Global Governance, Legitimacy and Gender.
UN-Business Partnerships For Women’s Rights

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ABSTRACT
The study of partnerships in global governance brings us to the heart of political and theoretical debates on the relationship between public and private. This paper examines recent UN-business partnerships for women’s rights, which have not been the subject of scholarly attention earlier. It investigates how those partnerships strive to establish their legitimacy and rationale and how they portray women and women’s interests. The paper demonstrates how a mutually supporting relationship between gender equality and economic gains is launched as partnerships’ main source of legitimacy. The logic of the market is exported to the human rights domain as considerations of rights become recoded and re-emerge as business opportunities. Women are constituted as competent and capable but in need of empowerment and at risk of falling victim of poverty. They are explained to represent different interests and perspectives than men. Women’s increased participation makes business sense in partnership thinking as it maximizes a company’s access to perspectives, skills and markets. Partnerships also make great efforts at obtaining epistemic legitimacy to validate the claim that equality means business. Arguably, the norms and legitimacy principles of the market sphere are embraced by the United Nations as a way of responding to demands for better efficiency.

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1. Global Governance, Partnerships and Legitimacy

The legitimacy of global governance arrangements has arisen as an important area of scholarly inquiry. This runs parallel with political demands for an increased accountability of international institutions. For example, the United Nations is under pressure to conform to democratic demands as well as increased efficiency. One important element in contemporary global governance is partnerships on public policy issues between interstate bodies, civil society actors and market actors in various combinations. Hopes for increased efficiency as well as broadened participation abound, as well as criticism of the partnership approach. In one interpretation, “partnerships stand out as one of the UN’s main tools for the promotion of global democracy” (Thérien & Bélanger Dumontier, 2009: 366-7). In another view, partnerships are considered a threat to democracy, epitomizing that “virtually no aspect of democratic politics seems to have gone unmarked by the penetration of market logic, and it is increasingly problematic to even speak of ‘democracy,’ as politics have become embedded, more and more, in markets” (Lipschutz, 2005: 173; cf. Cutler, 2008).

In any case, the partnership trend is no longer a novelty in the multilateral system, but has developed to become a normalized part of it (Bull & McNeill, 2010). This is not true for all issue areas, however. In the case of women’s rights and gender equality, major initiatives have been taken only in the past two to three years and still attempting to carve out their place in the fragmented global governance realm. This paper is a first attempt to examine recent global public-private partnerships for women’s rights, a phenomenon that has not been the subject of scholarly attention earlier. I look into how three recently formed partnerships for women’s rights strive to construct their legitimacy and rationale. The usual approach in partnership literature is for the author to assess individual partnerships against theoretically derived sources of legitimacy. My aim in this paper, in contrast, is to study how partnerships themselves strive to justify their role in global governance and how they, in that process, portray women and women’s interests.

The paper is part of a broader research program on public-private partnerships and widens the scope of future comparative analysis of partnership legitimacy, as the literature mainly contains single case studies on partnerships in the sustainable development, health and labour rights domains. The paper also contributes to the broader research field on legitimacy in global governance by looking into how the presence of market actors affects how legitimacy fashions evolve in such governance settings. The paper begins with an overview of the partnership landscape in the realm of women’s rights. Then follows a section where I explain
how I study legitimacy. After that I present the three partnerships in focus and examine their ways of justifying the partnership venture. Arguably, the disputed role of partnerships spanning the elusive public-private distinction is to a large extent explained by clashes between different principles of legitimacy prevailing in different societal spheres.

2. Partnerships for Women’s Rights - Overview

Overall, women-centred initiatives have stayed relatively marginal in global governance (cf. Rai, 2008). The UN Secretariat has promoted “gender mainstreaming” for the past fifteen years, which means that the implications of policies for both women and men should be taken into account in the whole policy process. Still, international organizations have usually downgraded gender issues to a marginal office with little funding. Global economic organizations like the World Bank have shown limited notice of gender issues in their promotion of neoliberal restructuring policies (Scholte, 2005: 339). Women have been few in leadership positions of regional and global governance bodies, as in civil society (Scholte, 2005: 370). Feminist social movements have contributed to the institutionalization of international norms on women’s rights, and influenced international organizations to take up women’s issues. The large UN women’s conferences have been important steps in that direction (Kronsell, 2010; True, 2003: 377ff). At present, negotiations are under way on a new entity for women’s issues at the UN.

On the part of private market actors, the record of companies’ reporting on gender issues is so far weak and the gender content of key corporate social responsibility (CSR) tools have major limitations (Grosser & Moon, 2005: 542-3). Recently however, companies have entered into partnerships with UN bodies on women’s rights in line with the current popularity of this form of global governance. A brief overview of the partnership landscape in the field of women’s rights demonstrates the multifaceted character of this governance form, even though partnerships in this policy area are much fewer in number than in certain other areas. There is of course a range of NGOs and broader social movements in the field of women’s rights. However, I reserve the term partnership for cooperative endeavours involving actors from two or more different societal spheres, such as civil society, market and states. Furthermore, my concern is with the interaction between public and private in this field, so the empirical study will be limited to partnerships involving both public and private actors.

There are, however, public-private partnerships of many kinds. One kind involves
intergovernmental organizations and a range of other actors, but do not include market actors. Examples are *The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health* composed of donors, health care professionals, international organizations, NGOs, governments and researchers, and *Say No-UNiTE to End Violence Against Women*, a UN advocacy campaign involving individual governments, civil society organizations and individuals aiming at ending violence against women. There are also public-private partnerships involving market actors but not including UN or other intergovernmental bodies, such as *The U.S.-Afghan Women's Council*, created in 2002.

The kind of partnership of interest in this paper are public-private ones that involve market actors and United Nations bodies and are directed towards developing countries. The paper is delimited to such partnerships of global character, that have a broad objective and contain a large number of more limited locally based projects within an overarching partnership umbrella. The ones in focus are the UN Global Compact *Women’s Empowerment Principles* (launched in 2010), the World Bank’s *Private Sector Leaders Forum* (2009) and *The Coalition for Adolescent Girls* (2005). The partnerships are chosen to represent different functional types, in order to facilitate future comparisons between them and between partnerships with the same functions in different issue areas. Drawing on a classification of partnerships based on their main function (by Steets & Blattner, 2010: 64; cf. Bull & McNeill, 2007), four partnership types are: (1) advocacy and awareness raising (*The Coalition for Adolescent Girls*); (2) rule setting and regulation (*the Women’s Empowerment Principles*); (3) policy implementation (*The Private Sector Leaders Forum*); and (4) information-gathering partnerships, including auditing (there are none specifically in the field of women’s rights). Even though partnerships sometimes fulfil several of these functions, a main function can usually be discerned. Underlying the choice of partnerships based on function is also the idea that functionally different partnership can require different forms of legitimacy and accountability (Steets & Blattner, 2010: 64-7).

Since the objective of the paper is to study how partnerships publicly justify their activities, the empirical study is based on the partnerships’ own material, such as launch event proceedings, presentations of the partnership and its area of operation, press releases and reports describing the issue in focus. In their mission statements, launch speeches, institutional design, problem descriptions and field activities, partnerships explicitly and implicitly justify their existence and activities.

The partnerships in focus here have women as their explicit sole focus. Several other large
public-private initiatives in developing countries include women’s rights as one among many components. Examples are the *Least-Developed Countries (LDCs) Initiative*, an extension of computing company Cisco Networking Academy Program and operated in partnership with UN bodies to encourage female students to enter technology-based professions. Another example is *The Millennium Villages Project*, working with governments, 13 large companies, NGOs, foundations, universities and research centres. Finally, another kind of partnership is “trading partnerships” between large companies and women’s informal networks, run for example by Unilever, Avon, Herbalife, Grameen Bank, and Vodafone, where women sell the products of the companies in a door-to-door mode. This market-based direct selling can in the best case create opportunities for poverty reduction and empowerment for women (Dolan & Scott, 2009: 204).

In sum, the emerging partnership landscape for women’s rights is rich in diversity. The partnerships are, however, more recent and much fewer in number than if compared to the realm of the environment/sustainable development.
3. Studying Partnership Legitimacy

In the global governance setting, legitimacy can be understood as the right to rule (Buchanan & Keohane, 2006: 411). It is not an objective condition but a normative belief that a rule, institution or order ought to be obeyed. This belief may be grounded in the substance of the rule, or in the procedure or source by which it was constituted. An institution perceived to be legitimate contributes to an actor’s definition of its interests (Hurd, 1999: 381). The literature on global public-private partnerships mirrors a more general tendency to slide between empirical and normative approaches in the study of legitimacy (cf. Steffek, 2003; Clark, 2003). The most common approach is for the authors to assess individual partnerships against theoretically determined sources of legitimacy. The main sources of legitimacy thus brought up are democratic (input) legitimacy, efficiency (output legitimacy), expertise knowledge, and moral authority (cf. Bull & McNeill, 2007: 32-5; Steets & Blattner, 2010; Bexell & Mörth, 2010). In the same vein, other global governance institutions are assessed against the values of justice, equality and accountability (Higgott and Erman, 2010) or against criteria such as minimal moral acceptability, comparative benefit and institutional integrity (Buchanan & Keohane, 2006). Arguably, a quick look at the partnerships in focus here suffices to point to a lack of democratic legitimacy, even if democratic criteria would be adapted to transnational governance settings. This is in line with results in research on partnerships from other issue areas (cf. Bäckstrand, 2008). Such a look also indicates that their output legitimacy, in this case based on the obtainment of more gender equality, is yet weak.

In this paper, I have found it more fruitful to examine how the newly formed partnerships in focus themselves endeavour to construct their legitimacy. This consists in an inquiry into the process whereby partnerships gain recognition as a relevant alternative to government policy on a specific public issue (cf. Glasbergen, 2007: 11). Looking at partnerships through this lens exposes much about prevailing views on legitimacy, problems and solutions in global governance. This can be followed by an assessment based on normatively determined legitimacy sources, but does also in its own right increase our understanding of the life cycles of principles of legitimacy in global governance (cf. Clark, 2003: 75).

The present approach involves examining the way in which the nature of the problems and solutions, and of the objects to be supported and governed is framed in partnership processes. Legitimacy turns power into authority, into a perceived right to rule. Legitimacy is essential for partnerships wishing to become established global governance arrangements (Glasbergen, 2007: 14). The justification for particular ways of exercising power is an important part of the
political rationalities of governing (Miller and Rose, 1990: 6; Hurd, 1999: 388, 402). Such rationalities address the proper distribution of powers and tasks between authorities and consider the ideals towards which governing should be directed. They are also articulated in relation to some conception of the nature of the objects governed, for example society, the nation, the population, or the economy. Specifically, they embody accounts of the persons over whom government is to be exercised (Rose & Miller, 2010: 273, 276-7). In short, they render reality thinkable. The objects to be governed are made thinkable in such a way that “their ills appear susceptible to diagnosis, prescription and cure by calculating and normalizing intervention” (Rose & Miller, 2010: 281). For example, “the economy” is enabled to be something that can be governed, managed, and evaluated in order to increase wealth and profit (Miller & Rose, 1990: 6). This perspective highlights how political truths and meanings are created and sustained on a normative level and the material effects that this generates (Woehl, 2008: 70). In the present paper, I am interested in how women’s “interests”, responsibility and difference are produced and accounted for in the partnership material (cf. Woehl, 2008: 82). I am also interested in what principles of legitimacy come to dominate in this meeting between public and market norm spheres.

In more concrete technologies of government, relations are established between the nature, character and causes of problems facing individuals and groups so that the problems of different groups seem linked in their basis and solutions. A key mechanism in this regard is the deployment of expertise, making it central to examine what kind of epistemic authority is privileged. The representation of that which is to be governed is through the active use and compilation of information on societal matters in which reality is rendered something that can be diagnosed and acted upon. Information is a way of acting on the real, making the domain in question susceptible to evaluation, calculation and intervention (Rose & Miller, 2010: 282-3). The subjects created through technologies of government contribute to the ends of government not merely by being obedient, but by being free in specific ways, required to conduct themselves responsibly. This is in contrast to technologies of domination and discipline (Rose et al: 2006: 89-91).

In the analysis below, I will draw upon this line of thinking by focusing firstly on how problems and solutions are framed (section 5.1), secondly on how women and their interests are constructed (5.2), and, thirdly, on how authoritative knowledge used in partnership decision-making is created (5.3). First though, I briefly introduce the three partnerships in focus.
4. Public-Private Partnerships for Women: Three Examples

4.1 Rule-Setting: The Global Compact Women’s Empowerment Principles

The Women’s Empowerment Principles were launched at a high-profile event on International Women’s Day in March 2010 as a result from collaboration between UNIFEM and the UN-aligned CSR initiative the Global Compact. The Global Compact is one of the main global corporate social responsibility initiatives, containing ten voluntary principles on human rights, labour rights, the environment and anti-corruption. At present, about 5300 large companies from all over the world have committed to the Global Compact.

The Women’s Empowerment Principles are adapted from principles that were formulated by US investment firm Calvert Investments in 2004 in cooperation with UNIFEM. The Calvert Principles were launched as “the first global code of corporate conduct focused exclusively on empowering, advancing, and investing in women worldwide” (WEP website). The response to the Calvert Women’s Principles was strong and positive but it was suggested that a broader range of stakeholders ought to be included in the formulation of such goals. One reason for the initial absence of women’s issues in the framework of the Global Compact might be the general lack of women representation in CSR stakeholder processes (Kilgour, 2007: 766). This absence might be due to a reluctance to legitimate this voluntary-based mode of regulating CSR and scepticism of business as a force for equality (Kilgour, 2007: 765; Grosser & Moon, 2005: 543-4).

The Women’s Empowerment Principles are the outcome of “an international multi-stakeholder consultation process” initiated in March 2009 at a UN event called Advancing Women in the Global Workplace. At the launch of this process, broad participation was sought in order to ensure that it would include global and local perspectives from large and small businesses in a range of industrial sectors, as well as other societal actors (website, Advancing Women). The consultation process involved international business leaders and other experts during 2009.

The content of the Principles are:

1. Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality.

2. Treat all women and men fairly at work – respect and support human rights and non-discrimination.

3. Ensure the health, safety and well being of all women and men workers.
4. Promote education, training and professional development for women.

5. Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women.

6. Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy.

7. Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality.

The Principles are not a legal mechanism to which business is asked to subscribe, but described as “offering guidance on how to empower women in the workplace, marketplace and community”. Their subtitle is *Equality Means Business*, indicating that they emphasize the business case for promoting equality and empowerment of women. They aim to “point the way to best practice by elaborating the gender dimension of good corporate citizenship, the UN Global Compact, and business’ role in sustainable development”. A CEO Statement of Support signed by 40 chief executives of major companies has been issued. The hope is also for the Principles to influence other stakeholders, such as governments, when engaging with business.

### 4.2 Implementation: The World Bank’s Private Sector Leaders Forum

The World Bank Private Sectors Leader’s Forum was launched at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2009. It is a partnership between the World Bank Group and the leaders of 21 large global private companies, among which are Boeing International, Goldman Sachs, Nike Foundation, Unilever and CISCO Systems. The Private Sector Leaders Forum is one of World Bank President Robert B. Zoellick’s six commitments on gender equality that were announced in 2008. As the World Bank Group has moved to implement its Gender Action Plan, partnerships with governments, civil society, donors and international organizations have become increasingly central. To speed implementation of its 2001 Gender Mainstreaming Strategy, the World Bank Group in 2007 launched a four-year action plan called Gender Equality as Smart Economics.

The aim of this partnership is to promote women’s economic empowerment and gender equality in support of the World Bank Group’s Gender Action Plan. It specifically strives to strengthen connections between the gender work of the World Bank and the private sector by being role models for companies, share best practices and “private sector examples of gender equality as smart economics” (PSLF website). It is best described as an umbrella partnership
that will convene annually but under which the participating companies undertake specific projects to reach the overarching aims. For example, in its 10,000 Women initiative, Goldman Sachs provides business and management education to women in 20 countries including Afghanistan, China, Egypt, Rwanda. Cisco and the Standard Charter Bank will provide training for girls in some of the world’s poorest countries. Boeing will track and spend $2 billion in three years on goods from women-owned businesses in its supply chains. Belcorp, a cosmetics company in North and Latin America, will in partnership with the World Bank train 50,000 women in “financial literacy” in Latin America (World Bank Press Release, October 4, 2009).

4.3 Advocacy and awareness raising: The Coalition for Adolescent Girls

Founded by the United Nations Foundation and the Nike Foundation in 2005, the Coalition for Adolescent Girls is now co-chaired by the two. It also includes other companies, international organizations and civil society organizations, such as International Center for Research on Women, the Population Council and the International Women’s Health Coalition. Its goals are advocacy, awareness raising and implementation in order “to unleash the untapped potential of the developing world’s 600 million adolescent girls by raising awareness and driving action” (Coalition webpage). It aims at collecting and distributing the facts that describe the positive change girls have on their communities. The Coalition also wants to identify girl-specific actions and investments that will ignite change and form a community of like-minded organizations with diverse expertise to inform its work (Coalition webpage).

The Nike Foundation was established in 2004 and has an exclusive focus on adolescent girls in the developing world. Its purpose is to “work to get girls on the international agenda and drive resources to them” through advocacy and awareness-raising, funding specific projects, evaluating what works, and lobbying for the issue at global events. Examples of projects funded by Nike are battling child malnutrition through education in India, safe spaces in the urban slum of Nairobi, islands of security for girls in dangerous environments, a microloan program to older girls in rural Bangladesh allowing them to start small businesses to earn income in order to be able to stay in school (website, Nike Foundation).

Coalition partners undertake advocacy at high-level global events at the UN and at recent World Economic Forum meetings. In 2009, the program of the World Economic Forum’s
Annual Meeting included a session on adolescent girls for the first time. The lack of investment in adolescent girls was here identified as an “irrational investment gap”. At the event, Nike President and CEO Mark Parker stated that “[i]ncluding girls in this year’s agenda marks a real turning point in the world’s understanding of adolescent girls’ potential contribution to their own communities and to the global economy” (Nike Foundation, Press Release 30 January, 2009).

At the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2010, a workshop was held on the issue of how to move from the acknowledgment of girls’ issues to active measures to be implemented across sectors. More than 100 leaders from companies, NGOs and the public sector participated, testifying to the rise of this issue on a global agenda. The resulting recommendations for action were: enforcement of relevant laws by governments, developing specific strategies for girls by civil society groups, and creating real economic opportunities for girls by business (Nike Foundation, Press Release, 1 February 2010).
5. Partnerships, Legitimacy and Gender: Reflections on Three Examples

5.1 Linking Problems and Solutions

Women’s Empowerment Principles

The problems to be addressed through the Women’s Empowerment Principles are the lack of gender equality and the weak position of women, particular in the job market and in company spheres at all levels. The financial crisis is another urgent problem figuring in the WEP material. The crisis “has demonstrated that markets cannot function adequately without an ethical grounding. The financial crisis has caused people to take note of gender disparities and has given weight to arguments calling for gender equality” (Launch of the WEP Report, p. 3).

In sum, as diverse phenomena as the financial crisis, a lack of ethical foundation of the market and gender inequality are the main problems motivating the need for the WEP.

The proposed solution consists in linking women’s empowerment to the business case, meaning that a strengthening of women’s status leads to improved company wealth, and in a broader sense to building an ethical basis of the market. The approach underlying the Women’s Empowerment Principles is in line with the general ambition of the Global Compact to restore confidence in markets. At the launch of the Women’s Empowerment Principles, UNIFEM Executive Director Inés Alberdi stated that “[w]hat is powerful and new today is that the corporate community itself reports that gender equality is good for business. It advances innovation, attracts top talent, raises positive consumer and community recognition and improves profits. The Women’s Empowerment Principles build on this business case” (Press Statement by Inés Alberdi, 8 March 2010). Referring to a recent paper produced by consulting firm McKinsey, Alberdi claimed that companies that already make efforts to support women report measurable benefits for their business in terms of greater profits.

At the same event, UN Global Compact Executive Director Georg Kell said that “the business case and the development arguments for action to empower women are robust. As such, the Principles point the way to a future that is both more prosperous and fair for everyone”. Kell also stated that “we seek to build support for a broader concept of corporate sustainability that more explicitly embraces women’s empowerment as a key goal that will help to foster sustainable development and benefit women and men” (Press Statement by Georg Kell, 8 March 2010). It is further suggested that “the Principles also reflect the interests of governments and civil society and will support interactions among stakeholders as achieving
gender equality requires the participation of all actors” (Women’s Empowerment Principles leaflet). The Principles are stated to be inspired by international human rights treaties and the Millennium Development Goals as well as research demonstrating that gender diversity helps business perform better, which “signals that self interest and common interest can come together” (WEP leaflet).

There is, in sum, an emphasis on linking together women’s need for empowerment and business need for profit, on the win-win relationship between the two, as well as on the consensus surrounding the Principles, reflecting not only the interests of business but also of governments and civil society.

World Bank Private Sector Leaders’ Forum

The problems to be addressed by the World Bank PSLF is that progress in the area of women’s empowerment is far too slow and that much work remains to level the playing field for women. More specifically, the problems presented are that women’s higher education is not translated into higher labour force participation, that women are underrepresented in management and leadership roles, that few women sit on company boards, that women tend to earn less than men for equal work, and that women opt out of the workforce to much higher degree than men (PSLF webpage).

The solution is more investment in women. At the practical level, this consists in targeted lending programs, promoting women into corporate leadership, and “strategic philanthropy” such as the training of businesswomen in developing countries. Investing in women is stated to be critical at a time of economic turmoil as putting earnings in women’s hands is the smart thing to do to facilitate recovery and rebuilding economies around the world (World Bank Press Release Oct. 4, 2009). Especially during difficult times, nurturing female talent is important as well as achieving results from diversity, says the CEO of Pricewaterhouse Coopers, a participant in the Forum. The CEO of StandardCharter, on the other hand, says that despite the challenging times, his company is committed to supporting women in its key markets (World Bank Press Release, January 29, 2009).
Coalition for Adolescent Girls

In the policy reports by the Coalition for Adolescent Girls, the dearth of investment in adolescent girls in developing countries is called an irrational investment gap. It is also pointed out that national economies experience the costs associated with excluding girls. The more concrete problems identified by the Coalition is that adolescent girls in developing countries are in trouble as they are less educated, less healthy and less free than their male counterparts, due to systemic disadvantages and discriminatory cultural norms (Girls Count Report, p. 1-2).

In terms of solutions, the Coalition has developed an agenda for global action that is directed towards the full range of actors operating in global governance settings. The means to reach gender equality is women’s empowerment, more concretely through education, training, professional development, supporting women’s businesses, management education, and financial literacy. The recommended actions are to collect data on adolescent girls and disaggregate it by age and gender, to invest in areas of education, HIV/AIDS prevention, health delivery, and economic skills, and to advocate for laws and policies that prohibit discrimination, education on rights. In addition, it is pointed to the importance of engaging men and boys as agents of solutions (An Agenda for Global Action).

Common features

A central common denominator in the rationale of the three partnerships is the win-win claim serving as the overarching guidance when problems and solutions are to be identified and linked together. This is in line with the presently dominant discourse in which corporate social responsibility is defined as a merger of profit and moral norms. Arguably, the ambiguities of the profit concept make it easier to launch the win-win claim. The difficulty of establishing what factors really impact a company’s profit facilitates the launch of the argument that equality benefits economic gains. In all three partnerships presented above, the main source of legitimacy is framed in terms of the mutually supporting relationship between gender equality and economic gains. Women’s needs for empowerment and business’ need for profit are established as problems linked in their solutions. This indicates that the relevant actors in whose eyes partnerships strive for legitimacy are market actors rather than the women and girls in focus of concern, international organizations or civil society actors.
This exemplifies a broader trend within multilateral institutions such as the OECD and World Bank, where gender mainstreaming is framed in terms of a “business case”, and women’s empowerment is thought about in terms of efficiency gains and investment in human capital (True, 2003: 385). The economic arguments of value gain and win-win employ a governance technique of a monetary valorization of rights, in this case of women’s rights: “The translation from the vocabulary of justice to the vocabulary of cost-benefit calculations enables the deployment of market rationality to the environmental and social domains of public policy” (Charkiewicz, 2005: 78). Notions of justice or equity are subsumed under the beneficent consequences of growth, as a supposedly natural and rational operation of the market (Lipschutz, 2005: 192). In broader terms, markets are of course social institutions, based on rules of the game that serve to legitimize and uphold them. Much partnership and CSR activity can be interpreted as ways to strengthen the political legitimacy of the economic system (Lipschutz, 2005: 30-1).
5.2 Constructing Women and Women’s Interests

Women’s Empowerment Principles

In the material of the Women’s Empowerment Principles, women are often explained to represent different interests and perspectives than men. Increased participation of women is considered to stand for increased diversity, which is claimed to make business sense as it maximizes a company’s access to perspectives, skills and markets. It is reported in the WEP material that some companies recognize that difference is valuable and that a woman’s vision can help improve a company’s bottom-line. Participants at the launch event also pointed to the risk that exclusive environments might force women to believe they must adopt “masculine business behaviour” in order to be successful. Due to the underrepresentation of women on company boards, the voices of women are not adequately heard. The need for female role models to help young girls build self-esteem and recognize their true potential is also pointed to (Launch of the WEP Report).

For the Vice-Chairman of McKinsey, the case for investing in women is clear as they represent half the potential talent in the world, they are consumers and sellers, and make most of the important household purchasing decisions, and make those decisions more wisely with their children’s future in mind (Speech, Inés Alberdi, 9 March 2010). It is emphasized in the WEP material that it is imperative to educate men about the business case for diversity and providing men with supporting data, so that an “us vs. them” relationship does not develop. It is also pointed out that the needs and wants of female workers are not always the same as male workers (Launch event WEP Report, p. 4). Labour markets are themselves gendered institutions that reflect socially constructed divisions of labour where women’s informal, care and home work is hidden. The Women’s Empowerment Principles, like most CSR codes, address the regulation of formal employment and work-related benefits but do not reach the large sector of the informal economy, where women are over-represented (cf. Pearson, 2007: 735-7).

There is a clear awareness in the self-description of the WEP that stakeholder involvement is an important way of obtaining legitimacy. Being a rule-setting partnership, the WEP and the broader Global Compact of which it is part, have potentially large normative influence by identifying the overarching values and best practices to be strived towards by the business community in the area of women’s empowerment. In the Global Compact as a whole, only six NGOs with explicit women/gender focus are listed out of a total of more than 1000 NGOs. Members of groups that are systemically excluded from power often find themselves
unrepresented in processes leading to voluntary-based CSR initiatives such as the Global Compact, adding to the lack of democratic connotations of such initiatives (Kilgour, 2007: 768).

World Bank Private Sector Leaders’ Forum

The rationale for forming the Private Sector Leaders Forum is, first, that women and girls are those expected to suffer most from the economic crisis as girls are likely to be drawn out of school and put to work instead. Women are most likely to lose their jobs as they constitute the main part of the job force in export manufacturing sectors. The Managing Director of the World Bank states that “[w]omen and girls need to be protected because they are suffering disproportionately from the economic recession”. Second, the idea is that women administer resources better than men: “[w]hen women are given resources and opportunities, it brings benefits to families, communities and the next generation. So it’s not only fair, it’s also smart economics” (World Bank Press Release, January 29, 2009). The webpage of the Private Sector Leaders Forum cites studies demonstrating that in Cote d’Ivoire, increasing women’s share of cash income increases the share of household budget assigned to food and reduces the share assigned to alcohol and cigarettes.

Women are hoped to be “the engine for recovery”, according to the World Bank. If their potential is used, the world can emerge from the financial crisis with healthier growth and be on a faster track to reducing poverty and boosting development (World Bank Press Release October 4, 2009). Women’s double burden of domestic and work responsibilities is also cited as a deterrent to full economic participation.

In sum, women are considered in need of empowerment and help but also constituted as capable, in some cases more capable than men as they are said to administer resources better and spread wealth more beyond themselves. It is emphasized by Robert Zellick, President of the World Bank Group, that women’s empowerment is “not just a women’s issue” but leads to better outcomes for society as a whole (Leaflet Promoting Women’s Economic Empowerment).
Coalition for Adolescent Girls

Similar thinking as in the two above partnerships apply also in the case of the Coalition for Adolescent Girls, aiming to “unleash the untapped potential” of the developing world’s adolescent girls. Girls are here portrayed to have potential but in need of help to take advantage of it. For Nike Chairman Mark Parker, the world has finally come to understand adolescent girls potential contribution to the global economy, and will strive to get away from this irrational investment gap.

The Coalition sees two possible scenarios for the life of an adolescent girl in developing countries: “An adolescent girl stands at the doorway of adulthood. If she stays in school, remains healthy, and gains skills, she will marry later, have fewer and healthier children, and earn an income that she’ll invest back into her family. Her alternative is the path laid down by poverty. She’ll leave school early, marry too young, and miss the chance to reach her full human potential. Her tragedy, multiplied by the 600 million adolescent girls throughout the developing world – contributes to the endless cycle of poverty (Coalition webpage ”Why girls?”). The Coalition points to the small proportion of international aid spent on adolescent girls’ needs and defines its own mission in terms of breaking the cycle of poverty. The interests of girls are, in summary, identified as getting away from traditional female roles concerned only with marriage and children and instead obtain an education and earn her own income, which will help her reach “full human potential”. We see the emphasis on a young women’s potential for development and empowerment that is at the same time considered favourable to the global economy.

Common features

The partnerships in focus here are but three examples of arenas where the continuous production of images on what it is to be a man or a woman are constructed and reproduced. We have looked at how women’s “interests” are accounted for in the partnership settings. Women and girls are explained to be in need of empowerment. They are the ones to suffer the most from economic crisis and underdevelopment. Their ills, however, appear susceptible to diagnosis, prescription and cure by intervention of partnership actors. Women are also constituted as capable, in some cases more capable than men. The images of women and girls underlying partnership policies are both constraining and empowering at the same time. There is inconsistency between the image of the woman in need of protection and help, and the
image of the competent and capable woman who can make much more out of her potential than is currently the case.

This is in line with a shift in development rationality from one where the state has an obligation to help, for example by making capital accessible to the poor, into one where individuals act as responsible agents for their own well-being; “the new agents of development are gendered as women entrepreneurs with cultural propensities to invest wisely and look after their families and communities” (Rankin, 2001: 20). In contrast to governmental technologies of domination and discipline, each individual is constituted as an ally of economic success by assuming responsibility for their own productivity, entrepreneurship and development.

5.3 Creating Authoritative Knowledge

Women’s Empowerment Principles

At the launch and continued proceedings surrounding the WEP, great efforts were made to verify the claim that “equality means business”. The importance of data is often emphasized in the material, stating that it is crucial in building the business case for gender equality. It is often repeated that research demonstrates that companies investing in women’s empowerment and rights show increased profit. A significant correlation between competitiveness and companies that have narrowed their gender gaps is pointed to (Launch of the WEP Report). An influential point of reference is a recent report by consulting firm McKinsey called *The Business of Empowering Women*. This report is frequently invoked in speeches etc. It documents the business case for focusing on women through a global survey of 2 300 senior private sector executives. The report concludes that companies already focusing their efforts on women are reporting measurable business benefits. One third of the executives said their investments in women already resulted in greater profits and another third claimed that their investments would soon show profit.

There is a clear emphasis on good practice, best practice and that the practicality of the Principles. With the launch of the Principles, a compendium documenting best practices for women’s empowerment undertaken to by 80 large companies was released. This compendium reports on company practices ranging from flexible working arrangements, onsite child care, donations to UNIFEM, career support, community programs, and micro credit loans, to promotion of women to senior positions (Companies Leading the Way: Putting the Principles
into Practice). It is also suggested that being able to communicate progress on gender equality can create competitive advantage (Launch Event WEP Report p. 7). Participants at the WEP launch event pointed to the challenge to address a disconnect between the persisting gender gap and a belief among what they see as a surprising number of people that such a gap no longer exists (Launch event WEP Report p. 3).

World Bank Private Sector Leaders Forum

The material of the Global Private Sector Leaders Forum points to “compelling evidence that women can be powerful drivers of economic development”, referring to research from the World Bank, the UN and Goldman Sachs. This research claims, inter alia, that closing the gap between female and male employment rates would have huge implications for the global economy as it would boost GDPs. It also shows that higher female education results in higher productivity and economic growth (PSLF webpage). The top executive members of the PSLF provide research and project-based evidence to support the business case for increasing women’s opportunities in the private sector (Leaflet Promoting Women’s Economic Empowerment).

Just as in the case of the Women’s Empowerment Principles, the report The Business of Empowering Women by consulting firm McKinsey is an influential point of reference. McKinsey is also member of the partnership. The report explains that there are three key links between economically empowered women and better company performance: (1) such women are potential customers, the more of them, the larger the market for selling goods and services; (2) skilled women constitute a broad and motivated talent pool to hire from and promote, and (3) investment in improving women’s lives in developing countries can enhance a company’s reputation and brand (The Business of Empowering Women, p. 18-22).

Coalition for Adolescent Girls

The first main step of the Coalition for Adolescent Girls has been to compile and disseminate adolescent girl-specific data in order to provide a basis for designing actions. The Coalition webpage collects a range of reports and research on the situation of girls in developing countries as well as material documenting how investing and supporting girls lead to development. Building on this, the Coalition develops action plans in different policy areas, such as health and education. The Coalition explicitly emphasizes that the compilation of
information is central to its work. By documenting what the situation of girls looks like through statistics, case studies, and expertise, as well as demonstrating that investing in girls leads to development, the Coalition hopes to influence global public policy.

Common Features

All three examples demonstrate how the partnerships actively use and compile information on the problems of concern. The problem areas in focus for all three partnerships are vast. By collecting and producing material grappling with the issues of concern, a reality that can be diagnosed and acted upon is created. The weight given to reports and research from diverse sources, such as companies, consulting firms, academics, research institutes and international organizations, is a fundamental part of establishing the epistemic legitimacy of the three partnerships. This epistemic legitimacy is part of the ongoing effort to establish a dominant truth on corporate social responsibility, stating that it is good both for business and society and the broader market economy. The claims that equality means business and that gender equality is smart economics are subthemes of this broader truth claim.

The partnerships examined here mirror the general trend pointed to by Higgott and Erman (2010: 463) in which the epistemic power to define global (economic) governance is primarily driven by a neoliberal discourse emphasising improved efficiency and where channels for critical voices are weak. The extent to which the voices of the women of concern are taken into account in this material varies between the sources, though women’s NGOs do not figure prominently in most of the reports. The fact that global governance is a contested political process about the distribution of global wealth and not an administrative technical matter is overlooked in the dominant discourse (Higgott & Erman, 2010: 453). The emphasis on research and knowledge bases conceals the contested political nature of defining normative principles, development interventions and the intricate power relations involved in initiatives of this kind. Partnership operations should be considered political spheres of action as they lock out certain human rights aspects and interests, as well as certain visions of women and gender, and favour others (cf. Glasbergen, 2007: 13).
6. Concluding Remarks

The study of partnerships in global governance brings us to the heart of political and theoretical debates on the relationship between public and private. This paper has looked into how global public-private partnerships for women’s empowerment legitimate their existence and ways of working. In pursuit of legitimacy, partnerships appeal to public values as well as to economic interests of their participants (cf. Glasbergen, 2007: 12). In all three partnerships, the main source of legitimacy is launched in terms of the mutually supporting relationship between gender equality and economic gains. Women’s needs for empowerment and business’ need for profit are established as problems linked in their solutions. The partnerships demonstrate the present willingness to ground social relations and responsibility in the economic rationality of the market. The logic of the market is exported to other social domains. Considerations of human rights become market-embedded, recoded and re-emerge as business opportunities (cf. Shamir, 2008: 6-14). This is a governance technique employing a monetary valorization of women’s rights where conflict and political tensions are hidden. In contrast to governmental technologies of domination and discipline, women are constituted as competent and capable and responsible for their empowerment and liberation, but also at risk of falling victim of poverty and in that case in need of protection and help. Partnerships also make great efforts at obtaining epistemic legitimacy, especially as concerns the claims that equality means business and that gender equality is smart economics.

The partnerships in focus strive primarily for legitimacy in the eyes of market actors, rather than in the eyes of the women and girls in focus of concern, civil society actors or other stakeholders. In these public-private ventures, the norms of the market sphere and its principles of legitimacy set the terms of reference for cooperation. This is in line with high expectations on partnerships to improve efficiency in global public policy. Our recent edited volume on democracy and public-private partnerships (Bexell & Mörth, 2010) demonstrated that despite a lack of democratic credentials, partnerships are widely perceived to be legitimate because they are supposed to be efficient. The cases showed that the political expectations of the problem-solving capacity of partnerships are huge in areas as vast as climate change, sustainable development, child immunization and the fight against HIV/AIDS and malaria. The attractiveness of public-private partnerships is that the partners can capitalize on their respective advantages: political, possibly democratic, legitimacy of the public sector, and the efficient workings of the market. The potential for operative capability and increased financial resources is crucial if we want to explain why partnerships with
market actors are attractive for the United Nations, an organization facing strong demands to become more effective.

As indicated in the introduction, a next step can be to elaborate on these findings in light of the ongoing normative debate on the legitimacy of global governance arrangements. Would these partnerships operate within the setting of a democratic rule-of-law state, the linkage of women’s rights and business opportunities might perhaps be normatively less problematic. However, since those partnerships operate in highly transnational settings, I argue we ought to be critical of linking human rights and economic profit in this manner. The main reason for this is that the idea of human rights is and ought to be based on seeing human beings as ends in themselves. This line of argument can be refined and further developed in future studies. Another direction in which research can be pursued is to deepen the gender analysis that this paper has only touched upon. Further examination of partnerships for women’s rights provide rich ground from where to begin addressing the lack of attention to gender in the mainstream literature on legitimacy in global governance.
References


