



CSR as Gendered Neocoloniality in the Global South

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Abstract

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has generally been recognized as corporate pro-social behavior aimed at remediating social issues external to organizations, while political CSR has acknowledged the political nature of such activity beyond social aims. Despite the growth of this literature, there is still little attention given to gender as the starting point for a conversation on CSR, ethics, and the Global South. Deploying critical insights from feminist work in postcolonial traditions, I outline how MNCs replicate gendered neocolonialist discourses and perpetuate exploitative material dependences between Global North/South through CSR activities. Specifically, I address issues of neocolonial relations, subaltern agency, and ethics in the context of gendered global division of labor through the exemplar of Rana Plaza and its aftermath. In all, I offer new directions for CSR scholarship by attending to the intersections of gender, ethics, and responsibility as they relate to corporate actions in the Global South.

Keywords Postcolonial · Feminist · CSR · PCSR · Capitalism · Neocolonial · Rana Plaza

Introduction

Today's societies are marked by increasing levels of technological connectedness, relationships that span material and virtual borders, flows of people and capital, and cultural exchanges among and between different people (Appadurai 1996). Within this context, multinational corporations (MNCs) have been at the forefront of expanding their business operations to locations beyond their own countries and employing low-wage workers (Doh 2005). At the same time, rising media attention and public pressure have led some of these MNCs to adopt pro-social activities to mitigate negative externalities associated with their operations. Beyond gaining profits, large corporate actors are now expected to engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives in the different nations and environments in which they conduct business. CSR programs and activities have the potential to impact significantly the living and working conditions of the mostly female Global South laborers in the global economy. While there have been some positive outcomes for such workers in transition economies including increased

social and economic development through CSR initiatives (see Jamali et al. 2015), many more still live under conditions of gender inequality.

In the management and organization studies field, there is growing interest in the relationship between CSR and gender (Bear et al. 2010; Grosser 2009; Grosser and Moon 2005a, b, 2008; Karam and Jamali 2013) including research that frames gender equality as an explicit objective of CSR and evaluates the role of CSR on gender mainstreaming, societal-level gender equality, and workplace equality (Grosser and Moon 2005a, b, 2008; Grosser 2009; Larrieta-Rubín de Celis et al. 2015). At the same time, there is a small but growing discussion around gender and CSR from feminist perspectives (see Grosser 2015, 2011; Karam and Jamali 2017; Marshall 2007; McCarthy 2012, 2015, 2017; Prieto-Carrón 2008; Spence 2016). Drawing attention to the intersections of gender and CSR is timely given the growing number of supranational conventions on achieving gender equality, such as the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Beijing Action Platform, Millennium Development Goals, and various other regional commitments (see UNDP 2014). Moreover, these efforts are generally public–private partnerships and include government entities, NGOs, nonprofits, and for-profit organizations including MNCs, who now occupy a growing and important role in such endeavors through CSR programs.

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While management scholars may not have attended fully to the implications of CSR for gender equality, feminist work in political economy and development studies offers many rich insights for understanding the impact of CSR initiatives for gender equality in a global context (Prieto-Carrón 2008; Prieto-Carrón and Larner 2010). For example, feminist work focusing on gender, stakeholders, and MNCs (Prieto-Carrón 2004, 2006; Prieto and Quinteros 2004) suggests that the voices and contributions of women factory workers in Central America need to be incorporated into discussions around CSR. Others have already examined the intersections of gender and global governance—particularly with respect to the interdependencies of markets, institutions, and ideologies—in perpetuating North/South inequalities as private corporate and financial actors encroach upon public spheres (Rai 2008). On these issues, feminist scholarship has pointed out that while ethical trade initiatives do not necessarily address gender inequalities arising from poor labor standards endemic in global production systems (Barrientos and Smith 2007), some women’s rights’ groups have found new opportunities for engagement with corporations opened up by CSR initiatives (Barrientos and Evers 2014).

Moreover, feminist perspectives deployed to study corporate codes of conduct have resulted in a rich array of discussion around the value of such codes, the roles of various stakeholders in their emergence, and a critical examination of their outcomes for women laborers (see Jenkins et al. 2002; Pearson and Seyfang 2001). Others have noted that substantive change can only come about with the inclusion of women workers in the decision-making processes related to CSR (Gardener 2012; Hale and Opondo 2005) given the complexity of interests arising from networked stakeholders (Hoang and Jones 2012).

Pearson (2007) has noted CSR initiatives do not necessarily remedy gender inequalities given that they exist in “labour markets [that] are themselves gendered institutions which reflect socially constructed divisions of labour” (731). Using the deaths of women maquila workers in Mexico as her example, Pearson’s (2007) analysis sheds light on the fact that a narrow and instrumental version of CSR dominates corporate (in)action in particular circumstances, and based on this finding, she states that a much broader sense of business responsibility to society is necessary in order to further an effective and comprehensive CSR agenda.

In summary, these feminist critiques highlight many important and hitherto missing conversations with respect to gender, CSR, and governance in the context of globalized capitalism and expanding neoliberalism. However, they do not focus on the discursive elements and issues around the emergence of the object/subject of productive/reproductive relations (i.e., female factory worker) through various discourses. By way of postcolonial feminist frameworks, this paper seeks to demonstrate the relevance of gendered

neocolonial relations as essential for recognizing the gendered *and* political nature of CSR activities in the Global South. By tracing the individual and collective dimensions of knowledge claims (i.e., epistemology), voices (i.e., representation and subaltern agency), and interests (i.e., question of value appropriation and the subject) as key insights derived from postcolonial feminist lenses, I provide new perspectives for conceptualizing ethics and responsibility in CSR scholarship. To accomplish this, I start by outlining key concepts arriving out of postcolonial feminisms and deploy a feminist reading strategy to demonstrate the gendered, neocolonial dimensions of CSR activities in the Global South through the exemplar of Rana Plaza. I then move onto discuss contributions arriving out of postcolonial feminist lenses for our understanding of societal transformations, gendering ethics and responsibility, and recognizing subaltern agency as relevant for future scholarship on the intersections of business/society.

Postcolonial Feminism

In general, feminist frameworks raise concerns over gender and gender relations, equality and social justice within the context of nations, societies, and organizations. While there are a variety of feminist perspectives, each with their own ontological and epistemological assumptions around how to conceptualize, study, and implement societal and organizational changes regarding gender (Calás and Smircich 2006), here I rely on insights from postcolonial feminist perspectives to examine issues of epistemology, subaltern agency, and the gendered global division of labor.

To this end, postcolonial feminist lenses highlight issues of representation, knowledge production (epistemology), historic power relations, and the embodied or material aspects of women’s lives and labor (Parry 2004). Textual analysis within this framework generally focuses on how people from the “Third World”/Global South are often spoken for and about in Western texts that are often produced by privileged academics in a kind of academic colonialism (Loomba 1998/2007; McClintock 1992) or epistemic violence (Spivak 1988). In fact, many postcolonial feminist scholars have critiqued and cautioned about the use of feminist ideologies and practices emanating from Western, white, and middle-class positions of privilege as the way to understand the experiences of women in the Global South (Mohanty 1988, 2003a, b; Spivak 1988) and speak/for about them (Cardoso and Adelman 2016; Lugones 2010). Ironically, while their voices are marginalized from Western texts and most organizational decision-making and policy arenas (Calás and Smircich 2006), such women’s bodies and labor are overrepresented in the global marketplace in low-wage, low-status, and low-productivity work (ILO 2010; Spivak

1990, 1999). These contemporary trends with respect to women's labor in the Third World/Global South are understood in the historic context of power relations in the economic, political, and military arenas between the "West" and "Rest" (Ozkazanc-Pan 2008) or Global North and South.

In addition to these epistemological concerns, issues of subaltern agency in the context of growing neoliberal state agendas have also been reconceptualized from postcolonial feminist frameworks. In this regard, much attention has been focused on the ways in which a Western/liberal feminist vision of political engagement coupled with neoliberal ideologies has come to dominate economic development agendas in the Global South and/or transition economies (Narayan and Harding 2000; Ong 1987/2010, 2006; McEwan 2001; McClintock et al. 1997). On this point, Mohanty (1988) reveals the difficulties of adopting an insular understanding of the Third World/Global South when relations of difference across gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, and so forth provide a rich and shifting context for people's experiences under colonialism and more recently under globalized capitalism (Hernández Castillo 2010). Rather than suggesting that everyone is unique without possibility for alliances or adopting a postmodernist position of "difference," the notion available from postcolonial feminist work is that of "strategic essentialism" (Spivak 1990) whereby people forge groups and communities based on emancipatory aims while cognizant of relations of difference as a form of inclusive feminism (Cunningham 2006).

Within this mode of analysis, subaltern represents that group of people beyond the representational gaze of privileged Western (and indigenous academics) and as a concept deployed to interrogate hegemonic subject formations and imperial discourses (Spivak 1988). Extending from this notion, subaltern agency is a problematic of epistemology or knowledge on/about Third World/Global South subject *and* an engagement with the possibilities of action and change. Moreover, it is also acknowledgement that particular structural arrangements offer possibilities for resistance and change for some while recognizing that the same arrangements might be oppressive to others. Postcolonial feminist frameworks with respect to global governance call attention to the ways in which various relations of difference impact agency, empowerment, and possibilities for resistance and organizing. Consequently, a growing number of postcolonial feminist scholars are calling attention to the material and embodied aspects of neoliberal state policies beyond textual analysis or critiques of them (see McEwan 2001). Perhaps one of the best examples of postcolonial feminist theorizing that addresses issues of epistemology/representation, subaltern agency, and the gendered global capitalism is the work of Gayatri Spivak.

Spanning several decades, Spivak's work keenly expresses the complicated subject formation and possibilities for

change related to Third World/Global South Women laborers under globalized capitalism. Examining contemporary forms of colonialism under growing neoliberal economic reforms particularly in Third World contexts, Spivak (1985, 1988, 1990) contends that questions of economic value must not be understood separately from questions of subject formation. Consequently, her analyses often deploy a combination of deconstructive-Marxist-feminist tools to demonstrate how value proposition under capitalism becomes appropriated through gendered, racialized subject positions occupied most frequently by Global South women (e.g., subaltern). Within this context, MNCs play a central role in facilitating globalized capitalism through gendered circuits of labor and value chains and their actions in the Global South exemplify postcolonial feminist concerns regarding the living and working conditions of women laborers. In light of these contributions and concerns from postcolonial feminist frameworks, I provide critique and new directions for (re) thinking CSR, ethics, and responsibility under conditions of globalized capitalism in the Global South.

Postcolonial Feminist Critique of CSR

As an illustrative example of gendered neocoloniality in contemporary times, I focus on the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse and its aftermath. Based on postcolonial feminist concerns around epistemic authority, subaltern agency, and gendered labor (Mohanty 1988), I adopt a feminist reading strategy (Mills 1995) that examines critically texts on/about Rana Plaza including media accounts, videos, Web sites, and other online sources. Through this move, I derive three key points related to CSR initiatives in the context of the Global South. These include rearticulating CSR as neocoloniality in contemporary postcolonial contexts, focusing on the female factory worker in relation to subaltern agency to underscore CSR's *gendered* neocolonial aspects and finally, expanding upon feminist ethical concerns arising out of these issues.

Rana Plaza Overview

On April 24, 2013, the Rana Plaza Building in Savar, Bangladesh, collapsed killing around 1130 garment workers (see Yardley 2013; Maher 2015 for overview of the accident and aftermath). This death toll came about as 3100 garment workers labored, in a building meant to house coffee houses and retail shops, for huge international brands such as Walmart, The Children's Place, Benetton and others. In the year following the tragedy, several developments took place including the October 2013 formation of a committee composed of local and international industry members, trade unions, NGOs, and Bangladesh government under the guidance of the ILO

(see <http://www.ranaplaza-arrangement.org/>). Under the label of “the Arrangement,” this group is working together guided by a memorandum of understanding that holds them accountable for an independent and comprehensive process to compensate victims, their families, and dependents. The funds for this compensation scheme are organized under the “Rana Plaza Donors Trust Fund” and made up of donations from individuals, organizations, and any other entities interested in supporting the victims of the Rana Plaza factory collapse.

Within this context, two competing industry/corporate-led initiatives emerged to address safety lapses and came to be known as the Accord and the Alliance (see Table 1). These initiatives were established after the Rana Plaza collapse despite a previous tragedy, the 2012 Tazreen building fire and collapse in Bangladesh. After the 2012 incident, the ILO together with the Bangladesh government, worker’s organization, and employers put together an action plan titled the National Tripartite Plan of Action (NTPA) to address structural integrity and safety issues in buildings (ILO 2013). Both sets of initiatives are unified in proposing that better safety measures are the solution/appropriate response in relation to the factory collapse, but differ in relation to how safety measures are financed (who pays for them), how to ensure accountability (regulated or voluntary), and legal liability (who is responsible for safety violation and potential loss of life/damage to property).

The Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, or “the Accord,” is a multi-stakeholder industry-driven set of action and implementation plans with signatories from over 200 European, North American, Asian, and Australian industry organizations. The plan includes participation by two large global unions, IndustriALL and UNI, and eight Bangladeshi unions, which is endorsed by the U.N. Secretary General, ILO, various US political institutions, and the European Parliament among other institutions. The Accord is a legal binding contract that regulates safety inspections such that factories and buildings that do not pass are subject to fines and other censures including sanctions by cosignatory unions.

The Alliance for Bangladesh worker safety, or “the Alliance,” is an industry-led effort led by Walmart and Gap and co-signed by 27 other US and Canadian retailers. This is a voluntary effort that seeks to address safety concerns through an industry network of retailers. The Alliance has the support of the signatory retailers plus various apparel industry groups in the USA and Canada, US Bipartisan Policy Center, BRAC (Bangladesh-based international nonprofit), and the Bangladesh government. Inspections of Accord-signatory garment producers have already led to the closure of eight factories, while those from the Alliance have led to none (Jopson et al. 2013). In the context of these facts, I unpack how the existing set of “solutions” or CSR

initiatives represent and replicate historic neocolonial power relations and then move onto discuss their gendered nature.

Neocolonial Discourse and Relations

As a starting point, the Alliance is endorsed by the Bangladesh government and BRAC, a nonprofit founded by Fazla Hasan Abed, a man who was been knighted by the British Crown and won numerous international awards as a social entrepreneur. BRAC’s approach to their work is through a voluntary accountability program alongside other international NGOs and is touted as an efficient and business-like NGO whereby,

After 30 years in Bangladesh, BRAC has more or less perfected its way of doing things and is spreading its wings round the developing world. It is already the biggest NGO in Afghanistan, Tanzania and Uganda, overtaking British charities which have been in the latter countries for decades. Coming from a poor country—and a Muslim one, to boot—means it is less likely to be resented or called condescending. Its costs are lower, too: it does not buy large white SUVs or employ large white men (Economist, 2010).

Yet to uncover why government and NGO support for a set of CSR initiatives reflect neocoloniality or “to offer an account of how an explanation and narrative of reality was established as the normative one” (Spivak 1988: 76), a brief overview of colonial history and its contemporary consequences in relation to globalized capitalism is necessary.

To this end, Bangladesh, initially known as East Pakistan, emerged as an independent nation in 1971 after breaking away from West Pakistan. Pakistan emerged from the 1947 partition of Bengal and India by the colonial British. This region was responsible for exporting raw materials and primary products to the British Empire (Adnan 2014). Thus, millions of Bangladeshi people experienced economic exploitation, social castigation, and political disenfranchisement under British rule for centuries. Figures such as Fazla Hasan Abed exemplify the rise of Western educated, local elites in a postcolonial nation that are aligned with neoliberal market ideologies (Makita 2009) while simultaneously, and paradoxically, attempting to undo decades of colonial rule. These efforts at economic development *by Muslims for Muslims*, such as BRAC, aim to curb the continued influence of the British in East Asia and elsewhere. These institutional aid efforts take shape in a neocolonial context or as Hoogvelt clarifies, “the period of colonialism had prepared and firmed up those institutions necessary for the ‘historical structure’ of international capitalism in the neocolonial period” (2001: 30).

The emergent neocolonial phase is exemplified by a *class alliance* between local mercantile elites and foreign

Table 1 Comparison of the Bangladesh Accord on fire and building safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh worker safety (Walmart/Gap Plan). Adapted from http://www.laborrights.org/sites/default/files/news/Matrix%20Comparison%20of%20Accord%20and%20Walmart-Gap%20Plan_0.pdf, http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/documents/article/wcms_241219.pdf, <http://www.bangladeshworkersafety.org/about/members>, <http://www.bangladeshaccord.org/signatories/>

	Bangladesh Accord on fire and building safety	Alliance for Bangladesh worker safety (Walmart/Gap Plan)
Participation	Over 200 companies from 21 countries, including HandM, the largest buyer from Bangladesh; Inditex, the world's largest fashion retailer; US-based PVH, the world's largest shirt seller; Carrefour and Tesco, two of the world's three largest general retailers; multiple North American companies, including Abercrombie and Fitch, Sean John Apparel, and Loblaw	Ariela and Associates International LLC; Canadian Tire Corporation, Limited; Carter's Inc.; The Children's Place Retail Stores Inc.; Costco Wholesale Corporation; Fruit of the Loom, Inc.; Gap Inc.; Giant Tiger; Hudson's Bay Company; IFG Corp.; Intradeco Apparel; J.C. Penney Company Inc.; The Jones Group Inc.; Jordache Enterprises, Inc.; The Just Group; Kohl's Department Stores; L. L. Bean Inc.; M. Hiday and Company Inc.; Macy's; Nordstrom Inc.; Public Clothing Company; Sears Holdings Corporation; Target Corporation; VF Corporation; and Walmart Stores, Inc.; YM Inc
Labor-management cooperation and role for worker representatives	Developed by apparel companies and both Bangladeshi and global unions and labor rights NGOs. Jointly governed by companies and worker representatives. The Accord reflects genuine cooperation between labor and management and includes a central role for independent worker representatives in its implementation. Co-signed by 10 labor unions	A unilateral corporate initiative designed and governed by corporations with no involvement by independent worker representatives
Safety inspections	Inspections are independent. Inspection and remediation plans completed for every factory within 9 months	Inspections are not independent; brands and companies retain complete control of the inspection process (Section 6.2 of the Walmart/Gap Agreement states that the Committee of Experts on fire and building safety will "operate under the oversight of the Board of Directors and the Executive Director," thereby ensuring that the companies maintain control)
Costs	Contractual commitments by signatory companies to ensure funds are available for all necessary safety renovations and repairs, based upon need, with tripartite system of checks and balances	No commitment by corporations to provide any funding for renovations and repairs. Any help to factories to pay for repairs is via a voluntarily loan program over which the brands have complete control (Section 2.3.1 of the Walmart/Gap Agreement outlines the "Affordable Capital for Building Safety" (ACBS) program, which states that company members of the Agreement may make loan funding available to factories, "on terms and conditions to be established solely by that Member" and that "participation in ACBS is voluntary"). Participation in this loan program is not a requirement
Workers' rights	Protects workers' rights to refuse dangerous work, including the right to refuse to enter a dangerous building among protections	No mention of the right of workers to refuse dangerous work
Endorsements	UN Secretary General, International Labor Organisation, Bangladesh Government, US Senators and Representatives, European Parliament, OECD National Contact Points, and numerous organizations representing garment workers in Bangladesh	Apparel industry groups: National Retail Federation, American Apparel and Footwear Association, Retail Council of Canada, Canadian Apparel Federation. Retail Industry Leaders Association, with the support of the Bipartisan Policy Center, two former US Senators, BRAC, and the Bangladeshi government
Enforcement	Binding, legally enforceable contract. Worker representatives are signatories. Binding arbitration, backed up by the courts of the home country of the company in question, used for dispute resolution	Unenforceable by workers. Worker reports any breaches to the companies and then the companies take necessary action

capital and *extreme patterns of social inequality* in colonized nations arising from the distortion of economic structures (Hoogvelt 2001: 38, 39). As long as the economic interests of such elites are aligned with those of MNCs, they will continue supporting MNC actions and initiatives, thereby continuing colonial dependencies and relations of power. The effect of this alliance is the subordination of the local economy to the structures of developed and advanced capitalist economies and an extreme dependency on overseas markets for exports (Hoogvelt 2001).

Such actions can have paradoxical outcomes: on the one hand, workers can benefit greatly if working conditions are improved through the support of government, public and private sectors partnership as is the case in the voluntary codes put forth by MNCs. On the other hand, such support replicates and perpetuates neocolonial relations as transition economies such as Bangladesh rely heavily on jobs available through MNCs to support economic development efforts. In fact, Human Rights Watch (HRW) has acknowledged that jobs available in the ready-to-wear industry have contributed to poverty alleviation in Bangladesh given that the industry employs over 4 million mostly female workers across more than 4500 factories (2015a). At the same time, the growing use of *badli* workers or substitutes for permanent and temporary workers contributes to economic inequality and limited economic entitlements in Bangladesh (Alamgir and Cairns 2015).

To this end, the ready-to-wear garment industry accounts for over eighty percent of Bangladesh's exports, contributing to more than ten percent of the country's GDP (HRW 2015a). Between 2006 and 2016, exports from Bangladesh to the USA rose from around \$3 billion to \$6 billion (from Census.gov), consisting mostly of woven garments and knitwear (Dhakachamber.org). Bangladesh is heavily dependent on the USA to purchase its exports broadly and knitwear/garments specifically and is the second largest exporter globally behind China (HRW 2015a). Within this context, US-based Walmart wields tremendous economic and political power globally in dictating the terms of its relationship with suppliers, manufacturers, and nations in terms of costs and favorable trade agreements. Such power is replicated and perpetuated through their leadership in the Alliance as the voluntary code that is being supported by the Bangladeshi government and influential nonprofits, such as BRAC.

As CSR practices emanating from the Global North have become the face of corporate-led globalization, they replicate colonial hierarchies and relations in the Global South through the emergent relations of difference and power embedded in globally dispersed production networks. The Rana Plaza example demonstrates that despite their claims to address safety lapses, CSR initiatives can be contemporary forms of colonial relations that benefit local and global elites, Western MNCs, and developed capitalist economies. In fact,

Whelan (2012) suggests that such MNC actions should be considered new institutional forms rather than instrumental actions taken in the context of diminished states. Economically powerful Western and US MNCs dominate governance processes coupled with support from local business elites in the context of economically dependent states, giving rise to neocolonial institutional forms under globalized capitalism. These complex institutional alliances produce neocolonial relations as nation-states face the choice of losing billions in trades or adhering to labor norms and practices set forth by Western/Global North MNCs. These alliances dictate how developing nations in the Global South can participate in the global economy, and for Bangladesh (Anner and Hossain 2014), such alliances replicate their colonial-era economic position as an exporter to Western capitalist economies by way of MNCs.

For Enloe, "the corporate strategy to assuage the concerns of rights-conscious consumers without jeopardizing profits has been to devise a system of workplace monitoring conducted under contract with 'independent' accreditation monitors" (2014: 255). From a postcolonial feminist perspective, such alliances raise concerns over the role of nation-states in furthering economic development agendas that replicate or maintain structures of gender and economic oppression from a colonial past under guise of better working conditions or workers' rights. While the efforts of MNCs may be social, economic, and political in nature, they replicate relations of gendered coloniality whereby certain populations, such as female factory workers, become dependent and subjugated in poor working conditions with little agency. I expand upon how neocolonial relations of power as embodied in CSR are in fact gendered in the next section.

Gender and Subaltern Agency Under CSR

In the context of globally dispersed production networks, most factory workers that produce goods for Western and other MNCs are women in the Global South (Beneria et al. 2000, 2013; Collins 2009). Globally, young women account for up to 90% of factory workers in various transition economies including China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Mexico among other nations (Collins 2009; Ngai 2005). In the Rana Plaza case, over 80% of the garment workers were young women (Kakuchi 2013) in a country where 75% of all workers in the garment industry are women according to Nari Udduk Kendra (NUK 2014) or Center for Women's Initiatives in Bangladesh. Ngai (2016) suggests that a "dormitory labor system" has emerged whereby women (and some men) are housed on-site at manufacturing plants across Asia, allowing MNCs to control both the working and living conditions of millions of workers.

Within this context, CSR initiatives in the Global South focus on "giving" factory workers a particular set of rights

that mimic those we might see in developed nations in the West, such as safe working conditions. On this point, Spivak states, “one of the strongest functioning of unwitting neocolonialism is the production of models of identity from supposedly the history of other places where the epistemic transformation is rights talk among a certain class” (2007: 8–9). CSR then is an example of neocolonial “rights” discourse: CSR imbues the specter of rights on its gendered subaltern subjects without affording agency, thereby (re) constructing neocolonial relations in the context of globalized neoliberalism and capitalism. Factory workers are then supposedly “workers with rights” under CSR initiatives, but such rights dictate conditions under which laborers can work rather than engage in addressing the problematic of subaltern agency in the Global South vis-à-vis MNC production and profit motives. That is, missing altogether from the CSR conversation is the (female) factory worker, a subject talked *about* and *for* but seldom seen at the “negotiating” table. Thus, CSR initiatives in the Global South reflect a codification of rules and regulations intended to regulate the behaviors of their gendered subaltern subject: the female factory worker.

Vacating the gendered subaltern subject position that female factory workers occupy requires engagement with subaltern agency. This is both an epistemic and material endeavor: hegemonic notions of subjectivity ascribed to women factory workers in the context of corporate CSR initiatives are challenged, *and* both global and local economic and social structures perpetuating neocoloniality are dismantled. Yet is this possible? Despite new labor laws in Bangladesh that allow for unionization and unions, there remain significant hurdles for women garment workers in becoming union leaders, stopping physical and verbal abuse by male employers, and being fired after becoming pregnant (Aktern 2013). Essentially, progress made in Bangladeshi women’s rights in the realms of the social and political (UN Women 2013) are being challenged by the government’s support of employment arrangements and work conditions set forth by mostly Western MNCs. Thus, there is a significant absence of women’s representation and voice in labor unions as well as organizational decision-making structures.

In fact, the very programs aimed to ameliorate working conditions can lead to the silencing of women’s ability to organize themselves for better wages and work conditions based on the assumptions that male-dominated and masculinized industry leaders/corporations are already addressing such issues through CSR initiatives. As Lipschutz suggests, “Decisions must be made by those who are subjectified about what is necessary for the good and just life; that is, they must become autonomous subjects themselves rather than objects dependent on corporate munificence” (2005: 764). Enloe (2014) suggests that tragedies like Rana Plaza underscore, ironically, the

indispensable nature of women laborers in the context of masculinities that discursively position factory women as inferior to male factory owners, managers, and political actors. Third World women’s structurally inferior position as labor providers for corporations in the global economy becomes normalized through organizational discursive repertoires and sociocultural representations of women as weak and incapable (Enloe 2014). Ultimately, VCCs as they exist today do not challenge or change the occupational segregation of women in the garment industry and are only minimally effective in curbing deleterious factory conditions (Bartley and Egels-Zanden 2015). Yet simply having more women in union leadership does not address the fundamental problems arising from globalized capitalism whereby the position of the Bangladesh economy in relation to Western developed nations does not change. Ultimately, in the context of the Global South, government and local elite businesses support for CSR initiatives developed by Western MNCs can (re)produce gendered neocolonial dependencies.

The continued neocolonial relations of dependence further exacerbate and simultaneously depend on existing local patriarchies and gender relations. An engagement with subaltern agency requires reversing the rules of recognition for female factory workers and (re)inscribing a new set of economic structures and governance arrangements under globalized capitalism. On this point, Spivak states:

Full class agency (if there were such a thing) is not an ideological transformation of consciousness on the ground level, a desiring identity of the agents and their interest... It is a contestatory *replacement* as well as an *appropriation* (a *supplementation*) of something that is ‘artificial’ to begin with - ‘economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life’. (1988: 72)

In effect, CSR initiatives do not engage subaltern agency, but rather their morphology reflects a continued narrative of gendered coloniality as people and populations become subjugated to new axioms of control and subjugation by way of MNCs. As Srikantia suggests, it is imperative to hear the voices of those community members “who are being silenced through violence and exclusion from decisions affecting their community’s survival” (2016: 223). Related to this point, Spivak states, “the nature of neocolonialism was economic rather than territorial or cultural that the production of knowledge within neocolonialism seems to have a much subtler role and it’s much harder to pin down. It’s not just colonialism over again” (2007: 2–3). CSR initiatives occupy such a space in the context of neocolonialism: they are epistemic claims about the gendered subaltern produced by MNCs with support from government entities, NGOs, and local elites. The subtle nature of CSR’s benevolent claims on behalf of factory workers occludes gendered

power relations that are left intact locally and in globally dispersed production networks.

Further, there is little recognition or inclusion of victims' voices toward reassembling governance mechanisms to not only to prevent factory collapses, but to also address longstanding inequalities in regard to workers' and women's rights. Yet what possibilities for change exist under these conditions, particularly when neoliberalism guided nationalist economic development efforts continue low-wage and labor extractions from subaltern subjects with the support of supranational institutions in their gender equality efforts (UNDP 2014)? To move forward from this potential impasse, I propose new directions for rethinking CSR in the context of the Global South.

New Directions for CSR Scholarship

Here I expand on the implications of postcolonial feminist lenses for redirecting CSR scholarship in three ways. First, I focus on the ways in which societal-level transformations with respect to modes of production under globalized capitalism and neoliberalism impact how we theorize the ways in which CSR takes shape in the postcolonial Global South. Second, I examine how gender relations become constituted through these structural transformations and reproduce gendered neocolonial organizational arrangements, such as CSR, that are currently under-theorized in scholarship. Finally, I outline ways in which subaltern agency is a relevant concept for rethinking governance particularly in relation to the ways CSR becomes constituted and implemented.

Societal and Economic Transformations and CSR

Over the last half century, various nation-states have claimed their independence after years or even centuries of colonial rule. These efforts have coincided with major economic structural reforms underway globally as both developed and developing nations experience capitalist expansion and participate in globally dispersed production networks (Levy 2008). For the Global South, developing and transition economies, these reforms have taken shape with the support of supranational institutions, such as the World Bank, IMF, and UNDP, in their efforts to promote "development" via structural adjustment policies and other instruments. Yet what has been not addressed is the way in which such transformations continue to reproduce and even expand upon colonial relations of power across differences of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, caste, and so forth.

That is, the dependences created through colonial history are replicated not only through structural adjustment policies, which are societal-level transformations, but also through MNCs organizational level politically guided

pro-social actions that are undertaken with the support of supranational institutions, governments, and NGOs. Thus, it is no longer sufficient to address these changes as mere context for organizational action but to attend to the ways in which CSR functions in epistemic and material complicity with societal transformation in remaking and continuing neocolonial relations of power among and between Global North/South, nation-states, and MNCs. Such an approach is an "ethical reading strategy" derived from Spivak's questioning and critique of the gendered global division of labor through deconstruction while adopting a Marxist materialist standpoint in relation to Global South political movements and commitments (Morton 2007: 9). Postcolonial feminist lenses build on neocolonial conceptualizations of CSR by attending to gender as a relevant concept and organizing principle for societies such that disembodied notions of organizational efforts in the Global South become impossible. To this end, next I expand upon postcolonial feminist contributions in relation to theorizing CSR and gender simultaneously.

Gendering CSR

While there is admittedly a growing body of work with respect to gender and CSR as mentioned in previous sections, postcolonial feminist frameworks and ethical engagements highlight the central role of gender and gender relations in epistemic claims and material experiences of organizational efforts in the Global South beyond inscribing a "feminist ethics of care" (Machold et al. 2008). Postcolonial feminist work has a long tradition and history of attending to the gendered subaltern. In the context of the Global South, CSR can be a form of epistemic erasure whereby the histories, experiences, and organizing efforts of women become subsumed under metanarratives of "development" while offering the Global North an opportunity to engage in "ethical consumerism." As such, postcolonial feminist scholarship engages directly with the gendered "moral imperialism" (Spivak 1999) of CSR efforts in the Global South as a form of ethics—that is, a political epistemological commitment to addressing both epistemic and material forms of gendered hegemony in CSR discourses and organizational practices. Public discourse and multi-stakeholder inputs in relation to MNC actions in the Global South are not sufficient to address gender-based inequities. Rather, conversations about the role and functioning of CSR efforts must include discussion around the central role of historic and ongoing gendered neocolonial relations. These relations are fundamental to theorizing the business/society nexus. In other words, gendering is a necessary theoretical lens to conceptualize and potentially dismantle gender-based inequalities that take shape through the very discourses and practices of CSR programs in different contexts.

Expanding further on this point, postcolonial feminist thought moves us beyond deliberative democracy (Bohman 1998) as the model for understanding governance, moral legitimacy, and ethical behavior in relation to MNCs and CSR. As political epistemology guided by a relational ontology, postcolonial feminist work (re)inscribes the foundations of CSR as a relational endeavor such that responsibility and accountability become conversations about possibility—the possibility of an ethical encounter whereby axioms of neocoloniality are not repeated but rather, they are “ruptured” (Spivak 1988). The role of agency in such encounters is the final of the three contributions to conversations on CSR by way of postcolonial feminist thought.

Subaltern Agency

The notion of subaltern agency as theorized by Spivak (1988, 1990) and other postcolonial scholars (Mohanty 2003b) acknowledges the gendered and embodied “Other” as worth theorizing about and occupying a particular space/place in CSR discourse and materiality. The support and actions of various stakeholders give credibility to MNCs claims to authority or legitimacy in defining the problem and offering the solution while simultaneously affirming the erasure of subaltern agency. In the Rana Plaza case, the presenting problem is defined as safety lapses, and consequently, the solution is VCCs or voluntary codes of conduct, which are purported to be a set of workers’ rights around work conditions. The emergence of such CSR initiatives is based on “epistemic violence” (Spivak 1988), leaving little room for alternate interpretations of events, such as the nature of gendered globalized capitalism versus safety lapses as immediate explanations for the factory collapse.

As such, attending to the gendered subaltern in the Global South opens up new possibilities for rethinking ethics and agency. Through such an epistemic move, the translation of subaltern experiences and subjectivity to a form comprehensible by the Global North, MNCs, and others under the rubric of “CSR” is not only questioned by resisted analytically. That is, while CSR aims to remake the subject of MNC actions in a manner that continues to extract their labor, subaltern agency as a conceptual engagement deters this possibility and questions whether CSR is the “way in” theoretically to underscore issues related to subalternity. For example, Plankey-Videla (2012) suggests that women garment workers in Mexico have successfully organized themselves to demand better wages and working conditions by arguing that the factory and MNC need their labor to be competitive globally. These women demonstrate their value in global commodity chains by challenging the business rhetoric/threat deployed by factory managers that such women are replaceable if they strike. In effect, postcolonial feminism informs CSR by reorienting the ways in which

corporations engage with society—women laborers are no longer passive recipients of corporate decisions but have voice and power in shaping what gets constituted as CSR.

But there is more that needs to be addressed: actions taken *by women for women* may not be enough to change the structuring of gender relations with respect to productive and reproductive labor in organizations and beyond. To this end, can there be a decolonizing of CSR or a decolonial approach to conceptualizing the discursive and material components of gendered globalized capitalism through indigenous worldviews (Manning 2017; Schiwy 2007)? Such an approach would allow conceptual and empirical scope to examine the practices of women laborers in the Global South through frameworks that are locally grounded and historically contextualized. In doing so, scholars would embark upon a parallel reading of feminist de/postcolonial subjectivity alongside that subject position which would be afforded them through the concept of CSR. As such, this approach might disrupt linear histories and allow a momentary engagement with “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1990) not to reify the gendered subaltern but to offer a precarious analytic category that is vacated immediately after its conceptual deployment (see Prasad 2012). Yet what possibilities for rethinking ethics and responsibility exist beyond extant approaches? Next, I address this concern by considering current approaches to theorizing ethics and responsibility in the Global South and move beyond them through postcolonial feminist perspectives.

Toward New Conversations on Ethics and Responsibility

In attending to the Global South and transition economies more generally, one of the most prevalent approaches has been through the lens of political corporate social responsibility (PCSR), defined as, “responsible business activities that turn corporations into political actors, by engaging in public deliberations, collective decisions, and the provision of public good or the restriction of public bads” (Scherer et al. 2016: 276). In general, PCSR has been the guiding lens to understand corporate behavior as an interest-laden political activity particularly in nations that have governance gaps. In such instances, corporations act in spheres of influence generally occupied by state-like political actors (Scherer and Palazzo 2011; Scherer et al. 2009) and are deemed to be engaging in *ethical* decision-making (Palazzo and Scherer 2006; Scherer and Palazzo 2007) if they are able to gain *moral legitimacy* in the different contexts in which they operate. Derived from Habermas’s notion of deliberative democracy whereby public deliberation is imperative for political decision-making (Bohman 1998), moral legitimacy can be accomplished through communicative action

and public discourse among stakeholders. In other words, public discourse and inputs to the corporate decision-making process can be the measure of whether corporations are acting ethically and responsibly in a globalized world with rising nationalisms and fundamentalisms, increased state and government regulations and financialization, among other developments (Scherer et al. 2016).

By focusing on the now public, once private deliberation process related to corporate activities, PCSR conceptualizes the foundation for (business) ethics as rooted in the public sphere and the adoption of particular codes or standards for corporate conduct arriving out of such deliberations as corporate social *responsibility* (Rasche 2009). Yet recognition of deliberations, collective decisions, and concerns for (global) public goods under the provenance of the newest version of PCSR, namely PCSR 2.0 (Scherer et al. 2016) still do not adequately account for gender as a central organizing principle for societies despite the fact that economic development relies on women's low-waged productive labor and unpaid reproductive labor (Ferber and Nelson 2003; Power 2004). PCSR does not recognize gender as central to the ways in which social, political, and economic spheres become structured and fails to make explicit the ethical issues raised by gendered labor despite its nuanced focus on public deliberations, collective decisions, and provisioning of public goods in the realm of corporate actions. As a consequence, PCSR as a theoretical lens for understanding the intersections of business and society in the context of the Third World/Global South ignores gendered neocolonial relations taking shape under "globalized capitalism" (Calás et al. 2010) by way of neoliberal oriented state and corporate policies. Within this context, understanding how people may become subject to different social conditions, economic inequalities, and life/work experiences across intersectional relations of difference (Yuval-Davis 2007, 2011) by way of CSR programs is imperative for conversations on ethics and responsibility.

Despite these concerns, PCSR focuses on ethical behavior or ethics as an engagement with multi-stakeholder CSR initiatives as a means to social development (Calkin 2015; Hayhurst 2011; Huber and Gilbert 2015; Reinecke and Donaghey 2015) and a sustained focus on inputs to the deliberation process rather than an acknowledgement and examination of local gendered power relations as relevant to the very process of deliberation and claims of knowledge. Inasmuch as PCSR attends to the ways in which organizations may embark upon CSR efforts in contexts where governance gaps exist, the literature is silent on the ways in which CSR may continue to remake postcolonial societies in familiar gendered colonial terms. In the case of Rana Plaza, an analysis guided by PCSR approaches might focus on which of the emergent CSR initiatives, the Accord or the Alliance, can be seen as more legitimate in affording factory workers

particular working conditions and rights. Specifically, the focus would be on legitimacy garnered through the ways each CSR initiative/voluntary code is enforced: under the Accord, there are external investigators assigned to survey factories in relation to safety measures, while the Alliance gives complete oversight and control of the inspection process to the companies themselves (see Table 1). The erasure takes shape when pluralistic governance enables the rise of a normative view and paves the way for the emergence of a gendered neocolonial discourse in the form of CSR. Thus, the ethical concern under PCSR is the credibility of actors and their ability to define themselves as morally legitimate by way of the initiatives they adopt and the governance structures they espouse in the Global South.

In contrast, feminist ethics arrives out of a relational ontology whereby the focus is on the emergence of relationships, responsibility "taking" and "having," and experiences that vary across intersectional differences and historic contexts rather than gender-based norms (Borgerson 2007; Calás and Smircich 1997; Derry 2002; Robin and Babin 1997). Consequently, "acknowledging relationships—actual or imagined, lived or theoretically conceptualized—form the foundation for notions of responsibility" (Borgerson 2007: 25) is crucial to feminist ethics. In this regard, Fraser (1989) suggests Habermas fails to recognize gender as relevant for understanding the relationship between economic spheres and family under capitalism. Further to this argument, Habermas does not recognize gender as an "exchange medium" such that the gendered division of labor in society and the assumed male that is the foundation of a "public citizen" are not considered in his theory of public space and citizenship (Meehan 1995: 7). Similarly, Landes (1992) suggests that Habermas's focus on the public sphere as the arena for exchange of ideas assumes disembodied subjects engaged in "discursive reason." Consequently, there is no acknowledgment of the multiplicity of public spheres in lieu of an idealized bourgeois public sphere nor consideration of whether an assumed universal discourse can lead to (gender) equality (Landes 1992).

One of Habermas's biggest weaknesses is his inability to differentiate the status of men and women in social and political spheres—consequently, he suggests that social movements, such as feminism, are particularistic attempts at social change based on identities and social relationships rather than universal ones that move forward with goals of progress and modernity (Cohen 1992). In doing so, Habermas fails to recognize how feminist social movements can rebuild existing relations of exchange and reconstruct aspects of civil, political, and economic spheres of society through explicit focus on gender, identities, and social relationships.

Building on these notions of feminist ethics, the ethical concern arriving from postcolonial feminist frameworks is

both an epistemic contestation and a political engagement. Specifically, postcolonial feminist ethics is an engagement with locally grounded and historically contextualized gendered power relations in which women negotiate their lives and work in order to challenge epistemic claims that are made on their behalf by Western/Global North MNCs, local elites, and governments. As Mohanty states, “only by understanding the contradictions inherent in women’s location within various structures that effective political action and challenges can be devised” (1988: 74). In Bangladesh, women did not have any protections around maternity leave, labored under excessive work hours and unsafe work conditions, suffered physical, verbal and sexual abuse, and did not receive equal pay for equal work (HRW 2015b; NUK 2014). In this sense, postcolonial feminist ethics is simultaneously critique of Western/Global North interventions, feminist or otherwise, on behalf of Global South women who are deemed powerless *and* a political and epistemic engagement with locally grounded discourses and actions arriving out of differentially positioned women. Thus, while the voluntary codes/CSR initiatives may differ in the ways they are enforced and supported, they do not make any substantial changes to governance mechanisms in the Global South in order to contribute to novel relations of power among and between mostly female garment workers, MNCs, governments, NGOs, and local elites.

In addition to providing insights about the lives and experiences of women laborers in the Global South, postcolonial feminist ethics is about encounters and agency: subaltern agency and attempted recovery of the subaltern subject whose very subjectivity has been created through the “benevolent interventions” of MNCs, NGOs, local elites, and governments alike. Postcolonial feminist ethics then is an epistemological and political undertaking or a political epistemology: an active questioning of the ways in which subjects become known in encounters and become deemed as in need of intervention. Deploying this notion of ethics as a lens, CSR can be conceptualized as an epistemological act that creates its desired subject and then immediately intervenes on their behalf. The epistemology of knowing as embodied in CSR reflects a desire about the nature of the subaltern in the moment of ethical encounter: a silent subject who’s engagement and response is not necessary for claims and struggles on their behalf. However, an ethical encounter can only take shape when the “respondents inhabit something like normality” (Spivak 1995: xxv). To this end, Spivak suggests we move from “ethics as imagined from within the self-driven political calculus as ‘doing the right thing’” toward “ethics as openness toward the imagined agency of the other” (2004: 61).

In doing so, she moves away from the possibility of an ethical singularity or the notion that ethics and responsibility “transcend the individual agency of the self” (Morton 2007:

62) whereby a knowing and understanding of the subaltern is possible. Instead, Spivak suggests “that no amount of raised consciousness field work can ever approach the painstaking labor to establish ethical singularity with the subaltern” (1995: xxiv). Following from this, postcolonial feminist frameworks attend to political epistemology and engage with the possibility of recognizing agency in the making of governance arrangements that speak for and about the subaltern as the new conversation about ethics and responsibility in the Global South.

Conclusion

In all, multi-stakeholder efforts such as CSR initiatives have become “ethical” claims about the empowerment of women and their economic and social well-being in developing nations. Yet postcolonial feminist frameworks redirect such claims and PCSR more broadly: CSR can no longer be understood only as politically motivated social action undertaken in a pluralistic manner by MNCs, but as contemporary organizational efforts in the Global South that reproduce gendered neocolonial relations with institutionalized support from supranational institutions, governments, NGOs, and local elites. As scholars studying the nexus of business and society, we must continue to adopt theories and approaches that can highlight the connections between neoliberalism and growing economic inequalities globally (see Fotaki and Prasad 2015). To this end, postcolonial feminist lenses emphasize ethico-political engagement in relation to gender, subaltern agency, and governance in the Global South and underscore the reproduction of gendered neocolonial relations in the context of globalized capitalism as the new conversation in CSR.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest Author Banu Ozkazanc-Pan declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Human or Animal Participants This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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