

Equality on whose terms? A feminist analysis of the JIBS editorial on gender and international business

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS) editorial’s approach to gender inequality and to argue for a radical rethinking of international business research through an intersectional anti-capitalist feminist perspective. The paper contends that, while the editorial seeks to advance gender research, it does not fully engage with feminism as a transformative political project. To develop this argument, the paper first examines the editorial’s theoretical foundations, including modernisation theory, gender essentialism, and the evaluative-equality framework, highlighting their potential depoliticising effects. It then analyses how feminist terminology is mobilised in ways that may dilute its critical significance. Finally, it proposes directions for more transformative feminist approaches to international business research.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper offers a critical feminist response to JIBS editorial “Evolving Patterns of Gender Inequality over Time and Across Countries.”

Findings – Drawing on feminist scholars, this critique argues that progress requires transforming systems, not just including women. It advocates integrating feminist political economy and decolonial perspectives into international business research. By highlighting how depoliticised concepts reinforce patriarchal norms, it calls for a shift from reducing equality to inclusion within existing systems towards transformative, structural change, offering a framework grounded in intersectional and decolonial feminist theory.

Originality/value – Since JIBS significantly shapes future scholarship, this critique is vital. It reframes feminist theory as a transformative political project rather than a mere managerial tool, challenging depoliticised research to demand a radical engagement with power, patriarchy and political economy.

Keywords Gender, Feminism, International business

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction

The recent editorial in the *Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS)*, “Evolving Patterns of Gender Inequality over Time and Across Countries” (Beugelsdijk *et al.*, 2025), presents a timely and thoughtful attempt to reframe our understanding of persistent gender inequalities across diverse national contexts. By incorporating concepts such as gender essentialism and cultural *backlash*, the authors seek to move beyond the unidimensional models that have long dominated research in international business. This is a welcome intention, suggesting a willingness to engage with more complex social and cultural dynamics. JIBS editorials carry particular significance in their field, as they not only reflect



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ongoing debates but also actively shape research agendas, theoretical priorities and future directions in international business. As the flagship journal of the discipline, *JIBS* plays a formative role in legitimising specific concepts, frameworks and problem framings. Consequently, the ways in which gender inequality is theorised in such an editorial are likely to influence how scholars conceptualise, study and address gender in international business research over time. It is precisely this agenda-setting role that makes a critical feminist engagement with the *JIBS* editorial both timely and necessary.

While the *JIBS* editorial is conceptually ambitious, it risks failing to consistently engage in the kind of critical rethinking that feminist scholars have long encouraged (Acker, 1990; Beasley, 1999; Calás and Smircich, 2006). Rather than disrupting traditional paradigms, the editorial may risk re-inscribing them, albeit in updated, more inclusive language. The result is an editorial that engages feminist concepts, but in ways that risk flattening or partially neutralising their political charge.

Addressing and combating gender-based discrimination, in fact, cannot be reduced to adopting new terminologies or superficially integrating feminist concepts. It requires a profound reconfiguration of the structures that reproduce inequality (e.g. corporate hierarchies, labour markets, global supply chains, institutional norms) (Acker, 1990; Mohanty, 2003). Without questioning and transforming these underlying systems, progress is likely to remain fragile and symbolic (Calás and Smircich, 2006; Fraser, 2013). Feminism's task is both to add women to existing frameworks and to expose their inherent inequalities and transform those frameworks accordingly (Fraser, 2013; Hooks, 2000).

In the context of international business, this means interrogating the very logics of profit, competitiveness and neoliberal governance that often reproduce gendered exclusions under the semblance of modernisation and meritocracy (Goldin, 2023; Mohanty, 2003).

At a conceptual level, this critique hinges on a crucial distinction between equality and equity. The *JIBS* editorial predominantly operates within an equality-based framework, where progress is understood as the uniform inclusion of women within existing institutional and organisational arrangements. Equality, in this sense, assumes that identical criteria, benchmarks and standards can deliver fair outcomes (Guy and McCandless, 2012). By contrast, an equity-oriented perspective foregrounds historically and structurally produced asymmetries in power, resources and valuation. Equity recognises that actors enter social and organisational systems from unequal starting positions and therefore calls for differentiated and transformative interventions rather than uniform treatment (Cook and Hegtvedt, 1983). From an equity perspective, treating individuals equally within unequal systems risks reproducing the very hierarchies that such equality-based frameworks seek to overcome (Bader et al., 2025). For this reason, this critique adopts equity as its guiding analytical lens. Doing so enables a more robust interrogation of the structural, political and institutional conditions that sustain gender-based inequalities in international business and helps frame the ensuing critique as a theoretical intervention.

The critique is organised into three sections. Firstly, I examine the theoretical foundations of the *JIBS* editorial, including modernisation theory, gender essentialism and the evaluative-equality framework, and consider their potential depoliticising effects. Secondly, I examine how feminist terminology is used in ways that may dilute its critical significance. Thirdly, I propose directions for more transformative feminist approaches to international business.

2. Underlying assumptions: re-evaluating theoretical frameworks

2.1 The assumption of linear progress

The *JIBS* editorial "Evolving Patterns of Gender Inequality over Time and Across Countries" (Beugelsdijk et al., 2025) draws on modernisation theory, a model that suggests

gender equality is a byproduct of economic growth and cultural secularisation. While the authors acknowledge that this trajectory has stalled or even reversed, they remain bound to its teleological perspective. This worldview assumes that societies evolve in a linear, predictable fashion, a deeply mechanistic frame that overlooks conflict and historical contingency. It is a theory of progress without politics. This narrative echoes what Nobel Prize [Goldin \(2023\)](#) demonstrated through historical labour data: that women's economic progress has been anything but linear, repeatedly stalled by structural constraints, cultural expectations and institutional inertia. Goldin's analysis of the *quiet revolution* in women's employment reveals that cultural shifts, not just economic development, are key to understanding when and why gender equality advances or stalls.

By framing gender equality as an automatic outcome of modernisation, the *JIBS* editorial risks reproducing what [Mohanty \(2003\)](#) critiqued as a universalist narrative of progress, one that assumes all societies follow the same path and that Western trajectories are normative benchmarks. It is true that, in its later developments and final research questions, the *JIBS* editorial opens up to cross-country and cross-cultural analyses; however, this tendency nevertheless risks erasing the situated struggles of women in different historical, cultural and economic contexts. It also overlooks how regression, *backlash* and authoritarianism can emerge within modern economies, as seen in recent democratic backsliding in highly industrialised contexts that are increasingly hostile to gender equity.

Furthermore, modernisation theory's mechanistic assumptions risk obscuring the role of agency, resistance and collective action in shaping gender outcomes. Feminist gains have always been entangled in contestation and political struggle rather than in a linear developmental logic: the persistence of wage gaps, occupational segregation and care burdens demonstrates that structural inequalities do not simply *fade* with growth ([Fraser, 2013](#)). Instead, they must be actively confronted and dismantled. Ignoring this reality risks reducing feminism to a passive accompaniment of economic change, rather than a critical force reshaping it. Goldin's empirical findings reinforce this point: she shows that women's labour market participation advanced not through uninterrupted progress but through contingent openings often tied to wars, social movements and cultural shifts ([Goldin, 2023](#)). When those openings closed, progress stalled or reversed. This underscores that gender equity cannot be viewed as a natural consequence of GDP growth; rather, it must be understood as a fragile achievement that is continually negotiated in political, social and cultural arenas. By neglecting this complexity, the *JIBS* editorial's analytical framing risks perpetuating a deterministic model that fails to account for struggle, resistance and reversal.

2.2 Essentialism as explanation

Gender essentialism is the cultural belief that men and women are *fundamentally* different by nature, with innate social roles and abilities ([Charles, 1992, 2011](#); [Ridgeway, 2011](#)). Unlike gender inequality, which operates vertically by legitimising hierarchical relations of superiority and inferiority between men and women, gender essentialism works horizontally ([Crompton and Lyonette, 2005](#)). It promotes an equal-but-separate logic in which men and women are constructed as different yet complementary, and therefore naturally suited to different social, occupational and economic roles ([Ridgeway, 2014](#)). Historically, these two logics have operated in tandem rather than in opposition ([Wade, 2024](#)). Gender inequality legitimises unequal access to power, resources and authority, while gender essentialism provides the cultural justification for why such inequalities appear natural, appropriate and even desirable ([Crompton and Lyonette, 2005](#)). One of the most enduring expressions of this interplay is the *separate spheres* ideology, which assigns men to the public sphere of paid work, rationality and economic provision and women to the private

sphere of care, emotion and social reproduction (Kerber, 1988). Far from being a neutral cultural arrangement, the *separate spheres* ideology has functioned as a powerful organising principle of labour markets, welfare regimes and organisational norms, underpinning gendered divisions of labour that persist even in formally egalitarian contexts (Kerber, 1988).

The *JIBS* editorial seems to frame gender essentialism as a novel analytical tool, suggesting that “new theorising is emerging in sociology and political science, with tremendous opportunities for IB” (p. 1) and that “the gender equality paradox is no longer a paradox once we incorporate gender essentialism” (p. 2). However, essentialist ideologies are not new, and feminist scholars have long critiqued and denounced this logic for normalising gender segregation even in the most egalitarian societies (Billing and Alvesson, 2000). For instance, countries like Sweden and Denmark show high levels of occupational and educational gender segregation precisely because essentialist ideology remains strong (Charles, 1992, 2011). In this sense, gender essentialism does not challenge existing structures of inequality; rather, it performs important ideological work by rendering segregation intelligible as the outcome of “natural” or voluntary choices.

This emphasis on individual preference resonates strongly with what feminist scholars have described as *choice feminism*, a contemporary discourse on gender that foregrounds women’s apparent autonomy while simultaneously obscuring the structural and political conditions under which such choices are made (Lewis and Simpson, 2017).

As Lewis and Simpson (2017) demonstrated in their critical rereading of Hakim’s (1991, 2006) preference theory, choice operates here not as a neutral expression of agency but as a central mechanism through which gender inequality is re-individualised and depoliticised. In this framing, women emerge as *choosing subjects*, responsibilised for navigating work, care and inequality through personal decision-making, while the structural organisation of labour markets, care regimes and organisational power relations remains largely unchallenged.

By attributing the gender-equality paradox to individual preferences or choices, the *JIBS* editorial risks aligning with what organisation studies scholars define as a postfeminist gender regime. This is evident when the authors define gender essentialism as the “cultural belief that women and men are inherently different” (p. 2) and have “inherently different aptitudes and preferences” (p. 2). By framing the paradox as resulting from individuals who “sort into different educational fields and occupations” (p. 2) once vertical barriers are removed, the editorial suggests that these outcomes are manifestations of personal agency. Specifically, the text notes that in egalitarian societies, “women are less likely to major in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and more likely to major in the humanities” (p. 1) because gender gaps in “preferences for STEM are largest in egalitarian countries” (p. 2). This focus on how individuals leverage their essential gender identity to make choices shifts the analytical focus from systemic inequality to the exercising of seemingly free, gendered preferences.

As Lewis and Simpson (2017) argued in their critique of preference theory, the figure of the *female chooser* is a discursive construction that masks the ways in which neoliberalism recalibrates gender inequality. In this framework, the rhetoric of choice obscures the structural and cultural constraints that continue to shape women’s lives, making inequality appear to result from autonomous female agency rather than systemic barriers (Lewis et al., 2017). This perspective is crucial for international business research to avoid depoliticizing the persistence of gender segregation in more egalitarian contexts.

Feminist scholarship has long emphasised the existence of multiple femininities, produced and hierarchised through organisational norms, cultural expectations and institutional practices (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2020). From this perspective, what appear as stable preferences or natural dispositions are better understood as outcomes of repeated

performances of gender that are differentially rewarded or sanctioned. Recognising gender as performative helps explain how structural inequalities are reproduced through everyday practices while continuing to appear voluntary and individualised.

The figure of the *female chooser* thus becomes emblematic of a postfeminist gender regime in which feminism is rendered simultaneously successful and obsolete: equality is presumed to have been achieved, and any remaining disparities are reframed as outcomes of individual preference rather than structural constraints (Lewis and Simpson, 2017). This logic aligns closely with the managerial, metrics-driven approaches to gender equality here critiqued, which address inequality through individual adaptation and optimisation rather than by confronting the political and institutional foundations of gendered hierarchies.

While acknowledging the *JIBS* editorial's effort to grapple with paradoxes observed in advanced and ostensibly egalitarian societies, it is important to note that it does not endorse gender essentialism as an ideology. Still, it introduces it as an analytical lens to explain paradoxes observed in advanced societies: *Gender essentialism can help us understand the perhaps surprising persistence of gendered segregation in developed and egalitarian societies* (Beugelsdijk et al., 2025: p. 2). The limitation, however, lies not in the use of essentialism as an analytical category *per se*, but in the failure to demonstrate how essentialism operates ideologically, how it legitimises, stabilises and depoliticises persistent gendered inequalities even in progressive contexts. In other words, the authors suggest that to understand why gender gaps persist in progressive contexts, we must account for these *equal-but-separate* cultural beliefs.

Moreover, presenting gender essentialism as a fresh and politically neutral perspective not only ignores this intellectual heritage but risks legitimising the very ideas that have historically sustained inequality. By overlooking the extensive feminist critique that has already exposed the limitations and dangers of essentialist thinking (Rhodes and Mandalaywala, 2017), the *JIBS* editorial's use of essentialism risks reproducing outdated assumptions under the guise of innovation. Such a move not only flattens decades of theoretical work but also risks offering conceptual cover for discourses that naturalise difference rather than challenge it. At the same time, the most significant limitation may lie less in the specific concepts used than in the broader reluctance to interrogate the patriarchal foundations of business, economics and society themselves. Still, this critique is an invitation to take the conversation further, towards a deeper engagement with feminist scholarship that confronts structures of power directly and seeks more transformative possibilities for understanding gender in international business.

2.3 On whose terms is equality defined?

The *JIBS* editorial appears to build its analysis on an evaluative-equality framework, in which equality is understood as women's access to male-dominated spaces and standards. This is reflected in the authors' definition of gender egalitarianism as the degree to which a society supports women's access to power, status and resources and their focus on the "declining gender gaps in labor force participation, education, and wages" (p. 1) as the primary metrics of progress. By framing the gender-equality paradox largely around the fact that "women are less likely to major in STEM" (p. 1), the editorial adopts a benchmark where equality is achieved only through the convergence of women into traditionally male-dominated educational and professional tracks, leaving the underlying masculine standards of those spaces unexamined.

Again, this model does not explicitly question whether those standards are themselves gendered. Instead, it seems to assume that the rules are neutral and that women just need to conform to them. This is emblematic of what some feminist theorists have described as a

model of *evaluative equality*, a vision of gender equality that focuses on granting women access to dominant systems of leadership and productivity (Acker, 1990; Fraser, 2017), without interrogating the values on which those systems are built (Lewis, 2014). This reflects what Acker (1990) called the *illusion of neutrality* in organisational structures, where male norms are universalised and rendered invisible. In such frameworks, success is measured by masculinised norms, individual competitiveness, continuous presence and disembodied rationality, rather than by reconsidering how care, relationality or interdependence might reshape the definition of value itself (Acker, 1990; Fraser, 2017). This critique reminds us that the problem is not only exclusion from power, but the uncritical preservation of the very structures and standards that define what counts as power (Sinclair, 2005). This produces what I would call *inclusion through assimilation*: women must adapt to masculine norms of leadership, ambition and productivity to be recognised as equals (Wajcman, 2013; Adamson and Kelan, 2019). True transformation is rendered difficult to achieve within this framework. In this way, the *JIBS* editorial risk unintentionally sustains the *illusion of equality* while the underlying structure, the one designed by and for men, remains untouched.

3. Feminist without politics: appropriation or engagement?

3.1 Decontextualised use of feminist language

This critique involves the deployment of feminist language devoid of feminist politics. Throughout the *JIBS* editorial, the term equality appears frequently, yet it is not defined through a critical lens nor situated within a broader distinction between equality and equity. As a result, equality tends to function as a taken-for-granted objective rather than as a contested concept whose limitations have been extensively interrogated in feminist scholarship, particularly through equity-oriented perspectives that are attentive to structural asymmetries and power relations (Ahmed, 2024).

Furthermore, key feminist scholars who have critically deconstructed the nexus between gender, neoliberalism and organisational structures (e.g. Acker, 2006; Calás and Smircich, 1993; Fraser, 2017) or who have challenged the universalism of Western feminist categories (e.g. Crenshaw, 1991; Mohanty, 2003) are notably absent. This omission is more than a citation gap; it can be read as suggesting a disengagement from the political lineage of concepts such as gender essentialism and cultural *backlash*, which originate in feminist critique (Code, 2018).

This form of what Dixon (2025) referred to as so-called *abusive feminism*, using feminist language while stripping it of its critical substance, can unintentionally serve to reinforce rather than challenge dominant paradigms. Dixon (2025) provided a crucial framework that distinguishes between two ways in which *abusive feminism* operates. At a *narrow* level, the abuse occurs when feminist terms are used superficially, detached from their critical origins. Words like equality and empowerment are repeated, but without an analysis of how power structures shape their meanings. In this form, feminism is reduced to a set of slogans, diversity trainings or numerical targets. At a *broad* level, *abusive feminism* takes on a more insidious form when feminist discourse is actively mobilised in support of wider political or economic agendas that undermine equality itself. Dixon (2025) pointed to phenomena such as *femonationalism*, in which feminist rhetoric is deployed to justify nationalist or anti-immigrant policies, and *girlboss feminism*, in which neoliberal ideals of individual success are packaged as feminist progress, even as they ignore or exacerbate structural inequalities. In both its narrow and broad forms, *abusive feminism* risks transforming what should be a critique into a pretence of progress. This perspective is important for understanding the *JIBS* editorial because it reveals that the problem is not simply a lack of citations or insufficient nuance, but rather a deeper dynamic. When the vocabulary of feminism is incorporated

without its politics, the result risks becoming complicity: feminist terms lend legitimacy to the very systems they are meant to challenge. In this way, the *JIBS* editorial risks reproducing a pattern that has become increasingly common across academic, corporate and political contexts, where feminism is celebrated rhetorically.

Furthermore, the *JIBS* editorial's focus on including women in international business often fails to question the terms of this inclusion. Organisation studies have highlighted how women are now being included through a reconfigured femininity that does not challenge the dominant masculine norm but rather adapts to it (Lewis, 2014; Lewis *et al.*, 2017). This postfeminist sensibility facilitates a critique of how femininity is mobilised in the workplace only when it is seen as a source of value for the firm. Without a critical feminist lens, the international business agenda remains stuck on the inclusion agenda, leaving the underlying power structures and the ideal worker norm (typically male and unencumbered) completely unchallenged (Delaney and Sullivan, 2021; Lewis, 2014).

Genuine feminist engagement requires not only citing key authors but confronting the uncomfortable questions about power, hierarchy and structure that their work insists we ask (Ahmed, 2024; Fraser, 2020).

Such a move reflects what Fraser (2013) warned against: the co-optation of feminist discourse into neoliberal governance frameworks that prioritise individual empowerment over collective transformation. By failing to critically examine power structures and historical inequalities, the *JIBS* editorial's use of feminist terminology becomes performative rather than substantive. This discursive strategy risks neutralising feminist critique, turning it into a hollow vocabulary of inclusion that satisfies institutional diversity metrics while masking the persistence of systemic gender oppression.

Moreover, this decontextualised use detaches feminist terms from their roots in resistance, solidarity and social justice. Without anchoring *equality* in structural critique, the term becomes malleable, able to serve corporate interests, depoliticised human resources strategies or Corporate Social Responsibility reporting without ever confronting how gendered hierarchies are reproduced. This is especially problematic when such language circulates within governance or academic frameworks, where it may lend an appearance of progressivity without accompanying accountability.

Finally, the absence of foundational feminist voices signals a disconnect from intersectional analysis. Intersectionality is an analytical framework to describe how overlapping social identities (such as race, gender, class, sexuality and disability) interact to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2019). Intersectionality posits that they are co-constitutive and inseparable, and this "matrix of domination" functions through structural, disciplinary and interpersonal domains of power. When the *JIBS* editorial overlooks these intersections, it risks universalizing the experiences of a privileged subset of women, typically those who already possess significant social and economic capital, while sidelining the experiences of those positioned at the margins of multiple systems of oppression. In international business, an intersectional lens is essential to avoid the *homogenisation* of women's experiences across different geopolitical and economic realities (Mohanty, 2003). Without this depth, the *JIBS* editorial's call for inclusion risks remaining inherently exclusionary, failing to account for the structural barriers that disproportionately affect, for example, black women, working-class women and women from the Global South. Ultimately, a feminism that is not intersectional remains complicit in the very hierarchies of power it claims to critique.

3.2 The instrumental use of feminist research

The *JIBS* editorial's use of England, Levine and Mishel (2020) is a case in point. The citation, adopted to support the claim that "progress toward gender equality has started to stall" (p. 1)

is, at a factual level, accurate. However, this usage extracts only the surface-level data point. It fails to engage with the deeper structural analysis that the authors provide on occupational segregation, care work and persistent wage penalties. Their critique of neoliberal reforms and the limits of formal equality, understood as equal access within unchanged institutional arrangements, is lost in the process. [England et al.'s \(2020\)](#) article offers a rich, multidimensional analysis of how progress towards gender equality in the USA has stagnated, emphasising not just outcomes but also the structural, institutional and ideological mechanisms that sustain inequality. Their work critically interrogates the limits of formal legal gains, reveals the persistence of occupational sex segregation and wage penalties and explores how care work, domestic labour and socialisation patterns remain gendered. However, these complexities are not well acknowledged or engaged in the *JIBS* editorial. Instead, by extracting only the descriptive outcome (*progress has stalled*) and omitting the explanatory richness of the source, the *JIBS* editorial risk is to treat [England et al. \(2020\)](#)'s work as a statistical backdrop rather than a critical and theoretical intervention. This choice risks flattening, again, the feminist critique embedded in the article and repurposes it in the service of a framework that largely sidesteps the structural foundations of gender inequality.

The way this citation is used exemplifies the *non-performative* uses of the equality concept: gestures towards feminist work that, again, fail to enact its critical implications ([Ahmed, 2024](#)). This practice reproduces what [McRobbie \(2008\)](#) termed the *disarticulation* of feminism, where feminist insights are acknowledged only to be stripped of their transformative potential and assimilated into mainstream social science narratives. By reducing the analysis of explanatory depth, the *JIBS* editorial may reduce a feminist interrogation of structures to a descriptive trend line. What tends to remain is a narrative of stasis, devoid of the mechanisms that reproduce inequality, thereby neutralising the political urgency of the findings.

Furthermore, ignoring [England et al.'s \(2020\)](#) engagement with care work and domestic labour is particularly telling. As [Fraser \(2016\)](#) argued, the *crisis of care* is central to understanding the contradictions of contemporary capitalism, where women's labour market participation is encouraged rhetorically but undermined materially by the lack of institutional support for care responsibilities. [England et al. \(2020\)](#)'s analysis situates stalled progress precisely in this argumentation, highlighting how neoliberal reforms exacerbate inequality by valorising market solutions while neglecting the structural redistribution of care.

In sum, the *JIBS* editorial's use of [England et al. \(2020\)](#) appears to reflect a broader pattern: the reliance on feminist research as empirical evidence, with little engagement with its theoretical or political content. The consequence is the risk of progressive marginalisation of feminist critique from the very debates where it is most needed.

3.3 Backlash: from feminist diagnosis to neutral category

A second similar concern arises from the *JIBS* editorial's use of the term *backlash*. While the authors cite [Faludi \(1991\)](#) alongside political scientists such as [Norris and Inglehart \(2019\)](#), they detach the concept of *backlash* from its original feminist and political meaning. In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), Faludi does not describe *backlash* as a neutral or spontaneous social reaction, but as a deliberate, systemic and institutionally driven counter-movement against feminist gains. It is a coordinated effort, across media, politics, psychology and medicine, to reassert patriarchal norms under the guise of *common sense* or *family values* ([Faludi, 1991](#)). By reducing *backlash* to a generalised socio-political reaction to status loss, the *JIBS* editorial decontextualises the term, depriving it of its critical edge. In doing so, it transforms a powerful feminist diagnosis into a value-neutral analytical category, thereby attenuating its political force and the structural critique it originally conveyed.

This risk of depoliticisation echoes what [Rottenberg \(2014\)](#) described as *neoliberal feminism*: the severing of feminist language from collective struggle and its reinsertion into frameworks of individual affect or sociological patterning. In this context, *backlash* becomes a psychological response rather than a political weapon, something that just happens, rather than something that is orchestrated. The removal of intent, structure and institutional complicity from the term erodes its diagnostic clarity and enables it to coexist with precisely the systems of oppression it was coined to challenge.

Moreover, this shift ignores the gendered asymmetry of *backlash*. By framing it as a generalised reaction to social change, applicable to any dominant group experiencing *status anxiety*, the *JIBS* editorial risks flattening the feminist specificity of [Faludi \(1991\)](#)'s work. Feminism is naming injustice while simultaneously revealing its systemic, historical and ideological foundations ([Hooks, 2000](#)). In this light, *backlash* is a gendered and racialised counter-insurgency. To treat it otherwise is to obscure the operations of power that undergird contemporary reactions to feminist progress.

4. Towards a critical feminist international business: beyond metrics and managerialism

To its credit, the *JIBS* editorial does attempt to address cultural and political resistance to gender equality. However, it does so primarily within the framework of incremental change and managerial adaptation, a choice that shapes the scope and limits of its critical intervention. The risk here lies not in evil intent but in a missed analytical opportunity. By stopping short of a structural critique, the *JIBS* editorial may unintentionally reinforce a model of change that privileges adaptation over transformation, thereby leaving underlying systems intact. The *JIBS* editorial may be seeking to distinguish between gender differences that lead to hierarchical outcomes and those that do not. There is, though, a strong tendency for those differences to become hierarchical whenever devaluation of what is feminised takes hold. This connection is not always explicitly acknowledged, and this omission may limit the analysis's critical depth. At times, the *JIBS* editorial's precise message remains somewhat unclear, perhaps because it balances descriptive analysis and conceptual innovation without fully resolving the tensions between them.

To move forward, international business scholarship might consider more critical feminist frameworks and engage with feminist theory as a crucial and disruptive force ([Calás and Smircich, 2006](#); [Connell, 1998](#)). This means shifting away from individual-level explanations and managerial remedies towards systemic, structural and historically grounded critiques. It means centring frameworks such as feminist political economy and decolonial approaches that challenge the very foundations of how we define progress, value and success. The question is how women can be included while simultaneously considering what kind of world we are including them in and who defines its rules.

An alternative solution is represented by the feminist economics of [Nelson \(2022\)](#), which proposes a vision of the economy centred on care, interdependence and sustainability. That means centring feminist theory not as a technical supplement but as a critical force for systemic transformation.

Moreover, a structural feminist approach must centre intersectionality ([Crenshaw, 1991](#)), recognising that gender inequality cannot be addressed in isolation from race, class and other forms of systemic disadvantage ([Acker, 2006](#)). The concept of intersectionality forces us to ask: whose equity is being pursued, and who remains excluded from mainstream frameworks that assume a universal women subject? To their credit, the authors of the *JIBS* editorial briefly acknowledge the complexity of cultural and political resistance to gender equality. Nevertheless, even here, their analysis remains firmly within the zone of incrementalism. As

Ely and Meyerson (2000) point out, addressing gender in organisations requires abandoning individualistic approaches in favour of critical, structural analysis.

The call for more female role models in international business research must also be approached with caution. The contemporary *female hero*, often epitomised by celebrity executives, promotes an individualised version of success based on *confidence, control and courage* (Adamson and Kelan, 2019). This model places the burden of overcoming inequality on the individual woman's shoulders, suggesting that gender barriers can be *jumped over* through personal resilience. This discourse is further complicated for working mothers, who are often constructed through a postfeminist lens as ideal only when they can seamlessly manage the tension between care and professional performance (Delaney and Sullivan, 2021). International business research should move beyond these heroic narratives to investigate how organisational structures themselves remain hostile to those who do not conform to neoliberal expectations of productivity.

What seems absent in the *JIBS* editorial, yet essential, is the affective and embodied dimension of feminist struggle within organisations. Feminist theorising is both analytical and experiential, rooted in the lived practices of resistance, care and solidarity (Fotaki and Pullen, 2024). Engaging feminist theories in management and international business studies requires recognising their activist origins and their potential to radically reimagine a firm, not just make it more inclusive. In addition, Walters (2022) provided a valuable framework for critiquing the superficial engagement with gender in contemporary strategic discourse. She identifies distinct *varieties of gender* (i.e. from reputation-washing to justice-washing) that allow corporations to signal gender progressiveness without altering exploitative practices (Walters, 2022). This is highly relevant to international business scholarship, where gender inclusion is often framed through sanitised corporate initiatives rather than structural transformation (Rottenberg, 2014; Lewis, 2014). Importantly, she shows how gender discourses are selectively mobilised to manage reputational risk while masking the persistence of gendered exploitation across global supply chains (Walters, 2022). Integrating this perspective underscores that feminist critique must remain attentive to how gender equality rhetoric is operationalised and depoliticised, within neoliberal capitalist logics. The limits of an equality-based approach become particularly visible. While equality-oriented frameworks focus on inclusion and comparability within existing systems, an equity-oriented perspective foregrounds the structural conditions, power asymmetries and historical relations that shape who benefits from such inclusion and at what cost.

The field of international business must move beyond managerialism and metrics. We need radical frameworks that confront the foundational logics that produce them. Equity defined within patriarchal terms reproduces injustice. If international business scholarship truly wants to address gender inequality, it must stop fine-tuning the system and start questioning the system itself.

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