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Preferred stream: Critique and contestation at Work

Elina Meliou, Aston Business School

Florence Villesèche, Copenhagen Business School

An examination of feminist collectives at work through theories of judgment

Feminist critiques of the gendered workplace (Acker, 1995) adeptly document women's experience of oppression, and discrimination in the male dominated organizations intending to change existing organizational structures and empower women at work and in life (Ashcraft, 2014). The need for this critique is particularly salient with the current trend of de-democratisation, restrictions on freedom (Lindenbaum et al., 2022) and the rise of populism (Kaltawasser et al, 2017), aiming at reducing women's reproductive rights and returning women to the home and family. In public life, political trust is declining and levels of participation and representation of women's voices in democratic institutions are low (Lehmann, Regel and Schlote, 2018). Raised feminist voices are increasingly met with anti-feminist backlash and gender equality is under attack, despite significant impetus from the #MeToo and #Blacklivesmatter movements.

Studies of feminist organizing and feminist practices in organizations show how the feminist project can be practised in the world of work and emphasize the necessity for collective action to address structural gender inequalities. Research highlights the importance of collectives who politically organise around gender equality issues, including social movements (Özbilgin and Erbil 2021), networks (Hersby, Ryan, and Jetten, 2009) and solidarity initiatives (Meliou, 2020), as conduits of collective social demands, and therefore as key actors in advancing gender equality. Studies for example show how women's cooperatives (Ashcraft, 2001; Vachhani and Pullen, 2018) promote solidarity and support that is compared to the domination of masculine structures and ideas in organisations. Women's cooperatives (Aazami et al., 2019), and women's activist movements (e.g. Daskalaki and Fotaki, 2017) are sites of political struggles and provide a platform for social transformation.

Concurrently, other forms of feminist collectives, notably women's business networks, are criticized for developing individualistic support strategies that call on women to take responsibility for professional success and change in their work conditions (Gill et al, 2017, Lewis et al 2019), failing to address organisational and structural inequalities that hinder women's careers (Petrucci, 2020). For instance, Sheryl Sandberg's popular book *Lean in* inspired the *Lean in Circles* by promoting individualistic strategies that women can deploy to enhance their careers without first addressing the gendered organisational structures. Consequently, the promotion of individualistic, performance-driven processes of self-realisation and freedom of choice undermines the feminist movement's collective action and jeopardises the realisation of 'true equality' (Rottenberg, 2019), resulting in an 'undoing of feminism' (McRobbie, 2009; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017). At the same time, other studies on women's business networks show how they may serve as forums for advocacy work

(Avdelidou-Fischer and Kirton, 2016; Villesèche and Josserand, 2017), displaying what Aronson calls ‘feminist consciousness’, i.e. an ‘awareness and critique of gender inequalities’ (2017: 335) that can create the base for collective action and world building (Villesèche, Meliou, and Jha, 2022).

This thus poses the question of how, in feminist research, we judge the feminist character of women’s collectives. To answer such a question, we engage with philosophical and political theories of judgment to discuss how we judge on whose behalf such collectives are forming and acting; the means and processes they are deploying, and the ends that are claimed. To do so, we review the literature on feminist organizing in and around the workplace vis-à-vis contemporary feminist theories of judgement including the ones proposed by Nussbaum (2000), Benhabib (2018), and Zerilli (2016). Doing so lets us show the limits and potentialities of these different takes on the way feminist organizational research studies feminist collectives and judges what change they bring about in the world of work.

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