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Extended Commentary: A Comparative Analysis: #MeToo, Nari Movements, and the Price of Neoliberal Feminism

Cover Page Footnote

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**A Comparative Analysis:
#MeToo, Nari Movements, and the Price of Neoliberal Feminism**

It was 1997, when young activist Tarana Burke sat across the table from a 13-year-old girl; speechless. The young girl courageously shared her experience as a survivor of sexual violence with Burke—who could not help but feel outraged at the fact that this could happen to someone else... *too*. In that moment, Burke had no idea that what she would do next would inspire a decades-long movement.

The saying “Me Too” was not actually used until 2006 to raise awareness of rampant sexual misconduct in society.¹ Burke’s “Me Too” was one centered on *community healing and justice*. But still, it had not gotten the limelight yet. Then in 2017, with a single tweet, the #MeToo movement surged across the internet. White actress Alyssa Milano demanded “time is up” for serial sexual abuser, Harvey Weinstein. Sexual harassment, assault, and abuse survivors alike, across the world, rallied on Twitter and Instagram, roaring #MeToo. Even today, #MeToo remains *trending* on social media.

Since then, the Movement has brought down 202 serial abusers (including Harvey Weinstein), brought on non-disclosure agreement bans (NDAs), protections for workers, and more. Besides its effect on the *West*, #MeToo has also busted down the “behind closed doors” nature of assault transnationally. Rightfully so, the women associated with the rise of #MeToo deserve praise for their ability to use their privilege to expose culturally-ingrained male entitlement. Equally, white neoliberal feminists deserve criticism for further imposing structures of violence and discrimination against people of marginalized identities. To be clear, “Me Too” started back in 1997, with a young black activist, Tarana Burke; white, neoliberal feminists like Alyssa Milano continually take credit for the movement’s transnational boom.

Across the world, #MeToo was on everyone's Instagram feed. However, a movement, such as Bangladesh's *Nari: Mahila Bus Service Limited* was not taking up transnational screen time. Yet Bangladeshi feminists were breaking down barriers of their own. Just because it was not trending, does not speak to failure. The *Nari* movement was similar in cause and platform to #MeToo. The difference lies in the mobilization of resources and framing of their cause, in addition to culture and mentality. These distinct differences will be highlighted. Bangladeshi feminists did not fall to western Neoliberalism, like American feminists did. In short, Bangladeshi feminists were not concerned with the visibility of their movement in the same way the West was—but that is not necessarily a bad thing. Thus, visibility is not particularly a metric for success.

The actions of white, neoliberal feminists can be harmful. In the context of this text, a neoliberal feminist is primarily a variation of Western feminism, where such "*feminists*," by nature, direct their energy and resources towards the upper-middle classes,² thus lending itself to the erasure of intersectionality by placing a price on every aspect of inclusion. Moreover, neoliberal feminism is exclusively informed by the market calculus and motivated by capital gains as a means of empowerment. Capital, in this case, not only refers to *monetary value* but *cultural capital* as well. As such, neoliberal feminism (particularly amongst white women) is uninterested in traditional forms of achieving social justice or the intersectionality of mass mobilization. Instead, to white, neoliberal feminists, inclusion comes at a price. Such feminists detect the price of market freedom in areas of oppression, like a flare. Therefore, incentivizing them to flock towards the movement as an untapped market for profit. Thus, confusing such gestures as actual, tangible, direct action.

So, indeed, the #MeToo movement is in trouble. Such neoliberal and colonial prospective could render the movement ultimately useless, given its problematic nature. However, it is not unable to be remedied. In fact, “Me Too” activists and feminist scholars have echoed that the movement is at a pivotal moment for change.³ Through this paper, I argue that it is white, neoliberal feminists’ mobilization of inaccessible resources that forces people of marginalized identities to move towards other social movements. Thus, these actions communicate white, neoliberal feminists’ commodification of oppressed narratives as a means to garner monetary and cultural capital by reinforcing privilege through capitalist structures of systematic oppression. Through comparative analysis with Bangladesh’s *Nari* Movement, this commentary will illuminate the pitfalls of #MeToo’s adoption of neoliberalism as a means to combat social injustice.

Origins: The 2016 Election & Rise of Neoliberal Feminism

Just a year prior to #MeToo, author Nancy Fraser introduced the topic too many with her article, "Progressive Neoliberalism versus Reactionary Populism: A Choice Feminists Should Refuse."⁴ In it, Fraser asserts that in the wake of the 2016 election, feminists who had rallied behind Hillary Clinton were essentially left grasping at straws to formulate a new strategy for feminism. In the aftermath of the election of Donald Trump, Progressive Neoliberalism became an ally to "new social movements" (particularly feminism). Pitting groups such as feminists on one end and service-based business sectors (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood) at the other. This alignment preemptively configured the functions of the #MeToo as a white, neoliberal feminist movement. The structure of such power within a social movement disguises forces of cogitative capitalism and financialization, falsely presenting it as emancipation.

This movement towards neoliberal feminism is explicitly imperialistic and colonial in nature as it operates on behalf of American empire building.⁵ Further, this feminism seeks to impose, rather than negotiate. In other words, it seeks to dominate, not liberate. Feminism in nature seeks to promote equality for all—rather run into the same problem of gendered domination.⁶ Also, Neoliberal feminism is privatized and individualized with little commitment to the masses of women or non-binary gendered peoples—a westernized concept indeed. Which allows one to recognize parallels to #MeToo.

Precedence: The Problem of Profit

In recent years, white activists have experienced criticism for exploiting black trauma through artistry, from which they frequently profit, similar to straight activists and retailers turning profits from *pride* branded items during June. Now, privatized and individualized white, Neoliberal feminists make money off of #MeToo marketed DIY Rape Kits and necklaces. Yet, the problem with profit, is not uniquely monetary. In fact, profit can lie within garnering cultural capital through digital interaction. For instance, when activists make a post on Instagram, Twitter or Facebook—it does not come free of cost. Social media users can be understood as pawns in yet another Neoliberal institution; *Big Tech*.

To demonstrate, western ideas of success, typically lie within visibility—one statement western readers can resonate with is “If I’ve never heard of it, it must not be that good.” However, when the focus is social justice and movements, that is surely not always true. In fact, in the case of Bangladesh’s *Nari* Movement, it might’ve been for the best. In the example of *Nari*, Bangladeshi feminists did, in fact, establish their following online. However, the online platform was merely used to leverage communication and accessibility. In economics terms, the Facebook platform was a *Public Good*, non-exclusive and non-rival.⁷ This platform aided

Bangladeshi feminists in communicating strategy, providing support to one another, and hashing out ideas without endangering psychological space.⁸ Additionally, the fact that, transnationally, no one had heard of them—made their work even more meaningful because they did not need the incentive of cultural capital to keep moving.

In contrast, #MeToo values cultural capital as a metric and means of success. Likes, comments, new followers and reposts are all forms of capital exchanged in this digital, cultural arena. Like a market, social media platforms carry their own forms of exchange. For instance, western social media users typically make assumptions about themselves based on their number of follows, likes, comments or retweets. Thus, verifying their status as *incentives*, driving human behavior. Which would explain social movements, mega-boom on social media but failure to affect change in the physical setting. Sure, there are positives when it comes to dissemination of information, accessibility, and movement visibility associated with #hashtag activism. Yet, its success is rooted in method and mindset.

When white, Neoliberal feminists rely on forms of monetary and cultural capital as a means of empowerment and metric of success, they minimize comprehensive social action to a purchase. In most cases, exploiting narratives all to turn a profit. Ultimately abolishing pre-existing successful methods of union like community organizing and inclusion efforts.⁹ Then, further stratifying social structure within the movement to fit the needs of the most privileged, rather than oppressed.

Framing Resource Mobilization: Wrong Tools, Right Theory

Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) was developed in the 1970s, as a means to study social movements. The praxis of the argument relies on the idea that the success of a social movement is dependent upon resources mobilized by dominant actors (i.e., time, money, skills,

etc.). In addition, to the activists' abilities to effectively use or 'mobilize' them.¹⁰ Resources can be material, human oriented, socially organized, cultural, or moral.¹¹ Whatever form they come in; they must be accessible in order to truly measure success. Which is easy to do in the case of *Nari* and #MeToo.

Rather successfully, *Nari* organizers were effective with the resources they were able to mobilize. Digitally, Facebook was a platform that Bangladeshi feminists were familiar with and equally able to use. For activists that did not have social media or cellular devices—community organizing proved to be effective and accessible, as well. Bangladeshi feminists were deliberate in being accessible but also protective of their members in the fight to end sexual assault on public transportation. By meeting online or in-person, with spokespersons for the groups, they were able to write petitions and raise funds. Collectively the group agreed to place the funds towards a “Women’s Only Bus-Service,” which were fully operational and accessible to anyone who needed them. Additionally, they wrote to legislature, demanding reforms be made to the law—outlawing sexual assault and abuse. Which was granted, thus becoming the first mandate outlawing rape in the history of Bangladesh.¹²

On the other hand, #MeToo activists, such as Alyssa Milano took on social media platforms, not as a means of mobilization but stratification; however, not intentionally. To put it in perspective, Alyssa Milano (and other women like her) are white, which comes with inherent privileges, yet on top of that—she is also rich and a celebrity, thus setting precedent for inaccessibility. Simply put, the forefront action of famous women taking responsibility for #MeToo’s trending, puts many resources on the other side of the glass ceiling. Meaning women of color and people of marginalized identities needs are left at the bottom of the ladder, while white, neoliberal feminists are more easily able to climb ahead and break through.

Women of color are disproportionately affected by sexual assault and harassment; leaving black women to ask, when will “Me Too” become “We Too.”¹³ Per 100,000 workers, black women were three times more likely to be harassed in the workplace than white women.¹⁴ Yet it is the resources of white, financially liberated women that are being placed at the forefront of #MeToo. Neoliberal feminists tend to mobilize resources, such as time, money, and even the justice system. These are often the resources that people in the United States have unequal access to, particularly in discussions of race and class¹⁵ and particularly when discussing the criminal justice system, which has a history for mistreating black women. For instance, for every black woman who reports sexual violence, at least fifteen black women do not report.¹⁶ Further, to date, white, neoliberal feminists have effectively mobilized their time, energy, and money to benefit themselves—leading to their role at the center of the movement—granting inclusivity to few marginalized voices. Exploiting such narratives later for monetary and cultural capital. #MeToo has become corporatized, pandering to potential consumers instead of promoting justice. As a result, the #MeToo movement reflects the bourgeois' needs who have the resources and means to prosecute or seek justice through the legal system; that was not designed to benefit the marginalized in the first place.

Framing the Issue: Continuing “Wrong Tools, Right Theory”

Framing Theory, a phenomenon coined by scholars Benford and Snow involves the social construction of a societal happening. Moreover, it is in the way mass media sources, political figures, or other social actors present a social issue as a means to garner support.¹⁷ Perception and deception come to play when movement recruitment takes place; and messaging is everything. To gain a healthy following, movement organizers tend to stress different parts of their cause to appeal to different types of people. Through both *Nari* and #MeToo, one may

observe the ways by which these two movements, similar in cause differ in applying their framing techniques.

Nari's framing techniques were not too complicated. Given Bangladesh's history with women, the majority of Bangladeshi women are not shy when it comes to fighting for their rights. So, the vast majority of women actively participate in the social, cultural, economic, and political activities for which they need public transport to meet up the daily necessities.¹⁸ Given their recent, silent history of feminist activism, it is no surprise women in Bangladesh did not hesitate after learning 43 percent of women had reported being sexually assaulted in public;¹⁹ particularly on public transportation. Similarly, to #MeToo, female commuters created a digital space where women felt comfortable sharing their experiences. Also, the women responsible for facilitating such discussions were well-educated and members of the middle class.²⁰ However, they used this platform to enlist new members by using narrative to create a collective sense of belonging and raise awareness.²¹ Their cause was put up front as “what you see, is what you get.” Whereas #MeToo told a different story.

The trouble is most white, neoliberal feminists do not consciously comprehend why their methods of employment are problematic. Nevertheless, that does not mean they should not be critiqued. To put it best, #MeToo was not merely framed as inclusive, it was *advertised*. White, neoliberal feminists employed the west's most elite, high profile, and wealthy women as the face of #MeToo's brand. The movement cared more about visibility through cultural capital that neoliberal feminists further marginalized communities of color by advertising #MeToo as a safe haven. However, due to the nature of neoliberalism, women of color and people of marginalized identities' narratives were simply used as leverage— as a means to gain cultural capital and appear intersectional. Further implicating other less fortunate groups, whose narratives would

simply serve as leverage for profit. Then forcing them to resort to other movements—less specific to their cause, but rather *branded identity*.

Conclusion & Final Thoughts for Success

Identifying the problems associated with the role of neoliberal feminism in #MeToo is a major feat. However, comparatively analyzing *Nari: Mahila Bus Service Limited*, a movement similar in cause, yet differing in approach allows for reflection. As such, while neoliberalism is certainly not a new phenomenon, unlike neoliberal feminism. Through this paper, it is clear such feminism has no place in a women's movement. Tarana Burke's "Me Too" originated with the promise of powerful, effective mobilization. Otherwise, a movement for all women, striving to dismantle sexual violence for all. Finally, the #MeToo movement's intersectional failure is rooted in the resources mobilized by white, neoliberal feminists (time, energy, and money) to benefit themselves.²² Nearly the Movement fails to become intersectional when the resources mobilized are not accessible to all identities. In a world where our privilege is so public, it is easy to wonder if posting or purchasing is all privileged activists are doing. At its best, #MeToo has exposed male entitlement within our culture. This is important; however, it is not enough for survival and longevity. White, neoliberal feminists have yet to mobilize their most crucial resource—privilege.

ENDNOTES

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