12 We build the *power* in empowerment

Feminist activism at the forefront of environment and climate change arenas

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In conversation with Kate Lappin*

Feminists, not gender professionals

‘We are feminist activists’, replied Kate Lappin, when asked whether the organisation that she led (at the time of the conversation), the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), was an organisation of gender professionals. ‘We see ourselves as responsive to a movement and are committed to building power and confronting power.’

The women’s movement has grown in size, shape and breadth over many decades, and whenever there has been a need to describe and categorise its membership, both diversity and hybridity often stand out. Notwithstanding debates over the linkage between women’s, queer and feminist movements, a core feature of the women’s movement can be said to be fundamentally anchored in the political goal to emancipate women from their long history of marginal political, economic and social status across geographical divides and to hence work towards achieving empowerment and equality. Our conversation focuses on what Kate refers to as feminism for the ‘99%’ of humanity, with an emphasis on tackling injustice: shifting the global power of the 1%, which she points out is something quite different from instrumentalised forms of gender mainstreaming.

Gender, environment and development as a field of research, policy practice and activism accommodates varieties of feminism, often differing in their framings of what ought to be transformed and the forms of transformative action. This chapter in particular sheds light on efforts to re-politicise gender along the lines of movement-building that counterpose conventional and technocratic approaches of gender mainstreaming. The ontology of feminist action is to work towards structural transformation by building and strengthening social and feminist movements. The object of transformative action is directed at elite and corporate capture of global resources, the disproportionate accumulation of wealth, and the response is to build movements that challenge these and enable a climate of equal rights, social justice and empowerment especially for those adversely disadvantaged.

Pathways to achieve empowerment and equality, and to engage in movement work diverge for feminists, and often this depends on personal trajectories, social contexts and histories. Our conversation with Kate includes an exploration of how her approach reflects early experiences with labour injustice, women's rights, health and the environment in her native Australia. Her work with APWLD provides an opportunity for us to explore a politicised engagement with 'gender' in the realm of environment and development, specifically in relation with the rights of women affected by extractive industries, and later, climate change.

Kate's parents worked in the state-owned, brown coal-powered electricity industry in a regional town built around the coal industry in Australia. Her mother was dismissed from work once married as government policy prohibited married women from working in public utilities. And so with limited options, her mother became a domestic worker and went on to have six children. Kate started working at 14, and although her early experiences with the Trade Union Movement were not positive due to underlying sexism, she went on to focus her union work on challenging injustice and in fostering women's human rights. At 20, she became the only woman trade union delegate in her workplace and later entered university where she studied in a law school that included a feminist legal studies stream and women's studies. Environmental justice questions greatly interested her because of her family's experience in the coal industry. 'Those early stages of my life influenced me to take up the issues of labour injustice, women's rights and environmental justice. The experience of the La Trobe Valley, the coal dependent town where my parents met, is illustrative of so many intersecting problems. First, the exclusion of women from work once married and the obvious economic independence that led to, then privatisation discarded thousands of jobs and the whole region suffered from economic depression and both the environmental problems locally and globally from the mine got worse with privatisation. Resistance to shutting the power stations is understandably strong in the community and when one of the oldest, dirtiest power stations was finally shut down, the state government supported a just transition package for the remaining workers. But there had been no just transition for my mum or other women denied jobs, no just transition for the workers discarded by privatisation. So, I probably noticed the impact of burning coal from an early age', recounts Kate. She was APWLD's executive director for eight years until mid-2018 and is now the regional secretary for the Asia-Pacific region of Public Services International (PSI), a global trade union federation representing 30 million workers.

Social movements and civil society organisations are known to push political boundaries to pave the way for more open engagements, blaze new discursive paths, and have been chiefly responsible for establishing feminism as a social discourse and policy norm within environmental and sustainability debates (for a complementary discussion, see Chapter 13 on conversations with members of Sida). For instance, the process adopted by the United Nations for formulating the post-2015 Development Agenda has been credited with opening up spaces for civil society and social movement consultations that became germane to the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This

dramatically altered the rules of agenda-setting in the UN, and which was in large part driven by global civil society's frosty reaction to the SDGs' precursor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which had been devised with little consultative action. Not everybody was pleased, however, with the outcomes of the SDGs either. Some remain 'cautiously optimistic' (Esquivel, 2016; Esquivel & Sweetman, 2016; Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Razavi, 2016), whereas the creation of the goals left many activist quarters unconvinced of the goals' capacity for meaningfully transforming gender equality. Feminist scholars refer to the underlying propensity of the SDGs to favour neoliberal market-driven means to achieve sustainable development instead of prioritising more redistributive and social welfare measures (Weber, 2017; Koehler, 2016; O'Manique & Fourie, 2016).

Babette: In the gender and environment panel at SEI's Science Forum last 2017 in Bangkok, Kate mentioned that the Beijing Platform for Action, with its emphasis on rights and justice, continues to carry more transformative potential than the SDGs, despite the latter's stated commitment to 'leave no one behind'.

'Yes, I wrote an article in *The Guardian* contrasting the Beijing Platform and the SDGs.* The Beijing Platform acknowledges the structural drivers of inequality including austerity measures, for example. The directives for governments include redistributing military spending to public services and conducting macro-economic reviews to eliminate practices that magnify gender inequalities which would clearly include privatisation. But the SDGs effectively encourage privatisation through public-private partnerships. The Beijing Platform recognises the gendered harms of structural adjustment and directs IFIs to reform but the SDGs require them to stay 'within mandate' – a mandate the banks say is not about environmental protections or human rights.

Becky: How do you locate your position within APWLD? Do you see yourself as a career feminist or gender expert?

'For us at APWLD, the driving motivation is not to build a career. We are not career feminists or gender professionals, and since we are a membership-driven organisation, there is a sense that this is not what our members really want', says Kate, nailing the door shut to being considered a 'gender expert'. 'We also hesitate to call ourselves an NGO, because there's a history of NGOs creating a profession out of other people's misery. The idea of an NGO comes with a particular, perhaps colonial perspective. We see ourselves as a movement, not a technical response to poverty or to climate change. We don't see our work as building expertise, but building power, this is the power in the over used term empowerment. So, we are activists not gender professionals.'

* <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/sep/23/global-goals-womens-rights-pale-imitation-beijing-declaration-and-platform-for-action>

NGOs in the Global South present a more complex picture than is often assumed. On one hand, they are essentialised as representing bottom-up commitments to gender equality, poverty reduction and/or social justice. Yet on the other, they may be purveyors of globalised agendas – new forms of colonialism – and elite capture. A conversation between feminist scholars Richa Nagar and Saraswati Raju (2003) explores whether NGOs in India, for example, usher in these new forms of colonialism as they professionalise and conduct gender mainstreaming, leading them to distance themselves from the world of ‘real’ struggles and align more closely with state and international technical agendas. Raju points out that increased professionalisation means that many NGOs cannot find the time to discuss questions of hierarchy and structure in their own organisations. Adds Nagar: ‘The new implicit understanding of the over-arching goal these days is not to overthrow the current system and build a new one’, but that ‘we have to live with the current political and economic structures and so our aim is to make the poorest women cope better with this reality of shrinking resources and increasing social and economic inequity and injustice by making them more knowledgeable, more comfortable with market forces.’ (Nagar & Raju, 2003: 3). The work of Narayanaswamy (2014, 2016) instructs us that ‘Southern women’s NGOs’ are not to be treated as an aggregate or homogeneous category, but instead to recognise that they, for their part, share trajectories of historical and contemporary oppression that allow them to transcend other axes of difference and generate their own elite elements. Nagar & Raju (2003) also note that reports that high-level NGO officials generate are primarily for funders, which De Jong (2016) affirms as she remarks that NGOs are more accountable to their donors who generally encourage service delivery over political advocacy.

APWLD is a regional women’s network in the Asia-Pacific region that started as a law- and human rights-related alliance of national women’s organisations and is membership-led. It now focuses on movement-building working with rural, indigenous and urban poor women especially in vulnerable climate change contexts. Says Kate: ‘When you work with grassroots women, they are more likely to be interested in livelihood issues around their daily lives than perhaps legal frameworks, which APWLD often started with in its past.’ Through a research and women’s self-organising program they call ‘feminist participatory action research’ or FPAR, local and grassroots women acquire research skills to understand their own contexts, self-organise and build their own movements to seek solutions for their own problematic conditions. ‘We’ve used FPAR in a palm oil displaced community. What would a feminist approach mean for women by way of building their own power and movement, for example? How could they contest the displacement?’ she adds. These are the concerns that their work addresses, which are different from other types of interventions such as income generation and creating local groups for resource management.

Kate says that they also engage internationally and regionally around climate and environmental issues, ‘so that we can help create just standards. Our work has overall increased especially since we are also addressing the impacts of the extractive industries on rural women apart from climate change,’ she adds. What began

as largely a loose network of lawyers and academics, APWLD is now responsive to environmental issues of currency and has become a presence in international meetings such as the Women's Major Group, a group of civil society organisations that engaged intensively in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Women and Gender constituency of the UNFCCC. This explains why the network has grown in breadth and is active in multiple scales of political engagement. 'If we need to build expertise, we use the expertise for the benefit of our members', remarks Kate, 'the driving motivation is not to build a career, that's why we don't call ourselves "gender professionals"'. For Kate and the members of the 30-year old feminist network in the Asia Pacific region, the challenge is to address and transform the 'nexus of patriarchy with militarism, fundamentalisms and neo-liberal economic globalization' that undermine women's human rights and freedoms (Asia Pacific Forum for Women, Law & Development (APWLD), n.d.).

The task that Kate and APWLD members have set for themselves, however, is far from straightforward. In a climate where certain brands of feminism have increasingly become *de rigueur*, it may be difficult for Kate and allies to separate the chaff from the grain.

'Doing gender' in a safe way

Many organisations understand gender mainstreaming as establishing and maintaining gender balance, or the equal representation of women and men. Says Kate: 'Many organisations are far more pragmatic and would be satisfied to just get 'gender' in to UN text. For example, with respect to the gender resolutions at the UNFCCC such as the creation of the Gender Action Plan (in 2017), some organisations within the Women and Gender Constituency were just intent to get a commitment to equal representation of women and men in delegations. At that time, some gender experts were keen to get a resolution at any cost without addressing fundamental issues such as loss and damage, financing, addressing injustices. That's 'doing gender' in a safe way.

Bacchi and Eveline (2010) point to similar tendencies in gender mainstreaming that privileges an *a priori* recognition of 'sexual/gender difference' supporting the ontological view that assigns biological characteristics to specific human beings thus setting them apart and unequal to each other. This approach underpins gender mainstreaming efforts that are plainly satisfied with gender parity in representation, as Kate's example above shows. This act dissuades from actually focusing on the politics that privilege some and not others. The focus on differences (often binary differences between women and men) fails to recognise that the acts of allocating or claiming difference is fundamentally politically imbued, and which therefore transformative change. As Fiona Wilson (1996: 834) argues, 'instead of looking at gender as a difference perhaps we need to look ... at how this is done'. To see how gender is 'done', Kabeer adds: 'we need to analyse the ways in which gender is constructed as a relationship of inequality by the rules and practices of different institutions' (Kabeer, 1994: 84). A feminist political ecology approach locates the political production of gender in the competition of

resources that create and stratify multiple and intersectional subjectivities; whereas the gender difference approach, which falls under the suite of so-called ‘women-only’ approaches, usually seek to accrue benefits singularly for women without questioning how women had been disadvantaged in the first place (Buchy & Rai, 2008). This approach also plays into the neoliberal argument for encouraging individual success and economic empowerment rather than a focus on multi-scalar and unequal relations of power that Nagar and Raju (2003) refer to.

Babette: What would have been a deal that you would have supported, then, for instance in the space of climate change deliberations? Some feminist scholars are diverting from the usual preoccupation on specific climate change impacts on women (and men).

Kate: Our starting point is climate justice. We differ from those who are focusing on just equal representation but not challenging the patriarchy. We challenge those who cause climate change. We differ from some others in the constituency of course, that’s inevitable. We cannot achieve gender justice in an unjust agreement that does not look at common or shared responsibilities for GHG emissions, does not ensure emissions are kept below 1.5°C, or does not make sure the polluter pays. These are core principles for us. Nevertheless, we support solidarity amongst the constituency, just like the tradition of Women’s Committees in different trade unions. Some may not share the same tactics and principles, but we all at least agree with the need to have women duly represented. However, we’re quite clear that there is no empowerment without power. There are no rights without the accountability of those who perpetrate injustice. The UN nowadays uses the language of gender equality and empowerment rather than human rights because you can talk about women’s empowerment, which has no legal meaning, and simply seek to increase the number of women in corporations or the number of women engaging in the market. That form of so-called ‘empowerment’ reinforces, rather than challenges corporate power. The UN has depoliticised the language to placate institutions that have more power than the UN, like the development banks, the IMF, and global corporations.

Apart from their advocacy work with the UN and other global actors, Kate also shares their work with communities affected by widespread palm oil plantations, using the feminist participatory action research (FPAR) approach. She demonstrates how action research can stimulate the growth of local feminist movements.

Kate: We’ve supported a feminist participatory action research (FPAR) in a palm oil-displaced community in Indonesia. The FPAR explored questions such as: What would the expansion of palm oil mean for women. What impact would it have on their own power? How could they contest the displacement? It will be up to the women to build their own solidarity with the men and others to arrive at common decisions and build their own movement. We’ve used the FPAR method in climate displaced communities in the Pacific, with

Indigenous women facing landslides and loss of habitat in remote areas of Nepal, with women living in slums and displaced by floods in the Philippines, with women in rural parts of Vietnam, Bangladesh and Cambodia. We support the women to identify their own solutions whilst understanding the global drivers, they build their own movements and conduct advocacy. Their demands all differ and can be very local and practical as well as seeking to collectively pressure governments and corporations globally. But at no time did any of these women say they want to see more women in boardrooms or in delegations.

Another way of co-opting feminism, according to Kate, is the manner with which it has aligned with technocratic practices. Kate refers to this as the practices that use the term 'gender equality' but instead serve to deepen the injustice and to de-politicise. Most state organisations and NGOs with gender equality in their agendas today will have to plan and use log frames to strategise interventions in these displaced communities or that researchers will report the impacts of such displacements, something that Kabeer (1994) might refer to as the 'project trap'. Kate agrees that NGOs face the lure of the project trap but argues that the FPAR method differs in the following way: 'For us it's not about doing a log frame that shows how we will build local wells, it is about whether the local community there would have summoned enough power to speak to the local government and feel that they have authority because they are collectively standing with their piece of evidence from their own research, and have the solidarity of other groups that they've aligned with. It may be that the government will not change its stance, but this is a step forward especially when they experience the capacity to negotiate, be heard and imagine the right to bring about change.'

Log frames and planning have been integral parts of the professionalisation of feminism in many development contexts. There are studies that argue that the very act of professionalisation de-politicises (Nagar & Raju, 2003; Li, 2007; Narayanaswamy, 2016). To illustrate the effects of professionalisation, Morondo-Taramundi (2016) draws attention to the growing gulf between state feminism and feminist movements in Spain. Women's movements have denounced state/institutionalised feminism as complacent and lacking in transformative power, or even colluding with patriarchy. Institutional feminism gradually lost identification with socialist feminist militancy and began to incorporate more ideologically neutral analyses of gender issues according to Morondo-Taramundi.

Kate: Many institutions are desperate to really corrupt the language of feminism. The World Trade Organization, is an example. It has always resisted any idea that it needs to look at human rights and has always explicitly said, 'Our mandate is not human rights.' Last year, it adopted a declaration on gender equality. One that's very clearly just trying to bring women into the system, the system of rules that privilege capital and are designed to ensure the current economic system continues expanding, and they call that gender equality. They are peddling the idea that women's power will come through an

expansion of the global economy rather than a redistribution. So absolutely, women should have demanded the right to be part of the economy and still have the right to work and to be paid for work, have the right to property and the same rights as men. But a just economy would ensure the redistribution of paid and unpaid work, not just bring more women into the workforce. A redistribution would allow for greater civic life and sustainable living. We really need to think about how wages have been distributed and what they do to the rest of our lives because sustainable living takes time, and the other aspects of life that are consumption-based take time. The global economic system has valued wages but has not valued the kind of work that is valuable, productive, and care-based that could and should be an essential part of a sustainable economy. Imagine if earlier feminist movements had not just demanded that women have an equal right to paid work, but had instead suggested a redistribution of paid work – a redistribution that should have meant the working week was reduced for all and everyone in the community would have time for social care, for civic life, for the work that is required for sustainable lifestyles.

Becky: So far, we've discussed the effects of professionalising feminism. But where is feminism going at the moment? There seems to be less political unity despite the fact that feminism seems to be gaining high visibility. For instance, I see that prominent women call themselves feminists.

Kate: Yes, there has been a global surge in interest in feminism. But what I guess the effect of this is is to magnify differences between perspectives. If feminist movements were just chugging along in the background, you wouldn't necessarily have contested space so much around what feminism means. But when it's prominent and when invoking feminist narratives can have power, then that power is contested. And so, when very prominent people call themselves feminists, there is more likely to be a reaction to that especially by activists questioning whether those prominent people reflect the interests of all women. Perhaps there's more unity now among the feminist groups that are coming together who try and ensure that feminism is not just for the 1%. Whilst a lot of the very prominent voices are from the 1%, I think there's an increasing response to that and more feminists are saying, 'No, feminism is about shifting the power of the 1% whether they be women or men, to the majority.'

Babette: I've been to a recent conference where women entrepreneurs were talking about women's economic empowerment. These women seemed to come from a different class, they were well-to-do. I did ask them whether they were willing to support the unionisation of their female and male workers. I only received deafening silence and a feverish passing of the microphone to one another.

Kate: Yes, the increasing focus on developing women entrepreneurs – it's quite a ruse. Women have always been entrepreneurs. Women have always traded. So it's not that women lack entrepreneurial skills or ideas, but the global system is making it increasingly impossible for them to survive as small traders.

The majority of world trade is between multinational corporations. And this idea that women are suddenly going to be able to access that world by becoming small entrepreneurs and that that's going to solve the level of inequality of wealth between men and women or between the 1% and the rest is really farcical. There's no evidence of it. There's no evidence that even the smallest level microcredit schemes that are promoted to have women enter into microeconomies have actually changed systems or led to any more than a few individual changes. So those kinds of responses are, again, very neoliberal. They focus on a supposed failure of women – their lack of entrepreneurial skills. All they need is a little bit more skill and then they'll make it. In actuality, the market is rigged against them. It's rigged against women and it's rigged against most men too. The market is increasingly set up for multinationals. And a woman that starts a small microbusiness isn't going to be able to compete in that global system. And in any case, even if they did, it would change the lives of four or five people but not those of other women. I think that those kinds of responses (presented as 'women's economic empowerment') are very much trying to tell us that the system can be just. They're giving us a misleading sense of the (gender equality) problems and how they sit within the global economy. But they're also trying to redirect, I guess, the anger that different groups have around the global economy into making very small band-aid solutions. Instead of being angry that inequalities are rising, that billionaires are making obscene profits from women's labour, that land is being destroyed or monopolised, that austerity measures are privatising public goods, that it is increasingly difficult to imagine a better life for the next generation, women are being encouraged to see their problems as a failure to understand the economic opportunities and encouraged to aspire to increased personal consumption.

From an environmental perspective, trying to bring in more women to be consumers, more women to be billionaires is hardly a solution.

Of course the biggest threat to the current system, the biggest threat to power, is solidarity. An essential part of the neoliberal project is to break solidarity. And that's why, as you say Babette, neoliberal feminists will never support the most proven way for women to increase economic justice – unionising. Even though donors regularly speak about 'results based' development assistance, very few will support unionising even though it has the most proven results for women. Meaningful social progress has only ever been won through solidarity. We can't win real change through professional training and logframes. We can only win change with overwhelming solidarity – that needs feminists and other movements to see that our struggles are bound together. The feminist movement, environmental movements, labour movements, Indigenous movements, all have interests in challenging the existing economic and political system. All risk appropriation by the system.

Conservative, right-wing political parties have been able to position feminism as elitist and exclusionary, a threat to the working class. When centrist parties and global institutions focus purely on increasing women's numbers

and profile within the system, they undermine the possibility for solidarity and create the illusion of gender equality.

What would really challenge power and bring about change? It would be all those movements coming together and withdrawing consent from the current system. APWLD has begun seeding the idea of a global strike – a strike designed to reset the system, a strike against neoliberalism, a strike for a new, sustainable, social contract.

Morondo-Taramundi (2016) refers to Antonio Gramsci's notion of the 'passive revolution', where the dominant, often ruling classes, incorporate elements from subaltern groups in order to neutralise them. In juxtaposition, we see an incorporation of feminist discourses (such as 'empowerment' and 'equality') in professionalised and mainstream institutions that Kate alludes to above.

Becky: Do you see the same thing happening with the green economy? There seems to be a lot of optimism over the promises of the green economy for sustainable development.

Kate: When we talk about a green economy, what is it that we're moving towards? It's very easy for corporations to start calling themselves green, and maybe some of them are, but then what kind of justice are they delivering? UN and financial institutions are encouraging what they are calling a just transition to renewable energy, but that just transition too often requires a move away from publicly owned state-based energy to private renewable energy sources. Until this year, Thailand, for example, provided free energy to households of very low energy use where probably you only had a fan and maybe a tv or a very small refrigerator. That is clearly beneficial to women, especially for those coming from the poorest households since they will have to make choices around their expenditure. With a push to liberalise energy and allow new private providers in through renewables, free energy to the lowest consumption households has been lost. These policies are introduced with a green narrative, but actually, a narrative that's quite harmful to both access to public services, to women's rights, and eventually, actually, to the environment, I think, because it takes away the opportunity for publicly funded and managed transition and it also takes away the incentive to use less energy.

Our response to the instrumentalisation of gender within the climate negotiations has been to instead call for a 'Feminist, Fossil Fuel Free, Future. We don't just call for a just transition for workers moving out of fossil fuels, but a just and equitable transition of the entire carbon based economy. That means changing the rules of the global economy – the trade agreements that prevent the regulation of corporations – the tax systems that allow for corporate tax avoidance and undermine public investment – the global supply chain rules that allow corporates to outsource labour and prohibit cross industry and cross country labour organising – the debt rules that give power to creditors to enforce austerity and privatise everything we need to live more equitably

and sustainably, and the political influence corporations have over governments and global rules.

Our planet desperately needs this type of feminism.

To conclude

Overall, Kate believes that feminism is increasingly being incorporated and co-opted by neoliberalism. She cited examples of the de-politicising effects of the professionalisation of feminism that focuses more on the technical delivery of services rather than political advocacy; of women's economic empowerment as tied to strengthening markets rather than the redistribution of gendered time, wages and assets and the equal exercise of resource rights; of weakening the energy security of poor women as countries transition towards low-carbon energy options driven largely by private sector interests.

Kate's insights chime with recent feminist scholarly debates that view the erasure of feminist politics in the face of neoliberalism. A number of them offer insights worth pondering as they critically engage with growing neoliberalism from different vantage points.

Nancy Fraser (2009), for instance, argues that feminism has itself been complicit in the furtherance of neoliberalism. She cites feminism's earlier critical stance towards the welfare state being paternalistic, which coddled former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's departure from welfare dependence and greater market reliance for the distribution of social services. She also points out that it was feminism's emphasis on identity and culture politics (which she calls the 'politics of recognition' 'the demand to be recognised, to be seen and included, to be given a seat within the system, deflects demands for system change') that eventually deflected attention from redistribution and economic justice. Similarly, Sylvia Walby (2011) argues that feminism must now revert to socialist politics and underscore the claim for redistribution to combat neoliberalism. She emphasises the need to strengthen socialist politics and defend the welfare state to address the adverse and disproportionate effects of neoliberalism on women. For her, neoliberalism 'increases gender inequality directly, through their disproportionate impact on women's jobs and welfare, as well as creating a less hospitable political context for women's effective engagement in the public sphere' (Walby, 2011: 158).

Though not to negate the dire effects of neoliberalism on different groups of women, other scholars are more cautious about the seeming coherence of neoliberalism – or often assuming it as a given – and its almost immense ability to flatten everything on its path. Janet Newman's (2013) research that mapped out feminist activists as they engaged with the state at critical historical junctures in Britain, demonstrates that feminism and neoliberalism comprise dynamic assemblages that constitute techniques and practices that are selectively appropriated as they come into contact with local politics and cultures at particular historical junctures. In short, feminist encounters with neoliberalism are situated (Nagar and Raju,

2003). For instance, Newman cites interviews with feminist activists in the 1970s that critiqued the male breadwinner model in Britain, pushed for child and social care, maternity provision and work–life balance. Newman (2013) notes that this activism can be viewed as first, a selective appropriation of feminist agendas that conferred women with full worker citizen status, but at the same time paved the way for firms to access cheaper, more flexible, less unionised female workforce; second, women are then viewed as integral to advanced neoliberal strategies of sustaining the domestic economy that reproduces conditions of capital accumulation and profit.

Newman also points out that neoliberal projects adapt to feminist activism. As a result of feminist activism in the 1970s, employers have had to bear the cost of equality governance within their firms, parental leave and more complex patterns of work that women demanded as they became full workers. State programs invested in training women enabling them to contribute to the economy and to manage care work. Overall, the gender order remained essentially unchanged. Newman’s analysis however points us to the dynamic and complex assemblage of interests and practices, where both feminism and neoliberalism simultaneously gain and lose, drawing attention to where nuanced spaces of political mobilisation might lie.

At this historical juncture of intensive global, national, and local debates over mitigating solutions to climate change and the drastic effects of a worldwide pandemic, it is however fundamentally crucial to keep our gaze fixed on preserving and exercising rights and social justice at the foreground. This means collective organising and strengthening movements to pry open the shackles of corporate capture that often remains unchecked in the search for sustainable solutions.

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