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From Corporate Governance to Global Governance: Locating varieties of genderwashing

Maisy Bentley

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Author:

Maisy Bentley graduated from Victoria University of Wellington – Te Herenga Waka in 2022 with a joint Bachelor of Laws (1st class Honours) and Bachelor of Arts, being granted the Sir John McGrath Prize in Public Law and the Thompson Reuters Prize in Contract Law. She has worked in a private law firm in Wellington, and as Executive Officer for UN Association of New Zealand, and intern for UNHCR in Canberra. Since 2023 Maisy has been studying at Oxford University on a Rhodes Scholarship, with a Masters in Women, Gender, and Sexuality (2024) and completing an M.Phil. in Law researching climate change litigation and human rights. She has held positions as a teaching fellow at VUW (2023 and 2024), has authored several publications and provided research and editing assistance to several more. At Oxford she has led the Oxford Climate Society's Climate in the Curriculum Project, is a research assistant for the Oxford Handbook on Algorithmic Governance and the Law and is Co-Convenor of the Feminist Jurisprudence Discussion Group in Oxford University's Law Faculty.

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Abstract

The overarching aim of this paper is to explore and describe ways in which various notions of 'genderwashing' are present in the emerging system of global governance – both political and corporate.

The paper reviews the (recent) history of the concept and practice. It adopts one framework of types of genderwashing that has been used within scholarship to locate genderwashing within the context of corporate governance, and applies this to global political governance.

To that end, the paper locates examples of five varieties of genderwashing within the United Nations. Those five varieties are: selective discourse, empty gender claims and policies, dubious certifications and labels, co-opted NGO endorsements and partnerships, and ineffective public voluntary programmes.

The paper then highlights several considerations or recommendations that need to be engaged with when seeking to understand the concept of genderwashing in global political governance rather than corporate governance. It concludes with a few areas of suggested potential further research or discussion in light of these findings.

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Executive Summary

Greenwashing is a term with which most would be familiar. The term was coined in 1980 but has risen to prominence in recent years driven in part by increasing claims and cases concerning greenwashing.¹ The number of greenwashing cases in the UK in 2024 was 179% higher than in 2018.²

A related but perhaps less familiar term is ‘genderwashing’. The term takes aim at advertising action similar to greenwashing but which misrepresents or overstates claims of gender equality or women’s empowerment as opposed to sustainability or climate action. Although the term may not be as familiar, there are several notable examples dating back many years including Dove’s ‘real beauty’ campaign which was first launched in 2014.³

In recent years genderwashing has become the subject of academic attention. Existing literature almost exclusively analyses genderwashing in the corporate governance context. There are indications, however, that such practices are not limited to only corporates. For example, a 2015 Guardian article cites UN campaign ‘HeforShe’ as an example of genderwashing alongside several examples of corporate advertisements⁴ and claims of genderwashing against autocrats who use their track record on gender to obscure other issues such as free and fair elections.⁵ This highlights an interesting gap in the issue of genderwashing within the context of global governance.

The overarching aim of this paper is to explore and describe ways in which various notions of genderwashing are present in the emerging system of global governance – both political and corporate.

- The paper first gives a brief overview of the relationship between the United Nations as an institution and women in that institutional context, through key milestones such as the creation of UN Women, the signing of the Beijing Declaration, and CEDAW.
- Secondly, it further explains the Lyon & Montgomery greenwashing framework and its adaptation to a genderwashing framework by Walters.
- Thirdly, it takes each of the varieties in turn, describing it, providing an example of how that variety manifests in corporate governance, and then, through a case study, engaging in a discussion of how it can be located within global governance. Those five varieties are: selective discourse, empty gender claims and policies, dubious certifications and labels, co-opted NGO endorsements and partnerships, and ineffective public voluntary programmes.

The paper then highlights several considerations or recommendations that should be engaged with when seeking to understand the concept of genderwashing in global governance. These considerations are:

¹ Andrew Nakamura “The History of Greenwashing and its Modern Evolution” The Climate Club. (25 September).

Available at: <https://www.theclimateclub.co/sustainabilityblog/the-history-of-greenwashing-and-its-modern-evolution>

² Jasmin Jessen “The State of Greenwashing Around the World” Sustainability Magazine. (1 November 2024). Available at: <https://sustainabilitymag.com/articles/the-state-of-greenwashing-around-the-world>

³ Nosheen Iqbal “Femvertising: how brands are selling #empowerment to women” The Guardian. (12 October 2015). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/12/femvertising-branded-feminism>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Elin Bjarnegård & Pär Zetterberg, “How Autocrats Use Women’s Rights to Boost Themselves” Foreign Policy. (3 June 2022). Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/03/autocrats-gender-equality-women-rights-rwanda/>

- First, criteria may need to be reversed or adapted; for example, the criteria of ‘co-opted NGO partnerships’ may not be directly applied because a global governance institution may not be the body coopting the partnership but instead allowing their partnership to be co-opted.
- Secondly, there appear to be two varieties of genderwashing (misleading branding and narratives) that are not ripe for analysis in the context of global political governance.
- Thirdly, the examples that can be located in global governance tend to fit into the broader understanding of genderwashing where messages or promotional materials do not reconcile with broader practices, as opposed to a narrow view that requires them to be directly misleading.

The paper concludes with a few areas of suggested potential further research or discussion in light of these findings.

- First, it would be suitable to conduct further research to establish what the nature and degree of harm is from genderwashing in the context of global governance and to whom it is caused.
- Secondly, it would be useful to conduct research into the different types of genderwashing that may exist within global governance and how they reinforce each other, for example, within global governance institutions (such as the UN-Bretton Woods system) versus by states themselves.
- Thirdly, more research may be useful on the relative levels of motivation: whether or not there is less motivation to explore the issue in global political governance and, if so, what the reason(s) may be.
- Finally, further research into the two varieties that do not appear to be as suitable or common in the context of genderwashing (specifically, why this may be the case) would enrich understanding of genderwashing in the global governance context and especially regarding how it compares to genderwashing in the context of corporate governance.

Part 1. Defining and Problematising Genderwashing

Genderwashing is still an emergent concept and has not been clearly defined.⁶ Attempts at a general definition conclude that “genderwashing is an organizational tool that presents the myth of gender equality in organizations through discourse and text”.⁷ Walters, a prominent writer on the topic, defines genderwashing as, “contradictory claims made by corporations whose products, business model or employment practices are inherently damaging to women and girls”.⁸

Walters also helpfully collates a series of examples that have been described as genderwashing to show the diversity of its use and boundaries especially in different disciplinary contexts:

“It has been variously used to describe rescue discourses about Afghan women and the War on Terror (Mason, [2013](#), p. 65); the impact of the presence of gender experts within an institution on its reputation and policies (Kunz & Prügl, [2019](#), p. 6); the business case logic put forward by the World Bank for investing in women’s empowerment (Gerard, [2019](#)); a ‘discourse of false state feminism,’ whereby authoritarian regimes make ‘claims to promote gender equality while simultaneously undermining it’ in order to appease international institutions or investors (Allan, [2020](#), p. 106); and ‘a particular organizational process that perpetuates the myth that an organization is practicing equity and fairness’ (Fox-Kirk et al., [2020](#), p. 587).”

This paper will adopt Walters’ ‘varieties of genderwashing’ as a framework consisting of seven types of conduct that can be described as genderwashing. Walters’ framework builds on the work of Lyon & Montgomery who identified the same seven types of conduct in relation to greenwashing. This framework is chosen for two reasons:

- First, because of its robustness. Lyon & Montgomery conducted a comprehensive review of greenwashing. The review covered a 34-year period and analysed over five thousand articles. Lyon & Montgomery used the articles to “synthesize this fragmented and multidisciplinary literature, showing that greenwash is a broad umbrella term that encompasses a variety of specific forms of misleading environmental communication.”⁹ One result of their work was generating seven categories of greenwash: selective disclosure, empty green claims and policies, dubious certifications and labels, co-opted NGO endorsements and partnerships, ineffective public voluntary programmes, misleading narrative and discourse, and misleading visual imagery.¹⁰
- Secondly, this framework has been chosen because of its specificity. Walters has since taken that framework and applied it to instances of genderwashing. Importantly, while her work focuses on corporate governance, Walters contextualises that corporate governance within the international

⁶ Rosie Walters (2022) Varieties of gender wash: towards a framework for critiquing corporate social responsibility in feminist IPE, *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:5, 1577-1600.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Lyon, T. P., & Montgomery, A. W. (2015). The means and end of greenwash. *Organization & Environment*, 28 2, 223–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026615575332>

¹⁰ Ibid.

political economy, and this goes some way to bridging the gap between corporate and global political governance.

For the purpose of this paper, I therefore define genderwashing as “an organizational tool that presents the myth of gender equality in organizations through discourse and text.”¹¹

The existing debate/gap in the literature

Despite the emerging position of genderwashing within the international political economy literature, scant attention has been paid to genderwashing, especially within the law.¹² Scholarship that does exist looks at the presence of genderwashing in corporate governance.¹³ Some scholars are beginning to think about genderwashing in the context of global political governance. However, this appears to be in the context of their partnerships with corporate bodies (for example, the use of International Women’s Day by corporate actors).¹⁴ An additional example can be found in thinking about how individual state actors may deploy genderwashing by signing up to certain ‘soft law’ initiatives while ultimately maintaining a foreign policy position that does not seek to advance women’s rights.¹⁵ Thinking has not yet occurred on how forms of genderwashing that can be found in corporate governance may be present in core global governance institutions.

Global governance refers to the governance that occurs at an international level on issues that transcend national borders. It includes the system of institutions, rules, norms, and procedures that enable international cooperation on such issues. Global governance is not global government and is “a dynamic complex process of interactive decision that operates within an agreed global framework”.¹⁶ This paper seeks to focus on only one aspect of that system of global governance: the United Nations (‘UN’). The UN has been selected as the main site of inquiry because it is central in global governance as the principal

¹¹ Fox-Kirk, W., Gardiner, R. A., Finn, H., & Chisholm, J. (2020). Genderwashing: the myth of equality. *Human Resource Development International*, 23(5), 586–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2020.1801065>

¹² The very limited discourse that has occurred only in the last few years has been in the fields of business studies, critical policy and international political economy, but not law. See for example Wendy Fox-Kirk, Rita A. Gardiner, Hayley Finn & Jennifer Chisholm (2020) Genderwashing: the myth of equality, *Human Resource Development International*, 23:5, 586-597, DOI: [10.1080/13678868.2020.1801065](https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2020.1801065) and Rosie Walters (2022) Varieties of gender wash: towards a framework for critiquing corporate social responsibility in feminist IPE, *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:5, 1577-1600, DOI: [10.1080/09692290.2021.1935295](https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2021.1935295); Sharan Grewal, M. Tahir Kilavuz, and Yuree Noh, “Does genderwashing taint the struggle for gender equality?” *Brookings commentary* (9 August 2023).

¹³ See e.g. Rosie Walters (2022) Varieties of gender wash: towards a framework for critiquing corporate social responsibility in feminist IPE, *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:5, 1577-1600; Natalie Stafford “Genderwashing: an ESG risk year round, not just on International Women’s Day” *S-RM* (8 March 2023). Available at: <https://www.s-rminform.com/latest-thinking/genderwashing-an-esg-risk-international-womens-day#:~:text=Another%20potential%20red%20flag%20for,any%20ESG%20due%20diligence%20engagement.%22>; Terry Morehead Dworkin and Cindy A. Schipani (2018) “The Role of Gender Diversity in Corporate Governance” *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Business Law* 21, 1.

¹⁴ Natalie Jester, Rosie Walters, Gender Washing War: Arms Manufacturers and the Hijacking of #InternationalWomensDay, *International Political Sociology*, Volume 18, Issue 3, September 2024, olae021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olae021>

¹⁵ Natalie Jester, Rosie Walters, Gender Washing War: Arms Manufacturers and the Hijacking of #InternationalWomensDay, *International Political Sociology*, Volume 18, Issue 3, September 2024, olae021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olae021>

¹⁶ ‘Our Global Neighbourhood’, Report of the Commission on Global Governance (Oxford, OUP; 1995), pp. xvi, xvii; <https://nzcgs.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/1.-2015-July-Global-Governance-and-the-UN-Security-Council.pdf>

body for bringing states throughout the world into dialogue on a range of issues from peace and security to economic, social and environmental pillars of development.

Given that the concept of genderwashing, especially in legal scholarship, is in its infancy, this paper should be modest in aspiration. There is no large body of scholarship on which to draw, nor are there any existing case-studies in global governance to build on or compare and contrast. As a result, the paper is explorative and tentative. Its aim is to demonstrate how the framework of genderwashing that currently exists in corporate governance may be situated in the context of global governance. It is not a comprehensive assessment of all the ways in which it may be present nor an assessment of the related impacts.

Further, the paper is not normative. It accepts that both the boundaries and impacts of genderwashing may be contestable. Many of the examples referenced have had a very positive impact and it may be that, on balance, even though they may fall into the category of genderwashing, this does not dismiss the positive impact they have had. This stands in contrast to consumer law where there are clear restrictions on misleading consumers and those restrictions are well established and their rationale well explored.¹⁷

The exact harms of global governance institutions and actors being misleading about their claims to gender equality are not as well explored or established. Further exploration of the potential impact of misleading claims is needed. For example, even a question of who is potentially being misled in the context of global governance may be more complex. Who are the ‘consumers’ in this context? Is it States? Is it individual citizens? Is it NGOs who partner with such organisations? Is it individuals who work for such organisations and subsequently experience the impacts of gender inequality?

This paper does not answer those questions. Rather, the paper demonstrates that practices which fit within the definition of genderwashing do in fact occur in global governance institutions, which is the first step in establishing the impetus for such further research and discussion. The contribution of this paper is to take that first step.

Part 2.

Overview of the UN system and women

This part provides a brief overview of the relationship between the UN as an institution and women in an institutional context and through key milestones such as the creation of UN women, the signing of the Beijing Declaration, and CEDAW.

Consideration of the place and role of women within the UN system offers a degree of nuance to the dominant narrative about the United Nations. The creation of the UN after the Second World War and the milestone conference in San Francisco where 50 countries came together to commit to cooperation, international peace and security is often discussed. Less discussed, however, is the fact that all 50 states

¹⁷ See e.g. Oliver Bray , Giles Crown, Rupert Earle, Geraint Lloyd-Taylor (2024) “Advertising Law and Regulation” Bloomsbury.

had male-dominated governments, only 3% of the representatives at the conference were women and only 4 women signed the UN Charter.¹⁸ One of those women who attended was Åse Gruda Skard. She was the only woman in the Norwegian delegation. She came to be at the conference due to the activism of a Norwegian women's rights group in London – a significantly different career path and journey to the UN than most of the men in their governments' delegations.

Participating in the UN system by being part of a government delegation as an NGO representative is still common today for women's organisations and their members. This is especially so when it comes to women's rights within the UN System such as the Commission on the Status of Women ("CSW") and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women ("CEDAW"). Another of the women who signed the UN Charter was Bertha Lutz, a delegate from Brazil. Farima Sator and Elise Dietrichson, who went looking for the missing histories of women within the UN, note that her contribution and her memoirs were "almost untraceable in history books".¹⁹ Notably not all women's voices have been excluded with equal measure, and the contributions of women from the Global South are particularly marginalised and undervalued. A comprehensive account that does justice to the varied contributions of women throughout the UN is beyond the scope of this paper, but other scholars have undertaken impressive and comprehensive work to recover and capture these histories.²⁰

Women's rights were acknowledged from the outset of the UN. In its 1945 founding Charter it included non-discrimination on the basis of sex as well as race, language, or religion. Feminists, especially Latin American feminists and pan-American feminists, were actively working to shape and make contributions to the UN from the 1940s to '60s.²¹ Within only a year of the Economic and Social Council being formed, it "adopted a resolution for the formation of a separate, free-standing functional commission on women in 1946".²² Women's rights were again recognised in 1948 when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed. However, progress significantly improved following the global uptake of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and '70s.²³ The year 1975 was declared by the UN General Assembly as International Women's Year, and the World Conference on Women was held in Mexico. It had "repercussions such as the initiators had hardly dared to dream of".²⁴ From the conference came a World Plan of Action, and the General Assembly declared 1976-1985 the UN Decade for Women. Two more conferences followed: Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985). These global conferences were significant

¹⁸ Torild Skard "Introductory note Learning journey for a feminist: Making women visible, recognizing women's achievements, and demanding power to women" in Rebecca Adami, and Dan Plesch (eds) *Women and the UN: A New History of Women's International Human Rights*. Routledge, page 14; Fatima Sator and Elise Dietrichson "Women of the UN: Shifting the Narrative by revealing forgotten voices" in Rebecca Adami, and Dan Plesch (eds) *Women and the UN: A New History of Women's International Human Rights*. Routledge., p. 19.

¹⁹ Fatima Sator and Elise Dietrichson "Women of the UN: Shifting the Narrative by revealing forgotten voices" in Rebecca Adami, and Dan Plesch (eds) *Women and the UN: A New History of Women's International Human Rights*. Routledge., p. 20

²⁰ Rebecca Adami, and Dan Plesch (eds) *Women and the UN: A New History of Women's International Human Rights*. Routledge.

²¹ Elise Dietrichson and Fatima Sator (2021) "The Latin American women: how they shaped the UN charter and why southern agency is forgotten" in Rebecca Adami, and Dan Plesch (eds) *Women and the UN: A New History of Women's International Human Rights*. Routledge.

²² E/RES/2/11; Hilary Charlesworth and Christine Chinkin (2013) "The creation of UN Women" . RegNet research paper series , 2013/7. Regulatory Institutions Network (RegNet), Canberra, Australia.

²³ Rebecca Adami, and Dan Plesch (eds) *Women and the UN: A New History of Women's International Human Rights*. Routledge.

²⁴ Hilikka Pietilä and Jeanne Vickers (1996) "Making Women Matter: The Role of the United Nation" Zed Books, p. 76. As quoted in Susanne Zwingel (2016) *Translating International Women's Rights: The CEDAW Convention in Context*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK.

for women building knowledge and recognition of women's rights as human rights but also creating spaces where most delegates and decision-makers were women.²⁵ In 1979 CEDAW was signed. It was regarded as a significant milestone due mainly to its comprehensive and legally-binding nature.²⁶ It also "manifested the international momentum in the field of women's rights" that had been building in prior years.²⁷ The year 1995 again marked a significant milestone with the creation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Declaration is "considered the most progressive blueprint ever for advancing women's rights."²⁸ It identifies 12 critical areas, namely: poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, economy, decision-making, institutions, human rights, media, environment and the girl child.²⁹

In 2010 the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, known as UN Women, was created. The entity amalgamates four existing parts of the UN system; its creation was motivated in part by a broader move towards institutional coherence and concerns about weaknesses generated by the fractured system.³⁰ Progress continues to be made; for example, "in 2017 UN Secretary-General António Guterres appointed 50/50 women and men in the UN Senior Management Group for the first time."³¹ In many ways the UN is a sum of its parts, those parts being the member states. As such, the progress of women in the UN system is closely linked to the progress of women within member states, particularly their progress within political or diplomatic roles that have influence in the UN system. Increased participation of women in politics globally has been slow and, as such, that has been reflected in the UN system.

Part 3

Varieties of genderwashing and their presence in the UN system

Introduction to framework

The Walters framework has been described above. Walters developed the framework from the Corporate Social Responsibility context applied to greenwashing, and applied it to the international political-economy context. It goes some way to bridging the gap between corporate and global governance.

²⁵ See e.g. Aoife O'Donoghue and Adam Rowe (2021) "Feminism, global inequality, and the 1975 Mexico city conference" in Rebecca Adami and Dan Plesch (eds) *Women and the UN: A New History of Women's International Human Rights* Routledge. Susanne Zwingel (2016) *Translating International Women's Rights: The CEDAW Convention in Context*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK.

²⁶ Susanne Zwingel (2016) *Translating International Women's Rights: The CEDAW Convention in Context*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK.

²⁷ Ibid at 42.

²⁸ UN Women (2015) "Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Beijing +5 Political Declaration and Outcome" Policy paper. UN Women Headquarters Office, New York. Accessible at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/01/beijing-declaration>

²⁹ Annie Rohan (2023). Empowering Women: The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. *MCN, The American Journal of Maternal/ Child Nursing*, 48 (5), 237-237. doi: 10.1097/NMC.0000000000000935.

³⁰ Hilary Charlesworth and Christine Chinkin (2013) "The creation of UN Women" . RegNet research paper series , 2013/7. Regulatory Institutions Network (RegNet), Canberra, Australia; UN Secretary-General, "Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform", Letter of Transmittal to the President of the UN General Assembly, Doc A/51/950 of 14 July 1997.

³¹ Rebecca Adami and Dan Plesch (eds) (2021) *Women and the UN: A New History of Women's International Human Rights* Routledge, page 14.

This section will further bridge the gap by locating five of the varieties of genderwashing within the practices of the UN. Five of the varieties relate to institutions and their approaches including institutional communications, policies, branding, partnerships, and programmes. Two of the varieties of genderwashing are associated explicitly with advertising and impressions given in advertising. This section also explores how such imagery, narratives and discourse may be incongruent with the actual practices of the Organisation. As the UN does not engage in advertising in a commercial context, the latter two are not readily suitable for analysis. Accordingly, this paper focuses only on the first five varieties: selective disclosure, empty green claims and policies, dubious certifications and labels, co-opted NGO endorsements and partnerships, and ineffective public voluntary programmes.³²

Varieties of genderwashing in global governance

(i) *Selective discourse*

The first variety of genderwashing in Walter's framework is selective discourse, which involves emphasising only areas of improvement or achievement. In corporate governance this may include boasting about paid parental leave, the promotion of women or other features that portray an image of gender equality in the workplace while in reality having serious issues when it comes to gender discrimination. One example is provided by Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corporation. The company "boasts of having featured on the *Working Mother* list 14 times (Novartis, n.d.). Yet, in 2010, Novartis lost the 'largest gender discrimination case to ever go to trial' (Sanford Heilser LLP, n.d.), with a further suit filed in 2015."³³ The claims established in the 2010 suit highlighted discriminatory practices in particular to mothers and pregnant women, and "the court awarded 5,600 sales representatives over USD 250 million in damages on the grounds of gender pay and promotion and pregnancy discrimination." (Sanford Heilser LLP, n.d.)" Other claims included "male managers openly discussing preferring not to hire young women and encouraging female employees to get an abortion or not to get pregnant"³⁴ (Velez v. Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corporation).³⁵

One example of this selective discourse within the global governance of the UN system is International Women's Day, especially the way it is used by corporations. The UN theme for the most recent International Women's Day was "invest in women" highlighting five key areas: Investing in women, a human rights issue, ending poverty, implementing gender-responsive financing, shifting to a green economy and care society, and supporting feminist change-makers. Even if the UN is more earnest in its efforts and its International Women's Day themes highlight the struggles that women currently face as well as noting celebration and calling for improvements to the situation, it could be argued that this enables corporates to virtue signal/engage in selective discourse. Feminists have criticised the way in which corporations especially use International Women's Day as a platform for selective and hollow discourse.

³² Lyon, T. P., & Montgomery, A. W. (2015). The means and end of greenwash. *Organization & Environment*, 28 2, 223–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026615575332>

³³ Rosie Walters (2022) Varieties of gender wash: towards a framework for critiquing corporate social responsibility in feminist IPE, *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:5, 1577-1600.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

- Vivienne Hayes, chief executive of the Women’s Resource Centre, has said: “This use of International Women’s Day by companies is part of the co-option of feminism and women’s equality into a much more mainstream position, that has led to the corporatisation of the advancement of women’s rights.”³⁶
- YWCA chief executive Frances Crimmins, has observed that many International Women’s Day events, particularly in corporate spaces, had become ‘tokenistic’.³⁷ She noted explicitly that, much like Walters’ critique of selectively focusing on positive discourse, “we do need to celebrate the wins” but argued that the many ways in which gender inequality persisted should not be ignored.³⁸
- International Women's Development Agency policy and advocacy adviser in Australia stated that “hosting IWD events was often used by companies to advance their credentials on gender equality – at the expense of women.”³⁹ This is a very similar description to the way in which Walters characterises genderwashing.

(ii) *Empty gender claims and policies*

The second variety of genderwashing concerns empty gender claims and policies. These are closely related to the first criteria. It is the creation and promotion of claims and policies that give a perception of an organisation being gender responsive but in fact make little difference for the women in the organisation or the women impacted by its work. One suggested example from the corporate context of greenwashing “is the creation of a ‘sustainability’ team within a corporation, whose role is related to improving the environmental performance across the organization, but who in reality are largely ignored.”⁴⁰ Walters draws a direct equivalent between such sidelined sustainability teams and “womens networks”. She highlights in particular, that although there is a small amount of research showing positive impacts of such initiatives for the women involved, such as increased confidence and colleagues with which they can share and receive career advice and emotional support, on the whole such initiatives are negative. This is because “the burden of challenging and resolving inequalities within a corporation falls on the shoulders of women, without addressing the many complex institutional and cultural factors that lead to discrimination against women, or indeed asking men to engage with these factors”.⁴¹ Another equivalent can be found in the creation of a ‘gender task force’ whose role is to improve gender equality but in reality is only able to make recommendations which may well be ignored.

³⁶ Alexandra Topping “International Women's Day risks becoming 'corporate Mother's Day', feminists say” (7 March 2020) The Guardian.

³⁷ Jostina Basta “Has International Women's Day become too far removed from its protest origins?” (8 March 2024) ABC News. Accessible at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-03-08/repoliticising-international-womens-day-creating-change/103561992>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Lyon, T. P., & Montgomery, A. W. (2015). The means and end of greenwash. *Organization & Environment*, 28 2, 223–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026615575332>, p 237; Rosie Walters (2022) Varieties of gender wash: towards a framework for critiquing corporate social responsibility in feminist IPE, *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:5, 1577-1600.

⁴¹ Gerard, K. (2019). Rationalizing ‘gender-wash’: Empowerment, efficiency and knowledge construction. *Review of International Political Economy*, 26(5), 1022–1042, p. 1026 as cited in Rosie Walters (2022) Varieties of gender wash: towards a framework for critiquing corporate social responsibility in feminist IPE, *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:5, 1577-1600.

A relevant example of such initiatives in the UN system may be that of the role of UN Women, specifically within the context of gender parity within the UN. Although UN Women more generally undertakes a range of tangible and important work, its role within the context of achieving gender parity within the UN may ring hollow upon investigation. For example, its website notes that “thirty-two UN entities *encourage* gender balance within their own organizations, many by drawing on UN Women’s support.” Entities simply encourage gender balance and UN women can only support them. There are not targets or quotas or clear measurements and initiatives. UN Women also refers to a voluntary network, the UN Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE), exactly the kind which Walters critiques. Furthermore, the IANWGE website has not been updated since 2014, which indicates that this workstream is not a priority, and the network is so insignificant that it can be dormant for 10 years before being removed from the website.

The biennial Secretary-General’s Report on the Improvement of the Status of Women is the UN’s main report on the equal representation of women in the UN system. This means that the actual reporting and policy-setting mechanism is not held by UN Women but by the Secretary-General’s office. This serves to make it appear as if there is a woman-led, woman-centric organisation tasked with achieving gender parity. Yet it only has ‘encouraging’ functions, while reporting and policy-setting mechanisms are withheld. Such mechanisms are held by the Secretary-General, an office which has not been held by a woman in its almost 80-year history – ironically, perhaps, the clearest embodiment of gender inequality within the UN.

(iii) Dubious certifications and labels

Lyon and Montgomery (2015) define the third variety of greenwashing as the use of dubious certifications and labels, with the aim of ‘substituting the credibility of a third-party certifier for a firm’s own claims’ (p. 237).⁴² There are many such certifications in the greenwashing space. One is provided by Cadbury’s use of the ‘GreenPalm’ label. Cadbury claims that it “is a responsible business” and it purchases “certified sustainable palm oil”.⁴³ GreenPalm is a certification system used by the RSPO⁴⁴ to encourage the production of sustainable palm oil. Regardless of the credibility of such labels, a Guardian investigation shows that, “only a small fraction of Cadbury’s global chocolate production is so certified. The GreenPalm website shows that it had obtained certification for 2,800 tonnes of palm oil through 2024 out of a total annual consumption of 40,000 tonnes”.⁴⁵ This creates the misleading impression that all Cadbury palm oil is sourced according to the GreenPalm certification, but this does not appear to be the case.

In the context of genderwashing, a common example is that of the pink ribbon (the symbol associated with breast cancer awareness) and research being used on products that in fact can cause breast cancer. Academic research has documented examples including the “prevalence of the pink breast cancer ribbon on products containing alcohol, which accounts for approximately 8% of the global breast cancer disease

⁴² Rosie Walters (2022) Varieties of gender wash: towards a framework for critiquing corporate social responsibility in feminist IPE, *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:5, 1577-1600.

⁴³ “Chocolate boycott supported” (17 July 2009) Stuff.

⁴⁴ Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil. Accessible here: <https://rspo.org/>

⁴⁵ Fred Pearce “Green palm oil’ claims land Cadbury’s in sticky chocolate mess” (20 August 2009) *The Guardian*.

burden”.⁴⁶ Similarly, documenting “action by the Breast Cancer Fund against Revlon, who market beauty products such as lip gloss featuring the pink ribbon, despite their products having been found to contain ‘formaldehyde-releasing chemicals, parabens, and carbon black (linked to cancer); endocrine disruptors (linked to breast cancer and thyroid disorders); and *p*-phenylenediamine (a respiratory toxicant)””.⁴⁷

Walters argues that “this critique could also be expanded to include corporations adopting the pink ribbon as a symbol when their very existence or business model perpetuates harmful discourses about women and girls.” Walters articulates that expanding the critique in this way “demonstrates the potential for the use of the concept of genderwashing to critique corporations’ practices in a way that goes far beyond simply questioning the content of products labelled in certain ways.” It then becomes a tool for highlighting and evaluating claims (such as “to be supporting, empowering or promoting the health of women”) which must be situated and contextualised in the broader practices of an organisation, including those which may harm women.⁴⁸

One example of Walters’ broader critique within the UN system may be found in the use of the pink ribbon symbol by its peacekeeping forces (known colloquially as the ‘Blue Helmets’): “The culture of PKOs still too often prevents women and men from equal participation and perpetuates discrimination and violence”.⁴⁹ In 2022, despite efforts to increase gender equality, just 8% of peacekeepers were women.⁵⁰ Perhaps more significantly, there are well documented and credible stories of sexual abuse particularly directed at women and children among peacekeeping missions.⁵¹ To feminise the Blue Helmet and portray it as a feminine symbol without addressing the ways in which such forces both exclude and harm women could be misleading. This adds to Walters’ critique that the use of this label or certification (related to women’s empowerment, safety or health) fails to reconcile with the broader activities of an organisation.

(iv) Co-opted NGO endorsements and partnerships

The fourth variety of genderwashing is co-opted NGO endorsements and partnerships. Through these means, corporations and organisations ‘boost’ their environmental or social credentials by being affiliated with the NGO but not actually altering or improving any of their own practices. Further, such

⁴⁶ Mart, S., & Giesbrecht, N. (2015). Red flags on pinkwashed drinks: Contradictions and dangers in marketing alcohol to prevent cancer. *Addiction (Abingdon, England)*, 110(10), 1541–1548. As quoted in Rosie Walters (2022) Varieties of gender wash: towards a framework for critiquing corporate social responsibility in feminist IPE, *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:5, 1577-1600.

⁴⁷ Sulik, G. (2014). #RETHINKPINK: Moving beyond breast cancer awareness SWS distinguished feminist lecture. *Gender and Society*, 28(5), 655–678. As quoted in Rosie Walters (2022) Varieties of gender wash: towards a framework for critiquing corporate social responsibility in feminist IPE, *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:5, 1577-1600.

⁴⁸ Rosie Walters (2022) Varieties of gender wash: towards a framework for critiquing corporate social responsibility in feminist IPE, *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:5, 1577-1600.

⁴⁹ Karim, Sabrina, and Kyle Beardsley, 'Introduction: Are Blue Helmets Just for Boys?', *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping: Women, Peace, and Security in Post-Conflict States*, Oxford Studies in Gender and International Relations (New York, 2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 Mar. 2017), Pruitt, Lesley J., 'Conclusion', *Women in Blue Helmets: Gender, Policing, and the UN's First All-Female Peacekeeping Unit* (Oakland, CA, 2016; online edn, California Scholarship Online, 19 Jan. 2017)

⁵⁰ UN Peacekeeping “Contribution of Uniformed Personnel to UN by Mission, Personnel Type, and Gender” (April, 2022). Accessible at: https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/07_gender_statistics_49_april_2022.pdf

⁵¹ Skye Wheeler “UN Peacekeeping has a Sexual Abuse Problem” (11 January 2020) Human Rights Watch.

partnerships often link any engagement with politics or social corporate responsibility to a brand's products.

Walters provides the example of Dove partnering with the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts "to create a teaching resource to boost girls' self-esteem". The aim of the resources is to help girls understand unrealistic beauty standards, how they are perpetuated (for example through photoshop) and vary over time. Walters adds that "the resource silences a critique of the behaviour of brands such as Dove in perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards in order to boost sales of their products."

In global governance, especially for organisations such as the UN, such co-opted endorsements may take a slightly different form, by participating in, or allowing, corporations to co-opt such initiatives. One such example is the 'HeforShe' initiative, whose aims and objectives are vague and which appear to be mainly videos or promotional materials along with a petition/personal pledge. In 2014 when HeforShe was initially launched, the Guardian noted that "Besides committed people, any attempt at changing the status quo also requires ideas on how to do so beyond a viral video and a petition." Ten years on, such substance does not appear to have yet arrived. In response, the Guardian highlighted the many women and women's groups who have been at the 'heart of the feminist movement':⁵²

- Feminist activists such as the judges and lawyers in Afghanistan who are providing women with access to legal advice and representation (Justice For All Organisation);
- Young domestic workers who fight exploitation and abuse in Tanzania (WoteSawa);
- Sex workers in Thailand who show that they deserve to be respected rather than 'saved' (Empower);
- Women in Serbia who challenge restrictive ideas about women with disabilities through art and performance (Iz Kruga Vojvodina).

Furthermore, such women know what strategies work and how to make progress. Emma Herman, writing for the Guardian, noted that those of all genders who were inspired by the HeforShe movement were most welcome, first to listen and learn from the many activists who have progressed the feminist cause to date.⁵³

HeforShe was not necessarily designed for corporate partnership but has been used almost exclusively by for-profit corporations. PwC was one of the HeforShe initial partners and "IMPACT 10x10x10 champion". The description of HeforShe on the PwC website is as vague as on the UN website itself. "HeForShe is the UN global solidarity movement for Gender Equality. HeForShe is an invitation for men and people of all genders to stand in solidarity with women to create a bold, visible and united force for gender equality. The men of HeForShe aren't on the sidelines. They're working with women and with each other to build businesses, raise families, and give back to their communities."⁵⁴ There is, however, no clear explanation of what the movement actually achieves. PwC claims to be one of the first corporates to sign up in 2015, renewing its commitment in 2021, but it does not point to any direct or measurable changes that have resulted.

⁵² Emma Herman. "Emma Watson's UN gender equality campaign is an invitation to men, too" (3 October 2014). The Guardian.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ PwC "HeforShe" (n.d.). Accessible at: <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/about/diversity/he-for-she.html>

As a result of being part of the HeforShe Alliance Partnership, PwC boasts only two tangible outputs. One is the “development and release of our Inclusive Mindset learning path/knowledge badge”. The pamphlet explaining the programme highlights that it focuses on awareness, empathy and action. Notably, it does not mention ‘women’ or ‘gender’ at all.⁵⁵

The programme has allowed corporates, such as PwC, to attend conferences, use the logo, and hold themselves out as champions of gender equality (with even more legitimacy when such gender equality carries the weight of the UN) without actually making material change. This appears to fit squarely within the definition of ‘boosting’ environmental or social credentials without altering or improving any of their own practices.

In contrast to the co-opted partnerships which Walters speaks of, the UN is the non-corporate entity allowing its partnerships to be co-opted rather than doing the co-opting. This reflects one difference of identifying and analysing genderwashing in the context of global governance as opposed to corporate governance. The harm, however, is no less significant; the UN has many initiatives that aim to improve the lives of women and work towards gender equality that need support, including financial support or greater profiling that could benefit from support from corporates. This potential is lost when corporates expend their partnership capital on campaigns such as HeforShe.

(v) *Ineffective public voluntary programmes*

The final relevant means of greenwashing and genderwashing concerns ineffective public voluntary programmes. This is where corporations sign up to public voluntary programmes, commitments and codes of conduct which have weak or no enforcement mechanisms but “help to silence calls for regulations and accountability”.⁵⁶

Walters identifies that an equivalent genderwashing practice can be found in voluntary programmes concerning supply chains. This is especially so when considering garment supply chains where a large majority of workers are women. For example:

- In 2013 the Rana Plaza factory collapse killed over 1,000 garment workers, an estimated 80% of whom were women.⁵⁷
- In 2015 another tragedy occurred involving the death of more than 70 workers in a fire in a shoe factory in Manila, most of whom were women.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ PwC “The Inclusive Mindset knowledge badge” (2023) Accessible at:

<https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/about/diversity/iwd/2023/inclusive-mindset-knowledge-badge-infographic.pdf>

⁵⁶ Elias, J. (2007). Women workers and labor standards: The problem of ‘human rights’. *Review of International Studies*, 33(1), 45–57; Rosie Walters (2022) Varieties of gender wash: towards a framework for critiquing corporate social responsibility in feminist IPE, *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:5, 1577-1600.

⁵⁷ Ozkazanc-Pan, B. (2019). CSR as gendered neocoloniality in the Global South. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 160(4), 851–864. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09692290.2021.1935295#d1e529>

⁵⁸ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights “The lessons of Rana Plaza have still not been learned” – UN expert group on business and human rights” (15 May 2015).

Walters cites the ‘Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety’, both of which were established after the disaster as examples of such genderwashing. Both agreements were “between the many different transnational corporations that purchase garments from factories in Bangladesh, most of them based in the Global North.”⁵⁹ Prior to the disaster, and already in force but clearly ineffective were the UN’s Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs).⁶⁰ These non-binding principles, established in 2011, combine state, business, and joint responsibility across several aspects of respect, protection and remedy of human rights.⁶¹ The principles have been subject to criticism, for many of the same reasons genderwashing would critique them, namely their non-binding nature and lack of suitable remedy and enforcement mechanisms.⁶² Despite this, “they have emerged as the dominant framework on business and human rights”.⁶³

Some initiatives to improve the UNGPs and their implementation (by minimising the voluntary nature of such programmes and increasing the accountability mechanisms) have occurred. For example: “In response to the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse, France enacted a Duty of Vigilance Law in 2017. The law was inspired by, and mostly tracks, the components of the due diligence process of the UNGPs pertaining to human rights. It requires large French companies to establish and implement an effective human rights vigilance plan, which covers their subsidiaries and certain of their contractors and suppliers. Injury caused by a company’s failure to implement an effective plan can subject the company to civil tort liability.”⁶⁴

In her critique of the Accord and Alliance, Walters notes that such efforts are either centred on, or exclusive to, the Global North. Such initiatives are “sold to shareholders and concerned Northern consumers and activists as an initiative aimed at empowering Bangladeshi women. The voluntariness of the scheme is presented as a willingness to do good.”⁶⁵ In contrast several developing countries have indicated dissatisfaction with the UNGPs and have pushed for the adoption of UN Human Rights Council Resolution 26/9, which in 2014 tasked the Open-Ended Intergovernmental Working Group (OEIGWG) with elaborating “an international legally binding instrument on transnational corporations and other business enterprises with respect to human rights”.⁶⁶

⁵⁹ Rosie Walters (2022) Varieties of gender wash: towards a framework for critiquing corporate social responsibility in feminist IPE, *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:5, 1577-1600.

⁶⁰ See United Nations: Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations “Protect, Respect and Remedy” Framework (A/HRC/17/31) and Human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises (A/HRC/RES/17/4), General Assembly, 63rd Session, New York, NY, 2011. Explained in United Nations, 2020.

⁶¹ Anne Trebilcock (2020) “The Rana Plaza disaster seven years on: Transnational experiments and perhaps a new treaty?” *International Labour Review*, Vol. 159 No. 4; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights “The lessons of Rana Plaza have still not been learned” – UN expert group on business and human rights” (15 May 2015).

⁶² See, for example, Anne Trebilcock (2020) “The Rana Plaza disaster seven years on: Transnational experiments and perhaps a new treaty?” *International Labour Review*, Vol. 159 No. 4. pp. 94–96

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ John Sherman (2020) “Beyond CSR: The Story of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights” Working Paper No. 71. Corporate Responsibility Initiative, Harvard Kennedy School, p 22. Available at: https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/mrcbg/files/CRI_AWP_71.pdf

⁶⁵ Rosie Walters (2022) Varieties of gender wash: towards a framework for critiquing corporate social responsibility in feminist IPE, *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:5, 1577-1600.

⁶⁶ United Nations: Elaboration of an international legally binding instrument on transnational corporations and other business enterprises with respect to human rights, General Assembly, 26th Session, A/HRC/RES/26/9, New York, NY, 2014.

The UNGPs are an agreement among states facilitated by a UN resolution, rather than an agreement among corporations facilitated outside of any formal institutions. However, especially in the context of garment workers and the supply chain, the UNGPs can be subject to the same criticisms and hold the same features of practices as Walters' varieties of genderwashing: namely, they are voluntary, ineffective (especially in regard to remedy and accountability) and gender-based.

Part 4 **Conclusions**

From the above analysis, several conclusions can be drawn, and highlighted as important, when considering genderwashing in the context of global governance, particularly when the (currently) limited existing scholarship is focused on analysing genderwashing in the context of corporate governance.

(i) Differentiation between corporate and global governance

When considering genderwashing in the context of global governance as opposed to corporate governance, some criteria need to be almost reversed. For example, the variety of genderwashing / greenwashing that is referred to as 'co-opted NGO endorsements and partnerships' is aiming to capture instances of corporates partnering with NGOs. Specific instances are where corporates co-opt those NGOs, so that their advocacy work is not critical of them or, perhaps, as an explicit way to advertise their products or to make a small impact on an issue such as women's rights. This is particularly the case when their whole brand and business model itself may rely on not exploiting women and their place in society (for example the Dove case study provided by Walters). However, in the case of global governance, institutions are more likely to play a role in genderwashing by allowing their programmes, brand or NGOs to be co-opted.

(ii) Private profit v. public awareness

Also of relevance is the fact that two of the criteria (misleading narrative/discourse; misleading branding) do not prove as suitable for analysis when an organisation does not explicitly engage with promotion or advertising. In a capitalist economy/society, for-profit companies are almost certain to engage in advertising or promotion of their products or services. Global governance institutions such as the UN may undertake promotions or campaigns, and there may be room for these initiatives to contain misleading narrative and discourse. However, examples are difficult to locate, and it may be that such criteria are less common in a global governance context. Many of the issues highlighted by Walters are more central in a commercial context; for example, harm caused to women throughout the supply chain or as parallel to the products themselves (perpetuating beauty standards so that there is motivation to purchase their products). As global governance institutions do not produce/supply products, these considerations or motivations fall away. Further, campaigns of the nature undertaken by global governance institutions often focus on bringing awareness to an issue/problem, rather than promoting how good a product or service is.

(iii) General v. specific misrepresentation

A third point that arises from the above analysis is that it is clear that examples are more likely to fit into Walters' broader understanding of genderwashing where a practice, initiative, or partnership does not reconcile with the broader practices of the organisation, as opposed to being a specific or direct misrepresentation. For example, dubious labels and certifications in the global governance context can be found in the feminisation of Blue Helmets with the pink ribbon logo when there are a very small percentage of Blue Helmets who are women and there are credible and well-documented accounts of Blue Helmets directly causing harm to women. In contrast, Walters has located examples in the corporate/commercial context that are more explicit, such as the pink ribbon on products that are known to cause breast cancer.

**Part 5
Recommendations**

Several recommendations for further research or discussion emerge from the above conclusions.

(i) Nature and degree of harm

The first is to establish what is the harm from genderwashing in the global governance context, and whom it impacts. This is not explored as much as in the corporate context and, moreover, may not be so clear. In a corporate context, the main victim is the consumer, and there may be secondary victims such as other consumers if advertising in general is misleading. In the context of global governance there are several actors, such as states, corporations, NGOs, and individuals who may be affected in different ways.

(ii) Relationship to international law and foreign policy

Some writing on genderwashing in the global governance context has focused on the role of states in genderwashing their foreign policy and in diplomatic engagement with international law. In this limited body of scholarship, genderwashing is conceptualised as conduct such as: a state signs up to 'soft law' instruments on gender while shunning 'hard law' equivalents to give the impression that they take a progressive approach to women's rights or to detract from any restrictions on women's rights in their country. Similarly, much has been written about the use of 'pink-washing', especially in the Middle East. A further interesting point of research could therefore be an exploration of if, and how, genderwashing in the UN (as described in this paper) may encourage or validate genderwashing (or comparators such as pink-washing) in foreign policy more generally.

(iii) Levels of motivation

A line of inquiry that may be suitable for further research is looking into the presence or suitability of misleading branding or misleading narrative and discourse in the context of global governance, whether there are fewer examples of this type of conduct and exploration of the potential reasons why, for example, are there fewer motivations for global governance institutions to engage in such behaviour?

(iv) Need for focus on global political governance

This paper has shown that five varieties of genderwashing as they have been conceptualised by Walters, building on Lyon and Montgomery's comprehensive study, can be located within global governance. The value of locating these varieties of genderwashing is that, if it can be shown that such practices are occurring, then it demonstrates that further investigation into genderwashing in the context of global political governance is warranted. There are several lines of inquiry that appear ripe for further investigation and which will enrich understandings of genderwashing in the context of global governance and the impacts of such practices.

Table 1
Varieties of gender washing (Walters 2022, 1585)

1. Selective disclosure	Communications emphasizing only areas of progress on gender related measures
2. Empty gender claims and policies	Claims to be implementing policies that will transform gender relations, but which in reality have little impact
3. Dubious certifications and labels	“The use of third-party labels and certification to imply a product is beneficial to women and girls”
4. Co-opted NGO endorsements and partnerships	Association with organizations focused on girls’ or women’s rights in order to boost corporate gender credentials
5. Ineffective public voluntary programmes	Voluntary commitments on gender equality in the workplace, with no legal enforcement mechanisms
6. Misleading branding	Use of female or feminine symbols, voices, and logos to present corporations as women-friendly
7. Misleading narrative and discourse	Positioning of corporations as gender equality experts, despite no evidence of a track record

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