the UK parent company would extend to the employees of subsidiaries: one key condition is that the parent company must play an active role in the daily operations of the subsidiary (Van Ho et al. 2018).

[291] Witness Testimony Manager 13, page 1 and para 29; Witness Testimony Worker 14, para 8 and 13

[292] See HTML version of Handed Down Judgment by the High Court of Justice Queen Bench Division London, p. 73 and 103 http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2017/371.html Accessed 26 June 2022; Remote Interview London Leigh Day Barrister September 2020.

[293] Legal scholars Van Ho et al. (2018) have argued that the workers faced "an insurmountable burden of proof" in court, since they were expected to prove a crucial point without having access to the relevant documents. "It's a Gordian knot", they argued, [a]nd the court requires the more vulnerable party to untie it".

[294] Witness Testimony 15, page 70.

In the Summer of 2018, the court ruled in Unilever's favour, thereby denying workers the opportunity to sue the company in England.[295] The ruling emphasized that the 'weakness' of the workers' evidence played a major role in this decision, leading business and human rights scholars to conclude that Unilever had managed to take advantage of a structural power imbalance built into the system that enabled them to withhold a crucial piece of evidence (Van Ho et al. 2018).

The court's rejection of their case did not stop the tea workers from seeking justice. But with their legal route to reparations now blocked, they increasingly relied on public pressure to push the company to engage with their demands. As part of this strategy, the workers filed a complaint against Unilever at the UN Working Group for Business and Human Rights in the Summer of 2020, arguing the company violated the UN's guidelines on responsible business conduct.[296] If, after investigating the issue, this UN expert body concludes Unilever has, indeed, breached these guidelines it can recommend – though not force – that the company engages with the workers and take steps to meet their demands.

Unilever's treatment of the workers, as detailed in this section, brings into sharp relief the contradictions between the company's reputation among influential TBF actors as a company that goes beyond its legal obligation to safeguard the safety and well-being of women workers, and its attempts to shirk responsibility for the brutal attacks. Given the structural pressures faced by corporations to prioritize profit and shareholder returns over human rights, this tension is no surprise (Harvey 2007). Indeed, from Milton Friedman's point of view, such a prioritization is precisely how corporate responsibility *ought* to work. More interesting, for the purpose of this dissertation, is how UN Women and Unilever's other TBF partners – groups that exist to amplify

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[295] See HTML version of Handed Down Judgment by the High Court of Justice Queen Bench Division London, para 40 http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2017/371.html Accessed 26 June 2022.

[296] The Guardian. 1 August 2020. Kenyan tea workers file UN complaint against Unilever over 2007 ethnic violence https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/aug/01/kenyan-tea-workers-file-un-complaint-against-unilever-over-2007-ethnic-violence Accessed 25 June 2022.

the voices and needs of marginalized and impoverished women – have responded to these paradoxes, which is the topic of the next section.

6.4 Solidarity Interrupted?

Using the lens of FCR, this section assesses the public communications of UN Women and other TBF partners of Unilever to unpack how these groups have navigated the tensions and contradictions arising from Unilever's dispute with the tea workers, as described above. It finds that they have upheld the CSR vacuum characteristic of FCR reasoning – thus, essentially ignoring the entire dispute – while continuing to endorse Unilever in their public communications. This selective engagement with the company, I show, led these feminists to promote a narrative about Unilever that directly contradicted the message that Anne and the other tea workers tried to amplify and, as such, may have undermined their campaign for justice. It argues that the pragmatic and strategic considerations at the core of FCR reasoning sets up a logic and incentive structure that places some women – women such as Anne – at the wrong side of the business case, because their perspectives and needs conflict with the 'win-win' frame and the strategic objectives woven into this formula. This dynamic not only excludes the perspectives and needs of these women from TBF efforts, but can also put business feminists in a position where their TBF projects work *against* the interests of the women they aim to serve.

6.4.1 Untenable Contradictions

When Unilever and UN Women announced they were to collaborate on a comprehensive safety manual for women workers in the tea sector in December 2016, they made no mention of the fact that, the previous year, a group of workers from that same sector had begun legal action against Unilever, embroiling it in a dispute with potentially damaging consequences for the company's carefully cultivated humanitarian reputation. The development of the Framework, and the roll-out of its associated programmes at Unilever's tea estates in Kericho – discussion groups, workshops, training programmes – thus occurred in parallel with the dispute, which, as noted, initially lasted until the Summer of 2018 and re-emerged when the tea workers filed their complaint at the UN Working Group in August 2020.

In its public communications, Unilever has treated these parallel processes as completely unrelated. The company frames the Framework as a stand-alone project, devoid of its violent backdrop and legal aftermath. Yet, interesting questions and tensions arise when the stated values and objectives of the Framework, and the donations Unilever has made to UN Women for their realization, are linked to the workers' accusations and financial demands. As this section aims to show, the tea workers' stories expose problems with the Framework – and the larger model of change it represents – that, in lieu of this broader context, are much harder to spot.

For instance, the workers' stories raise questions around the viability of Unilever's stated approach toward prevention, which aims to cultivate a safe climate where women feel confident to come forward with safety concerns. This objective is hard to reconcile with the allegations, made by the workers, that Unilever has never disciplined men accused of violence and robbery and expects their victims to work alongside of them. In that context, it stands to reason that at least some might fear that coming forward with safety concerns could worsen, instead of improve, their sense of safety.[297]

These same allegations place the Framework's 'business case for safety' – the idea that women are more productive at work when they feel protected – on shaky grounds. Indeed, Unilever's apparent inaction toward alleged perpetrators is hard to square with the company's professed belief that such action would *and* improve women's sense of protection *and* help the company's bottom line. Even the Framework's most robust and potentially impactful elements – such as its emphasis on "clear accountability measures for perpetrators" and the "wishes of victims/survivors" – seem little more than hollow statements in this broader context of impunity (UN Women 2018, 3, 23).

The workers' stories and demands also raise questions around the financial dimensions of Unilever's partnership with UN Women. Financial records of UN Women show that shortly after the workers confronted Unilever with their demand for reparations, the company dramatically

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[297] At least until 2015, when the workers filed their complaint, these men were said to still work there. Then, in 2018, when the workers wrote the public letter to Polman, they mentioned that their attackers were still working there.

increased its annual contributions to UN Women, raising its $40,000 donation in 2015 to more than a million in 2016 and subsequent years.[298] The company's demonstrated willingness to invest resources into voluntary empowerment programmes, while denying workers' claims for reparations raises moral questions that, neither the TBF discourse, nor the literature about TBF, have dealt with.

These tensions and paradoxes speak to the contesting visions of justice held by the workers and the gender experts tasked with their empowerment. They reveal the structural power of the latter group to impose its vision on the former – an outcome that, paradoxically, reinforces rather than shrinks the gap between them.

Ethnographic studies on ethical trade initiatives in the tea and flower industries illustrates the structural nature of this disconnect. In her study of fair-trade initiatives on a tea plantation in India, Besky, for example, found that these programmes placed the "the question of social justice on plantations in the hands of an unaccountable non-state bureaucracy" instead of the workers. Taking a similarly critical position, Dolan, writing about fair trade initiatives in the tea and flower industry, has emphasized the contrast between the rhetoric and realities of CSR (Dolan 2007, 2008; Dolan & Opondo 2005). Whereas the rhetoric of CSR highlights collaboration, partnership and worker' agency, these initiatives often elide power hierarchies and sometimes entrench workers' disempowerment. This manifests itself in how the Southern tea or flower

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[298] UN Women Annual Reports, amounts donated by Unilever. According to this calculation, the total amount between 2015 and 2020 is $4.828.594.
- 2019 annual report, page 16. $ 1,287338 https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/un-women-annual-report-2019-2020-enpdf?la=enandvs=3903 Accessed December 2020.
- 2018 annual report, page 43. $ 955,176 https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/annual%20report/attachments/sections/library/2019/un-women-annual-report-2018-2019-enpdf?vs=4621 Accessed December 2020.
- 2017 annual report, page 47, $ 1,070845 https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/annual%20report/attachments/sections/library/un-women-annual-report-2017-2018-enpdf?la=enandvs=2849
- 2016 annual report, page 47. $ 1,125,888 https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2017/un-women-annual-report-2016-2017-enpdf?la=enandvs=0. Accessed December 2020.
- 2015 annual report, page 47: $ 389,347: https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/annual%20report/attachments/sections/library/un-women-annual-report-2015-2016-enpdf?la=enandvs=3016 Accessed December 2020.

worker is depicted. According to Dolan (2007, 253), CSR in this sector posits workers as rights-bearers who are too 'powerless' to attain these rights without the external intervention of a moral agent – a representation that renders "the moral claims exercised by fair trade [or CSR] redolent of colonial beneficence". Rather than shrinking the power and wealth gap between Northern consumers and Southern workers and producers, and promoting a form of "genuine inclusion [that] accommodates dissent and makes explicit power inequalities" (Dolan and Opondo 2005, 97), fair trade "potentially naturalizes" these hierarchies and *marginalizes worker-driven organizations such as unions* (Dolan 2007, 256)

6.4.2 The Limits of Inclusion

Combined, the contradictions within the Framework, as discussed above, lay bare a reality deeply at odds with the collaborative, optimistic, allyship- based narrative that defines the feminist discourse of Unilever and the broader TBF project. How, then, have Unilever's TBF partners, and UN Women in particular, navigated these contradictions? How, if at all, have they responded to the allegations raised by Anne and her former colleagues? And what might their responses tell us about the position of women workers within the TBF project**?**

Unilever's main TBF partners appear to not have commented on the tea worker's ordeal, even though information on the case and the subsequent complaint at the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights, has been readily available since 2015.[299] Between 2016 and 2020 – the year the tea workers took the case to the UN – UN Women, Women Deliver and the ICRW have celebrated the company and their CEOs for their generosity, gender expertise and ethical leadership in their online communications, annual reports and at global events and global development conferences, including at the UN and the World Economic Forum (WEF). This included tweets by UN Women thanking Unilever "for committing an extra 1 million to @UNWomen" in September 2017 and tweets and research reports by Women Deliver and BSR

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[299] In 2021, these organizations were asked to invite by the Business and Human Rights Resource Center to comment on the tea workers' dispute with Unilever, after I published a story about it in The Nation Magazine. Their responses can be found herehttps://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/kenya-workers-continue-to-demand-compensation-from-unilever-following-its-alleged-failure-to-protect-workers-from-ethnic-violence-on-kericho-tea-plantation-in-2007-incl-company-response/ Accessed 26 June 2022.

that praise the company for "changing the world"[300] with their feminist partnerships and for "making women's work safer" [301]and more fair "throughout their chain of influence."[302] During this time, these groups have also disseminated quotes by top Unilever executives on their belief that "women cannot lean in if they fear for their safety at work" and plans to "wants to "empower economically 5 million women in our value chain" [303] and hold " "people to account" for treating women unfairly. And they have given Unilever's CEO awards and honorary titles for their "courage and determination"…"visionary leadership" and commitment to "drive change from the top."[304]

From the standpoint of Unilever's TBF partners, then, the company's dispute with the tea workers appears to bear no relationship to the credibility or viability of Unilever's TBF work. As noted before, this separation is consistent with, and indispensable to, TBF's business ideology which is sustained through the exclusion of realities that challenge its 'win-win' doctrines (Tornhill 2019).

The concept of FCR offers a clue into how these disconnects and silences might be rationalized in the TBF space. After all, when corporate consent is conceived of as imperative to positive change – a cornerstone of FCR thinking – and PR benefits for businesses are uncritically accepted as a necessary condition to such progress, it is only logical that 'negative' stories such as Anne's – stories that deal with power, conflict and accountability – are not only off-limits but,

[300] Katja Iversen (Women Deliver) Tweet January 2019.
https://twitter.com/Katja_Iversen/status/1088413135898210304 Accessed 30 June 2022.
[301] UN Women Tweet. December 2016. https://twitter.com/UN_Women/status/810085923031576576 Accessed 30 June 2022.
[302] ICRW and BSR Working Paper. Building Effective Women's Economic Empowerment Strategies. https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/BSR_ICRW_Building_Effective_Womens_Economic_Empowerment_Strategies-.pdf January 2016. Accessed 30 June 2022; See this UN Women report quote by Director in foreword https://www.unilever.com/Images/unilever-opportunities-for-women-report-march-2017-final_tcm244-500988_en.pdf
[303] UN Women Retweet of Unilever CEO Jope. 15 March 2017.
https://twitter.com/UN_Women/status/842084880326524929 Accessed 30 June 2022.
[304] ICRW Website. Paul Polman Receives 2017 Champion for Change Award. September 2017.
https://www.icrw.org/news/paul-polman-receives-2017-c4c-award-leadership/ Accessed 22 June 2022;
Unilever Annual Report.

arguably, *counterproductive*. Indeed, as Salmivaara (2018, 330) has argued in her analyses of CSR in the Cambodian apparel sector, global supply chains "build on the disempowerment of workers in the Global South", thus their CSR projects are restricted to 'solutions' that ignore "the economic conflict inherent to the labour-capital relationship". A consequence of such pragmatic exclusions and compromises, in the context of FCR, is that it renders the needs of some groups of women off-limits.

These limits became visible during a panel discussion at the 2019 edition of *Business Fights Poverty* – an annual CSR conference at the University of Oxford sponsored by Unilever and other major firms – when a representative of CARE International, a Unilever beneficiary, intervened to ensure that the tea workers' case was not discussed. Titled 'how can business tackle gender-based violence?', the panel discussion was moderated by the CARE International representative and featured five speakers from the business and development sectors, who shared their experiences and insights on the matter. Among them was Unilever's 'Global Director for Human Rights Stewardship' who used her speaking time to tell the audience about the various initiatives Unilever had implemented at its Kenyan tea plantations to prevent gender-based violence and harassment. When I, an audience member, used the Question-and-Answer time that followed her presentation to ask how the programmes she described related to the allegations made by the tea workers, the panel's moderator abruptly cut me off, noting that the topic I broached "was not related to our current conversation".[305] This statement was revealing, since the topic at hand was, precisely, violence against women on tea plantations. What she rejected, I argue, was not the topic but the perspective it conveyed, which signalled a deviation from FCR notions of what pragmatic and productive dialogue entails: a collaborative outlook; a blind eye to corporation's non-CSR activities; and a provision of 'safe spaces' where corporate executives can "become allies" without being criticized (See Chapter 4).

The panel discussion speaks to TBF's inability to acknowledge the possibility of conflict and 'win-lose' scenarios – wherein doing the right thing for women comes with a price tag – and develop a position on questions of accountability. The failure of Unilever – a firm widely

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[305] Business Fights Poverty 2019. Agenda. The relevant event is on page 6, in the Gender Equality Zone section. https://www.slideshare.net/PilarPedrinelli/bfpoxford-2019-agenda Accessed 26 June 2022.

extolled as a feminist role model – and its partners to include Anne and her colleagues in their empowerment efforts raises important questions about the viability and ostensible pragmatism of TBF and the enormous resources and energies that business feminists devote to corporate-led empowerment. More fundamentally, the workers' stories put the entire promise of TBF – that, with the right incentives, education and non-profit partners, corporations will voluntarily move toward a more ethical and feminist business model – on shaky grounds.

This, I argue, underscores the argument this chapter, and the wider dissertation, has made throughout, namely: that the impact, function, and possible 'co-optation' dynamics of TBF cannot be assessed properly without a detailed and careful look at the struggles taking places in firms' supply chains.

6.4.3 Conflicting Messages

The lack of engagement among Unilever's TBF partners with the tea workers' plight highlights how the supposedly pragmatic compromises built into FCR reasoning are no harmless abstractions but create real boundaries between those women who fit the narrative and those who do not. The exclusion of the latter group in the supposedly inclusive TBF project generates problems that go beyond discursive silences, but, I argue, might have more direct, or 'real world' effects. Chapter 5 has illustrated this point, by showing how the ideological biases of the PACE programme – in particular, its silence on power dynamics and the root causes of poor working conditions in the garment industry – ended up intensifying and legitimating workers' exploitation. Compared to that case study, the adverse impacts of Unilever's TBF alliances on Anne and the other tea workers are less direct and, consequently, more difficult to discern. It is in the domain of PR and reputation management, where we see this tension play out.

As explained earlier, business feminists tend to view reputational gains as an important and often necessary condition for corporations to embark on women's empowerment projects. The communications of Unilever's TBF partners – UN Women, the ICRW, Women Deliver, CARE

International – reflect this position: they have endorsed Unilever on their websites, social media channels, annual reports, conferences and other places throughout the dispute.

From a FCR point of view, which rarely engages with the realities of profit accumulation, these endorsements seem harmless. But when we link them to the tea workers' campaign for accountability, and their efforts to attract international attention for their stories – hoping this could generate a large enough reputational threat for Unilever to give in to the workers' demands – we see how they may have directly contradicted the workers' interests.[306] Put another way, by legitimating the company's social brand, at a time that the tea workers tried to create cracks in it, business feminists contributed to an outcome that further weakened the tea workers' bargaining position. This is worth reiterating since it reveals how TBF partnerships, when developed ina vacuum, can place business feminists in a position where their interests oppose those of the women they aim to serve.

A simple Google search illustrates how Unilever's feminist partners may very well have contributed to the tea workers' failure to generate substantial media attention in the Northern press. If you typed in "Unilever women tea workers" on Google in the period between 1 January 2018 and 1 January 2021, the first two hits will have taken you to descriptions of TBF projects involving Unilever, with the Safety Manual appearing first.[307] Only thereafter do we find articles citing the Kenyan tea workers' campaign.

6.4.4 TBF as Distraction

The disconnect described above raises a question that seems to have escaped attention in the TBF debate so far: how might corporations use their TBF alliances to deflect from or weaken workers' demands for accountability? It is a question worth asking since Unilever is not the only company to have launched a supply chain focused TBF partnership at a time when workers at the

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[306] Both Anne and Mary explained to me that public support from international human rights actors, in addition to media attention for their grievances, is critical for the workers in pressurizing Unilever to change track. Remote Interview Anne London August 2020; Remote Interview Mary London August 2020.

[307] It shows Unilever's website 'Breaking the silence, ending harassment, keeping women safe' on its partnership with UN Women. Site visited January 2022 (Google Advanced Search).

bottom of their supply chains campaigned against them, demanding compensation, and accountability for human rights violations.

One example is Benetton, the Italian clothing company, which in 2014 launched a (later abandoned) empowerment programme for garment workers with UN Women, at a time that worker-led groups petitioned the company to compensate victims of the Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh and to sign on to the binding Bangladesh Accord [308] (see Chapter 3). A second example is the Japanese clothing brand Uniqlo,[309] which in 2019 announced a comparable skills-programme for garment workers with UN Women – worth at least $ 2 million in donations for UN Women – while refusing to give in to ongoing demands by Indonesian workers for over $5 million in severance pay.[310] In both cases, UN Women endorsed and applauded these firms for "galvaniz[ing] change in the garment industry"[311] and enabling garment workers to "improve life for themselves and for their families" while workers accused them of deeply irresponsible sourcing practices [312] Other examples include Gap and IKEA which have, in recent years, initiated and expanded TBF initiatives, while, at the same time, refusing to pay workers the severance pay that their employers illegally withheld from them.[313] At the time of writing, labour unions and worker rights campaigners are, thus far unsuccessfully, lobbying several prominent

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[308] International Labour Rights Forum Website. Pressure increases on Benetton as nearly 1 million activists demand they immediately pay into Rana Plaza victims' compensation fund. 11 February 2015. https://laborrights.org/releases/pressure-increases-benetton-nearly-1-million-activists-demand-they-immediately-pay-rana Accessed 26 June 2022;Business and Human Rights Resource Center Website. Benetton to embark on living wage roadmap for women in textile and garment supply chain. 23 February 2015. https://www.business-humanrights.org/es/últimas-noticias/benetton-to-embark-on-living-wage-roadmap-for-women-in-textile-garment-supply-chain/ Accessed 26 June 2022.

[309] More precisely, the partnership was between UN Women and Fast Retailing, which is the company that owns the Uniqlo brand.

[310] UN Women Website. Fast Retailing and UN Women Sign Global Partnership to Empower Female Workers in Apparel Industry. 28 June 2019. https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2019/06/fast-retailing-and-un-women-sign-global-partnership Accessed 26 June 2022.

[311] See previous 2 footnotes

[312] Labour Behind the Label Website. Take action Uniqlo owe workers 5,5 million USD. 12 September 2019. https://labourbehindthelabel.org/take-action-uniqlo-owe-workers-5-5-million-usd/ Accessed 26 June 2022; Uniqlo Website. UN Women Global Partnership. https://www.uniqlo.com/uk/en/content/unwomen.html Accessed 26 June 2022.

[313] Apparel Insider. Brands under fie in CCC week of action. 16 November 2020. https://apparelinsider.com/brands-under-fire-in-ccc-week-of-action/ Accessed 26 June 2022; Sourcing Journal. Nike, Target Targeted by Labour Campaigns in Cambodia. 7 June 2022. https://sourcingjournal.com/topics/labor/nike-adidas-cambodia-factory-strike-severance-pay-global-fashion-summit-348222/ Accessed 26 June 2022.

TBF actors – include Walmart, The Gap, Levi's, Abercrombie & Fitch and VF Corporation, which owns Timberland, Eastpak, and the North Face – to sign onto binding safety agreements to improve workers' safety.[314] One of the most prominent TBF actors currently in the firing line by workers' rights groups is Nike. Since the Summer of 2021, the company stands accused of refusing to pay severance pay to over 1000 Cambodian workers.[315]

The preference these firms display for voluntary programmes underscores a point that critics of CSR have made for years: that CSR programmes can be used as alibis to avoid more robust and costly alternatives (Nova and Wegemer 2016). A detailed analysis of these projects is beyond the scope of this analysis, but their timing and context accentuate this chapter's key argument: that the adverse impacts of TBF can only be understood when they are contextualised in the broader context of their sponsors' supply chains.

6.4 Conclusion

When judged as a stand-alone product, the Global Women's Safety Framework by Unilever and UN Women is hard to criticize. Its recommendations on gender-based education, grievance systems and perpetrator accountability are worthwhile, if incomplete. Many of its recommendations, if implemented and enforced, could undoubtedly improve the lives of many women. It is only when we connect this product to the dispute that has prompted its creation, that we begin to see the Framework's more problematic discursive, ideological and financial dimensions, and understand how it may have helped to undermine and marginalize workers' legitimate demands for accountability and justice.

In the debate on TBF and the corporate 'co-optation' of feminism, these are important findings. That is because they illustrate the problems that can arise when feminists structure their vision

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[314] Worker Rights Consortium Website. Worker Rights Consortium Urges Apparel Brands to Join International Safety Accord on Anniversary of Deadly Factory Fire. 13 December 2021. https://www.workersrights.org/press-release/worker-rights-consortium-urges-apparel-brands-to-join-international-safety-accord-on-anniversary-of-deadly-factory-fire/ Accessed 26 June 2022.

[315] Clean Clothes Campaign Website. On International Women's Day We Call on Nike to Pay Your Workers.8 March 2022. https://cleanclothes.org/news/2022/on-iwd-we-call-on-nike-to-pay-your-workers Accessed 30 June 2022.

and work on corporate responsibility around the defeatist belief that 'pragmatic' interventions are those that can count on corporate 'buy in'. They help us see how the uncritical ideas around corporate allyship, 'safe spaces' and 'win-win' outcomes that underpin the TBF project deprive it of the vocabulary and rationale to deal with questions of justice and accountability, producing exclusions and silences that, as the stories of Anne and the other tea workers illustrate, are no harmless abstractions, but render the needs of some women beyond the scope of feminist intervention.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

7.1 A New Dawn (Again)

In the autumn of 2021, the *Financial Times* ran a podcast series titled 'Inside ESG', which asked: "can businesses really marry profit and purpose?". Short for Environmental and Social Governance, ESG is the latest incarnation of the corporate-led movement for a more humane capitalism. Like the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) movement, ESG claims to improve, on a voluntary and market-driven basis, the social and environmental impact of corporations by aligning 'purpose' and 'profit' in innovative and collaborative ways. It is often said that ESG represents a radical break with the Friedmanite profit-first vision on CSR. As the *Financial Times* podcast explained the ESG phenomenon:

> "Milton Friedman, the renowned American economist and spiritual mentor of many entrepreneurs, argued that the social responsibility of business was to increase profits. This has been the gospel since the early 1970s, but companies and investors are beginning to rethink the purpose of business. Has the sun really set on the Miltonian era?" [316]

Prominent ESG supporters, such as Black Rock CEO and gender-lens investing pioneer Larry Fink[317] and former Unilever CEO Paul Polman, have explicitly distanced themselves from Friedman's stony business vision.[318] They tell us that, contrary to what Friedman claimed, purpose and profit are perfectly compatible. Polman's visibility in the ESG space reflects the close overlap between ESG and Transnational Business Feminism (TBF) (Roberts 2012). In both

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[316] Financial Times. Inside ESG. 23 September 2021. https://www.ft.com/content/b7d6d00f-7378-4ffe-9577-24d197e84068 Accessed 28 June 2022 Accessed 28 June 2022.

[317] Fortune. Exclusive: BlackRock, the world's largest asset manager, debuts gender-lens investing. 25 May 2022. https://fortune.com/2022/05/25/blackrock-gender-lens-investing-esg-larry-fink/ Accessed 28 June 2022.

[318] IMD. Fink meets Friedman: who is right about the future of capitalism? May 2020. https://www.imd.org/research-knowledge/case-studies/case-studies/Fink-meets-Friedman/ Accessed 28 June 2022 ; Twitter. Paul Polman Tweet. In 1970, Milton Friedman set capitalism to maximize profit. In 2020, #letsreset to maximize shared wellbeing on a healthy planet. https://twitter.com/paulpolman/status/1305786189505495046 Accessed 28 June 2022.

spaces, the vocal support of CEOs for a 'new' way of doing business is read as a sign of its 'seriousness' and potential for impact. As a commentator in the *Financial Times* podcast stressed, ESG is not led by "hippies" – naïve, unserious, idealistic, powerless – but by CEOs with the clout, forte and skills to actually *get things done*. [319]

This is, indeed, the same 'capitalist realist' logic that we have explored throughout this dissertation (Fisher 2009). It echoes the same faith in CEOs and market solutions – some would say market *fundamentalism* (Rayment and Kozul-Wright 2007) – that I encountered in my interviews with business feminists, and observed in TBF conferences, documents, and webinars. Notwithstanding its revolutionary rhetoric, the mode of reason underlying these discourses, I have shown, is one of defeat and resignation: it sees no alternative to the current social order and accepts corporate hegemony as a given. Enlightened CEOs, in this vision, are our best hope for a better world. Even if the motivations of these executives are not 'pure', we are told, and their commitment to social and feminist progress serves primarily reputational aims, at least they are moving in the right direction. From this standpoint, the crucial question is: how do we maximize the social gains within this 'win-win' alignment.

My goal in this dissertation has been to investigate the origins and function of this 'win-win' orthodoxy in the context of TBF and corporate supply chains and offer insights into how these narratives have affected two groups of workers linked to two high-profile TBF initiatives. By linking the neoliberal beliefs of Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics to the second wave of feminism in the US, the emergence 'world market factories' in the Global South, the rise of the CSR movement in the late 1990s and the capitalist realist ideology (Fisher 2009) that intensified during this time, I have shown that the 'business case' for a more ethical and feminist capitalism denotes not a break (or rejection) from Friedman's neoliberal politics, but its de-politisation.

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[319]Financial Times. Inside ESG, 23 September 2021. Episode 2, 7.27 minutes. https://www.ft.com/content/b7d6d00f-7378-4ffe-9577-24d197e84068 Accessed 26 December 2022"
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If fifty years ago, Friedman felt compelled to advocate for a 'win-win' approach to responsibility and urged business leaders to only invest in social causes in the rare cases where this happened to overlap with commercial gains, today's TBF discourse accepts as a given that corporations, in the rule, operate according to Friedman's profit-first prescription. Accordingly, the only route to progress runs through this 'win-win' alignment.

Throughout this dissertation, we have seen how business feminists – in the name of pragmatism – defend this view, implement it in empowerment programmes for workers, and help normalize it through research reports designed to prove that the 'win-win' is no exception to business, but the rule. These conversations and observations shine a light on how TBF partnerships enable corporations to shape how influential women's rights groups imagine, articulate, and speak about feminist progress and change. They show that TBF partnerships impose a process of corporatization (Dauvergne and Lebaron 2014, 1) on their partners, by pressuring to "look, think and act like corporations" and, contrary to claims of neutrality and pragmatism, are entrenching a market rationality that is deeply neoliberal.

Business feminists might not argue against living wages, as Friedman did, but by framing the poverty of workers such as Malathi as a product of her skill-deficits, they entrench the same ideology. Similarly, they may not actively disapprove of unions, but by ignoring their existence, they deny unions' role and relevance for workers. And while TBF may not take a position against binding regulation and collective bargaining agreements, their ideology of voluntarism implicitly suggests there is no need for such force. In effect, then, TBF's story of change suggests that the market forces will fix problems of disempowerment and exploitation in a same way Friedman claimed it would protect workers and eradicate discrimination (See Chapter 3).

As such, TBF serves the same function as the CSR movement of which it has become a critical pillar. Like CSR, TBF is not "an opposition to the contemporary world of corporate capitalism, nor a limit to it, but the very mechanism through which corporate power is replenished, extended and fortified" (Rajak 2011, 239).

Does this ideological bias justify the flood of critiques that the TBF regime has received from critics? Some feminist scholars have contended it does not. For example, Elizabeth Prügl considers it misguided to denounce the TBF regime on grounds of their pro-market biases, without looking seriously at the benefits they may bring to their beneficiaries. In a way, her position echoes the argument, made by the radical women's liberationists in the US some fifty years ago, that it is "inhuman and cruel" to condemn minor gains and reforms as meaningless when they "alleviate the suffering" of some (Watkins 2018, np) (See Chapter 3). But what do we really know about TBF's positive outcomes? While dozens of evaluations might claim positive, and even transformative outcomes, many of such studies are either funded, directed or both by the corporations who initiated these programmes. A key finding of this study is that the incentive and power-structures behind such research are simply not favourable to robust and neutral outcomes (See Chapter 4 and 5). Hence, while Prügl and others have used corporations' self-evaluations, and those of their TBF partners, as evidence for their positive outcomes (Prügl 2015; Scott 2012), I argue that such documents must be treated with much more caution.

Thus, whereas the benefits of TBF to big firms and their feminist partners seem clear – the former gains in productivity and PR value, the latter in incoming revenue – we are left wondering: what about the women in whose name all these resources and energies are expended? Certainly, for Malathi, the garment worker we met in Chapter 5, and Anne, the Kenyan tea worker from Chapter 6, the triumphant narrative of TBF means very little. By following their stories, and those of their colleagues, this thesis hopes to have shown the need for more systematic worker-focused research in the TBF debate. Given how rapidly worker focused TBF programmes seem to multiply, the dearth of independent, empirical queries into this area is troubling.

But rather than fixating on the openings and opportunities that such programmes might bring and correct the supposed anti-market bias of TBF scholarship (Prügl 2015; Scott et al. 2012), I contend that future studies should take the regressive effects of TBF at least as seriously. Based on the findings of this study, three areas of concern stand out. First, the ways in which TBF stunts the ability of feminist partners to promote a bottom-up, progressive kind of solidarity with women workers; second, the problematic material effects that these programs can cause for their

supposed beneficiaries, and third; the flawed knowledges these projects create about women's lives.

7.2 Corporatization of Feminism

Are TBF partnerships helping or hindering the advance of feminist agendas? This question has been central both to this dissertation and the wider debate on TBF. The main take-away from the interviews, webinars and documents that informed this investigation is that corporations, through their TBF alliances, are detrimentally affecting the feminist praxis at leading gender and development organizations. I have shown how corporate partnerships pressure these organizations to adopt the language, customs cultures and expertise of corporations, including their concern for PR outcomes and limited transparency. This adjustment process entailed compromises and adjustments to their feminist vision and praxis and led them to promote and adopt 'empowerment' solutions based not on the demands and desires of their supposed beneficiaries, but on the outcomes that corporate executives deem permissible based on strategic 'shared value' calculations. The result is a highly ideological and commercially strategic story of empowerment, which reproduces racialized, neo-colonial tropes and structures (Mohanty 1988, Siddiqi 2020), treats women's rights as an instrument to enhance corporate competitiveness, and can only imagine corporations as allies, offering solutions, and never as the source of problems. The 'win-win' premise of TBF work, and the strategic goals built into this formula, deprives feminists of a vocabulary to deal with, let alone address questions of exploitation, justice and accountability. I have argued that business feminists rationalize these biases, flaws and compromises through a neoliberal mode of reason I have termed feminist capitalist realism (FCR), according to which the most pragmatic approach to drive positive change is to harness, rather than confront, corporate power.

The model of 'empowerment' that results from these compromises is incapable of accommodating the stories, experiences and needs of women whose demands and vision of justice do not match the strategic objectives built into TBF's 'win-win' frame. This exclusionary dynamic, I have argued, not only limits the efficacy of TBF programmes but can place business feminists in a position where their TBF projects neglect, or even *undermine* the needs of women they claim to serve. For the debate on TBF and its effects these are important findings: they

show that the ideological and pragmatic compromises associated with TBF can have side-effects that disadvantage the same group of women they claim to uplift. Such side-effects can include a worsening of women's exploitation, and the reinforcing of a deeply problematic and racialized narrative around 'Third World women', the role of culture in their lives and the ways in which they need to be empowered, saved or otherwise transformed. As Abu-Lughod (2002, 789) has argued, top-down women's rights campaigns of this kind end up "reinforc[ing] a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged." It is through this lens that we should understand and, indeed challenge, the transnational feminist project of TBF.

7.3 Workers

Just as CSR is no "harmless propaganda" but a "concrete corporate practice" with "material effects" (Fleming and Jones 2013, xiv), the impact of TBF is no abstraction. The ideological compromises, strategic silences and commercial objectives woven into the TBF project warrant more, not less scrutiny. As this thesis has argued, to get the full extent of TBF's impact, we need to look beyond the CSR vacuum, examine the struggles and conflicts taking place in the value chains of these corporations and ask: is TBF helping or hindering these workers to achieve their goals? For the workers in this study, TBF was more likely to obstruct their empowerment than support it. For Malathi and the other garment workers, the flaws and compromises of PACE – its productivity objectives, blindness to power relations and indifference to women's living wage demands – led to condescending 'life-skills' trainings that intensified, rather than alleviated, their exploitation. For Anne and the other tea workers who tried, in vain, to hold Unilever to account, the company's TBF projects did more to undermine than support their campaign.

Thus, just as finance-centred TBF programs are creating "new forms of exploitation and dispossession through financial relations" (Roberts 2012, 88), labour focused TBF programs might very well deepen workers' exploitation and suppress, instead of amplify their demands. A key take-away from this study's engagements with workers is that systematic, grounded research into this matter could add vital insights to the TBF debate.

7.4 Compromised Knowledge

TBF creates incentive structures that pressure their feminist partners to create new knowledges about gender and labour that prioritize corporation's reputational needs over objective fact finding. Indeed, we have encountered multiple knowledge production processes in this study, where the strategic needs of corporations – their need to tell positive stories that affirm the 'business case' and validate its 'transformative' outcomes on women and their employers – override research integrity and objectiveness. The resulting research tells a story of corporate responsibility where power does not exist, labour unions are no factor, living wages are irrelevant and the only obstacles and violence women face is cultural in nature. For Angie, the researcher who researched the garment industry for clients of the ICRW, this erasure became quite literal when these clients rejected her findings for containing too much labour, too much violence and too many references to CSR failures (Chapter 5). The experiences of both Angie and Pooja – the ICRW researcher who coordinated PACE evaluations – suggest it is immensely difficult to create meaningful, feminist research within such structures: they tried to push back at what they saw were harmful data collection and editing practices, but ultimately felt powerless in the face of their clients' demands. As a result, their energies and labour were pulled into projects they saw as deeply problematic. The compulsive optimism of TBF, and its rejection of any suggestions of exploitation, was also manifested itself in the Randomized Control Studies (RCTs) that US business school scholars carried out at Shahi factories, in collaboration with the company's management, to measure PACE's impact. While their studies found that Shahi kept all of PACE's productivity gains to itself – gains that were, at least half of the time generated in workers' unpaid private time – and did not share them with the workers, the authors nonetheless presented their findings as evidence of PACE's social success.

Evaluations such as these that are carried out with support and permission of their corporate sponsors are meant to affirm the neoliberal 'order of truth' (Brown 2015) underneath TBF. Judged in isolation, these glowing project descriptions offer us stories about individual firms and projects – stories that, as critics have noted, stand out for their excessive, and often less than credible, impact claims (Moeller 2018; Roberts 2016; Tornhill 2019) and, as I have argued earlier, cannot be seen as neutral evidence of impact.

Combined, these documents convey a larger ideological message, namely: that corporations are capable of moral improvement on a strictly voluntary basis and that business feminists have successfully used their position 'at the table' to facilitate this impact.

7.5 Conclusion

To understand the full extent of TBF, feminists need to situate TBF projects in the broader context of their sponsors' supply chain, move beyond the CSR vacuum, and pay closer attention to the sphere of labour. This means analysing TBF projects not according to the knowledge produced about it by its sponsors and participants, but by asking: what are workers in the supply chain of this corporation asking for? How might TBF help or hinder them in having their voices heard and demands met? How do TBF initiatives relate to their demands for living wages, better conditions workers or campaigns for reparations? It requires, in other words, a return to a very basic principle of feminist curiosity: a curiosity that begins with "taking women's lives seriously…listening carefully, digging deep, developing a long attention span [and] be ready to be surprised" (Enloe 2004, 3).

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