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Title: Globalizing 'Girl Power': Corporate Social Responsibility and Transnational Business Initiatives for Gender Equality

Abstract: The recent emergence of 'transnational business feminism' (Roberts, 2014) accompanied by numerous 'transnational business initiatives for the governance of gender' (Prügl and True, 2014) constitutes a significant area of debate in the feminist political economy literature. In this paper I focus on the confluence of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) agenda with the visibility of gender issues in development and the resultant corporate agenda for the promotion of women and girls' empowerment. The paper draws on two gender-focused World Bank collaborations with private sector actors: the Global Private Sector Leaders Forum and the Girl Effect campaign. The paper argues that the dominant model of corporate citizenship inscribed within the discourse of transnational business initiatives is framed in terms of capitalizing on the potential power of girls and women, achieving an easy convergence between gender equality and corporate profit. I suggest that the construction of an unproblematic synergy between these goals serves to moralise corporate-led development interventions and therefore does not challenge corporate power in the development process, but instead allows corporations to subscribe to voluntary, non-binding codes and cultivate a socially conscious brand image.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, gender equality, women's empowerment, World Bank, Nike

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Introduction

'Every global company should invest in the girl effect. Economists have demonstrated that it is the best possible return on investment'

- Nike CEO Mark Parker (World Bank, 2009b)

Over the past decade, growing concern by business to develop a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme has converged with the emergence of women and girls as the public 'faces' of international development. As a result, numerous 'transnational business initiatives' (TBIs) for empowerment and gender equality have appeared; TBIs join large corporations, international development institutions, and NGO groups together in a variety of forms including hybrid governance networks, transnational networks, business partnerships, transnational advocacy and knowledge networks (Prügl and True, 2014, pp. 5-6). Recent TBIs include the Nike Foundation's partnerships with the UK Department for International Development and World Bank, the UN Women partnership with Coca Cola, the United Nations Foundation's partnership with Exxon Mobile, USAID and the Ford Foundation, the UN Global Compact, and a variety of partnerships between corporations and non-profits for empowerment including Goldman Sachs, Intel and Hindustan Unilever, among others. The broad consensus that has formed around such partnerships among elite policy-makers in powerful institutions is characterised by the dominant 'Smart Economics' and 'Business Case' for gender equality policy discourses. This paper seeks to critically engage with the emergence of transnational business initiatives for gender equality and women's empowerment through a feminist political economy analysis of corporate social responsibility.¹

In a recent and growing body of literature, feminist political economists have responded to the emergence of a corporate-led development agenda in a few ways. First, reflecting the ever-present concern with co-optation appropriation, a substantial group has asked about the extent to which this agenda is a feminist one: corporatized gender equality discourses have been alternately conceptualized in terms of 'post-feminist' politics, 'market' feminism, 'transnational business' feminism, and 'neoliberal' feminism (see Prügl, 2014; Calkin, 2015b). Second, others have approached the TBI question through the lens of global governance, exploring the

emergent relationships between national governments, supra-national institutions, and corporations in which power relations are rapidly shifting to entrench and legitimise corporate power in the development process (Bexell, 2012; Roberts and Soederberg, 2012; Prügl and True, 2014; Roberts, 2014).

Extending this literature, I suggest that the feminist political economy analysis has not yet satisfactorily engaged with a range of critical IPE and sociological approaches to Corporate Social Responsibility. Contributions to this field reject the notion of corporate citizenship or the potential for a corporate-led emergence of a new ethical capitalism, but instead they develop a conceptualization of CSR as a 'mechanism to minimise resistance' while maintaining profitability, and an attempt to reconcile contradictions inherent in late capitalism (Raman, 2010, p.3; see also Dauvergne and Lebaron, 2014; Soederberg 2007; Banerjee, 2008). The central argument of this article is therefore that TBIs for gender equality and empowerment embody the problematic effects of the Corporate Social Responsibility agenda, insofar as they aim to deflect regulation, appropriate criticism, and capitalize on resistance to corporate practices. This is contingent, however, on the ability of the discourse to reimagine the corporation as a moral agent whose growth and profit contributes to both economic and social outcomes, in this case gender equality, neoliberal globalization, and corporate expansion. To this end, I demonstrate that the moralization of the 'Business Case' for gender equality stems from the supposed 'discovery' of girls and women as untapped resources for economic growth and the resulting policy outcomes which are closely tied to the advancement of a neoliberal economic policy agenda characterised by market fundamentalism, deregulation, and corporate-led development.

I develop these arguments at the level of publications, policy statements, publicity materials (including videos), and press releases produced by the TBIs under study in order to examine the ways they discursively construct and legitimise transnational business partnerships in the development process. This analysis does not address the impact of the specific CSR initiatives in the communities in which they operate but instead, noting the increasingly public role played by TBIs, provides analysis of their discursive context and claims. Methodologically, this paper draws on Critical Frame Analysis for the study of gender in policy institutions, asking questions about

how certain problems are framed, which issues are ignored, and how particular representations grant authority to an actor or policy direction (Elias, 2013, p.154-5).²

The remainder of the article proceeds in five sections. The first section expands on the concept of Transnational Business Initiatives, providing more details about the two World Bank associated TBIs under study here: the Global Private Leaders Forum and Girl Effect campaign. The second section reviews the extant political economy literature on CSR and considers the two TBIs under study in relation to a typology of CSR. The next three sections examine particular effects of the gender-equality CSR agenda with reference to these Bank partnerships, exploring: the 'moralization' of the profit drive, the potential to deflect regulation by adopting voluntary codes, and the use of CSR to develop 'ethical' brands. I will conclude by considering the implications of these findings and mapping some areas for further research.

1. TBIs and the World Bank

The World Bank has undergone a remarkable evolution from an institution which, by its own admission, rarely engaged with gender issues two decades ago, to one that places women at the centre of its anti-poverty agenda. The Bank now aims to position itself as the preeminent expert in the field of Gender and Development (Bedford, 2009a; Griffin, 2009). As part of this new 'gender sensitive' Bank, transnational business initiatives for the governance of gender (in the form of partnerships between the World Bank and private sector actors) have emerged as an important part of its gender policy agenda since the launch of the 2007-2011 Gender Action Plan (GAP). This plan, which first set out the 'Gender Equality as Smart Economics' agenda within the Bank, sought to support gender equality and women's empowerment through increased access to economic opportunities, financial services, land rights, agricultural and other resources; it aimed to make the 'business case for gender' by facilitating partnerships with governments, multilateral institutions, civil society groups and corporations, reflecting a shift in Bank priorities and increased role for the private sector (see Bedford, 2009a; Roberts and Soederberg, 2012). Out of the GAP's commitments to gender mainstreaming in the private sector and increased economic opportunity emerged several public-private

partnerships for empowerment between the Bank and corporations. In this paper, I focus on two TBIs: the Global Private Sector Leader's Forum and the Girl Effect.

The Global Private Sector Leader's Forum

The Global Private Sector Leaders Forum (GPSLF) is a Bank initiative launched in 2008 at Davos with the goal of 'expanding economic opportunities for women worldwide.' It is a public-private partnership between the Bank and twenty-one of 'the world's leading private sector companies' including Goldman Sachs, Cisco, Boeing, Nike, Hindustan Unilever, and others (World Bank, 2009a). Forum members are envisioned as 'ambassadors' for the Gender Action Plan in the private sector (GPSLF, n.d.). Their commitments have two parts. First, the GPSLF gathers members to meet and share 'best practices and lessons learned' and present evidence to 'support the business case for increasing women's opportunity' in the private sector and to strengthen connections between gender policies in the Bank and private sector (Ehrenpreis, 2011). Secondly, the members of the GPSLF make commitments to launching initiatives within their own organisations to promote economic opportunities for women, generally as part of the corporation's Corporate Social Responsibility or corporate citizenship agenda, although sometimes as part of its core business. These commitments take various forms, from diversity and mentoring programs to increase opportunities for women within the corporate structure or the launch of initiatives for women in developing countries to increase their business skills, access to credit and entrepreneurship. For example, on the CSR side, Forum member Goldman Sachs has launched an initiative, called 10,000 Women, to assist women in developing countries in obtaining business and management education, while Forum member Boeing committed to an initiative providing mentoring and leadership training for women employed in the company (GPSLF, n.d.). The GPSLF ceased to meet as of 2011, when the 2007-2011 GAP ended, but its enduring impact is evident in the IFC's new *WINvest* (women-specific investments) initiative to 'demonstrate where and when better working conditions for women can also lead to improved business performance' (IFC, 2013).

The Girl Effect Campaign

The partnership between the World Bank and Nike Foundation is the central public-private relationship in the Bank's 'Smart Economics' agenda: the Nike Foundation helped to launch the GAP in 2007 and is a leading corporate partner in the Bank's

gender work. The Girl Effect campaign, a collaboration between the Nike Foundation and public or charitable partner institutions,³ was launched at the World Economic Forum in 2008 to raise awareness of the ‘unique potential of adolescent girls to end poverty for themselves, their families, their communities, their countries and the world’ (Girl Effect, n.d. ‘About’). Although it is an initiative of the Nike Foundation, which emerged from the Corporate Responsibility wing of Nike Inc., the Foundation often refers to the Girl Effect as a ‘movement’ rather than a campaign or CSR project; it aims to serve as a ‘catalyst to drive demand action,’ in the words of the Foundation’s Brand Creative Director (Kylander, 2011, p. 2; Kanani, 2011). It consists mainly in a website which includes glossy publicity materials and a viral video campaign of YouTube videos demonstrating the impact of the ‘Girl Effect’.⁴ It provides space to donate and purchase merchandise, though the campaign’s online presence is primarily focused on raising awareness and encouraging individuals to use their social networks to raise awareness and advocate for girls; it does this in part by producing blog posts and brochures that reference World Bank reports and initiatives. The policy influence of this campaign has been significant, as the Girl Effect has since been a focus of the World Economic Forum and helped to spark the 2010 launch of the Girl Hub, a partnership between the Nike Foundation and the UK’s Department for International Development (see Elias, 2013; Roberts, 2014).

TBIs and the World Bank: Case Selection

These case studies were chosen for two main reasons: first, the World Bank is among the most powerful and influential producers of ‘development knowledge’ in the area of gender, so its gender-focused TBIs have particular significance. Since the mid-1990s, girls and women have been visually and rhetorically central to the Bank’s development discourses, as evidenced by the focus of its 2012 World Development Report, gender-focused corporate partnerships, and emerging gender focus in the International Financial Corporation (the Bank’s private sector arm). In short, the Bank’s gender discourse matters greatly for the extent to which it shapes the gender policy agenda across development institutions and governments (see Bedford, 2009a, 2009b; Griffin, 2009). Second, the increased influence of the private sector in the Bank’s gender agenda is reflective of a broader corporatization of development governance (see Roberts, 2014; Bexell, 2012; Prügl and True, 2014). Public-private partnerships have been common to other issue areas in development

(like public health and environmental sustainability) for many years, but they are newly emergent in the area of gender policy and now constitute a major focus of the global gender and development agenda (Bexell, 2012; Elias, 2013). The two cases under study are therefore reflective of emergent gender policy within the Bank, but speak more broadly to trends in Gender and Development.

Furthermore, although these two initiatives take different forms and the World Bank is differently positioned within each, though they are closely connected. The World Bank convened the Global Private Sector Leaders Forum, selecting members and convening the forums in which members share best practices; Nike Inc. is a prominent member of the Forum. The Nike Foundation, the CSR wing of Nike Inc., has launched the Girl Effect campaign alongside the World Bank's Adolescent Girl Initiative (AGI), and the two reflect many of the same funders, goals, and discourses, although the two take different forms and target different audiences; the AGI produces reports for policy makers and development donors, while the Girl Effect is a highly public 'viral' awareness-raising campaign.⁵ Similarly, the publications of these programs frequently cross-reference each other and reproduce research findings in different contexts. For instance, data from the pilot programs of the Adolescent Girl Initiative is reported in the World Development Report 2012, which is then reproduced in promotional material for the Girl Effect. The Girl Effect website publishes blog posts reporting World Bank findings and commenting on their implications, using the Bank to shore up the legitimacy of the online campaign. To the extent that these programs reference each other's findings, programs, and documents, the TBIs give the impression of various parts of a single, coherent project. For these reasons, I treat the two TBIs under study as parts of a unified 'discursive assemblage' within the broader project of transnational business feminism (Roberts, 2012; 2014).

2. Corporate Social Responsibility: What and Why?

Situating World Bank TBIs in relation to Corporate Social Responsibility requires us to first ask – what is CSR? The concept is contested, with both narrow and broader definitions. CSR broadly involves commitments to promoting sustainable development and social and/ or environmental protection in corporate operations and

in the communities in which they are located; despite the diversity of precise definitions, the common theme of its 'voluntary and discretionary nature' runs through most understandings of CSR (Banerjee, 2008, p. 60) Some prominent IPE analyses of CSR employ a limited definition which draws a strict line between CSR, which involves 'the integration of environmental and social considerations into core business strategies' and corporate philanthropy efforts (Jenkins, 2005, p. 540). However, in recent years, understanding of 'legitimate CSR activity' has undergone a shift, expanding the circle for those represented as beneficiaries, and changing ideas about the kinds of benefits they receive (Ponte et. al., 2009, 302; see also Richey and Ponte, 2008). Following Ponte et. al. (2009) I understand CSR in broad terms as involving a range of activities within the corporation, its supply chain, its environmental impact, its cause-related marketing, and corporate philanthropy efforts. CSR activities take multiple forms and are configured across two axes: proximity and engagement.

[Table 1. Typology of CSR; Adapted from Ponte et. al., 2009, pp. 302-4]

<p>Proximate vs. Distant:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the CSR activity take place in the corporation itself and with regard to the direct impact of its activities? • Or, does the CSR activity take place further along the supply chain or with distant beneficiaries? <p>Engaged vs. Disengaged:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the CSR activity have a direct impact on company operations, employees, and suppliers? • Or, does the CSR activity relate more to cause-related marketing and corporate philanthropy efforts outside of the business?

The two World Bank TBIs under study fit differently within this framework: The Girl Effect, with its focus on corporate philanthropic and awareness-raising efforts to benefit girls across the global South, represents distant and disengaged CSR by the Nike Foundation. The GPSLF, however, is more complicated because its members have committed to a range of initiatives that include many different forms of CSR. While some members have made commitments to improving the diversity of their boardrooms through mentoring and training for women within their corporate management structure (proximate and engaged CSR), most others have committed

to initiatives which are more related to corporate philanthropy efforts (distant, disengaged). Others, like Hindustan Unilever and Tupperware, employ direct sales strategies that employ small-scale female entrepreneurs to sell their products (proximate and distant, engaged). Notably, their commitments do not involve codes of conduct for suppliers, reforms to workers rights, or improvements to wages and working conditions. The expanded definition (and typology) provided by Ponte et. al. is analytically significant because it highlights the overlap (and blurry distinctions) between Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, corporate philanthropy, and cause-related marketing that the GPSLF and Girl Effect embody.

Extant analysis of CSR suggests that it can have beneficial impacts, albeit limited to specific issue areas: Utting (2007) argues that CSR can contribute to social and environmental protection, although empowerment and redistribution remain marginal to its goals (see also Utting 2005; Blowfield 2007). These limitations reflect CSR's origins as a business, rather than development tool: in CSR's function as a public relations tool, it serves to 'deflect criticism, engage critics and potentially capitalize on emerging business opportunities associated with doing, and being seen to do, good' (Newell and Frynas, 2007, 670). In this sense, the limitations of CSR are in-built because the profit motive persists as the *raison d'être* of the corporation; CSR merely represents another mode of profit-seeking. While some critics of CSR argue, following Milton Friedman, that the corporation exists only to generate revenue for its shareholders and can best benefit society in this way, advocates of CSR employ a narrative of 'double bottom line' of profit and social impact. Although the 'Business Case' for CSR is not empirically sound, it continues to be an important legitimizing mechanism (Blowfield, 2007, p. 690). This is especially true with regard to the 'gendering' of CSR, where the 'Business Case' for gender equality is powerful and politically salient discourse that has produced an increase in corporate power in the development process, and allowed corporations to position themselves as special sources of authority on gender and development.

3. Moralizing the profit drive: The 'business case' for gender equality

TBIs for gender equality work to moralize corporate-led development and corporate citizenship interventions through the construction of a synergistic 'win-win' narrative

of gender equality as economic growth. Their success is contingent on the development of a coherent and narrowly circumscribed narrative of women's empowerment as wholly compatible with, and indeed necessary for, the expansion and continued profitability of the corporation. The dominant model of corporate citizenship inscribed within TBI discourse is framed in terms of the potential 'double bottom line', harnessing the market power of girls and women to deliver dual returns (Roy, 2010; Roberts, 2014). The 'Gender Equality as Smart Economics' agenda is reflective of the discursive power and rhetorical appeal of this narrative, and its rapid institutional uptake further evidences its salience for development institutions and corporations (see O'Brien et. al., 2000; Bergeron, 2003).

Critical IPE sheds light on this process: Ronen Shamir (2008, 2010) argues that the very notion of 'corporate conscience' works to moralize the corporation, with two main implications. First, the ascription of the status of moral agent to a corporation further embeds the notion that corporations respond to norms, rather than regulations, and can therefore be counted upon to integrate social values into business practices out of enlightened self interest. Second, the moralization of the corporation provides a justification for the drive to profitability: when the pursuit of social aims can be construed in terms of a synergistic 'Business Case' which benefits all parties, then the pursuit of profit comes to affirm 'the moral side of business' (Shamir, 2010, p. 536). Within the TBIs for empowerment under study here, this moralizing process is evident in the GPSLF's construction of its membership as the enlightened leaders expanding the power of corporate conscience by inspiring other private sector actors; the Girl Effect ascribes moral agency to business interventions in development by way of narratives of untapped global girl power and the 'double bottom line' of profit and empowerment.

The Global Private Sector Leaders Forum sees itself as speeding up implementation of the Bank's Gender Action Plan by demonstrating the value of gender equality to the corporate world; it does so by promoting the profitable outcomes of action on gender equality and by depicting its members as socially responsible but savvy business leaders. An influential white paper⁶ produced by McKinsey & Co. in association with Bank staff and for the GPSLF, claims that too few companies recognise the potential of women's empowerment to 'spur economic growth or

contribute to their companies' success' (McKinsey & Co., 2010, p. 10). The power of girls and women is framed as 'one of the most powerful development multipliers' (World Bank, 2011a), and therefore an advisable business strategy: 'Unlocking the economic potential of half the world's population is nothing short of sound strategy' (McKinsey & Co., 2010, p. 31).

The GPSLF further promotes the 'Smart Economics' of gender equality by highlighting initiatives carried out by forum members. Hindustan Unilever developed a 'win-win partnership with rural women' using a direct sales model of hygiene products (GPSLF, n.d.). For Hindustan Unilever, the case study explains, helping to empower rural women is 'more important than sales alone' because the health of the business is 'inextricably linked' to the health of society (Neath and Varma, 2008). Companies like this who recognise and capitalize on women's potential are rare, however, GPSLF material asserts; given the enormous potential for profit from empowerment initiatives and its mission to promote private sector action on gender equality in business, the GPSLF members are represented as a vanguard in this movement. The GPSLF describes its members as 'enlightened' (World Bank, 2011a); they are 'recognized leaders and role models' who gain advantages from their 'first mover' position (Ellis, 2010); they engage in ambitious and innovative practices that are 'not for the faint-hearted or short-sighted' (Neath and Varma, 2008, p. 15). Furthermore, they inspire others:

Forum members are exploring new ideas and partnerships that challenge traditional paradigms. Leading by example, their work can serve as an inspiration for all (GPSLF, n.d.)

The actions of the corporate vanguard are both morally sound and economically wise, these discourses assert, because of vulnerability of the adolescent girls. The Girl Effect campaign echoes the language of untapped potential and economic power, through a focus on the precarious position of adolescent girls who can either be empowered to contribute to development, or remain disempowered. Adolescent girls, it asserts, are the 'world's greatest untapped resource' with the power to 'uplift entire economies' (Girl Effect, n.d. 'Smarter Economics'). The focus of its message is not explicitly targeted at corporations and as such is less concerned with promoting a

synergy between girls' empowerment and corporate growth, but instead focuses on the idea of the 'multiplier effect' of girl power, which asserts that 600 million adolescent girls have 'unique potential' to 'end poverty for themselves and the world' (Girl Effect, n.d. 'The Girl Effect'). The Girl Effect publications several times employ the phrase 'from burden to breadwinner' to describe the empowering journey of girls where they are transformed from inactivity to economic empowerment: 'Invest early so girls save money, build economic assets and move from burdens to breadwinners' (Girl Effect, n.d. 'Smart Economics'). Its publicity materials develop a narrative of girls as anti-poverty solutions, who can bring about economic growth and eradicate global poverty absent structural changes, evidenced by the message of the 'Girl Effect' video clip:

The world is a mess. Poverty. AIDS. Hunger. War. So what else is new?
So what if there was unexpected solution? That could turn in this sinking
ship around? Would you even know it if you saw it? It's not the internet.
It's not science. It's not the government. It's not money. It's (dramatic
pause) a girl (Girl Effect, 2008)

I suggest that these discourses of unproblematic synergy between gender equality and economic growth serve to moralize the actions of corporations engaged in CSR initiatives in the context of TBIs for gender equality. The Gender Equality as Smart Economics agenda, of which both the above examples are a part, ascribes moral authority and legitimacy to actors involved in the pursuit of growth because it conflates growth with a variety of social outcomes. Insofar as it appeals to corporations' social responsibility obligations, it does so on purely instrumental grounds through repeated emphasis on the 'Business Case' and the confluence of gender equality and profit agendas. The moralization of corporate action does not occur through the explicit attribution of moral agency to the corporation, although this is an occasional feature of the discourse, but more subtly through the repeated suggestion that gender equality, economic growth, and corporate profit are all related and mutually reinforcing goals. While explicitly subordinating moral considerations to market ones – gender equality is discovered *via recognition of its profitability* – this narrative also works to conflate moral duties and market rationality: 'doing good is

good for business' and the responsible corporation therefore asserts moral authority (Shamir, 2008, p. 13).

The synergistic 'win-win' narratives of TBIs are underpinned by some significant exclusions and silences. Most significantly, they occlude discussion of incompatibilities between growth and gender equality, instead relying on a modernization framework that imagines development as a smooth and even transition to more equal social structures (Elson, 2012). There is, of course, no such easy linkage between growth and gender equality, nor can globalization be unproblematically associated with transformation of gender relations. Moreover, it ignores the 'fundamental contradiction' between attempts to craft gender sensitive CSR policies and the 'nature of global competition' in which these companies pursue competitiveness through the exploitation and cheapening of female labour (Pearson, 2007, pp. 738-9; see also Elias, 2007).

4. Capitalizing on Crisis: Regulation and 'Knowledge Sharing'

While CSR represents, to some extent, a propagandist discourse that deflects attention from certain corporate practices onto philanthropic efforts, the political economy critique of CSR also associates it with capitalism in crisis, working as a mechanism through which corporations can seek 'new sources of legitimacy and value' outside of their traditional business realm (Fleming and Jones, 2013, p. 89). Drawing on this claim, I suggest that the corporate social responsibility agenda in TBIs is not merely a response to criticism or an exercise in public relations but an active series of policies that frame corporate action in such a way that legitimates its practices and justifies their expansion, positioning women as an 'untapped' group of customers, employees, and entrepreneurs.

The discourse of TBIs for empowerment works to construct the corporation as a moral agent in pursuit of enlightened self interest, thus contingent on the claim that empowerment is profitable and will be pursued by savvy corporate entities in pursuit of profit. The form of partnership institutionalised in TBIs is therefore frequently characterised by voluntary codes of conduct, permitting corporations to self-regulate and self-audit while lending credence to the notion that market rationality and

market-based interventions are more efficient than regulation (Soederberg, 2007; Kilgour, 2007). This constitutes a shift in the way that authority is deployed, to the extent that laws and regulations are partially replaced by guidelines, principles, and codes of conduct; law becomes ‘a shared problem-solving process coded by notions such as “multi-party cooperation”, “constructive dialogue”, “multi-stakeholder consultation”, “task sharing” and “democratic participation” rather than an ordering activity’ (Shamir, 2008, p. 7).

The marketization of governance authority is particularly evident in the Global Private Sector Leaders Forum, whose members have made commitments to ‘create opportunities for women’ as part of their ‘core business, corporate social responsibility agendas or diversity and inclusion initiatives’ (World Bank, 2011a). The GPSLF members act as ‘ambassadors’ for the Bank’s Gender Action Plan and provide ‘research and project-based evidence to support the business case for increasing women’s opportunity in the private sector’ (World Bank, 2011a). Because members do not commit to any core principles, key initiatives, or codes of conduct, their involvement is limited to launching their own initiatives and sharing ‘best practices and lessons learned’ (GPSLF, n.d.). The GPSLF is thus characteristic of corporate citizenship practices, as it is a voluntary initiative that serves to raise the profile of corporations and legitimate their position as ‘socially responsible’ actors without subjecting themselves to regulation, audit, or legislation; in doing so, they are able to deflect questions about *how* profit is made (Charkiewicz, 2005). Conversely, it strengthens the notion that regulation would stifle the socially responsible activity of corporations by positioning GPSLF members as innovators and inspired leaders:

The peer-to-peer exchange involved from a knowledge sharing exercise to a cross-industry and geographic pollinating incubator and is resulting in some innovative collaboration that will help drive women’s economic empowerment (World Bank, 2011b).

The Forum’s discursive position as a place for knowledge-sharing is important because it demonstrates the belief that corporations are best placed to develop policy solutions for women’s empowerment, which will involve little change to practices but rather ‘add on’ programmes and new CSR initiatives; it is further

instructive, however, in its enclosures and silences. Binding regulatory codes, mandatory changes to labour practices, or legislation to mandate supply chain standards are notable by their exclusion. Instead, the language of the GPSLF and its CSR initiatives employs the language of corporate innovation, knowledge-sharing by leaders in the private sector and best practice to frame corporate interactions while occluding discussion of regulation, legislation to mandate specific practices, or concrete enforcement mechanisms. In short, it relies on a narrowly circumscribed notion of corporate expertise that rests on the notion that regulation can only serve to hamper corporate creativity and social initiative (Elias, 2013). This is not a coincidence but a product of the discursive turn in CSR literature where corporate power and knowledge is continually reinforced as the most (and indeed only) effective agent of change. It reflects the notion that a significant governance gap exists in development which can best (or perhaps only) be closed by corporate citizenship and the 'natural, inevitable, and rational' power of corporate citizens (Roberts and Soederberg, 2012, p. 951).

5. Marketing Empowerment: CSR and Brand Reputation

Transnational business initiatives for empowerment present an opportunity for corporations to develop or change the nature of their 'brand' and tap into new consumer groups. CSR is widely recognised as a tool for improving corporate branding and attracting customers to what they perceive as ethical products; brand appropriation provides a mechanism for gaining 'added value' from social movements that oppose dominant corporate practices (Richey and Ponte, 2008; Ponte et. al., 2009; Dauvergne and Lebaron, 2014). Gender equality and women's empowerment is a popular development issue and can thus be very easily sold as part of a brand identity. In its white paper on *the Business of Empowering Women*, GPSLF member McKinsey & Company argues that 'investing in making life better for women in developing countries can be an effective way to enhance a company's reputation and brand' (McKinsey & Co., 2010, p.14). This echoes the discussion of brand reputation featured in the Bank's World Development Report 2012 which similarly asserts that gender equality is a 'desirable trait that customers and investors look for' and encourages corporations to see CSR as an opportunity to differentiate

their product and 'capture the loyalty of women's growing market power' (World Bank, 2011c, p. 36).

The Nike Foundation's work with the Girl Effect campaign plays an important role in branding Nike Inc. products, constructing a convergence between its CSR work in women-focused projects and efforts to attract female consumers:

In [Nike Inc. and the Nike Foundation], a realization took hold several years ago that women were being underserved and underrated—whether as consumers of sports apparel or as people who could help break the cycle of poverty in poor nations. A new kind of thinking has made women more central to Nike's strategy on both fronts (GPSLF, n.d.)

Nike calls upon the idea of a global community of women who are Nike customers, business owners, athletes, and engines of economic development, shoring up its brand image with reference to a synergistic discourse of empowerment and market expansion. Charitable initiatives therefore serve multiple functions: engaging consumers concerned with 'ethical' brands, expanding into new markets of women consumers, and pursuing a profitable growth strategy.

Simultaneously, the Girl Effect campaign serves to deflect attention from other features of the company's supply chain. Given the history of labour practices used by Nike Inc. and the continued accusations made against the corporation of use of child labour, worker abuse and other forms of unfree labour, the Girl Effect campaign also functions as a diversionary tactic which aims to rehabilitate the image of Nike Inc. through the work of its philanthropic Foundation.⁷ Moreover, the effort to re-brand Nike as a company dedicated to the economic empowerment of girls and young women is troubling, given the company's history of subcontracting to firms which employ child labour. This resonance is a notable silence in the Girl Effect discourse, however, as the mode of empowerment presented in the Girl Effect narrative takes place through community-based entrepreneurship, far removed from the factories where Nike products are manufactured (see Calkin, 2015a).

The Girl Effect campaign positions itself outside of Nike Inc., as an initiative that aims to draw on the corporate culture, funds, and resources of Nike Inc. in order to promote a charitable initiative that supposedly stand 'outside of the company's commercial interests' (Kylander, 2011, p. 2). The foundation aims, it explains, to leverage its resources in order to create attention and demands behind gender equality issues, in contrast to other fundraising and corporate foundation brands who are only 'interested in their corporate brand image' (Ibid.). There are, however, some obvious tensions in its approach that undermine this claim and significant inconsistencies that seem to reflect a confluence of Girl Effect, Nike Foundation, and Nike Inc. brands. The Nike Foundation's brand features heavily in the Girl Effect campaign and, by extension, so too does the Nike Inc. brand by virtue of their shared name; there is little to distinguish the two for a general audience. Furthermore, two out of three Girl Effect campaign videos are animations rendered entirely in Nike corporate colours: orange, black and white (see Girl Effect, 2008b; 2010; Girl Effect, n.d. 'Smarter Economics'). This colour scheme is also reflected in some of the World Bank's Adolescent Girl Initiatives materials (World Bank, 2010). The Nike Foundation represents the Girl Effect campaign as an initiative outside of its core business interests and detached from its corporate interest, but this claim is seriously undermined by the nature of its branding.

Firms are acutely aware of the 'dilemma' for growth that they face, wherein they aim to increase the global reach of their products while confronting public resistance towards big business and the forces of globalization; companies are increasingly using branding to address this dilemma, linking products to a particular cause and encouraging consumers to use 'the power of consumerism' to finance their cause (Dauvergne and Lebaron, 2014, p. 52). The adoption of voluntary codes of conduct similarly legitimises corporate social responsibility as 'good governance', even as it works to institutionalize and de-politicise anti-corporate struggles (Soederberg, 2007). This above exploration of the CSR agenda as a part of transnational public-private partnerships for empowerment demonstrates the multiple functions of CSR, simultaneously serving to deflect binding regulatory approaches by promoting voluntary mechanisms and alter brand image to capitalize on anti-corporate sentiment by appealing to consumers' desire for ethical products, thereby working to legitimise corporate authority in development governance. Given the widespread

consensus on the important of (a vague notion of) women's empowerment, and the visual and rhetorical centrality of girls and women to global governance and development agendas, firms gain advantage from being perceived as leaders in providing 'pragmatic' and 'innovative' development interventions to harness dormant girl power.

Conclusion

The field of feminist political economy has rightly dedicated significant attention to the recent proliferation of transnational business initiatives for gender equality and empowerment; given the unprecedented visibility of women and girls on the development agenda, this issue urgently calls for feminist scrutiny. In this paper, I have drawn on and extended current feminist research by examining emergent transnational business initiatives through the lens of critical CSR literature. I have suggested that not only do TBIs for gender equality work to legitimate corporate power in the development process and promote the marketization of development governance, but that they work to moralize corporate expansion by discursively linking the goal of gender equality to corporate profit. This discursive association, I have argued, is contingent on the construction of a limited conception of empowerment to harness the supposedly dormant power of girls and women. Furthermore, I have situated TBIs for empowerment within the framework of critiques of CSR, noting the multiple ways in which TBIs for empowerment enable corporations to shore up their authority in the development process, deflect regulation, improve branding, and attract new customers to capitalize on consumer desires for ethical products.

The apparent proliferation of gender-focused TBIs and the rush to 'engender' CSR raises numerous questions and opens up important research directions.⁸ Addressing concerns about accountability and corporate power in the process, we might ask how public-private partnerships are constituted, by which actors, and through which social forces. What are the mechanisms in place to ensure they are both democratic and transparent? Noting the potential for CSR to deflect criticism of corporations or regulation of their practices, future research should ask about the impact of TBIs both in terms of labour standards and supply chain practices within the firm and its

external CSR initiatives in developing countries. Do these gender-focused TBIs provide scope to transform corporate practices at multiple levels or do they shield them from scrutiny and therefore reproduce exploitative practices? Finally, connecting the rapid proliferation of TBIs and CSR initiatives focused on ‘women’s empowerment’ and ‘gender equality’, what are the implications for feminist political action? Are we witnessing the emergence of new ‘neoliberal’ or ‘corporate’ feminisms? These questions require continued, concerted attention from feminist scholarship and open up important pathways for future research.

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¹ Noting the distinction between my own feminist approach and the ‘gender sensitive’ approach employed in CSR, I do not assume that the gendering of CSR means it will necessarily evince feminist ideas or advance feminist goals. I do, however, argue that the gender-equality focus in CSR merits feminist scrutiny because of the ways that gender equality rhetoric is deployed and sold in service of the corporation.

² The data in the remainder of the article comes from a qualitative, thematic coding analysis of these texts. This analysis, carried out with the assistance of Atlas.TI research software, involved an iterative process of developing conceptual categories from the feminist political economy literature, reading and coding the report through these categories, and returning to adapt the coding framework in light of new themes that emerged from the text; this approach therefore draws on the methodology of Critical Frame Analysis. Although documentary analysis provides helpful insights into the power of a discourse and its material effects (and the Bank’s gender discourses are more powerful than most), there are limits to the use of documentary analysis to study complex institutions like the World Bank (see Bedford 2009b). While mindful I of these limits, in my analysis I employ a Critical Frame Analysis to understand the way that policy frames discursively diagnose problems, propose solutions, and therefore “set the conditions for future actions and realities” (Verloo and Lombardo 2007, 32). In particular, I use Critical Frame Analysis because it allows for attention to silences/ closures in the texts; in the context of CSR, these silences often serve to foreclose further regulatory action and deflect criticism from particular corporate practices through attention to philanthropic efforts.

³ The Girl Effect is supported by the Nike Foundation, Novo Foundation, United Nations Foundation, Coalition for Adolescent Girls (of which the Bank is a member) and UK Department for International Development.

⁴ The first video (‘The Girl Effect’) was debuted at the 2008 World Economic forum and appeared on the Girl Effect website at its launch in May 2008; the second video (‘I dare you to see I am the answer’) also appeared on the website in May 2008; the third video (‘Clock is Ticking’) was released at a Clinton Global Initiative meeting in September 2010 (Kylander, 2011, p. 2). Two of these videos (‘The Girl Effect’ and ‘Clock is Ticking’) were also aired by Oprah Winfrey on her talk show (Kylander, 2011, p. 3). As of May 2014, the three videos together had been viewed over three million times.

⁵ Given the limitations on space, this article does not provide detailed analysis of the Adolescent Girl Initiative. Nonetheless, the AGI is important because of its position between the World Bank and Nike Foundation, and its close relation to the Girl Effect campaign.

⁶ Although it is not primarily authored by Bank staff, the white paper produced by McKinsey & Company on the 'Business of Empowering Women' is a frequently cited source in GPSLF documentation, and it is promoted by McKinsey & Company as having been written with GPSLF World Bank staff and consultation from some corporate members of the GPSLF (McKinsey & Co., 2010). Bexell (2012) also cites the McKinsey report as essential documentation for the study of the GPSLF because of the frequency of its citations in GPSLF speeches and documents.

⁷ Nike Inc. has, for the past two decades, faced accusation of unfree labour practices in their factories worldwide, including accusations of exploitation of child labour in certain factories. It has since implemented stricter codes of supplier conduct, auditing processes, and a wide variety of CSR initiatives, but nonetheless continues to face accusations of unethical labour practices and worker abuse. (See Boje and Khan, 2009; Spar and Burns, 2002)

⁸ See also Prügl and True (2014, pp. 19-23), who lay out a detailed and promising research agenda for future feminist political economy study of TBIs for the governance of gender.