Not just one woman at a time: Re-radicalizing a feminist project at work in a postfeminist era

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Abstract

Feminism is back, but is it? What does the contemporary popularity of feminism mean for the feminist subject and the feminist project in western organizations? This is the question that lies at the heart of this article. We observe how postfeminism – as a key source for feminism's contemporary attractiveness – individualizes the feminist subject as empowered, choosing and self-transforming. However, feelings of affective incongruity between what is promised and what is delivered in postfeminist times provide an entry point for a re-radicalization of the feminist project. To examine how the disappointed postfeminist subject can challenge organizations, we return to the feminist concepts of collectivity and patriarchy. We update the notion of collectivity through fusion with network sociality, breaking with a traditional understanding of stable collaboration, and emphasizing diverse experiences and transient, intense collective encounters. Returning to patriarchy, we present it as 'stunningly adaptable' and the unsanitized interpretation of the struggle for equality. It is the context for the disappointment that can spark temporary intense collective action for intersectional equality. Finally, we identify the contours of a research agenda to explore how to radicalize the feminist subject to take forward a feminist project of intersectional equality.

Keywords

collectivity, intersectional gender equality, patriarchy, postfeminism, subjectivity

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Introduction

Over the past decade, feminism has been popularized on a mass scale, gaining levels of visibility, securing approval and acquiring a luminosity across western governments, politics, the media and business, which heretofore feminists could only have dreamed of (Favaro and Gill, 2018; Gill, 2016; Repo, 2020). Adopting feminism as a world view no longer requires personal justification or defence and 'identifying as a "feminist" has become an unexpected source of cultural capital' (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020: 17). Nevertheless, while Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017) point out the contemporary admiration bestowed on the subject position of 'feminist', they also sound a note of caution by saying that some feminists and feminisms are more visible and well regarded than others. Additionally, the continued lack of economic and social power of women and non-binary people vis-a-vis men indicates that the surge in popularity of feminism and the emergence of the feminist subject from the margins have not delivered on intersectional gender equality in the workplace.

A feminist project of intersectional gender equality, inspired by intersectional feminism as a critique of white liberal feminism, problematizes the simultaneity of gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality and sexuality inequalities in organizations (Holvino, 2010). This calls for equal visibility, participation and power distribution for all along procedural, material, affective and discursive dimensions, but remains an elusive ideal as multiple inequalities persist in work organizations (Woods et al., 2022). A project of intersectional equality would seek to destabilize regimes of inequality through the entry and presence of actors from marginalized groups across all organizational levels (Thomson, 2020). It would also aim to change cultural norms about work and workers and delegitimize the structures of inequality embedded in work arrangements and organizational processes of recruitment, selection, promotion and reward (Acker, 2006). The persistence of workplace inequalities is further reinforced by the contemporary expansion of anti-feminist positions and opposition to feminist activism (Verloo, 2018). If the popularity of feminism has soared, so too has a 'virulent misogyny' (Gill, 2017: 611).

Starting from a position that recognizes the new 'cultural life of feminism' (Gill, 2016: 1) amid enduring inequalities and anti-feminist opposition, we consider what the contemporary luminosity of feminism has done to the feminist subject and the feminist project. Exploring how the feminist project has been simultaneously 'defanged' and re-energized by the emergence of the (individualized) feminist subject, we consider the opportunities the moderated 'feminist discourse' of postfeminism[1] – as a key constitutive source of the contemporary feminist subject and feminist luminosity – provide for a re-radicalization of feminism within the world of work.

We note that the contemporary valorization of feminism in the wake of postfeminism has had two significant consequences. On the positive side, feminism has been destigmatized so that the identity of 'feminist' has now got significant social value attached to it and this has opened up new horizons for women (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). On the negative side, the championing of postfeminist feminism and the (individualized) feminist subject has affected the politics of the feminist project. As a consequence, system change has been removed from the agenda:

> . . . hollowing it out so it (becomes) an empty identification marked only by vague injunctions to 'support' women, celebrate female achievements and even just be 'nice' . . . (T)he individualism of this feminism, alongside the exhortation that 'you can do whatever and still be a feminist', works to systematically de-radicalize feminism. (Favaro and Gill, 2018: 61)

The central question of this article in light of the contemporary popularity of feminism, is how can we shift its claims and goals back towards a feminist project focused on broader social change so that it is not 'just one woman at a time' who benefits from the present-day feminist zeitgeist? In other words, how can we re-radicalize feminism? Some authors call for new feminist theorizing to address such questions (McRobbie, 2015), others believe in the value of revisiting feminist concepts and perspectives in new times (Enloe, 2017; Hunnicutt, 2009) 'to think through the feminist issues of the present' (Nicholas and Budgeon, 2021: 159). We connect to the latter as updating and contextualizing existing feminist theoretical tools for our time creates 'transgressive moments of repetition' (Nicholas and Budgeon, 2021: 159), providing us with a means to explore possibilities for the re-radicalization of contemporary feminism(s).

In considering the openings and possibilities the current popularity of feminism provides for its re-radicalization, the focus of this article is the production of organizational subjectivities and intersectional gender equality in organizations located in western economic contexts. We adopt this focus for a number of reasons: first, western work contexts are one key source of the current popularity of the (moderated) feminism we are exploring. This popularity is associated with the cultural phenomenon of postfeminism, which has been put to work in gender and organization studies to direct critical attention at the kinds of organizational subjects individuals in organizations are called to become at this historical moment. Second, our focus on western work settings is to emphasize the persistence of intersectional gender inequality and to add to those voices that continue to highlight how organizations within western arenas produce injustice and discrimination. Third, taking our own positions as researchers into account, we acknowledge that we are privileged, white, middle-class women professors in feminist organization studies. As such, through our research, we have familiarity and experience with western organizations. In developing our focus, we are not seeking to universalize that context nor favour the feminist perspectives that we are more familiar with as 'better than' other perspectives. Rather, as we are interested in developing and applying feminist organization theories to organizational life, we seek to promote dialogue around feminist projects with colleagues located in other contexts and working out of other feminist perspectives.

The structure of the article is as follows: we begin with an examination and critique of postfeminism. Drawing on poststructuralist feminism, we make visible how the tamed feminism of postfeminism and the affective dissonance it gives rise to provides an entry point for collective feminist mobilization and a re-radicalization of feminist concerns. Following this, we return to the feminist concept of collectivity that calls upon groups to transcend the focus on the individual and on individual careers. We consider how the 'me' in postfeminism can be changed into a 'we' (Tyler, 2005) by bringing (back) a collectivist feminism that aspires to change structural intersectional inequalities in the workplace. Third, we draw on the notion of patriarchy, which foregrounds the system of power relationships by which men dominate, oppress and exploit women (Walby, 1989).

The concept of patriarchy invokes strong feelings and entails a system critique that opens avenues to a much-needed radicalization of the gender equality project in the workplace. Finally, we conclude with a consideration of the article's principal contributions and sketch the contours of a research agenda that is focused on how the shift from a moderated to a more transformative feminist project can occur.

Postfeminism and the deradicalization of feminism

We draw on a poststructuralist feminist perspective to examine the cultural phenomenon of postfeminism within organizational contexts. Poststructuralist feminism has much to offer to the analysis of discourse, gendered identities, sexualities, power relations and organizing (Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004) and it is uniquely positioned to analyse the construction of feminist subjectivities within postfeminism. Accordingly, informed by poststructuralist feminist principles, gender and organization scholars focus on the constitutive force of postfeminist discourses in defining organizational subjects, and the reality they inhabit, interpellating individuals to open themselves up to new possibilities. These postfeminist discourses articulate a seductive language of freedom that entices individuals to break free from circumstances that limit them, encouraging a form of self-realization through which they can see a range of opportunities beyond what they normally assume is open to them. Here, postfeminism is performative in relation to processes of self-formation connected to the reconfiguration of subjectivity–exemplified, for example, by women's embrace of and pleasure in fantasies of the corporate career or business ownership or men's take-up and enjoyment of active fatherhood. However, postfeminism is not conceived of as totalizing; its hold on people's sense of who they are is always fragile, temporary and open to contestation (Tirapani and Willmott, 2023). Examples of this scholarship include studies on entrepreneurship (De Simone and Priola, 2021; Lewis et al., 2022); leadership (Banerjee and Zabin Memon, 2022; Lewis and Benschop, 2023) and motherhood, fatherhood and work (Edgley, 2021; Gruson-Wood et al., 2022). Postfeminist subjectivity is understood as a social outcome, historically produced by societal and cultural discourses, and subject to transformation as discursive shifts occur within the regime of postfeminism (Hekman, 2014).

A significant discursive shift within scholarship on postfeminism – with considerable implications for postfeminist subjectivities – concerns its engagement with and orientation to feminism. Foundational interpretations of postfeminism such as that developed by McRobbie (2009) disavowed feminism as outdated and abhorrent. McRobbie's emphasis on the repudiation of feminism as a defining feature of postfeminism manifested in what Gill and Orgad (2017) refer to as routine 'mocking' of the feminist movement as 'over' and 'past it' in light of the alleged achievement of gender equality. It is notable that McRobbie (2015) as a scholar centrally involved in the ongoing examination of postfeminist culture, now sees that feminism has made a 'comeback' with some commentators (Dean, 2010; Hollows and Moseley, 2006) asserting that it had never (completely) gone away. Nevertheless, what is agreed is that the rehabilitation of feminism as 'cool', 'progressive' and 'fair' within postfeminism, has given rise to a new feminist subject who is individualist in orientation, empowered, focused on making the right choices and engaged in practices of physical and psychic self-transformation on an ongoing basis. Gill (2007), who is also a

foundational scholar in relation to the development of our understanding of postfeminism, emphasized the repudiation of feminism as well. She too recognizes the new visibility of feminism and asks to what extent should postfeminism only be defined in relation to feminism. Importantly, she suggests that postfeminism is as much defined by its overlap with neoliberalism as it is by its relationship to feminism (Gill, 2017). As such, the autonomous, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism has a strong resemblance to the freely choosing self-transforming feminist subject of postfeminism (Gill and Scharff, 2011).

Within discussions on postfeminist gender regimes, it is now recognized that feminism does not disappear but *translates* into a confident, assertive and resilient woman who takes control, nurtures her ambition and builds a life-plan that will enable her to secure her own individual success (Repo, 2020). The moderated feminists of postfeminism may now acknowledge the persistence of gender inequalities, but the response to addressing them is as an individual woman who is called to accept responsibility for her own well-being and self-care (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Feminist critique is not irradicated by postfeminism for being no longer necessary, but rather the radical edge of feminism has been blunted as there is a postfeminist setting of feminism's agenda along with its terms and conditions (Favaro and Gill, 2018). Given the dominance of individualized feminist principles and ideas, we may ask if this moderation of feminism (with its focus on reconstructing subjectivity) is unassailable. However, as poststructuralism asserts, the feminist subject of postfeminism is characterized by fragmentation, fluidity, hybridity and contradiction – it cannot be stable or coherent and it does not have a fixed essence. Malleability is needed to respond to the cultural messages of lack or flaw that require continuous improvement and transformation of the self, and it is within this incessant effort and the affective dissonance (Hemmings, 2012) it can give rise to, that the possibilities of a re-radicalization of feminism reside.

'Feeling' postfeminism

Reflections on and interrogations of postfeminism highlight the adaptability and generativity of this cultural phenomenon (Gill, 2017; Thouaille, 2019) manifest in discursive shifts that create and shape new forms of subjectivity such as the individualized feminist subject. An important shift in the principles of postfeminism is the emergence of an increasingly psychologized logic with affective dimensions that individualize and responsibilize, translating choice and empowerment into psychologized feelings. This 'psy' element of postfeminism with its increased reliance on fostering particular ways of thinking and particular types of feelings (Appleton, 2023; Swan, 2018) has been instrumental in making visible workplace gender inequalities through a focus on emotional states such as the need to be confident. By way of this emphasis on the psyche and affect, both in postfeminism and neoliberalism, women are called to address negative work experiences by tackling the internal barriers that 'hold them back', turning attention away from critiques of workplace culture and keeping them attached to difficult work circumstances through the development of the right feelings. Insecurity is replaced by confidence and negativity avoided through the cultivation of positivity (Carr and Kelan, 2023; Orgad and Gill, 2022). Accordingly, feminism's visible presence as part of the postfeminist gender regime 'has become tied up with overwhelmingly positive, confident, and upbeat "feeling rules"'

(Dobson and Kanai, 2019: 774), which drive acceptance of the demands of postfeminism (Tirapani and Willmott, 2023). Women are invited to engage in psychological self-work such that they cultivate the 'right' kind of character to deal with work (and life) challenges as solitary individuals. This means they must continually improve not only their work and life skills in general, but also their attitudes and mindsets by cultivating confidence, resilience and positivity (Gill, 2017; Gill and Kanai, 2018; Kanai, 2019; Lamberg, 2021). As individualizing technologies, confidence and resilience structure feelings that provide the means through which women can constitute themselves as empowered, choosing and self-reliant feminist subjects. They also act as disciplinary mechanisms that make women individually responsible for 'solving' (or failing to solve) gendered injustices (Dobson and Kanai, 2019). This means that the road to success is constructed as lying within each individual woman who must devise internal solutions to whatever challenges or setbacks she faces. Confidence provides women with the ability to clear gendered barriers, but resilience ensures that women can 'bounce-back' from any hardships. Together they normalize the experience of ongoing struggle and recovery as women respond to the postfeminist call to engage in constant self-transformation (Orgad and Gill, 2022).

Aligning with the emphasis on confidence and resilience, is the valorization of positivity, which also sits within the landscape of postfeminism, constituting 'upbeat emotional management . . . as the pathway to success and prosperity in western professional and intimate life' (Calder-Dawe et al., 2021: 552). Referred to as 'a winning emotional style of our times', positivity is said to provide women with a way of agentically optimizing themselves and their situation, and invites them to be mindful of how their character and temperament impacts on others (Calder-Dawe et al., 2021: 566). The emphasis placed on positivity demands that women not only produce positive affects at the level of the individual for reasons of profitability or just to create a 'pleasant' organizational atmosphere, but they must also suppress any 'bad feelings' that emerge when working. Negative feelings such as 'hurt, grudge, bitterness, sadness, despair and (political) anger' (Orgad and Gill, 2022: 65) must be censured. Economically valuable affects – empathy, social sensitivity, collaboration, vulnerability – are expected and unprofitable negative feelings must be hidden from view. Whitney (2018) refers to this demand to conceal and manage negative feelings as byproductive labour, which requires that individuals metabolize unwanted affects and affective byproducts. In other words, the call to be relentlessly positive means individuals absorb and contain unwanted affects from themselves and others. As Whitney (2018: 648) states:

> The affects the worker produces that remain in her are not produced for their own sake, or for her own sake. They are byproducts, waste side-effects, excess to be thrown away; and yet they are also the visceral organs of this work in the workers – the affective offal created in one's own body in the production process.

This is a particular pressure for women within a postfeminist context where being seen to be 'reassuringly feminine' through the expression of 'niceness', 'gentleness' and being 'relentlessly pleasant' is demanded, alongside demonstration of an agentic, individualized, feminist self. The emphasis placed on 'internalizing the revolution' through the management of feelings . . . and the harnessing of individual resources' (Orgad and

Gill, 2022: 60) draws attention away from challenging the conditions that enable inequality and injustice. As Swan (2018) states, the proliferation of these 'psy' solutions to ongoing experiences of inequality reinforces a moderated individualized feminism, posing a concern that lies at the heart of this article. Does the reconceptualization of external barriers to equality as internal obstacles that individual women can address through cultivation of the right mindset, reduce and neuter feminism as an oppositional force (Rottenberg, 2014)?

The affective dissonance of postfeminism

According to McRobbie (2015) the affective demand to be confident, positive and resilient disables women's solidarity and collective politics. Likewise, Lauri (2021) claims that collectivist forms of feminism will find it difficult to flourish as an individualized 'business feminism' establishes an extensive presence. Lakamper (2017) demonstrates how collectivist forms of feminism will struggle to emerge through her analysis of Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (2013) and Tina Fey's memoir *Bossypants* (2012). She highlights how both women disavow the affective dissonance connected to struggles around maintaining a successful career and a fulfilling family life. Instead, advice is provided to 'support' women to achieve happiness within the existing ideological postfeminist parameters as opposed to seeking a transformation of them. Emphasizing the responsibility of the individual and the importance of making the right choices, Sandberg in particular locates herself firmly within postfeminist discourses. Sandberg and Fey's refusal to draw on their experience of affective dissonance, and their tendency to 'explain these feelings away' by denying the link between a felt discord and structural inequality, prevents the radical potential of a shared experience of disharmony from emerging (Lakamper, 2017). Nevertheless, Lakamper's analysis reveals how Sandberg downplays unhappiness connected to contemporary work, but other empirical studies that investigate how postfeminist organizational subjectivities can be experienced negatively, highlight its impact. Examples of such studies include Chowdhury and Gibson's (2019) investigation of the struggles of young professional women in New Zealand to reconcile the postfeminist assumption that gender equality has been achieved with the persistent experience of gendered and gendering practices within work contexts, producing affective dissonance. Focusing on the affectively laden identity work of young working women, Chowdhury and Gibson (2019) shed light on women's experiences of emotional distress through the identification of 'survival lessons'. These include the need to engage in masculine behaviours without violating conventional feminine norms; negotiating the tensions around articulating career ambitions while also being expected to participate in conventional feminine displays of modesty and other-centredness; and managing the pressures of motherhood and career. These 'survival lessons' capture the disconnection between the assumption that gender equality has been achieved and the real-life experience of persistent organizational inequality. This situation requires ongoing affect-laden identity work to survive and learn to 'accept' a discriminatory context as 'just-how-it-is', placing a significant emotional burden on women. Likewise, Gruson-Wood et al. (2022) in their investigation of postfeminist fatherhood demonstrate that postfeminism does not produce happy feelings for Canadian

fathers who want to be active, involved parents and also fulfil the traditional role of breadwinner. Focusing on the affects that mark family relations, they reveal how work in contemporary organizations shapes gender relations in the family giving rise to unease and unhappiness as both men and women face the pressures of postfeminism. Experiencing the social pulls of involved fatherhood and active breadwinner, men feel a strong sense of discomfort as they try to manage these two demands: 'Postfeminist intimacies are marked by tension, guilt, resentment, enervation, and isolation in spousal and family relations as parents can feel trapped in traditional roles while desperate to escape them' (Gruson-Wood et al., 2022: 269).

These empirical studies draw attention to struggles to reap the promises of postfeminism and we suggest that such exertions, if harnessed, can act to reduce the grip of individualized feminism, pushing people towards more 'radical' expressions of feminist action. In other words, the demand to seek individual internal solutions to negative work experiences and to avoid creating bad feeling in public, creates an *affective burden* for people that could translate into 'something social or communal, or something structurally connected' (Veldstra, 2020: 15). The lived contradictions of postfeminism and the associated emotional struggles can act as a catalyst that leads people to express frustration and dissatisfaction at the 'individuality imperative' that requires them to confidently and resiliently manage all aspects of their lives (Lamberg, 2021). Focusing on negative affect, Dobson and Kanai (2019) think that investigating the expression of more ambivalent emotions moves us towards the conceptualization of women as 'suffering actors' as opposed to 'emblems of positivity'. This exposes the dialectic tensions within postfeminism, providing an investigative space to consider the 'dissonant affective positions that connect to feminist aims of social transformation' (Dobson and Kanai, 2019: 776) beyond individualized success.

Encounters such as those outlined above highlight how situations where experiences of work do not cohere with the ideological expectations raised by the discursive framework of postfeminism give rise to an affective dissonance that can be felt in an intensely visceral way (Lakamper, 2017). Affective dissonance refers to situations where our sense of self – 'whom one feels oneself to be' – collides with the social world – 'the self we are expected to be in social terms'. Dissonance or disharmony occurs where there is tension 'between the experience of ourselves over time and the experience of possibilities and limits to how we may act or be' (Hemmings, 2012: 149). Dobson and Kanai (2019: 777) take up this notion of individuals experiencing a difference between their own sense of self and the social possibilities available to them to express and validate who they think they are, focusing on Hemming's (2012: 150, emphasis added) argument that '*in order to know differently, we have to feel differently*'. Feeling misrecognized, undervalued, anxious, not good enough, contributes to a sense that something is muddled and not quite right in how one is recognized. This affective dissonance generates politicization beyond individual felt emotions opening up a chance to move towards an affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012; Vachhani and Pullen, 2019), which can bring about social transformation. Through these experiences, a critical relation to the world emerges, providing opportunities for the appearance of a more collectivist-oriented feminist subjectivity where we move from a focus on individual experience to collective feminist capacity (Hemmings, 2012). While knowing there is a difference between an individual's sense of

self and the social possibilities available to them is an important precursor to political action, this knowledge by itself is not enough. An affective shift is also required to produce the struggle that can lead to a change from a feminism driven by an individualist focus to one that has a collectivist orientation (Hemmings, 2012). Investigating representations of negative emotions and dissonance in women-centred TV programmes in the USA, Dobson and Kanai (2019) argue for the possibility of challenging the demand for positive affects such as confidence, resilience and positivity as the means to achieve success. Rather, to move beyond the achievement of individual equality towards a deeper and more equitable social transformation, the unliveability of constant recourse to positivity and resilience should be made visible 'to analyse how affective dissonances and the generative feminist possibilities associated with (them)' (Dobson and Kanai, 2019: 783) can reroute us away from individualized feminism towards more radical versions.

What these studies demonstrate is the difficulty involved in trying to *neatly contain* feminism in an individualized form, particularly when the individualized strategies it propagates do not address the challenges women, men and non-binary people face within contemporary organizational contexts. Thus, we should not assume that there has been a wholesale defeat of more transformative feminist agendas leaving only a 'softer' version of feminism in play, no matter how popular or desirable this form of moderated feminism might first appear (Lewis et al, 2019; Rottenberg, 2019). Critiques of postfeminism underpinned by poststructuralist principles have alerted us to the grip of individualized feminism and also made visible how its hold is challenged through disillusionment. As affective dissonance cannot guarantee a feminist transformation, Hemmings (2012: 157–158, emphasis in original) maintains 'it just might . . . and that dissonance *has* to arise if feminist politics is to emerge'. The dissonance that emerges from the disconnect between experience and expectation can act as a catalyst to a desire to change by addressing inequality and injustice, and providing a space for alternative knowledge. Yet, as Hemmings points out, the discord felt when experience and expectation do not match may be ignored or simply expected.

From the above discussion, we can see that there is recognition of the gap between feeling 'empowered' and actually being 'empowered', leading to conflicting emotions around postfeminist subjectivity. A key issue then is not how to promote affective dissonance around postfeminism – it clearly exists – but how to harness this discord to achieve radical change. How can we stimulate an affective solidarity – drawing those who experience conflict to others who seek transformative change – from this affective dissonance to ensure that there is an 'impetus to change' (Hemmings, 2012: 150)? We wonder what is possible if the disappointed subject of postfeminism, who is sensitized to feminism, looks for more radical feminist interventions in the workplace? This may be wishful thinking on our part, but a dialogue based on different feminist concepts is possible – not choice, empowerment, agency, but solidarity, support and collectivity alongside systemic inequality, power and structures – and it is to this that we now turn.

Re-radicalizing a feminist project

To explore how the disappointed postfeminist subject can move from affective dissonance to a stance of challenge to secure transformation of the workplace, we turn to the concepts and insights of feminist thinking that are driven by a desire for radical change.

In doing this, we 'remember feminist theory forward' so that we can think through contemporary feminist issues and dilemmas (Nicholas and Budgeon, 2021). Taking seriously the need to 'feel differently' (Hemmings, 2012: 150) and following the advice of Enloe (2017) to repeat intersectional feminist questions over time, we first draw on the feminist concept of collectivity. We do this to highlight the need to share the 'bad feelings' that persistent gender inequalities give rise to over time. By sharing 'bad feelings' we prevent them from being carried on individual shoulders and construct a space where shared 'bad feelings' can act as a catalyst for collective action, creating the possibility of change for more than 'one woman at a time'.

Following this, we draw on the second key concept of patriarchy as it is experiencing a resurgence in mainstream media, in popular feminist publications, in digital culture and is being reclaimed as a useful analytic device by academic researchers (Ferry, 2024; Hill and Allen, 2021). As we want to move the disappointed postfeminist subject away from an individualist feminist orientation towards a more radicalized positioning, we treat the strong feelings that the concept of patriarchy provokes as useful in shifting people towards uncompromised feminist action. We think that these concepts can provide more radical feminist interjections into a contemporary project of organizational change that can transcend the grip of postfeminism. Even when intersectional gender equality requires more radical changes than capitalist western organizations may well be ready for, these earlier feminist notions push for the radical systemic changes in power relations that are necessary to improve the working lives of women in all their diversity.

Collectivity

Feminist notions of collectivity and community are arguably among the most powerful ideas to counterweigh the excessive individualism of postfeminism in organizations. The notion of collective foregrounds the social relations in women's lives and contradicts the liberal emphasis on every woman as an autonomous being (Calás and Smircich, 2006), an autonomy that is central to postfeminism. Collectivity is firmly grounded in the practices of the women's movement, from bringing women together in small consciousness-raising groups in the 1960s and 1970s to the massive women's protest marches and strikes of 2017 and 2018 and is at the heart of the contemporary feminist solidarity scholarship (Kenny, 2024; Vachhani and Pullen, 2019). Feminist collectives see women as a group with commonalities and originally placed an emphasis on coherence, embeddedness and belonging. Through proximity and close ties, a shared narrative could be generated to bring about social and material change (Cott, 1987; Wittel, 2001). This notion of a shared common history was believed to provide women with a space to interrogate together their experiences under patriarchy, enabling them to collectively analyse their oppression and to imagine alternatives (Ferree and Martin, 1995). There has been much criticism of the idea of a collective of women based on a common history, with one of the most notable coming from Black feminist scholarship on racial inequalities (Hill Collins, 2004; hooks, 1984). From this perspective, intersectionality research makes visible the complexity of difference and how the intersecting social categories of gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation and dis/ability produce different social and political realities for privileged and marginalized women (Crenshaw, 2017; hooks, 1984).

While the collective is an important benchmark for feminist organizing, we need to consider what form of collectivity can both address the issue of diverse origins, experiences and biographies as highlighted by Black feminist critiques, and challenge the individualized feminism of postfeminism. This is particularly pertinent when (as one reviewer pointed out) many women do not want to be associated with and do not see the need for women's collective groups at work.

Aspects of the notion of network sociality (Wittel, 2001) may be helpful here as it is not based on a shared history or shared narrative, thereby breaking with the traditional feminist understanding of collective. Instead, network sociality is a form of disembedded intersubjectivity defined by an array of experiences and life stories, and is characterized by 'fleeting and transient, yet iterative social relations of ephemeral but intense encounters' (Wittel, 2001: 51). Embedded in network sociality is an ethic of individualization that aligns with postfeminism. This requires individuals to actively construct social bonds as relationships are not pre-given via a stable community, but rather chosen through the ongoing maintenance of weak but intense ties (Wittel, 2001). Within a postfeminist context, research indicates that collective groups are not unusual and therefore there are attempts at collectivity to build on and expand. For example, Petrucci (2020) in her study of gender-inclusive meetup groups in the US technology sector, interpreted them as postfeminist communities based on their individual-level interventions of support, skill development and training. These types of meetup groups are no bastions of feminist activism, but they are a site for women to make sense of individual gendered experiences of work, making the individual collective, if only lightly. Interestingly, Villesèche et al. (2022) in their study of women's business networks in the USA and the UK, contend that the postfeminist emphasis on individual realization in these networks is not opposed to the dismantling of structural inequality. Instead, they suggest that such networks can be understood as collectivities that constitute a feminist practice of freedom, opening up imaginaries for collective engagement. These examples of de-individualization decrease feelings of isolation and build a community for women. Most importantly, they raise awareness of the systemic nature of organizational inequality regimes and potentially provide a platform for an agenda of political action (Dennissen et al., 2019). However, the potential for women's networks to disrupt organizational inequalities depends on the strategies and activities they deploy and their ability to prompt women to feel differently.

In relation to Hemmings' (2012) argument of the necessity to feel differently to know differently, Kanai (2019) explores online blogs produced by young women on the platform Tumblr. She investigates how the challenges of postfeminist regulation are translated into humorous posts as a means to forge a relatable connection with other women. While Lakamper's (2017) analysis of Sandberg and Fey discussed earlier highlights how the emphasis on 'getting ahead' means that discord is ignored, Kanai's (2019) study concentrates on how affective dissonance is acknowledged and managed. She reveals how young women come together through humour to share their struggles yet still remain within the terms of postfeminist normativity. As Kanai (2019: 74) points out, while this may offer 'a sense of resilient togetherness: of disappointment but not disenchantment' it does not prompt the pursuit of radical change. In similar vein, Martinussen et al. (2020) investigate how women's friendships act as a source of support around the pressures to

perfect the ideal neoliberal postfeminist self through aesthetic labour, education, career and the building of sexual capital. Drawing on interviews with groups of women friends in New Zealand, the study explores how the identity of 'good woman-friend' provides space for some resistance to neoliberal postfeminist regulation. Women's friendship is not straightforwardly a 'political indictment of the status quo', rather it provides some opportunity 'to jar against the regulative rhythm of normative discourses' (Martinussen et al., 2020: 18).

The importance of these studies is that they reveal how women come together not as part of a career strategy as Petrucci's (2020) analysis of postfeminist lean-in circles highlights, but rather as a source of collective support connected to the felt disappointments of postfeminism. It is this type of collective network, created for the purpose of support in relation to emotional disharmony, that could act as the location for harnessing affective dissonance. Such networks could establish a permanent position within the highly individualized culture of postfeminism and act to prompt more radical feminist action. We suggest that constituted according to the principles of network sociality, these collectivities built around a 'multitude of experiences and biographies' (Wittel, 2001: 65) provide the possibility for incidents of affective dissonance to give rise to intensive connection within a network. This connection can temporarily suspend individualism and mobilize collective power to challenge and push for change of inequality regimes, organized in a similar manner to short-term projects. From this perspective, affective dissonance need not give rise to strong and long-lasting network collaborations that require rule-following and expectations of deep commitment, but rather prompt feminist projects characterized by short-term but intensive collective campaigns. Accordingly, we can see the benefits from support networks of the type Kanai (2019) and Martinussen et al. (2020) reveal, but we are not concerned here with networks acting to alleviate or resolve affective dissonance per se. Instead, we think that through collectives infused with an ethic of network sociality, such disharmony can be sustained over time, and act as a catalyst to action when required. The maintenance of feelings of affective incongruity between what is promised in postfeminist times and what is actually delivered or possible to achieve can be used strategically to direct continuous attention to and put regular pressure on contexts where gender inequalities persist, with the aim of achieving substantial change. In between active feminist challenge campaigns, this collective action can be kept on the 'back burner', with feelings of affective dissonance acting to keep the collaborations and networks alive, until they can next spring into action, triggered by unacceptable punctuating events caused by persistent systemic and structural gender inequalities. Importantly, while forms of network sociality as described here may act to maintain affective dissonance for future ongoing feminist action, we also need to name and theorize the sources of these 'feelings of oppression'. To do this, we turn to the concept of patriarchy because it makes visible the basis of unacceptable structural inequalities (Hill and Allen, 2021: 170).

Patriarchy in focus

When the postfeminist subject is feeling disillusioned with the inwards politics of postfeminism, the context of patriarchy provides a way to redirect the feminist project

outwards again. We argue that affective dissonance is generated and maintained through patriarchy, a context that produces unhappiness with the postfeminist promise of success by calling attention to systemic power inequalities in organizations and societies. The individualization of inequalities characteristic of postfeminism acts to downgrade the harsh experience of persistent discrimination unlike the notion of patriarchy, which accentuates it by drawing out the connections between what appear to be arbitrary events and experiences (Ferry, 2024). Patriarchy is the unsanitized concept that foregrounds systemic intersectional inequalities.

As a concept, patriarchy provides a particular way of focusing feminist theory and politics (Ortner, 2014), a way that invokes strong feelings, and has always been subject to intense debate. In the much-cited definition of Sylvia Walby (1989: 214), patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. When the goal is to realize intersectional gender equality, it may seem odd to return to a notion that prioritizes gender relations, but patriarchy arguably offers the sharpest systems thinking developed in feminism and, importantly, it is intertwined with systems of class and race. Patriarchy has always been a contested notion in feminist thought; for prioritizing gender relations over key social relations of class and ethnicity and ignoring differences between women (especially problematic for intersectional feminists), for downplaying capitalism as the central system of oppression (especially problematic for Marxist feminists) or for being essentialist, ahistorical and universalistic (especially problematic for poststructuralist feminists). Against these critiques, Walby (1989) developed a flexible concept of patriarchy that explains the persistence of systemic gender inequalities in the public and the private domains, and various manifestations in different times, spaces and places. Patriarchy recently resurfaced in feminist writings that examine the durability and flexible hegemony of patriarchal systems and interrogate its relations with systems of racism and capitalism (Enloe, 2017; Gilligan and Snider, 2018). We think that a historically sensitive, contextualized notion of patriarchy is important in postfeminist times to recentre systemic inequalities in contemporary workplaces, to break the disciplinary power of postfeminism for disillusioned subjects and to mobilize them for a re-radicalized feminist project of changing organizations.

This starts with calling attention to contemporary manifestations of the complex multifaceted power system that is patriarchy in the context of postfeminist western work organizations in the 2020s. First, Kelan (2014) notes that for young professionals in the UK, a system of patriarchy has become unthinkable and unspeakable under postfeminism. The postfeminist model of organizational life maintains that gender equality is within reach if only women would be agentic enough to 'lean in', and while Black women and/or working-class women are excluded from leaning in (Bell Smith and Nkomo, 2021), the systemic nature of this gendered, classed and racialized oppression remains elusive. The young professionals in Kelan's (2014) study who take pride in their agency and autonomy and expect to be in full control of their careers are silent about the patriarchal norms surrounding successful careers. Yet, the evidence-base of patriarchy is irrefutable when labour market statistics show persistent gender inequalities, in the form of occupational segregation, and a wage gap that continues even when there is equal pay legislation, including in the most equality-oriented Nordic countries (see the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) Gender Equality Index and the United Nations

Development Programme (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index). In postfeminism, this evidence is explained away by opportunities women miss and choices they make even when choices made align with postfeminist normative expectations. So, it takes a radical feminist project to recognize that the feelings of disillusionment that go with 'doing the right thing' yet missing a promotion or being paid less should be understood as arising from patriarchal formations not individual actions.

Another manifestation of patriarchy has gained visibility in the wake of the many #MeToo scandals in organizations. It has become abundantly clear that gender-based violence, discrimination, harassment, bullying and abuse are not incidents caused by isolated 'bad apples' but are deeply ingrained in and enabled by patriarchal systems (Guschke et al., 2024). As male violence and patriarchal sexuality are identified as component structures of patriarchy (Walby, 1989), the spotlight on gender-based violence in the workplace highlights the systemic nature of patriarchy. Manifestations of patriarchy are also evident in the digital world as illustrated by studies on sexist cyberbullying and online anti-feminist attacks against professional women who speak up against patriarchal cultures (Mandalaki and Pérezts, 2023; Vachhani and Pullen, 2019). The renewed interest in patriarchy acknowledges that patriarchal formations in organizations are inextricably linked to racism and capitalism. In a rare study of Black female professors in the UK, Rollock (2021) documents how they do the hard work to carve out successful academic careers without rocking the boat of white academia, where adherence to white norms equals competence and racial equality is an illusion. Duijs et al. (2022) examine self-employed care workers in long-term healthcare in the Netherlands at the intersections of gender, class, race, migration and age. They find that this crucial care work is increasingly precarious for racialized women who are squeezed out of organizations into self-employment because of discrimination, increasing workloads, poverty and health risks.

To push back against the individualization of postfeminism and advocate for system change, we think that the flexible notion of patriarchy can deliver a crucial stepping-stone. A feminist project that monitors and reports on the systemic nature of structural intersectional inequalities can expose how patriarchy persists in today's workplaces in intertwinement with racial hierarchies (Nkomo, 2021), and capitalist structures (Walby, 2013). Patriarchy can thus call attention to the scope and entanglement of multiple gender inequalities in the public and the private domain as it highlights the power processes that take for granted the oppression women face in organizations and misconstrue it as choice. This misconstruction as choice can be the entry point to engage the disappointed subjects and loosen the disciplinary hold of postfeminism. The contradictions between the tropes of empowerment, authenticity and choice and the narrow organizational femininities possible in capitalist patriarchal organizations are too obvious (Zaeemdar, 2024). Recognizing the systemic power of patriarchy can invoke strong feelings of fear and anger against injustice, and of loss of agency, but it can also spark the desire for change (Gilligan and Snider, 2018). A radical feminist project needs to change the story to one about patriarchal organizations, reframe inequalities as systemic inequalities again and bring these to the attention of women in all jobs. Difficult as it may be to engage women, (digital) women's networks or diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) professionals can play a role in making these connections and spur people into action. When patriarchy becomes the target of change, the feminist project is no longer about palatable win–win

situations such as managing the loss of talent, realizing meritocracy, building the business case for diversity or any other way to secure legitimacy with and serve the agenda of white men (Carrillo Arciniega, 2021). Instead, with patriarchy centre stage, the language changes to a radical and political calling for the redistribution of power, the inclusion of all women in decision making and a fundamental rethinking of formal and informal organizational processes to undo their systemic sexism, racism and classism. Changing patriarchal organizations also requires an unlearning of the focus on the individual and the individual career, redirecting the project to a collective effort to change norms for work and workers instead. The strong feelings that working through the concept of patriarchy can provoke, with its focus on calling out power and the need for systemic change, cannot be dealt with at the level of the individual. Instead, there is a need for collective action to address these feelings. Such collective action can be channelled through connections infused with an ethic of network sociality, characterized by weak but intense ties, encouraging individuals to continually work on building and maintaining social bonds so that women are ready to challenge instances of patriarchal discrimination when required.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have set out to explore what the contemporary luminosity of feminism in the wake of postfeminism means for the feminist subject and the feminist project in western organizations. Repudiation of feminism – often in violent ways – and the change it seeks to bring is not unusual, and even the moderated feminism we seek to challenge can provoke strong negative reactions. Nevertheless, harnessing the unhappy experience of postfeminism is the trigger point to revive more radical feminist projects for intersectional equality in the workplace.

   This article offers three principal contributions to the literature, accompanied by the contours of a research agenda for the investigation of the ways by which a feminist alternative to postfeminism can be brought into western workplaces. The first contribution concerns rethinking the possibilities of feminist subjectivities under postfeminism. We observe the postfeminist dynamic that disciplines an individualized feminist subject in the workplace as an empowered, self-transforming, choosing agent. Furthermore, we note how postfeminism occupies this feminist subject with psychological work for confidence, resilience and positivity, which turns the feminist project inwards. This leaves gender researchers longing for a *more* feminist subject and a more radical feminist project (Utoft, 2021). This yearning makes us wonder about the possibilities of enticing the individualized feminist subject into engagement with a more radical feminist project and how this might occur. We identify one of the problems around postfeminism as how it has sought to sanitize the project of gender equality, by denying or managing dissatisfaction with the slow pace of change. However, as we have argued, feminist subjects can harness affective dissonance as the trigger point for movement to more radical action.

   For our research agenda, we build on the emerging strand of empirical studies that highlight the disjuncture between postfeminist expectations of career success and the actual experience of working in western organizations (Dobson and Kanai, 2019; Kanai, 2019). Our research agenda seeks to direct more attention to the work struggles of the

individualized feminist subject to study the gap between feeling empowered and being empowered and the affective dissonance that results from this mismatch. Under what conditions can affective dissonance transform from an internal feeling of disillusionment to the realization that external action is needed? It would be good to have empirical studies into the conditions of possibility for the individualized feminist subjects of postfeminism to engage in more radical feminist thought and action. Research questions would address how affective dissonance emerges, what sectors and forms of work are more likely to give rise to it and in what way is it experienced by different women? How can the realization – that the postfeminist promise of individual career success will not happen – lead people to engage with a feminist project on intersectional equality that pushes for systemic organizational change? Crucially, this element of the research agenda should include studies that seek to understand how experiences of affective dissonance will vary across the world. As Dosekun (2015, 2020) asserts, postfeminism may originate in western culture, but it is not essentially or exclusively so, as it is a globally circulating phenomenon and therefore, responses to it and the potential to translate it into transformative feminist action will vary across contexts.

Second, we contribute by disrupting the binary of individual versus collective by showing how collective organizing can emerge in postfeminist times. The individualization of postfeminism is not conducive to collective organizing in the tradition of feminist collectives. By introducing the concept of network sociality, that to our knowledge has not been taken up in the gender and networks or feminist solidarity literature to date, we have shown how networks could strive for radical change operating in a postfeminist era. Network sociality allows us to realize that when something is individualized, it does not necessarily mean that it is *only* postfeminist. Previous studies have pointed at how feminist networks have transformed in a digital world (Fotopoulou, 2016). We add to this body of work by bringing the notion of feminist collective forward with network sociality to demonstrate how networks take a different form today. Instead of stable feminist collectives with strong feeling rules, (post)feminist networks respond to punctuating events, such as sexual scandals, and mobilize for action to deliver an intensive temporary response to prompt change.

A research agenda on contemporary feminist collectives would ask whether postfeminist networks are characterized by individualism and conservatism, and under what circumstances can they be mobilized to collective, progressive action for intersectional equality? How do affective bonds and attachments developed through shared experiences, whether extreme or mundane, stimulate group and organizational dynamics that prompt collective action that leads to radical change? What form do such organizational dynamics take? As we have highlighted, interpreting collectives through network sociality, questions arise around the longevity of these collectives and how relationships are maintained over time. Is there empirical support for the idea that postfeminist networks are temporarily coming together for radical feminist action when they can no longer curb their unhappiness with the injustices of racialized patriarchy in capitalist organizations? Attention should be directed at how ideas of network sociality travel in a globalized world, and how collectives in local contexts are organized. Across the world, research can explore if network sociality manifests and in what way in feminist collectivities? What possibilities exist for shared experiences of persistent inequality to act as an affective dissonant glue that builds connection between women located across different

geographical contexts (Kenny, 2024)? How might existing women's networks play a role here, under what circumstances can these collectives be a part of changing the conversation and re-radicalizing the feminist project (Kenny, 2024)?

Our third contribution is to make the argument to return to patriarchy as central to the constitution of a radical feminist project. We draw on patriarchy as a direct challenge to the postfeminist focus on the autonomous individual and associated psychologized feelings as a means of making visible the broader economic, social, cultural and political systems that shape experiences of organizational life. Patriarchy is the context of the discontent people feel with postfeminism in organizations, and the way to make visible how intersectional inequality is a systemic and not an individual problem. Our analysis of how patriarchy manifests in a postfeminist era foregrounds the power processes that systematically produce and maintain gender, race and class inequalities in contemporary capitalist organizations. This discontent with the preservation of the status quo of intersectional inequalities despite significant equality, diversity and inclusion efforts is extensively documented (Benschop and Van den Brink, 2018), as is the call for changing systems and work processes rather than changing individuals (e.g. Janssens and Zanoni, 2014; Lansu et al., 2019). As gender within postfeminism 'lacks the critical-political sharpness of patriarchy (and is) more assimilated and co-opted than patriarchy' (Bridges and Messerschmidt, 2019: 1775), we suggest that patriarchy is the unsanitized concept that can foreground how discrimination and intersectional inequalities are ongoing organizational processes in specific contexts.

An additional reason for our choice of patriarchy as a key concept for a radical feminist project is that it provokes strong feelings. As stated above, 'to know differently we have to feel differently' (Hemmings, 2012: 150). Patriarchy in contrast to postfeminism generates different feeling responses of either positive affect for those who see it as a source of collective feminist strength to address system disadvantage, or negative affect for feminists raging against its injustice, or for anti-feminist groups who reject it as an irrational conspiracy theory (Hill & Allen, 2021). The concept of patriarchy does not generate neutrality; it is more likely to produce anger, frustration and rage among feminists and anti-feminists alike. For a transformation that will change organizational life for more than one woman at a time, we must work with the controversy that the concept of patriarchy is equally likely to generate among pro-feminist and anti-feminist forces. While Hemmings (2012) asserts that affects generated by disappointing (organizational) experiences are unstable and that their impact cannot be controlled, we see opportunities to mobilize affective dissonance in a radical feminist project for and in organizations. Feelings of discomfort are at the root of political transformation, both for forms of change that benefit the historically disadvantaged and for alterations that reduce the power of the dominant group.

Future research could examine the affective reactions to an invigoration of patriarchy in contemporary organizations with empirical studies on how different people in different organizations in different contexts feel about and respond to this term. Which actors could put patriarchy on the organizational agenda, what could be the role of feminist networks, activists and researchers in this and how does this vary across the world? What are the reactions of DEI professionals to the radical project, when many are so used to making the pursuit of equality palatable in postfeminist times (Nkomo and Hoobler, 2014)? What are the reactions of managers when they learn they have to work

on intersectional equality and dismantle multiple dimensions of discrimination simultaneously? In line with most research on patriarchy, we have concentrated on women's experiences of patriarchal structures and systems. We note, however, that the subjective experience of men in relation to patriarchy should also be part of this research agenda. Men are more often than not assigned the status of 'oppressor' but with little detail provided of how this is practised and felt by them as they negotiate 'patriarchal expectations of manhood' (Ferry, 2024: 19) to enact dominance or alternatively challenge conventional masculine norms. Challenging the unimaginative assumption that men's default stance within a patriarchal context is to subjugate is necessary as part of efforts to undo systemic discrimination.

Feminist research projects developing contemporary analyses of patriarchy would have to invest continuous research effort to keep track of inequalities across multiple dimensions and understand how marginalization and privilege are intertwined to develop interventions for transformational change in different local settings. To further such a radical feminist project of intersectional equality, there may be potential in action-research projects on transdisciplinary collaborations of feminist researchers and feminist activists who do not shy away from addressing the power within organizations. This research agenda opens up the possibility to investigate various manifestations of intersectional inequalities and give rise to avenues for change. Our hope is that this research will inspire the emergence of varieties of feminist subjects, and an array of feminist projects in which they can collaborate to generate a shift away from gender equality focused on one woman at a time.

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Note

1   It is important to note that postfeminism is not the only cultural phenomenon that has energized a revival of feminism. Other emergent feminisms that have propelled its popularity include neoliberal feminism, popular feminism, corporate feminism, choice feminism, commodity feminism, celebrity feminism and transnational business feminism, to name a few (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Favaro and Gill, 2018; Gill, 2016; Repo, 2020; Roberts, 2015). However, we focus on postfeminism as it has been put to work within gender and organizational studies to direct critical attention at the kinds of organizational subjects women are called to become at this historical juncture and to consider why gender equality proves so elusive (Lewis, 2014).

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