



Corporate Infiltration of the UN: Dire Consequences for Global Democracy, Women's Rights, and Social and Environmental Justice

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Acknowledgements

CRIAW-ICREF acknowledges its presence and work on the Indigenous Territories. We respectfully recognize the legacy of colonization upon Indigenous Peoples.

Copy Editor: Janine Bertolo with Consensual Copy

Design: The Public Studio

Layout: Kenya Thompson

Publisher: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW-ICREF)

250 City Centre Avenue, Suite 807, Ottawa, ON K1R K67

ISBN: 978-1-77483-011-6

This project has been funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada.



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Introduction: UN Multilateralism and Multinational Corporations

In 2019, António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) signed a Strategic Partnership Framework with the World Economic Forum (WEF).¹ More than 400 civil society organizations and 40 international networks called on the Secretary-General to end the recently signed Strategic Partnership Agreement. The open letter condemned the Agreement for delegitimizing the United Nations and weakening the role of states in global decision-making.² The Agreement committed the corporate sector to accelerate implementation of Agenda 2030,³ and focus on climate change, health, digital cooperation, women's rights, and education by strengthening institutional collaboration and coordination between the UN and multinational corporations. The Agreement grants multinational corporations preferential and deferential access to the UN System at the expense of States and public interest advocates such as feminist organizations.⁴

Needless to say, this preferential access undermines the mandate of the UN and compromises its ability to compel the corporate sector into any accountability for their actions and violations of the UN's rights-based conventions, and the principles and mandate of UN. What is even more troubling than the many negative repercussions of this corporate coup for global democracy, is why member states of the UN and the UN General Assembly itself were not involved in this decision. In short, who authorized the UN to become a "multi-stakeholder" global governing body?

The engagement of multinational corporations in the United Nations has been an issue of concern, critique and protest for women's groups and many civil society organizations for the last four decades. The multinational corporate sector is not a government, thus does not qualify to participate in UN global governance and decision making. Yet, as demonstrated above, multinational corporations buy access to the UN, through what would ordinarily be called corruption and claiming the global governance main stage as "multistakeholderism" partners.

¹ See the announcement and photo on the website of the WEF. <https://www.weforum.org/press/2019/06/world-economic-forum-and-un-sign-strategic-partnership-framework/>

² You can see the civil society letter here:

<https://www.cognitofirms.com/MultistakeholderismActionGroup/CorporateCaptureOfGlobalGovernanceTheWorldEconomicForumWEFUNPartnershipAgreementIsADangerousThreatToUN>

³ For information about Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals see: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

⁴ You can see the letter on this page: <https://www.tni.org/en/article/hundreds-of-civil-society-organizations-worldwide-denounce-world-economic-forums-takeover-of>

The United Nations was founded on the basis of unity of purpose as outlined in the UN Charter of 1945.⁵ The UN became a multilateral organization of nations based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its members, the commitment to stopping war and maintaining peace, upholding the human rights of men and women, and justice and international law. It committed itself to settling international disputes with “peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered.”⁶ All member nations are expected to abide by the principles enshrined in the Charter.

Over the years, the UN has been a leading multilateral organization for international governance, peace, and equality of nations, where multilateralism refers to the coming together of three or more nations for the defined purpose of collaboration and action to deal with shared global problems. It does not refer to multinational corporate engagement with nation states as equal partners. In an effort to claim legitimacy at the UN decision-making table, multinational corporations have been attempting to change this relationship by referring to themselves as “stakeholders” engaged in “partnerships” and “multistakeholderism” to legitimate their right to engage in the UN decision making processes. Multinational corporations rationalize their inclusion at the UN by claiming the business acumen, international experience, and financial resources to solve the world’s pressing problems (ignoring that they created and caused many of those problems in the first place).

The world has changed considerably since 1945 and the areas of engagement and concern for the UN in global governance have become more complex. Increasingly, the UN and member states are faced with multiple and intersecting crises. Some of these issues include the growing inequalities between and within states; the numerous impacts of the climate emergency; environmental degradation and habitat loss; migration; male violence against women and girls; the COVID-19 and HIV-AIDs pandemics; the global digital divide and unequal collection and control of citizens’ data; the debt crisis of poorer nations; and the space race.

What has also changed since 1945 is the nature of capitalism as an economic system and as an ideology. Today, we live in a world dominated by neoliberalism and globalization.

⁵ <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter>

⁶ Ibid.

The Global Proliferation and Dominance of Neoliberal Capitalism

Naomi Klein exposes the historical origin of neoliberalism to the University of Chicago under Milton Friedman in her book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007). She demonstrates how “free market” policies have come to dominate the world, not through the “natural” triumph of free market economics, but through the opportunistic exploitation of disaster-shocked people and countries in crisis. Through extensive research she demonstrates that neo-liberal theorists advocated the use of crises to impose unpopular policies while people were distracted. Examples include neoliberal policies imposed in the aftermath of Pinochet’s coup in Chile and the Iraq war which enabled the introduction of legislation that allowed Shell and BP to claim the vast oil reserves in Iraq. Additionally, after September 11, 2001, the Bush Administration quietly outsourced management of the “War on Terror” to two corporations, Halliburton and Blackwater.

The dominance of neoliberal capitalism as a global system was consolidated into a global corporate agenda by International Financial Institutions (IFIs), the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Neoliberalism is an ideology that centres the market as a “neutral” organizing principle for the allocation of resources, goods and benefits. It sidelines the goal of redistributing global resources to establish equality of nations. Additionally, neoliberalism values and rewards individualism and competition over community and collective effort and turns citizens into consumers.

Today we understand neoliberal capitalism manifests in deregulation, privatization, outsourcing, austerity measures, corporate tax cuts, debt crises for poorer nations, and free trade deals. These measures favour the corporate sector, undermine national governments and impoverish everyday working people (the 99%). These measures have been especially disempowering for diverse working women and girls who already experience systemic discrimination due to their class, race, and patriarchal social and gender norms.

Together deregulation, privatization, outsourcing, austerity measures, corporate tax cuts, the debt crisis of poorer nations and free trade deals enable corporations to operate with less restrictions and greater freedom to exploit people and the planet for super profits. Structural adjustment programs first enforced in much of the Global South, and later in the North, amplified the influence and power of corporations in government decision-making, and disempowered women’s groups and civil society organizations with cutbacks to critical public services and funding. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer and we

witnessed the impact of cross-cutting inequalities on the most marginalized populations of women and men.

Some of these austerity measures and their impacts include:

- **Loss of government revenue** due to increased financial subsidies from governments to the private sector. This loss of revenue led to cuts in government-funded public services such as health, education, public transport, water and sanitation services, non-market housing, social assistance programs, sexual and reproductive health services and services for women, men and children with disabilities or to their privatization and outsourcing. Government decisions weakened environmental protection measures clearing the way for further exploitation of Indigenous lands, an increase in the mining of fossil fuels and GHG emissions. These measures violate the human rights of women and girls, increasing their domestic burden, at the same time as blocking access to essential services, food, land and the global commons.
- Massive tax breaks for multinational corporations in their countries of origin as well as the countries they operate in; more tax breaks for the rich elites with a corresponding **increase in illicit financial flows (IFFs) and the growth of tax havens**; and gutting labour laws, workers' rights, and union density. Numerous free-trade deals led to the loss of well-paid domestic jobs that migrated to low-wage and unregulated jurisdictions, causing erosion of local economies and businesses that support local industry and workers, and further entrenching many women around the world in low-wage jobs in the service sector and in precarious work.
- Neoliberal policies have **weakened protections for the natural environment and diverse species**, at the same time as enabling expansion and growth of the extractives sector. Decade after decade and country after country we see the expansion of government subsidies for fossil fuel, gas, and minerals, as well as the harassment, arrests, and killings of Indigenous land, water and human rights defenders.
- The experiences of poor working women, men and marginalized communities topped media headlines because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In many countries, this pandemic finally pushed governments to treat the well-being of citizens as a key responsibility of the state.

The same multinational corporations that undermine governments, people, and nature are responsible for undermining the UN, global democracy, and multilateralism. Barbara Adams and Jens Martens (2015) of the Global Policy Forum, provide an in-depth analysis of the funding crisis in the UN caused by reduced contributions from member states because neoliberalism has drained their national revenues. The lack of operational funds

precipitated a financial crisis within the UN. Additionally, hostile right-wing heads of member states (often the U.S.) withhold funding in objection to certain UN programs and their operations in certain countries.

The UN financial crisis led to corporate and philanthropic overtures of financial support and tied the UN to their corporate agenda. During the time of Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-moon this was often spoken of as “reforms” needed in the UN system for greater accountability. Operating under the UN flag provided multinational corporations a cover of legitimacy and access to international decision making in a manner they had not had before. It also increased their access to governments and markets.

A partial list of the structural changes in the UN enabling corporate infiltration:

Extracted from: Fit for Whose Purpose? Private Funding and Corporate Influence in the UN. Global Policy Forum, 2015.

The **United Nations Fund for International Partnerships (UNFIP)**, established in March 1998, has played a significant role in the evolving relationship between the UN and corporate philanthropy. It was developed as an autonomous trust fund of the UN to interface with the **UN Foundation**, which is **not** a UN body. It was created by US billionaire Ted Turner to channel his unprecedented “gift” of \$1 billion USD to the UN. No mechanism existed to transfer large sums from individuals to the UN prior to this. Rather than cash, the donation was in Time Warner’s stock to be distributed over 10 years. The UN Foundation now operates as an independent body that fundraises from the private sector and governments and channels money independently to US-based organizations. The Foundation also has a tax-deductible status in the US (p. 22-34).

Between 1999 and 2014 the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation gave \$231 million USD in grants to the UN Foundation, mainly for projects in the areas of health and agriculture. Most of these funds did not benefit the UN development system and did not involve consultation with the UN and with UNFIP (p. 23).

As the result of corporate lobbying for several years previously, the **UN Global Compact**, was initiated in 1999 by then Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and approved by the UN in 2000. Created with the purpose of addressing “urgent global problems” under the cover of UN/corporate “partnerships”, the UN Global Compact office is located at UN Headquarters in New York and claims 14,670 companies in 162 countries as members. The Compact operates under 10 guiding principles,

including those related to human and labour rights, environment, and anti-corruption. UN oversight mechanisms do not apply to the Global Compact, which is funded with voluntary contributions from member states and the private sector. It provides “advisors” to the UN, hosts high profile events for corporate leaders to “mingle” with heads of state and serves as the platform for their political initiatives. The UN Global Compact acts as a key promotor of corporate interests at the UN (p.34-42).

The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) marked the first time that corporate partnerships ranked prominently in negotiations on the global agenda for sustainability.

In 2006, Kofi Annan created the **UN Office for Partnerships (UNOP)** whose mandate has expanded from the management of UNFIP to include management of the **UN Democracy Fund**, partnership advisory services and outreach. A key function of UNOP was to “Provide a dedicated gateway for company signatories to the Global Compact to navigate and engage the UN system in the identification and development of UN-business partnership opportunities” (p.30). In years following 2006, UNOP became actively involved in organizing high-level events with senior business representatives and corporate philanthropists to promote market-based solutions and raise private funds for addressing global problems (p.30). By 2010, over 99 companies had established various forms of partnerships with the UN (p.31).

UN Women and UN Global Compact

In 2010, UN Women and the Global Compact launched “Women’s Empowerment Principles (WEPs)” to “encourage” companies to enable women in the workplace and market under the rationale that companies have a stake in gender equality and women’s empowerment. United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed [whole heartedly endorsed the WEPs](#) saying, “This will help our women, families and communities, and it is certainly good for the bottom line in business.” Feminist groups expressed concern and outrage at the coopting of feminist principles and the language of women’s empowerment by the corporate sector. This is yet another example of the insidious nature of neoliberalism and highlights that *all* women do not have the same agenda for women’s rights, equalities and social justice.

Coca-Cola began funding various UN Women training programs for women entrepreneurs in 2011. In 2014, [UN Women launched its private sector Leadership Advisory Council](#) with CEOs from 10 corporations including L'Oréal, McKinsey, Goldman Sachs, Chanel, Anglo American, Tupperware, Ogilvy Public Relations, Coca-Cola and Unilever.

The recent Beijing+25 process (2019-2021), commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration, created Action Coalitions – partnerships between governments, women's groups, NGOs, civil society organizations, and of course, the private sector! for the implementation of specific actions for women's rights and gender equality over the next five years. Consumer goods company, Proctor & Gamble, (who produce and use innumerable chemicals harmful to humans and the natural environment) [committed to spending \\$10 billion](#) with women-owned and women-led businesses by 2025. Global payments company PayPal [committed more than \\$100 million](#) to advance financial inclusion and economic empowerment for women and girls around the world in the next five years.

Resisting the Multinational Corporate Agenda at the UN

In 2011, with pressure from women's groups, civil society organizations, some member states and from within the international civil service, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. They were revised in 2015 to bring a greater focus on due diligence and transparency. In 2019, the UNHRC and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) released Gender Dimensions of the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.⁷ Feminists have criticized these principles on several fronts, most notably that they propose gender be integrated into trade and investment agreements and that women be involved in their negotiation, rather than supporting a feminist analysis of the very structure of the international investment regime.⁸

⁷ <https://www.undp.org/publications/gender-dimensions-guiding-principles-business-and-human-rights>

⁸ <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/blog/new-un-gender-guidance-is-a-reminder-that-real-equality-requires-tackling-discrimination/>

Throughout these decades feminists and women's groups around the world have challenged and continue to challenge the multinational corporate agenda at the UN with campaigns for a corporate-free UN, lobbying for increased participation by women in decision making, and demanding binding agreements for accountability for the unelected representatives and the unrepresentative corporate sector in global democratic forums. They point out the dangers of undermining nation states in UN decision making and the need for greater accountability and transparency of private sector funding and activities in the UN system.

That said, feminism and the women's movement are not immune to the forces of neoliberalism.

In the past decade, in the US and the UK, high profile corporate and business women such as Facebook [Chief Operating Officer, Sheryl Sandberg](#), and [Ivanka Trump](#) declared themselves to be feminists. However, as Catherine Rottenberg points out in her book, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (2018), that these women are "unmoored from social ideals like equality, rights and justice and that their feminism construes women as atomised self-optimising and entrepreneurial." They "incite women to accept full responsibility for their own well-being and self-care and their audience is middle- and upper-class women." Rottenberg describes this form of feminism as exclusionary, founded in white privilege, class privilege and heteronormativity, and often aligned with neo-conservative agendas.⁹

According to Lea Sitkin, a feminism that is a handmaiden to capitalism isn't feminism at all. Sitkin's 2017 article for openDemocracy states that:

...a core flaw of neoliberal feminism is its failure to contend with hierarchies of privilege among women. While the American dream promises equal opportunity, economic inequality is higher, social mobility lower, and worker's rights significantly less developed in the US than in any other developed country. Many jobs women do in America are low-paid, exploitative and fail to provide basic economic security, never mind the sense of 'life purpose' described in Ivanka Trump's book, *Women Who Work*.¹⁰

Nancy Fraser, a professor of Philosophy and Politics at the New School for Social Research in New York, warns that feminists need to be critical of neoliberalism and be aware that not all feminists operate with a critical analysis of neoliberal capitalism. According to Fraser, many feminists have been coopted by a "liberal, meritocratic feminism" and are

⁹ <https://theconversation.com/how-neoliberalism-colonised-feminism-and-what-you-can-do-about-it-94856>

¹⁰ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/neoliberal-feminism/>

too focused on individual gains and opportunities, such as “breaking the glass ceiling” which benefits only a very few. She points out that “we need a feminism of the 99% which is about the overwhelming majority of women who do not crack any glass ceiling; they are stuck in the basement, they are cleaning up and sweeping up the broken pieces of glass.”¹¹

Militant, in the streets anti-neoliberal feminism is far from dead. Witness the critical leadership of diverse women in the Occupy Movement, the global mobilization for the Slut Walk, the global #MeToo movement, the mass mobilization of women in Mexico to challenge femicide, the successful campaign by Argentinian feminists for women’s rights to control their own bodies, the International Women’s Strike, and the inspirational mobilization of millions of girls and young women around the world who challenge all forms of power for their right to a future on a healthy planet Earth.

Feminists and women’s groups continue to challenge corporate power in their villages, towns, cities and countries. They continue to organize together and with nation states for a corporate free UN and for the implementation of existing conventions and agreements as well as pushing back on the push back on women’s rights. For a recent sample from 2019, see the joint statements of feminists from Europe, Central Asia and North America for Tax Justice and Gender Equality,¹² for Addressing Economic and Structural Barriers for Economic Justice,¹³ and for Corporate and Institutional Accountability to the Beijing+25 process and beyond.¹⁴

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