

The Commodification of Feminism — A Critical Analysis of Neoliberal Feminist Discourse

Sarah Louise Bennett¹

¹ University of Western Australia, Australia

Correspondence: Sarah Louise Bennett, University of Western Australia, Australia.

doi:10.56397/SSSH.2024.05.04

Abstract

This paper critically examines the commodification of feminism within the framework of neoliberal feminism, a discourse that has gained significant traction in recent years. Neoliberal feminism emphasizes individual empowerment, personal success, and market-driven solutions to gender inequality. While this approach has succeeded in making feminist ideas more mainstream and accessible, it also poses substantial challenges by overlooking systemic and structural barriers that many women face. This paper explores the historical emergence of neoliberal feminism, its key characteristics, and the role of media and corporations in promoting commodified feminist ideals. It further analyzes the positive and negative impacts of neoliberal feminism on broader feminist movements, highlighting the shift from collective action to individual empowerment. Through critical perspectives from radical, intersectional, and socialist feminists, this paper underscores the limitations of neoliberal feminism and calls for a renewed focus on collective action, intersectionality, and systemic change to achieve true gender equality. By resisting the commodification of feminist ideals and advocating for more inclusive strategies, the feminist movement can better address the root causes of gender inequality in a neoliberal context.

Keywords: neoliberal feminism, individual empowerment, systemic inequality, collective action, structural barriers, gender equality

1. Introduction

Neoliberal feminism is a contemporary feminist discourse that aligns feminist goals with neoliberal values such as individualism, market competition, and self-empowerment through consumer choices. Unlike traditional feminist movements that emphasize collective action and systemic change, neoliberal feminism focuses on individual success and personal empowerment as the primary means of achieving gender equality. This form of feminism often promotes the idea that women can attain empowerment primarily through career success, entrepreneurial endeavors, and participation in the marketplace.

Commodification in the context of feminism refers to the process by which feminist ideals and messages are transformed into marketable items that can be bought and sold. This involves the appropriation of feminist rhetoric by corporations and media to sell products, enhance brand image, or gain political leverage, often leading to the dilution of feminist messages. Feminist symbols and slogans are increasingly used in advertising and product branding, with companies adopting feminist rhetoric to appeal to female consumers without necessarily committing to genuine gender equality initiatives (Rottenberg, 2014; Rottenberg, 2018).

This paper argues that neoliberal feminism commodifies feminist ideals, undermining the transformative potential of feminist movements by aligning them with capitalist values. The commodification of feminism can lead to the depoliticization of feminist movements, making them more palatable to mainstream audiences but less effective in challenging patriarchal structures. Public perception of feminism is influenced by its

commodified forms, which often prioritize aesthetics and consumerism over activism and advocacy (Rottenberg, 2014).

Analyzing the commodification of feminism within neoliberal discourse is crucial for understanding the dynamics of modern feminism and its interaction with market forces. This analysis provides a critical lens through which to view neoliberal ideologies, revealing how they co-opt and transform progressive movements for their own ends. Investigating the commodification of feminism helps identify the limitations and potential pitfalls of neoliberal feminism, guiding feminist theory and practice towards more effective strategies for achieving gender equality. Furthermore, it highlights the need for collective action, underscoring the importance of reclaiming feminist discourse from neoliberal influences and re-centering it on collective struggles for justice and equality (Rottenberg, 2018).

In conclusion, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive critical analysis of neoliberal feminism, exploring how the commodification of feminist ideals impacts feminist movements, public perception, and the broader struggle for gender equality. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to ongoing debates within feminist theory and offer pathways for reclaiming feminist discourse from the grip of neoliberalism.

2. The Emergence of Neoliberal Feminism

2.1 Historical Context and Origins

The concept of neoliberal feminism emerged against the backdrop of significant socio-economic changes in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Neoliberalism, characterized by market-driven policies, deregulation, and the prioritization of individual responsibility, began to dominate global economic policies in the 1980s. The intersection of neoliberalism and feminism became particularly prominent as feminist movements sought to adapt to the changing socio-economic landscape.

The rise of neoliberalism can be traced back to the political and economic shifts during the Reagan-Thatcher era. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom implemented policies that emphasized free-market capitalism, reduced state intervention, and promoted individual entrepreneurship. These policies were aimed at fostering economic growth through deregulation, privatization, and the reduction of welfare programs. The focus on individual responsibility and self-sufficiency became central tenets of neoliberal thought, reshaping social and economic policies across the globe.

As these neoliberal principles began to permeate various social spheres, including gender equality efforts, feminist movements faced the challenge of adapting to this new socio-economic environment. Traditional feminist approaches that emphasized collective action and systemic change started to shift towards frameworks that aligned more closely with neoliberal ideals. Feminists began to emphasize individual empowerment and personal success as markers of progress, which resonated with the broader societal emphasis on individualism and market-driven solutions.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, this shift became more pronounced. Feminist discourse increasingly incorporated neoliberal language, focusing on personal success and career achievements as primary indicators of feminist progress. Influential texts and public figures emerged, embodying the ideals of neoliberal feminism and marking the formal emergence of this new feminist wave. Notable publications, such as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* and Anne-Marie Slaughter's "Why Women Still Can't Have It All", played significant roles in shaping and popularizing neoliberal feminist thought. These works highlighted the importance of individual ambition and career advancement, encouraging women to navigate and succeed within existing power structures rather than challenging them fundamentally.

2.2 Key Characteristics and Principles

2.2.1 Individualism and Self-Empowerment

Neoliberal feminism emphasizes individual agency and personal responsibility. It encourages women to take control of their destinies through self-improvement, career advancement, and personal branding. This focus on individual success often sidelines collective struggles and systemic critiques, shifting the narrative from societal change to personal achievement. The underlying assumption is that through sheer determination and hard work, women can overcome structural barriers and achieve equality.

2.2.2 Market-Oriented Solutions

Solutions to gender inequality within neoliberal feminism are often market-based, advocating for women's increased participation in the workforce and entrepreneurial ventures as key to achieving gender parity. The market is seen as a neutral and meritocratic space where women can compete and succeed based on their abilities and efforts. This approach assumes that economic empowerment through market participation will naturally lead to gender equality, without addressing deeper systemic and structural issues that perpetuate inequality.

2.2.3 Depoliticization and Commodification

Feminist ideals are commodified and depoliticized, turning feminist symbols and slogans into marketable products. This process strips feminism of its radical potential, making it more palatable to mainstream audiences and corporate interests. For example, feminist messages are frequently used in advertising campaigns to appeal to female consumers without necessarily promoting substantive gender equality initiatives. Products like T-shirts with feminist slogans, advertisements featuring empowered women, and corporate diversity campaigns exemplify how feminist rhetoric is used to enhance brand image while often lacking genuine commitment to feminist goals.

2.2.4 Emphasis on Professional Success

Professional success and economic independence are often highlighted as the ultimate goals of feminist empowerment. Books like Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* and Anne-Marie Slaughter's "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" encapsulate this ethos by advocating for women's advancement in corporate settings. This focus on professional achievement can obscure the broader structural barriers that many women face, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. The narrative suggests that achieving high-level professional success within the existing corporate framework is the primary path to empowerment, neglecting the importance of systemic change and the collective struggle against broader societal inequities.

2.3 Influential Figures and Movements

Sheryl Sandberg

Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, is a prominent figure in neoliberal feminism. Her book *Lean In* (2013) has become a seminal text, encouraging women to assert themselves in the workplace and strive for leadership positions. Sandberg's message centers on personal responsibility and ambition, advocating for women to "lean in" to their careers. While *Lean In* has been praised for empowering women to pursue their professional goals, it has also faced criticism for neglecting structural issues and promoting an individualized approach to gender equality (Rottenberg, 2014).

Anne-Marie Slaughter

Anne-Marie Slaughter's article "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" (2012) sparked widespread discussion about work-life balance and the challenges women face in achieving both professional success and personal fulfillment. Slaughter argues for more flexible work policies and greater support for working mothers, emphasizing the need for systemic change alongside individual efforts. Despite advocating for policy reforms, Slaughter's work has been associated with neoliberal feminism due to its focus on individual strategies for navigating work and family responsibilities.

Lean In Circles and Corporate Initiatives

The establishment of Lean In Circles, small peer groups that support women in achieving their ambitions, reflects the grassroots application of neoliberal feminist principles. These circles encourage networking, mentorship, and self-advocacy, aligning with the broader goals of individual empowerment and professional development. Corporate initiatives that promote gender diversity and inclusion, often inspired by neoliberal feminist ideals, also play a significant role. Companies adopt feminist rhetoric to enhance their brand image and attract talent, though the depth of their commitment to genuine gender equality varies widely.

The emergence of neoliberal feminism represents a significant shift in feminist discourse, reflecting broader socio-economic trends and the influence of market-driven ideologies. While it has contributed to raising awareness and encouraging women's empowerment in certain contexts, it also poses challenges by prioritizing individual success over collective action and systemic change. Understanding the nuances of neoliberal feminism is essential for developing more inclusive and transformative feminist strategies.

3. The Commodification of Feminist Ideals

3.1 Marketing and Selling Feminist Ideals

Feminist slogans and symbols are incorporated into product branding and advertising campaigns to attract female consumers. Companies often use empowering messages to sell a wide range of products, from cosmetics to clothing. For example, slogans like "Girl Power" and "The Future is Female" are emblazoned on T-shirts and other merchandise, transforming political statements into fashion statements. These messages are designed to resonate with women who identify with feminist values, thus encouraging them to purchase products that seemingly align with their beliefs.

Products are developed and marketed with a feminist angle to appeal to women who identify with feminist values. Makeup brands, for example, may advertise their products as tools of empowerment, encouraging women to "express their individuality" and "embrace their power" through beauty routines. This approach not

only boosts sales but also reinforces the idea that consumer choices can be a form of feminist expression.

Companies engage in CSR initiatives that focus on gender equality and women's empowerment. These initiatives often involve partnerships with feminist organizations or the creation of programs aimed at supporting women in the workplace. For example, a company might sponsor events related to International Women's Day or fund scholarships for women pursuing STEM careers. While these efforts can have positive impacts, they also serve to enhance the company's brand image and market appeal.

3.2 Role of Media and Corporations

Media outlets increasingly feature stories and images of empowered women, highlighting their successes in various fields. This representation reinforces the neoliberal feminist ideal that individual achievement is the key to gender equality. Television shows, movies, and online content often incorporate feminist themes, presenting characters and narratives that emphasize personal empowerment and career success. These portrayals shape public perceptions of feminism, making it more accessible and appealing to a broader audience.

Corporations launch marketing campaigns that use feminist rhetoric to connect with female consumers. For example, Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign promotes body positivity and self-acceptance, aligning the brand with feminist values while driving product sales. Companies also collaborate with high-profile feminist figures as brand ambassadors to lend credibility to their feminist messaging. Celebrities like Beyoncé and Emma Watson, known for their feminist advocacy, are often featured in advertising campaigns, blending their personal brands with corporate interests.

Examples of Commodified Feminist Messages and Products:

1) Dove's "Real Beauty" Campaign

Launched in 2004, Dove's campaign aimed to challenge conventional beauty standards by featuring women of diverse body types, ages, and ethnicities. The campaign's message of self-acceptance and empowerment resonated with many women, making it a commercial success. However, critics argue that it ultimately serves Dove's business interests rather than advancing genuine feminist goals. The campaign has been praised for promoting body positivity but criticized for not addressing the deeper issues of beauty standards imposed by society.

2) Always' "Like a Girl" Campaign

The 2014 campaign by Always, a brand of menstrual products, sought to redefine the phrase "like a girl" to mean strong and capable rather than weak and inferior. The campaign included a viral video that showcased girls performing various activities with confidence and strength. While the campaign was praised for its empowering message, it also faced criticism for using feminism as a marketing tool to sell products. The emotional appeal of the campaign successfully attracted attention and sales, but the commercial motive behind it raised questions about the sincerity of its feminist message.

3) Pantene's "Shine Strong" Campaign

Pantene's campaign featured a series of advertisements encouraging women to be unapologetically strong and confident. The ads highlighted phrases like "sorry, not sorry" to promote the idea that women should not feel the need to apologize for asserting themselves. Although the campaign received positive feedback for promoting self-assurance, it was also seen as leveraging feminist rhetoric to enhance the brand's image. Critics pointed out that while the campaign encouraged women to assert their power, it did not address the structural barriers that prevent many women from doing so.

4) Nike's "Dream Crazier" Campaign

Nike's campaign, featuring prominent female athletes like Serena Williams, celebrated women's achievements in sports and encouraged women to "dream crazier" and break barriers. The ads emphasized perseverance and determination, aligning with feminist ideals of empowerment. While the campaign was inspirational, it also served Nike's commercial interests by associating the brand with progressive values. The use of high-profile athletes helped Nike connect with a broader audience, but the campaign also highlighted the tension between promoting empowerment and profiting from it.

These examples illustrate how feminist messages are commodified and used to drive consumer behavior. While such campaigns can raise awareness and promote positive messages, they often prioritize corporate profits over genuine feminist advocacy. The commodification of feminist ideals thus presents both opportunities and challenges for the feminist movement, influencing public perceptions and potentially diluting the transformative potential of feminist activism.

4. Impacts on Feminist Movements

4.1 Positive and Negative Effects on Gender Equality Efforts

Neoliberal feminism has had a mixed impact on gender equality efforts, with both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, neoliberal feminism has succeeded in making feminist discourse more mainstream and accessible. The emphasis on individual empowerment and personal success resonates with broader societal values, helping to normalize feminist ideas and make them more acceptable in public and corporate spheres. This increased visibility can encourage more women to identify with feminist values and pursue their goals with confidence.

However, the drawbacks of neoliberal feminism are significant. The focus on individualism and market-based solutions often overlooks the systemic and structural barriers that many women face. By promoting a narrative that emphasizes personal responsibility and self-improvement, neoliberal feminism can inadvertently blame women for their own disadvantages while ignoring the broader social, economic, and political contexts that perpetuate gender inequality. This approach can also marginalize women who do not fit the mold of the “ideal” neoliberal feminist subject—those who are economically disadvantaged, racially marginalized, or otherwise excluded from mainstream narratives of success.

Neoliberal feminism’s tendency to depoliticize feminist messages and commodify feminist ideals further dilutes the movement’s transformative potential. By turning feminist symbols and slogans into marketable products, the radical roots of feminism are often stripped away, making it less effective in challenging entrenched power structures and advocating for systemic change. This commodification can also lead to a superficial engagement with feminist issues, where the focus is on surface-level empowerment rather than addressing deeper, more complex forms of oppression.

4.2 Shift from Collective Action to Individual Empowerment

One of the most notable shifts in feminist discourse under neoliberal feminism is the move from collective action to individual empowerment. Traditional feminist movements have historically emphasized the importance of collective struggles and solidarity in achieving gender equality. These movements recognized that systemic change could only be achieved through collective efforts to dismantle patriarchal structures and advocate for broad social reforms.

In contrast, neoliberal feminism places a strong emphasis on individualism and personal success. The narrative promotes the idea that women can achieve empowerment primarily through their own efforts, by excelling in their careers, developing personal brands, and making strategic choices. This shift towards individualism aligns with neoliberal values, which prioritize market rationality and competition over collective welfare.

The focus on individual empowerment can have several implications. On the one hand, it can inspire women to take charge of their lives and pursue their goals with determination. On the other hand, it can create a competitive environment where women are pitted against each other rather than working together to achieve common goals. This emphasis on personal success can also obscure the importance of collective action and systemic change, making it more difficult to address the root causes of gender inequality.

Following activities illustrate the impact on various feminist initiatives:

Time’s Up Movement

The Time’s Up movement, founded in 2018 in response to the #MeToo movement, is an example of how neoliberal feminist principles can both advance and limit feminist initiatives. Time’s Up focuses on combating sexual harassment and promoting gender equality in the workplace. The movement has successfully raised awareness about workplace harassment and has provided legal support to victims through the Time’s Up Legal Defense Fund.

While Time’s Up has made significant strides in addressing workplace harassment, it has also faced criticism for its alignment with corporate interests and high-profile celebrities. The movement has been accused of prioritizing the experiences of privileged women in the entertainment industry while neglecting the voices of marginalized women in lower-wage jobs. This focus on high-profile cases can overshadow the systemic issues that perpetuate harassment and inequality in various industries.

SheEO Initiative

SheEO, an organization founded by Vicki Saunders, promotes female entrepreneurship and economic empowerment by providing funding and support to women-led ventures. The SheEO model encourages women to contribute financially to a collective fund, which is then invested in women-led businesses. This initiative aligns with neoliberal feminist principles by emphasizing individual entrepreneurship and market-based solutions to gender inequality.

SheEO has been praised for its innovative approach to supporting female entrepreneurs and for creating a network of women who support each other’s business ventures. However, it has also been critiqued for focusing primarily on individual success within the existing capitalist framework. Critics argue that while SheEO

provides valuable support to women entrepreneurs, it does not address the broader systemic barriers that many women face in accessing capital and growing their businesses.

HeForShe Campaign

Launched by UN Women in 2014, the HeForShe campaign aims to engage men and boys in the fight for gender equality. The campaign encourages men to take active roles in promoting women's rights and addressing gender-based discrimination. HeForShe has gained widespread attention and support, with high-profile endorsements from global leaders and celebrities.

While the HeForShe campaign has successfully raised awareness about the importance of male allies in the feminist movement, it has also faced criticism for its focus on individual actions rather than systemic change. The campaign's emphasis on male participation can sometimes overshadow the experiences and voices of women, and its reliance on high-profile endorsements can detract from grassroots feminist efforts. Additionally, the campaign's marketable appeal has led to concerns about the commodification of feminist ideals, where the focus is on public declarations of support rather than substantive actions to dismantle patriarchal structures.

Lean In Circles

Lean In Circles, inspired by Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In*, are small peer groups that support women in achieving their ambitions. These circles encourage networking, mentorship, and self-advocacy, aligning with neoliberal feminist principles of individual empowerment and professional development. Participants share their goals and challenges, offering each other advice and support to navigate their careers.

While Lean In Circles have provided valuable support and resources for many women, they also reflect the limitations of neoliberal feminism. The focus on individual success within existing corporate structures can reinforce the status quo rather than challenging the systemic barriers that prevent many women from advancing. Critics argue that Lean In Circles prioritize professional success within a capitalist framework, often overlooking the needs of women who do not have access to such networks or who face intersecting forms of discrimination.

These case studies illustrate the complex impact of neoliberal feminism on various feminist initiatives. While neoliberal feminism has succeeded in making feminist discourse more mainstream and accessible, it also poses significant challenges by prioritizing individual success over collective action and systemic change. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing more inclusive and transformative feminist strategies that can effectively address the root causes of gender inequality.

5. Critical Perspectives

5.1 Academic Critiques of Neoliberal Feminism

Neoliberal feminism has been subject to extensive critique from scholars who argue that it undermines the transformative potential of feminist movements. Academic critiques focus on several key issues:

Superficial Empowerment

Critics argue that neoliberal feminism offers a superficial form of empowerment that emphasizes personal success and career advancement over collective action and systemic change. For instance, Rottenberg (2014) contends that neoliberal feminism encourages women to focus on self-optimization and individual achievements while ignoring broader structural inequalities. This form of feminism, critics claim, reduces feminist politics to a series of personal choices and lifestyle changes rather than a collective struggle against patriarchal and capitalist systems.

Rottenberg (2014) discusses how neoliberal feminism promotes the idea that individual women can overcome structural barriers through personal effort and self-improvement. This narrative suggests that empowerment is a matter of individual resilience and determination, downplaying the significance of systemic factors such as institutional sexism and economic inequality. By framing empowerment in terms of individual success stories, neoliberal feminism tends to overlook the collective dimensions of feminist activism that aim to address and dismantle broader social structures.

The focus on personal success and career advancement can create a narrow definition of empowerment that is accessible primarily to women who already have certain privileges, such as education, social connections, and economic resources. This superficial empowerment often translates into a "lean in" culture where women are encouraged to strive for leadership positions within existing corporate and institutional frameworks, rather than challenging the frameworks themselves. As a result, the broader feminist goals of achieving structural equality and social justice may be sidelined in favor of more individualized and market-friendly approaches.

Market Integration

Scholars such as Fraser (2013) argue that neoliberal feminism has been co-opted by market forces, transforming feminist ideals into marketable commodities. This integration into the market serves to depoliticize feminist

messages, stripping them of their radical potential to challenge existing power structures. By aligning feminist goals with neoliberal values, such as competition and self-reliance, neoliberal feminism is seen to reinforce the very systems of oppression it purports to dismantle.

Fraser (2013) elaborates on how feminist ideas have been appropriated by capitalist enterprises to create a form of “feminism lite” that is palatable to the mainstream market. This co-optation involves the commercialization of feminist symbols and rhetoric, turning them into products and advertising campaigns that appeal to consumers. For example, companies might use feminist slogans and imagery in their marketing strategies to attract female customers, thereby profiting from the feminist movement without committing to substantial gender equality initiatives.

The market integration of feminist ideals often leads to the commodification of empowerment. Products such as T-shirts with feminist slogans, cosmetics marketed as tools of empowerment, and corporate diversity programs are all examples of how feminist messages are repackaged for consumer consumption. This commodification can dilute the transformative power of feminism by reducing it to a series of consumer choices and branding exercises. Instead of challenging the structural inequalities embedded in the market system, neoliberal feminism tends to reinforce these inequalities by promoting market-based solutions that benefit corporations.

Exclusion of Marginalized Voices

Another major critique is that neoliberal feminism tends to prioritize the experiences and interests of middle- and upper-class women, often at the expense of marginalized groups. This focus on professional success and individual empowerment can obscure the struggles of women who face intersecting forms of oppression, such as racism, classism, and ableism. Ahmed (2012) highlights how neoliberal feminism can marginalize women of color, working-class women, and other groups whose experiences do not align with the dominant narrative of individual success.

Ahmed (2012) argues that neoliberal feminism’s emphasis on individual empowerment often fails to address the systemic and intersectional nature of oppression. By focusing on the success stories of women who have managed to “break the glass ceiling,” neoliberal feminism can inadvertently exclude those who face multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination. Women of color, working-class women, and women with disabilities, for example, may find that the neoliberal feminist narrative does not resonate with their lived experiences, which are shaped by complex interactions between different forms of marginalization.

This exclusion is further compounded by the tendency of neoliberal feminism to promote role models who represent a narrow demographic—typically, affluent, well-educated, and predominantly white women. The experiences and achievements of these role models are often held up as universal examples of feminist success, ignoring the diverse and intersectional realities of women’s lives. This can create a hierarchy within the feminist movement, where the voices and concerns of marginalized women are sidelined in favor of those who fit the neoliberal ideal of individual success.

Moreover, the focus on professional success within neoliberal feminism can perpetuate the myth of meritocracy, suggesting that anyone can succeed if they work hard enough. This narrative fails to account for the structural barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized groups, such as racial discrimination, economic inequality, and lack of access to education and resources. By promoting a one-size-fits-all approach to empowerment, neoliberal feminism risks perpetuating the very inequalities it seeks to address.

In conclusion, the academic critiques of neoliberal feminism highlight its limitations in achieving genuine gender equality. The emphasis on superficial empowerment, market integration, and the exclusion of marginalized voices undermines the transformative potential of feminist movements. Addressing these critiques requires a shift towards more inclusive, intersectional, and systemic approaches to feminism that prioritize collective action and social justice over individual success.

5.2 Perspectives from Different Feminist Scholars and Activists

Feminist scholars and activists from various backgrounds offer diverse critiques and alternatives to neoliberal feminism:

Radical Feminists

Radical feminists argue that neoliberal feminism fails to address the root causes of gender inequality, which they see as deeply embedded in patriarchal and capitalist systems. They advocate for a more transformative approach that seeks to dismantle these systems rather than working within them. For example, Andrea Dworkin (2000) and other radical feminists emphasize the need for collective action and solidarity to achieve true gender equality, critiquing neoliberal feminism for its emphasis on individualism and personal success.

Radical feminists assert that gender inequality is fundamentally rooted in patriarchal structures that permeate all aspects of society, including economic, political, and cultural institutions. They argue that neoliberal feminism’s

focus on individual empowerment and career success does little to challenge these deep-seated structures. Instead, radical feminists call for a more revolutionary approach that seeks to dismantle patriarchy itself. This involves advocating for systemic changes that address the root causes of gender inequality, such as advocating for reproductive rights, fighting against sexual violence, and challenging societal norms that perpetuate gender roles.

For instance, radical feminists emphasize the importance of collective actions such as protests, strikes, and grassroots organizing. They believe that only through collective struggle and solidarity can women achieve significant and lasting changes. Radical feminists also critique neoliberal feminism for co-opting feminist language and symbols to support capitalist interests, arguing that this commodification of feminism undermines the movement's revolutionary potential.

Intersectional Feminists

Intersectional feminists, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), critique neoliberal feminism for its lack of attention to the intersecting forms of oppression that many women face. They argue that a focus on individual empowerment fails to account for the ways in which race, class, sexuality, and other identities intersect to shape women's experiences of inequality. Intersectional feminists call for a more inclusive approach that recognizes and addresses these multiple dimensions of oppression.

Intersectionality is a framework for understanding how various forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, classism, and ableism, intersect and compound each other. Crenshaw introduced the concept to highlight how the experiences of women of color are often marginalized in mainstream feminist discourse. Intersectional feminists argue that neoliberal feminism's focus on individual achievement and market-based solutions overlooks the systemic barriers faced by marginalized groups.

For example, an intersectional feminist approach would not only advocate for gender equality in the workplace but also address the specific challenges faced by women of color, such as racial discrimination, lower wages, and limited access to career advancement opportunities. Intersectional feminists emphasize the need for policies and practices that address these intersecting oppressions, such as affirmative action, equitable access to education and healthcare, and anti-discrimination laws that consider multiple axes of identity.

Furthermore, intersectional feminists critique neoliberal feminism for promoting a narrow definition of success that often excludes marginalized voices. They argue that true feminist progress requires a more inclusive and holistic understanding of empowerment that considers the diverse and interconnected experiences of all women.

Socialist Feminists

Socialist feminists critique neoliberal feminism for its failure to address economic inequality and its complicity in perpetuating capitalist exploitation. They argue that true gender equality cannot be achieved without addressing the economic structures that underpin gender inequality. For instance, Hester Eisenstein (2009) calls for a feminist movement that challenges both patriarchy and capitalism, advocating for policies that promote economic redistribution and social welfare.

Socialist feminists contend that capitalism inherently exploits women by undervaluing their labor, both in the workplace and in the home. They argue that neoliberal feminism, with its emphasis on individual entrepreneurship and market success, reinforces capitalist values that contribute to economic inequality. Socialist feminists advocate for a feminist agenda that includes economic justice as a core component, arguing that systemic economic reforms are essential to achieving true gender equality.

For example, socialist feminists support policies such as universal healthcare, affordable childcare, paid family leave, and a living wage. They believe that these measures would address the economic burdens disproportionately shouldered by women and create a more equitable society. Additionally, socialist feminists emphasize the importance of collective ownership and democratic control of resources, arguing that such approaches would better serve the needs of women and other marginalized groups.

Socialist feminists also critique the neoliberal feminist focus on professional success within existing capitalist structures. They argue that this approach often benefits only a small elite group of women while leaving the majority of women, particularly those in low-wage and precarious employment, vulnerable to exploitation. By advocating for broader economic reforms and challenging capitalist exploitation, socialist feminists aim to create a more just and equitable society for all women.

In conclusion, the perspectives from radical, intersectional, and socialist feminists offer critical insights into the limitations of neoliberal feminism. These critiques highlight the importance of addressing the root causes of gender inequality, recognizing the intersecting forms of oppression, and challenging the economic structures that perpetuate exploitation. By incorporating these diverse perspectives, the feminist movement can develop more inclusive and transformative strategies to achieve true gender equality.

5.3 The Debate over Empowerment vs. Exploitation

The tension between narratives of empowerment and practices of exploitation is a central theme in critiques of neoliberal feminism. This debate revolves around the conflicting interpretations of what constitutes genuine empowerment for women and whether the neoliberal approach truly advances feminist goals.

Empowerment Narratives

Proponents of neoliberal feminism argue that emphasizing individual empowerment can inspire women to achieve their goals and break through barriers in traditionally male-dominated fields. They highlight the successes of high-profile women in business, politics, and other areas as evidence of the potential for individual empowerment to drive social change. This narrative is supported by initiatives such as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, which encourages women to assert themselves in the workplace and pursue leadership positions.

Neoliberal feminism promotes the idea that personal ambition and resilience are key to overcoming gender barriers. Sandberg's *Lean In* serves as a manifesto for this perspective, advocating that women should be more assertive in their careers, take risks, and seek mentorship to climb the corporate ladder. This message resonates with many women who aspire to professional success and seek practical advice on navigating their careers. The visibility of successful women in leadership roles can provide powerful role models and demonstrate that gender barriers can be overcome.

Additionally, empowerment narratives often emphasize the importance of financial independence as a means of achieving personal freedom and security. By encouraging women to pursue higher education, develop their careers, and engage in entrepreneurial activities, neoliberal feminism aligns with broader societal values of self-reliance and economic participation. Programs and campaigns that support women entrepreneurs, such as SheEO and various corporate diversity initiatives, reflect this approach by providing resources and networks that help women succeed in the marketplace.

Exploitative Practices

However, critics argue that the focus on individual empowerment can obscure the exploitative practices that sustain systemic inequality. By promoting personal success as the primary measure of feminist progress, neoliberal feminism can divert attention from the structural factors that create and sustain gender inequality. For example, Fraser (2013) argues that neoliberal feminism can reinforce economic exploitation by encouraging women to accept precarious employment conditions and exploitative labor practices in the name of personal advancement.

Fraser (2013) contends that neoliberal feminism often operates within the confines of a capitalist system that inherently values profit over people. This system perpetuates economic inequalities by creating precarious work conditions, such as part-time jobs, freelance contracts, and gig economy roles, which are often filled by women. These roles typically lack job security, benefits, and protections, making them more vulnerable to exploitation. Neoliberal feminism's emphasis on individual adaptation to these conditions can mask the need for systemic reforms that address labor rights and economic justice.

Moreover, the focus on individual empowerment can lead to a competitive environment where women are encouraged to "lean in" and succeed at all costs. This can result in a culture of overwork and burnout, where women are expected to continuously prove their worth through productivity and performance. Critics argue that this model of empowerment is unsustainable and neglects the importance of collective well-being and work-life balance. By framing empowerment solely in terms of individual achievement, neoliberal feminism may inadvertently uphold exploitative practices that prioritize corporate profits over employee welfare.

Another critical point is that neoliberal feminism often fails to address the intersecting forms of oppression that many women face. While promoting individual empowerment, it may neglect the systemic barriers related to race, class, sexuality, and other identities that compound gender inequality. For instance, women of color, low-income women, and LGBTQ+ individuals may experience unique challenges that are not adequately addressed by neoliberal feminist strategies focused on professional success. This oversight can perpetuate exclusion and reinforce existing power hierarchies within feminist movements.

In conclusion, the critical perspectives on neoliberal feminism highlight the limitations and contradictions inherent in aligning feminist goals with neoliberal values. While neoliberal feminism has succeeded in making feminist discourse more mainstream and accessible, it also risks depoliticizing and commodifying feminist ideals, thereby undermining the transformative potential of the feminist movement. Addressing these critiques requires a renewed focus on collective action, systemic change, and the inclusion of diverse voices and experiences in feminist discourse.

6. Conclusion

In summarizing the key points discussed, it becomes evident that neoliberal feminism, while making feminist

discourse more mainstream and accessible, also brings significant limitations. Neoliberal feminism's emphasis on individual empowerment and personal success has helped normalize feminist ideas and integrate them into broader societal values. This integration has encouraged more women to identify with feminist principles and pursue their professional goals. However, the drawbacks are substantial. The focus on individualism and market-based solutions often ignores the systemic and structural barriers many women face. By framing empowerment primarily through personal achievement, neoliberal feminism inadvertently blames women for their own disadvantages and overlooks the broader socio-economic contexts that perpetuate gender inequality. This perspective can marginalize women who do not fit the mold of the ideal neoliberal feminist subject—those who are economically disadvantaged, racially marginalized, or otherwise excluded from mainstream narratives of success.

Neoliberal feminism's tendency to depoliticize feminist messages and commodify feminist ideals dilutes the transformative potential of feminist movements. By turning feminist symbols and slogans into marketable products, the radical roots of feminism are often stripped away, making it less effective in challenging entrenched power structures and advocating for systemic change. This commodification can lead to a superficial engagement with feminist issues, where the focus is on surface-level empowerment rather than addressing deeper, more complex forms of oppression.

Looking to the future of feminism within a neoliberal context, there are both opportunities and challenges. The trajectory of feminism will likely continue to be influenced by neoliberal values, as these principles remain dominant in global economic and political frameworks. However, this influence presents significant challenges. Neoliberal feminism's focus on individual empowerment may continue to overshadow the importance of collective action and systemic change. As economic inequality widens and social justice movements gain traction, there may be increasing tension between neoliberal feminist approaches and more radical or intersectional feminist perspectives.

Potential pathways for reclaiming feminist discourse from neoliberalism involve re-centering the movement on collective action and intersectionality. One approach is to integrate feminist activism with broader social justice movements that address economic inequality, labor rights, and anti-discrimination efforts. This could involve supporting policies such as universal healthcare, affordable childcare, paid family leave, and a living wage, which would benefit a wide range of women and reduce economic vulnerability. Additionally, fostering a culture of solidarity and collective action within feminist movements can help address the root causes of gender inequality and create more sustainable and inclusive forms of empowerment.

Another strategy is to emphasize the importance of intersectionality in feminist discourse. Recognizing and addressing the intersecting forms of oppression that many women face can help create a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to gender equality. This involves advocating for policies and practices that consider multiple dimensions of identity, such as race, class, sexuality, and disability, and how these intersect to shape women's experiences. By focusing on the diverse and interconnected realities of women's lives, the feminist movement can develop more effective strategies for achieving genuine gender equality.

Resisting the commodification of feminist ideals requires a critical examination of how feminist messages are used in the market. This involves challenging the ways in which corporations and media co-opt feminist rhetoric for profit and advocating for more substantive commitments to gender equality. Feminist organizations and activists can work to hold companies accountable for their use of feminist imagery and language, pushing for genuine efforts to support women's rights and empowerment rather than superficial branding exercises.

In conclusion, the critical perspectives on neoliberal feminism highlight its limitations in achieving genuine gender equality. While neoliberal feminism has succeeded in making feminist discourse more mainstream and accessible, it also risks depoliticizing and commodifying feminist ideals, thereby undermining the transformative potential of the feminist movement. Addressing these critiques requires a renewed focus on collective action, systemic change, and the inclusion of diverse voices and experiences in feminist discourse. By adopting a more inclusive and intersectional approach, and by resisting the commodification of feminist messages, the feminist movement can better navigate the challenges of a neoliberal context and work towards achieving true gender equality.

References

- Ahmed, S., (2012). *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press.
- Crenshaw, K., (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.
- Dworkin, A., (2000). *Scapegoat: The Jews, Israel, and Women's Liberation*. Free Press.
- Eisenstein, H., (2009). *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women's Labor and Ideas to Exploit the*

World. Paradigm Publishers.

Fraser, N., (2013). *Fortunes of feminism: From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*. Verso Books.

Rottenberg, C., (2014). The rise of neoliberal feminism. *Cultural Studies*, 29(6), 1015-1033.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2013.857361>

Rottenberg, C., (2018). How neoliberalism colonised feminism – and what you can do about it. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from
<https://www.theconversation.com/how-neoliberalism-colonised-feminism-and-what-you-can-do-about-it-94856>

Sandberg, S., (2013). *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. Knopf.

Slaughter, A. M., (2012). Why women still can't have it all. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).