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Abstract

This article highlights how 'smart economics' as a paradigm for gender equity reflects a continuum of the gendered and racialised history of capitalism's appropriations of equity and social justice. By focusing on the example of one corporation Unilever and its co-option of social justice and equity discourse, the article aims to put into perspective the limits and ideological meanings of gender equity as 'smart economics' when understood as being on a continuum of gendered racial capitalism. Our aim is to highlight how a company with its roots in colonial commodity racism has not only segued into the contemporary global context by commodifying social justice issues but is actively utilising gender equity within its narrative of progress through 'smart economics'. Rather than holding to account such corporate entities which have profited from colonialism and commodity racism, gender equity frameworks have enabled gendered racial capitalism as can be seen in Unilever's corporate strategy.

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Introduction

One of the legacies of Gender and Development (GAD) since the 1990s has been the adoption of gender equity frameworks by a range of actors and institutions. Not only development agencies but also commercial actors have incorporated women's economic empowerment within their corporate social responsibility campaigns by promoting gender equity/equality as 'smart economics.' 'Smart economics,' based on an efficiency approach which presents investing in women and girls and women's economic empowerment as a means to address global poverty, has been actively promoted by the World Bank, the MDGs/SDGs and wider international agencies. While the co-option,of the gender equity policy agenda by a range of different organisations, especially corporate institutions, has been critically examined for the role that 'neoliberal-compatible feminisms' (Calkin, 2015) have played in forwarding and supporting corporate-led strategies, this ongoing co-option and feminist scholarship's contributions to it require continual scrutiny. Despite the routinely signalled imperatives of intersectional analysis, the broad corpus of gender, development and feminist scholarship has been somewhat reticent to engage with the intersecting racialised dynamics of neoliberal capitalist agendas and smart economics slogans of the development sector. A deeper understanding of the consequences of this trend requires a critique that allows us to hold these strands together as well as holding them accountable. Ultimately, a more nuanced approach is called for that genders racial capitalism.

In this article, we aim to place 'smart economics' and gender and development's contributions to it within the broader history of colonialism and capitalism. The convergence of 'smart economics' and gender equity frameworks present an analytical imperative to consider how gender and race have contributed to gendered racial capitalism. Gender equity frameworks have contributed to these projects by providing the rhetoric of awareness and equality to commodifying processes of racialised and gendered extraction and exploitation. The intersectional and historical dimensions of capitalist expansion and extraction in the shaping of social and material relations has been explored by a vast literature spanning stories of origins as legacies of colonial violence within the contemporary climate crisis (Goffe, 2025), evolving modes of extraction (Boyce-Davies, 2008; Williams, 2022B), waste imprint on communities (Manglou et al, 2022), and racialised sexual tropes used to market consumer products (McClintock, 1995), to name a few areas which explicitly reference historical and contemporary continuities. Our intervention here, builds on this scholarship while specifically focusing on one corporation, Unilever, as an example of a company which has appropriated gender equity frameworks in conjunction with its ongoing uses of racialisation over its history which mirrors Britain's colonial and postcolonial history.

Unilever, a partner of UN Women on gender equality issues was included in the Bloomberg Gender-Equality Index (GEI) which was replaced in 2024 by the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) framework marking a shift in emphasis from equalities to sustainability for companies to display their commitments to transparency and reporting. The company's invocation of 'smart economics,' however, highlights the ways in which gender and race/racism have featured in the construction of its evolving corporate strategy over time. The commodification of anti-racist messaging by capitalist interests is a recurring dimension of racial capitalism's shapeshifting features in contemporary times (Bhattacharyya, 2018).

The article begins with a brief overview of the rise of 'smart economics' approaches and then presents some of the related critiques from feminist scholarship which, while important, highlight the need for further intersectional analysis that engages with gendered and racial logics of capital. The third section of the article argues that an understanding of 'smart economics' on a continuum of gendered racial capitalism holds the potential to broaden our understanding of the workings of capitalism and the co-options of social justice issues by 'smart economics.' We then offer a potted corporate history of Unilever across mergers and acquisitions during a significant period of empire and commodity capitalism. In the final section, we consider the Gender Equity Assessment Tool as a co-option of gender equity as an endeavour to 'whitewash' its reputation and history of expropriation by evidencing its strategy to 'do good.'

1. 'Smart Economics'

Feminists in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s attempted to shift the discourse about women and development from a basic focus on women's reproductive functions and 'potential' as economic actors to centring issues of rights, justice, and power. Gender equality and women's empowerment each brought significant challenges to the development sector. The former related to the gender and development (GAD) campaigns advanced by feminists in the 1970s and 80s wanting to expand, complicate and politicise the way women were discussed in the development sector. The latter was part of a radical political project in the late 1980s and 90s that called for transformative action (See Cornwall and Rivas, 2015) to disrupt and dismantle power hierarchies. Many UN agencies, international financial institutions and private sector companies adopted the new lenses and pithy language as equality and empowerment became new catchphrases.

By the 2000s, however, economic empowerment became the nucleus of the agenda to which other women's rights and development goals, such as poverty reduction, health,

and education, became hinged upon and was deemed as the "most powerful routes for women to achieve their potential and advance their rights" (Golla et al., 2011:3). New campaigns echoed the Women in Development (WID) approach that was dominant from the late 1960s and focused on women as economic actors and critiqued their exclusion from the market (Boserup, 1970). Reflected in this updated version of 'empowerment,' and in the aftermath of structural adjustment, numerous debt crises, and conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s in the UK and US, was the 'Efficiency approach' (Moser, 1993). Development agencies began to promote women as good managers, multitaskers, and reliable investments (Chant and Sweetman, 2012). Women were a resource that could make development more effective while simultaneously mitigating the crippling effects of structural adjustment (Kanji, 2003). Consequently, empowerment became synonymous with 'smart economics' and began to look profoundly different than the feminist frameworks of previous decades. Collective action, social justice, and structural transformation central to the earlier feminist calls for empowerment were no longer necessary. The social justice lexicon gave way to liberal corporate language of efficiency, optimal, assets, gains, and investment.

In the early 2000s, the logic of smart economics, which we would characterise as "women + asset = saved world" was solidified in several widely circulated policy reports, including *Gender equality as smart economics (World Bank, 2008), and Gender Equality and Development (2012). The latter reminding us that,*

> *Gender equality is a core development objective in its own right. It is also smart economics. Greater gender equality can enhance productivity, improve development outcomes for the next generation… (World Bank, 2012:vii).*

In this 21st century vision women became empowered through individual economic gains and success in the liberal marketplace (Zuckerman, 2007). As articulated by the World Economic Forum (WEF):

> *Women's economic empowerment is the right and smart thing to do… The human development, economic and business gains from empowering women are substantial. Greater gender equality means a country is associated with better education and health, higher per capita income, faster and more inclusive economic growth, and greater international competitiveness* (WEF, 2017)

By making gender equality a 'business case,' the smart economics rationale posits that economic investment in women is a win-win. On the one hand it helps women have more options and choices in their lives while simultaneously promoting economic growth and development and supporting free-market principles. The focus on individual 'power to' (Lukes, 2005 and 1974) and liberal market solutions created a fertile ground for multi-national companies to jump on the empowerment – smart economics bandwagon. Sleek marketing of campaigns such as Nike's The Girl Effect and Like a Girl drew global

attention while obfuscating the gendered effects of capitalist accumulation which has rarely empowered women (Eyben and Napier-Moore, 2009; Eyben, 2010). New and innocuous partnerships have been facilitated between the corporate world and development agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) (Tennyson et al, 2008). Unilever, despite its well-documented complicity in colonialism, gendered and racial labour practices, and advertising, among other things developed extensive partnerships within the aid sector. Several of their collaborations with aid agencies, such as the long-standing Unilever–Oxfam (See Newcombe-Ling, 2021; Oxfam and Unilever, NB) partnership focused on improving the working conditions of Global Majority women, while actively perpetuating those same conditions. Ironically, the Unilever CEO reminded audiences on the eve of the Unilever-UN Women partnership:

> *Empowering women with equal rights is the most important thing we—and any business—can do to drive the success of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals…At Unilever, the safety of women working across our supply chain is a top priority—helping them to be productive at work, support their families and fuel their economies. We are delighted … to help empower five million women in our value chain and raise standards across the wider tea industry* (UN Women, 2016).

Not surprising, therefore, gender units within development agencies increasingly centred economic development within their programmes. Meanwhile, gender equality training, language, and equity toolkits that emerged from the GAD era became adopted by multi-national companies in their quest to empower women in the developing world. The circle of gender equity and capital accumulation was now complete.

The mobilisation of gender by neoliberal agendas has not gone unnoticed by feminist political economy scholarship. The implication of second wave feminism in the story of neoliberalism's hegemony reveals how the fragmented strands of feminist mobilisations contributed to the cultural transformations around gender but failed to transform institutions to such an extent that 'feminist ideals of gender equality, so contentious in the preceding decades, now sit squarely in the social mainstream' (Fraser, 2009). The rise of neoliberal feminism through the co-option of gender equality has been firmly critiqued by others as 'yet another domain neoliberalism has colonized' (Rottenberg, 2013: 418) which can be seen in the capture of democratic discourse through gender equality and women's rights discourse to justify neoliberal wars and violations (Eisenstein, 2007). However, while such critiques of neoliberal co-option of gender policy agendas have been forthright within this significant literature, the naming of race *and* gender has been less forthcoming.

2. Feminist Critiques and Race

The co-option of gender equality and women's empowerment by development organisations and multi-national companies did not go unnoticed. Feminist scholars put

forth consistent and compelling critiques of the smart economics approach. Many critiques came from feminist socialists and political economists, and those who had worked to advance the ideas behind GAD in the 1980s. Critiques have been plentiful and have included, but are not limited to, a focus on appropriation of language and concepts (Cornwall and Brock, 2005; Wilson, 2015), the de-politicisation of gender equality and women's empowerment (Hossain, 2020; Cornwall and Edward, 2014; Sardenberg, 2009; Batliwala, 2007) and the gendered nature of capitalist extraction and labour (Sholkany, 2010; Kabeer, 2013 and 2005) among others things. These important contributions also reflect some of the omissions of the GAD era, that have limited our understanding of complex consequences of capitalist penetration and expansion.

Despite the influence of GAD in shifting the discourse to discussions of gender norms and relational dynamics, and the contributions of women scholars and activists from the Global Majority such as Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (*we argue that an intersectional*), the discussions of difference did not engage deeply with issues of race. As scholars have pointed out, the GAD agenda contributed to the problematic labelling of 'women' as identifiable as 'third' and 'first' world which reified racialised constructions and dynamics in the development field informed by centuries of western imperialism which continued to go unnamed (White, 2006: 55-56 and 2002). In practice, race itself was rarely brought into discussions on development and neither were the contributions of black feminist scholars who had been questioning not only the gendered foundations of capitalism but also how this was hinged on racial logics (Rivas and Purewal, 2024). Work from scholars such as Mohanty (1991), detailed the limitations of the universal feminist movement for women in the Global South. Even within this body of work within development studies the explicit naming of racism and the use of race as an analytical lens is reticent (Rivas, 2018).

Some of the critiques of 'smart economics' reflect this hesitation to name race as a crucial factor in understanding capitalist accumulation including their highly racialised mechanisms and entanglements with the aid world. As a result, the experiences of racialised people have not been fully articulated in most critiques of 'smart economics' that we find in scholarship today. This absence, however, is not a nascent omission and persists despite longstanding interventions within social justice and education fields from racialised feminists who have categorically pointed out the difficulty of feminist movements to engage with intersectionality (Combahee River, 1977; Andaluza and Moraga, 1981; Carby, 1982). Recognition of 'race' within intersectional analyses has proven particularly difficult with discussions of work, labour and care (Duffy, 2005). Indeed, liberal co-option has produced an intersectional 'equity' discourse in the policy and the private sector (Vasil et al, 2025) expressed in toolkits and tick-boxes that focus on representation, diversity and *place intersectionality at the heart of inclusion* (Unilever,

2022; Also see Government of Scotland, 2022). This approach serves rather than dismantles 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' (hooks, 1984 and 2000) and ignores the transformative hope and radical intent of intersectional analysis.

Discussions of gender, however, are racialised just as race is always gendered. As social constructs situated within structures of power, it is important to note that while relations of power may shift, systems of domination do not (Bolland, 1981). Black feminist scholars have laid bare importance of intersectional analysis (Rivas and Safi; 2022; Nash, 2008 and 2019; Crenshaw, 1991; Combahee, 1977; Jones, 1949; Truth 1851) to understanding structural injustice and the multifarious ways in which capitalism and colonialism are inextricably linked (Davis et all, 2022; Boyce-Davies, 2008; Hill Collins, 2001; Sweeney, 2020). Both are exploitative, violent systems of White patriarchy dependent upon the ownership and exploitation of gendered Black and Brown bodies for the purposes of profit-making and oppression (Benard, 2016). The complicity of white and Global north women in the oppression of racialised and Global south women runs contrary to the social justice framing of intersectional feminist praxis and scholarship (Purewal and Loh, 2021).

Feminist analyses of social reproduction have waged a significant critique of the origins story of capitalism by demanding that reproduction and reproductive labour be foregrounded instead of remaining invisibilised by being placed outside of the domain of production (Federici, 2004; Bhattacharya, 2017; Mezzadri, 2022). An important contribution has been a focus on the international division of labour in the creation of power dynamics between the so-called 'developed' and 'developing' and the global north and south within the gendered global political economy (Mies, 1986; Tsikata, 2009). However, the racial logics of the foundations of capitalism within the feminist political economy tradition, while being an important critique of 'smart economics,' also reflects limits of feminist critiques of development and contribute to a longer tradition of erasure of race, racism and racialisation in development (Verges, 2021; Rivas and Purewal, 2024). However, there is much scope for this lens to more fundamentally acknowledge racial oppression by following the lead of Fraser (2016) who argues for a more expanded conception of capitalism which recognises its consistent entwinement with racial oppression through the concept of expropriation (rather than exploitation). For our purposes here, expropriation offers an insight into the ways in which entities with their roots in colonialism have segued into contemporary times through expropriation of the labour of black and brown racialised and economically marginal women which dispossesses across generations (See Hartman, 2016, Kilomba, 2021, Zaragocin, 2019). As such, we think with and beyond feminist political economy and the gender and development literature for deeper engagements with race, gender and capital in outlining an approach towards gendered racial capitalism.

3. Gendered racial capitalism

The concept of racial capitalism, most attributed to the work of Robinson (1983), has gained more recent popularity since 2000 and, more specifically in conversations on racial injustice ignited by the BLM movement. Scholars have used it as a lens for explaining historical and continuing structural racial injustices around economic predation, dispossession, punishment, and dehumanisation (Bhattacharyya, 2023; Gilmore, 2025, Haley, 2016) and the perpetration of racial violence by the capitalist state (Melamed, 2015; Kelley, 2020; Gilmore, 2023). Racial capitalism informs contemporary understandings of how the axes of race and class shape the systemic nature and persistence of differentiation, inequality and division as a modus operandi of capitalism. Endeavours to account for 'race' within economic and social structures in specific national as well as global frames cannot entirely be encapsulated within the concept and the scholarship which now revolves around it. While we utilise the term racial capitalism in this article, we acknowledge its limitations which are in part due to the divergent histographies within social science scholarship, junctures and debates in the scholarship, and ideologically informed lines of inquiry which predate the concept. Most of this scholarship neither uses the term nor neatly aligns with its conceptual parameters prior to the term's emergence. Indeed, Robinson's (1983 and 2000) contributions in writing 'race' into the global history of capitalist expansion and his articulation of racial regimes (2007) are a part of the establishment of this field of inquiry. However, Hall's (1980) call to restructure the theoretical examination of the question of 'race' across the 'economic' and 'sociological' bifurcation signalled an epistemic provocation within broader academic inquiry on 'race' and capitalism. Subsequently, critical voices have continued to respond to Hall's call highlighting the racial dimensions of European civilisational narratives of 'development' and progress (Bhambra, 2023; Go, 2021; Virdee, 2019; Kelley, 2020; Lowe, 2015).

While we align with this latter body of scholarship's understanding of racial capitalism that racialism is constitutive of capitalism across social, economic, political and cultural formations, our intention here is to extend this further by gendering its analytical use in the study of 'development' which legitimises Western, European supremacist civilisational narratives and hegemony. Gendering racial capitalism is an analytical position inspired by struggles against racial, gender and class oppression most significantly those articulated by anti-colonial and decolonial feminist activists (See Umoren, 2018) and Black feminist Marxists. Jones (1949) highlighted the 'super exploitation' of poor black women through their concentration in domestic work as a continuation of the models of unfree labour within the broader historical legacies of slavery and colonialism. We take a cue from the tradition of black feminist Marxist engagements with 'race' in engaging with 'smart economics.' Within the gender and development field here has been less attention placed on how gender and feminist

critiques of capitalism relate to capitalism's racial logics and origins. Even the earlier mentioned literature engaging with the concept of racial capitalism or of racial logics within studies of capitalism have shown a lack of gender analysis. We argue that neither does this disjunction exist due to disagreements about the origins story implicit in the transition and expansion of Western/European feudalism to capitalism, nor is this a matter of whether gender, race or class is a more crucial signifier within this history of capitalist development. Instead, we posit that gendered racial capitalism has operated over time through compulsion derived from domination, obligation and 'naturalised difference' utilising racial oppression, gender oppression and class alienation in co-constituting ways.

This is not an understanding of gendered racial capitalism which can be constructed through an additive approach (i.e. gender + race + capitalism = gendered racial capitalism). Instead, it identifies the intertwined and co-constituting roles that gender and racial logics have played in capitalist development in shaping and articulating patterns and processes of gendered racial capitalism. Melamed's (2015) statement that capitalism "can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups" is instructive in understanding how systems of racial capitalism operate. It is also important to consider how gender and racial logics, once categorisation has been established, operate through tactics of compulsion in various forms, ranging from the threat of violence, or even death, to obligatory codes of subservience awarded by patriarchal and racialised social and economic structures.

The dialectics behind the attribution of differential human value within relations and systems of reproduction have shown a tension between centring versus merely recognising racial logics within broader schemes of differentiation. The centring of race and gender within understandings of capital accumulation means a reworking of how notions of value, trade, commodification, and social reproduction are inherently gendered and racialised. Morgan (2021) embraces such an analysis by highlighting how the Black Atlantic bound enslaved people via their reproductive labour by making them vulnerable to rape, demographically enumerated as commodities, and subject to laws that enslaved their children upon birth thus marking this mode of social reproduction explicitly and violently racialised *and* gendered.

Capitalist expansion, growth, and development which are terms used to understand and depict the history and ascent of neoliberal capitalism stem from this foundation of differential human value perpetuated through gendered and racial compulsion, compliance, and violence. Corporations spanning this period of colonial and capitalist development are accountable to this history by the very fact that they generated profit in a global economy upholding colonisation and domination. In particular, those companies which profited from empire (which continue to operate on a colonial-

postcolonial continuum without rupture) must be questioned for the frameworks which they utilise in a world shaped by colonialism, slavery, patriarchy and capitalist expansionism.

This is a call for a disruption of the 'business case' of 'smart economics' through a more penetrating questioning of the deeper ethics around racial, gender and social justice which underlie the more instrumentally co-opted equity frameworks. By gendering racial capitalism, the power of compulsion is juxtaposed against the business vision and strategy which is simultaneously appropriating the language of social justice. While 'development' within 'smart economics' is promoted as a logic which simultaneously addresses inequality and the demands of productivity, gender equity frameworks have contributed to the enablement of corporate interests to adopt social equity agendas through the language of social justice. The exploitative and extractive dimensions of capitalist development provide ample cases of how corporations seeking to maximise profit have drawn on rhetoric, models and discourses which are hinged on compulsion. As Krishnan and Antona (2023) argue, 'the carceral …exists at the heart of the neoliberal fantasy of futurity, rather than at its margins – and in its disciplinary role in rendering its inhabitants into figures who reproduce racial capitalist, nationalist, and global imperialist futurities.' Gendered racial capitalism has yet to be attributed, at least in part, to gender and development paradigms despite the space created by proponents of intersectionality, decolonial and indigenous feminism, abolitionist feminist geography, and other strands of academic and activist thinking.

By focusing on Unilever, we argue that an intersectional analysis that engages with gendered and racial logics can contribute to the already important critiques from within feminist scholarship. Unilever is a company with a long history of colonial and commodity capitalism which spans the Nineteenth Century to the present. The company can be held up as an important illustration of how gendered racial capitalism has been operationalised over time through applied and evolving usage of gendered and racial logics. A critical examination of the gendered racialised backdrop of the company makes it possible to understand its contemporary operations and how 'smart economics' has been utilised to whitewash its past and present.

'Smart economics' offers much leeway for companies to market their brands and make claims about 'doing good' through frameworks and toolkits. It markets images of healthy, happy and sustainable communities through the aims of equity, sustainability, inclusivity and other principles. On the one hand, we see overtly colonial and racist images and processes of labour extraction and production of commodities, on the other hand, seemingly 'smart' models for efficiency and productivity through inclusion. The next section will highlight how gender equity provides frameworks to 'whitewash' earlier

histories while adopting new models and images of gender equity directed towards social responsibility for contemporary codes of compliance.

4. Another story of Unilever

Unilever (as it is known today) was formed out of a series of mergers and corporate acquisitions over time since the 1870s. However, the official history of the company marks its establishment dates as 1929 when the British soap company Lever Brothers and the Dutch margarine producer Margarine Unie merged (Unilever History and Archives, 2024). This official narrative is carefully presented in annual reports, in company archives, and on the company's website where the story of the company is told through the lens of progress, enterprise and global modernising commodities without the inclusion of the highly racialised advertisements during the colonial early Twentieth century. The company's composition and name, which shifted over time, included entities such as Anglo-Dutch Companies and the Niger Company, which were pivotal in European colonial expansion and extraction in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, most notably as part of the so-called 'scramble for Africa.' This period between 1870 and 1914 saw the continent go from being ten percent colonised to ten percent not being colonised by European countries (Chamberlain, 2013), showing the significance of the time period in question for the promotion of commodity racism. Earlier generations of companies, the Dutch and English East India Companies, played leading roles in the colonisation of India and Indonesia, first through trade, then through taxation and eventually through direct colonial rule. These corporations reflect 'global imperial designs' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012) as a hallmark of how capitalism and 'development' have operated in tandem.

Unilever was one of the first corporations to operate on a global scale of such magnitude within this history. However, there are other examples of significant corporations such as the Royal Dutch/Shell Group, comprised of the Royal Dutch Petroleum Group founded in 1890, which have similar elusive histories of mergers and acquisitions. Unilever's rise as a corporation mirrored the expansion of empire, and the profits made were enabled by the expansion of empire alongside the active promotion of the ethos of imperialism, enterprise, and 'progress' through its commodities and brands as well as its strategies and marketing (Faria and Cunha, 2022).

The narrative of the company's past and present has been closely monitored and controlled. According to the Unilever Art, Archives and Records Management office based in Port Sunlight, the historic base of the company, 'Unilever is a company founded on a sense of purpose, and our unique heritage still shapes how we do business today'

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(Unilever Art and Archives, 2025. Unilever's history, which shadows the period of colonisation of the late Nineteenth to mid-Twentieth centuries, reflects how gendered racial capitalism generated British imperialism as both a business and administrative pursuit while continuing its enterprise and expansion into the 'postcolonial' period.

Figure 1. Our History and Archives (Unilever)

Source: https://www.unilever.com/our-company/our-history-and-archives/

The transfiguration of the previous incarnations of Unilever, dating back to the Nineteenth Century, make the company's history elusive to tag onto its earliest profits from raw material extraction, coercive labour systems, and colonial violence and domination. For instance, an early advert of Pears Soap, a company previously owned by Andrew Pears, is one of the most notorious series of colonial advertising campaigns. The ads showcase derogatory racist images aligning cleanliness with whiteness (Figure 2) and associating dirt with the civilising mission of empire in claiming that 'Pears Soap is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilisation advances…' (Figure 3).

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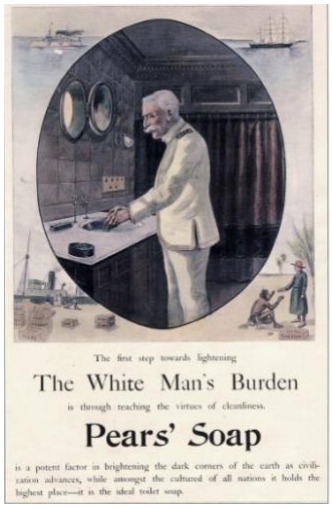
Figure 2.

Pears' soap : matchless for the complexion / Pears. Pears (A. & F.) Limited. London : Riddle & Couchman, [between 1880 and 1889?]. Colour illustrations, 23 cm. Retrieved from Wellcome Collections: https://wellcomecollection.org/works/fmg9u8f8.

Figure 3.



*The first step toward lightening the White man's burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness.*1899. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2002715038/.

Figure 4.

Image Gallery 02 - The Mammy Caricature - Anti-black Imagery - Jim Crow Museum. Ferris State University: Michigan. Access here: https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/mammies/more/mammy-image-gallery-02.htm

Commodity racism is identifiable in colonial advertising which drew explicitly upon racist and gendered imagery and messaging not only by Unilever and its predecessors but also by a range of other companies. The racist and gendered stereotypes as shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4 provide a reminder of the company's past. Commodity racism not only pertains to advertising and images but the broader ties between race and commodities in how they mutually inform one another (including the commodification of human life) (Hund, 2013). The lack of reckoning and redress of the colonial ideology and interests that drove Unilever's past profits from empire facilitated a continuum across colonial and postcolonial operations of the company despite the fact that this long history of commodity racism promoted by European corporations and business interests has been widely noted and critically understood (McClintock, 1995; Ramamurthy, 2003, Mugubane 2004).

Unilever's more recent projections show a concern for 'people and planet' and ambitions of 'doing good.' The company claims on its website that:

> *We're not afraid to take a stand. We're using our reach and presence to defy stereotypes and our voice to help drive change, shaping a more inclusive future and a People Positive Beauty & Wellbeing business.*

The space for critique of corporate co-options and denials of links with colonial commodity capitalism have been most poignantly created by cultural studies with its attentiveness to capitalism and racism. The realm of culture is where some of the most vehement, sustaining and critical analyses have been articulated (Hall, 1992). An explicit reference to the company is made by UK-based alternative, anarchist band Chumbawamba, known for addressing issues of feminism, queer liberation, class struggle and anti-fascism. A 1986 song by Chumbawamba explicitly titled *Unilever* connects the company's commodities and brands with the violence of extractive racial capitalism through the concept of 'whitewash' (see Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2019):

Unilever washes whiter
Soap to clean those dirty hands
And a slap for the people who work the land
Unilever...
Soap to wash the darkest stain
Profit covers up the pain...
We make whitewash
We sell whitewash
Consume whitewash
Consumed by whitewash
Whitewash
Buy it
Somewhere in this cycle there's me and you
What are we prepared to do?
Source: Lyrics .com: https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/29659165/Chumbawamba/Unilever

Unilever's adoption of 'smart economics' has served the purpose of averting such criticisms of its legacies of colonial collusion and corporate harm by allowing it to join platforms of compliance with SDG priorities through statements on climate, sustainability, and gender inequity. This has been done primarily through two strands of promotional work. The first is the use of corporate social responsibility and the second is through specific frameworks and tools such as gender equity. For instance, demands for boycotts, divestment, reparations, and decolonisation in critical challenges to systems of apartheid, settler colonialism, unfair or exploitative labour practices, and historic and unreflective connections to the transatlantic slave trade have inflected how business ethics are being questioned by new generations of critical consumers who see consumer activism as key to keeping checks on the accountability of corporations and institutions.

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5. 'Doing good' (or 'whitewashing') through gender equity

Corporations and corporate power played a pivotal role in venture colonialism for centuries and this has continued after the formal end of empire (see Stern, 2023). The history of gendered racial capitalism is therefore a part of the story of Unilever. Large corporations which weathered the colonial to postcolonial transition retain this legacy deep within their business histories which is often not easily accessible within official archives designed to silence rather than ask critical questions (see Decker, 2013).

Since the early 2000s Unilever worldwide has had well established public relations and communications teams dedicated to promoting the corporation's alignment with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from 2000-2015 and subsequently the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from 2015 onwards. SDG5 on Gender Equity, in particular, has been a focus of Unilever's careful and strategic management of its image in promoting its most well-known brands: 'doing good sits at the heart of everything we do.' It is here that 'smart economics' through its popularisation in the early 2000s has enabled companies, including those with longstanding profit trails to empire, to embrace concepts and buzzwords such as empowerment, equity and sustainability and to even 'whitewash' their histories through new and evolving terminologies and schemes. The commodification of social justice issues has been critically explored as an ongoing part of processes of capitalist exploitation, expropriation and expulsion propelled by colonialism, racism, and empire (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Ramamurthy and Wilson, 2013) and more recently given further sustenance by discourses and narratives of development and 'smart economics' (Wilson, 2013). Gender equity and sustainability buzzwords, now firmly established as part of the social responsibility lexicon, have become a part of business strategies and visions of even the largest corporations.

The introduction and implementation of gender equity frameworks more broadly across different types of organisations and institutions like the World Bank, UN agencies such as UN Women, private trusts and foundations, as well as government programmes shows an active engagement with and convergence around gender equity frameworks. It is through these partnerships that corporate social responsibility, ethical business practices and policies declaring commitment to gender equity and sustainability charters have provided Unilever with an opportunity to 'cleanse' itself of its explicitly imperial past by showing itself to be modernising through concepts of equity, purpose and empowerment.

Unilever's Gender Equity Assessment Tool is an example of the embedding of gender equity principles, policies and frameworks with its corporate strategy through 'smart economics' showing the 'business case' for investing in gender equity. The Gender Equity Model (GEM) was designed with International Centre for Research on Women

(ICRW) Advisors as a strategy for Unilever to assist the corporation to ‘map how it integrates and catalyses gender equity across its work to foster business practices that create opportunities for women’ (p. 6).

Figure 6.

Source:https://www.unilever.com/files/fdb74b69-5824-4709-a8cf-84748dfe1c45/unilever-gender-equality-report.pdf

The GEM focuses on four key components: Unilever’s engagement with its extended value chain; its approach in terms of policies, practices, initiatives and programmes; the five gender drivers derived from SDG5; and desired goals in terms of broader effects and impacts towards economic and sustainable growth. The forefronting of equity and sustainability highlight how the core principles of business growth, expansion of markets, and more efficient systems of production underlie the Gender Equity Model (GEM) and the Gender Equity Assessment Tool (GEAT). As a model and toolkit ‘commissioned’ by the corporation itself, the GEM and GEAT. are extensions of Unilever’s story and have enabled Unilever to project the corporation’s strategy for growth and productivity through gender equity.

The toolkit is openly modelled on frameworks designed for and by the international development sector claims to show how the complexity and extensiveness of gender equity frameworks developed by the UN, INGOs such as CARE and Save the Children and the Inter-Agency Standing committee (IASC)’ facilitated the ease of use and transferability to a private sector audience and strategy. The toolkit is purported to be a resource to enable private sector actors – like Unilever – to design, measure, and track progress on gender initiatives …and mainstream gender equity throughout their value chain and enhance business success, productivity and profitability (See Unilever’s Gender Equity Model and Gender Equity Assessment Tool, GEAT).

The centring of the company's objectives of growth and profitability have a long history of utilising gender either through modernity or equity, as a projection of business ethics. A distinctive shift in this projection can be seen within the company's use of gender modernising campaigns across different periods. For example, around the time that Ghana and Niger(ia) were gaining independence in 1957 and 1960 respectively, the United Africa Company (UAC), a subsidiary of Unilever, appointed Eleanor Macdonald as 'Women's Adviser' to build a portfolio of market research on African middle class women as consumers with specific reference to fashion and cosmetics through the company's department store chain, Kingsway Stores. Rather than understanding this market research directive as a reflection of the company's strategy to sustain itself and even capitalise on the pending decolonisation process, the Unilever archives reflect on this period as a time of post-war opportunities and training for women:

> The position of many African women also changed as a result of post-war developments within the company. The end of produce trading and the shift towards more sophisticated retail trading with the development of Kingsway stores, created new career opportunities for women, both on the shop floor and at management level, for which extensive training was provided (Unilever Archives, p. 34).

The fact that there are many companies which are either still partly owned by Unilever or which have their origins within the history of Unilever and its subsidiaries has offered much scope for the company to repackage its associations with gendered racial capitalism. It has done so by emphasising women traders, training, skills and culturally specific market research, rather than the direct influence of European capital's track record of extractive resource and labour practices. Instead, Unilever has managed its public image through a careful utilisation of a business history which traversed African, Asian and other economic nationalisms, on the one hand, and led by example through the embracement of women's advancement through capitalism, most recently in the form of 'smart economics', on the other. The company's vested interests and its role within colonial and then post-colonial independent economies shows little reflection and no remorse about how its activities contributed to the colonial system and ongoing legacies of the company.

We argue that 'smart economics' through gender equity has enabled the company to distance itself from its history of entanglement with colonial commodity racism. The lexicon of gender equity provides buzzwords and principles such as empowerment, gender champions, and social equity to maintain a tight corporate narrative of social responsibility and SDG compliance which disguises a myriad of transgressions. However, corporate compliance creates blind spots amidst the buzzword principles and targets. Unilever's ascendancy as a champion for gender equity occurred alongside continued violations of the rights of their workers and along their supply chain throughout the Global South. In 1984 a Unilever thermometer plant was moved from New York to India due to a failure to comply with environmental and health and safety concerns. The Tamil Nadu

site was closed in 2001, but not before mercury poisoning had affected over 1000 employees (AFP, 2016). Unilever's refusal to accept responsibility for the dumping of mercury waste and provide compensation to victims forced a decade long legal battle that garnered international attention after Sofia Ashraf's Kodaikanal rap song *Won't* was released on YouTube (Rahman, 2015). The case was resolved in 2016. Over the ten years, 45 former employees died from mercury poisoning and others continue to suffer with motor and neurological disorders due poisoning from mercury waste (AFP, 2016). In 2019, security personnel hired by Unilever attacked striking workers in South Africa (Carlile, 2020). A 2016 Amnesty International Report confirmed that Unilever was ignoring severe labour abuses in their palm oil supply chain and continued to purchase palm oil from Wilmar refineries and plantations in Indonesia, where severe human rights violations were taking place, particularly impacting women and children (Amnesty International, 2016). More recently, in what has been called the #MeToo moment for tea, Unilever was found to have had sexual abuse and harassment entrenched across its plantations in Kenya for years without any action or redressal (BBC, 2023).

Despite the corporation's successes in whitewashing the harmful dimensions of its history from popular memory, the notoriety of Unilever as a global agent within the colonial era continues to be remembered in arts and music. A song by global Afro-beats artist Burna Boy, *Another Story (2019),* begins with lyrics which name a previous incarnation of Unilever, the Niger Company, from whom Britain assumed administrative control of Nigeria in 1900 as a '*business deal … between a company and a government'*. The song's central message is to tell the story of the capitalist venture which established the foundation of British colonial expansion in west Africa in what later became Nigeria. The elusiveness of the name of a company which morphed into what became known as Unilever serves the purpose of evading accountability by whitewashing the story of the company. The continuum of gendered racial capitalism in the history and present of Unilever highlights how 'another story' can be told about mechanisms through which companies and commodities have shaped the world we have inherited. Accountability to this history is necessary as this history has been bound up in the continuities of corporate strategies which have incorporated development policy and discourse, including gender equity frameworks.

Conclusion

In this article we have explored how an analysis of the convergence of 'smart economics' and gender equity frameworks allows us to understand the workings of gendered racial capitalism. We position the rise of 'smart economics' and gender and development's contributions to it within broader colonial and capitalist history. Unilever's adoption of equity frameworks signals the ease with which gender equity has been captured by

neoliberal, capitalist interests. GAD frameworks and policy agendas have shown a propensity to team up with the drivers of extraction and exploitation rather than disrupting systems of accumulation. Instead, 'smart economics' has delivered a strategy for large multinational corporations such as Unilever to segue into the era of SDGs, despite such strong roots in the colonial commodity system. The Gender Equity Assessment Tool (GEAT) reflects how integrated and proliferated 'smart economics' is across a range of institutions and activities which bear on partnerships, monitoring and reporting. Key to this is the recognition of the way in which commodity colonialism has been central in shaping how capitalism constantly works through new patterns of inequality which it continues to commodify, including anti-racist and gender equity messaging for capitalist interests.

Unilever aims to appear to be a company with a mission to 'do good,' a vision upheld through numerous partnerships with development agencies and INGOs. The line between 'doing good' and generating harm (plastics, labour practices), however, is not very fine. Ultimately, the continuum of gendered racial capitalism across colonial and postcolonial operations reveals the adaptability of profit-seeking corporate missions which span different eras of capitalist development to utilise buzzwords and frameworks which enable them to disguise the past from the present. Gendering racial capitalism is an attempt to visibilise that which has been 'whitewashed.'

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