

Feminism with a price tag

Isabelle Gray, Editor, investigates the ugly truth of neoliberal feminism



Images: Gage Skidmore, Flickr

AFTER the creation of successful fashion brand Nasty Gal, founder and CEO Sophia Amoruso published a memoir and business guide entitled *#Girlboss*. Welcome to the era of neoliberal feminism.

Neoliberal feminism and the concept of *#Girlboss* go hand in hand. A *#Girlboss* strives to be defined as an independent woman who prides themselves on being "self-made". The idea around neoliberal feminism is based on self-empowerment, where to live a well-rounded happy life - to be one's best self - you must be the one, as an individual, to achieve it. Neoliberal feminism emphasises that there is always potential to be more, do more, look better, feel better. You are a failure if you are not within a constant desire to "thrive."

“ Neoliberal feminism pushes anyone who isn't middle class to the side

This continual self-evaluation essentially encourages women to put themselves on a program of self-surveillance. This ideology of *#Girlboss* means to internalise an idea that the only thing preventing you from achieving success is yourself. As a result, institutional disillusionment is instilled, and an acceptance of structural powers that work against

women, instead of a desire to fight against them. This is subordinate to the demands of neoliberal economics. What feels like self-empowerment seems to come across as a disguising of patriarchal ideas, where the patriarchy manages to preserve its functionality within mainstream feminism.

“ Neoliberalism recasts feminism as looking nice and buying things

Feminism, therefore, is trapped within these market-led ideologies and doesn't serve to improve the lives of women across races, classes, and others. Neoliberal feminism is a bubble of white privilege and thrives off its core in only serving the elite few and severely undermining the needs of most women.

Essentially, neoliberal feminism convinces us that its ideas are breaking the glass ceiling and creating effective change for women. Whilst neoliberal feminism can acknowledge things like the gender pay gap, it struggles to properly interrogate the economic structures behind this, and instead encourages women to become CEOs. Feminism in its current form incessantly encourages women to become fully responsible for themselves: *#Girlboss*, pitching t-shirts with "Feminist" on it (most likely made in a sweatshop), pushing

face masks and spa treatments, ultimately pushing anyone who isn't middle class to the side. It seems you can only become liberated from the patriarchy if you one, pull yourself out from under it and two, have the salary to do so.

If you type "feminism" into Google, the first link that comes up is "Feminism - at amazon.co.uk" It is as though in order to be an accepted member of this movement, you have to literally buy into its brand. It personally feels like a white fantasy that neglects non-privileged women.

“ In order to participate in this movement you have to buy into its brand

As a part of Amoruso's *#Girlboss*, an annual conference is organised, where tickets for the said event can go up to \$800 in price. The conference includes "private beauty touch-up areas", discounts on purchases and "glam touch-ups" before headshot sessions. Amoruso is selling the idea that a key to achieving a sense of empowerment is by looking nice and buying things that will help achieve that.

When Hillary Clinton announced she was running for President of the United States in 2016, it was met with applause for new hope for feminism, and women everywhere. Whilst the

US having its first female president would and should be considered revolutionary, there should be a more nuanced discussion around whether Hilary Clinton simply being a woman is going to advance and adhere to the aims of feminism.

Hilary Clinton's history regarding international human rights (Zunes 2007; Barrett and Kumar 2016), or the harm of ethnic minorities and migrants (Nair, 2016), and even a lack of support for LGBTQ+ rights (Schwarz, 2015; Young and Becerra, 2015). Because of this objectively non-intersectional approach continuously taken by Clinton in her political past, it is hard to see, when thinking intersectionally, Clinton being a merit to all of the women she'd be in office representing.

It is easier, however, to see how under the guise of neoliberal ideas that she, a middle-class white woman, is the perfect candidate. It propels the "right" women forward, whilst also remaining under the commands and ideals of capitalist thought and structures.

“ There should be a more nuanced discourse about Hillary Clinton and feminism

Despite Clinton's election campaign slogan being titled 'Stronger Together', *#Girlboss* advocates bowed

down to the neoliberal queen, and consequently attacked other women who supported Bernie Sanders and his social policies for being "anti-feminist". Gloria Steinem, defines herself as an "American feminist and journalist", claimed that the young women who supported Sanders had their priorities elsewhere, "when you're young women, you're thinking, where are the boys? The boys are with Bernie". For someone widely known for their feminism, this stands out as an outright sexist and essentialist remark.

“ This feminism promises freedom but replaces the patriarchy with the free market

Neoliberal feminism promises freedom: the freedom to care and strive on one's own, freedom to choose, and freedom to be self-empowered. But this freedom replaces traditional, patriarchal authority with another - the free-market.

Self-surveillance monitored through endless consumption becomes the ultimate form of female empowerment and sense of value, which distracts from feminism's aim to transform women's lives and to achieve equality regardless of race, class and sexuality.