



Title	The Empowerment Paradox: Exploring the Implications of Neoliberalized Feminism for Sustainable Development
Authors(s)	Kelly, Orla
Publication date	2020-09-29
Publication information	Kelly, Orla. "The Empowerment Paradox: Exploring the Implications of Neoliberalized Feminism for Sustainable Development." University of California Press, September 29, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1525/sod.2020.6.3.296 .
Publisher	University of California Press
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/25258
Publisher's version (DOI)	10.1525/sod.2020.6.3.296

Downloaded 2026-05-02 00:29:08

The UCD community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters! (@ucd_oa)



© Some rights reserved. For more information

The Empowerment Paradox

Exploring the Implications of Neoliberalized Feminism for Sustainable Development

ABSTRACT An extensive literature is dedicated to examining the proliferation of private sector-led, market-based approaches to address gender inequality. Drawing on insights from feminist environmentalism and environmental sociology, I explore how and why this phenomenon is connected to the environmental crisis. First, I analyze the World Bank's gender strategy papers for 2001–2023. I highlight the organization's role in entrenching a neoliberal discourse of women's empowerment that erases socio-ecological contexts. Next, I provide an overview of Project Shakti, a women's empowerment program run by Hindustan Unilever, a subsidiary of the Unilever conglomerate and a corporate partner of the World Bank. Secondary data on program outcomes show that the organization's selective use of gendered ideologies has increased HUL's rural market share. On the other hand, the benefits for participants are less clear, particularly when considered in the context of the program's social and environmental footprint. Finally, I present the Exxon Mobil's Foundation's gender portfolio to illustrate how exclusive networks and non-participatory program evaluations have been used by private sector actors to normalize an understanding of women's wellbeing that is devoid of environmental considerations. Together, these cases illustrate how feminist ideals have been used to support elite economic agendas with high environmental costs, while also marginalizing those who seek sustainable development through systemic reform. This phenomenon exacerbates an environmental crisis that disproportionately affects the people these programs purport to empower. **KEYWORDS** Women's empowerment, environmental feminism, sustainable development, neoliberal feminism, feminist environmentalism

INTRODUCTION

The term “women's empowerment” has been part of mainstream discourse on gender equality for well over a decade. Among high-income populations around the world, especially in Western nations, large economic entities have used feminist theory and language, including the term women's empowerment, to stimulate consumer demand and build their brands (Zeisler 2016). In these contexts, women's empowerment is often presented as consumer choice and female representation in the upper echelons of corporate and political structures (Hozic and True 2016).

Feminist logic and language have also been absorbed and reconstituted by international financial institutions, and more recently, corporate actors, in their operations in low- and middle-income countries. In these contexts, women's empowerment is used in

Sociology of Development, Vol. 6, Number 3, pps. 296–317, electronic ISSN: 2374-538X © 2020 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/sod.2020.6.3.296>

reference to initiatives that target women marginalized by class, rural location, caste, ethnicity, or race. These programs include access to financial credit, skill and entrepreneurship training, and participation in the formal economy. The use of a gendered ideology by economic actors to support interdependent demand and supply-side global capitalist processes is known as the neoliberalization of feminism (among other terms).¹

This trend has been the subject of a wave of feminist critiques. For example, previous analyses highlight some of the social and economic impacts of the neoliberalization process, such as the normalizing of an exploitative global supply chain and the obfuscation of the real drivers of inequality (Calkin 2015, 2017; Chant and Sweetman 2012; Eisenstein 2005, 2015; Fraser 2009; Hickel 2014; McRobbie 2009; Roberts 2015; Roberts and Soederberg 2012). More recently, other scholars have advocated for a more nuanced representation of the disadvantages and potential benefits of feminist ideologies being integrated into broader neoliberalization processes (Funk 2013; Jaquette 2017; Prügl 2015). This research explores some of the environmental implications of this phenomenon.

Informed by a variety of feminist perspectives, and insights from environmental sociology, I present three cases to illustrate some of the environmental implications of folding feminist ideals into neoliberal logics. I apply Agarwal's (1992) concept of the "political economy of ideological construction" to analyze the World Bank's gender strategy papers for 2001–2023. This case reveals the organization's unique role in entrenching a self-serving discourse of gender equality at the expense of approaches which embedded women's well-being within broader social and ecological contexts. Given the long-standing resistance of many grass-roots feminist organizations to the World Bank's operations, across a variety of national contexts (Baksh-Soodeen and Harcourt 2012; Moghadam 2005, 2010), I contend that the organization's promotion of neoliberalized feminism overlaps with "green neoliberalism," whereby the World Bank absorbs and neutralize threats from environmental interest groups, in order to realize its economic agenda (see also Goldman 2005).

Next, I provide an overview of Project Shakti, a women's empowerment program run by Hindustan Unilever (HUL), a subsidiary of the Unilever conglomerate and a corporate partner of the World Bank. Project Shakti has been the subject of other analyses in the transnational feminist literature (Eisenstein 2015; Prügl 2015). I build on these evaluations of this corporate-led gender empowerment program by considering secondary data on participant economic outcomes against the organization's broader social and environmental footprint.

Finally, I examine the ExxonMobil Foundation's gender portfolio. I argue that the presence of this controversial organization in the field of gender and development is normalized through elite networks, and illustrates how disconnected from ecological considerations the concept of women's empowerment has become. Further, I apply Haraway's (1988) concept of "partial perspectives," in an analysis of the Exxon Mobil Foundation's "expert guidebook," *A Roadmap for Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment*, to illustrate how non-participatory program evaluations contribute to the proliferation of this limited conceptualization of women's well-being.

Together, these three cases illustrate how the folding of the ideals of gender equality into neoliberalism serves to support elite economic agendas with high environmental costs, while marginalizing those who oppose them.

NEOLIBERALISM, FEMINISM, AND DEVELOPMENT

“Neoliberalism” refers to a political, economic, and cultural turn toward free market ideals. The policy paradigm advocates trusting the market to reduce social inequality via trickle-down effects, free trade, and a smaller role for state governments (Portes 1997; Williamson 1990). Many trace the resurgence of this paradigm to the conservative administrations in the United States and United Kingdom in early 1980s (Peck and Tickell 2002), the influence of these administrations on the mandates of international financial institutions at the time, and the global diffusion of these standards through international financial institutions’ structural adjustment policies (Babb 2009; Chorev and Babb 2009).²

A wave of recent feminist research explores how the increasing reliance on free market ideals in political and economic spheres has affected the principles and practice of feminism.³ For many, the co-option of feminist ideals into neoliberal ideologies and economic projects is evidence of the “neoliberalization of feminism” (Prügl 2015). Fraser (2009) argues that the neoliberal milieu transformed (international) feminist movements from a legitimate political movement to a buttress of capitalist interests. Similarly, Eisenstein (2005) charges that international financial institutions, with support from national governments, are promoting education, training, and jobs for women and girls as the antidote to poverty and underdevelopment—a self-serving solution which began with the spread of low-cost female employment in export processing zones. She warns that “hegemonic feminism” is engaging in an increasingly “dangerous liaison” with capitalism. She attributes the success of this partnership to its congruence with a certain version of feminism rooted in Western ideals of individualism. Similarly, Hickel (2014:1356) remarks that interventions for the empowerment of girls “rely on assumptions about ‘freedom’ that are particular to the Western liberal tradition, which focuses on achieving individual authenticity and self-mastery.” Taking into account the agency of those who are disadvantaged by the neoliberal order, Sa’ar (2005) suggests that some internalize the neoliberal epistemology in the interests of personal security and maximizing opportunities.

More recently, there has been a call in the subfield for a *less* critical approach to understanding the implications of the current political economy for international feminism (Funk 2013; Jaquette 2017; Kapur 2016; Prügl 2015). For example, Prügl (2015, citing Lerner 2003) criticizes the overuse of the term “neoliberalism” as a catchall for complicated global processes of capitalism, modernization, and globalization. She further accuses socialist feminists of being “trapped in backward-looking imaginaries” (615) which are nostalgic for a political order that never existed. She urges feminist theorists to move beyond approaches that lament the co-option of feminism, to explore instead how feminist ideas are being “integrated into neoliberal rationales” and to examine “what is lost in the process and what is perhaps gained” (615). Similarly, Funk (2013) argues

that Fraser's and other critiques of neoliberalized feminism overstate the anticapitalistic nature of the second wave of feminism by focusing on a minority feminist position as opposed to mainstream realities of the time. Kapur (2016) also dismisses the rise in anti-neoliberal Marxist feminism as a form of utopian thinking which does not adequately engage with nuanced counter-criticism.

Jaquette (2017) warns that critical gender and development theory is becoming increasingly outdated, resulting in a growing wedge between feminist theory and practice. The author advocates closer feminist engagement with the potential role of state governments, as opposed to simply discounting them in Marxian terms. In particular, she problematizes anti-neoliberal feminists' inattention to the role of individual agency. Echoing postcolonial critiques of Western feminism (Mohanty 1988), Jaquette counters those who position working-class women's labor in low- and middle-income countries as economically, socially, and ecologically exploitative by highlighting the potential of unionized employment to improve the lives of millions of women and their communities.

This paper adds to this debate by considering the environmental implications of the dominance of neoliberal feminism in the development context. In the next section, I provide an overview of feminist scholarship that addresses the link between the subordination of women and the environment, and developmental processes.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER, NATURE, AND DEVELOPMENT

Decades of critical feminist theorizing has addressed the connection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. Some of these schools of feminist and environmental thought include ecofeminism, feminist environmentalism, feminist post-structuralism, and feminist political ecology. Early ecological feminist theory argued that women were naturally closer to nature than their male counterparts (Ortner 1974; Salleh 1984). Later iterations rejected the biological foundations of this argument but agreed that women tend to interact with, and are impacted by, the natural environment differently because of the exploitative use of gender ideologies (Merchant 1980; Plumwood 1993).

Merchant's seminal *The Death of Nature* (1980) explores the epistemological and ideological underpinnings of women and nature's shared oppression. She provides a historical account of the Western cultural shift toward economics, scientific mastery, conquest, and empiricism and the concurrent "othering" of women and the natural world. A decade later, feminist post-structural thought, and in particular the work of Donna Haraway, built on this critique of objectivism and positivism, advocating an integrated understanding of nature and social, ecological, and technological realities. Like Merchant, Haraway (1988) problematized the prevailing understanding of scientific objectivity, noting that only "partial perspectives," which are rooted in dualistic Western cultural narratives, could rely on totalizing claims of scientific authority. According to Haraway, these objectivist perspectives use techniques which systematically narrow and obscure the subject, empowering the "objective observer" to control the narrative. While moving beyond the romanticism and technophobia which characterized some of the earlier forms of critical ecological feminist thinking (White, Rudy, and Gareau 2015), Haraway (1988)

emphasizes the importance of partial knowledges. She proposes an approach to knowledge creation which allows nodal, global connections and the ability to connect knowledges among diverse and power-differentiated communities.

Consistent across much of this theorizing is the contention that feminism and environmentalism have a common enemy (patriarchy), common approaches (participatory), and common goals (egalitarian societies), leading to a natural alliance and interdependence between the political movements. According to Plumwood (1993), women's liberation will fail unless it can challenge the dualism that links and degrades both women and nature.

In the late 1980s, some feminist and environmental scholars, many from the majority world, complicated several aspects of ecological feminist theorizing. In particular, they criticized the prevailing focus on the ideological connection between women and the environment at the expense of considerations of the material reality of poor women (Agarwal 1992; Mies and Shiva 1993; Shiva 1988). For example, Indian scholar and environmental activist Vandana Shiva (1988) stressed the urgent need to explicitly link environmental degradation and women's subordination to the Western-led development project. Further, Shiva contended that the dualist development discourse destroys complexity and diversity and renders non-Western peoples and nature "deficient" and in need of "development" (4). And, like Merchant and Haraway, Shiva criticizes reductionist science for marginalizing local feminist knowledge, particularly knowledge that originates outside the West.

Indian development economist Bina Agrawal (1992) commends Shiva's focus on both the material basis of violence against women and nature and the role of larger macro-level social structures, such as geopolitical arrangements, in theorizing the relationship between women and nature.⁴ According to Agrawal, some of the weaknesses of ecofeminist theorizing, such as its inattention to intersectionality, are due to ideological constraints that shape our understanding of relations of gender dominance and forms of acting on the nonhuman world. She emphasizes the need for a theoretical understanding of the "political economy of ideological construction." According to this perspective, unpacking dominant narratives requires attention to "the interplay between conflicting discourses, the groups promoting particular discourses, and the means used to entrench views embodied in those discourses" (123). The focus on ideological struggles is a key component in what Agrawal calls "feminist environmentalism." This approach situates women and men's relationship with nature in their material reality, paying particular attention to how gender, class, and race-based divisions of property, power, and knowledge structure people's interactions with the natural world. According to Agrawal (2007), the ongoing neglect of inequalities embedded in ideological construction is a major obstacle to the emergence of an inclusive sustainability movement.

In the last two decades, a feminist political ecology framework has emerged which combines many aspects of ecological feminism, feminist environmentalism, feminist poststructuralist thought, and the women, environment, and development movement in a gendered analytical framework for environmental issues (Baksh-Soodeen and

Harcourt 2015). Theorists and practitioners who subscribe to this approach try to move theory and practice beyond capitalist vs. socialist and human vs. nature dualistic paradigms (Rocheleau and Nirmal 2015) through scholarship on legitimate knowledge and authority, tenure rights, and the feminist environmental movement (Gender and Environment Series Editorial Committee 2011).

CASE SELECTION

The next section applies the theoretical insights of these environmental feminist scholars to an analysis of three large economic actors that have incorporated neoliberalized feminist ideologies into their operations. These cases illustrate “how” and “why” (Yin 1994) the proliferation of neoliberal feminism is connected to the environmental crisis. Informed by Agarwal’s concept of the political economy ideological construction, I present the World Bank as a key case because of its role in spreading a neoliberalized gender discourse implemented by corporate actors at the expense of other, more socio-environmentally oriented, approaches. For this analysis I focus on the World Bank’s gender strategy papers for 2001–2023.

After that, I analyze secondary data on Project Shakti, a women’s empowerment project being implemented by HUL which has trained over 100,000 women across India (Unilever 2018). Unilever, the parent company of HUL, is a member of the World Bank’s Global Private Sector Leaders Forum (GPSLF), an initiative established to engage with the private sector in advancing women’s economic opportunity (World Bank 2011). I selected Project Shakti because it is illustrative of the socio-environmental implications of corporate-led gender equality initiatives because of its connection with the World Bank, the scale of the program, the similarity of the model to other bottom-of-the-pyramid marketing schemes, and the available secondary data on program outcomes.

Finally, I present the case of ExxonMobil’s women’s empowerment program. I chose this case in part to illustrate the diversity of industries involved in the implementation of global gender equality initiatives. Further, the presence of the infamous energy giant ExxonMobil in the gender and development space is in itself a striking example of the normalization of understandings of women’s well-being divorced from broader environmental considerations. This case centers on an analysis of a guidebook commissioned by the ExxonMobil Foundation in collaboration with the United Nations Foundation. The report provides guidance to private-sector actors on how to effectively advance the cause of women’s empowerment. An environmental feminist analysis of the approaches promoted by the organization in the guidebook illustrates the role of non-participatory methodologies in the normalization of economized approaches to gender equality.

THE WORLD BANK’S GENDER STRATEGIES

In the wake of the Third World debt crisis, the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) used their leverage to pressure national governments to engage in market-liberalizing structural reforms, including the privatization of state-owned

industries, lifting of trade barriers, and removal of regulations.⁵ In the 1990s the WB and IMF were facing strong critiques regarding the consequences of these policies, which included rising inequality, declining labor standards, undermining of national sovereignty, displacement of populations, and degradation of the environment (Downey 2015; Goldman 2005; McMichael 2012). In response, in December 1999, the boards of the two organizations approved a new approach to the challenge of reducing poverty in low-income countries. This policy required countries applying for loans to prepare a white paper, in partnership with the WB and IMF, outlining structural and social policies aimed at promoting broad-based growth and poverty reduction and the associated funding needs (IMF-IDA 2002). Despite this mission enlargement, the central function of the World Bank remained the implementation of fiscal conservatism and market-based reforms (Babb 2009). It was at this point that the “empowerment of women” became a central feature of World Bank’s poverty alleviation discourse.⁶

The World Bank’s approach to addressing gender inequality has been outlined in a number of organizational policies over the last two decades. In April 2001, the bank approved its first cohesive gender strategy, *Integrating Gender into the World Bank’s Work: A Strategy for Action* (World Bank 2002). The document notes that “gender equality is an issue of development effectiveness not just a matter of political correctness or kindness to women” (17). The “business case” for investing in gender equality and women’s empowerment is framed in terms of the link between investments in human capital, poverty reduction, and economic growth. Specifically, the mechanisms proposed for achieving equality are investments in human capital (especially girls’ and women’s education and health); investments in physical capital (especially women’s access to capital or to the formal sector employment it creates); and the functioning of markets and institutions.

To strengthen strategy implementation, the bank set out a Gender Action Plan for 2007–2010 (World Bank 2006). Consistent with the previous Strategy for Action, investing in women was positioned as functional for poverty reduction and faster economic growth. The core objective of the plan was to empower women to compete in product markets, financial markets, land markets, and labor markets (9).

Drawing on the outcomes of the programs implemented under the Gender Action Plan (2007–2010), in 2012 the World Bank dedicated its annual flagship publication, the World Development Report (WDR), to the cause of gender empowerment. In a more expanded but ideologically consistent formulation of previous gender strategies, the 2012 WDR emphasized that gender equality could be addressed through the accumulation of endowments (education, health, and physical assets) and the use of these endowments to take up economic opportunities and generate income, and to improve agency in households and political institutions.

The content and implications of these policies have been subject to a range of feminist critiques.⁷ Several scholars have argued through these strategies the bank promotes a liberalized version of empowerment which justifies the deepening of unequal global market relations, disrupts social ties, exonerates development institutions from perpetuating conditions of global (gender) inequality, tasks women with dealing with the social

consequences, and frames corporate citizenship as an inevitable feature of development (Calkin 2015; Chant and Sweetman 2012; Eisenstein 2015; Fraser 2013; Hickel 2014; Roberts 2015; Roberts and Soederberg 2012).

In focusing on the advancement of women's economic interests, these World Bank strategies also represent a significant embedding of definitions of gender equality divorced from broader ecological considerations. Except for mentioning the role of education in lowering population growth (and thereby environmental stress) in the 2002 strategy (6), and a brief case study of the gendered impacts of climate change in the 2012 WDR (86), there is a striking lack of substantive engagement with the implications of environmental change in these strategies. This is despite scientific evidence of the impending impacts of climate change on many nations to which these action plans applied (Houghton et al. 2001), calls by feminist development practitioners to integrate climate considerations into gender and development programming (Masika 2002), and even (limited) environmental programming in some of the bank's own operations (Goldman 2005) during this time.

To highlight the magnitude of this omission, the bank's gender policies for this period can be compared to the United Nations gender and development programming of the previous decades. For example, the official UN evaluation of the UN Decade of Women (1975–1985) included direct reference to the interdependence of gender equality and environmental protection, noting that in the forthcoming planning period (1986–2000) changes in the natural environment would be “critical to women,” particularly the urban poor, the indigenous, and those in areas affected by drought and deprived of their traditional means of livelihood (Dankelman 2012). In 1990, UNIFEM dedicated a program to building research, guidelines, and internal advocacy for gender mainstreaming in environmental and sustainable development within the United Nations. Further, the principles and guidelines that emerged from UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 included institutional protocols for the inclusion of gender perspectives in global environmental and development strategies (Dankelman 2012).

Given this historical backdrop, it is important to note that the bank's ideological extrication of women's well-being from broader social and ecological considerations is particularly impactful. This is because the World Bank, unlike UN institutions and grass-roots organizations, can couple its policy advice to nations with the provision or withdrawal of significant resources, giving it significant ideological leverage (Babb 2009; Downey 2015; Goldman 2005). At the international level, lower funding for intergovernmental institutions in the 1990s resulted in many organizations reshaping their agendas to align more closely with the economic ideologies of Western countries and international financial institutions (Babb and Chorev 2016; Chorev 2013; Kabeer 2005).

The bank's market-oriented agenda has faced significant challenges. Both before and since the introduction of the gender strategy papers, national and transnational feminist activist organizations have played a central role in contesting the social and ecological effects of neoliberal policies (Basu 2010; Harcourt 1993, 2012; Moghadam 2005, 2010). Grass-roots organizations have highlighted the paradox that much of global poverty and

gender inequality has been driven by the “heavy-handedness of the institutions of neoliberal capitalism—multinational corporations, the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO” (Moghadam 2005:106). Many global women’s collaborative initiatives (sometimes referred to as transnational feminist networks), such as the Women’s Environment and Development Organization, DAWN, and the Association of Women in Development, continue to mobilize large numbers and actively advocate sustainable globalization from below (Baksh-Soodeen and Harcourt 2015; Moghadam 2005, 2010).

Given the ongoing resistance of many grass-roots feminist organizations to neoliberal ideologies, I argue that the neoliberalization of feminism overlaps what Goldman (2005) termed “green neoliberalization.” According to Goldman, the World Bank “restructures and commodifies nature-society relations to realize its economic agenda” (7). A key component of this process is placating and neutralizing opposition to this agenda without ever jeopardizing prevailing approaches to development. This end is achieved through the assimilation of environmental discourse into neoliberalist logics. Similarly, by absorbing feminist language and logic and reconstituting them in congruence with capitalist interests, the bank can attempt to absorb a serious threat to the problematic ecological and social ramifications of its actions, namely grass-roots feminist movements.

Based on the intellectual infrastructure set out in the WDR, in 2015 the bank released its Gender Action Plan for 2016–2023 (World Bank 2015). This strategy makes scattered reference to climate change, mostly in the context of “green jobs.” It also states that an emerging area for the World Bank Group is “bringing a gender lens to climate resilience and developing gender smart solutions to climate change.” The bank’s efforts to integrate gender empowerment efforts with its environmental agenda is outlined more fully in the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery’s “Gender Action Plan 2016-2021” (2016). The plan focuses on two aspects of gender and disaster risk management: understanding and addressing the different needs of men and women in disaster risk management investments; and promoting women’s empowerment for broader resilience strengthening. Specifically, the plan proposes that in the “post-disaster context, access to social safety nets helps women get back on their feet quicker, their health and education contribute to their ability to participate in economic opportunities and access key productive assets and to exercise their voice and agency in the reconstruction process” (4).

The integration of ecological and gender concerns in this plan represents a contrast to the omission of environmental considerations from the bank’s main gender strategies. There is also a notable parallel. The previous strategies disproportionately task women with (re)building local communities and economies, particularly in the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis (Hickel 2015; Roberts and Soederberg 2012). The Gender Action Plan’s approach to gender and climate change applies a similar logic. Poor women are likewise encumbered with the labor of strengthening community resilience and responses to climate-related disasters, which are growing in frequency and intensity. This framing is resonant with the broader trend within the neoliberal milieu toward the individuation of environmental responsibility, a burden embedded within gender and class relations (Auyero and Swistun 2009; Bryson et al. 2001; Dzialo 2017).

Each of the World Bank's gender strategy papers identifies private, and in many cases corporate, actors as critical partners in the realization of their gender agenda (World Bank 2002, 2006, 2012, 2015). For example, the first gender strategy identified the bank's sister organization, the International Financial Corporation, as one of the main implementers of the plan (World Bank 2002). Part of the implementation of the Gender Action Plan for 2007–10 included the launch of the GPSLF, which aimed to advance women's economic empowerment and promote shared growth through closer partnerships with the private sector. The GPSLF has attracted a variety of high-profile corporate participants, including Nike, Boeing, Unilever, and the McKinsey group. These forum members act as "ambassadors" for the Bank's Gender Action Plan (World Bank 2011). The 2016–2023 strategy highlights some high-profile corporate initiatives, such as Goldman Sachs's 10,000 Women project, the Coca-Cola 5×20 Program, and notes that "encouraging and partnering with the multinational and local private sector in developing countries can be beneficial for women entrepreneurs" (23).

A white paper written by the McKinsey corporation (2010) explicates three key benefits for organizations involved in women's economic empowerment in low-income countries:

First, economically empowered women are potential customers; the more of them there are, the larger the market for selling goods and services. Second, skilled women represent a broad and motivated talent pool from which to hire and promote. Third, investing in making life better for women in developing countries can be an effective way to enhance a company's reputation and brand. (14)

According to Roberts and Soederberg (2012), the World Bank approach has successfully framed corporate citizenship as an inevitable feature of development, thereby further embedding the fundamental values and tenets of capitalist interests and creating more opportunities to economically exploit women. The following analysis of HUL's women's empowerment program, Project Shakti, unpacks some of the social and ecological implications of corporate women's empowerment programs.

HINDUSTAN UNILEVER'S PROJECT SHAKTI

Since the early 2000s, "corporate social responsibility" activities have been an essential component of consumer goods conglomerate Unilever's operating strategy (Pralhad 2005). Such initiatives have been an important component of Unilever's brand promotion and protection efforts, in particular since advances in technology and consumer advocacy have brought attention to controversies such as alleged illegal dumping of waste, rainforest degradation in Indonesia (Greenpeace 2018), labor force abuses in tea plantations in India and Nigeria (van der Wal 2011), price fixing in Europe (Weardon 2011), and child labor in Indonesia (Amnesty International 2016). The organization's alleged involvement in the dumping of mercury in South India in 2001 received widespread media and civil society attention, culminating in 2016 with the company settling with a worker's association representing 591 ex-employees and their families (Associated Free

Press 2016). This scandal was particularly problematic because India is one of Unilever's largest and most competitive markets (*Economist* 2012).

In the year of the mercury scandal, the organization piloted Project Shakti in India. This bottom-of-the-pyramid marketing program trains rural women to become local entrepreneurs and employs them as direct home salespeople for HUL's hygiene products. Project Shakti has been instrumental in increasing HUL's market share through sales of products in markets that had been hard to reach. As noted by an Accenture (2012:2) business case study on the initiative, the markets penetrated by the program "often lie entirely outside the reach of mainstream media, and they cannot be reached cost-effectively through the usual marketing channels, such as retail stores or online shopping sites." By 2018, the Shakti network included more than 100,000 saleswomen across 18 states in India and had been scaled to a range of other low- and middle-income countries (Hindustan Unilever 2019).

In addition to some of the problematic environmental implications of Unilever's mainstream operations, mentioned above, Project Shakti itself has its own environmental costs. Shakti entrepreneurs promote large volumes of single-use packages to serve this low-income rural market. The proliferation of these packages has increased the volume of waste in communities with negligible refuse collection services, leading to local pollution (Karnani 2007). Further, the spread of such single-use sachets, which are promoted by companies such as Unilever, is an important contributor to global plastic pollution, crippling the waterways in many parts of Asia and the Pacific (Bong 2018; Lévi Alvarès 2017). Poonamallee (2011) also highlights the link between the increased use of chemical soaps, which have replaced natural products, and the contamination of local groundwater.

Feminist environmentalists stress that debates about environmental protection must take into account the material reality of those who rely on the said environment for their economic survival. According to HUL, those who participate in Project Shakti can increase or even double their household income. But the material benefits for program participants and their communities are contested. An independent evaluation with 40 program participants in Andhra Pradesh found that the volume of sales needed to reach this doubling of income was unachievable for many (Thekkudan and Tandon 2009). Some participants also had supply chain problems and were pressured by representatives to buy large amounts of stock in advance. The report concluded that participation in the program did not guarantee gains in quality of life.

Similarly, in an ethnography of 15 Shakti participants across the state of Madhya Pradesh, Rohatynskyj (2011) concludes that the initiative is an effective tool for increasing Unilever's market share, but not for raising the standard of living of the participants. In particular, Rohatynskyj finds that those from the most economically and socially marginalized groups accrued the least returns from participation, because they often needed to borrow from self-help groups to meet program buy-in requirements and did not have the resources to scale their businesses.

Furthermore, and contrary to the gendered empowerment discourse used by HUL, both Thekkudan and Tandon (2009) and Rohantynskyj (2011) found that in many

cases women participated in name only, with male relatives or established traders in the community participating in practice. The Accenture case study also noted that the success of the program relied in part on the displacement of existing small-scale purveyors in these rural areas, which suggests disruption of local economies. It is this threat of a corporate dominance which led to community resistance to Project Shakti implementation in the state of Kerala (Prügl 2015).

Hindustan Unilever (2005) has noted that the program owes part of its widespread success to its ability “to tap into the growing number of women’s self-help groups designed to help women save money and borrow from each other.” This is similar to trends observed by Radhakrishnan (2015) in the microfinance space, where private-sector actors gain access to many potential clients and employees through collaborations with local NGO groups. In this case, self-help groups also give Shakti participants access to the funds needed for program buy-in through group lending programs. However, Rohatynskij (2011) finds that HUL’s goal of profit accumulation is often at odds with the goals and operating strategies of the women’s self-help groups and NGOs with which they partner. Similarly, Thekkudan and Tandon (2009) find that several non-profit organizations had discontinued their relationship with HUL because they were dissatisfied with the long-term viability of the program and the lack of “empowerment training,” such as classes in bookkeeping and literacy, which HUL had agreed to provide.⁸

There is also some evidence that this strategic absorption of social capital by HUL can weaken the fabric of the host organizations. Thekkudan and Tandon (2009) found that the recruitment of members into the program had a destabilizing effect on that group because of competition for customers. HUL has also documented that, once established in a rural area, the organization promotes the interests of other (“noncompetitive”) corporate actors, acting as a “catalyst for creating new markets and generating rural micro-economies” by allowing partners to use their established distribution channels (Hindustan Unilever 2005:3). For example, in many regions, HUL promoted the formalized microfinance services of ICICI Bank to their Shakti entrepreneurs and other residents. Such collaborations build elite network presence, and in this case serve to formally financialize these communities, moving power away from locally centered self-help lending groups toward formalized corporate financial institutions.

Evidence suggests that these institutions are less responsive to the needs of poor communities, tend to have much higher rates of profitability, serve less marginalized populations, and have higher interest rates compared to community-based village banks and self-help groups (Cull, Demirguc-Kunt, and Morduch 2009; Goldberg and Palladini 2010). More indirectly, Sanyal (2009) finds that nonprofit microfinance groups build members’ social capital as well as normative influence and individual agency, which contributes to women’s propensity to undertake collective actions in the interest of both the group and the community at large. As in the World Bank case, by embedding the interests of the corporation with some individual members of these self-help groups, HUL can neutralize a potential source of resistance to the ecologically and socially problematic aspects of their operations in these rural areas. This indirect effect is

pertinent in the Indian context, where a politically active women's movement has been found to have ecologically protective effects (Agarwal 2009).

The utility of the women's empowerment programs has spread beyond industries that directly target women as a source of low-cost labor and as direct consumers. As part of larger corporate social responsibility portfolios, several prominent organizations in the extractive industries have invested in empowerment programs in response to the greater focus on social and environmental scandals (Bright 2008). Oil giant ExxonMobil's empowerment program for women is a useful case for understanding the path through which energy companies gain entry into the gender and development space, the epistemologies used, and the implications for sustainability.

EXXONMOBIL'S WOMEN'S ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY INITIATIVE

In 2005, extractive conglomerate ExxonMobil launched the Women's Economic Opportunity Initiative through its ExxonMobil Foundation. According to their official communications, the company has invested more than USD 120 million across 90 countries to help women fulfill their economic potential. The initiative focuses on three program areas: developing women entrepreneurs and business leaders, supporting research to identify effective interventions, and deploying technologies that accelerate women's economic advancement (ExxonMobil Foundation, n.d.).⁹

As in the Unilever case, ExxonMobil's investment in women is an important mechanism for brand protection and promotion. These are particularly important given the high social and ecological costs of the organization's economic fortune. They include large-scale environmental destruction through disasters such as Alaska's *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, the Baton Rouge Refinery pipeline oil spill, and the Niger Delta disaster. The corporation has been accused of worker safety infractions and anti-organizing efforts in Columbia, and human rights abuses in Indonesia (Mattera 2018). And most recently, it is being sued in the United States for investing heavily in a "longstanding fraudulent scheme" to obfuscate the link between the burning of fossil fuels and climate change (Schwartz 2018), misleading investors and the general public. An important component of this scheme is the funding of a climate change denial movement, which has delayed political action on climate change in the United States (Farrell 2016). And partly as a result of this inaction, ecological disasters are increasing in number and intensity (Masson-Delmotte et al. 2018).

Feminist and environmental scholars have demonstrated that poor women, particularly those in low-income countries, tend to be disproportionately affected by climate disasters because of traditional gender norms, their material reliance on nature, and lack of economic and social capital (Neumayer and Plümper 2007; Women's Environment and Development Organization 2007). Given these documented links, the presence of ExxonMobil, a company so deeply implicated in the climate crisis, in the gender and development space is in itself a striking example of the normalization of an approach to gender equality which discounts socio-ecological considerations. As others have illustrated, this trend relies on notions of progress and empowerment divorced from broader social and ecological environments (Hickel 2015; Moeller 2013; Roberts 2015). This case

provides more insight into how exclusive networks and non-participatory methodologies facilitate this normalization.

The ExxonMobil Foundation launched its international gender equality portfolio through high-profile partnerships with established participants in the gender and development field. Women's Economic Opportunity Initiative partners include the Bush Institute, Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, Council on Foreign Relations, Women and Foreign Policy Advisory Council, Harvard Kennedy School, Plan International USA, and the United Nations Foundation. Partnerships with mainstream nonprofits, think tanks, and academic institutions lend the foundations of controversial organizations like ExxonMobil legitimacy. Further, by directing USD 120 million in funding toward a few mainstream organizations, the ExxonMobil Foundation can influence the terms and definition of women's empowerment in ways that serve its strategic interests and do not disrupt the neoliberal status quo. From the perspective of partnering NGOs and academic institutions, a large corporate entity like ExxonMobil provides attractive resources. Small underfunded organizations not in this elite network may reframe their mission and scope to fit the foundation's strategic focus.

Examining the ExxonMobil Foundation's flagship initiative, *A Roadmap for Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment*, from an environmental feminist perspective provides further insight into the mechanisms used to promote and protect neoliberal feminist ideologies. The project was commissioned by the ExxonMobil Foundation in collaboration with the United Nations Foundation to address the "crucial knowledge gap regarding the most effective ways to advance women's economic prospects" (ix). It is designed "to guide actions and investments by the private sector and potential public-private sector partnerships . . . and favors actions that directly and in the short-term seek to empower women economically, and measures empowerment as increases in women's productivity and earnings" (2). The report draws its conclusions from the findings of 136 existing and commissioned empirical evaluations of women's empowerment programs across Asia, East and Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. It only includes empirical studies "with natural or statistical controls." Most had large sample sizes, and many used a randomized control trial design (16).

This document is illustrative of Haraway (1988)'s concept of a "partial perspective," whereby powerful actors spread totalizing and self-serving claims while marginalizing insiders' perspectives. While Haraway warns against romanticizing or appropriating the perspective of the less powerful, she also notes that perspectives which "distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything" (481) "through systematic narrowing and obscuring" serve only the interests of the powerful. By using their resources to define empowerment with respect to short-term economic outcomes, measured using non-participatory methods, the foundation is further embedding an understanding of women's well-being divorced from broader socio-environmental issues. By blurring and homogenizing the social and ecological realities of the program participants through the use of narrow metrics, the organization can also deflect attention from the high cost being paid by many marginalized women and their communities as a result of Exxon Mobil's core business.

DISCUSSION

Feminist and environmental scholars and activists have long highlighted the social and environmental harms associated with development agendas led by large economic organizations “that subordinate national interests to their own global profit and growth strategies” (Sen and Grown 1986:32). The environmental harms of the mainstream operations of the organizations highlighted in this paper have been documented in many other studies (Downey 2015; Farrell 2016; Goldman 2005; Greenpeace 2018). Related research also indicates broader trends. For example, sociologists have revealed a link between inward foreign direct investment in low-income nations and a variety of environmental problems, such as higher levels of carbon dioxide emissions and water pollution (Grimes and Kentor 2003; Jorgenson 2007, 2009), as well as other industrial pollutants (Jorgenson, Dick, and Mahutga 2007; Jorgenson and Kuykendall 2008).

Other studies have shown that powerful institutions can use both ideological and economic resources to protect their economic agendas, despite these problematic social and environmental outcomes (Downey 2015; Goldman 2005). As outlined in this study, the World Bank has marginalized more socio-ecological approaches to addressing global (gender) inequality by absorbing feminist language and logic and reconstituting it as gender empowerment, narrowly construed—just as it used its resources to spread a particular approach to sustainable development in the field of environmentalism (Goldman 2005). Further, the emerging discourse on gender and the environment contributes to the individualization and feminization of environmental responsibility.

Large economic organizations also exact influence through elite networks and collaborations (Downey 2015). These kinds of collaborations and networks can partly explain the proliferation of corporate-led development initiatives. For example, the GPSLF, introduced by the World Bank, enabled corporate actors to play a more significant role in the field of gender and development.¹⁰ HUL, itself a member of the GPSLF, creates opportunities for the formal financialization of women’s self-help groups by giving financial institutions and others access to their “distribution networks” once they became established in rural areas through their women’s empowerment program, Project Shakti. Similarly, ExxonMobil legitimized its gender portfolio through high-profile collaborations with educational institutions, think tanks, and nonprofits.

This normalization of collaborative corporate initiatives as a solution to global gender inequality relies on the assumption that economic actors’ interests can align with participants’ well-being and the overarching goal of poverty alleviation. However, the propositions of gender empowerment through economic production and consumption, which underlie the neoliberal gender ideologies, remain contested. As the case of Project Shakti and related research illustrate, the selective use of gendered ideologies serves a variety of functions for powerful economic actors, while the benefits for program participants are less clear, particularly when situated within the broader social and environmental impacts of the program and the organization’s for-profit operations.

This opacity of the relationship between corporate-led strategies to address gender equality and women’s well-being can be partially explained by an excessive dependence on

non-participatory program evaluations such as those promoted in the ExxonMobil Foundation's "roadmap." Feminist scholars have long problematized "objectivist" approaches to knowledge generation. Theorists draw attention to the masculine capitalist organizational roots of these methods and the extent to which they can subjugate local knowledge and ecologies (Agarwal 1988; Merchant 1980; Mies and Shiva 1989; Spivak 1988). Related research has demonstrated that overreliance on these approaches in the development field has obfuscated the impact of development programs by allowing funding agencies to miss the unintended consequences (Bamberg et al. 2016), homogenizing the program beneficiaries (Radhakrishnan 2015) while proving the efficacy of the organization's theory of change by design (Moeller 2013). From an environmental perspective, sole reliance on these methods to evaluate empowerment programs allows corporate actors to separate the well-being of participants from the broader ecologies in which they are embedded—ecologies which are often harmed by mainstream corporate operations.

To break the stalemate between critical feminist theorizing and those feminist practitioners who operate within the constraints of the neoliberal development milieu, Jaquette (2017) calls for fruitful dialogue within the subfield which acknowledges participant agency and the transformative potential of unionized labor for working-class women. This argument is consistent with the "decent work" movement being led by a variety of labor organizations in the global South (International Labor Office 2015). Indeed, millions of women have used programs funded by the World Bank for the betterment of themselves and their communities. For example, India's largest women's union has successfully partnered with the World Bank for sustainable livelihoods initiatives (Darji 2012). Corporations, including those included in this study, are increasingly investing in sustainability initiatives (Unilever 2020). In other instances, national governments are partnering with international governance organizations to promote women-led climate resilience employment programs (SDG Fund, n.d.).

From Jaquette's position, radical solutions which insist "that the only solution is to halt the ever-greater consumption of disposable goods and people . . . may assuage Northern guilt for depleting the planet's resources but would take jobs away from women who choose factory employment and urban life over early marriage and unpaid labor" (252). In line with the position of Shiva (1988) and Agarwal (1992), Jaquette raises critical considerations regarding women's agency and right to work—though the argument above does not account for the heterogeneity in motivations for and experiences of workforce participation. However, I argue that the co-option of feminist ideals into neoliberal economic projects is also being used to assuage "Northern guilt." Specifically, a script of empowerment through (over)consumption targeted at high-income women (Zeisler 2016) is facilitated and legitimated, at least in part, by the neoliberal ideal that those employed in corporate supply chains are also being empowered. As Sexsmith (2012:43) argues, "unsustainable consumption and production practices are shaped everywhere by gender inequalities." Given these complexities and

contradictions, the relationship between gender “empowerment” and sustainability deserves ongoing scholarly attention.

In all, my study illustrates how feminist environmental perspectives can enrich broader debates about global sustainability in general and neoliberalized development in particular. Specifically, the analysis contributes to understanding of how feminist ideals have been used by economic actors to deepen and legitimize a global economic system with increasingly untenable ecological costs—costs that are disproportionately borne by the people corporate initiatives purport to empower. ■

REFERENCES

- Accenture. 2012. “Hindustan Unilever: Scaling a Cost-Efficient Distribution and Sales Network in Remote Markets.” Institute for High Performance (https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/Accenture/Conversion-Assets/DotCom/Documents/Global/PDF/Dualpub_23/Accenture-Unilever-Case-Study.pdf).
- Agarwal, B. 1992. “The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India.” *Feminist Studies* 18(1):119–58.
- Agarwal, B. 2007. “Gender Inequality, Cooperation and Environmental Sustainability.” Pp. 274–313 in *Inequality, Cooperation and Environmental Sustainability*, edited by Jean-Marie Baland, Pranab Bardhan, and Samuel Bowles. Princeton University Press.
- Agarwal, B. 2009. “Gender and Forest Conservation: The Impact of Women’s Participation in Community Forest Governance.” *Ecological Economics* 68(11):2785–99.
- Amnesty International. 2016. “Palm Oil: Global Brands Profiting from Child and Forced Labour” (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/11/palm-oil-global-brands-profiting-from-child-and-forced-labour/>).
- Associated Free Press. 2016. “Unilever Settles Dispute over Mercury Poisoning in India.” *The Guardian*, March 9 (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/mar/09/unilever-settles-dispute-over-mercury-poisoning-in-india>).
- Auyero, J., and D. A. Swistun. 2009. *Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown*. Oxford University Press.
- Babb, S. 2009. *Behind the Development Banks: Washington Politics, World Poverty, and the Wealth of Nations*. University of Chicago Press.
- Babb, S., and N. Chorev. 2016. “International Organizations: Loose and Tight Coupling in the Development Regime.” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 51(1):81–102.
- Baksh-Soodeen, R., and W. Harcourt, eds. 2015. *The Oxford Handbook of Transnational Feminist Movements*. Oxford University Press.
- Bamberger, M., M. Tarsilla, and S. Hesse-Biber. 2016. “Why So Many ‘Rigorous’ Evaluations Fail to Identify Unintended Consequences of Development Programs: How Mixed Methods Can Contribute.” *Evaluation and Program Planning* 55:155–62.
- Basu, A. 2010. *Women’s Movements in the Global Era*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Bong, S. 2018. “What a Load of Rubbish: The Impact of the Philippines’ Sachet Economy.” *Asia Correspondent*, October 10 (<https://asiancorrespondent.com/2018/10/rubbish-impact-philippines-plastic-sachet-economy-environment/>).
- Boykoff, M., M. Daly, L. McAllister, M. McNatt, A. Nacu-Schmidt, D. Oonk, and O. Pearman. 2019. “United States Newspaper Coverage of Climate Change or Global Warming, 2000–2019.” Media and Climate Change Observatory Data Sets, Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences, University of Colorado (doi.org/10.25810/jck1-hf50).
- Bright, B. 2008. “How More Companies Are Embracing Social Responsibility as Good Business.” *Wall Street Journal*, March 10 (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB120491426245620011>).

- Bryson, L., K. McPhillips, and K. Robinson. 2001. "Turning Public Issues into Private Troubles: Lead Contamination, Domestic Labor, and the Exploitation of Women's Unpaid Labor in Australia." *Gender & Society* 15(5):754-72.
- Calkin, S. 2015. "Feminism, Interrupted? Gender and Development in the Era of 'Smart Economics'." *Progress in Development Studies* 15(4):295-307.
- Calkin, S. 2017. "Disrupting Disempowerment: Feminism, Co-Optation, and the Privatised Governance of Gender and Development." *New Formations* 91:6-86.
- Chant, S., and C. Sweetman. 2012. "Fixing Women or Fixing the World? 'Smart Economics', Efficiency Approaches, and Gender Equality in Development." *Gender & Development* 20(3):517-29.
- Chorev, N. 2013. "Restructuring Neoliberalism at the World Health Organization." *Review of International Political Economy* 20(4):627-66.
- Chorev, N., and S. Babb. 2009. "The Crisis of Neoliberalism and the Future of International Institutions: A Comparison of the IMF and the WTO." *Theory and Society* 38(5):459-84.
- Ciplet, D., J. T. Roberts, and M. R. Khan. 2015. *Power in a Warming World: The New Global Politics of Climate Change and the Remaking of Environmental Inequality*. MIT Press.
- Cull, R., A. Demirguc-Kunt, and J. Morduch. 2009. "Microfinance Meets the Market." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 23(1):167-92.
- Dankelman, I. 2012. "Women Advocating for Sustainable Livelihoods and Gender Equality on a Global Stage." In *Women Reclaiming Sustainable Livelihoods: Spaces Lost, Spaces Gained*, edited by W. Harcourt. Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Darji, H. 2012. "SEWA, IFC to Provide Eco Friendly Lamps to over 2 Lakh." *Economic Times*, May 24 (<https://m.economictimes.com/sewa-ifc-to-provide-eco-friendly-lamps-to-over-2-lakh/articleshow/13456093.cms>).
- Dauvergne, P., and G. LeBaron. 2013. "The Social Cost of Environmental Solutions." *New Political Economy* 18(3):410-30.
- Downey, L. 2015. *Inequality, Democracy, and the Environment*. NYU Press.
- Dzialo, L. 2017. "The Feminization of Environmental Responsibility: A Quantitative, Cross-National Analysis." *Environmental Sociology* 3(4):427-37.
- Economist*, *The*. 2012 (June 30). "Fighting for the Next Billion Shoppers: The Eternal Battle between Procter & Gamble and Unilever Is Intensifying in the Developing World."
- Eisenstein, H. 2005. "A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization." *Science & Society* 69(3):487-518.
- Eisenstein, H. 2015. *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women's Labor and Ideas to Exploit the World*. Routledge.
- Empower Women. N.d. "Companies" (<https://www.weps.org/companies>, accessed April 28, 2020).
- ExxonMobil Foundation and United Nations Foundation. N.d. "A Roadmap for Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment" (http://www.womeneconroadmap.org/sites/default/files/WEE_Roadmap_Report_Final.pdf).
- ExxonMobil Foundation (n.d.). "Women's Economic Opportunity" (<http://corporate.exxonmobil.com/en/community/womens-economic-opportunity>, accessed April 27, 2020).
- Farrell, J. 2016. "Network Structure and Influence of the Climate Change Counter-Movement." *Nature Climate Change* 6(4):370.
- Fourcade-Gourinchas, M., and S. L. Babb. 2002. "The Rebirth of the Liberal Creed: Paths to Neoliberalism in Four Countries." *American Journal of Sociology* 108(3):533-79.
- Fraser, N. 2009. "Capitalism, Feminism, and the Cunning of History." *New Left Review* 56: 97-117.
- Funk, N. 2013. "Contra Fraser on Feminism and Neoliberalism." *Hypatia* 28(1):179-96.
- Gareau, B. J. 2008. "Dangerous holes in global environmental governance: The roles of neoliberal discourse, science, and California agriculture in the Montreal Protocol." *Antipode* 40(1):120-130.

- Gender and Environment Series Editorial Committee. 2011. "Feminist Political Ecology." In *The Women, Gender and Development Reader*, edited by N. Visvanathan, L. Duggan, N. Wieggersma, and L. Nisonoff. London: Zed Press.
- Global Change Research Program. 2018. *Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States: Fourth National Climate Assessment (Vol. II)*, edited by D. R. Reidmiller, C. W. Avery, D. R. Easterling, K. E. Kunkel, K. L. M. Lewis, T. K. Maycock, and B. C. Stewart. Washington, DC: U.S. Global Change Research Program.
- Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery. 2016. "Gender Action Plan 2016-2021." Fall 2016 Consultative Group Meeting (<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/243921492664887890/pdf/114422-WP-PUBLIC-gender-action-plan-2016-2021.pdf>).
- Goldman, M. 2005. *Imperial Nature: The World Bank and Struggles for Social Justice in the Age of Globalization*. Yale University Press.
- Goldberg, M., and E. Palladini. 2010. *Managing Risk and Creating Value with Microfinance*. World Bank.
- Greenpeace. 2018. "Now or Never to Reform the Palm Oil Industry" (https://storage.googleapis.com/planet4-international-stateless/2018/10/6d4a29ea-greenpeace_finalcountdown_lowres.pdf).
- Grimes, P., and J. Kentor. 2003. "Exporting the Greenhouse: Foreign Capital Penetration and CO₂ Emissions 1980-1996." *Journal of World-Systems Research* 9(2):261-75.
- Haraway, D. 1985. "Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century." *Social Review* 80:65-108.
- Haraway, D. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14(3):575-99.
- Harcourt, W. 2012. *Women Reclaiming Sustainable Livelihoods: Spaces Lost, Spaces Gained*. Springer.
- Harcourt, W., ed. 1993. *Feminist Perspectives on Sustainable Development*. London: Zed Books.
- Harding, S. 1989. "Is There a Feminist Method?" Pp.18-32 in *Feminism and Science*, edited by Nancy Turner. Indiana University Press.
- Hickel, J. 2014. "The 'Girl Effect': Liberalism, Empowerment and the Contradictions of Development." *Third World Quarterly* 35(8):1355-73.
- Hindustan Unilever. 2005. "Project Shakti: Creating Rural Entrepreneurs in India" (https://www.unilever.com/Images/es_project_shakti_tcm244-409741_en.pdf, accessed December 28, 2020).
- Hindustan Unilever. 2019. "Enhancing Livelihoods through Project Shakti" (<https://www.hul.co.in/sustainable-living/case-studies/enhancing-livelihoods-through-project-shakti.html>, accessed August 9, 2019).
- Houghton, J., Y. Ding, D. J. Griggs, M. Noguer, P. J. Van der Linden, X. Dai, . . . and C. A. Johnson. 2001. *IPCC 2001: Climate Change 2001. The Climate Change Contribution of Working Group I to the Third Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*.
- Hozic, A., and J. True, eds. 2016. *Scandalous Economics: Gender and the Politics of Financial Crises*. Oxford University Press.
- International Development Association and International Monetary Fund. 2002. "Review of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) Approach: Main Findings" (<https://www.imf.org/External/NP/prspgen/review/2002/031502a.htm>).
- International Labor Office. 2015. *Localizing the Decent Work Agenda through South-South and City-to-City Cooperation*. Department of Partnerships and Field Support, International Labour Office, Geneva (https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---xrel/documents/publication/wcms_414590.pdf).
- Jaquette, J. S. 2017. "Women/Gender and Development: The Growing Gap between Theory and Practice." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 52(2):242-60.
- Jorgenson, A. K. 2007. "Does Foreign Investment Harm the Air We Breathe and the Water We Drink? A Cross-National Study of Carbon Dioxide Emissions and Organic Water Pollution in Less-Developed Countries, 1975 to 2000." *Organization & Environment* 20(2):137-56.

- Jorgenson, A. K. 2009. "The Transnational Organization of Production, the Scale of Degradation, and Ecoefficiency: A Study of Carbon Dioxide Emissions in Less-Developed Countries." *Human Ecology Review* 16(1):64–74.
- Jorgenson, A. K., C. Dick, and M. Mahutga. 2007. "Foreign Investment Dependence and the Environment: An Ecostructural Approach." *Social Problems* 54:371–94.
- Jorgenson, A. K., and K. Kuykendall. 2008. "Globalization, Foreign Investment Dependence, and Agriculture Production: A Cross-National Study of Pesticide and Fertilizer Use Intensity in Less-Developed Countries, 1990–2000." *Social Forces* 87:529–60.
- Kabeer, N. 2005. "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millennium Development Goal." *Gender & Development* 13(1):13–24.
- Kapur, Akash. 2016. "Couldn't Be Better: The Return of the Utopians." *New Yorker*, October 3, 66–71.
- Karnani, A. 2007. "The Mirage of Marketing to the Bottom of the Pyramid: How the Private Sector Can Help Alleviate Poverty." *California Management Review* 49(4):90–111.
- Larner, W. 2003. "Neoliberalism?" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21:509–12.
- Lévi Alvarès, D. 2017. "The Curse of Sachets in Asia: Why Western Companies Should Be Held Accountable." *Zero Waste Europe*, 28 July (<https://zerowasteurope.eu/2016/07/the-curse-of-sachets-in-asia-why-western-companies-should-be-held-accountable/>).
- Masika, R., ed. 2002. *Gender, Development and Climate Change*. Focus on Gender Series. Oxford: Oxfam.
- Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, H. O. Pörtner, D. Roberts, J. Skea, P. R. Shukla, . . . and M. Gomis. 2018. *IPCC, 2018: Summary for Policymakers*.
- Mattera, P. 2018. "Exxon Mobil: Corporate Rap Sheet," April 24, 2018. Corporate Research Project (<http://www.corp-research.org/exxonmobil>, accessed 7/9/2018).
- McKinsey and Company. January, 2010. "The business of empowering women: Where, why, and how" online report <http://mckinseysociety.com/the-business-of-empowering-women/>
- McMichael, P. 2012. *Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective*. Pine Forge Press.
- McRobbie, A. 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. Sage.
- Merchant, C. (1980). *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Mies, M., and V. Shiva. 1993. *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books.
- Moghadam, V. M. 2005. *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Moghadam, V. M. 2010. "Gender, Politics, and Women's Empowerment." Pp. 279–303 in *Handbook of Politics*, edited by Kevin T. Leicht and J. Craig Jenkins. New York: Springer.
- Mohanty, C. 1988. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Feminist Review* 30(1):61–88.
- Neumayer, E., and T. Plümper. 2007. "The Gendered Nature of Natural Disasters: The Impact of Catastrophic Events on the Gender Gap in Life Expectancy, 1981–2002." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97(3):551–66.
- Ortner, S. 1974. "Is Male to Female as Nature Is to Culture?" In *Women, Culture, and Society*, edited by Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere. Stanford University Press.
- Peck, J., and A. Tickell. 2002. "Neoliberalizing Space." *Antipode* 34(3):380–404.
- Plumwood, V. 1993. "The Politics of Reason: Towards a Feminist Logic." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71(4):436–62.
- Poonamallee, L. 2011. "Corporate Citizenship: Panacea or Problem? The Complicated Case of Hindustan Unilever." *Journal of Corporate Citizenship* 44:9.
- Portes, A. 1997. "Neoliberalism and the Sociology of Development: Emerging Trends and Unanticipated Facts." *Population and Development Review* 23(2):229–60.
- Prahalad, C. K. 2005. *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty through Profits*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Wharton School.

- Prügl, E. 2015. "Neoliberalising Feminism." *New Political Economy* 20(4):614–31.
- Radhakrishnan, S. 2015. "'Low Profile' or Entrepreneurial? Gender, Class, and Cultural Adaptation in the Global Microfinance Industry." *World Development* 74:264–74.
- Roberts, A. 2015. "The Political Economy of 'Transnational Business Feminism': Problematizing the Corporate-Led Gender Equality Agenda." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17(2): 209–31.
- Roberts, A., and S. Soederberg. 2012. "Gender Equality as Smart Economics? A Critique of the 2012 World Development Report." *Third World Quarterly* 33(5):949–68.
- Rocheleau, D., and P. Nirmal. 2015. "Feminist Political Ecologies." In *The Oxford Handbook of Transnational Feminist Movements*, edited by R. Baksh-Soodeen and W. Harcourt. Oxford University Press.
- Rohatynskij, M. 2011. "Development Discourse and Selling Soap in Madhya Pradesh, India." *Human Organization* 70(1):63–73.
- Sa'ar, A. 2005. "Postcolonial Feminism, the Politics of Identification, and the Liberal Bargain." *Gender & Society* 19(5):680–700.
- Sa'ar, A. 2016. *Economic Citizenship: Neoliberal Paradoxes of Empowerment*. Berghahn Books.
- Salleh, A. K. 1984. "Deeper than Deep Ecology: The Eco-Feminist Connection." *Environmental Ethics* 6(4):339–45.
- Sanyal, P. 2009. "From Credit to Collective Action: The Role of Microfinance in Promoting Women's Social Capital and Normative Influence." *American Sociological Review* 74(4):529–50.
- Schwartz, J. 2018. "New York Sues Exxon Mobil, Saying It Deceived Shareholders on Climate Change." *New York Times*, October 24 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/24/climate/exxon-lawsuit-climate-change.html>).
- SDG Fund (n.d.). "Strengthening Women's Ability for Productive New Opportunities (SWAPNO)" (<https://www.sdgfund.org/strengthening-womens-ability-productive-new-opportunities-swapno>, accessed 7/10/19).
- Sen, G., and C. Grown. 1985. *DAWN, Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*. Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, New Delhi.
- Sexsmith, K. 2012. "Consumption and Production Agreements." In *Women Reclaiming Sustainable Livelihoods: Spaces Lost, Spaces Gained*, edited by W. Harcourt. Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Shiva, V. 1988. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. Kali for Women, New Delhi.
- Unilever. 2020. "The Unilever Sustainable Living Plan" (<https://www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/>, accessed April 28, 2020).
- Thekkudan, J., and R. Tandon. 2009. *Women's Livelihoods, Global Markets and Citizenship*. Working Paper 336, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.
- van der Wal, Sanne. 2011. "Certified Unilever Tea: Small Cup, Big Difference?" SOMO, Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (<https://www.somo.nl/certified-unilever-tea/>).
- Weardon, G. 2011. "Unilever and Procter & Gamble Fined £280m for Price Fixing." *The Guardian*, April 13 (<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2011/apr/13/unilever-procter-and-gamble-price-fixing-european-commission>).
- White, D., A. Rudy, and B. Gareau. 2015. *Environments, Natures and Social Theory: Towards a Critical Hybridity*. Macmillan International Higher Education.
- Williamson, J. 1990. "What Washington Means by Policy Reform." Pp. 90–120 in *Latin American Adjustment: How Much Has Happened?* edited by John Williamson. Peterson Institute for International Economics.
- Women's Environment and Development Organization. 2007. "Changing the Climate: Why Women's Perspectives Matter." WEDO, New York.
- World Bank. 2002. *Integrating Gender into the World Bank's Work: A Strategy for Action* (<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources/strategypaper.pdf>).

- World Bank. 2006. *Gender Equality as Smart Economics: A World Bank Group Gender Action Plan* (<https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources/GAPNov2.pdf>).
- World Bank. 2011. "The Global Private Sector Leaders Forum," May 25 (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2011/05/25/the-global-private-sector-leaders-forum>).
- World Bank. 2012. *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development* (<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/4391>).
- World Bank. 2015. *World Bank Group Gender Strategy (FY16-23): Gender Equality, Poverty Reduction and Inclusive Growth (English)* (<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/820851467992505410/World-Bank-Group-gender-strategy-FY16-23-gender-equality-poverty-reduction-and-inclusive-growth>).
- Yin, R. 1994. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 2nd ed. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Zeisler, A. 2016. *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to Covergirl, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement*. Public Affairs.

NOTES

I thank Professors Sarah Babb, Julia Chuang, Liam Downey, Brian Gareau, Andrew Jorgenson, and Stephen Pfohl for helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper. I would also like to express my appreciation to handling editor, Jeff Kentor, and the anonymous reviewers for their many insightful comments and suggestions.

1. Others have termed it "free market or hegemonic feminism" (Eisenstein 2015), or "faux-feminism" (McRobbie 2009). Those focused on the growing role of corporations in the development space refer to it as "transnational business feminism" (Roberts 2015). Some also focus on the relationship between neoliberal feminism and state governance (Prügl 2015).

2. Importantly, cross-disciplinary scholarship finds that the form and effect of neoliberalism differ across time and context (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002; Larner 2003).

3. See Gareau 2008 for similar analysis of the neoliberalization of environment governance.

4. Agarwal also highlights some of the weaknesses of Shiva's argument, which ignores the class and gender discrimination and environmental exploitation that existed before Western incursions. She also problematizes Shiva's conflation of the experience of women in North India with all Third World women.

5. They exacted influence during this time through the provision of funding for specific types of projects, the structural conditions attached to the provision of development loans, technical advice, research, and publications (Babb 2009; Evans, Haggard, and Kaufman 1992; Williamson 1990).

6. Before this, the bank supported a variety of projects to improve access to economic opportunities and "human development," including project loans for better access to education and health, some of which had a gender focus. For example, between 1995 and 2000 the bank lent more than USD 3.4 billion for girls' education programs (World Bank 2002).

7. See Roberts and Soederberg (2012) for a comprehensive analysis of the 2012 WDR.

8. The challenge of balancing feminist organizational ideals of social justice, while operating within the constraints of the neoliberal milieu, has also been documented in the Middle Eastern context (Sa'ar 2016).

9. Tech initiatives include a collaboration with the Cherie Blair Foundation on a mobile service for women entrepreneurs, Business Women. The service purportedly reached 100,000 women, providing them with 250+ targeted tips and practical advice for starting and running successful businesses.

10. Similarly, Goldman Sachs's 10,000 Women, a USD 100 million initiative aimed at creating female entrepreneurs, is being operationalized in partnership with more than 80 academic and nonprofit organizations.