

# Post-feminist times – a brave new world or the same old story?

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# Feminism

The recognition that women are subordinated to men, and the desire to do something about it

# **Feminist research**

Attempts to describe,  
interpret and/or explain  
women's subordination

Feminism, feminist theory and  
feminist activism come in  
different versions

<b>Categories of Feminist Perspectives</b>					
	<b>Feminism</b>	<b>Feminist research</b>	<b>View of sex</b>	<b>Research focus</b>	<b>Theoretically expected changes</b>
1	Liberal	Feminist empiricism	Men and women are similar	Make women and their conditions visible	Equal access to resources and equal rights
2	Radical, socialist	Feminist standpoint theory	Men and women are different	Make women's unique perspectives and contributions visible	Change of social structures
3	Postmodern, postcolonial	Poststructuralist feminist theory	Gender is socially constructed	Make gendered discriminatory practices visible	Change of discriminatory social practices

But what is then  
**post**feminism?

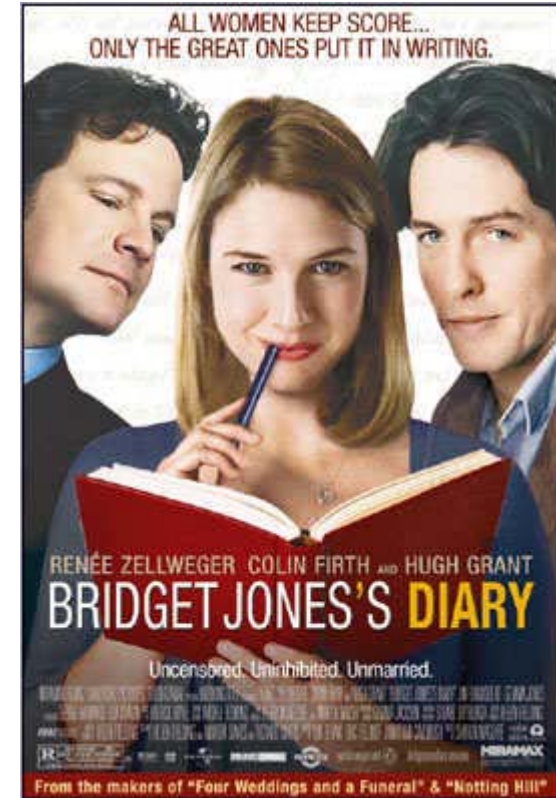
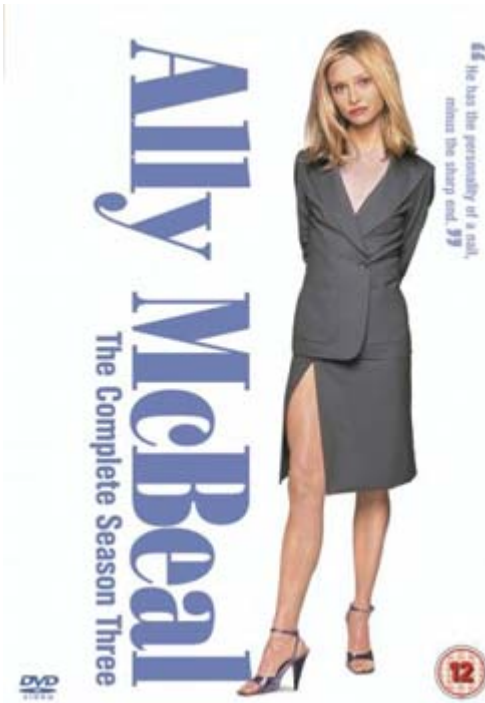
# **Postfeminism: short version**

**Gender equality is already here**

**Women and men have the same opportunities**

**Old-fashioned feminist (collective) action no longer needed.**

# The postfeminist





is

- **successful**
- **professional**
- **independent**
- **young, white, heterosexual**
- **a sexually liberated *subject* (as opposed to object)**
- **attractive and sexy (or stays that way)**
- **...through *consumption***
- **but still obsessed by finding the perfect male partner**

# Paradoxical

- Women can choose *anything*, but they choose to enact traditional femininity
- Coexistence of neo-conservative gender, sexuality and family values with processes of liberalization regarding choices of the same

# Postfeminism as neo-liberal and entrepreneurial ideology

- Privileges *market* before state
- Deregulation, privatization, *choice*
- *Agentic*, self-governing, self-regulating and *entrepreneurial* citizen

# The others:

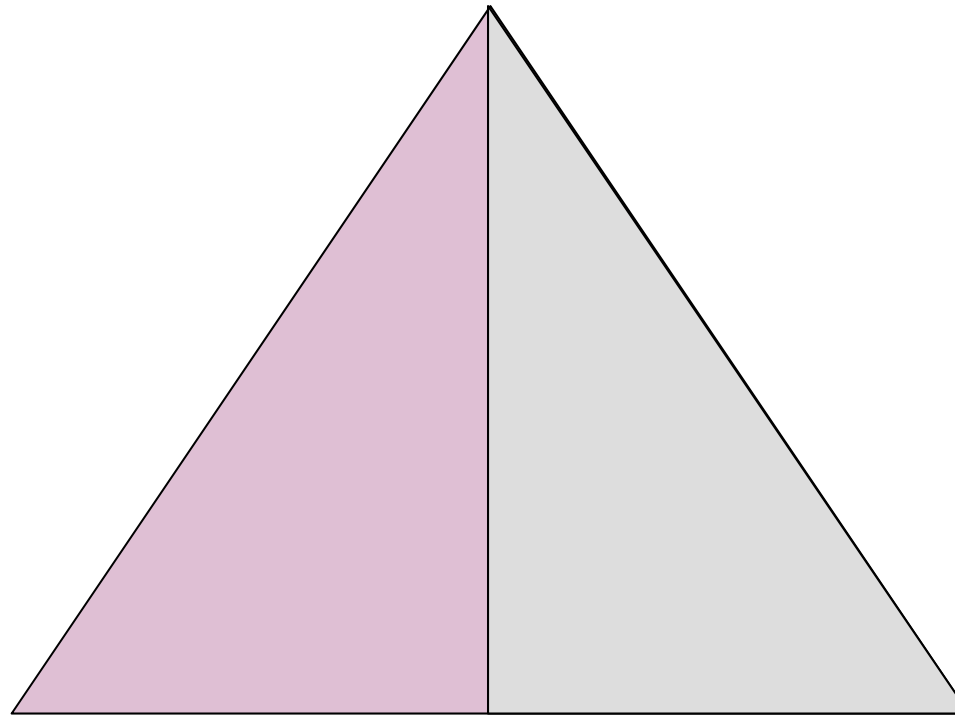
- Women of colour
- Working class women
- Older women
- Women who don't make it in terms of success or beauty

**So, postfeminism, or postfeminists,  
recreate old gender, class, age and  
race hierarchies**

# Historically:

Upper class

Working class



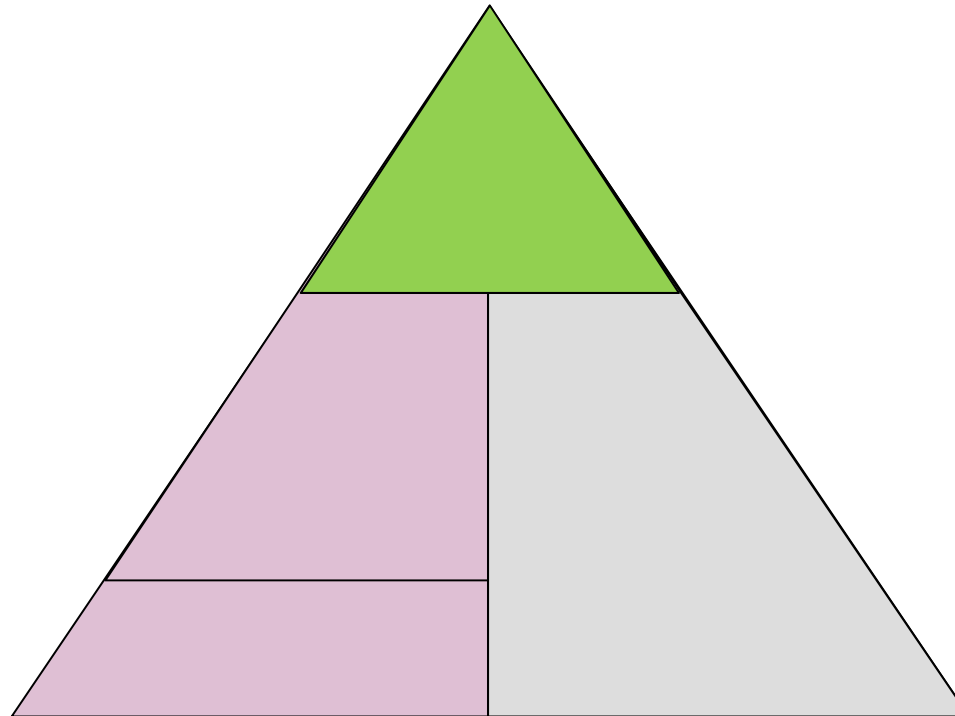
All women were primarily defined as mothers, and equally discriminated by legislation. This made for solidarity across classes.

# Now

20% -  
professionals, men  
and women who  
live similar lives

80% - strongly  
gender segregated  
labor market

20% - the return of  
the servant classes



For more information: See Alison Wolf (2013)

# **Feminist postfeminism?**

- 1. Is it feminism achieved?**
- 2. Is it a backlash against feminism?**
- 3. Is it new, upbeat girl-power version of feminism?**

# Postfeminism is *not* feminism

- ...but a *response* to feminism. It does not negate feminism, rather co-opts it.
- So, it renders old-fashioned feminism outdated
- Holds feminist *as well as* anti-feminist discourses

**There is no clear definition!**



# A discursive formation

- implies that gender equality has been achieved and feminist activism is thus, no longer necessary;
- defines femininity as a bodily property and revives notions of natural sexual difference;
- marks a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification;
- encourages self-surveillance, self-discipline, and a makeover paradigm;
- emphasizes individualism, choice, and empowerment as the primary routes to women's independence and freedom;
- promotes consumerism and the commodification of difference; and
- regards the retreat to home as a matter of choice, not obligation

(See Gill 2007, Butler 2013:44; Lewis 2014)

# The woman entrepreneur

The assumptions in mainstream research on women's entrepreneurship reflect a postfeminist/neoliberal ideology:

- the primary purpose of entrepreneurship is profit and economic growth
- entrepreneurship is something male
- it is an individual undertaking
- men and women are different
- work and family are separate spheres
- women prioritize (or ought to prioritize) family

(Ahl, 2004, 2006).



# Types in the literature

1. The entrepreneur: gender neutral, meritocratic
2. The “mumpreneur”: home-based business, products or services associated with motherhood.
3. The “female entrepreneur”: performs traditional, relational femininity

...all part of a post-feminist discourse

(Lewis, 2014)

# Government support for women's entrepreneurship in Sweden

## 1990s: Liberal and socialist feminist:

*The goal could be to promote women's independence so that women, irrespective of where in the country they reside, can live a dignified life measured by women's standards. This means equal conditions for women and men regarding education, income and influence in society. It means that society's resources – ownership, right of disposition – are equally divided between the sexes. It means freedom from patronizing, abuse and other violations from men (Friberg, 1993).*

# Anything after, clearly neo-liberal and postfeminist:

*Problem descriptions and analyses must take into account that women and men have different needs and conditions...Special measures for women are also needed (Proposition, 1993/94:140).*

*There is reason to believe that female entrepreneurship is an industry of the future...studies have shown that women's businesses are more long-lived, [and] stable (Motion 1993/94:A460, 1994).*

*The program shall contribute to more new women owned businesses and that more businesses owned by women grow. The program shall thus make more women consider starting a business, chose to run a business full time and choose to employ others (Regeringsbeslut, 2011).*

# What happened?

- **Privatization of schools, care and health-care**
- **More women-owned businesses**
- **All of the increase in low-paid, low-skilled sectors**
- **Most of former government operations went to male-owned large oligopolies**

**So, gender hierarchy recreated**

# UK: neo-liberal & postfeminist

- **Fragmented, "on-and-off"**
- **Focus on enabling individuals to achieve on a supposedly neutral, free market**
- **Women's lower rate of self-employment blamed on feminine deficiencies**

*Key challenges included balancing work and family life (40%), achieving credibility for the business (37%) and a lack of confidence (22%). All of these are limiting women's ability to start, run and grow their businesses. (Women in Enterprise: Untapped Potential: 2016:4)*

- **Vehicle to transform employment into self-employment in context of public sector cutbacks**
- **No feminist agenda, no recognition of structural barriers**

# What happened?

- **More women-owned businesses**
- **Fewer employment opportunities in public sector:**
- **...harder to re-select employment**
- **gender segregated businesses as in Sweden**
- **many more home-based part time firms (unlike Sweden)**

**So, gender hierarchy recreated**



# **The discourse on women's entrepreneurship may be characterized as postfeminist:**

- **It celebrates individual agency, empowerment and choice.**
- **It is built on the notion that a woman can build her own bright future by starting a business.**
- **It assumes that all structural barriers have been removed and that women are now free to actualize themselves and to make money.**
- **It has developed alongside neo-liberal economic policy and transformation, and is part of the neo-liberal discourse.**
- **The promise of entrepreneurship in liberal societies is a fragile promise which rests upon aspirational arguments.**
- **Entrepreneurship does not challenge existing gender inequalities; it recreates them in a new form.**

# Conclusions

## 1

The postfeminist discourse recreates women's subordination, it neglects structural barriers, and it renders feminist (collective) action – which could potentially change this – obsolete.

There is reason to speak of postfeminism as a particularly insidious form of *governmentality* – it makes women conduct themselves in such a way as to recreate their own subordination

# Conclusions

## 2

Postfeminism cannot be used as an analytical tool in organization science, and it is not a theoretical stance or position. It is far too imprecise.

Postfeminism is rather the *analytical object*.

The postfeminist discursive formation can be used to characterize the results of an analysis of contemporary discourse around gender and femininity.

# Conclusions

## 3

To count as a *feminist* analysis, it cannot stop at the description of a discourse as postfeminist. It needs an accompanying (old-fashioned) analysis of the gender order.

In organization science, this is best done by reviewing the evidence.

**Given this;** an analysis of postfeminism may help us describe how power operates in organizations and society

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