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Corporate Responsibility, Gender and Feminist Organizing in a Neoliberal Age

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The intersection of business and feminism as both theory and praxis has in recent years been the topic of ferocious debate within academic journals. Just as frequently, this debate has taken place on business and feminist blogs and social media sites where social movements are blooming. As the power of business grows both economically and politically, how can we address the gendered impacts of business on society? Should feminists work with corporations on gender equality issues to push through change (Kemp, Keenan & Gronow, 2010), or should they protect against co-option and work against them? Or can social movements guided by feminist ideologies do both in novel and hybrid ways? What is the role of businesses as they engage in 'gendered' corporate responsibility efforts (Karam & Jamali, 2013), and in which ways might 'neoliberal feminism' (Prugl, 2015) offer challenges and opportunities for feminist organizing? Which women is 'market feminism' (Kantola & Squires, 2012) seeking to 'liberate'- and from what, and for what ends (McCarthy, 2017)? How do these 'empowerment' and 'liberation' agendas relate to feminist social movement agendas, including in local contexts, and with regard to both multinationals and smaller companies? In this stream, we expand upon previous GWO streams on 'corporate responsibility and gendered organizations' (2014) and 'the rise of moderate feminisms' (2016) to further scrutinize the fascinating, yet always contentious relationship between business and feminisms in their various forms.

In many countries Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has emerged alongside the rise of neo-liberal economics, and partly been used to legitimize that rise (Özkazanç-Pan, 2017). We are guided by scholarship derived from feminist work at the intersection of gender and organization studies, and CSR (Grosser and Moon, 2017). The former suggests CSR often results in gendered and unequal outcomes for women rather than being the harbinger of empowerment or better working conditions. Hayhurst (2013) argues CSR can function to replicate or exacerbate existing forms of patriarchy, holding individual women responsible for their own economic welfare while governments are released from their obligations to citizens under corporate-led responsibility efforts. Relatedly, feminist political economy scholarship analyzes CSR with hostility, with Fraser (2013) lamenting that feminism

has become 'capitalism's handmaiden'. In this context research on gender and business needs feminist theory more than ever (Grosser and Moon 2017; Karam & Jamali, 2015) to examine the extant structural arrangements, economic, political and social, that are not being changed or challenged by CSR scholarship or practice.

We contend that the rise of the neoliberal era- and CSR- offers both opportunities and challenges for feminist movements. We seek to better scrutinize and theorize the role of corporate responsibility practices in addressing gender inequality in different contexts. CSR has developed from its philanthropic foundations and broadened from its narrow association with instrumental interests and PR. New political theories of CSR view it as a process of contested governance involving business, government and civil society organizations (Moon, 2002). Here CSR is conceived of as 'a multi-actor and multi-level system of rules, standards, norms, and expectations' (Levy and Kaplan, 2008:438), involving 'a political deliberation process that aims at setting and resetting the standards of global business behavior' (Scherer and Palazzo, 2008:426). From this perspective participation by social movements matters, and critical examination of these processes is particularly important where governance systems are unstable, changing or failing (Jamali & Karam, 2016), resulting in the expansion of 'responsibility free space' (Donaldson and Dunfee 1994).

Since the 2014 GWO stream we have seen an explosion in attention to gender inequality on CSR agendas (ICRW, 2016), with business increasingly working alongside government, civil society and corporate partners. A rising number of multi-stakeholder initiatives, such as the Women's Empowerment Principles, have grown in strength: hailed as new leverage for promoting gender equality (Kilgour, 2013), or lamented as a sanitized vision of a previously critical social movement (Bexell, 2012). Thus questions about the gendered nature of new global governance systems involving business have been highlighted (Grosser, 2016; Bexell, 2012). These relate not just to traditional workplace agendas through diversity policies and practices, but extend to corporate value chains in the global South in the form of 'women's empowerment' programmes (Prugl, 2015), and to the gendered impacts of business on mining communities (Keenan, Kemp & Ramsay, 2016; Lauwo, 2016; Lahiri-Dutt, 2013) and in post-conflict development zones (Karam & Jamali, 2015).

In this context, our steam focuses on what role feminisms plays in CSR, and what CSR might offer feminisms? We seek insights into the dangers, opportunities, strategies, framings and constellations of feminist activity related to promoting gender equality within businesses - and out into the societies, communities and households intrinsically linked with business activity. This agenda incorporates attention to a wide range of business relationships and stakeholders, including with consumers, suppliers, workers, families, and the ecological environment - indeed throughout corporate value chains (Grosser, McCarthy & Kilgour, 2016).

Thus, we encourage theoretical, conceptual and empirical contributions that draw upon various strands in the gender, diversity or intersectionality literatures, including post- colonial, transnational, political economy and other feminist frameworks that attend to the intersections of business, society and gender broadly. Themes to be addressed include, but are not limited to:
- Feminist strategies for change 'with' or 'against' business
- Feminist theories and CSR, e.g. gendered organizations, feminist economics,

feminist political economy
- Gender, CSR and the marketisation of feminism
- Gender, CSR and new configurations of global governance
- Gender in multi-stakeholder CSR initiatives
- The intersections of gender, class and race in the field of corporate responsibility
- Social movements and feminisms in the context of transitions economies and CSR programs
- Gender and CSR in specific sector contexts
- Gender, CSR and the ecological environment
- Gender and CSR throughout business value chains

For submission details go to: www.mq.edu.au/events/gwosydney

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Papers from the stream will be selected for a special issue proposal of the *Gender, Work and Organization* journal.

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