

Feminist Epistemology and Business Ethics

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Neoclassical economics has become the predominant school of economic thought, influencing scholarship on management, organizations, and business ethics. However, many feminist economists challenge the individualist and positivist foundations of neoclassical economic epistemology, arguing instead that purportedly gender-neutral and value-free methods routinely and systematically leave out and undervalue women. Extending this proposition, this article introduces the epistemic foundations of feminist economics and illustrates how they can produce novel insights relevant for business ethics. In particular, by examining economic phenomena from the point of view of the people they affect, feminist economic epistemology is able to elucidate the ways in which power asymmetries and gender norms that constitute the social world can be reflected in business practices. I apply this methodological insight to three case studies of global supply chains to challenge the neoclassical assertion that including women in labor markets necessarily catalyzes gender equality.

Key Words: feminism, epistemology, gender, labor, globalization

Epistemology is central to the study of business. Epistemic foundations determine how we seek to access truth about the world and the methods we use to support our conclusions. Neoclassical economics, the predominant economic school of thought, views economics as a positive science. As such, it treats markets like natural phenomena, and it seeks the truth about them through the kind of objective observation characteristic of the scientific method (Barker, 1999). However, some feminist economists and business ethics scholars challenge the positivist spirit of neoclassical economics as the only appropriate methodology for understanding life in and around organizations (e.g., Nelson, 1996), arguing instead that neglecting the social dimensions of human behavior is a serious limitation of economic scholarship instead of a sign of rigor (Nelson, 1995). In contrast to the assumed scientific nature of economics, many feminist scholars assert that to study markets and business firms, we must consider the social facets of human relations, including gender.¹ In part, their critique is an epistemic one: they urge us to consider that knowledge of social processes—including in business—can be influenced by our biases, values, and social positions.

¹ In this article, I emphasize the social nature of gender as well as the distinction between sex (male/female) and gender (man/woman) (Rubin, 1975). I do not suggest that sex categories are binary or that they are not also socially constructed. I also do not view gender as binary. My aim here is to draw attention to the idea that gender is not merely anatomical but, rather, has a social character. As such, gender classifications can differ across cultures, situations, and time.

Rather than assume that markets are best studied as the sum of rational actors' individual preferences and actions, as neoclassical theory posits, feminist economists instead suggest that markets could be structures of "coercion, power and domination" (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010: 574) that may mirror and reinforce social norms structuring who can work and how (Young, 1988). Many feminist economists begin labor market analysis with the claim that economic life is embedded in social structures; thus, economic relations are shaped by social and political norms and ideologies (Folbre, 1994; Nelson, 1996; Waring, 1988), including those that are gendered: "the formal and informal rules which structure the operation of labor markets are instantiations of the gender relations of the society in which the labor market is embedded" (Elson, 1999: 612). These social gender relations, then, impact labor supply and labor demand, and individual "preferences" should be understood—and interrogated—as learned and contingent (Anker, 1997) reflections of those gender norms.² Because economies, markets, and business practices exist within the social world, they reflect social processes, values, and hierarchies; as such, many feminist economists argue that purportedly gender-neutral and value-free economic methods can leave out and undervalue women.³

To better account for the influence of gender norms on knowledge of business functioning, these scholars often foreground the social position of the knower and the context of investigation in their studies of gender (Nelson, 1996). Some of this research has revealed gendered dimensions of organizational life that can be erased by methods rooted in other epistemologies (Grosser, Moon, & Nelson, 2017). For example, this epistemic stance is immanent in some business ethics scholarship in the area of "gendered corporate social responsibility" (Karam & Jamali, 2013), or gendered CSR, which refers both to firms' attempts to minimize harm and to their efforts to advance gender equality (Grosser, McCarthy, & Kilgour, 2016). Pearson, for instance, extends the feminist economics insight that "labour markets are themselves gendered institutions which reflect socially constructed divisions of labour" to theorize a more expansive notion of gender-conscious CSR in the "extreme" context of Ciudad Juarez, where thousands of manufacturing assembly plants are located and where hundreds of young women have been murdered (Pearson, 2007: 731, 740). Similarly, McCarthy (2018) and Johnstone-Louis (2017) advocate for business firms to reconsider the roles of paid and unpaid labor—to see them not as dichotomous but instead as inherently connected and mutually constitutive—in constructing and evaluating the success of gender-focused CSR strategies. Through

²I follow Haslanger (2012) in defining gender norms as "clusters of characteristics and abilities that function as a standard by which individuals are judged to be 'good' instances of their gender; they are 'virtues' appropriate to the gender." These norms serve social ends, and they are variable across time, place, culture, and other features, such as race, class, and sexuality.

³This article discusses gender as the focal social process, and I am not explicitly discussing class, race, religion, nationality, and other relevant social realities marked by hierarchy that are worthy of analysis in the context of labor and value. In not adopting an intersectional approach to the topic, I risk exclusion and erasure of people who do not fit simply into gendered categories and generalizations. Adopting an intersectional approach would be a fruitful path for future research. I thank an anonymous reviewer for emphasizing the need to make this point explicitly.

a series of in-person workshops with employees of a Ghanaian cocoa supplier, McCarthy (2018: 343) uncovers existing patterns of paid and unpaid labor that explain the failure of the firm's CSR strategy while also suggesting new avenues for intervention, such as providing women with labor-saving devices like bicycles and water wells, that would "reduce the drudgery and time burden of unpaid care" and could bolster gender equality in that context. Johnstone-Louis (2017: 580) likewise argues that firms cannot be meaningfully separated from their social community, and she asserts that gendered approaches to CSR ought to reject the distinction between production and reproduction, which "represents a theoretical position," not an objective reality.

In this article, I adopt and make explicit the feminist epistemological stance found in the gendered CSR literature and apply it to other areas of business ethics. My interventions are twofold. First, I expand on the implications of feminist economic epistemology for business ethics research on gender and labor. To accomplish this, I articulate the divergent epistemological foundations of neoclassical and feminist economic approaches. Adopting a feminist economic epistemology, I engage with the topic of gender in global supply chains to illustrate some ways in which feminist scholars have generated novel insights about gender and business. Specifically, I review and discuss three cases of global supply chains: flexibilization in Chile and the United Kingdom (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999) and how women workers were deemed "inflexible" in the Dominican Republic (Werner, 2012). Flexibilization in these contexts refers to seasonal, part-time, or temporary work (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999), and Werner (2012) illustrates how perceived inflexibility can relate to and reflect gendered designations of "skilled" and "unskilled" labor.

These are three cases that could be taken as evidence of women's increased access to formal labor markets and, therefore, as an indication of progress toward gender equality. Instead, I argue that by adopting a feminist economic epistemology, these cases provide reason to resist this conclusion and to consider, instead, that business outsourcing and hiring practices may reinforce sexism. By foregrounding the social positions of individuals in labor markets, these cases demonstrate some ways in which organizational outcomes identified by neoclassical theory can reflect gendered social expectations and thus should be seen, from the perspective of epistemology, as knowledge undermining. Second, my aim is to place these cases in the broader discussion of epistemic foundations of business research. Here, I make an explicitly ethical argument by suggesting that neoclassical economic epistemology harms: when not interrogated critically, it can reify a partial epistemic standpoint that may silence lived experiences and perpetuate gender hierarchy. I conclude by discussing the implications of feminist epistemology for future research in business ethics.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ECONOMICS

Positivism as embraced by neoclassical economics has a venerable lineage in Western thought, starting with Plato's (2002) tripartite formulation of knowledge in the *Meno* as justified true belief. In the positivist tradition, knowledge requires 1) a

belief 2) that is objectively and verifiably true and 3) is justified through a replicable, cogent set of explanations articulated through universally valid rules that serve as epistemic arguments (Pritchard, 2009). This definition of knowledge operates under the supposition that positivist scientific inquiry should not depend on normative assumptions about the world (Wicks & Freeman, 1998) or knowers' social locations in it (Kukla & Ruetsche, 2002). That is, central to the positivist tradition is the claim of "aperspectivity," which suggests that observations of the world and justifications for what we believe are not conditioned by social position, nor do they have any impact on the circumstances observed (Haslanger, 2012).⁴ In the time since the *Meno*, knowledge as defined by positivism has become understood as the aim for all knowledge seekers (Code, 2014), including those engaged in economic analysis. With this supposed aperspectivity in hand, economics promised to be "an objective, gender-neutral and value-free science ... that is independent of theoretical observations" (Barker, 1999: 570).

Yet this notion that we can always see the world and form beliefs about it objectively—that is, without the influence of our values, biases, expectations, attitudes, and accumulated experience—is a fiction (Ichheiser, 1949; Lewin, 1939; Ross & Ward, 1996). Worse, ignoring the fiction blinds us to the distortions that our values, biases, and social experience create. This is just what happens in neoclassical thinking, which treats the observations it offers as if they are on a par with scientific observations. Economists from a variety of disciplines, including feminist economics, reject this epistemic stance as the correct one for studying markets, businesses, and economic actors. For them, the questions asked, the factors taken to be relevant in answering them (e.g., what is measured), and the answers rendered can all reflect value assumptions and social position. The beliefs at which some positivist scholars arrive are thereby mistaken or incomplete. As a result, much in neoclassical scholarship is seen in a distorted way or not seen at all. In this section, I describe a particularly pervasive and troubling form that pretensions to objectivity take—namely, wish fulfillment, or what feminists refer to as "the problem of direction-of-fit"—and then show how it influences economic thinking.

Direction-of-Fit

It is undoubtedly the case that we want our beliefs to fit the world. To that end, in some contexts, an objective, positivist methodology may glean good results. For instance, if the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, then we should believe that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. We can observe the world and, independent of our social values, biases, and experiences, achieve true beliefs about it. Our minds will conform to the world. As a result, we satisfy the tenets of epistemology (i.e., we achieve justified, true beliefs) and ethics (i.e., we do not harm others). In social contexts, however, positivist approaches sometimes lead to

⁴For a fuller account of the connection between objectivity and aperspectivity, see Haslanger (2012), who suggests that the function of aperspectivity is to mask the power of observers making claims to aperspectival knowledge, enabling observation to become justification. Haslanger argues that this allows gender differences to be perceived as asocial and amoral.

pernicious results. Some feminist epistemologists note that this can be true in situations characterized by unequal power, in which one's desires exert influence on one's perceptions of the world. In such instances, empirical patterns in the world can fail to be independent of the observer; instead, the observations are informed or conditioned by the observer's social position (Code, 1981). When not attentive to this process, believers might think—wrongly—that they are observing the world in an objective, value-free way. In feminist epistemology, this problem is known as the direction-of-fit, and the critique is this: “a believer might believe that *p* because *p* is the case—her belief thus conforming to the world; or *p* might be the case because the believer believes it—the world thus conforming to her belief” (Langton, 2009: 280). This latter possibility is an instance in which a would-be knower's “direction-of-fit” (Anscombe, 1957; Humberstone, 1992) between phenomenon and belief has reversed, such that the belief corresponds to the world, but not in the way a knowledge seeker would like.

The direction-of-fit problem can alter anyone's beliefs. Indeed, we can all be wishful thinkers, altering our beliefs to fit our desires instead of our perceptions of the world: “I want to believe I can jump across a crevasse, and gritting my teeth, come to believe it” (Langton, 2009: 281). But the direction-of-fit problem is especially troubling in social situations of power hierarchy, for the powerful group's beliefs may influence how the world is and thus how it comes to be known. When this happens, the (supposedly) objective gaze becomes what feminist philosophers describe as the social process of objectification (Haslanger, 2012; MacKinnon, 1987, 1989). By “objectification,” I mean a process of seeing or apprehending that projects the viewer's desires onto the person being viewed, such that the person comes to embody those desires. The viewed person then becomes an object of desire: the person is imbued with the viewer's desires, and this imbuing displaces the viewed person's particularity.

Importantly, “objectification is not just ‘in the head’” (Haslanger, 2012: 65). Rather, desires become embodied. This perspective has similarly been termed an “arrogant eye” who “manipulates the environment, perception and judgment of her whom he perceives” (Frye, 1983: 67) in a way that aligns the material world with his desire. One problem with such an arrangement is that in cases of objectification, the epistemic goal of objectivity cannot be achieved. Instead of the mind conforming to the world, the world conforms to the mind's desires, because those desires co-occur with the social power to enforce. Desire, which is erroneously deemed “objective” belief, seen as value-free and neutral, is backed up by power to influence the arrangements of the world. When this happens, both perception and belief can become self-fulfilling, “in part because the world actually arranges itself to affirm what the powerful want to see” (MacKinnon, 1987: 164).

Feminist epistemologists argue not only that the direction-of-fit problem is knowledge undermining but also that it is gendered. We sometimes construe reality in accordance with men's desires, thinking those desires are beliefs, and thus knowledge of the world becomes corrupted. For example, MacKinnon (1987: 117–24) theorizes objectification through the context of sport, in which gendered norms of athleticism favor men, such that women “are” less athletic. In other writing,

she extends this phenomenon to argue that objectification happens in gender socialization, during which “women internalize (make their own) a male image of their sexuality as their identity as women, and thus make it real in the world” (110–11). The aim for objectivity thus paradoxically relies on a social practice of objectification (MacKinnon, 1989) because “if men have power, [their desire] becomes reality. It is therefore real. It is not an illusion or a fantasy or a mistake. It becomes *embodied* because it is enforced” (119). When observers assume objectivity when observing a social phenomenon, they are “arrogant” (Frye, 1983: 67) because they “may consider it ... just the way things are” (MacKinnon, 1987: 164) without attending to the social conditions and desire that brought it about.

This epistemological dysfunction matters for the study of business. The epistemic foundations of positivist inquiry assume an objectivist direction-of-fit, in which our beliefs fit the world (Anscombe, 1957). But in the case of gendered social hierarchy, this assumption sometimes enacts objectification in that the world comes to fit desires about women (Haslanger, 2012). To make matters more concrete, imagine that a researcher looks around and sees that compared to men, women do not occupy positions of power. Typically, the researcher notes, women demonstrate different capabilities and talents in labor markets compared to men. The researcher thinks these may be natural facts, like stargazing, and provides evidence of this belief that is observable: the dearth of women CEOs or women’s lower aptitude in competitive negotiations, for instance. These beliefs fail to be knowledge, not because they fail as true beliefs, but because they have the wrong direction-of-fit: the beliefs are fitting something other than the world, or the world has come to fit the beliefs, or both (Langton, 2009). Under a more genuinely objective process, the observer might see that an observation is the result of gender norms that dictate not only what “leader” and “negotiator” mean in a social context but also who has been encouraged to embody those roles and who is viewed as legitimate when doing so. For the neoclassical economist, markets comprise rational individuals who interact contractually when it would be in their self-interest to do so and whose outcomes therefore result from their collective choices, thus taken to be optimal and efficient economically (Barker, 1999) and socially (Friedman, 1970). But the direction-of-fit problem would have us consider seeing things otherwise: that social hierarchy and gender norms influence our desires and beliefs about women, keeping them from positions of power and delimiting the occupations legitimate for their access. In other words, we might consider that what the researcher observes is objectification, not objective fact.

While not giving us reason to do away with the practice of positivist inquiry or the aspiration of knowledge acquisition in social contexts, the direction-of-fit problem ought to give us pause when applying positivist standards in social contexts marked by hierarchy and power. Although we can maintain objectivity as an epistemic goal, “the real culprit is the lazy assumption, not the hope, of objectivity” (Langton, 2009: 265). To avoid objectification, the researcher ought to bring a “critical awareness” of the possibility that the researcher will be led astray in observing patterns of the social world, such that the researcher might “expose [those patterns] as specifically male” and therefore neither universal nor objective (MacKinnon, 1989: 125). By taking

seriously this epistemic slippage in direction-of-fit, in which people see what they believe—“theory-laden perception” (Langton, 2009: 282)—we can understand how claims to positivist modes of justification can lead to material harm and get in the way of knowledge. Instead of affirming the positivist notion that justification situated in or dependent on one’s experiences or social position in the world is invalid and knowledge undermining (Kukla & Ruetsche, 2002), in social contexts, it may be the case that some knowledge is accessible only by virtue of one’s social position.

An assertion of this kind has been made by feminist scholars in a variety of disciplines, including philosophers of science (Haraway, 1988; Hartsock, 1983; Keller, 1985; Longino, 1990), critical race theorists (Crenshaw, 1988, 2016), and postcolonial theorists (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988). One implication of the argument that value-free, positivist methods might be the wrong epistemic stance for some empirical contexts (Grenz, 2005; McCorkel & Myers, 2003; Mies, 1983; Shotwell, 2011) is that knowledge about the social world can be more comprehensive when diverse perspectives are included in accounts of it (Hartsock, 1983). Scholars who produce work from such a feminist epistemic stance resist relying on a singular standpoint as valid for knowledge formation. Rather, because the experiences of individuals provide legitimate and sometimes unique ways of knowing, an antidote to objectification is to include diverse and marginalized perspectives.

Feminist Economic Epistemology

Aligning with philosophers who see positivism as assuming a set of ontological claims reflecting a privileged social position, not objective reality, some feminist economists reject the view that economic life is fully captured by the neoclassical tradition (Code, 1981, 2014). They note that the history of economics suggests that the social milieu from which the discipline emerged shaped the questions asked, the foundational assumptions of the paradigm of inquiry, and the epistemic tools used for determining truth (Nelson, 1996). They have suggested that the concepts of free choice and individualism in neoclassical economics, embodied in the figure of *homo economicus*, whose birth in economic thought is often ascribed to John Stuart Mill (Nelson, 1999), assume that individuals are responsible for their own needs (Jones, 2012) and thereby place those who require care (e.g., children, the elderly) as well as those who provide unpaid caring labor—disproportionately, women—outside the domain of economic study (Strassmann, 1993).

One way that feminist economists have intervened in economics is by challenging the ostensible division of productive and reproductive labor, the latter referring to the provision of services required to create and sustain a person’s functioning, both physically and mentally, oftentimes called “caring” labor (Himmelweit, 2007; Himmelweit, Santos, Sevilla, & Sofer, 2013). For instance, many have produced work critiquing the exclusion of emotional and household labor from economic accounts of value (Waring, 1988) like gross domestic product (Nussbaum, 2000, 2003). Marcal (2017) reminds us that Adam Smith, from whom economics inherits the famed parable of the butcher and baker, expressing how self-interest connects

man with his bread, lived with his mother for much of his life and rarely cooked his own dinner, yet relegated such investments into social reproduction to the margins of economic life. It is perhaps illustrative that the parable of Robinson Crusoe is used in some economics textbooks to demonstrate how self-sufficient, rational agents allocate time to maximize well-being. Grapard (1995) argues that the story of a white, male colonizer living alone is hardly representative of economic life and, furthermore, reveals the extent to which neoclassical theory is based on the erasure of social reproduction.⁵ These and other feminist critiques charge that the self-supporting, rational caricature of economic life might “be typical of the perceived experiences of adult white male middle-class economists” (Barker, 1999: 573; Strassmann, 1993) but it is foreign to everyone else.

From the epistemic perspective in which gendered norms around social reproduction are considered central for understanding economics, feminist economists have advanced the field’s understanding of a variety of topics, including sex discrimination in labor markets. In neoclassical economic theory, discrimination exists when differences in remuneration between sexes cannot be captured by variables like education or job experience; thus, discrimination is analytically treated as a “residual, stemming from the tastes of employers,” and as a “puzzle,” because it is seen as an inefficiency (Elson, 1999: 611) that market forces tend to eliminate over time (Becker, 1957). In contrast, from a feminist economic starting point, we might theorize labor markets—and the sex discrimination observed in them—not merely as expressions of individual preference or belief but as reflecting gendered social institutions in which economics is embedded, including the gendered expectations around caring labor. Following from this premise, some feminist economists suggest that “discrimination against women in the labor market may persist even though it is not economically efficient, in the sense of maximizing profits and output, because it is an effective way of empowering men socially and politically” (Elson, 1999: 619–20) and, indeed, economically.

Feminist economists extend critiques and contributions beyond those I cite here, including challenging androcentric bias in econometrics, measuring unpaid work as well as paid work in informal economies, and advancing the understanding of occupational segregation. While some feminist economists depart from neoclassical theory altogether, others work within the neoclassical tradition, publishing research that incorporates feminist insights to innovate and advance neoclassical theory and methodology (Barker, 1999). What I wish to emphasize is the epistemic stance found in several of these streams of research, in which feminist scholars have interrogated and critiqued how social categories like gender, race, and class influence economic theory and research, rather than assuming that they play no role at all.

Here, I highlight one technique they have used to study labor markets: foregrounding the social position of the knower. Deploying methodologies that may include but also go beyond the neoclassical, including qualitative studies in the traditions of organizational ethnography and economic sociology, many feminist economists seek to engage directly with the experiences of those influenced by labor

⁵ Barker (1999) argues that this parable also naturalizes racism and colonial exploitation.

markets, with particular attention paid to those occupying marginalized social positions. As a result, they are able to offer novel analytic insights into the gendered nature of labor markets. Such scholars hold that instead of seeing labor as exogenous, we should consider how labor markets impact people in ways that are relational, gendered, and fundamentally social (Ramamurthy, 2003) and how gender norms around caring labor can influence formal labor markets (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002). By recasting labor as a site of study marked by social gender norms and power hierarchy, not natural laws, feminist economic epistemology helps us understand how social position matters for producing knowledge about business. In the section that follows, I illustrate how.

FEMINIST ECONOMICS AND FLEXIBILIZATION IN GLOBAL LABOR MARKETS

Existing business ethics scholarship on power in global labor markets focuses on ethical questions surrounding the globalization of supply chains, such as exploitation of workers in sweatshops (Berkey, 2021; Zwolinski, 2007), while most articles that center gender do so through the analytic lens of CSR (Johnstone-Louis, 2017; Lauwo, 2018; McCarthy, 2018; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019), including voluntary codes of conduct (Prieto-Carrón, 2008). Here, I extend the business ethics conversation on gender in global supply chains toward the ways in which feminist economic epistemology can produce new knowledge about gender, labor markets, and the functioning of human capital in global supply chains. I illustrate the gendered production of a “flexible” labor force through an analysis of seasonal labor in Chile, flex-time work in the United Kingdom, and garment manufacturing in the Dominican Republic (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999; Werner, 2012). By including the lived experiences of laborers who occupy marginalized social positions, these researchers have been able to theorize how the creation of flexible labor in these contexts can be understood as a process of reconstituting labor’s value to capital (Elson, 1979) through the “construct[ion of] categories of social difference, especially, albeit never exclusively, gender” (Werner, 2012: 405).

In the discussion that follows, I illustrate that through gendered work processes and the construction of masculine and feminine skills, local gender norms can be seen as having influenced how a flexible workforce was created to meet the needs of the firms described in these cases. I argue that considering the gendered patterns uncovered in these cases as reflective of objectification, we gain analytic rigor. Namely, we can theorize flexibilization and skill as resulting from socialization and gender norms that narrow women’s access to forms of labor that are seen as legitimate, even by their own lights. This analysis also responds to the call to view gender in the business ethics context as a “situated social practice” with multiple performative possibilities rather than “understanding femininity as a fixed concept attached to female bodies” (Lewis, 2014: 1847–48) and to depart from the female–male binary (Johnstone-Louis, 2017) toward a more capacious notion of practices and performances of gender, including femininity and masculinity associated with expectations for particular competencies and behaviors (Kilkey, Perrons, &

Plomien, 2013; McCarthy, Soundararajan, & Taylor, 2020). Focusing only on women in this context would be incomplete; instead, I highlight the shifting nature of gender roles and their implications for economic life.

Flexibilization

The basic features of globalization from a neoclassical economic perspective are “the transformation linked to ever-expanding markets, intensified by the rapid technological changes in communications and transportation that transcend national boundaries” catalyzed by “trade and financial liberalization and the formation of regional trade organizations such as common markets and free trade zones” (Beneria, 2003: 63–64). While there are important differences based on economic sector and country context (Ivan-Ungureanu, 2008), for some countries, entering global supply chains resulted in shifts from import substitution to export promotion, in which external demand drives production (Gereffi & Lee, 2012). The growth of low-cost production and manufacturing resulted in geographic areas called “export processing zones.” To become competitive and remain successful in global supply chains that demand “lean retailing . . . , quick and timely supply of goods associated with the just-in-time inventory system” (Beneria, 2003: 119), the firms in export processing zones came to rely on systems of flexible production. “Flexibilization” in these contexts refers to seasonal, part-time, or temporary work (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999).

Gender is central to this story. As empirical studies since the 1970s demonstrate, globalization became defined by the use of temporary contracts, part-time work, and unstable working conditions, for which women were usually recruited (Beneria, 2003; Elson & Pearson, 1981). Neoclassical economic theory claims that because women’s employment—even in low-wage, “flexible” jobs in global supply chains—reflects their free choices, expanding such employment is good for women (Barker, 1999). As feminist scholars have noted, and critiqued, increased access to formal labor markets could be taken by this reasoning as a “win-win” formula that links greater gender equity with economic growth (Chant, 2008: 172). However, they assert that the analysis of labor in global supply chains, if left here, would be incomplete, as inclusion in formal labor markets does not automatically catalyze gender equality (Kabeer, 2012; Kabeer & Natali, 2013). Instead, evaluating links between macroeconomic changes like globalized supply chains and people’s experiences within them must take into consideration “gender socialization and power relations” that influence the organization of labor via social norms between men and women (Beneria, 2003: 126; Pearson, 2007; Rankin, 2001). In what follows, I review case studies of the global fruit chain in Chile and the United Kingdom (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999) and garment manufacturing in the Dominican Republic (Werner, 2012) to illustrate the importance of considering gender norms when evaluating flexible labor’s influence on women’s lives.

Creating the Flexible Woman Worker

Consumer-driven demand for fresh fruit facilitated macroeconomic connections between developed and developing countries, such as between the United Kingdom

and Chile, two contexts in which women formed significant portions of the fruit chain's labor force, often employed on a flexible basis. Women in Chile were employed by fruit exporters as temporary, seasonal workers, whereas women in the United Kingdom formed a significant proportion of the part-time labor force in supermarkets where that fruit was sold. Neoclassical economics views reduction in gender differentials in employment as evidence supporting the view of women's economic progress (Tzannatos, 1999). However, some feminist economists suggest that the story is more complicated. This case's authors used a comparative method to illuminate how women's inclusion in the global fruit chain was through flexible employment in both contexts, yet local norms around gender influenced the different forms of that flexibility (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999). Namely, women's inclusion in flexible employment both depended on and, in part, reinforced their social gender roles—specifically, their caring responsibilities in the household. The creation of a flexible labor force in Chile and the United Kingdom can be understood as similarly premised on gendered assumptions of women depending on a partner's income. As a result, the case authors suggest, some business firms in both contexts—fruit-sourcing firms in Chile and supermarkets in the United Kingdom—benefited from unequal gender divisions of caring that helped create a flexible labor force willing to accept insecure employment patterns and partial wages.

In Chile, agricultural commercialization dramatically transformed the rural sector, leaving most Chileans landless and dependent on waged labor, such that 80 percent of individuals hired for harvesting and packing fruit—52 percent of whom were women⁶—were employed on a temporary basis for approximately four months of the year. High poverty rates and expanded opportunities for waged employment in Chile together increased women's participation in the fruit industry. There were few alternative employment options to this high-intensity, seasonal labor, and women reported to the researchers that their income was indispensable to household functioning. In the United Kingdom, women formed a significant proportion of year-round part-time workers in supermarkets that sold the fruit picked and packed in Chile. To minimize costs, supermarkets increasingly sought out low-cost, flexible labor that could fluctuate with sales and match the flow of shoppers. Other employment opportunities were usually available in the areas where these women worked, unlike in Chile, but gender norms of caring labor were relevant in shaping the conditions of a flexible labor force in both contexts.

The case illustrates how the conditions of women workers' flexibilization were shaped by gender norms. The authors focus much of their analysis on the ways in which paid employment did or did not influence women's social relations within the household, including their empowerment. Their earnings should have a positive effect on their empowerment, the idea goes, because, among other things, it improves their fallback position: their well-being if they separate from their partners (Sen, 1990). However, though the gendered nature and effects of flexibilization depended, in part, on different regulatory contexts and employment requirements, in

⁶This was significantly higher than women's representation in the Chilean labor force as a whole, which at the time of the case's publication in 1999 was 31 percent.

both Chile and the United Kingdom, unpaid caring labor shaped and constrained women's capacity to be recruited as flexible workers.

Although women in the Chilean fruit chain often worked longer hours than men during high season, they remained responsible for much of the domestic and caring work in the household, leading to a "dual burden" that led most women interviewees to cite childcare as "by far their main problem" (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999: 156–57). Furthermore, although many husbands contributed to caring labor during the fruit picking and packing season, albeit to greater or lesser degrees, they largely ceased doing so once the seasonal employment for women had ended. Indeed, related research in this context reports that while men's responses to their wives' seasonal employment represented a range of views, some reported assenting to their wives' waged employment because they would return to their "normal" role as homemakers for the remaining months of the year (Bee & Vogel, 1997). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, limited childcare facilities led women to work short hours for low pay at times when their children were in school or when they could be watched by relatives. Despite the low pay of about four pounds sterling per hour,⁷ these women reported that they valued their part-time work and that they found it appropriate, as they suggested that it was "considered desirable and natural that their paid work should take second place to both their childcare responsibilities and their husband's career" (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999: 161).

The impact of labor market dynamics on gender inequality in these cases depended not merely on labor market participation but also on the "socially appropriate scale and nature of women's employment and the gender division of labour within the household" (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999: 164). Though mediated by unique macro-economic conditions and local contexts, in both Chile and the United Kingdom, caring responsibilities in the household were central to facilitating and constraining women's roles as flexible laborers. These patterns align with other research programs that track how people allocate their time: "the evidence from time budgets from a wide variety of countries in all regions of the world suggests that the gender division of work in the reproductive economy does not change enough to offset rising female and falling male participation in the productive economy" (Elson, 1999: 613).

Taking caring responsibilities into account helps us gain a fuller picture of women's empowerment in these contexts of flexibilization: the Chilean and UK cases illustrate divergent effects of employment on women's relative fallback positions. In Chile, women's work was temporary and seasonal, with their return to full-time caring labor the rest of the year, resulting in their "contribution to household income, the strength of their bargaining and fall back positions [being] constrained and dislocated" (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999: 162). In contrast, women in the United Kingdom had to adapt throughout the year due to their part-time work at supermarkets, thus making their fallback positions still "weak" but "more consistent" (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999: 164). This occurred because, as the authors note, the

⁷ At the time of the case's publication in 1999, this was roughly equivalent to half the average hourly male earnings in the United Kingdom.

seasonal agricultural work in Chile and flexible supermarket retailing in the United Kingdom were made possible by women's caretaking roles in ways that "transformed yet reinforced [their gender roles] within the context of a more globalized fruit chain" (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999: 153–54).

These studies of flexibilization in Chile and the United Kingdom demonstrate that interrogating the context of gender norms in which economic life occurs is required for understanding how labor is valued in global supply chains and how labor influences gender relations in those contexts. In contrast to what would be assumed by traditional economic analysis—that inclusion in formal markets represents a meaningful preference and ought be taken as an indication of gender progress (cf. Kabeer & Natali, 2013)—the reality was more complex. Although women's flexible employment may have contributed to overall financial improvement in the household and improved their relative fallback positions within households, women also experienced a reinforcement of their social role as primarily the stewards of social reproduction. Not only did gender norms erect boundary conditions around the scale and nature of women's paid work but in these cases, women ended up doubly burdened by wage labor and domestic work. As a result of this flexible work, the gender dynamics associated with women's involvement in the paid workforce "both transformed and reinforced their stereotypical role" (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999) as primarily provisioners of unpaid caring labor.

Redefining Gender Roles: When Women Become Inflexible

A qualitative study of the garment manufacturing firm anonymized by the author as Dominican Textile (DT), the Dominican Republic's largest private-sector employer at the time, is a case in which perceptions of skill within the same firm were redefined in relation to gender, resulting in women's sewing labor being construed as inflexible and, thus, systematically undervalued compared to men's (Werner, 2012). Werner, the author of the case, applies a feminist lens to supply chain analysis (Ramamurthy, 2003) to study how embodied labor becomes an abstract form of value (Elson, 1979) through the relational definition of masculine and feminine skills. Ultimately, she argues that an analysis of how the full-package garment manufacturing firms in her sample constructed a workforce comprising mostly men must consider "gendered narratives of skill and practices of training" that resulted in different levels of remuneration and the gendering of sewing skills as masculine (Werner, 2012: 413).⁸ The context provides an instance, I argue, in which feminist economic epistemology can provide an explanation for the otherwise puzzling perpetuation of sex discrimination.

The context of DT is one of "upgrading." Firms can develop a global competitive advantage by specializing at scale through the process of upgrading, through which "countries, regions and other economic stakeholders ... maintain or improve their

⁸ I will focus on the primary mechanism that Werner identifies—reconfiguring sewing as a masculine skill—in the context of DT, though she identifies several other contributing factors, including social class, the ability to speak English, the nationality of firm ownership, and gender norms traveling with firms that moved operations from Florida to the Dominican Republic.

positions in the global economy” (Gereffi & Lee, 2012: 25–27). Upgraded firms are those able to achieve one or more of the following: increased production efficiency, transition to producing more complex products, or shifting to technologically intensive industries. Changes in trade policy, including the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 and its extension in the Dominican Republic–Central American Free Trade Agreement in 2005, incentivized firms in export processing zones to upgrade from simple assembly by incorporating more functions of the labor process to fulfill production orders from the United States, including processing both knit and woven materials. Only a few firms in the Dominican Republic were able to upgrade to “full-package” operations with the in-house capabilities for cutting, laundering, finishing, and developing products, which DT accomplished primarily through a vertical integration strategy to cope with the conditions of shorter fashion seasons, smaller orders, and higher demand for variety (Werner, 2012: 409–10).

In these export processing zones, men became increasingly employed in full-package factories compared to simple assembly firms. At DT, too, men occupied almost all of the positions considered to be the most skilled, such as sewing the inseam and attaching waistbands, which were the highest-paid single operations at the firm. “Utilities,” workers who could complete all sewing operations, were exclusively men. Through interview and observation, Werner finds that participants cite the reason for why men were deemed more appropriate for these “higher-skilled” operations as corresponding to the thickness of the woven material, which is heavier and used to make bottom garments like blue jeans, compared to the lighter, knit material used for top garments (Werner, 2012: 412). However, Werner notes that this explanation, taken alone, is insufficient to account for the dynamic, gendered perception of skill that took place in this context of upgrading. Prior research on blue jeans manufacturing in Mexico found that women made up the bulk of the workforce in factories that handled primarily woven materials, until the firms transformed to full-package operations (Bair & Gereffi, 2001; Bair & Werner, 2011). Werner takes this comparison with Mexico to suggest that feminine and masculine labor can be constructed in relation to one another, not merely attaching to a certain function or type of product (here, processing thick, woven material), in part through changes in labor process organization that disproportionately benefit men.

Applying this insight to the context of DT, Werner illustrates that movement between tasks and acquisition of new skills became keys for gaining access to higher-paid work and that gendered features of mobility—not “skill” itself—can explain why no “utilities” were women. When formal training was deemed unnecessary by DT’s management, official training programs were phased out from DT entirely, and informal routes of skill acquisition became the primary path for self-training. One participant, Nicolas, describes how he practiced for years as a custom tailor during lunch breaks, nights, and weekends so that he could learn new sewing techniques that would command more pay from DT (Werner, 2012: 415). Werner observes this pattern across her sample, concluding that through men’s increased mobility and access to informal inter- and intrafirm training programs during

nonworking hours, they could learn multiple operations and thus secure higher pay from DT.

In contrast, women reported being constrained by childcare responsibilities and thus were unable to access these informal training opportunities. This gendered difference in access to ongoing training in the workplace echoes empirical patterns in prior literature, in which researchers explain gendered patterns of mobility in factories as reflecting existing social gender norms and hierarchy (Salzinger, 2003). In the context of DT, participants discussed skill as “a matter of individual initiative and will, independent of gendered hierarchies of labor in the workplace and household” (Werner, 2012: 417). Here, flexibility became associated with learning multiple, “skilled” sewing tasks that aligned to the firm’s needs in upgrading. The reason participants give for why women do not access more training is that they are *inflexible*. “They simply lack *chispa* [spark],” one manager said (Werner, 2012: 416). Another interviewee, who identified as a woman, said that women are too dedicated to their households to improve their DT-relevant sewing skill, which she saw as a regressive choice. Werner notes that these narratives explaining women’s absence from the most “skilled” sewing positions at DT ascribed to women “a quality of rigidity... characterized by a refusal to govern the self in accordance with the requirements of the new production model” (Werner, 2012: 417). These women were perceived as refusing to increase their skill levels, and thus, they were blamed for making the wrong choices and deserving their lower rates of pay.

Discussion

The cases of Chile, the United Kingdom, and the Dominican Republic explain the persistence of sex discrimination, which neoclassical economists theorize should not persist in competitive markets, in a new way. Understanding labor’s value to capital here requires considering the issues of social dependence, gendered expectations, and power, all of which influenced the ways in which gender norms around caring conditioned opportunity and the social construction of skill. The analytic lens of assumed objectivity fails to account for the ways the world organized itself—in gendered ways—to accommodate presumed notions of skill and how labor became valued in these contexts.

A researcher studying the labor patterns at DT could come to believe, as in fact some participants in the case espouse, that women possess less sewing skill—and thus deserve less remuneration—than men and justify this belief through the observation that women execute fewer skilled tasks than men. Werner indeed illustrates that, according to her study participants, to become a “utility,” the most skilled class of sewer at the factory, a woman would have to demonstrate the ability to sew woven garments, an operation seen as both higher skilled and “masculine.” Similarly, the participants in the United Kingdom considered that working part-time to accommodate both their husbands’ careers and their childcare responsibilities was “desirable and natural” (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999: 161). These cases are distinct due to their historic and material differences, yet by considering the epistemic direction-of-fit (Haslanger, 2012; Langton, 2009), they are united in illuminating some ways in which gendered assumptions around who contributes to households (e.g., men,

women) and how (e.g., mostly through labor income, mostly through caring labor) may delimit the scope and value of women's contributions to the formal labor market and limit the advancement of gender equality in different geographic and economic contexts.

Indeed, we might consider that the impacts of labor market dynamics on gender inequality—and vice versa—depend not merely on labor market participation but also on the local gender norms defining the “socially appropriate scale and nature of women's employment and the gender division of labour within the household” (Barrientos & Perrons, 1999: 164). The expectation, evidenced by participants in the cases presented here, that women perform the majority of unpaid household labor in addition to having paid employment have long been suggested to limit their opportunities for training and entrepreneurial pursuits relative to men (Folbre, 1994). Werner argues that skilled labor at DT became redefined during upgrading as the ability to perform multiple operations, and thus the standard for value benefited men, who were able to access training. Conversely, women were less able to benefit from informal training routes due to their limited mobility at work and after work, in part because of domestic responsibilities stemming from gender norms of social reproduction. In turn, they “were” less skilled, a belief we can consider to result from objectification: “how women are will come to fit what is believed about women—what is expected of women” (Langton, 2009: 283). Recall that this state of the world is “not just an illusion or a fantasy or a mistake” (MacKinnon, 1987: 119) but a true belief, which women themselves may have, too, as the participants in all three cases demonstrate.

These cases allow us to consider that beliefs about women's flexibility and skill could be understood as not value-free in the positivist sense, which assumes its separation from theories of the social world, but rather as a belief to which the world has conformed. By eliding this distinction, positivist neoclassical methods detect only the ostensibly value-free pattern that women, in the DT case, have less skill at sewing. They “presume, rather than interrogate,” the construction of labor and skill in the upgrading analytic (Werner, 2012: 410) and might not see how power and desire influence what we believe about skill and value. If, however, we consider “feminine” and “masculine” labor patterns as constructed in relation to one another (Connell, 2011), we can appreciate how the local labor market was reconfigured by macroeconomic market trends and existing social norms and hierarchies. These norms can be seen as having impacted labor supply and labor demand, suggesting that the gendered “preferences” from both workers and firm management can be understood as learned and contingent (Anker, 1997), not natural and universal. As a result, a feminist economic epistemology allows us to treat labor not as exogenous in economic analysis but rather as itself a production that becomes integral to the functioning of the economy (Heintz, 2008).

What we lose by blurring the epistemic distinction contained in feminist accounts of the direction-of-fit, and by not embarking on an analysis of how economics is part of the social world and that our beliefs about the latter ought to be interrogated in the former, is twofold. Our conclusions might very well be bad by the lights of ethics, as well as epistemology. First, we harm workers by perpetuating a narrative in which women's labor skill and value remain reinforced by social norms that we take to be

natural fact. Second, we limit our knowledge of economic life. We obscure our understanding of how economic policies and trends rely on, draw from, and deploy gender norms that privilege some to the detriment of others, in terms of pay, access to training, and fallback position. This limits our capacity to gain knowledge of business. For though women at DT are less “skilled” in sewing, it is unlikely to be the case that our justification for how we know that women in the Dominican Republic are less skilled than men—their inability to sew woven fabric like blue jeans—will provide the correct account in all other situations. To see otherwise, one need only fly to Mexico.

IMPLICATIONS OF FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY FOR BUSINESS ETHICS

Scholars have long argued that the scientific rationality guiding much business theorizing insufficiently captures the realities of organizational life. Feminist epistemology provides an alternative: by considering the ways in which individual observations are partial and conditioned by our values, biases, and accumulated personal and professional experiences, business ethicists can produce more objective scholarship about organizations. Specifically, I have argued that by interrogating rather than assuming the epistemic direction-of-fit between observations and desires, and by including the perspectives of socially marginalized people in our research, scholars can observe and theorize new insights about economic and organizational functioning, including how social norms of gender impact life in firms. This theory of epistemology has been embraced, implicitly or explicitly, by some economists and business ethicists, and I have illustrated in this article that their research demonstrates what is to be gained by adopting this view. Here, I begin to trace some further implications of this feature of feminist epistemology for business ethics scholarship.

Research Methods and Epistemology

While positivist methods have generated important insights into the functioning of markets and business firms, “the costs too have been high” because “it is an error to pretend that the methods of the physical sciences can be indiscriminately applied to business studies” (Ghoshal, 2005: 77). The direction-of-fit problem helps us conceptualize one way that our social positions can influence how we observe and justify our claims about the empirical contexts that we study. One solution, I have suggested, is to include and to value the experiences and knowledges of people in these contexts: it is by engaging with the varied, many, partial experiences of the world that we can achieve more objective and rigorous scholarship (Haraway, 1988; Langton, 2009; Longino, 1990). By bearing witness to the lived experiences of intersubjectivity and prioritizing “concrete and particular, yet theoretically elaborated” experiences of people in and affected by organizations, feminist epistemology is one lens through which business scholars could produce empirical and theoretical work about “living with, enduring, and attempting to resist forms of exclusion, subordination, and oppression” (Borgerson, 2007: 481–86) that elude more canonical approaches to epistemology (Borgerson, 2010) and economics

(Nelson, 1996). Legitimizing experience, particularly of the socially marginalized, as both empirically valid and morally relevant can aid business ethics researchers in strengthening their scholarship about the material realities of business life.

Rejecting the scientific method's tenets of value-free objectivity, scholars argue that scientific rationality is helpful but insufficient for studying organizational life, in part because it fails to capture the "logic of practice" (Bourdieu, 1990). In response, "practical rationality theories" attempt to mitigate the theory–practice gap by elucidating the ways in which organizational practices are constituted and enacted by individuals (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). Qualitative methods, including ethnography, interview, narratives, and participant observation, which center individuals' reported experiences of work, are important tools to "open up the black box of production" (Werner, 2012: 408). These approaches are only some of the many methods that scholars have used to incorporate the knowledges of those who occupy marginalized social positions into empirical and normative business scholarship.

Furthermore, scholars go "beyond [interrogating] the performance of specific practices to set them in the context of the logics they reproduce" (Mutch, 2018: 255) through attention to the social and moral values (Ghoshal, 2005) and emotions (Lamprou, 2017; McCarthy & Glozer, 2021) that animate and shape the actions of people in organizations. While practice theory scholars produce organizational scholarship from varied philosophical and empirical orientations, their work is unified through the idea that "knowledge is not a static entity... but rather an ongoing and dynamic production that is recurrently enacted as actors engage in the world of practice" (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011: 1243), including the researchers themselves (Shotter & Katz, 1996).

Indeed, calls for "reflexivity" in scholarship implore researchers to cultivate a sensitivity to how their own social position, values, and experiences, including gender, influence the research process (Cunliffe, 2003; McCorkel & Myers, 2003). Business ethicists, too, should be alert to the ways in which gendered norms and assumptions influence scholarship, including our beliefs about what is "feminine," which realities are worth privileging in our work, and the extent to which our theories uncritically recapitulate neoclassical beliefs about choice and empowerment. Instead, we can extend the arguments offered herein to both the topics we choose to study and also the methods we deploy as scholars.

Gender and Organizations

Extending beyond the present context of global supply chains, adopting a feminist epistemology is a powerful tool by which researchers can identify gendered practices that disadvantage women in organizations (Derry, 1996). For decades, scholars have wrestled with the persistent problem of gender inequality in business, from disparities in leadership (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; Tharenou, Latimer, & Conroy, 1994) and entrepreneurship (Marlow & Martinez Dy, 2018) to the efficacy of diversity policies (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006; Leslie, 2019) aiming to mitigate those disparities. Feminist epistemology provides a novel way to theorize and study these gendered outcomes and to contribute to the academic and policy conversations around labor, gender, and governance.

One way that feminist economists have contributed to scholarship on how gender norms influence the study of economic life is by reconsidering the stark distinction between productive (paid) and caring (unpaid) labor and by emphasizing the gendered nature of this distinction. As I have aimed to illustrate through the preceding case studies, instead of seeing labor as exogenous, feminist economic epistemology provides one way to consider how labor markets and gender norms are mutually constitutive: just as these norms can influence the functioning of labor markets (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002), business practice can in turn influence how gender norms are maintained in some contexts (Ramamurthy, 2003).

By considering the ways in which organizational life is influenced by gender norms and power hierarchy, feminist business scholars have demonstrated new ways to understand gendered outcomes in organizations (Johnstone-Louis, 2017; McCarthy, 2018). For example, recent scholarship considers the relationship between paid and unpaid labor to understand the hegemony of men and masculinities in some global value chains (McCarthy et al., 2020). Similarly, scholars have begun to consider how organizations reproduce social inequality (Amis, Mair, & Munir, 2020; Janssens & Steyaert, 2019; Johnstone-Louis, 2017) and to advocate for an intersectional analysis of social categories in discussions of diversity in organizations (Clair, Humberd, Rouse, & Jones, 2019; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2015) to mitigate those inequalities. By interrogating the ways in which social categories and norms—including but not exclusively gender—inform how business relations are known and valued, researchers can further acknowledge and theorize how social relations mediate business functioning, and vice versa.

A renewed focus on the material conditions under which labor is created, sustained, and valued can also expand our view of how social institutions influence business practice, which in turn can expand opportunities for business to contribute to social gender equality. As business firms increasingly voice the desire to address “grand challenges” (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016) like poverty and gender inequality, scholarly approaches that account for how businesses, markets, and society are mutually constitutive can contribute meaningfully to this line of research. For instance, by rejecting the characterization of stakeholders as “‘rational,’ atomized individuals,” feminist scholars have uncovered new ways for businesses to consider the experiences and needs of stakeholders who may otherwise be excluded as irrelevant (McCarthy, 2018: 338) or remain invisible altogether. For example, McCarthy’s longitudinal, participatory research with a CSR partnership between a British chocolate company and its Ghanaian cocoa supplier exposed previously obscured limitations of the company’s existing CSR practices and also conceptualized several improvements, informed by the experiences of the beneficiaries themselves (McCarthy, 2018). In other research, scholars advocate for gendered CSR initiatives to extend their purview beyond the firm’s employees, past “the factory gate to the population cohort from which the ‘cheap’ labour of women is recruited,” to better understand the gendered implications of firm practices for women stakeholders in export processing zones (Pearson, 2007: 740). Furthermore, recent research considers the emotional work required by organizational actors who work to dismantle institutional sexism, including how this emotional energy can be

replenished either through affective solidarity, when one feels aligned with the collective, or through sensory retreat, when one feels misaligned (McCarthy & Glozer, 2021). By studying the ways in which organizational and social norms influence individual—and, here, gendered—outcomes, business scholars not only better comprehend the influence of business practices on gender equality but can also imagine new organizational forms and practices that can advance social equality and contribute to individual and collective flourishing.

Ethics

Questions of gender and power matter not only for producing good scholarship about economics and labor markets; these issues are also central to ethics (Langton, 2009). Feminist scholars suggest that by cultivating a sensitivity to the lived experiences of others, we act ethically in relation (May, 1992). When marginalized persons' perspectives are left out of business ethics scholarship, the legitimacy of their true beliefs and ways of knowing can be erased and the facts of their lives can fall out of analysis. The epistemic foundations of feminist economics, then, offer rich resources for informing debates in contemporary business ethics. Borgerson (2007) highlights, for instance, the capacity for feminist approaches to business ethics to expand and enrich our understanding of relationships and responsibility. Some ethics scholars have theorized more capacious accounts of responsibility that take into consideration social institutions, hierarchies, and the nature of intersubjectivity. Business ethics scholars have argued that ethical decision-making by firms, particularly in the context of globalized labor, ought to consider both economic and social conditions when evaluating potential harms, as well as potential gains (Borgerson, 2005; Donaldson, 1996).

Similarly, although the concept of an “ethic of care,” which focuses on interconnections instead of independence, is neither inherently feminine nor feminist (Derry, 1996), business ethicists have used it as a lens through which to theorize business responsibility to stakeholders. Recent work extends the work of philosopher Held (2006) and psychologist Gilligan (1982) to expose “masculinist bias in some extant CSR research” and to reconceptualize CSR for small- and medium-sized enterprises (Spence, 2016: 42). Similarly, other work incorporates Heidegger's (1962) account of care to retheorize leadership in organizations (Tomkins & Simpson, 2015). Relatedly, scholars argue that cultivating a feminist approach to stakeholder management upends typical notions of power and legitimacy to carve out new possibilities for understanding and engaging marginalized stakeholders ethically (Derry, 2012; Karam & Jamali, 2013; McCarthy & Muthuri, 2018). Emphasizing the social context of discovery, including how social power influences what and how we apprehend the world, would align with this existing work and expand the possibilities for contributing to normative business ethics scholarship.

CONCLUSION

Our values, biases, and experiences influence how we apprehend the social world. I have argued that by attending to these features, and to the lived experiences of

marginalized groups and the material circumstances of social norms and gender hierarchy, we can better see how social structures influence our perceptions of markets, business firms, and labor value. This analysis draws on and extends insights from feminist epistemology that interrogate, rather than assume, the direction-of-fit (Haslanger, 2012; Langton, 2009) and considers how desire influences what and how we know. The case studies of flexibilization in the United Kingdom and Chile and upgrading in the Dominican Republic, I argue, give us reason to consider that labor markets should be seen as “bearers of gender” in that they are structured by gender-inflected social practices, norms, and perceptions (Elson, 1999). Understood in this way, we can consider that labor is not exogenous but rather a social production that allows the economy to function by reflecting existing social hierarchies relating to gender. This analysis gives us a framework within which to consider that women’s inclusion in these markets should not be seen in all cases as evidence of women’s empowerment. Indeed, by adopting a feminist epistemology, feminist business ethics scholars and economists have been able to elucidate otherwise obscured facets of how gender functions in market contexts. These facets matter not only for theory but also for practice. If real labor markets differ from the neoclassical model, then “pursuing an agenda of labour market flexibility can produce perverse outcomes” (Heintz, 2008: 14). Research based on feminist economic epistemology, discussed herein, suggests that this might be true.

In this article, I have focused on how adopting a feminist epistemic stance can allow scholars to perceive the reciprocal process through which gender is reconfigured by the globalization of business and how business processes are themselves gendered (Eschle, 2004). The case studies discussed in this article are temporally and geographically particular and distinct, and future research should consider the implications of social position and power on knowledge in new contexts, likewise foregrounding the material and historic background of the site of study. As one review of gender and transnational production concludes, “*how* gender matters in a particular location on the global assembly line is variable and contingent; *that* gender matters is not” (Bair, 2010: 205).

By adopting a feminist economic epistemology, I have argued that we have much to gain as business ethics scholars by questioning the positivist assumptions of value-free, aperspectival knowledge and, instead, by considering that knowledge of the social world—including, then, of business—is conditioned by our social positions. By recognizing the experiences of people who occupy marginalized social positions as legitimate ways of knowing, scholars in business ethics can mitigate harm while producing more complete knowledge about business, society, and the ways in which these spheres of life may not, after all, be so materially or analytically separate.

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