“We don’t want complaining women!” A critical analysis of the business case for diversity.

Abstract

The author explores how the corporate discourse of ‘the business case’ works to frame, restrict and de-politicize the discussion of gender in the workplace. In turn bemused and surprised by the ease with which women have been persuaded it is not ‘businesslike’ to complain, the author explores how women’s linguistic choices shape their corporate life. By examining the didactic and embedded ‘gender work’ of a women’s leadership event and reflecting on her own, occasional, weakness for the discourse the author contributes to the understanding of how a seemingly positive and popular communication strategy reproduces unequal gendered relations in the workplace. The author rejects the claim that using a business case discourse is an effective strategy in improving the recognition, promotion and rewarding of women in organizations.

Keywords feminism equality corporate discourse

Introduction

The study of corporate discourses can help us understand gendered relations in business because how things are talked about reflect current power relations in the workplace (Ahmed, 2007; Zanoni & Janssens, 2003). But corporate discourses of gender have raised as many questions for those who study them as they have provided answers, for example: what does it mean to ‘sell’ diversity to an organization? How is diversity achieved and for what purpose? What ‘bargains’ get struck between agents in this process (Hunter & Swan, 2007, p.378)? As researchers have pursued these lines of inquiry, they have also raised questions about the way organizations individuate difference and cast it as something that can be described, measured and utilised for increased business productivity (O'Leary & Weathington, 2006). Kirby and Harter (2003) identified corporate training events as a potentially useful source of data to examine corporate diversity discourses, and, in this study, I have followed their suggested approach and collected data from a business conference to analyse how gender is framed as an issue of productivity, as a ‘business case’ for diversity.

Diversity initiatives are an area of political sensitivity for many organizations. As a result communication researchers have difficulty gaining access to private training events to do the sort of research called for by Kirby and Harter. Opportunities to hear organizations talk publicly about their gender communication strategies are also rare. I[1] was fortunate to receive an advertising flyer for a 'women and leadership' conference that offered participants an opportunity to receive instruction by 'experts' on how gender issues *should* be communicated within business organizations. The two-day event was co-organised by a US equality consultancy and an international business conference firm. The conference was a mix of plenary sessions, panel discussions and individual presentations covering topics such as work/life balance challenges and creating women's networks. The event carried the prominent sponsorship of a range of established multinational organizations and featured representatives from those same organizations as speakers and panellists.

The conference speakers and panellists placed particular emphasis on the need to present gender in a way that did not challenge the central values and discursive preferences held by business. Participants were repeatedly assured that this 'business case' approach was a successful communicative strategy. But instruction on how to speak *appropriately* to employers about gender and/or race turned out to be nothing more complex than restricting communication about diversity issues to those of individual merit, responsibility and profit. Our experience of the didactic aspect of the conference confirmed O'Leary and Weathington's (2006) thesis about the individuation of difference and the links to profitability. By using linguistic analysis software to analyse all the conference data (not just the sessions that covered communication strategies) I was able to reveal the degree to which 'gender work' is embedded within corporate discourses. The embedded 'gender work' in tandem with restricted language choice enables gender to be de-policitized in many workplaces.

My aim in presenting a critical analysis of the business case for diversity is to aid understanding of how communication reproduces gendered relations in the workplace and to contribute to the study of organizations from a social constructionist understanding of discourse (for other examples see Ahl, 2004; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Deetz, 1992; Fairhurst, 2007; Kirby & Harter, 2001; Lair et al., 2005; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). In the first section of the paper I establish the background to the

[1] As an early-career researcher at the time this research was conducted I had under-estimated the effort it took to gain research funding for assistance in fieldwork. Two other recent PhD graduates, Esther Priyadharshini from University of East Anglia and Carole Elliott from Lancaster University and I agreed to act as unpaid research assistants on each other's small research projects when the opportunity presented itself and the project appealed.

rise of business case. I start by providing an example of its use from my own professional experience and then explain its take-up by practitioners who felt that a rights-based approach to gender equity was ineffective. I end this section of the paper by outlining how the business case has been criticised by gender scholars. The second section outlines the methods used in the analysis of the data. In the third section I show how gender is framed in order to remove any potential for challenge of the dominant values and behaviours of business. De-politicization is achieved by combining the effects of (deliberate) restrictions in language and a whole raft of other (unacknowledged) discursive modifications. The discussion section examines whether it is possible to successfully challenge dominant discourses by using the business case as a carrier discourse for more radical ideas. I compare the use of the business case discourse in diversity initiatives to its use in introducing corporate social responsibility concepts. The paper concludes that the strategic use of a business case discourse is bound to fail. Its use can only maintain, not challenge, existing inequalities and it is important that we find ways to legitimise moral arguments in corporate discourse.

The rise and rise of the business case

The business case discourse has been an established part of organizational life for many years but that does not mean that those who use it understand it. This much is obvious from my own work history. In the 1980s I worked for an international financial services firm as a Human Resource Consultant. My role was to work with business units who were experiencing difficulties in implementing central policies and procedures. One of my assignments was to visit a unit that was finding it difficult to retain staff; a substantial number of employees had left our company to work at a local supermarket where the pay and conditions were considered superior. The message that the supervisors wanted me to return to senior management with was that "it was unfair and demoralising for financial service professionals to be paid less than supermarket employees". I remember being surprised at what I interpreted as their naivety. The company had located this unit in a geographically remote and economically depressed area as a direct result of local tax reductions, subsidised building costs and the availability of cheap labour. The fact that the company *could* staff this unit at minimum wage levels was a large factor in deciding to create it. My reply, to the obvious irritation of the supervisory team who were on the receiving end of my corporate homily, was that appeals based on fairness or morale were unlikely to result in success. Unless the management at this site could demonstrate that the high turnover of staff had an economic cost to the company that outweighed the benefit it received from employing them at low wages the situation would remain the same.

I doubt if anyone else who was in the room that day remembers my mini-lecture on the importance of couching complaint in an appropriate form. And perhaps the only reason I remember it is because my current research interests give the speech a post-hoc significance it did not have at the time. But the incident is a useful illustration of several key aspects of the use of the business case in a typical workplace. The first thing to note is failure to communicate using the dominant (or 'preferred') discourse is interpreted as incompetence. In appearing to ignore the economic context in which the company is operating you are judged – as I judged the staff I was speaking to – as being out of touch with 'reality' (i.e. naïve). The second point to note is that the dominant discourse is sufficiently pervasive so that enough members of the organization automatically use and maintain it (I did without ever being instructed to do so) but that it is not universally used (otherwise my advice to the supervisory staff would not have been necessary). And finally, the discourse is one that can be used to protect the organization from a wide variety of challenges, not just those arising from gender or race. In the example above the refusal to pass on a complaint because it is not appropriately expressed as a financial issue means that the organization did not have to respond to a challenge regarding the diminished reputational capital that its work represented.

Although the business case discourse had been an established part of corporate life for many years there were still some issues that were articulated using older, alternative discourses. This was true of appeals for gender and racial equality in the workplace, which continued to be framed in Europe in terms of social justice until the mid-1990s (Greene et al., 2005) although the business case for racial equality had been a feature of US workplaces from the 1950s (Wilkins, 2004).

The shift in rhetorical strategy since the 1990s in respect of gender issues has been attributed to management consultants who argued that it was necessary to argue for the promotion of women into leadership positions using an economic rationale and as a commonsense response to the threats of economic recession, demographic change and globalization (Greene et al., 2005). Consultants found many organizations willing to purchase their advice on how to introduce diversity (i.e. gender and race) initiatives into organizations that had hitherto seemed resistant to equal opportunity programmes. Senior managers (i.e. men) were thought to respond more positively to business-based diversity discourses rather than discourses of gender equity (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005). And by tapping into established managerial discourses (colloquially referred to as the 'money code') the case for diversity was able to be packaged in a way that would be more easily accepted by decision makers trained to rationalise behaviour based on the bottom line (Kirby & Harter, 2003, p.43).

So what were the key elements of this business-friendly 'diversity' discourse? The Table below sets out the key claims made for the approach.

The business case for diversity discourse

Promoting more women and ethnic minority staff into leadership roles will benefit organizations in the following ways:

- It will involve senior management in human resource planning
- Enhance the organization's ability to recruit from a diverse general population
- Increase the range and depth of the skills of the workforce
- Improve staff retention
- Increase the appeal of the organization to a wider customer base through offering a more nuanced or differentiated service and product
- Enhance the organization's reputation in the community
- Enhance the organization's ability to predict and respond to customers from diverse backgrounds
- Reduce discrimination allegations

Table 1: Key elements of the business case for diversity (Sources: Business Link, 2007; Greene et al., 2005; Hutchings & Thomas, 2005)

Social groups *outside* of the organization (e.g. 'women' or 'the Afro-Carribbean community' or 'the Jewish community') are viewed as potential markets for products or services. But when they are *inside* the organization an individual's membership of these distinct social groups is downplayed and the organization prefers to talk about individual merit, abilities and contribution. This emphasis on individualism allows business to portray discrimination as the unfortunate failure to identify an individual's talents rather than systemic discrimination towards a distinct social group (Hutchings & Thomas, 2005).

But it would be wrong to suggest that only management consultants and HR managers have been responsible for the take-up of the business case discourse. Diversity activists have also been complicit in the move away from equality discourses and frequently used terms deployed in policy debates are believed to have a limited shelf life before they become familiar and easier to tune out or ignore (Ahmed et al., 2006) Words, for all their apparent mobility and elasticity, can become stuck or function in ways to slow down debate rather than to energise it (Ahmed et al., 2006).

> … the tiredness of 'equality' is the result of the failure to hear the term – which means practitioners have to repeat it – as well as failure of things to change. The word equality also gets associated with specific kinds of politics, and specific people, which means they too are less likely to be heard (Ahmed et al., 2006, p.37)

The equality discourse may have been 'tired' from having to be repeated often but at least it was able to acknowledge that groups of citizens had been subject to systemic disadvantage in the past and that organizations reflected wider societal prejudices. Equality discourses also stressed that the law, as opposed to the market, was the appropriate regulatory mechanism for redressing inequality.

The gender equality discourse
Recognition that groups of citizens have been subject to discrimination in the past and are now entitled to special protection.
Assumption that all human beings are fundamentally equal and no group is inherently more talented or competent
Acknowledgement that private and public organizations reflect the wider prejudices prevalent in society and have in the past been sources of discrimination against groups of citizens.
Acknowledgement that the law is a legitimate source of external and regulatory force in respect of organizations
Based on a liberal-humanist perspective of human progress. The struggle in respect of gender equality is part of a wider social movement towards human equality, authenticity, self-improvement, democracy, freedom and social progress.
The belief that women should be unified in their opposition to oppression and express its arguments and demands in a common voice
The belief that political organization should be collective
Awareness that barriers to equality of opportunity and outcome in the workplace include low pay, differential treatment of part-time and casual workers, gendered division of labour and low status of work considered to be 'female'

Table 2: Key elements of the gender equality discourse (compiled from Judith Baxter, 2003; Janeen Baxter & Wright, 2000; Colling & Dickens, 1998; Edelman et al., 2001; Wilkins, 2004)

The irony is that the business case discourse has proved just as ineffectual in bringing about change as the equality discourse. But there are no calls for the business case approach to be abandoned because it is still believed that the approach ensures people 'with a specific kind of politics' (Ahmed et al., 2006, p.37) get a hearing in corporate settings.

A more persuasive explanation for the tenacious grip that the business case discourse has on the framing of gender relations is the changing macro-economic policy choices of government. Blackmore (2006), for example, observed that the arrival of 'business case' discourses coincided with a period of radical workplace restructuring when new public administration approaches adopted principles from private business. Furthermore the belief that diversity is something that can be capitalised on by an organization to increase profit often accompanied the belief in the free market and a less interventionist approach (Blackmore, 2006). Colling and Dickens (1998) also interpreted the rise of the business case discourse as ‘privatisation’ of the responsibility for promoting equality. They believed this was a result of the state in its role as regulator standing back and encouraging equality, as an issue, to be appropriated by line management. Finally, the idea of ‘capitalising’ on diversity has been associated with the effort to gain new markets as a result of globalisation, with new flows of trans-national migration and the shift to the service economy (Blackmore, 2006) all supported by governments. Rather than the state behaving as the regulator of business, the appearance has been one of business regulating the state. As a result corporate discourses such as the ‘business case’ have gained greater legitimacy and have come to dominate policy debates.

The limitations of the business case approach in furthering women’s interests in the workplace are obvious. Using a business case justification when discussing gender in organizations restricts both the types of appeals that women can makes and the range of outcomes that women can expect. The business case assumes that the only gender issue in the workplace is that of the under-utilisation of women’s ability in senior management roles. The business case is emphatically *not* concerned with tackling low pay, rights for part-time workers, casual employment, the gendered division of labour or power differentials in the workplace (Colling & Dickens, 1998). A business case measures success in terms of the increase in the number of women and ethnic minority managers rather than progress made in reducing pay inequality or gender segregation (Colling & Dickens, 1998). Thus, the problem with the business case discourse is not merely that it has replaced an earlier legal discourse (one that could, crucially, claim a socio-political legitimacy greater than an appeal to ‘the market’) but that the business case restricts the discussion of gender to such a narrow range of concerns.

In this section I have introduced the business case discourse, compared it to a traditional rights based approach to gender and provided an initial critique of its limitations. However, I have not yet established how the business case discourse ‘works’ to maintain gendered relations in their present (inequitable) state. The data from the conference allowed me to examine the discourse using text analysis software and in the next section I provide more detail on the dataset and the analysis that was undertaken.

Methods

The fieldwork for this research project took place during a ‘Women and Leadership’ corporate workshop in 2000. The two-day conference was marketed to senior management representatives across Western Europe and promised delegates that they would learn how to create more equitable and profitable companies through the management of diversity. An equality consultancy and a multi-national business conference firm jointly ran the conference. The official conference language was English. Two researchers attended the event[2] as participant observers and attended each session, collecting copies of keynote speeches and presentation slides when available and taping sessions, whenever possible, for later transcription. The data used in this research comprises the speech of anonymised participants made in a public space and in front of an audience. No data has been included from conversations that took place in a private capacity or in non-public spaces. The speech data created an evolving in situ text, which when subsequently transcribed was constructed as a corpus for linguistic analysis using T-LAB software.

The conference was a mix of plenary, panel discussions, individual presentations and (the now ubiquitous) ‘break out’ sessions. The estimated number of delegates was 240 of which about 95% were women. There were two keynote speeches and stories of women who had reached the top of their organizations. There were also a number of mixed-sex panel discussions on issues related to women’s advancement.

I built the corpus dataset using the text from five conference sessions. I chose sessions that consisted of a panel of ‘experts’ and which encouraged discussion from session participants as opposed to keynote speeches. The text files were then fed into the T-Lab software package, which provides computer-aided analysis of text through functions such as text mining, mapping and content analysis.

[2] As mentioned earlier, the fieldwork was undertaken as part of a collective agreement between three early-career researchers to help each other out on small research projects that would otherwise require us to apply for research funding to resource.

T-Lab organises data into corpus, subsets and lemmas. A ‘corpus’ is simply a body of one or more texts chosen for analysis. In this project the corpus consists of the combined transcripts of different sessions within the same conference event. The ‘subsets’ were the individual conference session transcript texts. Taking the words in the corpus – in this case 3517 – the software is able to convert each word into a lemma (or lexical root) that corresponds to the grammatical categories of verb, noun, adjective etc. For example, the words ‘spoken’ and ‘speaking’ would both appear under the lemma ‘speak’ but ‘talent’ (noun) and ‘talented’ (adjective) are separate lemmas. The unit used in analysis is the lemma, not the word.

T-Lab allows for a wide range of complex quantitative analytical functions to be carried out on text in support of a qualitative analysis of discourse. Qualitative researchers are often challenged to justify focusing on one aspect of text rather than another. By using software that reports on the number of occurrences of lemmas, their context, and how they are clustered within and between texts, the researcher can now notice patterns in the data that they might otherwise miss. My analysis has been guided by three different quantitative types of data interrogation: The frequency with which a lemma appears in the whole corpus, the under- and over-use of a lemma in a sub-set as compared to the corpus, and the co-concurrences of lemmas.

Table 3 shows the 20 lemmas that appear most frequently in the corpus.[i]

LEMMA	FREQUENCY	LEMMA	FREQUENCY
think	322	business	91
woman	312	talk	87
people	259	need	81
work	241	important	74
know	140	man	70
company	131	career	66
issue	106	Board	56
organization	104	question	54
network	96	Right	46
Time	93	Ask	45

Table 3: Frequency of selected lemmas within the corpus

An important second check of the data is one that examines how common the lemma is across the corpus. The following is an example of this type of analysis of Session D of the conference.

OVER-USED WORDS (illustrative sample)			
WORD	CHI≤	SUBSET D	TOTAL
network	309.22	93	96
Woman	211.48	175	312
Budget	42.32	15	17
Gender	41.45	20	27
advancement	22.83	8	9
corporate	22.66	18	31
man	21.94	32	70

UNDER-USED WORDS (total)			
WORD	CHI≤	SUBSET D	TOTAL
work	-30.4	19	241
personal	-7.76	1	35
today	-7.76	1	35
solution	-4.63	1	24

Table 4: Over- and under-used words in relation to Session D

Although the frequency of the lemma ‘network’ is high when the whole corpus is the unit of analysis by using the second test we can see that the use of the ‘network’ is almost entirely limited to one session on the conference (i.e. Session D). The lemma has to be checked in its context in order to judge whether this is the result of a single person over-using a particular vocabulary or whether the clustering is indicative of other issues.

The third analytical technique is to examine the co-occurrences of lemmas. T-Lab converts the co-efficient scores of a selected key lemma and lemmas that co-occur with it in order to map co-occurrences visually. T-Lab then presents the researcher with the context in which the co-occurrence appears. The following example tracks the co-occurrence of the lemmas ‘recruit’ and ‘talent’, first through a map of the co-occurrences and then using the corresponding text sample.

Table 5: Co-occurrence map of the lemma 'recruit' ABOUT HERE

**** *TEXT_0001 This is actually a population that we recruit a lot of graduates from, so we clearly have to think again how we are targeting winning the war for talent. In the UK we know that this 16-24 labour market will actually be shrinking by 1 million by 2006, but at the same time the total workforce is increasing by 1 million, largely due to the number of women returning to work.
**** *TEXT_0001 So we really want to make sure that we are capturing the best talent out there. We also look to our business case from the point of the cost of attrition. We spend a lot of money recruiting and developing a number of talented people and a large proportion of women and unfortunately we are losing them. So it just makes good business sense to make [named company] a great place to work for women.
**** *TEXT_0001 I'll try not to over push the analogy of the value chain. I was trying to describe how we recruit in the increasingly competitive market and bring people through the talent pool, so that they can make the biggest possible contribution that they possibly can.
**** *TEXT_0005 … then you have to fill in the education programme and strangely I don't think that's unusual anyway. When we recruit graduates and those from [named company] here will know this, we do recruit people with effectively, talents not skills. Talents.

Table 6: Text featuring co-occurrences of lemmas 'talent' and 'recruit'

A combination of approaches is needed in order to avoid the temptation to equate frequency with significance within the discourse. A lemma's explanatory power in relation to a specific discourse is a combination of frequency of use, pattern of representation across the corpus, co-occurrence patterns and contextual use. As a result when a lemma is referred to as significant in the analysis that follows it is a judgement that encompasses more than frequency of use.

Talking appropriately about the talent

In this section I use the significant lemmas from the analysis to demonstrate the ways in which gender, as an issue, is stripped of its potential to be political by the way it is positioned in corporate discourse. As I outlined above, the 'Women and Leadership' conference was an unusual event because one of its obvious aims was to teach women how to talk appropriately about gender. It is therefore not surprising that the corpus shows a form of talk about gender that is instructional in tone and intent. I refer to this sort of discursive approach as *didactic*. But speakers also moderated their use of language in ways that were unacknowledged and occurred much more frequently than didactic gender talk. I refer to this discursive approach as *embedded identity work*. The two categories are covered in turn below.

Didactic elements

The didactic elements revealed in the data provide us with an outline of the framework and tools with which business tries to manage claims by women, ethnic minorities and other traditionally under-represented groups in senior management groups for greater access to those positions. The data shows a mix of exhortations as to what women must start (and stop) doing if they are to be recognised in organizations and attempts to get women to buy in to suggested 'solutions' such as women's networks and flexible working.

Throughout the conference the liberal feminist discourse (i.e. the equality discourse discussed earlier in this article) was repeatedly characterised as a failed discourse and its key phrases were not used. There were, for example, no occurrences of the words or phrases: feminism, feminists (although 'feminine' occurred 6 times), gender equality, equal opportunities, legislative pressure, women's rights, ethnicity, race, disability, sexual orientation, sexism or harassment. Not only was the equality discourse dismissed as ineffectual but also women were explicitly told not to a) identify collectively as women and b) to use gender as the basis of complaint. It was so rare that women were identified as a group that it was far from clear, when the following advice was given by one of the speakers, whether the 'we' being referred to was women or the corporate world:

> We [have] realised that the one thing we don't want – we don't want complaining women! Don't stay in a complaining role!

Women were warned that senior male managers would interpret an appeal to equality as a 'deficit model', which was defined as "there's a problem, you're a woman, you're singled out, and you have to fix it". The 'business case' model was, in contrast, presented as something that would tempt the organization, through an emphasis on performance and profitability, to engage with gender.

> [The choice is between] the deficit model of women fixing a women's problem or … a positive proactive way of pitching gender as a tangible, measurable asset.

The refusal to use the equality and discrimination discourse was highlighted by a male panellist.

> … one of the things we haven't talked about here really is the issue of discrimination. It is discrimination against women that women don't progress in the same way as men do in organizations, but I haven't heard that word in the two days that I've been here…

At this point one of the representatives from the conference organizers stepped in to assure the panellist that these issues would be followed up in a subsequent session. They weren't. But it was obvious from the panic that this intervention caused that existing gender relations could still be challenged using older, more established equality discourses. The momentary discomfort was soon smoothed over by other panellists returning to the theme of how to speak appropriately.

Senior managers, participants were told, should only be spoken to in terms that they understood and valued. Gender was not something that could be sold to them on an emotional level as a societal good. Gender needed to be transformed into an asset that could be managed, accounted for and translated into profitability. Organizations would remain deaf to any appeals that were not made directly to the bottom line of their profit and loss account.

> [I explain] to corporate women, how to pitch the gender debate to the Board to get a budget. Because that's the number one option that you have. You have to get a budget because if a corporate doesn't give a budget … it gives no visibility.

The main didactic work of the conference was done through the sub-sessions that each featured different solutions to the problem of under-representation of women at senior management levels. The lemmas within these sessions appeared as clusters i.e. lemmas that are statistically over-represented in a particular text within the corpus. For example, in the discussion that recommended women's networks the lemma 'network' appears 93 times but only a further three times elsewhere in the corpus. And the discussion around work/life balance showed clustering of a number of lemmas related to the private realm (home, family etc). Clusters, in the context of this corpus, represent lemmas that appear frequently because they are officially sponsored rather than being less self-conscious in use across a range of texts and contexts.

Conference speakers promoted women's networks as a mechanism for the advancement of women into senior management positions. The speakers stressed that women's networks should be sold to sceptical managers and co-workers if it treated like any other initiative. A woman's network could gain legitimacy by being allocated a budget and marketed correctly.

> It must have a brand. What is the brand and reputation of your gender forum or women's network. What's its identity? It has to have a brand! Your have to work at the brand to make it successful…

Networks also have to deliver benefits to women who participate in them. Those who organised networks saw them as opportunities for reinforcing the importance of global business knowledge, with the USA identified as the originator of new approaches.

> So we … pick the topics to change mindsets and give women knowledge and strategies that will help them to assist in networks. The topics that we choose are always very topical, we hear things coming from the States, we're straight onto it and we are feeding that into the networks in Europe.

But there was a warning to those who were interested in establishing a network in their own organization. Women – perhaps those who were aware of the advice *not* to invoke the idea of women as a collective in the corporate workplace – were often unhappy about being associated with a women's network.

> Perhaps the biggest surprise to me when I came to the UK three years ago was this [attitude of] – "I don't want to be part of a women's network…What would the men think?"

One organization had decided not to use 'women' in their network name - "we didn't want to have the word 'women' because there were so many networks of associations with women this, women that, etc." Another speaker reported that many of their clients grappled with the issue, knowing that if they called it a women's network "you are making a cognitive statement that it is about women helping women to move ahead and women's development". The speakers showed a keen awareness of the scrutiny that their actions were under and stressed that women had to show that this activity brought individual knowledge or behavioural gains back to the organization.

> …you have to walk away [from a network meeting] with new thinking, new thoughts, new stuff and that's what will make the members in your corporate organizations, the other women, men and the boys take notice of what you are saying.

Some speakers went further than worrying about 'what the men would think'. One consultancy representative spoke of the need for networks to deliver productivity gains to the sponsoring organization. They recommended 'gender forums' rather than women's networks, using the following justification:

> [Corporations] want the best combination and synergy in this because that gives greater innovation, greater productivity, you work better, etc., all the economic reasons. So some organizations are making [a shift to gender forums] so that they are bringing men in so that the men are educated about how women work…

Nobody in the audience appeared to find it ironic that the one consultancy product that was designed to support and develop women was being used for the development of men.

Embedded identity work

In this sub-section I analyse how the women at the conference deployed de-gendered corporate discourse. I am attempting to capture the 'doing' of gender and 'crafting' of self (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004) in the corpus and the ongoing efforts to demonstrate an appropriate corporate gender identity. The first notable feature of this embedded gender work is prevalence of the lemma 'thinking', in preference to 'feeling'. Managing diversity, as we have seen in the didactic elements of the discourse, is an appeal that is made to the corporate head, rather than the heart. The lemma 'think' appears 225 times in the corpus, as does its similarly cerebral relation 'know' (104 times). In contrast the lemma 'feel' is under-represented across all of the sessions, and occurs an equal number of times as 'believe' – just 12 times each.

The most significant word in terms of the number of occurrences in the corpus is 'woman' at 293. Of the 67 times that the word 'man' is used in the data it appears in close association with 'woman' on 42 occasions. The frequency of the co-occurrences indicate that the discourse aims to be an inclusive one, wanting to stress an even-handed approach to gender issues rather than drawing attention to women as a group in need of remedial action. For example,

> ...this whole debate has got to appeal to men and to women and it's got to be an inclusive debate. And I think that unless it is inclusive, it will always be seen as doing favours for women to taking time off.

> … we've approached growing a business hopefully sustainably that works both for men and for women at different bases and at different ages.

As mentioned earlier, corporate diversity discourses might stress the different talents and attributes different social groups bring to an organization but the preference is to individualise difference. Claims for specific qualities held by women or ethnic groups were absent from the discourse. Where it was not possible to use inclusive language (i.e. 'men and women') the management practitioners at the workshop referred to ‘talent’ or ‘people’ instead. Speakers created the impression of a de-gendered and de-racialised organizational landscape by using the lemma ‘people’ 181 times. For example:

> ...we’re looking for the best people to bring into the company and we’re looking for people to progress through the company on the basis of merit.

> … we do have very numerous programmes that are focused on training and development that do help people to develop.

> We spend a lot of money recruiting and developing a number of talented people - and a large proportion of women - and unfortunately we are losing them.

Both the lemmas ‘people’ and ‘talent’ were frequently associated with the activities commonly referred to in business case arguments (i.e. recruitment, the market, diversity, advancement, the company, work, jobs and teamwork.) Employees, in contrast, are surveyed, have perceptions, participate, attend courses, are managed, impacted and measured. The lack of permission within this discourse for individuals to identify with any of the established categories of difference (i.e. race, gender or disability) was evident in the way that respondents spoke during plenary discussions. One woman, standing to ask a question of a panellist, introduced herself by saying “As a diverse person...”

Given the emphasis on inclusivity in the discourse, the discussion of domestic responsibilities represents a considerable problem as gender and domestic responsibilities have to be discursively ‘managed’. Lemmas that were over-represented in a session on work/life balance included ‘home’, ‘household’, ‘husband’ and ‘life’; the lemma ‘wife’ does not occur in the corpus. Heterosexuality was assumed to be the norm (there were five references to marriage). But when discussing home and household issues inclusivity was maintained by suggesting that adjustments designed to help women fulfil childcare responsibilities were open to all.

> ... I think a lot of the discussion we've had is about caring issues because this

> whole debate has got to appeal to men and to women and it's got to be an inclusive debate. And I think that unless it is inclusive, it will always be seen as doing favours for women to taking time off.

Women’s (mostly fulltime) childcare responsibilities were treated as if they were the same as men’s (mostly occasional) childcare activities. Citing an example of how to make the work/life balance debate relevant to men a panellist presented the positive message of how men were also making use of flexible working options.

> [Male colleague] coaches football - his son plays in a football team – he comes in very early but leaves at 4.30 on a Wednesday because he coaches football that afternoon.

Compare the relatively minor impact of a male colleague coaching his son’s football team in this account (noting also the approval that the colleague comes into work ‘very early’ to make up for his early departure) with the adjustments that are necessary for a female co-worker.

> But also, another colleague of mine has two young children, now she works four days in the office but also takes work home on Friday and works from home on a Friday.

The discourse shifts its emphasis from accommodation to ‘choice’ when a woman is judged as giving less than full-time attention to the business or business environment. One of the most significant co-occurrence lemmas of ‘choice’ is ‘individual’ and ‘personal’. Women are considered to be making good decisions about their working life when they make them (as a business would do) on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis.

> I think individuals have a far better choice, sometimes like they don’t want to make them, but they’re available.

> … so you can choose to be flexible and make less money or you could make a lot of money and hang yourself along the way. It’s a choice. It’s there.

The implication of these statements is that it is the individual woman and not the organization that is expected to make choices. One of the panellists admitted that one of their company’s senior management roles was job-shared between two (male) executives each working a 56-hour week. The unchallenged assumption is that organizations require fulltime commitment and continuity. Managers are required to service the needs of the organization and it was therefore up to individual women to decide whether they could make the necessary time commitment. For example,

> ...there are different stages in people's lives and people have got to make that relevant in terms of their working life and life outside of work. So I totally agree, if people want to work 80 hours a week, that's their personal choice.

> [Those working part-time] didn't pick up on what was going on in the organization that well because, when you only work two or three days a week, it takes you quite a while to pick up on all that's happened in your work place when you've not been around. So there are big issues in terms of the ways that people are perceived who work part-time and who job share and that does have implications. But that's the choice really at the end of the day that people may want to make.

> ... it’s really true that so many talented women take the choice of marrying and not then hanging on to their careers ...

There is an implicit acceptance that the needs of the business take priority. It is the responsibility of the individual to approach the organization to suggest variations to the assumption of fulltime commitment. If the individual is sufficiently valuable to the organization and if their suggested solution does not affect profit or performance then their case might be viewed sympathetically.

> I think in terms of personal productivity and business leads, the onus is actually for individuals to come up with their own creative solutions. If you have a solution, you have to understand the business needs and understand the context.

> And so if we're looking for solutions, it's actually solutions for individuals by individuals.

If individuals (and despite the gender neutral language the discussion *is* about women) need to work differently then it is up to them to design the appropriate solution, not the organization. In a world where diversity is managed, women are entitled to make any choice that they like – except the choice to complain that the only choice available is between a rock and a hard place.

Discussion

In this section of the paper I explore the implications of the continued dominance of the business case discourse in relation to gender. I suggest that the strategy of using corporate values as a route to achieving significant change in workplaces has not been successful. It has not worked in relation to gender and it has not been successful either when used to heighten environmental awareness and other corporate social responsibility issues.

Key elements of the corporate gender discourse		
Didactic elements		
Lemmas	**Co-occurrences**	**Discursive 'rule'**
Problem	Women	Avoid complaint
Business	Case	Gender as a form of capital Talk to business in business terms
Networks	Women Organization Set-up	Sell it as a product. Call it a women's forum if you want to make a statement that it is women helping women. Call it a gender forum and you build synergy between men and women.
Embedded identity work		
Lemmas	**Co-occurrences**	**Discursive 'rule'**
Think Know	People Women work	Emphasis on rationality
Women	Men Think organization	Talk about men *and* women, not just women
People	Company work	When you cannot refer to 'men and women', refer to 'people' or (even better) as being 'diverse'
Life	Work Family Diversity	Work-life balance is a personal responsibility and is of relevance to men as well as women
Choice	Personal Individual Flexible	Organizations can't make choices about work but individuals can

Table 7: Summary of the key elements of the corporate gender discourse

As a woman it is difficult not to be disappointed by how easily the corporate gender discourse has achieved its overwhelming dominance. Given the long-standing barriers to women and ethnic minority advancement in Western capitalist organizations it might have been some comfort to women in knowing that it took a discourse of considerable linguistic subtlety or low cunning to keep us down. The reality, summarised in Table 7 above, is that the corporate gender discourse does not need to be complex. Because market capitalism and its attendant assumptions about human and personal capital represent the dominant ideology of advanced Western nations, the work that the corporate gender discourse has to do is relatively minor. Although a certain amount of negotiation of meaning (Mumby & Stohl, 1991) takes place around gender it *is* a case of negotiation rather than a tooth and claw battle between discursive strategies. In reality organizational homogenization (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983) ensures that organizations reproduce standard gender discourses along with standard organizational forms and other rituals of conformity.

At this point I am aware that I *want* to offer reassurance about the chances of opening up space within the corporate discourse for wider, equality based debate about women. It would certainly be customary at this point to suggest that practitioners are the group best placed to challenge the dominant discourse. Indeed, in UK diversity literature practitioners have been explicitly identified as ‘language workers”:

> Diversity practitioners are also language workers. This means that they are aware of the politics of words and language around diversity, and use different cases or ‘translations’ in their work (Swan & Gattrell, 2008, p.61)

However, in Ahmed’s (2006) research with diversity practitioners, the respondents felt that it was unhelpful, even counter-productive, to differentiate between good discourses (that were challenging of the status quo) and bad discourses. Practitioners wanted to retain the ability to mix and match words taken from different discursive traditions with those which an organization might identify with, whether ‘excellence’, ‘internationalism’ or other strategic priorities (Ahmed, 2006, p.123). Practitioners partly based their claims of professional competence on the ability to knowingly shift between alternative discourses in order to operate effectively in corporate settings. Practitioners feel that part of their professional role is to ‘translate’ challenges from other traditions into the appropriate language for an organization as a pre-condition for the introduction of diversity initiatives.

The claim to be able to manage gender discourse strategically is a common one. When challenging dominant discourses practitioners have two options - counter-discourses or strategic changes (Heracleous, 2006). Counter-discourses are positioned in direct opposition to the prevailing discourse but are characterised as ‘coping discourses' because they are weak in the extent and consequences of their opposition (Heracleous, 2006). When the speaker at the 'Women and Leadership' conference warns that speaking from a collective sense of grievance is counter-productive this is what the delegates are being warned against. Discourses that are positioned in opposition to the dominant will always appear marginal, ineffective and irrelevant. Hence my own reaction in the example of the disaffected supervisors that their stance was 'naïve'.

Given that naivety is not the impression that most people strive for when trying to articulate a case for change, other more strategic discourses have been tried. These discursive approaches attempt to modify aspects of the dominant discourse rather than attempt to challenge it in its entirety. Partial modification has been the approach taken by practitioners in respect of another contentious area for business, the corporate social responsibility (CSR) agenda - specifically in relation to environmental action. Business has attempted to manage the CSR debate by converting it – as with gender – into a business case discourse. Joutsenvirta's (2007) research explored what happened to a debate about CSR when Greenpeace, an environmental direct action group, adopted a market rhetoric to try and convince business that more needed to be done. Joutsenvirta concluded that:

> …although the market discourse provides a powerful persuasive means for changing corporate behaviour, it simultaneously comes to justify the construction of reality in which environmental agency is subordinated to the market system, and the ethicality of the behaviour is 'externalized' to the markets. (Joutsenvirta, 2007, unpaginated)

She judged it to have failed as a result. Some academic writers (e.g. Simmons, 2004) have attempted to use another business concept (stakeholder theory) as a Trojan horse to introduce broader social perspectives. Stakeholder theory rests on the belief that organizations have stakeholder groups that affect and are affected by that organization in return, and that the views and interests of those different groups determine how viable different strategic options are (Simmons, 2004). Stakeholder arguments can be used for radical or more functionalist ends depending on how liberal an interpretation is allowed in respect of who (or what) is counted as a stakeholder and how far their interests extend beyond the merely financial.

The problem with attempts to colonise the business case argument through perspectives such as stakeholder theory is that the dominant discourse cannot be substantially altered by the addition of equality concepts as co-occurrences. Practitioners using the business case as a ‘carrier’ discourse for equality concerns believe it allows them the opportunity to import messages that would otherwise be difficult to get heard in organizations. However, once a financial justification is used as a means of deciding whether to follow a course of action or not, the social issue in question becomes subordinated to the market. The business case discourse takes up all the discursive space available around the debate and drowns out attempts to qualify it. This is because it positions corporate organizations as commercial agents that *must* respond to the demands of the market rather than socially concerned moral agents (Joutsenvirta, 2007).

However, for business organizations to be re-positioned within discourse as moral agents, they would also have to be positioned as such in our socio-economic and political systems. As Wilkins (2004) commented, although market based arguments may be a useful tactic they cannot substitute for a politics that is committed to achieving equity because it is the right thing to do. Financial rewards that might result from right moral action are a different order of thing from a moral good that might result from the pursuit of financial reward. When we are fortunate enough to find an intrinsic motivation to do good it is the introduction of a financial justification that is counter-productive. The appeal to extrinsic motivation diminishes our ‘motivation to obey moral rules’, despite the individual and societal benefits that would be derived ‘from a general acknowledgement of those moral rules and the corresponding duty to obey them’ (Graafland & Van der Ven, 2006, p.121). Human beings, even ones that occupy senior positions in business organizations, need to be re-acquainted with the ‘moral case’ for change.

Conclusions

The business case does not really need a series of expensive, well-catered conferences in order to be explained to women. Neither does it represent any sort of secret language of success. Nor, regretfully, can the dominance of the business case justification be attributed to the discourse being the product of the brightest and best managerial minds. The discourse has power because business-based justifications are heard more often in our society, are given more opportunities to present themselves, monopolize communications and ‘make use of strategies of control to ensure their eminence’ (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996, p.54). The business case has power because we are willing to provide it with ever more legitimacy even as we bemoan the results of doing so.

The standard business case is problematic because it constrains, rather than opens up, the discussion of social justice issues in the workplace. The continued use of the business case justification enables organizations (and governments) to argue against taking action on economic grounds when it is otherwise justifiable for social justice reasons (Dickens, 2006). We should not be surprised that when we expect the market to define the problem *and* to provide the solution in respect of social issues it leads only to an impoverished understanding of the former and an inadequate response to the latter (Colling & Dickens, 1998). The ‘market’, left to its own devices, will show a tendency to produce discrimination not equity because many of the social processes through which market pressures are interpreted contribute to women’s continuing unequal position in the workplace (Colling & Dickens, 1998). The widespread use of the business case discourse has crowded out a range of other ways of thinking about and responding to problems. We need wider tools to think with than those provided by economists and financiers if we are to create more inclusive and moral societies.

Perhaps now is a good time for the state, given its legitimate access to discourses of equity and social justice that it has at its call, to return to the field of debate and show some discursive leadership. We should be aiming to rebuild a policy arena that is open to a range of voices and ideas. We could do more within organizations also. Language workers (Swan & Gattrell, 2008) need to abandon their stance that the business case discourse is a neutral medium through which to transmit the idea of gender and racial equity. Social justice and equality depend on the voices of complaining women being heard. What we need, contrary to what the organisers of events like the ‘Women and Leadership’ conference would have us believe, are *more* complaining women.

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[i] The software allows the researcher to remove frequently occurring words that do not carry meaning in the context of the discourse– thus there are a number of lemmas that appear more often than those listed, for example ‘the’ (1588), ‘and’ (1378) and ‘to’ (1004). Table 3 shows the frequency of lemmas excluding prepositions and similar grammatical features.