Self-Optimization in the Face of Patriarchy:

How Mainstream Women's Media Facilitates White Feminism

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"The end goal of white feminism is to succeed within the current structural framework—not design a new one." – *Koa Beck*

Abstract

Fourth-wave white feminism is defined by and is aligned with corporate narratives of capitalistic success with neoliberal foundations. This particular interpretation of gender inequality exempts itself from critiques of race, class, or heteronormative advantages and lacks a critical lens of systemic or structural institutions that perpetuate them. White feminism, both historically and in the fourth-wave, has relied extensively on individualized understandings of gender equality that relies on the singular, often economic, success of one woman rather than collective gains. This metabolizing of gender equality is reflected in both how feminism is communicated to the reader within mainstream women's media and what profile subjects are deemed "feminist" as well as how these subjects personally interpret misogyny, sexism, and feminism.

Introduction

Since the publication of *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*[1] by Sheryl Sandberg in 2013, traditional women's media has infused its messaging about what constitutes professional success with explicitly branded feminist packaging, erecting a robust narrative that personal career success is "feminist." This tonal shift, in which "feminism" as a word or theory was no longer taboo, paralleled a rise in a feminist-identified pop culture. Beyoncé's 2013 song "***Flawless," which included a clip of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's wide-reaching 2012 TEDxEuston talk "We Should All Be Feminists,"[2] would echo the dictionary definition for the next two years: "feminist— a person who believes in the political, social, and economic equality of the sexes." When Beyoncé stood before prominent "FEMINIST" signage at the 2014 MTV Music Video Awards[3], it drove home the possibility that you could be an internationally top-selling female vocalist and simultaneously recognize systemic gender inequality – two previously exclusive identities. As traditional women's media grappled with this trend, "feminism" had to be incorporated or addressed in a literal way, both in pop culture as well as the professional sphere (with occasionally collapsing barriers).

Despite ample criticism of *Lean In,* Sandberg claims the text as a "sort of feminist manifesto" in the book's introduction, and traditional women's media have latched onto the book's message, pushing and identifying individual productivity and capitalistic success as "feminist." In her response to *Lean In*[4] on the Feminist Wire in 2013, bell hooks famously noted:

> Sandberg's definition of feminism begins and ends with the notion that it's all about gender equality within the existing social system. From this perspective, the structures of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy need not be challenged… No matter their standpoint, anyone who advocates feminist politics needs to understand the work does not end with the fight for equality of opportunity within the existing patriarchal structure. We must understand that challenging and dismantling patriarchy is at the core of contemporary feminist struggle – this is essential and necessary if women and men are to be truly liberated from outmoded sexist thinking and actions.[4]

One of the many hallmarks of *Lean In* is that it doesn't advocate structural critique, with the exception of a passing mention of federal paid parental leave in the introduction, but rather shifts the responsibility of change to the singular female-identified reader to act on a strictly personal level. Moreover, "feminist"-branded success takes on a capitalistic form, in which individual elevation within a company, personal capital, and productivity on behalf of a company (rather than domestic labor), are deemed innately "feminist" despite their centrality to capitalism. This particular understanding of gender equality breaks considerably with foundations of multiple feminisms from the first- and second-wave, which directly identified capitalism as a key component of the oppression of women, particularly those who were not white or middle class.

Capitalism Literacy Within First- and Second-Wave Feminisms

Even the use of the word "wave" is limiting in capturing feminist discourse as the

practice has often homogenized feminism into a dominant narrative, often centering on white feminism and casting all other feminisms as reactionary.[5] Nicola Rivers observes in her book *Postfeminism[s] and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides:*

> Despite feminist 'movements' often being conceptualized as 'waves,' what distinguishes one wave from another is, like much within feminism, a contentious issue. A range of arguments is put forth for establishing the start of a feminist 'wave' varying from waves being defined by generations, with each new generation establishing a new 'wave,' or stressing differences and tensions between the aims and ideologies associated with each particular wave. However, feminism ebbs and flows within generations, with varying issues resurfacing in a cyclical fashion. Although the temptation may be to present each wave as distinct from its predecessor, in reality the arrival of a new wave does not signal the neat conclusion of what came before… Nonetheless, the 'wave' analogy persists, both in academic literature and in mainstream media discussions and journalism. Whether or not such a metaphor provides a useful concept for engaging with feminism as we sit on the crest of the apparent fourth wave of feminism, remains a pertinent question though, as much for asking what this analogy may erase, as for what it offers in terms of discussing and exploring feminist movements.[6]

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Acknowledging this limited framework, Black feminism, Black lesbian feminism, and Third World Women's Alliance within the second wave, are three of many movements that were founded on not just a centralized lens for race and class but also anti-capitalism ideals. Part of this thinking was intrinsic to Black feminism in its critique of slavery—a proponent of capitalism that was both highly profitable to the United States and, because of that profitability, was considered too valuable to give up. Capitalism, a system in which a country's industries are privately owned and subjected to private interests, prejudices, and bias in the name of profits, was just as lethal as racism or sexism because it had the capacity to incentivize racists and sexists.

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes in the introduction to her incredible oral history *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective:*

> In all of their cases and perhaps thousands of others, these women had come to revolutionary conclusions that their, and indeed all Black people's, oppression was rooted deeply in capitalism. This meant that the narrow goals of simply reaching 'equality' with men or with white people were not enough…They came to believe that Black liberation cold not actually be achieved within the confines of capitalist society.[7]

Behaving like men or obtaining what men have or achieving parity with men was (and still is) not only short-sighted, it was deemed innately oppressive and therefore not in line with Black feminism. After all, the machinations that make what men have and how they historically operate (patriarchy) possible relies on the exploitation of others.

Industrial feminists of the first-wave, white, and immigrant working-class women who worked in American garment factories and laundries, also identified profits and overt company influences as oppressive to their gender. Their extensive union organizing, both before and after the Triangle Shirtwaist fire in 1911 that killed over 100 workers due to a common workplace policy of locked doors and

stairwells to prevent the workers from taking unauthorized breaks, galvanized the rapid growth of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (known as the ILGWU), which was the largest union in the early twentieth century. Their feminist platform was centralized around workers' rights: safe conditions, shorter hours, good wages, access to education, the end of sex-based pay disparities, and more representation within labor unions. Annelise Orleck observes in *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1950*, that "Industrial feminism posited a reciprocal relationship between economic and political rights,"[8] identifying the then-hypothetical right to vote as part of a bigger strategy to have more control over the quality of their lives as working-class women. "The attraction to suffrage was simple: well-orchestrated use of the vote promised to increase women's power and independence in relation to employers, to the state, and to their often-manipulative allies."[6] Under unchecked capitalism, these women were deemed cheap labor and nothing more.

In the first-wave, white feminism set a historical template for the myriad ways in which the pursuit of "power, money, and prestige" would ultimately come at the expense of other women who were not approximate to this trinity.

At a memorial service for those killed in the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, Rose Schneiderman, a Polish immigrant who would go on to be a prominent union leader and help lobby for women's right to vote, underscored the lack of regard for human life at the hands of profiteers:

> This is not the first time girls have been burned alive in the city. Every week I must learn of the untimely death of one of my sister workers. Every year thousands of us are maimed. The life of men and women is so cheap and property is so sacred. There are so many of us for one job it matters little if 143 of us are burned to death.[9]

Divisions In What Gender Equality Looks Like

Orleck observes that, "From its inception, the working women's suffrage movement spoke in a distinctly different voice from that used by more affluent suffragists,"[10] making arguments for broader human rights versus fighting for access to what husbands and patriarchy possessed. This divergence was further manifested in how differently both groups interpreted the right to vote and later the Equal Rights Amendment:

> Professional women—who were, by and large, well educated, economically comfortable, and native-born—had a different view of sexual equality than did factory workers…professional and upper-class women sought equal access to the power, money, and prestige that their husbands and brothers wielded. Working-class women wanted to use the vote to redistribute that power to the working-class as a whole.[11]

This essential divide in envisioning and achieving gender equality has been foundational to differing and enduring strategies between lesbian, non-white, and working-class feminisms in each successive wave—and a defining characteristic of white feminist mobilization.

In the first-wave, white feminism set a historical template for the myriad ways in which the pursuit of "power, money, and prestige" would ultimately come at the expense of other women who were not approximate to this trinity:

> When militant suffragist Alice Paul formed the National Woman's Party in 1920, she set as her

major goal an Equal Rights Amendment to the federal constitution. Paul was unresponsive to working-class organizers' arguments that such an amendment might nullify legislation protecting women workers. She was equally uninterested in requests by African American feminists that the suffrage battle be continued until southern blacks—men and women—could safely and easily exercise their vote. Paul had decided that sex discrimination would be the sole focus of NWP. Attempting to deal with issues of class and race, she said, would dilute the party's strength as an advocate for gender equality. This felt like a betrayal to many black and working-class suffragists, for it left all but white women of the middle and upper classes out in the cold.[12]

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White Feminism Establishes Foundational Principals

The pursuit of "power, money, and prestige" would continue to divide white feminism from more holistic forms of organizing, as was keenly registered in the second-wave by feminist journalist and essayist Ellen Willis. In her piece "Economic Reality and the Limits of Feminism," in the June 1973 issue of *Ms.,* Willis recounts attending a meeting of a women's group of "a dozen or so upper-middle-class Midwestern housewives,"[13] evidencing her growing concern that the women's movement of the era was not at all prepared to re-envision the economic landscape, a central piece to working-class women fighting for equal rights. She explains to the group that the same logic used to relegate women to domestic work is often employed to keep women in low-paying jobs: simply that work of this nature needs to be done to sustain social functioning. She proposes a variety of different economic structures at the meeting: people who perform these duties are paid more (rather than the customary less), everyone trades off performing these tasks for a year, or a craft hybrid work structures of "onerous" tasks as well as rewarding ones. Willis recalls one woman who responds to the suggestion, "'Frankly, if Women's Liberation means sacrificing what I have, I'm not interested.'" Willis continues by analyzing this very telling response across community lines:

> The main difference between this woman and many who call themselves feminists—or even radical feminists—is that she is candid about her self-interest. More often, the same basic attitude is disguised with fancy radical rhetoric like, 'As a revolutionary I must organize around my own oppression, not other people's' and 'All women are really working class.' For several years now, feminists have been insisting that we want to revolutionize the economy, not just integrate it. The present system—so the argument goes—cannot accomplish our demands because it requires cheap female labor in the marketplace and free female labor in the home; the cost of abolishing sex-typed work, granting women equal pay, and compensating domestic work and child care at their fair value would be prohibitive. Besides, capitalism is its own specialized form of patriarchy…[14]

Here, Willis echoes hooks' salient criticisms of *Lean In* and its methodology, in that a lack of structural critique of how women's labor is economized and exploited explicitly for capitalism is a very particular, and often personalized, form of feminism with singular interests. She draws this distinction again by identifying an alternative, economically divergent feminism with different goals, writing, "Many upper-middle-class women regard feminism as a process of individual liberation and disdain 'politics'."[15]

This practice of "individual liberation" ascended in the neoliberal landscape, in which optimization of self within capitalism is coded and branded as "feminist." Catherine Rottenberg observes in her book *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism:*

> …this recuperated feminism forges a feminist subject who is not only individualized but entrepreneurial in the sense that she is oriented toward optimizing her resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative, and innovation…And the question of social justice is recast in personal, individualized terms…it not only neutralizes the radical idea of collective uprising by atomizing the revolutionary agents and transferring the site of activity from the public arena to each individual's psyche, but also conceptualizes change as an internal, solipsistic, and affective matter.[16]

… metabolizing feminism within the concept of personal gains rather than collective wins is consistent with the feminism that has been taken up by traditional women's media.

This way of metabolizing feminism within the concept of personal gains rather than collective wins is consistent with the feminism that has been taken up by traditional women's media within the last five years. From both the pop culture landscape (post-Beyoncé's VMAs and performances) and the professional sphere (post-Lean In), "feminism" and "feminist" have been coded as individualistic, valuing professional accolades and personal economic gain. This is evidenced in the myriad profiles and spotlights on female CEOs[17] in which feminism is often identified within their achievements. Their access to corporate power and ascension within a business setting[18], is aligned with and defined as "feminist"[19] within the narrative.

White Feminist Metrics in Mainstream Women's Media

White feminism's permeation of media is further evidenced in the number of traditional women's outlets that fetishize the personal calculation of time as a feminist metric. The Cut's "How I Get It Done," a recurring series that distills the personal and professional schedule of "successful women," traffics in this notion, while also framing maximum productivity, a capitalistic value, as the ultimate goal. All pieces begin with an introduction of a hyper-condensed summary of the subject's professional background, family, and relationship status before uniformly ending on "how she gets it all done" or "how she gets it done." The recurring series always begins with a dissection of her morning routine. Many, like this one focused on SoulCycle CEO Melanie Whelan, detail a cumbersome maze of satisfying both the needs of children and employers:

> **On her morning routine:**
> I have an 9-year-old son, Lachlan, and a 6-year-old daughter, Charlotte. I travel so much and work very long hours, so when I'm not traveling and I'm home, I try to take my kids to school, I think it's really important. They are my alarm clock — they're up at 6 and don't go to school until 7:30, so it's a really active time to spend with the family. My husband is usually the first one up and out the door. Before I leave with the kids I spend 10 or 15 minutes on my phone just getting prepared for the day. SoulCycle's numbers come in at 4 in the morning, so I look at those. I get them to school, talk to a couple of moms and teachers, and see what's going on.[20]

Despite whatever admitted lack of structure, science, or calculus does consume some part of their days or careers or personal lives, the true thrust of the series is to relay "hacks," "work-life-balance" tips, or various "routines" that can be replicated

to maximize productivity, like this strategy from Eva Chen, director of fashion partnerships at Instagram:

> **On her best email hack:**
> Think about the emails you send in any given day. You're probably responding to the same ten topics. For example, someone will invite me to an event and I'll be out of town, so my response is, "I'm sorry, I can't make it. I'm out of town." Instead of typing that out, I have it saved as a signature. So basically I have ten signatures saved on my email like, "Sorry I'm out of town I can't make it," "I'll be there," "CCing my admin to set up a meeting," etc. It makes a big difference.[21]

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These productivity narratives skirt feminist principals or sexist experiences but without ever identifying them as such, subtly coding these accounts as feminist without every actually having to commit to an ideology, practice, or critique. Like this experience from Whelan:

> **On being the only woman in a room:**
> From the moment I chose engineering as my college major until now, I've often been in the minority in a variety of situations. What I've always tried to do is be really clear on my point of view and have a really keen understanding of what the business needs, whether it was a problem set in an engineering classroom or a presentation in a room full of men — to have confidence and conviction underpinned with a lot of hard work to make sure that I know my information better than anybody. I'm raising a son who has a mother who's a CEO. It's just going to be very different in 20 to 30 years.[22]

In this hyper-distilled account, Whelan is captured by The Cut as essentially developing a personal way of navigating and surviving within a massive structural failure: the lack of women in her college engineering classes and through her career. That she is depicted as having an individualized strategy to succeed within systemic failure—"confidence," "conviction," and "hard work"—reveals how she ultimately processes "being the only woman in the room," and what kind of feminism (white) is being practiced to combat a failure of diversity.

That no critique of these structures or institutions is being offered echoes hooks' assessment of *Lean In* and Sandberg's theories in that this approach is "... all about gender equality within the existing social system. From this perspective, the structures of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy need not be challenged."[23]

Whelan's next observation about her son's impending reality, having had a CEO for a mother, both assumes that the reader is equating a female CEO with some version of feminism or gender parity, again, fusing female corporate presence with feminism, but also evidencing another pillar of contemporary white feminism: that by Whelan occupying this CEO role, she has already put a progressive change regarding gender equality into action. The simple declarative that "It's just going to be very different in 20 or 30 years" furthers this interpretation of politicized action and mirrors Rottenberg's observation about neoliberal feminism: "The call to internalize revolution is particularly disconcerting, since it assumes that the revolution has in some sense already taken place and therefore all women need to do is to rouse themselves by absorbing and acting on this reality."[24] Whelan's assertion

that "it's just going to be very different" both employs the narrative that feminist changes have already occurred while also preserving sexist structures by advocating for individualized rather than collective strategies to combat them.

How Feminism Is Captured Through Corporate Productivity

The proposed fix for these systemic and widely documented blockades to women's professional security, economic security, and, at times, physical safety, is to go inward .

This preservation of systems/individualized solutions binary is further employed by a variety of women's media outlets when it comes to professional content or work advice. In a 2018 piece entitled "5 Ways to Stop Hating Your Job," the introduction offers four scenarios that have traditionally inhibited women's economic stability within professional settings: " Is your job... A) boring, B) going nowhere, C) filled with awful annoying people, or D) any combination of the above? Most people have at least one of these gripes—and almost no one can just up and quit."[25] Given Cosmopolitan.com's readership (women between the ages of 18 and 49)[26], these three scenarios can broadly speak to the work women and people of other marginalized genders perform as 1) Menial[27] 2) limited in upward mobility[28] 3) rife with sexual harassers[29] or, along the same spectrum of institutional misogyny, pervasive verbal interruption, and devaluation of ideas[30].

The proposed fix for these systemic and widely documented blockades to women's professional security, economic security, and, at times, physical safety, is to go inward: "What you can do: Change the way you think about your nine-to-five," says Daniel M. Cable, author of *Alive at Work*. Switching up your mind-set will help make your time on the clock more fun and fulfilling. Here's how to retool your workplace 'tude."[31] The individualized responses to limited and compromising workplace settings are cited as "stop talking trash," "ID one good thing," "reward yourself," "grab a new task," and "fire up the fun."[32] The aim of the workplace advice is centralized in creating "higher overall job satisfaction" within the current framework rather than challenging, resisting, or envisioning a new one.

Changing one's outlook on work is presented as not only a way to change your relationship to demeaning or poor professional circumstances, but as essential to securing increased opportunities. In the 2018 Cosmopolitan.com piece "Why You Need a 'Work Wife'," the author advocates finding and facilitating a close relationship with another woman in your office in order to further dedicate your very personal resources to the company—essentially, tricking yourself into working even more by way of a sex-specific friendship:

> A female on-the-job ride-or-die—a peer to grab lunch with, go to for advice, and rely on when you're swamped—can make your 9-to-5 a whole lot happier. She can also help you ace your job (and vice versa), says Chad McBride, PhD, a communication studies professor at Creighton University who researches work spouse–type bonds. "You become more invested in your company because you're invested in this relationship."
>
> In other words, you're psyched to go to your gig because it means being with a pal. "And when you enjoy going to work and are less stressed, you end up doing better work," says Lauren McGoodwin, founder and CEO of female career-development site Career Contessa. "This could then turn into your boss recognizing your enthusiasm and giving you more cool opportunities." (A promo could be around the corner, thanks in part to your profesh friend!)[33]

"Cool opportunities," such as professional advancement, tellingly, are increased by "find[ing] a gal around your same level and with whom you've had casual, pleasant convos." The reader is then, not only encouraged to strategically erode and evaluate personal relationships with a monetary or a professional value, but to eventually manipulate this partnership into increased mutual corporate labor.

The aim is to "Feel out her potential by asking for small favors that benefit you both: 'Want to brainstorm over lunch before tomorrow's presentation?'" The eventual strategy is to "try asking for a bigger solid, like covering your shift (and, duh, offer to do the same for her). Then follow these tips to nurture that dynamic and rock the work-wife life."[34]

The incentive is to continue to perform invisible labor with complete invisibility, and mimicking a capitalistic approach to exploiting other women—a historically disposable resource—to increase individual ascension.

White Feminism Mimicking Exploitative Labor of Patriarchy

"The work-wife life" ostensibly is to find and exploit yourself within a white-collar framework, and encourage her to do the same, rather than advocate for additional employees to share the "swamped" workload, restructuring within the company, or formalized shared responsibility that is recognized within job descriptions and even increased pay or title changes. The incentive is to continue to perform invisible labor with complete invisibility, and mimicking a capitalistic approach to exploiting other women—a historically disposable resource—to increase individual ascension.

Using an example of how housework and domestic labor went unseen in traditional economic theory, Kathrine Marçal explains in *Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner?* that "Women's work is a natural resource that we don't think we need to account for. Because we assume it will always be there. It's considered invisible, indelible infrastructure."[35] Advocating for obtaining a "work-wife" as Cosmopolitan.com does preserves this "indelible infrastructure" by applying the same framework and understanding of domestic labor to a white-collar landscape and utilizing a gender-specific exploitation of unseen labor to get there. That the reader is encouraged to specifically seek out another woman, as evidenced with word choices such as "gal," "work-wife," or "a female on-the-job ride-or-die," keeps to this patriarchal practice of usurping gendered labor for capitalistic gains and, more importantly, not deeming it labor at all, but coding the dynamic with colloquial, almost intimate, language so as to obscure the transactional nature of this rapport.

Significantly, this "work-wife" piece from Cosmopolitan does not explore, address, or even mention race, class, or gender presentation between the female-identified reader and her intended "work-wife," which would invoke a more direct interrogation of the power being leveraged to execute this dynamic: white privilege, classism, or heterosexism, for example. The recommendation to "find a gal around your same level" sanitizes the individual's relationship to these structural powers and focuses the editorial solely within a limited lens of gender—a dual propensity of white feminism.

At the same time, this piece furthers a foundational premise of white feminism that unseen labor by women, even women who are your colleagues, friends, or peers is essential for you—the female-identified reader—to achieve financial autonomy and professional recognition, which are paramount tenets of white feminist success. Utilizing female labor in this way is not only consistent with patriarchy and capitalism, but also neoliberalism, in which the importance of optimizing

the self and personal resources eclipses structural responsibility. Marçal observes:

> There are no workers in neoliberal history. There are only people who invest in their human capital. Entrepreneurs whose own lives are their business projects who bear full, sole responsibility for their outcome…Neoliberalism resolves conflicts between work and capital by simply turning a person into capital—and her life into a series of investments she makes in her market value…It's a viewpoint that has made us all equal.[36]

If everyone, women and other marginalized genders included, are individualized agents or "entrepreneurs" of their own economical futures, then there are no structural obstructions...

Without "workers," there is no need for workers' rights or employee protections or other hard and fast regulations, and therefore recognition, of that labor. If everyone, women and other marginalized genders included, are individualized agents or "entrepreneurs" of their own economical futures, then there are no structural obstructions—only singular strategies and advancement for solitary success, or personal failures.

The Individual Woman as Feminist

This narrative of an individualized ascension within a feminist context or landscape is further evidenced in mainstream celebrity profiles where issues of social justice, activist tendencies, and political ideologies are captured as highly specified singular radicalism rather than as part of a broader movement. More tellingly, engagement with gender politics or activism is centered on individual resolutions, but not structural changes. In "The Life and Death of Mandy Moore" on Bustle.com, the singer is captured framing gendered societal conditioning within personal and individualized responsibility and awareness:

> "We do ourselves such a disservice. And I think, not to make a generalization, but I think it often afflicts women more than men, where we make ourselves feel so small to make other people comfortable. I think I did that for so long because I was scared of ruffling feathers. I just didn't want to cause trouble. I felt like somebody else was more important. Somebody else's choices or time, or whatever, should come before me."
>
> "Once you sort of" — she makes a whooshing sound and fans her face at once with both hands, her eyes wide open, her eyebrows being her eyebrows — "wake up and realize that that is so not the case, and you have to be your biggest advocate. No one's going to do it for you. It's a stunning realization."[37]

Moore tells the reporter that there is "a lot of weirdness wrapped up in music for me that I still have to work through" and mentions issues with self-esteem, self-confidence, and then later, seeking therapy. Still, her cultural and societal observation that women diminish their presence more than men is not positioned as a systemic or institutional ill. In fact, there is no "blame" to be assigned, either to another person, or the industry itself that is not even named:

> She doesn't want to put all the blame on one person, though, and she's ready to try again. "I'm going to drop the bags, and I'm going for it because I miss [music], because I love it, because it's a part of me. And I shouldn't let anybody else's ideas of that determine how I feel, or the choices that I make."[38]

The solution to the opaquely depicted and highly gendered practice of diminishing-of-self within her industry is self-realization and individual resilience. The imperative, in response to institutionalized sexism, is to go inward rather than outward in terms of resources, organizing, or even analysis.

This limited understanding of social justice without structural critique is also seen in the practice of singling out specific female celebrities as "feminist." In a 2017 piece on Refinary29.com called "Allison Williams Is The Feminist We Need," published in conjunction with International Women's Day, Williams is asked "what other steps are you taking to feel empowered and make a difference?" She tells the reporter that she advocates for being vigilant about getting information "from different sources" and also urges readers to "brush up on our civics." But, from there, she identifies engaging with an activism that speaks to her personally, invoking a very individualized comprehension and assessment of social justice:

The imperative, in response to institutionalized sexism, is to go inward rather than outward in terms of resources, organizing, or even analysis.

> That's what I'm focusing on — the activism work that comes from the heart, the causes that speak to me, the stories that tug at my heartstrings or seem unfair or un-American in some way. That's where the work should go. That's the magic sauce that creates change.[39]

Williams's "magic sauce" comes from engaging with issues that "tug" personally, revealing a very limited threshold for structural change, particularly given that Williams identifies herself in the same piece as "disproportionately lucky" in the context of the activism she participates in:

> To say that there has been any moment in my life when I've felt disadvantaged would be incredibly tone-deaf and self-unaware of me. I have been so fortunate. Have there been instances in which I think maybe I've been treated differently because I'm a woman? Yes — chiefly by the media. But that word — disadvantaged — is not a word that I can, in good conscience, apply to myself. I've been disproportionately lucky and privileged, and I intend to spend the rest of my life working off that credit by giving back and paying it forward.[40]

That Williams is portrayed by Refinary29 as both literate of the "privileged" platform she possesses, while also continuing to advocate for "causes that speak to me," reveals the logical cul-de-sac of white feminism. The outlet has collapsed the responsibilities of social justice and feminism into a single actress, identifying her literally as "the feminist we need" despite the fact that the scope of the issues she tends to is limited and omits the "we." You have an individual actress both resisting but, in other moments, embracing an individualized understanding of feminism.

This narrative is similarly employed in a 2019 profile from Bustle.com entitled "Rachel Brosnahan Is Standing On The Shoulders Of Giants," signaling the many women that have made her commercial and professional success possible. Yet, when identifying Brosnahan's activism, Bustle.com tethers her politics to a narrative of self-empowerment:

> The other part is much bigger than her — it's the conversations that people across the country are having "about the ways that we raise young men versus the ways that we raise young women", she says, to advocate for themselves. An outspoken proponent for causes like Time's Up and social and political activism (see: her Emmys speech about women using their

voices to vote), Brosnahan wants the young girls of today to feel as empowered as she did at their age.[41]

The reference to differences in how children within the gender binary are raised does, for a moment, allude to larger cultural and systemic shifts well outside the personal, as does her encouragement to vote. But, the reporting returns this narrative of activism to the self, capping off both declarations with a mandate to "advocate for themselves" and to "feel as empowered as she did at their age." "Lucky," a term referenced in Refinary29's piece on Williams, is once again used to neutralize any race, class, or heteronormative privileges that Brosnahan has benefited from:

> The actor's teenage self was, she tells me, lucky enough not to feel too confined by society's baked-in pressures and demands with regard to her gender. Ironically, that was because she surrounded herself with men, from her dad to her brother to the guys on her school's wrestling team. "I feel like in a way, because of a lot of the male influences in my life, I missed some of those things that keep young women taking up less space and feeling less comfortable taking up space," Brosnahan says now.[42]

That Brosnahan is depicted as having inoculated herself against sexism through "male influences" perpetuates the notion that structural misogyny can be evaded through personalized efforts and calculations but also being "lucky." Class, race, cisgenderism, and heternormativity go unanalyzed and are effectively factored out of this representation of activism and feminism.

This critical lack of context surrounding identity, effectively dulled by the shorthand of "luck," reveals a very specific feminism available to very particular kinds of women—those who find "luck": white, wealthy, able-bodied, cisgendered, straight, and with a conventional femininity that is culturally sanctioned.

How Structural Oppression Is Rendered Invisible

The deliberate articulation of "luck" in quantifying or expressing structural advantages has been analyzed in a study cited in Rachel Sherman's book *Uneasy Street: The Anxiety of Affluence*[43] in which researchers have observed, "The use of 'luck' as an explanation for success is significant because it signals an acknowledgment of the uneven distribution of opportunities at the same time as overlooking more structural explanations for maldistribution."[44] This critical lack of context surrounding identity, effectively dulled by the shorthand of "luck," reveals a very specific feminism available to very particular kinds of women—those who find "luck": white, wealthy, able-bodied, cisgendered, straight, and with a conventional femininity that is culturally sanctioned. Having gone inward to find their feminism or activism underscores the lack of structural barriers they encounter, but also, how those same identity-based barriers serve them.

In a 2017 piece from *Vogue* magazine entitled "Lena Dunham on Why Red Lipstick is Feminism's New Calling Card," Dunham observes:

> My mother's style wasn't overtly feminine. She was one of a group of women (Cindy Sherman, Sarah Charlesworth, and Marilyn Minter, to name a few) whose emerging presence in the male-dominated art world in the late seventies and early eighties signaled a tidal shift. Being a woman wasn't an easy space to occupy then—it required strength, precision, and fearlessness. Maybe that's why, growing up, I remember a lot of menswear: crisp white shirts, J. Crew khakis, desert boots, shoulder pads. But always red lipstick, reminding the powers-that-be that their femininity was an asset rather than an albatross.

> Nearly 40 years later, we find ourselves asking similar questions about our rights that we never thought we'd have to revisit.[45]

Dunham posing that these "questions about out our rights" were effectively resolved echoes Rottenberg's analysis about the internalized feminist narrative being predicated on the flawed assumption that "the revolution has in some sense already taken place" and also narrows Dunham's feminism to those women who have never had to "revisit" rights because, to some extent, they have always had them.

Conclusion

That so many mainstream women's outlets choose or try to apply feminist lenses to singular female celebrity narratives mirrors the reality of how feminism is portrayed in personal and professional life. The end goal of white feminism is to succeed within the current structural framework—not design a new one. According to Rottenberg, this particular way of viewing gender equality further strengthens the narrative that progress is an individual journey. She writes:

> "Internalizing the revolution," "lean in," and closing the "ambition gap" operate together in the text in order to call into being a subject who is compelled and encouraged to conform to the norms of the market while assuming responsibility for her own well-being. Moreover, "true equality" is predicated upon individuals moving up the professional ladder, one woman at a time.[46]

This white feminist interpretation of gender equality is further reflected in the spotlighting of individual women in corporate spaces as well as the individual distillation of their profession achievements. In 2015, *Glamour* distilled former Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes' achievements in their Woman of the Year round up by highlighting her singularity: "At only 31, she is already proving the outsize impact one fiercely determined individual can have on the lives of so many."[47]

Ultimately, white feminism does not disrupt structures or systems, but excels within them, reflecting a distinctly neoliberal landscape within popular feminist discourse. Structures, specifically in the workplace, are preserved. These individual women are succeeding in existing structures, eclipsing the need for a collective feminism or for a feminism that recognizes that most women lack the inherent advantages that helped these individuals to succeed. ✖

About the Author

Koa Beck is the former editor-in-chief of *Jezebel* and co-host of "The #MeToo Memos" on WNYC's The Takeaway. Previously, she was the executive editor of Vogue.com and the senior features editor at MarieClaire.com. For her reporting on gender, LGBTQ rights, culture, and race, she has spoken at Harvard Law School, Columbia Journalism School, The New York Times, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, among other institutions. She has also been interviewed by the BBC for her insight into American feminism. Her literary criticism and reporting have appeared in TheAtlantic.com, Out, *The New York Observer,* TheGuardian.com, Esquire.com, Vogue.com, MarieClaire.com, among others. Koa was a guest editor for the 2019 special Pride section of *The New York Times* commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, editing such prominent voices as Kate Bornstein, Gavin Grimm, Julia Serano, and Barbara Smith, among other activists.

Her book, *White Feminism: From the Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind,* was published by Simon & Schuster in January 2021.

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