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# **IN THIS TOGETHER? POSTFEMINIST DISCOURSES OF WOMEN PR AGENCY LEADERS**

**LBU GENDER CONFERENCE,  
6 MARCH 2018**

**LIZYEOMANS**

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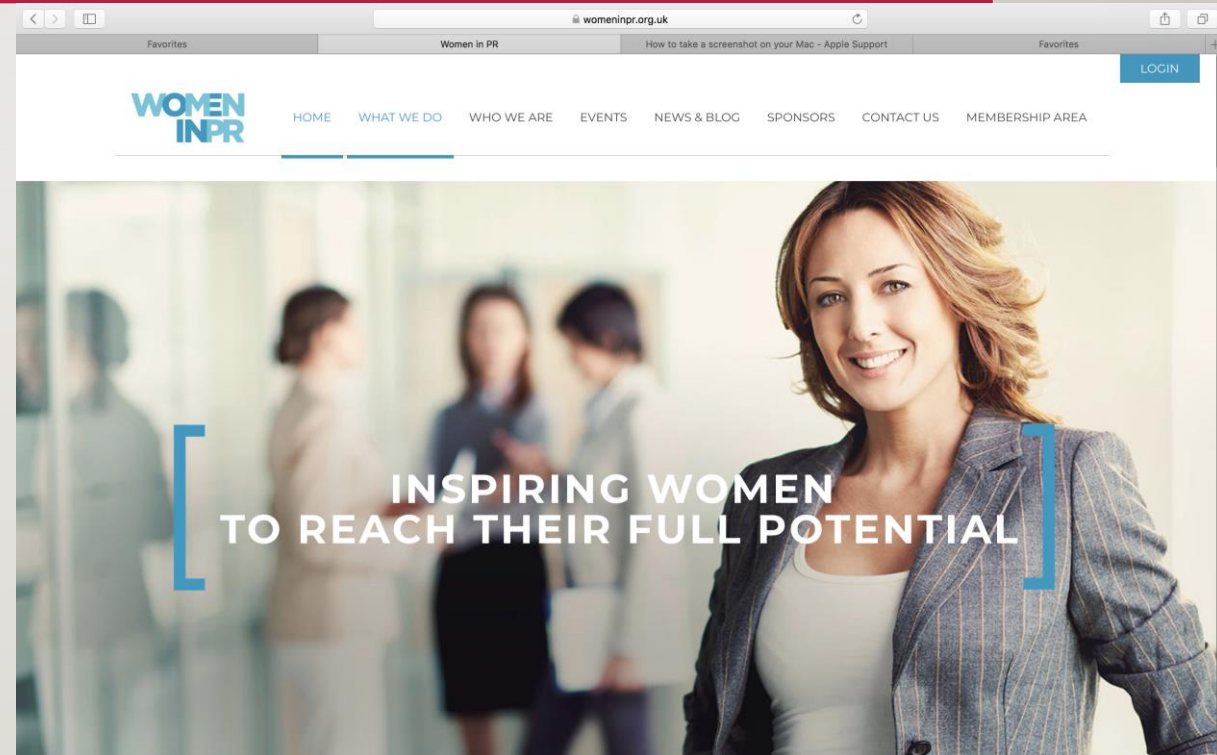
# PUBLIC RELATIONS AND FEMINISM: AN UNEASY RELATIONSHIP

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- Historic discourses (1950s and 60s) associated with promotion of “conservative” values.
- No recognition of gender issues among interview participants who worked in postwar PR, despite distinctive gender segregation in the industry at the time. (L’Etang, 2015).
- Absence of “feminist consciousness” among the 70s and 80s generations of new entrants. Women in senior positions unwilling to support younger generations (Yaxley, 2013).

# GENDER INEQUALITIES IN PR TODAY

- Despite PR being a 'feminised' profession (64% female) only 36% women are at board level.
- There is a 'gender pay gap' of £5,000-£6,000 (CIPR, 2017).
- Gender pay and 'unconscious bias' (sexism) are policy priorities for two professional membership associations (CIPR, 2017, PRCA, 2017).





# EXPLORATORY, QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY (2016)

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- In depth interviews with 7 women leaders of PR firms (owners, MDs and board directors), aged between 39 and 59. All graduates and 6 out of 7 London-based.
- Short periods of observation in 3 agencies.
- Questioned on personal career experiences, everyday professional relationships, training and mentoring, and meaning of role, including being a woman leader.
- Discourse analysis undertaken, drawing on the notion of 'subject positions': identity performance (Edley, 2001; Gill et al, 2017).
- Postfeminism used as a critical lens (Lewis, 2014; Gill et al, 2017) for interrogating discourses, with the purpose of understanding phenomena, not generalising findings.

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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- How do female leaders in PR firms position gender-related issues in discussing their career experiences?
- Does feminist discourse in PR signal potential for transformative change and social justice, reflecting mainstream feminist ideals? (Golombisky, 2015, p. 409).
- Or, in a profession that is strongly intertwined with the rise in neoliberal values over the past 30 years (Miller and Dinan, 2000), is PR emblematic of a highly individualistic ‘neoliberal feminism’ (Rottenberg, 2014); and expressive of a ‘postfeminist sensibility’ (Gill, 2007)?

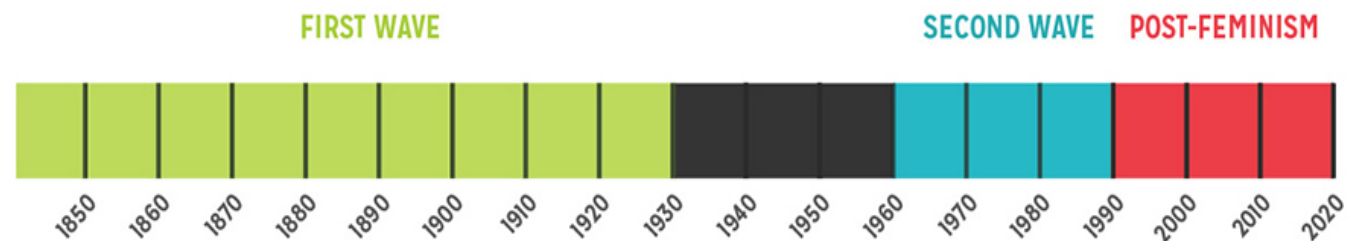
# POSTFEMINISM

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- Ill-defined concept; associated with anti-feminism on the basis that equality has been achieved (McRobbie, 2008).
- Strongly associated with neoliberal values: focus on individual choice, empowerment and the freedom to be ‘yourself’;
- Also a “safe and unthreatening” feminism (Dean, 2010, p. 391).

Source: [annesisto.com](http://annesisto.com)

## WAVES OF FEMINISM:



# USING POSTFEMINISM AS A CRITICAL LENS

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“a patterned **yet contradictory** sensibility connected to other dominant ideologies (such as individualism and neoliberalism).

Rosalind Gill, 2016, p. 621

Postfeminism’s potential for critical insights in PR (Fitch, 2015); L’Etang’s (2015) call for studies that contextualise women’s labour in PR.



# FINDINGS: TWO DISCURSIVE REPERTOIRES

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1: Repertoires of achieving a work-life balance

2: Repertoires of recognition, resistance and acceptance of corporate masculinities

# DISCOURSE I: REPERTOIRES OF ACHIEVING A WORK-LIFE BALANCE

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## ***a. Seeking support for self-help and self-development: the importance of mentoring and networking***

- *I'd had quite a rough time before I went on maternity leave [...] it just felt like sometimes I didn't really have an outlet to talk to anyone, so [...] were doing this kind of mentoring scheme and I applied and got accepted. (participant 2)*

# DISCOURSE 1: REPERTOIRES OF ACHIEVING A WORK-LIFE BALANCE

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## **b. Caring sensibility; meeting the demand for enjoyable work**

- *As a woman, being a mum I think has definitely altered my outlook on flexible working [...] at home I am still the primary carer and so I shoulder a lot more of the household responsibilities, despite my continual efforts to adjust that balance. (participant 4)*
- *I want work to be enjoyable and fun [...] for everyone that works here (participant 6)*
- *so they're going to come to work, they want to enjoy it and therefore that's your job, just to help make it feel fun as well as work. (participant 2)*

# DISCOURSE 2: REPERTOIRES OF RECOGNITION OF CORPORATE MASCULINITIES

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## *a. Recognising corporate sexism*

- *there is a generation of men – the ‘Boomasaur’s’ - more in the city/financial side of PR who need to go with the times. Until they do we won’t see real change. They have a house in the city and country and no idea what it’s like for women working in an environment that continues to operate under male norms and ideas of equality. (participant 1)*
- *Even in the most modern company, there still is this almost, like, unconscious bias. “Oh well this woman is of an age”, or “she’s just got married”, or... and it shouldn’t even be part of the conversation and it still is. Whether you have a family or not, it’s still...your career is coloured by that, I think. (participant 3)*



# DISCOURSE 2: REPERTOIRES OF RESISTANCE TO CORPORATE MASCULINITIES

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## *b. Giving younger women a voice*

- *I'm very aware who's not speaking or who maybe is feeling they don't have a voice. And I do make a point to bring them in, you know, include them. (participant 3)*
- *so I'm encouraging the girls to get involved in a lot of the [women's networking] organisations that are out there, to go and meet new people and network a bit more. (participant 2)*

# DISCOURSE 2: REPERTOIRES OF ACCEPTANCE OF CORPORATE MASCULINITIES

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## *a. Performativity:*

- *I'm setting up a meeting now because I need a bloke in the room, so I'm taking my CEO [...] to be the bloke and the grey hair in the room.[...] I know it's not right, but it's my reality.*  
(participant 5)
- *For [him] it's a concentration thing so he gets a lot more done in his office. I've got an office. I just never use it. Because I'd rather know what's going on downstairs and not miss out.*  
(participant 6)

# DISCOURSE 2: REPERTOIRES OF ACCEPTANCE OF CORPORATE MASCULINITIES

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## *b. Denial of sexism*

- *Maybe when I started in PR [...] “Go and become a secretary, dear”, sort of summed it up [...] but I don’t think that’s the case anymore at all. (participant 7)*

## *c. Acceptance of how things are*

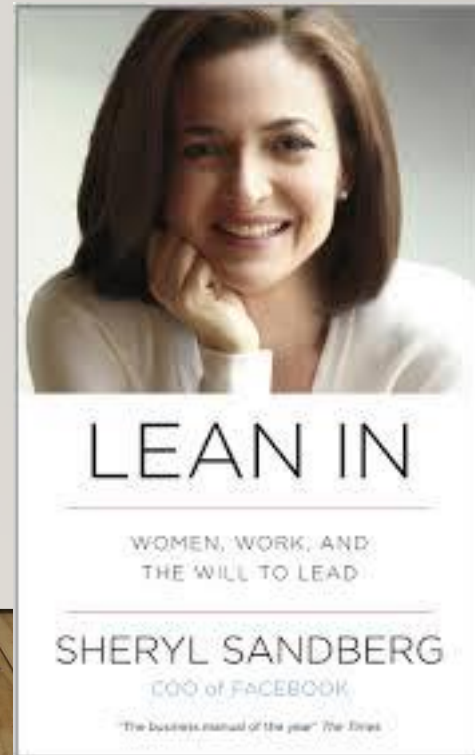
- *[networking is] not my cup of tea because it’s just a load of women moaning about this glass ceiling and you just look around and think “you all own your own companies. What are you complaining about?” But a lot of them have sold their agencies to big companies and then they’re not allowed to join the board. So you just think “well why did you sell it then?” (participant 6)*



# INTERPRETATION: POPULAR CULTURE AND THE *LEAN-IN* 'MANIFESTO'

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- Influence of highly successful, best-selling book by Sheryl Sandberg (2013)
- Three phrases in the public domain produce a specific feminist consciousness (Rottenberg, 2014):
  - Internalising the revolution
  - Lean in
  - Leadership ambition gap





# CRITIQUE OF THE *LEAN-IN* 'MANIFESTO': NEOLIBERAL, POSTFEMINISM

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**Re-frames mainstream liberal feminism**, in “extremely individualistic terms” therefore “ceasing to raise the spectre of social or collective justice”.

Discursively produces a “**particularly feminist subject**”, who while aware of inequalities **accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care** [based on] crafting a felicitous work-family balance based on a cost-benefit calculus. (Catherine Rottenberg, 2014, pp. 419-420)

“In these iterations of popular feminism, the solution to injustice is to **work on the self** rather than to work with others for social and political transformation. Thus, while they can be pulled together with other examples to create a compelling story of feminist ascendancy – of **new feminist visibility** – it is imperative to interrogate such a vision.” (Rosalind Gill, 2016, p. 617)



# IN THIS TOGETHER? CONCLUSION

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- PR agency work epitomises neoliberalism, through the conservative values it promotes and the type of individualised, market-facing, neoliberal worker required to perform the job.
- A feminist consciousness appears to be emerging among a generation of women PR leaders age 40+ - however women's discourses strongly reflect the *Lean In* manifesto of neoliberal postfeminism which calls upon women to provide for their own needs and aspirations: to achieve a "happy" balancing act that does not threaten the status quo at work or at home (Rottenberg, 2014; Adamson, 2017).
- *"I know it's not right, but it's my reality"* illustrates this consciousness: the potential for enacting structural change among some women leaders exists; but it is also the basis of continuing compromise within existing structures.