What is 'freelance feminism'?

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Abstract
This article introduces the concept of 'freelance feminism': a term we use to highlight how a combination of casualised precarious labour and platformised entrepreneurialism constitute a key terrain through which contemporary feminist work is enacted. The article proposes that this term can be a way to understand new formations and constellations of activity which are being shaped in the intersections between precarity, feminism and entrepreneurialism. How, in what ways, and with what consequences are feminist activism and platformised entrepreneurialism becoming entwined? How are new forms of self-promotion, self-branding and precarity shaping feminist cultures? Are entrepreneurial projects more broadly taking on feminist forms and, if so, how can we understand their politics? To explore these issues, the article examines in turn (1) neoliberal, short-term, precarious labour in the cultural industries and its exacerbation during the pandemic, (2) contemporary entrepreneurial 'platformisation' and (3) the increased visibility of feminism in contemporary popular culture. It concludes by introducing the range of articles in the special issue.

Introduction

This special issue identifies and interrogates a phenomenon we term 'freelance feminism' or freelance feminisms. 'Freelance feminism(s)' is a term designed to highlight

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how feminist projects are now increasingly operating in a casualised gig economy; and how models of entrepreneurial precarious labour – including branded partnerships, monetisation platforms such as Patreon and Substack, and subscription-based packages – are being used to facilitate feminist work, variously sustaining, rethinking and possibly even threatening it. While we do not subscribe to a view of feminist purity, and are suspicious of the ways in which feminisms often become hierarchised along a spectrum from 'good' to 'bad', this article – like the wider special issue – contends that there are new questions raised by the current conjuncture. It asks the following: what constellations now materialise at this new intersection of feminism and entrepreneurialism? How, in what ways and with what consequences are activism and entrepreneurialism becoming entwined? How are new forms of self-promotion, self-branding and precarity shaping feminist cultures? And might entrepreneurial projects be taking on feminist forms?

Definitions of 'freelance' predominantly relate to work – for example, 'working independently usually for various organisations rather than as an employee of a particular one'.[1] The special issue employs such meanings while also expanding the term's use. It surveys different iterations of 'freelance feminism': from feminist activist groups, organisations and enterprises to more individualised examples including the increasingly prominent figure of the 'feminist influencer'. It explores how freelancers sit across and permeate different areas, from the wellness industry to online cultural 'content' through to fashion and the arts, and contours the nuanced ways in which feminism is now understood and promoted in these fields. As part of this investigation, the special issue aims to illuminate the intersectional issues that freelance feminism gives rise to. Who succeeds in these lines of work? How are constituencies differently positioned in terms of 'race', class and (dis)ability, and how are they represented within as well as marginalised and excluded from these areas?

The issue therefore asks how feminism, precarious labour and entrepreneurialism coexist together in novel and contradictory spaces, including platform cultures. In what ways do feminist freelancers combine individual and promotional activities with collective feminist politics? And how do the logics, structures and affordances of platforms enable or constrain collective feminist politics? To what extent has feminism always been 'freelance', in the sense of being characterised by free labour? How does freelancing shape feminism, and in what ways do the logics of entrepreneurial freelancing complicate feminist organising principles and values? What does the emergence of the feminist professional mean – or perhaps even the professional feminist? The article builds on engagements with the 'institutionalisation' of feminism – in universities and schools, in creative organisations and indeed across corporations through 'Equality, diversity and inclusion' (EDI) policies on one hand, and branding strategies on the other hand that see the vast majority of large companies issuing International Women's Day communications every year and responding, too, to the increased visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+) politics and the revitalisation of #BlackLivesMatter (Ahmed, 2012: 19; Hemmings, 2005; Malik, 2023, Naidoo, 2024). The fact that this is happening concurrently with a worsening of inequalities, devastating increases in poverty and, in a UK context, the deliberate creation of a 'hostile environment' for migrants and, arguably, all people of colour, makes it even more complicated to read and understand. We aim, through this special issue, to generate new insights into

how feminism and activism are being reworked and arranged in precarious, and often branded, environments.

In the process, we take a deliberately broad and inclusive approach to the topic, connecting together and putting into dialogue the rich seams of recent work in cultural studies on (1) neoliberal, short-term, precarious labour in the cultural industries and its exacerbation during the pandemic, on (2) contemporary entrepreneurial 'platformisation' and on (3) the increased visibility of feminism in contemporary popular culture. We start this introduction by outlining these three areas and some of the key debates and issues which have emerged within and in relation to them.[2]

Neoliberal, short-term, precarious labour in the cultural industries

To understand the emergence of the formation we are calling 'freelance feminism(s)' we need to consider the context of the rise of neoliberal, short-term, precarious labour in the cultural industries and its exacerbation during and after the pandemic. Though we acknowledge that articles in this issue span far wider than 'the creative industries' as they are traditionally understood – including graduate labour markets, the sex industry, social media creator economies and pandemic baking – this cultural industries lens enables us to both take an expansive view of its trends and to revisit a number of its prevailing characteristics which are also present in these broader areas. Common concerns bridging these fields, which have been extensively theorised within existing cultural and creative industries research, include issues around short-term precarious projects, self-promotional and neoliberal culture, affective and entrepreneurial labour, and persistent intersectional inequalities. This issue draws on the significant body of academic work which illustrates the double-edged sword compounding these styles of cultural practice. On the one hand, independent creative and cultural work offers workers the autonomy to 'do what one loves' (Duffy, 2017), to be involved with 'exciting and cutting-edge work' (Gill, 2002), to engage in 'passionate' and fulfilling labour (McRobbie, 2016), and even to realise the potential for self-actualisation (Gill and Pratt, 2008). The cultural sector seemingly promises an environment which is 'open', 'diverse', 'bohemian' and 'hostile to rigid caste systems' (Florida, 2002): a plausible space to seek out new forms of agency outside the confinements of traditional employment. Quite simply, these forms of work vow to provide personal gratification merely through the act of 'being creative' (McRobbie, 2015). Creativity has been understood as the 'wonderstuff' of the contemporary working world, a force great enough to transform workplaces into 'powerhouses of value' (Ross, 2009).

The counterpoint to this narrative is that creative and cultural work is overwhelmingly characterised by short-term, precarious, project-based and insecure patterns of labour (Banks, 2007, 2017; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Jones, 1996; McRobbie, 2016). Independent cultural work can so often be wholeheartedly neoliberal in its shaping and practice, implicitly or explicitly promoting market deregulation and privatisation alongside individual responsibility, autonomy and choice (Pruchniewska, 2018). In addition, engagement in these fields is unpredictable and intermittent, demanding varying forms of agility (and resilience) to cope with the inevitable 'bulimic' patterns of work (Pratt, 2002)

– which affects and restricts some groups far more than others. Coupled with these issues, and propelled by wider institutional and structural pushes towards self-employment succeeding the 2008 financial crash (Cohen et al., 2019), creative and cultural industries are today overwhelmingly primarily made up of independent and freelance workers.

The nature of these styles of work, and specifically, of freelance working cultures, entails its own particularities and expectations, which are inflected differently according to social geographies, but nonetheless often share common tendencies (McRobbie, Strutt and Bandinelli, 2022). Freelancing frequently requires workers to develop skills in 'self-management' (McRobbie, 2016), and in the absence of the job security and advancement opportunities of traditional employment, freelancers rely on self-promotion and self-branding to maintain and further their careers (Pruchniewska, 2018). Conceptualised as 'portfolio' workers, freelancers bear the constant 'affective labour of updating profiles, tweeting, blogging' while being readily prepared to sell one's work and skills within these 'reputation economies' (Conor et al., 2015). Much of this 'relational labour' is unpaid (Baym, 2015), an issue which has been rigorously critiqued in academic work, alongside the wider exclusionary structures pervading these industries (Conor et al., 2015; Malik and Shankley, 2020; O'Brien et al., 2020; Saha, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the ongoing 'polycrisis', has undoubtedly exacerbated these issues. Widespread collapses in income and employment throughout the first lockdown brought devastating effects to a number of areas, including the precarious livelihoods and working conditions of freelance cultural workers. And while many governments including that of the United Kingdom rolled out several 'safety net' schemes across these areas, these measures in so many cases proved to be nets with many holes, leaving thousands of freelance workers unsupported (Communian and England, 2020). Today, 4 years on from the first lockdown, there is now increased awareness that the effects of the pandemic were felt unevenly by workers across the cultural sector. Specifically, the reduction of financial stability and job security, obstacles to entry and progression, as well as ongoing forms of discrimination have fallen disproportionately on the shoulders of Black, Asian and ethnically diverse cultural workers (Ali et al., 2022). A range of interdisciplinary research has likewise illuminated the stark and growing gendered inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic (Casey et al., 2022; Chung et al., 2021; Foley and Cooper, 2021), and within the cultural sector (a sector which has historically and notoriously disadvantaged women and marginalised groups), the crisis has only exacerbated these inequities. The current and ongoing 'cost of living crisis' has further complexified and intensified these existing problems.

This special issue homes in on the emergence and growth of feminist projects – or 'freelance feminisms' – which are operating within these cultural logics and spaces. It examines their varying forms, and outer reaches: from feminist magazines to women's wellness platforms, to sex worker collectives, to feminist 'content producers', exploring the nuanced ways feminism is now understood and promoted. Along the way, it asks how these wider neoliberal and precarious settings are shaping and informing feminist initiatives. How might the broader moment of 'polycrisis' be affecting the sustainability of freelance feminist projects, and what are the key pressure points for workers and feminists? What are the issues and problems that arise – from burnout to 'bulimic' funding

– when feminism becomes a job? In what ways does freelancing shape feminist expression, and how is feminism shaping freelance environments? Particularly, where freelancing often demands varying self-branding and self-promotional approaches, this special issue explores the tensions these practices evoke for collective feminist work. How do 'freelance feminists' negotiate these contradictory, and at times, opposing environments, amid the wider backdrop of environmental and economic upheaval? And how are these tendencies shaping wider trends of, and for, contemporary femininities?

Contemporary entrepreneurial 'platformisation'

One almost unavoidable realm through which freelance feminists have to navigate these complex and contradictory environments today is that of entrepreneurial 'platformisation': by having to be, in some capacity or other, *entrepreneurial on the internet*. The widespread, commonplace norm of both online social worlds and entrepreneurial behaviour, and the fusion between them, is a near-ubiquitous feature of contemporary societies in the 2020s.

This is not to say that there is a global uniformity of the digital landscape, nor that people relate to the neoliberal imperative to 'be entrepreneurial' in a monolithic or unitary fashion. Platforms develop quickly, often with dizzying speed; people's access to them is uneven; they are shaped and adopted differently according to geographical and political contexts and cultural routes. While we undoubtedly have the global hegemony of 'platform capitalism', run primarily by men (Little and Winch, 2021), we also have the vital histories and present existence of 'platform cooperativism' (Srnicek, 2016). Likewise, entrepreneurialism is a constituent component of neoliberal culture: the imperative to brand the self, to treat the individual as a commodifiable product and the erosion of long-term public sector institutional funding in favour of short-term, privatised 'entrepreneurial' bids are now key features across the majority of sectors (Bröckling 2015). Yet, it is also important to note that these entrepreneurial logics and tendencies have also been interpreted in a range of ways, and have been both embraced and resisted, both 'within' feminist debate and beyond.

Feminist projects have to operate within this landscape: both in terms of how the projects progress and in relation to what they have to face and negotiate; and in terms of how feminists, as people, have to sustain their material existence in relation to employment. As one of Hannah Curran-Troop's feminist interviewees puts it, which she discusses in her article in this issue, 'We live in a capitalist world, we need to survive!' Yet there is an argument to be made that feminism has always been 'freelance', or at least the vast swaths of it which have existed outside of 'gender mainstreaming'. Feminist movements from suffragettes to consciousness-raising groups of the 'second wave', from the Combahee River Collective to Brixton Black Women's Group all, for example, operated through people squeezing feminist activism and practice around their day's work – in effect, these have been unpaid forms of feminist activity, or feminist labour (Bhandar and Ziadah, 2020; Littler, 2023; Taylor, 2017). Indeed, it might be noted that there are deep affinities between the 'free' in 'freelance' and the emphasis on 'liberation' in much feminist practice.

Equally, there have long been intersections between entrepreneurial activity and feminism. The meanings of entrepreneurialism today primarily connote a blend of 'creative'

activity and profit seeking, and there have been many historical examples of such synthesis, from Selfridges' adoption of suffragette products to the neoliberal girlboss of the present (see Curran-Troop et al., 2022). There are also numerous historical examples of creative feminist organisations which have advocated working against capitalist logic, from the Black Panthers women's groups to UK-based Red Rag anarchist collective to the Global Women's Strike. As Jo Littler (2024) explores in this issue, for some theorists such activity can be read as a kind of 'left entrepreneurialism'; yet for others it is seen to operate against entrepreneurial logic entirely. Similarly, there is debate over whether the most hard-edged capitalist entrepreneurial feminist activity should even be *considered* feminism. Amid this history, we might also locate a long line of more unequivocally pro-business female entrepreneurs whose activity has intersected with different historical and geographical 'gender regimes', from Coco Chanel (whose fashion empire had decidedly problematic associations with Nazism) to Chiara Ferragni (Italy's most prominent female influencer-entrepreneur, recently fined for misleading cause-related marketing claims). Notably, recent examples of female entrepreneurs over the past few decades have, as Kim Allen and Kirsty Finn (2023) discuss in this issue, become cathected to images of 'empowerment' increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity, sexuality and age (see also Banet-Weiser, 2018; Littler, 2018; O'Neill, 2024; Valdez, 2015).

What is particular about the feminist work of the present, that we have dubbed 'freelance feminism(s)'? One constituent feature of the present moment which is now widely commented on is the incitement to be entrepreneurial at a highly individualised level and to brand the self. This has been a ubiquitous imperative since the advent of post-Fordist capitalism in the 1980s, but has taken a new cadence in the contemporary era – which Robin Murray et al. (2014) once called 'post-post-Fordism' – adopting new circuits of being and accumulation through digital platforms. In this issue, contributors refer to a number of different types of platforms. These include social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, through and in which groups and individuals can present themselves, share text and images, monetise content through advertising and promote causes. It includes the use of sites facilitating subscriptions for content; through which, for instance, articles can be published and read by subscribers (whether individualised websites or established platforms like Substack), or podcasts which can be listened to if you pay some money (through Patreon). It includes digital marketplaces like Etsy, where goods can be sold with a financial 'cut' going to the platform owners; and sites such as YouTube, where self-published videos can be monetised if they reach enough 'likes' and subscriptions.

With this platform economy, online self-branding is for so many people now a means of obtaining visibility 'in public' – in what is simultaneously a digital public social forum and crowded digital marketplace (Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013; Whitmer, 2019). The blurring of private and public personas, the 'leakage' and porous boundaries between them, have consequently become a recurrent topic of interest and examination for cultural, media and sociology scholars. This work includes studies of the 'perfect' lifestyle pressures foisted on and negotiated by young women in particular (Gill, 2023; Kanai, 2020; McRobbie, 2020); on the labour of female lifestyle gurus (Baker and Rojek, 2019; Klein, 2023) and TikTok teenagers (Kennedy, 2020); on the racialised and classed

hierarchies and modalities of influencers (Casey and Littler, 2022; Pitcan et al., 2018; Sobande, 2020) and the affective negotiations of social media's 'feeling rules' (Kanai, 2020; Lehto, 2022; Marwick, 2013).

Feminist activists have to negotiate this digital entrepreneurial landscape. They have done so in a wide range of ways, mobilising the affordances of social media as groups and individuals, as demands and campaigns. Such activity has included feminist hashtag activism, both on a large scale, as in the case of #niunamenos and #MeToo, and in the case of smaller scale campaigns like #ButNotMaternity which Sara de Benedictis and Kaitlynn Mendes analyse in this issue as offering modes of solidarity and resistance. Specific feminists have also emerged in the media landscape who are curating their campaign content to a great extent through social media; for instance, in the United Kingdom 'journalist turned social media influencer' Anna Whitehouse, aka 'Mother Pukka', uses Instagram to campaign on flexible working for parents as well as to promote her novels and branded lifestyle partnerships. Feminists' negotiations of the digital entrepreneurial landscape also include high-profile feminists like adrienne marie brown in the United States, or Margaret Atwood in Canada, both of whom use social media as a place of both connection and promotion. In brown's case, for instance, this works through regular sharing of Instagram stories which blend comic memes and reels with queer feminist anti-capitalist and abolitionist thoughts and slogans, all of which build connection, consciousness and community, as well as advertising her podcasts and writing retreats.[3]

Both the problems and possibilities of digital feminist organisations amid this landscape are palpable. The hugely influential British feminist online and print magazine *gal-dem*, for instance, produced by and for women and non-binary people of colour, closed in 2023 after 8 years for financial reasons.[4] During its lifetime, it published work by 350 contributors, launched as a fully fledged company employing permanent members of staff, and was influential on more mainstream institutions, collaborating with, for instance, broadsheet newspaper *The Guardian* on a guest-edited supplement and the Victoria and Albert Museum. The demise of *gal-dem*, just like the emergence of 'pop-up' feminist projects, is simultaneously indicative of both the vitality of contemporary feminism and the difficulty of sustaining feminist platforms and projects – and particularly when compounded by structural and intersectional inequalities – in the contemporary conjuncture.

The increased visibility of feminism in contemporary popular culture

These issues bring us to a third key context: the growing visibility of feminist movements, discourses, practices and products/productions across cultural life. This has been evident for around 10 years now, seemingly countering two decades of widespread erasure and hostility to feminist ideas in popular culture. Extensive discussions of 'backlash' (Faludi, 1991) and subsequently 'postfeminism' (McRobbie, 2009; Tasker and Negra, 2007) characterised much feminist scholarship in the 1990s and 2000s, documenting the patterned attacks on, and silencing of, feminism, including the 'disappearing' of terms like 'sexism' (Ahmed, 2015; Williamson, 2003). During this period, immense energy went into exploring the emergence of a distinctive postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007; Kanai, 2020). Among its central features was the *repudiation of feminism* (Scharff, 2012)

which formed a key part of what Angela McRobbie (2009) dubbed the 'new sexual contract'.

Today, by contrast, feminism has a vivid luminosity in popular culture (Hamad and Taylor 2015). Feminist books top best-seller lists; musicians, models and other celebrities proudly proclaim their feminist identities; and streaming platforms from Amazon to Netflix to Spotify have built feminist tastes and inclinations into their recommendation algorithms, allowing us, for example, to choose to watch one of the ever-growing numbers of 'women-led movies or series' showcasing 'female empowerment'. As Sarah Banet-Weiser et al. (2020) argues,

> The brand of feminism has been stamped on clothing, jewelry, and other personal accoutrements. Etsy and others offer feminist tank tops, buttons, and entire wardrobes. We can buy 'Empowered' crop tops at H&M, or for those feminists who have financial means, we can wear the $710.00 t-shirt designed by Christian Dior that proclaims 'We Should All Be Feminists'. We can drink our coffee out of mugs that say 'Smash the Patriarchy' or 'Women Power'.

In addition to the selling of feminist products, significant shifts are under way right across the cultural sector. Indeed, 2023 might be said to have been the year of the feminist art exhibition in the United Kingdom, as heavyweight galleries like Tate, the Barbican, Somerset House and Whitechapel Gallery featured blockbuster feminist shows centred on gender and ecology (*Re/Sisters*), Black women in visual culture (*Black Venus*) and feminist art and culture of the 1970s to 1990s (*Women in Revolt*). Film and television production has also significantly transformed, not only with huge box office hits like *Barbie* but also a plethora of smaller productions foregrounding feminist themes and concerns and brought into being by feminist writers and directors. Feminist ideas are also part of the discourse that increasingly makes up the public spheres of news, politics and digital culture. Topics such as equal pay, women's representation and sexual violence have a prominence not seen since the 1980s. The clearest example is the attention given to sexual harassment in all kinds of media and public discourse since #MeToo. For instance, in the United Kingdom, posters are now published on the walls of the London underground and train carriages instructing or reminding people that staring and touching is an offence, and giving advice on what to do if you witness, or are subject to, sexual harassment (Transport for London (TFL), 2023). It is striking to see an issue once treated as 'boring' now getting extensive attention (Mendes et al., 2018). These shifts are a global phenomenon which can be seen in China, in Iran and in Saudi Arabi (among other places), but are perhaps most evident in Western countries including the United Kingdom (from where we write), Europe and the United States.

We suggest that the novel visibility of feminism operates as one of the conditions of possibility for the formation of freelance feminisms discussed here – which sits at the intersection of entrepreneurialism, platformisation, precarity and feminism. However, this novel visibility of feminism is complicated and contradictory. However, it has not displaced other currents and trends, including virulent misogyny which has been re-animated during the same period in the form of 'toxic technocultures' (Massanari, 2017), the 'manosphere' (Ging, 2019), 'misogynoir' (Bailey, 2021) and proliferating forms of politically organised hate and trolling. If feminism is 'having a

moment' – or even a decade – then this also must be theorised alongside such disturbing countertrends.

Second, it is clear that a highly specific feminism – or indeed set of feminisms in the plural – has come to the fore. In general, the feminist ideas that have achieved greatest visibility are those that are liberal, media-ready and capitalism-friendly (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016; Press and Tripodi, 2012). These ideas are often steeped in individualist and neoliberal values (Rottenberg, 2018), as well as in the logics of the market (Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee, 2012). Although 'left feminisms' may arguably be achieving wider recognition and discussion, it is clear that dominant discourses continue to privilege versions of feminism that do not offer a critique of structural inequality (Emejulu, 2022; Littler, 2023). This produces patterns of depoliticised discourse which has continuities with postfeminism. It leads to a focus on only particular kinds of issues, problems and solutions (those that are not threatening to the capitalist status quo), and foregrounds particular kinds of subjects (e.g. white middle-class girls), while ignoring or excluding others (e.g. refugee women). This is why we consider freelance feminisms in the plural, rather than as a singular 'freelance feminism'.

In her book, *Empowered*, Banet-Weiser argues that platform logics also shape what she calls the 'economy of visibility' in which feminism circulates. In this way, feminist issues come to be associated with metrics linked to likes, comments, searches, shares and what is trending. Thus, visibility becomes seen as an end in itself rather than a means to enact structural change: 'the visibility of popular feminism, where examples appear on television, in film, on social media, and on bodies, is important but it often stops there, as if *seeing* or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures' (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 4). The T-shirt, in other words, becomes the politics.

This new visibility of different variants of feminism is complicated, then, and is profoundly interconnected with the two other key contexts discussed earlier. As we have shown, these two issues are also complicated: entrepreneurialism is contested, depending on its political economy; and platform labour is not a priori capitalist – as the existence of platform co-operativism shows – but it is the dominant iteration at present. In the next section, we outline how contributors have approached these issues, trends and intersections in their articles.

Articles in this issue

Our special issue on 'freelance feminism' explores these themes in a variety of ways, with the connected themes of entrepreneurialism, precarity and feminism cross-cutting and uniting them. In several of these articles, there is a particular emphasis on the gendered politics of platformed entrepreneurialism (e.g. Glatt; Duffy, Ononye and Sawey; Sobande). Others have an interest in the histories, politics and present of the female entrepreneur, in all her incarnations (e.g. Allen and Finn; Littler; Simpson; Lauri and Lauri; Bandinelli). While some writers are in effect exploring 'freelance femininities' from a feminist perspective, others are focusing specifically on what happens to the character of feminism under conditions of platform precarity (e.g. Curran-Troop; Scharff; de Benedictis and Mendes). The issue of neoliberal inequalities on gender concerns all the writers, and the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is discussed by many. In the

following section, we outline the papers from the issue in more detail, in the process making some thematic links rather than listing them in chronological order.

In their innovative article, Kim Allen and Kirsty Finn interrogate how universities today are embedding initiatives which promote the idea and practice of the student 'side hustle'. These encourage students to develop their part-time money-making 'passion projects', and to 'extend their entrepreneurial mindsets', or rationalities. This process is distinctly gendered, Allen and Finn argue, for while the context of both university life and the graduate labour market are marked by profoundly gendered inequalities, it is nonetheless the young women in such projects who tend to become the 'poster girls' of entrepreneurialism, masking and facilitating the postfeminist myth of success. Examining a range of case studies from UK universities, they show how uncritical corporate tie-ins and diversity initiatives further encourage young women to lean into neoliberal norms, rather than push back against their harsh and exploitative economic and social logic.

Allen and Finn's focus on young women as the contemporary 'poster girls' of entrepreneurialism connects to Jo Littler's piece (in the Cultural Commons shortform section) tracing this figure back through time, space and theory to offer 'fragments of a geneaology' for the female entrepreneur. Tracking its long evolution, from its absence in disciplinary scholarship to its diverse representation in popular culture, it outlines how the female entrepreneur is imagined in different conjunctural moments and eras – from tragic 1950s entrepreneurial stars, through to the plucky, shoulder-padded heroines of 1980s women's magazines and films, through to the girlbosses, Instagram entrepreneurs and 'hustle culture' of the present. In the process, Littler asks searching questions about the politics of entrepreneurialism: about whether a left feminist entrepreneurialism can actually exist, or is a contradiction in terms.

Taking a multifaceted, creative approach to these entrepreneurial femininities as they manifest in the present, Francesca Sobande explores the labour and framing involved in documenting #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking on Instagram from 2020 onwards. Noting that during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic more white middle-class people were working from home and able to post images of their therapeutic practice, while more Black people were on the public frontlines as keyworkers, she considers how social media postings parlayed dynamics of gendered domestic labour, digital self-presentation and 'soulfulness'. Examining how these domestic forms of freelance femininity and feminism have been constituted through intersections of gender, race and class at a time of crisis, Sobande's highly original analysis shows how the dominance of this marketable, spatial domestic imaginary dovetails with that of the predominantly white female wellness industry, reflecting a racialised form of entrepreneurial domestic 'freelance feminism'.

Johanna Lauri and Marcus Lauri explore some of the complexities and practical implications of merging feminism with small scale entrepreneurial businesses through their interviews with Swedish activists who sell 'products for feminist purposes' on the platform Etsy. Their interviewees emphasise that they consider themselves to be 'selling feminism' by trading their products (which include jewellery, t-shirts and art). The authors observe that sellers also like to position their products as 'authentic' and in opposition to corporate values. They use their analysis of the interviews to explore the discursive struggles over popular feminism and its commodified contradictions, noting,

crucially, that the sellers tend to avoid structural or explicitly political forms of feminist address.

Christina Scharff's expansive article explores the different ways in which digital feminist activism can be monetised in contemporary culture, and with what consequences. Key discussions in existing literature concern how market principles have been applied to political protest, and, conversely, how the themes and motifs of political protest have been taken up by marketing. Scharff's paper adds to these foci by examining the way that activists' emotional investments become tied to income generation. Drawing on interviews with 30 feminist digital activists, she shows how activist selves become entangled with neoliberal values of entrepreneurialism and market competition, in the process remaking subjective experiences of feminism.

A contrasting perspective is offered by Sara de Benedictis and Kaitlynn Mendes in their incisive paper about the feminist hashtag #ButNotMaternity, which became prominent in the United Kingdom during the COVID-19 pandemic as a site of protest about conditions for women in the healthcare system. Analysing 70 posts featuring the hashtag, de Benedictis and Mendes argue that mainstream feminism is 'increasingly organised by the principles of entrepreneurialism, market competition and insecure and precarious labour'. However, they also note the existence of campaigns, including #ButNotMaternity, which challenge such patterns – for example, through alliances with healthcare workers and third-sector organisations in which people are paid rather than giving their time for free, and where calls for structural transformation are heard. They conclude that freelance feminism may be 'becoming hegemonic' but there are also creative spaces (Malik and Shankley, 2020) where collective action, structural critique and resistance may develop.

Brooke Erin Duffy, Anuli Ononye and Megan Sawey's paper explores how platform-dependent workers, including influencers, experience 'compulsory visibility' in the current moment, with the incitement to 'put yourself out there'. They argue that in this context vulnerability has become a 'structuring concept'. It exists as a strategy to accrue attention, at a time when being authentic has become a pre-eminent commercial logic. Yet social vulnerability is shaped by gender, race, sexuality, ability and body type, leaving some platformised workers at far greater risk of hate and harassment than others. In this freelance world, Duffy, Ononye and Sawey ask, what happens to vulnerable workers who have no protections?

Zoë Glatt's paper further explores the promises and pitfalls of platformised labour through ethnographic research into the influencer YouTube industry. By coining the term 'the intimacy triple bind', Glatt highlights how marginalised creators face unequal pressures in negotiating and relating with their audiences. Outlining the complex systemic challenges faced by these workers, Glatt underscores the double-edged sword of the audience-dependent income model. This is a model in which creators are tasked with performing relational labour to engage their audiences (and secure their financial support) yet are at equal risk of harassment and hate from these very same audiences. Glatt shows how, within this paradox, creators utilise survival tactics such as disengaging, retreating and forming community to endure online spaces.

Jessica Simpson's shortform article in the *Cultural Commons* section further investigates precarious labour and feminist organising by reflecting on her research into sex

worker-led feminist projects. Simpson highlights how these projects are being sustained through varying forms of precarious gig-work. In doing so, she outlines how these workers combine promotional freelance activities with their collective feminist politics to build viable and sustainable businesses, and to improve employment rights and protections. Alongside this, Simpson shows how wider issues such as the pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, diminishing state funding, and anti-sex work feminist campaigning evoke further threats to the precarious livelihoods of these sex worker-led projects.

Carolina Bandinelli takes an unusual approach to the issue of freelance feminism by undertaking a deep case study or 'person-biography'. Having conducted extended interviews with a single creative industry fashion designer, Bandinelli works alongside her to present an account of her creative employment history. This cultural-sociological work biography provides an insight into the longer term negotiations of, in and around attempting to 'do what you love', which Bandinelli theorises as offering a logic of 'romantic opportunism'.

Finally, Hannah Curran-Troop's paper analyses the shifting terrain of feminist cultural work within the context of the pandemic. Through 12 interviews with feminist cultural organisations ('feminist CCIs'), and a digital ethnography undertaken during the COVID-19 lockdown, she explores the contrasting pandemic reactions transpiring at this intersection of feminism and entrepreneurial labour. Curran-Troop shows how some feminist organisations took up new models to support their work such as corporate funding, subscription and membership schemes, platformisation and digitisation. In the process, she highlights the contradictions these models bring to feminist creative and cultural industries – or 'Feminist CCIs' - work and collective politics: tensions which some feminists are simultaneously both aware and critical of.

As we have been outlining here, then, the phrase 'freelance feminism' is one we use to indicate the intersections between feminism, platform entrepreneurialism, and precarious and short-term funding and employment patterns in contemporary neoliberal culture. This includes how, today, forms of feminism are not only very visible in the cultural sphere, but are increasingly 'freelanced', whereby feminist projects are now working through a casualised gig economy, and in which models of entrepreneurial precarious labour are being used to sustain feminist work. In considering this, we have taken an expansive approach to the issue, exploring both 'freelance femininities' from a feminist perspective as well as what happens to the character of feminism under conditions of platform precarity. We hope this space and range of papers opens up and encourages further debate and discussion.

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Notes

1. For instance, Cambridge Dictionary online: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/freelance
2. This issue grew out of a hybrid event we put on at City, University of London just after the pandemic. Many thanks to all the contributors, including Awkugo Emejulu, Leah Bassell, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Angela McRobbie.
3. See https://www.instagram.com/adriennemareebrown/?hl=en.
4. See the archive at https://gal-dem.com/

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