Gender Diversity and the City

Softly, softly feminism among London’s business leaders

Jane Webb
Master’s Thesis
June 2014

Department of Social Anthropology
Stockholm University
Supervisor: Mark Graham
In 2011, advisors to the British government recommended against introducing a quota for women to corporate boards in the UK. The advisors instead set an aim for the UK’s 100 largest companies. They recommended company leaders take action to increase female representation on boards from just over 12 per cent in 2011, to a minimum of 25 per cent by 2015. The threat of government intervention remains. The EU Council is currently discussing the European Commission’s proposal for a minimum of 40 per cent of each sex amongst non-executive directors by 2020 across all EU member states. Using material from ten weeks of fieldwork in the City of London, I examine how a loose network of business leaders, lobbyists, journalists and researchers are shaping ideas about gender and business. This network intends to show that a quota is not needed to increase the numbers of women in business leadership. I relate my discussion to ideas of markets and marketing, and to ideas of gender differences and gender equality. I first analyse the ideas set out in the business case for gender diversity and in the term gender balance. I then explore how London’s business leaders enhance personal, employer and corporate brands by publicly demonstrating their commitment to gender balance. Through this commitment, leaders also prove themselves members of the collaboration that unites against a quota. I focus particularly on how senior businesswomen are expected to be role models for other women. I show how role models urge other women to ensure they remain recognisably feminine.

Key Words: gender diversity, policy, market feminism, interpellation, networks, branding
# Part One. Introduction: The Davies Report and its Policy World

- Aims and Research Questions .......................................................... 3
- Method ................................................................................................. 4
- Theories and Concepts ....................................................................... 11
- Background .......................................................................................... 18
- Thesis Overview .................................................................................. 22

## Part Two. Stating the Business Case for Gender Diversity

- The Concepts of Gender Balance and Gender Diversity ....................... 26
- Better Balance Really is Better Business: The Business Case .................. 27
- Pale, Male and Stale ............................................................................ 28
- A Business Issue, Not a Social Policy Issue .......................................... 30
- Feminising UK Business Culture ........................................................... 32
- I’m Head of Inclusion. We’ve Dropped the Diversity ............................... 33
- Softly, Softly Feminism ........................................................................ 34

## Part Three. Collaborating on Gender Balance across UK Business

- The Future Belongs to Those Who Collaborate ...................................... 39
- Buying and Selling Networks .................................................................. 43
- Reflected Glory: Enhancing Corporate and Employer Brands .................. 44
- Best Practice as a State of Mind ............................................................. 46
- Measuring Progress towards Gender Diversity ......................................... 50
- Collaboratively Continuing the Momentum ............................................ 51

## Part Four. Calling Women to Be Role Models

- Britain’s Leading Ladies ........................................................................ 56
- Feminine Power Inside and Outside the Corporate Hierarchy .................. 57
- Leaning in to Beat the Boys ...................................................................... 58
- Feminisation of Leadership: Accentuating the Positive ........................... 64
- Enhancing Personal Brand through Be[com]ing a Role Model .................. 66
- Invite the Women – Just as They Are ....................................................... 71

## Part Five. Conclusion: Market Leadership on Gender Diversity

- Bibliography .......................................................................................... 77
- Appendices ............................................................................................. 82
- Glossary ................................................................................................. 82
- The City of London ............................................................................... 83
- Respondents Mentioned in the Thesis ................................................... 84

It’s early evening in late October in one of the meeting rooms at a London law firm. The other event attendees and I have already collected name badges, hung up coats on the mobile rails at the side of the room and mingled over coffee and biscuits. We are sitting in high-backed, leather swivel chairs positioned in five rows of ten. Tonight’s event is arranged by a membership organisation specifically for women. Membership means a lower fee to attend workshops like tonight’s that help women become ‘board ready’, as well as providing access to a list of board-level vacancies across the private and public sectors. Those here tonight, some members, some potential members, are interested in receiving tips on how to gain a non-executive director (NED) role within the financial sector. James, the Chief Executive at a finance company and the only man in the room, speaks first to the assembled forty women. He is in his mid-fifties, balding, and is wearing the standard business uniform for British men of dark suit and tie. He talks about how his company handles the recruitment processes for NED roles. Ellen then presents her three tips on how to secure a first NED role. She is in her late forties, smartly dressed also in dark colours, and is a director at an executive search firm with responsibility for searches within the financial sector. Both James and Ellen use slides for their presentations. The final speaker is Alice, a solicitor aged fifty wearing a bright red jacket. She tells us about the Financial Conduct Authority’s (FCA) approval process for new NEDs within the financial sector. She speaks off the cuff, without slides, and is far livelier and engaging than the previous speakers. She jokes about the “men in suits” at the FCA.

During the question and answer session that follows, an audience member tells a story about her experience being headhunted for an NED role. She describes how whilst being interested in the role, she had felt she would not have had time for it. For this reason she turned down an interview. As a throwaway comment she says: “I think they were looking for a woman.” She asks the presenters: “How can you marry an executive day job and an NED position?” Ellen says that individuals should be cautious about the formal time commitment suggested for roles and the reality of how much time it actually takes. James is next to respond. He seems angry. He says: “My job is to find the best board”, asking everyone in the audience: “Do you want to get a job because you’re a lady or because you’re the best person for the job?” He remarks that the woman’s comment about the rival firm is “extraordinary”. The woman in the audience concedes she “may have expressed it badly” and says the headhunters “were hoping to attract a woman.” It’s an awkward moment. The event facilitator invites Pippa, the Executive Director of the membership organisation, to comment. Pippa, a
woman in her forties, dressed in a black suit and with curly brown hair, is sitting towards the back of the room. She stands up and comments first on how “merit is a subjective thing”, so it is “fair” to ask questions about just how closely formal processes are followed. She goes on to say it is a “reasonable question for shareholders of how representative a board is of its consumer base.” She also mentions that financial regulators around the world are concerned about “whole boards of certain types”, and advocate “diversity within corporate governance”.

This thesis is based on fieldwork among the leaders and future leaders of Britain’s biggest companies. I approach an area of UK policy discourse that has been increasingly in the media spotlight since the 2010 consultation commissioned by the UK government on a quota for women to corporate boards. The 2011 report (Davies 2011) from that consultation became shorthanded as The Davies Report and the debate as Women on Boards. I first became interested in this policy area after reading a British newspaper article which began:

Move over, male fat cats. Your monopoly is over. Businesses need female talent at board level if they are going to prosper – the fat kittens are coming. (Mills 2011)

While categorising business leaders as fat cats is common, I had never heard the label fat kittens before. It brought to my mind the phrase sex kittens. Why had the female journalist not labelled wealthy, influential, senior businesswomen as female fat cats? I set out to learn more about the ideas that have emerged following The Davies Report. I followed in the footsteps of anthropologists concerned with policy worlds (Shore & Wright 2011).

Ideas of business practices are changing as the UK’s business leaders discuss why more women in business leadership are necessary, and how company leaders can increase the numbers of women at the senior levels in their companies. As Pippa’s comments show, new ideas of what constitutes fair and reasonable are being discussed. Emotions run high when someone feels their sense of fairness and reasonableness is opposed, as James’ response indicates. For James, fairness perhaps requires that individuals are judged as individuals. Others prioritise group membership to right structural inequalities. There are also new experts, such as the membership organisation, providing services to enable more women to reach higher levels in UK business. As Pippa closed the event, she told us that the membership organisation, twelve months after its launch in London, is now “a network of influence”, providing its members with a “network of connections across sectors.” As I came to see, networks and connections between individuals and the companies they work for are very highly valued by those I met. The collaboration of expert service providers, lobbyists and researchers with companies sponsoring events, is crucial to how this policy area has taken on a social life of its own.
Aims and Research Questions

Frequent reporting by the media on the percentages of female directors at the UK’s largest companies, means that the same questions are asked over and over again about what action is necessary and whether enough is being done. The discourse on gender in business presented in The Davies Report and at business networking events in London is the focus for this thesis. Put simply, my research questions are: What does talk about gender in business in the City of London look like today? How do business leaders convey, debate, deploy and contest the ideas from The Davies Report to shift the discourse?

Statistics and surveys are widely used to demonstrate the financial benefits businesswomen bring to teams, the barriers women face in their careers, and the appropriate company practices to remove these barriers. Business leaders are directed to the strategies to adopt by the findings of Business Schools and think tanks. Underpinning these reports are assumptions about a gender dichotomy where men and women are understood as having different qualities as leaders. This gender dichotomy is also mobilised to explain why there are more senior businessmen than senior businesswomen. The studies circulate transnationally and present a common sense about why change is needed and how leaders can make that change happen.

Business leaders talk about changing business culture. The goal: gender balance or gender diversity. The way to achieve this: a collaboration of people presenting the business case for gender diversity and sharing best practice on managing the female talent pipeline, with current senior businesswomen being role models for other women. I map out how these concepts are used and understood. I discuss how the dominant discourse is shaped in a network (the collaboration) with its own norms and sanctions. The discourse of this network creates a market for new practices, ideas and forms of expertise. Within the discourse, a market rationality also creates concerns about the supply of talented women interested in working at the top of UK business and the demand for these women.

Those shaping the discourse imagine an ideal businesswoman – a role model. I explore how professional women make sense of this ideal type, and which versions of this main subject position are available to women. As with other projects within feminist anthropology, my aim is to “work out what bearing the social and cultural discourses have on individual experience” (Moore 1994:16). I discuss the framework for constituting femininities provided within the current dominant discourse on gender within UK business. Since “deciding on differences is one way of delineating identities” (ibid:1), the framework for femininities also illuminates the framework for masculinities. By calling the discussion on women in business
leadership a discourse, I problematise how “socially produced forms of knowledge...set limits upon what it is possible to think, write or speak about” (Bacchi 2009:35). The discourse in London is but one example of a widespread discourse that builds on “historical discourses about corporate domesticity, motherhood, and women’s innate care-taking qualities” and is “reconfiguring gender, feminism, leadership, and the financial crisis” (Fisher 2012:157,171). This thesis contributes to the body of research on that wider discourse.

During fieldwork in London I attended events arranged for the purpose of increasing the numbers of women in business leadership. Many events seemed intended to diffuse the business case for gender diversity and best practice on managing the talent pipeline. Some of these events were women-only; others were open to men and women but mainly attended by women. I also attended events to train women on how to succeed in a male-dominated environment. The classic model for anthropology is a place- or people-bounded research project where “the ethnographer sought out modes of thought, systems of belief, ritual performances, and myths as the means to ‘the native point of view’” (Holmes & Marcus 2005:247,250). Instead of exploring the intimate lives of the people I met, I explore their worldview as they shape the direction for business practices in the UK following The Davies Report. This is a specific worldview shaped in the context of London’s business community even if it is also shaped by ideas circulating transnationally. What views do the natives have of their culture and how it should be changed?

Method

In total I carried out the equivalent of ten weeks of fieldwork in London during five visits to the city from December 2012 to November 2013. I attended events and had meetings during brief visits (lasting between two to eight days) in December 2012, June 2013 and July 2013. I was based in London for six weeks during September and October 2013, and then returned to London for the final two weeks of November 2013. Participant observation and interviews in Stockholm from November 2012 to May 2013 provided preparation for the UK fieldwork, as did webinars broadcast from the US that I listened to from January 2013 onwards.

Defining the Field as a Policy World and Gaining Access

An interest in the challenges of studying up (Gusterson 1997; Nader 1969) led me to choose a project where the background seemed to be a struggle between transnational corporations and national and/or transnational policymakers. I was inspired by an anthropology of policy worlds that is concerned to show how policies belong to and are embedded in particular social and cultural worlds, both creating and reflecting those worlds; taking expression through a
sequence of events; and creating new social spaces, new sets of relations, new political subjects and new webs of meaning (Shore & Wright 2011). I was intrigued by how my chosen policy world appeared to consist of a large network of powerful actors united against a quota of women for boards. What lay beneath the outward appearance of consensus?

While I frame the field as a policy world, many of the people I met are continuing work they begun several years, or even decades, ago. They do not consider that they are taking action in response to The Davies Report. I understand the business-led approach proposed in 2011 as created in a particular social and cultural world and that after The Davies Report, new spaces, social relations and subjects have emerged. Framing the field as a policy world provides a conceptualisation of the process in which policies come about and evolve socially and culturally in particular contexts. I understand policy as not just what government policymakers state as policy but also as the policies that company leaders set.

As UK anthropologist Susan Wright suggests, field and site may not be co-terminous when it comes to studying policy worlds. Wright defines a field as “the full range of people, activities and institutions potentially relevant for the study of the chosen issue”, whereas a “site opens a window onto that field and the process of change” (2011:28). The issue I chose to track during fieldwork was the range of perspectives on why to, and how to, increase the numbers of women in senior business roles. Initially I imagined a two month project based in one company in London where I would have looked at recruitment processes for senior business appointments. Such an archetypal single-sited project was my preference. I would have been more comfortable where both the group, and what I would do each day, was clearly defined. Problems in gaining access to one company as a base for my project dictated my method, the timeframe for my project and the research questions I could approach. Understanding the field began during these negotiations over access.

The project became more than multi-sited as I followed the discussion about women in leadership, women on boards and gender diversity and began to map out the policy world and its connections to other policy worlds. I imagined I was following the policy, even though I was unsure of how a project that makes a policy the research object would fit within the six tracking strategies that US anthropologist George Marcus (1995) discusses in his classic article about multi-sited ethnography. In total I visited fifty-four places in London, visiting all but a handful of these only once. These sites were all windows onto the issue. Virtual sites complemented the physical sites (see later section Yo-Yo Fieldwork). Defining the field as a policy world set some boundaries for my project, even though the project was much more fluid than anthropological projects bounded to one site or a fixed set of sites.
I made two short trips to London in Summer 2013 to attend events and for meetings. By early August 2013 I had negotiated access to ten events with a women’s network that related to their women of the year award, and ten events with a women’s training and network programme. Around these I built up a calendar of events hosted by additional organisations. I had separate discussions with three different women who were interested in working together to produce joint research. Two were executive coaches, the other was revamping the women’s network within the division at the company where she worked. I was uncomfortable, feeling that they had mistakenly taken me for an expert on gender diversity. All three women had clear ideas of the white papers\textsuperscript{1} they would produce. They already knew what their arguments and findings would be and how this would help them present themselves, and by extension their companies, as ‘thought leaders’. In working with them, they would have given me access to their clients and colleagues and allowed me to use their corporate branding. A more experienced anthropologist may well have made this scenario work, becoming a counterpart to people in the field who were engaged in a para-ethnography (Holmes & Marcus 2005). As it was, I chose to go it alone rather than risk surrendering freedom over who I talked to and what I did during fieldwork, and how I later used the material gathered.

Negotiating access continued throughout the Autumn as I introduced myself and my project by email when asking organisers about attending an event. I signed a Declaration of Secrecy for one company so I could sit in on planning meetings for their women’s network. For another company, I signed an Event Participation and Confidentiality Agreement as well as a general Non-Disclosure Agreement so that I could attend a panel discussion.

Chats over Coffee and Networking

In total I had thirty-five phone calls, virtual meetings on Skype or meetings in London during my fieldwork. When arranging meetings in London, I suggested a chat over coffee. Consequently most of the meetings were at a cafe or hotel lobby. I had sixteen such meetings, with seven of those recorded. I sometimes felt awkward asking to record these conversations which were otherwise informal. All those I did ask, were happy for the conversation to be recorded once I explained that I would not identify them or the company they worked for in my writing. For some meetings I met interviewees at the reception of the building where they worked. We then went to a lobby, cafe or meeting room. Beforehand I jotted down how I saw

\textsuperscript{1} While my prior understanding of white papers was that they are produced by government appointees to provide direction for policy-making, the people I met also use the term to mean reports with recommendations produced within the business community. White papers are connected to the idea of thought leadership.
the respondent’s work as connected to my research and some themes to discuss. After my introduction, most often the interviewee would then signpost me to research I should be reading and to what I should write about. I asked about the themes that had emerged during my study. Through discussing these themes, I gained an understanding of how the individuals made sense of ideas that appeared contradictory to me. At times I felt that the people I met were dismissive of me as only a student. The feeling that people spoke down to me may well have had more to do with my respondents being uncomfortable: most were unfamiliar with anthropology and that made them unsure of my aims. As Hugh Gusterson says, even senior anthropologists experience difficulties while studying up since “participant observation is a research technique that does not travel well up the social structure” (1997:115). That said, often those I met did listen with interest to my observations.

In addition to these chats, I also attended five planning meetings for a company’s internal women’s network. Otherwise, participant observation was at seminars, conferences and networking events. The largest event I attended had nearly six hundred delegates; the smallest around forty. As I failed to satisfactorily answer Ruth, the founder of a women’s network, how my research would help the network with “improvement, innovation and promotion”, it was as a volunteer that I attended the network’s events. I wore the greeter’s uniform of blouse (loaned by the network to all the greeters), black skirt and appropriate shoes, and followed the emailed instructions to ensure my hair was “tidy”, my nails were “in good condition (filed and polished)” and I had “subtle make-up”. I was relieved to find these instructions were only guidelines – my idea of appropriate shoes was not the high heels my fellow greeters suffered in; I did not wear make-up or nail polish. The experience as a greeter in July 2013 gave me the idea to offer assistance to other events organisers in exchange for free admission to events. Assisting events teams meant welcoming guests, handing mics to delegates during Q&A sessions, packing goodie bags, and setting up before, and clearing up after, events.

At some events I attended as a guest: free to mingle, enjoy drinks and canapés or lavish buffet lunches; able to fully participate in workshop activities; and having the chance to talk to other guests about, for example, how they came to be at the event and what their impressions of the event were. The format of such events made it easy for me to jot down notes during presentations and panel discussions. I expanded these to more detailed fieldnotes later. I also collected the programmes, delegate lists, event questionnaires, and reports distributed at events. Chatting with events team-members, as well as the photographers employed to capture the mingling and presentations, provided further insights into the people
earning their living in the spaces created for discussions about gender balance in UK business. After events I received emails sent by organisers with event photos and Twitter feeds.

Most of the events I attended were seminars meticulously-organised around breakfast or lunch and lasting about an hour, or evening panel discussions or awards ceremonies lasting around two hours. These events required advance registration, sometimes membership of a network and the purchase of a ticket. The events were no-expense-spared and took place in City of London or Canary Wharf venues chosen for their proximity to the workplaces of the intended audience and their wow factor (such as being held on the fortieth floor of über-modern offices with views of the City skyline or in luxuriously furnished historic buildings). Other events were one-day conferences taking place at offices in the City or at luxury hotels. Many of these events were designed to be exclusive, as the high ticket prices or by-invitation-only made clear. There was a spectrum of different purposes across the events I attended. These gave me a broad view of the social spaces in which the discourse was being shaped. The events themselves shared many similarities though and, like other attendees, I enjoyed events most when the canapés were a bit out of the ordinary or when an event afforded a look inside the quirkily-designed offices of a technology company rather than yet another law firm.

The host organisations for the events were networks for professional women; think tanks and lobby organisations; and recruitment, accountancy and law firms. At events I met people from a wide range of occupations and sectors, including other academic researchers. The majority of attendees worked in senior private sector roles, but there were also leaders from the public and the not-for-profit sectors. Events were sometimes specifically targeted to people at a particular stage in their career, making the age range of the audience narrower than at other more general events. Most often the majority of the audience would be white women. Many of those I met were in their forties and fifties. Those with the most influence in the policy world were female entrepreneurs who had founded business networks, coaching practices targeting professional women, or gender diversity consultancy firms; as well as senior businesswomen working for change from within the corporate world; and a few senior businessmen who were keen advocates of the business case for gender diversity. Although most people were British, I also met people of many other nationalities.

---

2 See the appendix *The City of London* for background on these areas of London.
3 I list the people I met and/or observed whom I refer to in this thesis, in the appendix *Respondents Mentioned in this Thesis.*
Yo-Yo Fieldwork and Keeping in Touch with the Field

My project fits in many ways with Helena Wulff’s (2007) description of yo-yo fieldwork, although the extent of my yo-yoing and the amount of time in the field was not as great as Wulff’s. My yo-yoing was between London and Stockholm, with trips to three other UK cities. Where Wulff connected to a “lively and dense network of people in and around the dance world” (ibid:141), I connected to a network of people in a corporate world and a policy world. By necessity, I similarly planned activities and interviews to maximise my time in London, and had extended periods of off-fieldwork (ibid:143) at home in Stockholm.

Webinars and discussions on social media yielded significant insights for me. These were more than just complements to participant observation, as Wulff sees them (ibid). They allowed me to stay up-to-date with the field. I joined a New York-based global women’s network. Through this network I participated in eight webinars led by speakers in the US. These signposted me to online groups on LinkedIn and Facebook. Through these I kept track of discussions taking place as reports and articles were shared in the (virtual) field. I also found new people to contact about my project from noting the people who were writing articles and posting online. I signed up for electronic newsletters too. All of these sources kept me connected to the field, albeit virtually, and gave me a sense of continuing my fieldwork as I followed who shaped new ideas and how these ideas then passed from person to person. For my fieldwork, the virtual field was vital in helping me find sites and actors within the policy world. For the people I met, online sites formalised connections and also allowed the establishment of credibility as an expert or, in their words, thought leader.

Helping the Pipeline with their Master’s Studies - Meet Jane Webb

Name badges listing Stockholm University as my affiliation revealed me as an outsider of sorts, although my accent meant I was always recognised as British. Londoners tested their assumptions about Sweden (or more commonly Scandinavia as a whole) and wanted to find out – Is there a quota in Sweden? Are there much higher numbers of women business leaders in Sweden? I made small talk awkwardly. My never-ending struggles to explain what anthropology is and the focus for my project, meant I never shook the feeling of oddness.

Early on in the project in many ways I networked just like the people I met at events, albeit for a different purpose. I explained my interest in the debate about quotas and its impact on the business community, and was given tips on other people to contact. As fieldwork continued, I drew on anecdotes from what I had observed and my analysis of it. I felt people perceived me as much younger than I was and I strove to assert my professionalism. Like
those I met, I told stories in order to establish my own credibility. I felt reduced to the position of student after a Skype call in early September with Diana, when she e-introduced me to five other women and titled the email *Helping the Pipeline with their Master’s studies – Meet Jane Webb*. The people I met seemed to think I only wanted to meet them to ask them for a job and that my research was some kind of ruse. I frequently felt that I was expected to be able to draw a clear line from the topic for my thesis and the job I wanted to do. My respondents seemed to assume that I too wanted to be part of the talent pipeline at an investment bank or multinational company, and by my fifties have a portfolio of NED roles across different sectors of UK business; or that I dreamed of being a gender diversity expert.

During the project I reflected on my own career. At events celebrating future female business leaders, I noted that the nominees were my age or younger. Ideas about how women should modify some of their practices and emphasise others reminded me of when I had been part of a pool of graduate trainees, closely guarded by a central HR team grooming us as future senior directors. I was familiar with some dimensions of policy-making, and also with efforts to rebuild organisational reputations, from my previous experience working as a policymaker for the UK’s tax authority, as well as in liaising with policymakers while working in communications at a research institute in Stockholm. These experiences no doubt influenced my choice of project. I thought about my own background as I was drawn into the worldview of those I met. My parents, through having paid for me to attend private all-girls boarding schools from the ages of eleven to eighteen, provided me with the characteristic upbringing of the daughters of Britain’s wealthiest families. Identify or not with this class and its femininities, I do not doubt that the way I talk, the way I look and my schooling all affected the way I was received in the field. I may resist thinking of myself as one of them, but it was to my advantage that, like many of those I met, I am recognisably white, British, and upper middle class. Attending women-only events was also not as alien to me as it would have been for a woman who had attended a mixed school, or indeed for a man.

Going back and forth between feelings of insiderness and outsiderness made me consider which elements of the discourse I was critical of and why it was that I was critical. My original curiosity came about from my wish to make sense of how it could be that the governments of the country of my birth (UK) and of my adopted country (Sweden) both advocated voluntary, business-led initiatives rather than quotas, when I felt the countries had very different histories on policies for gender equality. Academic courses such as gender studies may help immigrants further their understanding about how culture in a new country functions (Eisenstein 2009:12-3), but my project became one of understanding more about the
country I was from. Many times during fieldwork I faced hours in social settings that were not at all comfortable for me. I remembered all the reasons I had stepped off London’s career and property ladders and left for Stockholm in 2008.

*Theories and Concepts*

This thesis is about the ideas of a network of people. I explore how the discourse they are shaping is an example of market feminism (Fisher 2012; Kantola & Squires 2012) and of government at a distance (Miller & Rose 1990). This section sets out some of the main concepts I use in my discussion.

*Doing Gender*

The discourse on gender diversity my respondents are shaping rests on a binary gender system of man/woman, ignoring the difference within these gender categories and failing to recognise the multiple ways of doing gender (West & Zimmerman 1987). This underlying duality to the discourse puts into question the diversity within the idea of gender diversity. As I show, respondents naturalise gender differences, sometimes using differences to argue that gender balance in teams is desirable as men and women complement each other, and at other times using differences to explain why there are few female business leaders. Discussing this specific discourse on gender means exploring how gender difference is produced and when ideas on gender difference are made relevant. Rarely defined by those I met, usage of the term gender seemed to tally with the definition: “Males or females viewed as a group”. I instead take the following as my starting point: “The state of being male or female as expressed by social or cultural distinctions and differences, rather than biological ones; the collective attributes or traits associated with a particular sex, or determined as a result of one's sex”.

Anthropologists have long looked at how roles in different societies relate to gender categories (Moore 1994:24) and the “underlying logic of cultural thinking that assumes the inferiority of women” (Ortner 1974:68), even if from the 1960s feminists critiqued the lack of attention paid to female roles within classic anthropology. Anthropologists debate the gendered division of labour in capitalist economies between productive and reproductive labour (Rubin 1975); and the gendered dichotomies of culture/nature (Ortner 1974) and of domestic/public (Rosaldo 1974). Some feminist anthropologists have been criticised for

---

4 These definitions of gender are from the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, accessed 18 March 2014.
ethnocentrism, due to their apparent assumption that in all societies it is women who spend the most time raising children.

Gender, as with other forms of difference, is a relational concept. It must be contextualised to “the concrete specificity of gender relations” (Moore 1994:26), rather than abstracting a gender. The business case for gender diversity emphasises a value in the difference women add to all-male teams. Men and women are assigned values in the labour market due to the difference understood within the idea of opposite sex. These values may be considered equal but they are not the same. This discourse in London is but one example of a much more widespread emergent discourse on gender and business leadership.

Gender is generally understood heteronormatively by the people I met and as in relation to gendered ideas of male breadwinner and female caregiver. The women I met attempted to reconcile the competing schemas of masculine devotion to work, and feminine devotion to marriage and motherhood, that US sociologist Mary Blair-Loy explores as the “traditional gendered division of labour” (2003:14). The frequent references to guilt for working mothers and to women’s natural caring qualities mean that emotional management and affect are accepted as an important aspect of femininity. The concepts of emotional labour (Hochschild 2012 [1983]) and intimate labour (Boris & Parreñas 2010) are relevant for both the business case for gender diversity (Part Two) and the ideal type of female business leaders (Part Four), based as the two concepts are on capturing how care work is considered feminine.

The Davies Report, although not using the term, is an attempt to challenge institutionalised hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987) that has kept women out of the UK’s boardrooms. Boardrooms are understood as masculine spaces. Hegemonic masculinity is the pattern of practice that continues women’s subordination to men (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:832). Enacted by only a minority of men, it is taken as normative and contrasts to subordinated masculinities (ibid). I observed much discussion about how women could survive in a man’s world. I explore how the discourse calls women to navigate between acting like a man and being a woman. US gender theorist Judith Halberstam’s concept of female masculinity recognises that masculinity is “at least in part, a construction by female- as well as male-born people” (1998:13). She notes that a masculine woman is “more likely...to give than to take” from male masculinity in producing “new constellations of embodiment, power, and desire” (ibid:277) for masculinity. While her focus is queer female masculinity, Halberstam emphasises the potential also of heterosexual female masculinity to challenge hegemonic forms of gender conformity (ibid:28). The women I met feared being read as masculine due to their success in a man’s world. I use psychologist Joan Riviere’s (2000
discussion of how professional women use womanliness as a masquerade to make themselves readable as women. This shows how gender displays are skilled performances of doing gender. I explore how businesswomen make strategic use of the mask of womanliness, emphasising their responsibilities to children and husbands, the guilt from working, and feminine dress, for example, to ensure their gender display is read as feminine.

A focus on gender balance in business leadership has diverted attention away from other categories of difference that structure unequal societies.\(^5\) I explore to what extent hegemonic masculinity is opening up to embodiment by white, middle-class women as well as white, middle-class men. While altering hegemonic masculinity, this does not affect the stability of the binary gender system nor disrupt white heterosexual middle-class bodies from being those that signify masculinity and femininity.

**Feminisms: Hegemonic, Market and Mainstream**

As I am exploring ideas about gender in the workplace, I introduce next the relationship between feminism and anthropology, as well as the concepts of hegemonic feminism (Eisenstein 2009) and market feminism (Fisher 2012; Kantola & Squires 2012).

Within social science, a feminist approach is connected to both the emancipatory aims of critical theory, which critiques political economy, ideology and culture; and the deconstruction of postmodernism, that shows the links between the production of knowledge and the production of culture (Delanty 2005:69,79,104,124). UK anthropologist Henrietta Moore points out that “feminism as a cultural critique, as a political critique and as a basis for political action is identified with women – not with women in their socially and historically distinct context, but with women as a sociological category” (1988:10-1). Anthropologists strive to analyse “the experiences and activities of women...in their socially and historically specific context” (ibid:9). Feminisms instead often essentialise a universal woman. Indeed, feminist-anthropologists in the 1970s were themselves criticised for essentialising woman in choosing the title *Woman, Culture and Society* (Lamphere et al. 2007:421). Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern characterises an awkward relationship between feminist scholarship and anthropology since while closely connected in a concern to promote difference, the two are structured differently in the way they define their scholarly communities (1987:286,289).

\(^{5}\) Some researchers focus on the interrelationships between categories of difference in creating subordination and discrimination. See Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) on intersectional analysis. My focus in this thesis is the discourse that prioritises gender as the social category structuring careers. I do not provide an intersectional analysis of social divisions in UK business. For this reason, I do not engage with the literature on intersectionality.
The first-wave of feminism, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, was primarily focused on the right of women to vote. US political theorist Nancy Fraser presents second-wave feminism as a critique of “androcentric state-organised capitalism” concerned with the economic, cultural and political aspects of social justice – redistribution, recognition and representation (2009:99,100). Fraser (2008) divides the second-wave, beginning in the 1960s, into three phases: the first, committed to redistributive justice and seeking to transform the welfare state; the second, coinciding with the shift to postcommunism after 1989 and characterised as the era of the politics of recognition when feminists targeted cultural values and status hierarchies; and the third, the transnational phase taking place currently in transnational spaces and where feminists attempt to rebalance redistribution and recognition, as well as tackling issues of representation inherent in the nation-state system. Other theorists frame what Fraser sees as the third phase of the second wave as feminism’s third wave. I understand that feminism takes multiple forms and that these forms are contextualised in time and place. Feminisms result from, and give rise to, different gender systems. Many gender systems not only subordinate women but also hold disadvantages for men. I hold with the view that feminisms seek to transform society through ending hegemonic masculinity and are political projects relevant to men and women from different classes, religions and ethnicities.

In the formulation of political scientists Johanna Kantola and Judith Squires, the emergent phenomenon of market feminism is where feminist engagements are developed by state agencies working in partnership with privately interested groups, and where policy is evidence-based and tested by market mechanisms (2012:386-8). This network mediates feminist engagements with public policy in accordance with the logic of the market. US sociologist Hester Eisenstein’s (2009) concept of hegemonic or mainstream feminism emphasises how feminist ideals are appropriated by capitalism. Eisenstein argues that second-wave liberal feminists define themselves as workers rather than homemakers, seeing work as liberation, and taking individualism and self-development as major goals (ibid:39). These goals underpin hegemonic feminism. Eisenstein recognises the significance of class in shaping this feminism, arguing that feminist ideals travel along class lines and that hegemonic feminism connects to professional women’s aim to compete on a level playing field with men (ibid:47). She urges a decoupling of feminism from capitalist modernity.

In her ethnography of the life histories of a cohort of the first generation of women to work in senior positions in investment banks in New York, US anthropologist Melissa Fisher (2012) emphasises the multi-directional relationship between the logics of feminism and
markets. Fisher conceptualises the feminisation of markets as the opposite pole to market feminism (ibid:10). This feminisation is action to develop “alternative, socially responsible investing approaches”. Fisher mentions advocating gender equality on corporate boards as one such approach to feminising markets. She argues that her ethnography demonstrates the “changing relationship between markets and feminism” and allows her to “problematisethe idea that market capitalism always and inevitably subsumes feminism” (ibid:4).

Rather than the long view Fisher takes of the relationship between feminism and markets through her informants’ careers, this thesis provides but a glimpse of the current moment in London. For me the ideas of market and hegemonic feminisms provide a framework as I examine how the discourse of the network I studied connects to logics of feminism and markets. This private sector network is a policy world, formed in the space created by the UK government’s decision to back business-led initiatives. The elite collaboration of UK business leaders focus on a form of feminism almost wholly devoid of concern for the ways that class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and other forms of difference structure experiences at work. As in Eisenstein’s conceptualisation of hegemonic feminism, it is assumed that women should want to work at senior levels in business and that women have a responsibility to themselves, to the company they work at, even to the national economy, to reach their ‘potential’.

In Part Four, I discuss the expected role for senior businesswomen. Anthropological analysis of roles is epitomised by the structural-functionalism of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. This prioritised understanding how structures like marriage and systems of kinship provide social order and define the relationships between a society’s parts. Roles were seen as static. The discourse I am studying is a political ideology calling individuals to action. Understanding discourse requires looking at which subject positions are promoted, who assume them and who contest them. Louis Althusser coins the term interpellation within his theory of ideology, arguing that “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (2001 [1968]:117). In order for ideology to be said to exist, individuals must be recruited to be, or transformed into, subjects through interpellation (ibid:118). The role model position put forward by those I met is an ideal type. It functions as a category position for all women working in business, or who hope to work in business, which each woman must relate to and translate. There is a performative element to this though as women embody the caricature differently, showing how roles are not as static as Radcliffe-Brown conceptualises. Why are women called to be role models within this feminist ideology? Are women cultivating a female masculinity in a UK business context and is this “a major step toward gender parity” (Halberstam 1997:272)? What are the advantages to a businesswoman of making herself
recognisable (Butler 1997:5) as a role model? What different versions of the role are actualised and how are these received?

**Neoliberalism, Networks and Numbers**

In exploring how the transnational policy norm of measuring numbers of women in senior business positions is translated to the UK context, I conceptualise my field as local and transnational simultaneously. Changes in gender relations may now be influenced at the transnational level such as by EU legislation, but within nation states these changes do not happen in the same way or at the same pace. The use of international comparisons of national performance and progress assessed in percentages of female business leaders is recognisable as neoliberal audit culture (Strathern 2000). The twinned precepts of economic efficiency and good practice so central to audit cultures (ibid) underwrite the business case for gender diversity. Like other number regimes, the network is characterised by processes of “manipulating words, things and life, through numbers” (Guyer et al. 2010:37). International comparisons also concern which countries have adopted which policies and what impacts these have had in those national contexts. How ideas enter and exit the policy world connects to the anthropological interest in diffusionism, now often labelled as globalisation processes. The links that the London policy world has to counterpart policy worlds in other countries or regions provide the momentum to constantly shift the discourse as people in London respond to global ideas by adapting them locally into the network (Collier & Ong 2005).

In the London policy world, respondents speak of a collaboration on gender balance and of what can be achieved in a spirit of collaboration. As I explore in Part Three, how respondents imagine this collaboration echoes how the network society enabled by the technological paradigm of informationalism contrasts to vertically organised command and control structures (Castells 2004). Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells sums up the culture of the global network society as:

> networking for the sake of networking, being ready to learn from others and to give them what you have, could be the culture of the network society: a belief in the power of the network, in your empowerment by being open to others, and in the joy of diversity (ibid:40).

Put simply, there is a common belief in the use value of sharing (ibid:42). The networks that make up global society create a “complex set of joint action that goes beyond alliances to become a new form of subject” (ibid:32). Networks are defined by programmes that assign goals and rules of performance (ibid:3). The key individuals within the network are those who have the ability to (re)programme the network, and those who “connect different networks to ensure their cooperation by sharing common goals and increasing resources” (ibid:32). Three
major features of how Castells characterises the network society are flexibility, scalability, and survivability (ibid:5-6). Such characteristics allow fluidity while also providing structure.

In the context of a network society, the UK government chose not to implement quotas, but instead to “withdraw to the position of simply checking the resultant indicators of performance” (Strathern 2000:4). The London network, its discourse and its audit culture are an example of government at a distance (Miller & Rose 1990). Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose argue that government at a distance occurs when networks bring people, organisations and political objectives into alignment. Of great importance within this is the role of expertise in developing the self-regulating capacities of subjects. Instead of acting directly, government influences a group to modify their practices. Forms of evaluation are turned into values for citizens and new vocabularies indicate changes in relationships. As Marilyn Strathern says of audit cultures, the “accompanying rhetoric is likely to be that of helping (monitoring) people help (monitor) themselves, including helping people get used to this new ‘culture’” (2000:4). While there is an aura surrounding numbers (ibid:8), most people I met distinguished between the targets company leaders set for their own companies and quotas imposed from outside. The former appeared an enabler, the latter, as one respondent termed it, a straitjacket.

To discuss the form of the collaboration I use UK political theorist David Halpern’s (2005) conceptualisation of the three components of social capital - a network, and its norms and sanctions. Neoliberalism, defined as “a mode of governing through freedom” and “the recalibration of the capacity of groups in relation to the dynamism of global markets” (Ong 2007:4), is the context to the network. US anthropologist Ilana Gershon notes that in neoliberal contexts, neoliberal selves are produced who use market rationality to interpret their social relationships and social strategies (2011:539). These selves reflexively manage how their marketable collections of skills, traits and capacities enter “into alliances with other such collections” (ibid). Alliances are based on mutually satisfying goals (ibid:540). The driving programme for the London network appears to be blocking government intervention in company practices. Companies must work together, rather than compete. Major norms for the network are monitoring the numbers of women, sharing best practice and diffusing the business case. Shame is the main sanction used against those speaking out in favour of quotas.

---

6 Halpern builds on work by sociologists James Coleman, Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Putnam.
Background

This section provides a short introduction to the wider context by looking at UK legislation and priorities within the UK business community, as well as outlining the starting point for this project: the recommendations set out in *The Davies Report* published in February 2011.

Diversity Politics in the UK

What form of diversity politics is the background to the UK’s reaction to the transnational debate about quotas for women to corporate boards? The focus on gender in business appears new, since previous UK governments have focused more on race and ethnicity, than gender. Anti-racial discrimination legislation covering employment, housing and other services stretches back nearly 50 years. Action to promote ‘good’ race relations in the UK was “relatively progressive compared to other European countries” but still limited (Cantle 2005:7,16). When violent ethnically-motivated riots took place in Oldham in Northern England in 2001, earlier approaches to race relations were criticised for perpetuating the idea that “disadvantaged individuals need special treatment to overcome their apparent inadequacies” and for reinforcing the separateness of communities (ibid:9). The UK government shifted focus to tackle the parallel lives of white and black communities through the concept of community cohesion (ibid:9). The practice of community cohesion concerned creating a vision and sense of belonging, valuing diversity, ensuring equality of opportunity and developing cross-cultural interaction (ibid:11,25). Its aim was changing values and attitudes, contrasted to earlier efforts to constrain and change behaviour (ibid:26).

Community cohesion is depicted as interculturalism rather than multiculturalism since it challenges identity politics (Cantle 2012). Often it is presented as mid-way between separation and assimilation. Recently, there has been political pressure to integrate communities. The Department for Communities and Local Government, in a 2012 white paper, expresses concern about people left outside, or choosing to remain outside, mainstream society and how this causes extremism and intolerance (2012:2). The proponent of community cohesion, Ted Cantle, points out that the fear of difference is not limited to race and ethnic divisions (ibid:18). Interrelated layers of separation create distances between minorities and between the minority and majority groups (ibid:71). The continuum between assimilation/integration and separation frames thinking on diversity politics more widely than just race and ethnicity. UK political theorist Davina Cooper discusses the overlapping relationship “between difference as a term of critique and diversity as a normative politics” (2004:8). Diversity politics places a value on social difference, with social diversity
functioning as a symbol of freedom, but such politics also defines the subjects of that freedom (ibid:23). It becomes unclear “who [diversity] is good for and why” (ibid:26). As Cooper asks, is it for the individual who gains freedom and choice or for society in gaining “the social richness that emanates from a flourishing, culturally diverse environment” (ibid)? These same tensions are at play in discussions about women in business.

Priorities for the UK Business Community

During the period of my fieldwork in London, the UK business community continued to frame many of its priorities within the context of the 2008 financial crisis. Each company was called on to increase its competitiveness so that in turn the whole UK economy would grow. Economic recovery was tied to building a sustainable economy: sustainable not implying a green, low carbon economy but rather a future-proofed economy that had adapted. This adaptation was to come about through trend-spotting. Some trend-spotting required making use of untapped or undertapped resources by mapping talent more effectively. Much of the general discourse echoed the species thinking that was anthropology’s focus at the turn of the twentieth century (Barnard 2000:29). At this time, such anthropologists as Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward Burnett Tylor talked of cultures progressing from undeveloped and savage to advanced and civilised. In her review of how ideas about health, bodies and diseases have changed since the 1940s, US anthropologist Emily Martin argues that science and medicine in the 1980s and 1990s were generating “ideal models of being in the world” (1994:245). Martin discusses the images of innovative and agile bodies and how this coincided with shifts in political economic organisation (ibid). The discourse on gender balance and gender diversity decades later connects to the now taken-for-granted values of innovation and flexibility within business, seen, for example, in the ever-increasing frequency that project teams are organised in an agile way.

Innovative management of human resources was vital because of demographic change and a skills gap. Respondents spoke of the desirability of a multi-generational workforce, believing that people must work to an older age than currently and also that different generations have different skills. A multi-generational workforce presented issues though as Generation Y or Millennials (born from the 1980s onwards) were considered as having different relationships to career and work than those of their parents, grandparents and Generation X (born from the 1960s to the 1980s). At the same time, people I met talked of a social mobility or wider participation agenda as taking hold in the UK. They connected this to high levels of unemployment among young people and a political will to instil new
aspirations among young people from poorer backgrounds. As many people as possible were to be entrepreneurial and set up their own companies to boost the UK economy.

Ultimately those I met also described it a necessity that the UK ensures a flexible labour market. The responsibility for this long-term value creation through harnessing resources was placed within the context of what was termed a partnership agenda between businesses and government. Nominally there was understood to be a push on fairness at the centre of some of the programmes and initiatives funded privately or by the government. This push on fairness appeared to connect to a separate concern to rebuild trust in some of the UK’s largest companies, especially within the financial sector. In order to rebuild trust, ensuring transparency of company practices was vital.

A Business-Led Approach to Women on Boards

The Davies Report, published in February 2011, sets out a “more-focused business-led approach” to increasing the number of women on corporate boards than previous efforts (2011:18). The authors state that the “issues debated here are as much about improving business performance as about promoting equal opportunities” (ibid:7). Lord Davies and the steering board of the review do not propose a quota but instead make recommendations to encourage action “at a much faster rate than we have seen recently” (ibid:18). A quota is not appropriate since “board appointments should be made on the basis of business needs, skills and ability” (ibid). In his foreword to the report, Lord Davies notes: “Government must reserve the right to introduce more prescriptive alternatives if the recommended business-led approach does not achieve significant change” (ibid:2).

Many of the report’s ten recommendations (ibid:4-5) relate to how Chairs⁷ should set, regularly review and annually report on “aspirational goals” for female representation at board level. Chief Executives (CEOs) are recommended to review the percentage of women they aim to have on their Executive Committees. Lord Davies and the steering board for the review recommend that the UK’s one hundred largest companies, those in the FTSE 100, should aim for a minimum of 25 per cent female representation on their boards by 2015. Other recommendations focus on greater transparency of the board appointment process, suggesting that executive research firms (ESFs) should draw up a voluntary code of conduct covering processes related to FTSE 350 board level appointments.

---

⁷ The Davies Report frequently refers to Chairmen. I use Chairs.
In addition to these responsibilities for Chairs, CEOs and ESFs, one recommendation notes the “critical role” that investors play in “engaging with company boards”. The authors recommend that investors pay close attention to the recommendations on reporting and appointments. A further recommendation notes that “a combination of entrepreneurs, existing providers and individuals [need] to come together to consolidate and improve the provision of training and development for potential board members.” The final recommendation notes that the steering board will report annually on “whether sufficient progress is being made”. All in all, these recommendations are intended “to increase the demand for women by chairs and executive search firms but also to expand the pool of female candidates” (ibid:18). I see this as providing the supply and demand frame for this market feminism in London.

Referring to the recommended aim of 25 per cent female representation on boards, the authors state that this is “achievable” and will be a doubling of the current percentage in four years (ibid:18-9). They note that this aim is considerably lower than targets being considered by the European Commission or than the quotas implemented worldwide (ibid:19). The authors of The Davies Report indicate that the review was motivated by the Coalition Government’s pledge when elected in 2010 to “promote gender equality on the boards of listed companies”. In the annexes to the report, the authors set out an “international comparison” (ibid:22-3) of countries with quotas; countries considering legislation for quotas; and countries taking alternative action. They provide case studies (ibid:26-7) on Norway, which has had a 40 per cent quota since 2008; and Australia, which has used a ‘report or explain’ approach since 2010. During September 2012, the UK led a group of EU member states against the proposal by the European Commission for a 40 per cent quota of the underrepresented sex in NED positions for listed companies by 2020 (Fontanella-Khan 2012). The draft law was later passed by the European Parliament in November 2013 but is still being considered by the Council of the EU (European Commission 2014).

The Davies Report focuses on the external barriers and enablers to women’s success, but the summary of the responses to the consultation show how respondents (overwhelmingly women) were also concerned with the internal barriers. When asked “What actions might be taken to achieve recruitment of women to the boardroom?”, 15 per cent of respondents mentioned “encouragement and support for women, promoting role models, acknowledging achievement and action to overcome the issue of career breaks” (2011:33). Lord Davies and the steering board emphasise that “providing role models, education and training, and flexible working are all solutions that would encourage women to serve on corporate boards, having gained experience, expertise and profile” (ibid:34).
Thesis Overview

In Part Two, I introduce the business case for gender diversity, discussing how gender balance implies that when men and women complement each other, company performance improves and group think is disrupted. I show how gender balance is conceived of in numbers of women at all levels in organisations. I explore how the softly, softly feminism set out in London colludes with hegemonic masculinity through including only some women, rather than challenging the dominant gender system. I also discuss how gender diversity is framed as a business issue. Equal opportunities for men and women are dismissed as not of interest to companies. Instead, increasing numbers of women is linked to business performance.

In Part Three, I discuss how a group of leaders imagines themselves as coming together in collaboration to diffuse new business practices and values across the UK. I consider how social capital is used and discuss the gendering of collaborative and networking practices. I argue that the consideration by the UK government of a quota has had significant impacts as the leaders of the UK’s largest companies now recognise increasing the numbers of women at all levels of companies as good business practice. I see this as an example of government at a distance where the effect on the group has been to persuade business leaders that collaborating with others on gender diversity is brand-enhancing. Glory is reflected on companies through promotion of their best practice and position in league tables.

In Part Four, I discuss how the collaboration’s discourse creates a responsibility for senior businesswomen to be role models for other women. This role is understood as inspiring more women to be business leaders. Being a role model is framed as a duty for senior businesswomen. I present examples of the narratives of senior businesswomen to discuss different versions of an ideal type of female business leader. I show how these narratives demonstrate that women mask practices deemed masculine with a supposed natural femininity. Central to the role model performance is an emphasis on learning to live with managing guilt. This emotional labour is an important mask businesswomen use to be recognised as feminine. I discuss how ideas of who constitutes a good role model are shaped at women’s networking events and how a role model habitus is adopted through effort.

To conclude (Part Five) I summarise my discussion about the ideas of gender difference circulating within the discourse, and the form in which people organise around the discourse. I write a post-script to the thesis by talking about the recent review of the impact of The Davies Report three years after its publication. I reflect further on the method used in the project and identify new areas for research. I also discuss what my project reveals of the applicability of the concept of market feminism to ethnographic studies.
Part Two. Stating the Business Case for Gender Diversity

The following description of a conference serves as an example of the typical format and content of events that I attended, although at this particular conference an unusually high proportion of the attendees were men. This description is a reference point for my discussion in this Part where I focus on the questions: What is the discourse centred on gender balance in business leadership and the business case for gender diversity? How does this discourse connect to feminism?

Almost six hundred men and women sit in near-darkness in the vast, windowless conference room of a five star hotel on the outskirts of London for a one-day conference on gender balance in business. The event is organised by a company billed as a “business-led initiative working to increase the number of women in senior positions in corporate UK”. The small company arranges a training and development programme for women; a national network for senior women; and today’s annual conference. The delegates are sitting at round tables of up to ten people. Each table is covered with a white tablecloth. Bottles of water, glasses, and a small bowl of individually-wrapped sweets stand in the centre. On the table in front of each seat is an iPad; a small, plastic box of breath mints and a pen, both bearing the logo of the main sponsor for the event; and an A5-sized, spiral-bound programme. Inside the programme are a save-the-date card for next year’s conference, as well as a find-out-more card to be completed with name, company and contact details and left on the table.

To introduce the conference aims, a short film is played on a large screen at the front of the room. As many of the sixty tables are so far away from this screen, some delegates watch the film on one of the plasma screens mounted on pillars around the room. An invisible male emcee then announces Joanna, the founder and chief executive of the host organisation. Loud music plays as Joanna, a woman in her early forties with shoulder-length brown hair dressed in an electric blue dress, makes her way to the stage. The lights come on throughout the room. As Joanna reaches the see-through Perspex lectern, she is caught in the bright beams of spotlights against a dark curtain behind her. Joanna tells us that there are three aspects to the conference: sharing the business case on gender diversity; hearing from business leaders on best practice from their companies; and lastly, an “interactive part” which will provide the content for a future white paper.\(^8\) She emphasises that the business leaders presenting during the day are not there “to grandstand or to boast”. Instead she asks the delegates to “recognise

---

\(^8\) See footnote 1 on usage of the term white paper within London’s business world.
that we’re all on a journey”, adding: “This might be the starting point for your organisation.”

As she says this, she looks towards the tables near the front of the room, searching out delegates and making eye contact with them.

Joanna invites David, a senior director from the main sponsor, to come up on stage. More loud music accompanies the switch as Joanna returns to her seat at a table near the front of the room, and David, early fifties, with scruffy short hair, dressed in a grey suit and white shirt, the top button undone and no tie, gets up from the same table and weaves his way speedily between the tables to reach the stage. He states: “Collaboration is key” and that the delegates have a “mutual interest, an economic one, in dealing with this issue”. Talking of the company he represents, David says he does not like the word sponsor, and that he instead prefers to say “_____ [the company] is involved”. He continues:

Women are a massive lever we can all use in our organisations. It is now time to be proactive. It’s not about talking. It’s about real tools and moving forward. Today is all about new ideas and new contacts.

He closes by again mentioning collaboration, this time to say simply: “The most important thing is that you do collaborate.”

Two journalists, Simon and Judith, employed to facilitate the conference, come up on stage and go through the format for the day. They then introduce Paula, a thirty-something occupational psychologist employed at a consulting and research institute. Paula is dressed in a black skirt suit and white shirt. For the next half an hour she presents the “latest thinking” on the business case for having gender balance in business, roaming around the stage and from time to time glancing back to the presentation projected behind her. Paula is “separating fact and fiction” for the delegates, presenting “data that helps build a strong business case.” Her presentation, made up of many complicated and colourful graphs and diagrams, is shown on the large screen, as well as on the plasma screens. Many delegates are busy with the iPads in front of them. Some follow the presentation slides, even adding notes through a function on the iPad, others use the networking function to send messages to other delegates about meeting at lunch, and a few read the biographies of the speakers presenting later in the day.

Paula tells us: “There is strong evidence of direct and indirect links of effects of women on organisational performance”. She refers to a study by the consulting firm McKinsey on how women challenge attitudes and build a culture that fosters a diverse workforce. “I want to make sure we keep the argument credible”, Paula says, as she moves onto talking about how men and women differ in one personality trait. “Women just have a natural edge”, she tells us, “when it comes to nurturance. While men in general exhibit more behaviours connected to assertiveness”. She explains that there are not so many differences between men and women
when it comes to other personality traits. On the left-hand side of the slide, the behaviours listed under the heading *Nurturance* are: democratic, participative, proactive, collaborative, cooperative, rewards, and developing others. Arranged beneath *Assertiveness* on the right are: directive, autocratic, management by exception, influence, and building confidence. Paula tells us that some individuals have the ability to be both assertive and nurturing. Her message is that organisations need both sets of behaviours, especially today when business is more about “collaboration, engagement and partnership” than seeing other companies as competitors. She associates “connectivity, adaptation and innovation” with “modern organisations” characterised by “nurturing behaviours”, while “traditional organisations” exhibit more “assertive behaviours”.

The rest of Paula’s presentation is taken up with the findings from a recent survey she and her colleagues at the research institute undertook to look at the “barriers and enablers to career progression” for professional women. She tells us that “women’s networking is absolutely essential but [it’s] about networking with key leaders and decision-makers”, since a woman is often an “unknown quantity”. Linked to this, Paula says, is a “specific type of mentoring” which “allows access to opportunities and to leaders.” She points out that the “results” on barriers and enablers to career progression for men are “not too dissimilar” to those for women, but that “men can just fit into existing HR processes”. She finishes her presentation with a slide that shows a graph of the numbers of women at different levels in UK companies. “This is how we’re doing in the UK right now”, says Paula and asks: “We’re not doing very well, are we?” She hands over to a colleague at the technology company that owns the institute she works for. He talks about how the company leaders are “building the business case” for gender balance in relation to their company’s strategy.

The day continues with different company leaders presenting case studies and best practice in tackling barriers and implementing enablers. These are interspersed with short films of business leaders talking about the six enablers to gender balance (flexibility; tackling unconscious bias; sponsorship; resilience; sustainability; and systems and processes). Before lunch is a panel discussion from the morning’s speakers that completes the *I Get It – But How Do I Make It Happen?* portion of the day. During the final hours of the day on *Better Balance, Better Business – Now Make It Work For You*, a female moderator asks the delegates what has struck them during the day and how they will take this back to work. This session includes instant polls administered through each delegate tapping one of several options on the iPad, as well as group discussion at the tables where one delegate inputs main points into the iPad to be later collated into the white paper Joanna mentioned. Joanna ends the day
telling the delegates that “the emphasis is on you as a leader” and how “change starts from within”. She asks us: “Can we really wait for another generation to instil choice and control for employees?” She says of her role that it is “more than a job or a vocation. I’m doing it for these two” as she clicks to change the slide projected behind her. Caught up in the seeming emotion of this moment, she unintentionally clicks past a slide with a photo of her teenage daughter and son, to a slide with her contact details. She looks over to the technical team and frantically asks: “How do I get it back?” When the slide with her children is projected behind her, she returns to her script and implores: “Do it for those young people you’re connected to,” adding it will mean “not only better balanced business, but a better balanced society”.

The Concepts of Gender Balance and Gender Diversity
The conference described above was promoted as being about gender balance and gender diversity in business. At events, both these terms were used as interchangeable shorthands and I never heard them defined. Speakers assumed that the audience understood to what they were referring. An example of this shorthanding appears on the first page of the programme for the annual gala dinner of a London women’s network. The President says:

We are still early on in the marathon to reach gender balance and the efforts of [network’s name] as well as many others are critical in encouraging and supporting women to aspire to take leadership roles.

Similarly, at an event for in-house recruitment specialists on tackling unconscious bias within recruitment, the male keynote speaker commented: “The higher you go, the less gender diversity you find”. The Davies Report authors also take it for granted that gender balance and gender diversity are well-understood terms that require no explanation. There is a clear sense of progress towards gender balance or gender diversity, as in the reference to the “marathon”.

In the parlance of those I met, there is a business case for taking action towards achieving gender balance or gender diversity in business. Generally within the UK business community, business cases are an assessment of costs, benefits, risks, business drivers or imperatives, and return on investment (ROI). Such business cases are considered before the implementation of change programmes. Respondents use these business case terms when talking about women in business leadership. As shown in Paula’s presentation, there is also a categorisation of practices within companies as either enablers or barriers to women’s career progression.

As far as knowing when gender balance or gender diversity has been ‘achieved’, this ties to quantitative targets: where at least 25 per cent to 40 per cent of the team or board is from the minority gender. Measuring progress means measuring the numbers, a focus of bureaucracies and a neoliberal technology of internal controls (Strathern 2000). Gender balance does not imply 50:50, but more often 25:75. One commentator in a national
newspaper saw the targets as “arbitrary and lack[ing] logic”, asking: “If we accept the business case, why not aim for 50:50 (Kandola 2014)?” Respondents often spoke of a “critical mass of 30 per cent” for change to boardroom dynamics, believing that when less than 30 per cent of a team are women, the women will strive to fit in with their male counterparts. The Davies Report also mentions this magic 30 per cent and yet the report authors pragmatically recommend a minimum of 25 per cent female representation for FTSE100 boards since this proportion appears “achievable” (2011:8,18).

Better Balance Really is Better Business: The Business Case

At the core of the business case is a gender dichotomy. Paula presented women’s natural edge in the nurturing behaviours, contrasted to men’s assertive behaviours. That equivalent value in the labour market is apportioned to men and women through a naturalisation of gender difference is a different tack to the marginalisation of ‘women’s work’ to reproductive labour, intimate labour, care and emotional labour (Boris & Parreñas 2010; Hochschild 2012; Rubin 1975). As Paula said, it is the natural skills that women have in cooperating, developing others and rewarding others that now make women valuable in business. These skills are the same that meant reproductive labour and care are considered female work. In The Davies Report, gender difference is emphasised through reference to women taking NED roles more seriously, preparing more conscientiously for meetings and asking the awkward questions; as well as through different risk preferences and behaviours, for example, in attitudes towards indebtedness and debt management (2011:8,9). The authors mention findings by Harvard Business School researchers that “women appear to be more assertive on certain important governance issues” (ibid:10). However, while these practices are now deemed valuable to an employer, it is also understood that gender differences hold back women in their careers and give men an advantage. The message for both men and women in the discourse on gender is that some of their ‘natural’ practices are valued some of the time, while at other times they need to develop practices to be more like those natural to ‘the Other’ (gender).

The value that women bring as a “lever” to a company, to use David’s word, is understood as being different for each company, and across different sectors. Each company needs its own specific business case. Sara, a founder and director of a gender balance consultancy, listed the different motivations of her corporate clients in coming to her firm:

Some people want to know that there’s a cost return. Some people are: “Actually we need to reflect our customer/consumer base, and therefore if we want to make the right decisions.....” Some people do it because of risk, because there’s piles of evidence around. There’s something that I tweeted [posted online to Twitter account] this week actually, around M&A [mergers and acquisitions] decisions where you’ve got female representation at board level. Actually it’s been shown that those who have females on their boards make better decisions around M&A than those who don’t. And that’s because a
woman’s approach to taking risks is different to a man’s and they also will not do things if it doesn’t feel right, seem right, whatever it is. And that’s not saying that men will go and make that decision. However, with more representation of both sexes on boards, it’s been shown to have an impact. So it depends on what your strategy is, you know. If you’re growing by M&A, then that would be a reason. If you’re losing money and talent because of the drain, then that’s a different reason. If you want to represent your customer/consumer base better, then that’s another reason.

Speakers brought up the same variety of motivations at different events, creating the sense of a general business imperative to find ways to increase the numbers of women within senior teams. Many worked within the financial sector and focused on the idea that women balance men’s risky decisions. Time and time again I heard different people say: “Had Lehman Brothers been Lehman Sisters, then perhaps it would all have been different”, usually followed by something along the lines of: “Of course, Lehman Sisters would not have been any better. Lehman Brothers and Sisters is the ideal.” This balancing power of women on men or complementarity is explicitly linked to the perceived excessive risk-taking that led to the 2008 financial crisis. Gender balance appears connected to restoring trust in the financial sector, as if an expressed commitment to “the marathon to reach gender balance” demonstrates an effort to change general practices within the sector. US anthropologist Gayle Rubin critiques such ideas of gender complementarity. Rubin argues that the way the sex/gender system organises gender and sexuality around procreation acts as “a taboo against the sameness of men and women” (1975:178). Using Lévi-Strauss’ theories on the centrality to kinship of the exchange of women through marriage, Rubin shows how a “systematic social apparatus...takes up females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products” (ibid:158). Those I met, both men and women, were creating a usefulness for women in business from a “cultural heritage of forms of masculinity and femininity” (ibid:164)

Other company leaders focused on who bought their products, believing that women are responsible for or influence the majority of purchasing decisions. Their business imperative was for the senior team to reflect the company’s consumer base. As Paula mentioned during her presentation on the business case: “Women and men look for different things when purchasing”, making it an imperative for male leaders that they “bring women into senior leadership”. Leaders from professional services and consulting firms spoke of wanting to have leadership teams of the same background as their clients. Other times, leaders wished the senior leadership teams to better represent the overall make-up of the staff in a company.

Pale, Male and Stale
Complementing these ideas of business drivers making gender balance an imperative is a strong belief in the problem represented by ‘pale, male and stale’ teams. Respondents referred
to the dangers of group think and tunnel vision and the benefits gained from a team of people with a range of perspectives, experiences, psychological make-ups, outlooks and thoughts. There was a clear focus though on the numbers of men and women as general markers of how diverse a team is. Gender diversity and gender balance seemed to create an emphasis on the male part of the problem and not the pale and stale parts. I asked Melissa, an executive coach and gender diversity consultant, about this during an hour-long chat. She told me: “Gender is the biggest part of diversity. If companies get that right, the rest will follow.” As we continued chatting, Melissa acknowledged that “the metrics around gender are easier to deal with”, even if reporting on other categories of difference was “getting more sophisticated”.

For Melissa, company directors now recognise that “they have to start somewhere” when it comes to tackling pale, male and stale senior teams and that this leads them to being currently “very focussed on promoting and retaining female employees”.

As her job is building and maintaining gender diversity within companies, it is not surprising that Melissa would frame diversity as stemming from gender. In suggesting that diversity in its widest sense will be brought into leadership teams through the pursuit of gender balance, she ignores that most women who become NEDs are also white, heterosexual and middle class like the pale and stale men in leadership teams. The focus on gender and the belief that “the rest will follow”, perhaps reflects how gender is taken to be “the essence at the core of personal identity in many Western discourses” (Moore 1994:37). Halberstam comments that the power of the gender binary system sits in how “virtually nobody fits the definitions of male and female” (1998:27). The flexibility and fluidity of gender “allows dimorphic gender to hold sway” (ibid:20). For Eisenstein, it is this malleability of gender that makes possible the appropriation of goals of liberal feminism – that work is liberating, and white middle class women setting the major goals of individualism and self-development – into today’s hegemonic feminism (2009:39). The network of business leaders seem to boost the status of a few women within the corporate hierarchy but remain blind to other structural

---

9 This framing ignores the rhetorical celebration of racial/cultural diversity that has taken place historically in the UK. See Background section in Part One. When the category of gender is taken on its own it invariably represents a white perspective (Eisenstein 2009:73). Moore argues that gender is actually a “deeply racialised” experience for white people, since “their race is both an unmarked category and constructed in contra-distinction to other race identities (1994:61). Those I met saw gender as separable from other categories of difference, not being concerned about the specific barriers and enablers to, for example, black women’s careers but speaking in general terms of women as if a universal woman does exist. 1960s and 1970s white, heterosexual, middle class feminists from ‘Western’ countries were also critiqued for imagining all women had the same experience and that they spoke for all women. This liberal feminist blindness is a key aspect of Eisenstein’s (2009) concept of hegemonic feminism. Intersectional analysis seeks to remedy this by making clear the interrelationships between categories of difference in creating subordination (see, for example, Yuval-Davis 2006).
categories that exclude people from reaching decision-making positions in business. Even the idea of pale, male and stale limits diversity to race\textsuperscript{10}, gender and age.

\textit{A Business Issue, Not a Social Policy Issue}

In her \textit{What’s the Problem?} approach to policy discourse, Australian political scientist Carol Bacchi urges researchers to see policies as “competing interpretations or representations of political issues”, and to examine how policy proposals produce women’s inequality as a particular kind of problem (1999:2). For most of those I met, the problem of pale, male and stale teams was connected to negative impacts on organisational performance, growth, innovation and customers’ perceptions of the company. Understood was that companies not working towards gender balance risk missing out on the positive impact that women’s presence brings to profit-making. It appears only logical to many business leaders that within the UK context of what they refer to as an Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism characterised by short-term activity in markets\textsuperscript{11}, leaders themselves should be free to adopt, or not to adopt, practices towards raising the numbers of senior businesswomen. Quotas were understood as an anomaly within an Anglo-Saxon capitalist economy, where business need and efficiency should drive rapid change, not government intervention. When leaders do not act to bolster the female talent pipeline feeding talent pools at all levels of their company, the understanding is that the company’s profit and growth will suffer. Convincing leaders of the business case would ensure the adoption of practices to recruit, retain and promote women.

Bob, aged in his early sixties and employed at a public authority to manage a team working on best practice in corporate governance, stated his understanding of the political aims of different countries when we met at his office in late September 2013:

\begin{quote}
\textit{…}when we met at his office in late September 2013:
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} See \textit{Background} section in Part One for discussion of the discourse on race relations and cultural diversity in the UK since the 1950s, that contrasts, for example, to the focus in Sweden on \textit{jämställdhet} (gender equality) since the 1970s.

\textsuperscript{11} This invented ‘Anglo-Saxon model’ connects to the focus on profit for shareholders, rather than concern for a wider group of stakeholders. The Anglo-Saxon model appeared to be understood as something similar to the idea of ‘shareholder value’ that Karen Ho (2009) discusses as central to the financialisation of capitalist practices by investment bankers in New York. Ho says that shareholder value “signified a mission statement, a declaration of purpose, even a call to action. Creating or reclaiming shareholder value was morally and economically the right thing to do; it was the yardstick to measure individual as well as corporate practices, values, and achievements” (ibid:125). Efficiency is understood as “the set of practices which most quickly and cheaply translates corporate actions into rising stock prices” (ibid:162). The people I met in London contrasted the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism to the ‘Scandinavian model’. This model, as political, economic, social and cultural context, was given as explanation of why a quota had been adopted in Norway. Respondents did not discuss the variety of policies in other countries in Scandinavia (I am not sure which countries respondents included within their idea of Scandinavia) and perhaps did not even realise that variety existed. Morality, that might be assumed a motivation behind policies looking at gender representation, was dismissed by those I met in London. The important motivation was the business benefits.
I think some countries, and this is probably grossly simplifying it, some countries have come at this from primarily the business case perspective, as I think we have here, and said there is clearly a business case for more gender diverse boards but not necessarily a business case for a quota. Others have come at it more from a sort of social policy end, which says it is just inequitable that women appear to be being denied these opportunities and therefore we need a quota. And I think there’s no reason if the government here felt this was a social policy issue, they should legislate.

It was rare that respondents framed in this way what Bacchi might see as competing interpretations of representing the problem. Bob believed that the UK government, in accepting Lord Davies’ recommendations in 2011, had chosen to represent the problem in a particular way because they understood that “without the consent or the involvement of the different parties, it’s not an approach that would work at all”. He later said “I think it’s one of those examples where, you know, governments at some point have to decide whether they’re willing to take on what might be unpopular decisions.” The UK government’s decision not to implement a quota appears to be a policy without teeth but even such soft policies or symbolic policies have impacts. As Emily Martin argues: “Policies with teeth’, with legal or other coercive backing, are often preceded by a myriad of policies with no teeth, but plenty of links to prevailing cultural ideas about the nature of the person and society” (1997:255). The representation of the problems and solutions, the enablers and the barriers, and the business case has tapped into cultural ideas and become common sense for many UK business leaders.

Part of what shapes the UK collaboration on gender balance is a belief that countries that have introduced a quota have missed a crucial point – that the numbers of women working as senior executives with day to day responsibility for companies will remain unchanged. However, as one respondent in London termed it, those pro- and anti-quotas “want the same thing”. Such a perspective disregards the different political framings of why more women in leadership is a desirable ‘thing’ and reduces quotas or voluntary measures to simply two ways to achieve the same ‘thing’. Rejecting quotas, the majority within the London business community focus on fixing the leaky pipeline of women in business. Leaders set targets for female representation throughout their own companies and monitor this. However, Sara expressed concern about a fixation on numbers.

I’d say people are heading towards a number and a lot of that is generated because of The Davies Report that says you have to hit a number. And so the way to hit a number, to a certain extent, is a shopping list and to go out and buy your talent.

I take this financialisation of the benefits of gender diversity, and the fixation on numbers and a “shopping list”, as indications of a neoliberal audit culture (Strathern 2000). Numerical measures provide “an aura of objective truth and facilitate comparisons”, and “produce a world knowable without the detailed particulars of context and history” (Merry 2009:239,240). Recording performance can be assessed as becoming a superficial practice.
Feminising UK Business Culture

Sara’s comments about the fixation on numbers raise the question about what meaning the people I met give to action to increase the numbers of women. What kind of change will be achieved in the corporate world by increasing numbers of women? At women-only events, women were encouraged to be authentic and to bring their whole selves to work. It was clear that it was not just numbers of women, but numbers of the right senior businesswomen. Such women will feminise business practices, the process Paula alluded to in her comment that modern organisations are characterised by nurturing behaviours, deemed feminine. This is an example of the widespread discourse that builds on “historical discourses about corporate domesticity, motherhood, and women’s innate care-taking qualities” and is “reconfiguring gender, feminism, leadership, and the financial crisis” (Fisher 2012:157,171). For Fisher, the life stories of Wall Street Women show a shifting relationship of feminism and financial markets over several decades that at times creates a feminisation of the market (ibid:4). I found that in this moment in London, this feminisation was more often depicted as good for business rather than about creating career opportunities women currently do not have.

This feminisation is understood firstly as for increasing profit, and secondly as essential to changing UK corporate ‘culture’ and paving the way for women to build careers without being required to act like men. It is perceived, connecting back to the idea of a required 30 per cent critical mass of women, that there is a risk that women would adopt the practices already present in the corporate world. This would mean that simply increasing numbers of women would have no impact. Rebecca, a researcher in her twenties at a think tank, explained the motivation of Val, her female boss, for their research report:

Val definitely has that frustration where she thought that her generation was going to be the last generation to kind of have to put up with this. And she sees the new generation coming through and they’re also getting assimilated into the dominant culture. So, I mean, this report really focuses on changing the dominant culture because it kind of just has to suck people in and assimilate them and makes them either so they can’t handle it and they leave, or they get assimilated and get stuck into the old patterns of behaviour.

Val appeared committed to change that would not be defined by numbers alone. Clearly influenced by theories of organisational development put forward by Business Schools, respondents spoke of UK corporate culture as if it were unitary, and often of how it could be changed on the say-so of leaders. This conceptualisation of culture contrasts significantly to the discipline of anthropology’s emphasis on how groups come together to form organisations, creating cultures through their practices. Within business studies, organisations are seen as pre-existing structures into which people fit. While anthropologists adopt an interpretive approach to culture where organisations are “sites for constructing meaning”,
business studies is marked by positivist approaches that deny the effects of human agency within organisations, viewing culture as static rather than a negotiated process (Wright 1994:3,21). Anthropologists are interested in how language and power affect culture and how the act of organising is itself culture (ibid:17-9), while researchers within business studies have focused much more on “similarity, convergence, sharedness, and normative consensus” (Bate 1997:1157) without asking whether the culture really is shared (Shore 2000:23). The emphasis on achieving coherence demonstrates that within business studies a unitary corporate culture is considered possible, in contrast to the resistance and subcultures that anthropologists find in their studies of organisations (Wright 1994:24).

I’m Head of Inclusion. We’ve Dropped the Diversity.

In Autumn 2013 I began to notice that more and more often respondents spoke in terms of inclusion and inclusive work environments. In October 2013 Esther told me that her job title was Head of Inclusion and joked that her company “had dropped the Diversity”. Her title did not now indicate a responsibility for Diversity and Inclusion. The terms gender diversity; diversity; inclusion; and diversity and inclusion were all bandied around simultaneously and combined in new ways. It became even harder to keep track of what it was that people were talking about, and what they were hoping to achieve. This points to how the discursive object was under construction. My respondents were as muddled about their objectives as I was. Initially I thought that somewhere in the turn to inclusion there emerged more discursive space for feminism. Those respondents who talked about inclusion and a culture set by alpha males seemed to believe that the current gender system holds disadvantages for some men as well as many women. Sara explained why she thought diversity was not the right approach and why inclusivity was:

If you start on a diversity bit, I don’t think you will totally get there. If you think about inclusivity, then I think diversity follows by being inclusive and really thinking about how to be as inclusive as you possibly can be. And that means, you know, flexible working for all, career progression and that opportunity, for all, what you offer people in terms of experiences, for all.

Was a challenge to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987) happening? Or was inclusion related to fitting in? I understood from Emily how inclusion, while focused on the individual, was related to each employee contributing as much as possible in their work to benefit the company’s performance, rather than the individual herself. In the on-site coffee shop of the office building where she worked within finance services at a consultancy firm, Emily told me how she saw “two aspects of inclusion more interesting than women” for the area she worked in. These were “how to leverage youth better” and changes to the “traditional education system” in a shift from university degrees to practical training in digital and
software skills. Her “side of the desk work” developing the women’s network was for Emily about “reorienting ourselves away from categories of gender, sexuality, religion and ethnicity et cetera.” She saw instead that the central question was “what contribution can each person make?”, requiring a focus on “value they can add for the client”. For Emily inclusion meant a meritocratic focus and minimising differences between people. She told me that she thought there was “laziness” in the business case for gender diversity, and that commentators were “holding us back” by emphasizing differences between men and women.

Emily understood diversity as having had three phases – the first shaped by the introduction of legal requirements in the 1970s and 1980s; the second from the 1990s onwards when managers were expected to recognise the benefits of diversity; and the current moment which made diversity an “industry necessity”. Emily was clear that the focus now had to be on “inclusion, innovation and creativity” for the sake of the company’s profit, not on personal progress or the empowerment of a particular group. In Emily’s formulation, inclusion seemed to be a reaction to the emphasis placed on the valued difference of women as a group. Respondents like Emily re-emphasized assessment of an individual’s value to a team being their contribution at work, while Sara saw flexible working arrangements as a way for everybody to contribute at work. Inclusion seemed to indicate an interest in assimilating differences and minimising special treatment. New working arrangements may have been made available that challenged the requirement for long hours in the office, but hegemonic masculinity was not critiqued by either the business case for gender diversity or ideas about inclusion. James’ question in the first vignette: “Do you want to get the job because you’re a lady or because you’re the best person for the job?” remained illustrative of the tension between prioritising groups to create a level playing field and assessing individual merit.

**Softly, Softly Feminism**

While Sara questioned the focus on numbers of women, and Val and Rebecca hoped that increasing numbers of female business leaders would change the ‘dominant culture’ in UK business, others questioned the purpose of the business case for gender diversity. Melissa told me that she thought the business case was developed “to get the attention of men.” Calling herself a feminist, Melissa said: “In my heart it’s equality that motivates me”, but that her work consulting with companies on gender diversity required her to temper her approach into what she called “softly, softly feminism”. Others I met, talked in a way that suggested feminism even if that was not a label they used. There seemed to be a constant movement
between equal opportunity ideals and the value women represented through disrupting a male-dominated world.

In June 2013, I attended a two-day summit at a central London hotel. The summit was “convened to drive collaboration, energize the global discussion and create a roadmap for increasing women’s participation in high growth entrepreneurship”. Tina, a US economist in her forties and the CEO of the organisation arranging the summit, repeatedly asked during the summit whether the business case was proven. She questioned whether findings such as those published in McKinsey’s Women Matter research series from 2007 onwards,\(^\text{12}\) showed an actual causation or simply a correlation between numbers of women on company boards and company performance. Tina felt that attributing improved company performance to the presence of women in leadership teams risked underplaying multiple other variables that might have impacted business performance. While the summit delegates, predominately white US women in their late thirties to early fifties, were signed up to a pledge that “we are invested in women leaders as aspiring entrepreneurs, founders, CEOs, C-suite managers\(^\text{13}\), owners, investors, and board members”, they questioned the business case. It seemed they wanted the findings to be true, to be more than correlation, but as one delegate said during a small group discussion, “gender diversity cannot be an objective criteria” when considering whether to invest in a company. Another delegate said that there was “an opportunity for investors” when no one else recognised the opportunity in investing in women-led and women-owned companies. As the lively conversation in the small group continued, a third delegate said that there was a “need to translate women into a revenue centre, an asset”, giving the example of how intellectual property has become highly valued. Another delegate questioned this attitude, asking why the studies and data were needed, since constant reference to them suggested there was “something to prove” when it was “common sense that women are equal to men”.

The keynote speaker after lunch on the second day of the summit was Claire, a British woman who heads up a “group of Chairmen\(^\text{14}\) voluntarily committed to bringing more women

\(^{12}\) See: mckinsey.com/features/women_matter

\(^{13}\) C-suite managers are the other corporate executives at C-level besides the CEO, such as Chief Financial Officer and Chief Operations Officer

\(^{14}\) Checking the website of the network that Claire heads up in April 2014, only seven of the 81 members are female, making ‘Chairmen’ appropriate for almost all the members. In the English language the terms Chairmen or Chair may be used. I met one woman working in executive search who objected to the title Chair saying: “You’re not an inanimate object. Chairman describes what the job involves – chairing and managing.” Some I met did feel that the gender neutral Chair was preferable.
onto UK corporate boards” and who works in a senior role in the finance sector. Claire spoke of how there is “a danger of the conversation getting tired”. She acknowledged her personal “firm belief” in the “behavioural differences between men and women” but that more work needed to be done on proving the gender differences that underpinned the business case. The group she headed was motivated to “restate the business case” that “men and women complement each other” and so had commissioned research in what drives and motivates women and men, looking at whether differences are due to society or to biology. Claire stated that she thought the data would “solve the problem” and make it possible to “say a balanced team is better”. Like in the earlier discussion at the summit, she spoke of “trying to get to the causality”.

Clearly for the people I met gender diversity and gender balance did not carry the same meanings as gender equality. Businessmen and businesswomen place a value on women as different and the aim is for companies to make more use of gender difference. A desired quantity of female difference is put on “a shopping list” when business leaders go to the market to buy in talent. Leaders are given objectives for recruitment and promotion, which creates situations as in the opening vignette to the thesis where a headhunter is asked by a client to look for a woman. Instead of representing the problem as a social issue where, as Bob said, it would be seen as “inequitable that women appear to be being denied these opportunities”, the problem is related to business performance. At the summit it seemed that an emphasis on difference was creating concerns for some delegates, not only in the issue of correlation or causation, but also that the volume of studies on difference seem to only go against the idea that women are men’s equals. One delegate scoffed at the title of McKinsey’s Women Matter series and that it was not until 2007 when someone at McKinsey decided women matter. She pointed out how laughable a series titled Men Matter would be.

Bacchi discusses how often a framing dichotomy of difference/equality, and its parallel dichotomy of sameness/difference, means that “those who are ‘equal’ are held to be the ‘same’ in some way” (2009:184). Anyone who is different will be considered unequal. This connects also to US historian Joan W. Scott’s (1999) discussion about the paradox feminism has faced: feminists throughout history have been “caught in the problem of sexual difference”, producing the sexual difference they sought to eliminate, and drawing attention to sexual difference instead of banishing it (ibid:7). Scott argues that equality and difference are interdependent rather than opposites and that it is necessary to recognise and maintain the tension between equality and difference, and between individual rights and group categories, to get the most democratic results (ibid:1,3). In London though, business leaders emphasise
the business benefits of women’s ‘difference’ to men in order to gain support for tackling the practices that deny women equal opportunities to be promoted into business leadership.

At times during my fieldwork, I heard from women how that they had shied away from women-only groups and from positioning themselves as different to their male colleagues. Julia, the president of a women’s network in London, put it like this:

I do say to people in some respects it’s quite odd that I’m the president of a women’s network because frankly, when I was an EVP [Executive Vice President], I wouldn’t have touched this with a bargepole. And I think it was partly to do with the fact that I saw it as very much, um, marginal. And I wanted to be in the mainstream. I saw it very much as, um, you know, there was that whole thing about women’s lib, and you know we still get it, some guys...You know we still get the odd sort of ‘Oh, is it a knitting circle or is it a man-hating group?’

Collective identities are “inescapable forms of social organisation” that are “inevitably politicised as a way of both discrimination and of protesting discrimination” (ibid:6). For Julia, experiences during her career had taken her from fearing discrimination as a member of a man-hating group, to taking up a goal “to bring it [the women’s network she represented] in from the margin and to make women’s achievements, contributions, their perspective, their experiences, not extraordinary but ordinary.” That Melissa saw her action as “softly, softly feminism” makes it relevant to discuss the gender system that this feminism results from and gives rise to. Since one definition of feminism is as a critique of “androcentric state-organised capitalism” concerned with the economic, cultural and political aspects of social justice (Fraser 2009:99,100), it seems counterintuitive to assess this discourse on gender in business as feminism. Respondents are not concerned about transforming the economic status quo but instead focus on the recognition of women within a corporate elite. It is hard to see the Women on Boards debate in London as connected to social justice. The extent to which respondents prioritised business benefits over societal ones was clear during a webinar arranged by a business-led charity about the application process for their award recognising the best UK employers for women. The presenter stated: “Women’s success at work is not only good for business, but good for society too.” After eight hours of talking about the business case at the conference described earlier, Joanna’s comments which accompanied the photo of her children also show how change is understood as benefitting the next generation.

I have set out how the discourse being shaped in London centres on an idea of the value gender difference offers to business performance through men and women complementing each other. This acceptance of the capitalist system and the goal that women should participate (at the highest levels of) the market economy, fits with Eisenstein’s definition of hegemonic feminism (2009:58,66). In Part Three I explore how a network of business leaders, lobbyists, journalists and academics perceive themselves as collaborating on gender balance.
Part Three. Collaborating on Gender Balance across UK Business

The Davies Report authors expressly place responsibilities on individuals in particular occupations, but also emphasise the importance of partnership. For the training and development of potential female board members, entrepreneurs, existing providers and individuals must work together (2011:6,21). In Part Two, I looked at how the business case for gender diversity links to the shared goal to block a quota of women to corporate boards. In this Part, I focus on the questions: How is the business case for gender diversity diffused by a network of business leaders? How does the business case link to norms and sanctions within this collaboration? I use the concept of a network society (Castells 2004) to discuss the collaboration of people clustered around the business case, and also the understanding of social capital as encompassing a systemic relationship (Halpern 2005:27) between a network itself, and the norms and sanctions of that network. I both show how social capital is understood normatively within the field as something valuable that must be managed, and use the concept analytically to frame my discussion on the pattern of relations (Schuller et al. 2000:35) between business leaders, lobbyists, consultants, journalists, and academics.

Since this study concerns a business network, I am particularly interested in analysing power relations and the resources to which a network connects an individual (Halpern 2005:23). For the people I met, the understanding is that, like other forms of capital, social capital can be almost privately owned and consumed (ibid), and that social networks are personal assets. This makes investing time and money in networks important for individuals in their own careers as well as when representing the companies for which they work. Since brands are a product of the joint labour of both producers and consumers (Manning 2010:44), skills in managing social capital are important for management of personal, employer and corporate brands. The Davies Report authors make several references to how consultation respondents believed that the informal networks used to find new board directors only include men and that “women have poor networks” (2011:8,17,30). This understanding that women do not have the same social capital as men, nor even understand the uses of social capital in the same way as men, is presented as an important barrier for women in their careers. This makes social capital a key aspect of how the problem is represented. The solution is an investment in training programmes and networking events for women (ibid:28). A part of the efforts of the collaboration on gender diversity is to reiterate the problem and to demonstrate that the solution works, illustrating what Bacchi argues is the dominant paradigm in current public policy – discovering what will solve problems (2009:xvi). As I spent most of my time
at events arranged by networks where networking was built into the schedule for the event, my method is also shaped by understandings of social capital and the network society. Indeed my project was made possible by following guidance from respondents on how to network, even if it was often hard for me to meet the norm of offering something in exchange.

I understand the UK government’s decision to proceed with voluntary, business-led targets as due to an emergent collaboration on gender diversity within business. This collaboration has since been strengthened and ensures that many of the leaders of the UK’s largest companies now recognise increasing the numbers of women at senior levels in companies as good business practice. Policies within companies such as establishing women’s networks, and mentoring and sponsorship programmes, underwritten by the business case for gender diversity, have become the norm. In this vein I argue that while the UK government did not implement a quota for women to the boards of listed UK companies, the business-led approach paved the way for business leaders to set norms and sanctions themselves. This collaboration has achieved a similar culture of monitoring numbers of women and is an example of government at a distance (Miller & Rose 1990).

The Future Belongs to Those Who Collaborate

Collaboration is a term well-used in all kinds of environments, including academia. The term encapsulates the idea that collective action yields improved results compared to individual action. Respondents spoke of how a partnership agenda generally in the UK between business and state agencies also creates a new emphasis on work with peers. This may appear somewhat in tension with competing with other firms but as Castells argues, the network enterprise has become the most productive and efficient form of doing business, with strategic alliances, partnerships and collaborations providing the way to share information and knowledge in order to win market share (2004:21,28). In this section I explore some native understandings of collaboration, networking and social capital from the London network.

At a one-day conference in October 2013 where the organiser’s goal was “to connect up more majority owned women’s businesses into the corporate supply chain”, one of the breakout sessions was led by Vivian, the founder and CEO of a law firm. Drawing on examples from how she had structured her firm “innovatively” to maximise collaboration between the lawyers in the firm, and with the clients and their in-house legal teams, she referred to an article in The Economist (2007). This article was based on a report itself produced in a collaboration between Cisco Systems and The Economist Intelligence Unit. It stated that “the future belongs to those who collaborate”, rather than those who compete.
Vivian told the twenty or so women who had chosen to attend her session titled *Collaborating for Success: How to Succeed at Working with Others*, that for her collaboration meant sharing knowledge; reaching out to partners; and coming together to create something new. Vivian emphasised how collaboration is not a transaction between parties, but rather about “cultures mixing together”\(^\text{15}\). Through this “win-win situation” the parties “create value for each other”.

Talking about her firm’s “collaborative business model”, Vivian spoke of the importance of “picking the right people who are interested in collaboration” and who have the “right attitude”. She also emphasised that for her building collaboration with others was “ongoing. You have to keep feeding into the relationship.” A woman in the audience commented that often what holds back (women-led) companies is a fear of both competition and collaboration. “Being too scared is stifling innovation”, she said. Vivian agreed that collaboration is what creates “shifts in industry”, such as she was trying to make in the legal sector through a new way for law firms to work with clients. She also mentioned how collaboration was about “creating a family feeling” and that “the end product is greater than the sum of its parts.”

Vivian provided examples of what collaboration should or should not be. How then do respondents talk about managing social capital? Jackie gave a keynote address on *Winning Corporate Business – It’s Not What You Know, But Who You Know* earlier at the conference where Vivian spoke about collaboration. Jackie, the founder of a company providing training in networking skills, provided tips for the two hundred delegates on the process of managing contacts. She emphasised the importance of reviewing contacts and assessing who are the connectors, the experts and the influencers. Jackie said that a good network would have enough people of each of the three categories, and that managing connections should be part of a leader’s business plan. She spoke of her own aim “to get coffee conversations going” and to “get my brand moving around.” She was clear that “there’s nothing new here – just discipline”, and that it “takes practice and risks. You’ve got to get yourself out there.” She told business owners of the importance of aligning their small businesses to “credible giants” by thinking about: “How do I get into their world? How can my business add value to the large corporate beyond just what it’s selling? How do I market myself on their trigger bits?” She ended her presentation urging the attendees: “Care about your contacts!”

\(^{15}\) Vivian’s comments suggest a view of cultures evolving through contact with other cultures, reminiscent of late nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropology’s focus on culture areas and also on Ulf Hannerz’ concept of creolisation (1987) where creole cultures draw on two or more historical sources.
These understandings of collaboration and networking as ongoing processes that create meaningful social relationships, show how ideas long emphasised in the discipline of anthropology are used normatively. Anthropologists studying social networks\textsuperscript{16} envisage “each person as a node linked with others to form a network” and “quantify...the interactional attributes of the linkages” (Rogers & Vertovec 1995:15). Such research analyses what value and meaning people assign to networks. Jackie’s ideas about managing contacts as a process echoes Castells’ description of networking within the network society:

> the process by which conscious social actors of multiple origins bring to others their resources and beliefs, expecting in return to receive the same, and even more: sharing a diverse world, and thus ending the ancestral fear of the other (2004:40).

At a Women in Leadership conference for executive women working in the UK’s National Health Service (NHS), Ruth, a keynote speaker, had a similar message to Jackie. Ruth told attendees how “the ability to network is now a core competence” in business. During her presentation on The Power of Networking, Ruth described how managers are valued for their “span of connections” and leaders “have a knack for knowing who to tap into.” Pinpointing when networking first became a buzzword to the 1990s, Ruth defined the term as meaning today the “process of building, nurturing, and leveraging a network of relationships in order to maximise opportunities for yourself and others”. Ruth asked the audience which qualities they thought made a good networker. When one woman replied that she thought networking had something to do with wanting to help other people, Ruth quickly replied: “I’m not sure anybody does anything truly altruistically. What you are getting out of it is connecting.” Ruth saw the ability to make links between people and ideas as one of the key characteristics of networking. She spoke of “plugging people into each other all the time” and urged the audience members to “keep feeding them with information.” Another key characteristic that Ruth outlined was “keeping the channels of communication open.” Similarly to Jackie’s way of describing an ongoing process of managing connections, Ruth mentioned a “daily connection goal to keep things moving forward.” She suggested reconnecting with five people a day, by email, a chat at their desk, or over a coffee.

Networking, social capital, links, contacts and connections were all emphasised as important to individuals and to their companies, requiring ongoing management. More could

\textsuperscript{16} Ulf Hannerz’ (1980) Exploring the City helps define the area of study that came to be called urban anthropology. He argues that social network analysis is an important framework for the study of social relations (ibid:181). Hannerz’ interest led him to pioneer work on transnational connections (1996). The scope of my project is limited to the London context only, even though the loose network I discuss is shaped by transnational connections to other policy worlds. See section Neoliberalism, Networks and Numbers in Part One.
be achieved through reciprocal exchange than could be achieved alone. While analytically social capital may be understood as “not an attribute of individuals but a function of relationships between agents and between social institutions” (Schuller et al. 2000:20), for those I met it was understood as both at once. Bourdieu first used the term social capital as part of his project to theorise the reproduction of class relations through cultural mechanisms (ibid:5). That those I met in London believed so strongly in meritocracy meant that class was not considered a barrier (or an enabler) to “building, nurturing and leveraging”, in Ruth’s words, a social network. Accumulating social capital was considered possible by effort alone.

Throughout their analysis of why there are not many female board directors in the UK, *The Davies Report* authors emphasise a dichotomy between men’s skills and women’s lack of such skills, when it comes to networking. In the *Women on Boards* policy world, part of the problem was understood as being how social capital reproduced the structure of gender relations within UK business. While the descriptions of networking and collaborating were similar, the ideas that women lacked the networking skills of men and that women were collaborative through their natural edge in nurturing, seemed to suggest that one practice was considered masculine (networking) and the other feminine (collaborating). Vivian’s comments of collaboration creating a family feeling seemed connected to the schema of family devotion as feminine (Blair-Loy 2003). That the loose group of business leaders responding to the threat of quotas was framed as a collaboration rather than a network, suggests also that the group was gendered and prioritised the newly valued (feminine) skill of collaboration in business. The collaboration itself indicated a feminisation of leadership.

That said, speakers at events urged women to start networking like men. Julia summed up how she made sense of men’s ability to leverage their contacts like this:

One of the arguments that I’ve heard is that actually it’s because men work more in a networked way from when they’re little. Maybe because they do team sports and whatever. So they might think: ‘Oh well. I don’t have those three skills or that experience, but I know Joe who does, or Bob who does, or Bill over here. So I’ll say yes I can do it and then I’ll leverage them.’

Julia’s comments seem to be based on an assumption that girls, unlike boys, do not play team sports. Louise, an executive coach, told me about a “missing ingredient” when it came to how women approach their careers. She said women were not aware of the importance of getting up from the desk and investing time in building relationships. Women, unlike men, did not understand that this was part of the job. From her work coaching women, she saw the first challenge as helping women realise they have to network in order to progress in their careers, and the second challenge as teaching women how to do this. Although this seemed tied to the
idea of helping women to survive in a man’s world by approaching networking as men do, Louise emphasised her belief that this was about “empowering women, not fixing them”.

**Buying and Selling Networks**

Researchers debate whether social capital, similarly to economic capital itself, has a hard and fast value (Halpern 2005:29-30). During the course of my fieldwork, I saw how within the business world networks were bought and sold. During a chat over coffee with Ruth in London, she told me how she had been approached the year before by a businesswoman from a global company who was interested in buying the London women’s network Ruth had established over more than a decade. However, in order to determine a purchase price for the network, the potential buyer had asked Ruth to implement a membership system so that the network generated an annual income. A similar but more public example of an investment in women’s networks occurred in May 2013, when the news broke that Sallie Krawcheck, the former President of one of the divisions at Bank of America, was buying 85 Broads, the global women’s network made up of 30,000 paying members. Krawcheck’s comments (2013) in a post to LinkedIn were widely reported. She drew on the business case for gender diversity, stating that “smart companies and smart investors” are increasingly recognising the need to make “real investments in women”. Krawcheck’s comments summarise normative ideas of networks and collaboration:

> Networks are beginning to operate alongside the traditional corporate structure, serving as a modern means for individuals to come together to exchange ideas and information. They enable their members to contribute to, and pull from, the network to accomplish more than the sum of the parts would indicate (ibid).

That relationships are understood to be buyable is perhaps why gender has become the barrier to career progression most concerning the business world, while class, ethnicity and other categories move out of focus. The assumption that any man can succeed on the back of his own merit, that through success comes money, and that money and discipline will allow entry to networks across business, means the problem to be fixed and the solution to that problem echo the logic of gender mainstreaming. This is where gender difference is minimised in order to promote equality of opportunity (Prügl 2011:83). However, since the business case for gender diversity emphasises that superior business outcomes are produced when men and women are able to express their difference, a lack of women (being women rather than fitting

---

17 Social media and online networking sites like LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook facilitate the potential to buy, or at least attract, connections, followers, and friends. There was frequent discussion of how to use these services to benefit personal and company brands.
in with men) in business leadership is also a problem following the logic of diversity management. Such an approach generates an appreciation of diversity in its widest sense and a market where “diverse selves [can express] their difference” (ibid). It appears contradictory that in London difference must be expressed, but also minimised. Women are held to be better than men at collaborating, which makes their difference desirable in leadership teams. At the same time their difference is also the reason given for why there are only a few women in leadership teams – men are held to be better at networking in the ways required for career advancement. Women must continue collaborating, but start networking. While it is implied that men must start collaborating more, this was not the focus.

**Reflected Glory: Enhancing Corporate and Employer Brands**

The importance of reciprocity within the collaboration is made visible through the sponsorship and hosting of events. Most events are delivered in a co-hosting arrangement where a legal or financial firm offers its offices for the event, providing a women’s network or lobby group with a central London venue at no cost, as well as making available an events team to manage the cloakroom and to serve refreshments. In return, a leader at the host firm receives the opportunity during the event to showcase what action the firm is taking on gender diversity. Other events take place at conference venues or hotels, but the sponsoring companies (usually ranked as platinum, gold or silver according to the amount of money given) will often again send someone to present the company’s best practice. Company logos are also displayed prominently. Event programmes, banners, backdrops to stages, online event information and printed invitations all offer additional marketing opportunities. At the beginning and end of conferences, event organisers without fail thank the sponsors and co-hosts for their generosity that has made the event possible. It is common practice that delegates also receive goodie bags stuffed with branded pens, notepads, USBs, diaries, mouse pads, mugs, and travel pass holders. Here the win-win allows one party to appear included within the collaboration as a company who understands the business case for gender diversity; and allows the other party to gain access to a venue and the funds required to organise the event.

When I first met Ruth in December 2012, she mentioned her idea of reflected glory. She told me that men more than women understand that by championing a colleague or acquaintance for a job, they would receive reflected glory when that colleague or acquaintance succeeded in that role. Ruth went further and said that men are motivated by earning reflected glory, but that women do not understand reflected glory as a purpose or end.
Within the collaboration though, actions seem motivated by the reflected glory that can enhance reputations. Through publicly taking a position alongside others as forward-thinking, enlightened, and proactive on gender diversity, business leaders enhance employer, corporate and personal brands. Business leaders make an effort to keep up with their peers/competitors and to be part of the group.

Bourdieu argues that economic, social, cultural and symbolic forms of capital are all self-interested and should be considered within a frame of mercantile exchange (2002:280-1). It is clear too that business leaders in London understand networking as self-interested. Influenced by marketing jargon, individuals are concerned with personal brands, but remain aware of how their personal brands link to employer brands and corporate brands. These brands themselves appear as if in collaboration, since the personal brand of a business leader may enhance that of the company where that leader chooses to work. Within their collaboration on gender diversity, informants speak of a journey together, meaning across sectors, companies and all of UK business, perhaps even in business beyond the UK’s borders, but also between men and women, since the business case for gender diversity is believed to make Women on Boards a business imperative rather than a special interest issue. Does this mean action through collaboration is not self-interested? As the networked social structure makes access to networks and the power-sharing these networks offer essential (Castells 2004:42), so business leaders seek to be part of the group with the most economic, social and political influence.

Enhancing employer brands through playing an active role in the collaboration was explicitly connected to what respondents called the war on talent. Annually a list of the top UK employers for women is published in a national newspaper. In Autumn 2013, I listened to a webinar organised by the business-led charity overseeing the awards application process. The webinar provided information to HR teams thinking of making an application on behalf of the company for which they worked. The whole process was set up as a marketing exercise. Companies were to self-nominate to be included in the list, providing descriptions of their best practice on policies and practices tailored for women employees, as well as of their activities which benefit female clients or customers. The presenter frequently mentioned the “profile opportunity” available to companies purchasing advertising space in the newspaper supplement in which the list would be presented. Through the revenue received from the sale of advertising space, applications remained cost-free. As well as the chance to be listed as a top employer for women, companies might also be chosen as a case study for the supplement.

The speaker representing the charity described her work and that of her colleagues as “focused on creating a better gender balanced leadership, unbiased recognition and reward for
all, and agile work cultures that are fit for the future.” She added: “One of the key ways that we work is by sharing best practice.” This demonstrates the mix between individual companies being recognised for their best practice, possibly becoming case studies in the supplement, and with the way that the sharing of best practice will impact business leaders at other companies. The media has a role in diffusing best practice through the use of profile opportunities for business leaders and their companies. I noticed the ways in which the national newspapers responded to the collaboration on gender balance. The Guardian, for example, created a Women in Leadership “community” in Spring 2013, inviting readers to sign up to receive weekly e-newsletters with “all the latest about the site”. This section provided space for numerous pieces by guest writers, as well as live online blog discussions, where those frequently appearing in panel discussions or as keynote speakers, could now reach a wider audience, enhancing their personal brands while also diffusing the business case and their opinions on the solutions to the lack of women in leadership. The Telegraph renamed their women’s section as Wonder Women, branding it an “irreverent women’s channel”. The Huffington Post launched a section online called The Third Metric intended to “[redefine] success beyond money and power”. As I discuss in Part Four, being a role model requires senior businesswomen to court the media increasingly. Social media like Twitter and LinkedIn also present opportunities for shaping a media profile.

Best Practice as a State of Mind

In this section I explore the specific norms and sanctions within the network of business leaders in London. These make clear that the collaboration’s goal is to stop government intervention in business practices. Social relations, according to US sociologist James Coleman, appear as useful resources through processes to establish obligations, expectations and trustworthiness; to create channels for information, and to set norms backed by efficient sanctions (Schuller et al. 2000:6). Bob, the team leader at a public authority overseeing corporate governance regulations, told me about how UK business leaders had worked together as a group “to get business’s reputations and practices cleaned up” over the past two decades, and that successive UK governments had recognised this when considering policy and legislative options intended to intervene in business practices. In this way, social relations constituted what qualifies as acceptable business practice. This had led to the Comply or Explain approach in the UK’s Corporate Governance Code. Bob said that most companies will comply in order to be “part of the club that’s compliant, unless they have a good reason not to [since the Code] is recognised as best practice in the market.” Following the 2011
recommendations in *The Davies Report*, the Code now requires FTSE 100 company directors to publish aspirational goals for female representation at board level, as well as a summary of performance against the company’s boardroom diversity policy. Bob explained when it is appropriate to legislate for particular business practices:

> While there are some things that are clearly unacceptable practice in any company and should be outlawed through hard law, if you’re talking about good practice it’s better to have something like this, where you have the boards becoming more accountable to the shareholders and the shareholders then having the decision as to how they respond to that.

The *Davies Report* authors also pick out the role of shareholders or investors in reviewing company reporting and board appointments (2011:5,20). As I mingled one-on-one with respondents at events and told them about my research, I was frequently asked whether I thought all the talk about *Women on Boards* was just lip service. People understood that gender balance may be used by the UK’s largest companies to rebuild corporate reputations and restore trust among investors, consumers and clients following negative press. Business leaders are keen to retain control of methods to “clean up” reputations and what constitutes good practice, as shown by the 2011 opposition to the introduction of a quota for women to corporate boards. For US sociologist Joan Acker “talk about ‘diversity’...may be another ideological form that substitutes for more structural attacks on inequality and thus legitimates inequalities” (2000:207). It seems likely that despite all the talk within London’s business community, the masculine image of the corporate world and regime of inequality will remain unchanged (ibid:199).

I saw how ideas of what constitutes good practice on tackling the lack of gender diversity are shaped and how these ideas are diffused at the events I attended. More often than not, the term best practice slipped in, and leaders would represent the practices of their company as a model for other companies. Such a focus on good practice, coupled with economic efficiency, is a key ingredient of neoliberal audit cultures (Strathern 2000). At the conference which began with Paula setting out the latest thinking on the business case for gender diversity, a law firm was one of the six associate sponsors for the conference (ranking below a bank as the major sponsor, and three companies as lead sponsors). As the last presenter of the conference, Stuart, the CEO of the law firm sponsoring the event, spoke on *Balancing Business, Accelerating Success*. He used his firm as a case study and structured his comments around three questions: “Can diversity be a source of competitive advantage? Who’s responsible for the whole diversity issue? How do you achieve alignment?”

For Stuart, diversity “used to be PC” (politically correct) but the “new notion [is that] diversity is positive for business”. He said that some suggested firms were “missing out [as
clients] want diversity that reflects them” believing that this results in empathy. Stuart argued that this was incorrect and that instead what was needed was “integration across everything – not identity groups working with each other.” This mirrors the idea of community cohesion where “strong and positive relationships are...developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods” (Cantle 2005:57). It is this interaction that creates value. Stuart spoke from a position of the benefits to us of others groups working with us. He was clear that when it came to who was responsible for diversity, leaders “at the top [must] set the tone”, acting as “agents for change”. In talking about how to achieve alignment of business practices and diversity ideals (he did not explain what diversity was), he referred to the McKinsey 7-S model that he had first come across as a student at Harvard Business School. Distinguishing between “hard esses” (strategy, structure, and systems) and “soft esses” (skills, style, shared values), Stuart said that the “ultimate leader of a business is responsible for changing culture” and assessing the alignment of the esses of the company. He described how his company was working on gender diversity and said: “Regulation does not achieve best practice. Best practice is a state of mind, an attitude [that] must come from within.” He referred to quotas as “straitjackets” and commented that “life isn’t like that.” Instead he said that companies “need a gentle push from time to time from a leader”. In this way, change would “happen with time”.

Stuart was influenced by his education at Harvard Business School that included the organisational model from McKinsey. His comments set out how some business leaders in London feel that a leader committed to gender diversity is all that is needed to change practices throughout a company. As discussed in Part Two, this is very different to the concept of culture in anthropology where groups come together to form organisations, creating cultures through their practices. Stuart’s perspective also contrasts with how Vivian saw cultures as changing through mixing, a process that Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1987) might call creolisation. As I helped tidy up after the conference, I picked up a discarded programme from one of the delegate tables and noticed some scribbled comments on the back cover: “Sounds like he’s building a case for the defence”. Another writing style beneath this gave the response: “They’re a sponsor. Just getting their airtime.” Clearly these

18 Here Stuart, while referring to diversity ideals, appears to contrast the logics of gender mainstreaming and diversity management that Prügl (2011) discusses. See earlier section Buying and Selling Networks in this Part.
19 See: mckinsey.com/insights/strategy/enduring_ideas_the_7-s_framework
20 See Changing UK Business Culture section in Part Two for discussion on the different understandings within anthropology and business studies of organisational cultures and leadership.
delegates were, like me, sceptical about what was said. They perhaps judged Stuart’s presentation as a defence of continued waiting for gradual change. Stuart’s presentation is an example of the norm that speakers present a case study of best practice at their firm. Just as corporate sponsorship of a conference may mean reflected glory for corporate or employer brands, so too can speaking at an event enhance the personal brand of a leader.

One of the clear sanctions of the collaboration was against those who suggested that a quota for women to corporate boards should replace the business-led, voluntary measures. It was common sense for most to consider quotas as straitjackets, and to view targets set by business leaders for their companies as enablers. I never heard a businessman propose that the UK government reconsider quotas, but from time to time a businesswoman would propose this. While this viewpoint was generally respected within all-women settings, suggesting perhaps that others shared this view but were keeping this to themselves, when a businesswoman voiced this opinion at an event with substantial numbers of male delegates and speakers, she risked having her views dismissed by male speakers. The way that this pro-quota perspective was silenced at events made it appear that the key belief that united the collaboration was opposition to quotas.

Earlier at the same conference where Stuart spoke, Simon, the facilitator, asked during a panel discussion: “Should we have quotas?” Victoria, a senior lawyer at a telecommunications company, revealed that she thought a quota should be reconsidered, adding “I know I’m in the minority here and it’s not a popular view. I don’t mind where quotas come from, as long as they’re there.” David, a panellist from the conference’s major sponsor, said people were “sadly, sadly misguided if they think quotas can work.” He said there were “unintended consequences when unqualified people took on roles.” David also mentioned that the quota for corporate boards had “not worked” in Norway as one woman was an NED for fourteen companies. Victoria replied by challenging the idea that there are not enough qualified women, saying that she believed that those who argue there are not enough women to do the jobs, are really saying that they do not believe women can do the jobs as well as men. Simon ended this tense moment by asking all five panellists about their thoughts on the view that a “focus on boards is not addressing the issue head on”, opening up for a discussion about how few CEOs are women and how that can be changed. Ten minutes later, as he announced it was time for lunch, Simon joked that he would be selling “ringside tickets for the lunchtime discussion” between David and Victoria.

With this, Simon wanted to raise a chuckle from the audience. He had directed the panel away from a discussion of quotas to what was considered the right focus – senior executives.
The way that David spoke of quotas not working reveals the policy paradigm of representing a problem and a solution. Members of the collaboration on gender diversity stuck closely to the solution being that business leaders adopt a best practice “attitude” or “state of mind”, as Stuart said, and change the culture of organisations with a “gentle push”. Some months earlier Felicity, the organiser of the conference, said to me: “It’s only through collaboration that change will happen.” I believe it is also through collaboration that resistance to change happens. The way that David dismissed Victoria’s pro-quotas stance as misguided, and how Simon changed the topic, demonstrated how business leaders in London collaborated to block one possible solution – a quota. They rejected how business leaders in other national contexts, however reluctantly, had achieved change through complying with a quota. While many in London represented themselves as pro-change, leaders like Stuart reflect how collaboration and talk on diversity may be legitimating current inequalities, as Acker suggests (2000:207), by accepting that change will happen with time.

The sharing of evidence about best practice and case studies at events was considered vital for changing business leaders’ attitudes and demonstrating that women’s networks; unconscious bias workshops; return to work coaching; the availability of flexible working arrangements; and mentoring programmes for women, represented a package that would increase the numbers of women in the talent pool imagined as feeding senior levels in business. Esther spoke of a mantra for the women’s network at her company of attracting, retaining and promoting female talent. Other respondents used different language, strengthening the idea of retaining to talk of progressing, cultivating or developing women. These mantras were repeated over and over again, becoming part of the shared language (Miller & Rose 1990:10) of the collaboration.

Measuring Progress towards Gender Diversity

Perhaps the clearest impact of the collaboration, acting as a norm and sanction, were the ways in which ‘progress’ was measured. In Part Two, I discussed the fixation on numbers driven by The Davies Report and how gender diversity and gender balance were imagined in terms of numbers. Particularly puzzling to me was that while most leaders seemed to unite to oppose a quota, these same leaders spent much time discussing the targets they had set for their companies. Frequently speakers made reference to the saying from management strategies that “what gets measured, gets done” or to comments they attributed to Viviane Reding, the European Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship: “I don’t like quotas, but I like what they do.” Some respondents pointed out that this was about semantics,
and indeed Victoria’s comment: “I don’t mind where quotas come from, as long as they’re there”, may well illustrate her understanding that company-set targets are not so different from government-legislated quotas. Why did the collaboration make such a distinction between a quota set by the government for all companies and the aspirations set as targets in *The Davies Report*?

All kinds of league tables were important to respondents, such as the LeaderBoards based on percentages of women directors in FTSE 100 companies and FTSE 250 companies, or the annual FTSE board report for FTSE 100 companies, most recently sponsored by Barclays Bank. These rank the ‘achievements’ of individual companies as a percentage of women on the corporate board, as well as providing an overall percentage of women on boards by sector. While companies may wish to explain the particular difficulties of achieving gender balance within the sector in which they operate, such mechanisms distinguish the companies who ‘lead’. These numerical tools illustrate a pattern for how effective the collaboration’s aim to diffuse the business case has been. The rankings also act as both a hierarchical structure and a way to compete. Other league tables look at percentages of women across a company’s workforce, or rank whole countries in terms of the numbers of women in business leadership.

In early 2014, Lloyds Banking Group made headlines for pledging to ensure a high percentage of its senior workforce will be made up of women. Writing in *The Guardian*’s Women in Leadership section, Fiona Cannon (2014), director of diversity and inclusion at Lloyds, confirmed the Group’s aim that at least 40 per cent of the 8,000 senior jobs will be occupied by women by 2020. This move was reported widely in the mainstream media and praised when shared on social media. Cannon lists a sponsorship programme, a role model programme and an unconscious bias programme as the ways Lloyds hopes to meet the target and to “lead the way in the banking industry” (ibid). A few days later, the Group announced its 2013 profit and that the CEO, António Horta-Osório, would receive a bonus of £1.7m, bucking the trend among UK banking bosses (especially the banks part-owned by UK taxpayers) to waive their bonuses (Treanor 2014).

_Collaboratively Continuing the Momentum_

In mid-December 2013, I received a Christmas email from the team at Joanna’s company. From the many activities of Joanna’s company, I expect that there would have been a few

21 See: BoardWatch from Professional Boards Forum:boardsforum.co.uk/boardwatch.html and Female FTSE Index from Cranfield School of Management: som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/ftse
thousand recipients. We were all thanked for our “continued support on this serious business imperative” (gender balance in UK business). As if raising a glass in toast, Joanna’s message continued: “Here’s to 2014 and collaboratively continuing this momentum.”

Strikingly, the collaboration in London is organised in such a way that it resembles UK anthropologist Andrew Strathern’s (1971) ethnographic description of the big-men in Papua New Guinea, and their engagement in the ceremonial exchange of the Moka. Self-interested political concerns for both clan prestige and personal prestige (ibid:220) are instead, in London, concerns to compete with other individuals and companies for reflected glory on corporate and personal brands. The exchange network is organised as reciprocal partnerships, which create a “co-operative interest in each other’s affairs” (ibid). A structure emerges through chain sequences that add group-pressure (ibid:220, 221). To maintain the alliance (or collaboration), the process of prestations must continue (ibid:214). London’s business leaders must collaboratively continue the momentum.

In this Part of the thesis I have explored the practices of a self-named collaboration promoting gender balance and the business case for gender diversity. This collaboration is mainly driven by the largest companies in the UK, such as banks, but also by law and accountancy firms, and large consultancy firms. Particular interests in what can be gained from the reflected glory of leading on gender diversity, and the resources available within particular sectors, affects how the collaboration continues to develop. I understand this collaboration as an example of a “self-reconfigurable, complex structure of communication”, ensuring “unity of purpose and flexibility of its execution by the capacity to adapt to the operating environment” (Castells 2004:4). Exclusion from this structure becomes “a good indicator of deeper structural subordination and irrelevance” (ibid:24). That the finance and legal sectors dominate the network suggests that leaders in other sectors do not hold so much political influence, see the benefits to their corporate brands or have the same resources.

Most respondents have a particular understanding of culture, believing that when a senior leadership team aligned on gender diversity implements a package of activities across the company, changes in values, beliefs and practices of all employees will follow. This understanding of culture is crucial to appreciating how business leaders understand what can be achieved through their collaboration on diffusing the business case for gender diversity and best practice to achieve gender balance. The UK government supports this collaboration as the way to bring about changes in practices. Business leaders can sign up their companies to the government’s Think, Act, Report initiative, by detailing how they identify issues around gender equality; take action to fix those issues and report on those actions (Think, Act,
Report). The information provided during sign up is used to write online case studies. By being included in the published list of signatories, company leaders will demonstrate that “they share...a common desire to be more transparent about workforce issues and disseminate best practice.” This is yet another example of how the norms of the collaboration are diffused. Signing up to *Think, Act, Report* offers “strong reputational benefits for being recognised as thinking and acting on barriers for women and reporting on progress” (ibid).

While in Part Three, I have looked primarily at how business leaders can enhance the employer or corporate brands of the company they work for through participation in the collaboration, in Part Four I turn to the expectation that senior businesswomen will act as role models, inspiring other women to aspire to business leadership roles. Important again are the ideas that best practice is a state of mind, and that the right people with the right attitudes, connecting people and ideas, will bring about wider change across society.
Part Four. Calling Women to Be Role Models

The discourse on gender diversity in business emphasises a responsibility for senior businesswomen to be role models for other women. While diffusing the business case is to tackle the demand side of the issue, encouraging women to be role models is about fixing the supply side in the market and ensuring that there are enough women who aspire to be leaders within UK business. In this Part, I focus on the question: How do women relate to this role presented in the discourse? I use Althusser’s (2001[1968]) concept of interpellation that he presents within his theory of ideology. Drawing on observations from women-only networking events, I show how those speaking at events presented themselves as role models.

The discourse on women in business assumes that women naturally lack confidence and ambition. These ideas are part of an ideology. Althusser’s starting point was Marx’s definition of ideology, or superstructure, as the dominant system of ideas and representations of a social group. Interpellation, according to Althusser, is the process by which an ideology produces individuals as subjects and where the individual recognises herself in the subject categories provided. An individual is called from outside by the ideology to take up a subject position. The details set out for businesswomen in the call to be role models, direct women to how they should act to influence change within UK business. Senior businesswomen are summoned to adopt the subject position of role model, a role that already exists and is awaiting an incumbent. To become role models though, requires that women recognise themselves as potential role models and so recognise the call is for them. While women are called to be role models, men are instead called to be mentors or sponsors to women. These different calls demonstrate the different roles for men and women within the softly, softly feminism in London. These roles relate to the gender dichotomy in the discourse.

The people I met in London recognised themselves as called to action on gender diversity in business. They wanted to demonstrate they were part of the collaboration on gender balance. As I said in my conclusion to Part Three, UK business leaders in some sectors do not position themselves within the collaboration. They do not (yet) recognise that the calls within the discourse are for them. In this Part, I show how the calls are under construction as women discuss the different ways of being a woman in business. This shapes ideas of the ‘good’ role model. I explore how ideas of masculinity and of natural femininity feed into this role. I also assess the motivations individual women have for adopting the position of role model and discuss how the good role model is contrasted to the Queen Bee type of businesswoman.
I understand the role model position as an example of emotional labour and intimate labour (Hochschild 2012; Boris & Parreñas 2010). Senior women are asked to turn “their show of personality into a symbol of the company” (Hochschild 2012:153), but in a quite different social contract than the one to which Hochschild’s informants, flight attendants, sign up. Here the employer and corporate brand is enhanced through the right senior businesswoman working at the company. A woman who is well-regarded within the business community makes the perfect spokesperson on how seriously the company takes action on gender diversity. She becomes a corporate mascot (Manning 2010:46). She encourages other women of the company’s suitability as an employer by her choice to work there, and also tries to convince investors or the media that the company’s actions to foster diversity are more than lip service. While the role model speaks openly of the story of her career at events, the intimacy may be shared with over a hundred people. Perhaps she is also paid to speak, providing intimate labour that intersects commerce and intimacy (Boris & Parreñas 2010).

Unlike her male counterpart’s public role in the collaboration, a businesswoman’s public display of emotion work is one that “affirms, enhances, and celebrates the well-being and status of others”, just as Hochschild tells us women tend to do through emotional labour (2012:164). Instead of focusing on her own success, the role model focuses on the satisfaction she says she gets from helping other women, even though by taking to the stage as role model she becomes more visible herself and might be paid. She speaks from her experiences and from what she has observed around her. She delivers her message that she has no regrets about her career choice; that the challenges are worth it; that it is possible to be authentically feminine in a masculine world; and that women must help other women at work.

This template narrative and performance for a role model connects to an emotional landscape particularly populated with guilt. Guilt is portrayed as an emotion that men do not face. As anthropologist Millie Creighton understands it, guilt results from the fear of punishment or retribution when the group finds out the individual has deviated from the group’s standards (1990:286). Guilt, like shame, is a sanction insuring socialisation of an individual (ibid:290). Shame is connected to a fear of being placed in an inferior position within the group and of failing to live up to a wished-for self-image (ibid:286). The ideal role model in London gives permission to women to be devoted to work, even when this conflicts with the expected feminine devotion to family. She tells her audience that she is a better parent and partner because of the satisfaction she gains from her career. Her performance is intended to induce particular feelings in those listening: they can do it too. While an aspect of being a role model means emphasising feelings of guilt, this guilt can be managed and guilt
should not stop women from taking career opportunities. Being read as feminine in the corporate world appears to require an emphasis on guilt about the time not at home.

*Britain’s Leading Ladies*

Women must relate to the idea of role models. A woman faces assessment of whether she is a good or bad role model for other women. While women should be recognisable as a type – a role model – there are many possible versions. Since there are a small number of women at the top of UK business, the media presents its viewers and readers with stories that refer to the same few women over and over again. Travelling by coach from London to another city, I noticed an advert with the strapline *Meet Britain’s Leading Ladies*, branded with the logo for the high street retail store M&S. These were not Britain’s leading businesswomen, however, but women from the oft-celebrated realms of fashion and the arts, acting as models in a campaign explicitly connected to female leadership. Two billboards were positioned next to each other, connected in the middle and then angled out as if an open book, drawing the viewer to two scenes where eight of the UK’s most famous women, such as Dame Helen Mirren, Monica Ali and Darcey Bussell, sat or stood close together looking directly into the camera. In one of the scenes the women were in the lounge of a country house, clustered around a sofa in front of a fireplace and dressed in coats, dresses, tops and skirts, mostly either red or black, that suggested they were dressed up for a party. In the other, the women were in more casual clothes and were in the vast, dark space of an artist’s loft cluttered with easels. Patrick Bousquet-Chavanne, Executive Director Marketing and Business Development at M&S said that the campaign, photographed by Annie Leibovitz, marked the company’s “move into a new era” and a “new and confident tone of voice” (M&S 2013). I read this as Bousquet-Chavanne’s hope that the M&S brand will bask in the reflected glory from *Britain’s Leading Ladies* and so recapture its recently lost share of high street sales of womenswear.

This marketing campaign is an example of wider trends to celebrate the achievements of women and the way that female leadership across society is being reconfigured. Female leadership is now in vogue. The M&S marketing team latch onto this in the clear invitation to their customers to buy the clothes at their local high street M&S store that they see modelled by Britain’s leading ladies. Within the UK’s senior business community, the resignification of female leadership goes beyond promoting who can be termed leading ladies and how female

22 For images of the first *Britain’s Leading Ladies* campaign, see: creativereview.co.uk/cr-blog/2013/august/ms
leaders dress, to talk about a more active role in inspiring other women to follow their example. Senior businesswomen are still expected to be models for other women though.

Feminine Power Inside and Outside the Corporate Hierarchy

In September 2013 I contacted Sally, an executive coach and co-founder of a gender diversity consultancy firm, to find out if I could observe her work. During our first conversation she talked to me about how, together with her co-founder Catherine, they had decided to focus their work on helping companies design sponsorship programmes for their female employees. She spoke of how they had set up the company following the publication of The Davies Report but how she had actually realised eight years ago that her “calling” was working with senior businesswomen. She confided that their company had not yet made money but that together with Catherine she was determined to “have a go.” She mentioned her personal values of equality, fairness and honesty and how it was “not fair that unconscious bias is keeping women out.”

Due to its early stage, there was no way for me to include Sally’s company in my fieldwork. Three months later we caught up with each other on Skype. Sally excitedly told me about being contacted by recruiters “at a very large company” who had found her profile on the social networking site LinkedIn. These recruiters were interested in the package of skills she had from her previous experience within sales and operations and her more recent work on gender diversity and coaching. She had already been interviewed twice and I was surprised that she was so openly sharing her emotions and thoughts about the possibly imminent job offer when she had not yet told Catherine. Sally told me:

I’m really torn because this is a really big global company with global brand, they are talking a really good story about wanting to bring more women into their business and I’m really torn. To be honest, Catherine and I are really finding it hard to get companies to a) recognise they need to do something different, and b) pay for us to tell them what that is.

She was torn between her loyalty to Catherine and the opportunity to “go back to what [she] used to do”. This time she could “go back and do it with [her] feminine power.” She summed up her approach ten years earlier as: “I was doing it very much from trying to be one of the blokes.” Sally began to think that she could “let Catherine carry on the flame externally and [she] would keep working internally.” She added later in the conversation that:

I think now I feel equipped, really, to be a bit smarter about the type of person I want to be and how to work with people to kind of get what I want but also to get what they want, you know.

She was clearly drawn to the new challenge of re-building her corporate career on her terms when a decade earlier she had chosen to leave the corporate world to retrain as an executive coach. Sally felt empowered through her new awareness of her feminine power and the
chance to work from within the corporate world on her calling of working with senior businesswomen. She wanted to be a role model demonstrating how women can use femininity in the corporate world, even though she also asked herself: “Am I selling out?” She was unclear if she would help senior businesswomen more through her consultancy work or by becoming again a senior businesswoman herself.

*Leaning in to Beat the Boys*

To coincide with International Women’s Day in March 2013, Sheryl Sandberg, the Chief Operating Officer (COO) of the online social networking service Facebook published her book *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead.* Sandberg had previously gained attention for her views on the low numbers of women in business through a TEDtalk in 2010 titled *Why We Have Too Few Women Leaders* and a panel discussion at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2013 alongside, among others, Christine Lagarde, *International Monetary Fund Managing Director*, and Viviane Reding, *European Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship.* In the introduction to her book, Sandberg says she fears that society is “so focused on supporting personal choices that we’re failing to encourage women to aspire to leadership” (2013:159). Sandberg sets out her message like this on how women hold themselves back:

> My argument is that getting rid of...internal barriers is critical to gaining power. Others have argued that women can get to the top only when the institutional barriers are gone. This is the ultimate chicken and egg situation. The chicken: Women will tear down the external barriers once we achieve leadership roles. We will march into our bosses’ offices and demand what we need...Or better yet, we’ll become bosses and make sure all women have what they need. The egg: We need to eliminate barriers to get women into these roles in the first place. Both sides are right. So rather than engage in philosophical arguments over which comes first, let’s agree to wage battles on both fronts. They are equally important. I am encouraging women to address the chicken, but I fully support those who are focusing on the egg (ibid:8-9).

By virtue of her high media profile, Sandberg’s book was the subject of many blog posts and articles where authors, male and female, outlined their reaction to the book. Some praised her for starting or reigniting the debate about gender and business leadership. Others questioned Sandberg’s right to tell women to lean in to their careers. Unlike most US couples, Sandberg and her husband have the financial resources to afford childcare for their young family that fits around their long hours, full-time careers. In the book’s introduction Sandberg anticipates the criticisms she would face, and expresses a hope that the book “will resonate with women in a broad range of circumstances” as she intends to “make the case for leaning in, for being

---

23 See: [ted.com/talks/sheryl_sandberg_why_we_have_too_few_women_leaders.html](https://ted.com/talks/sheryl_sandberg_why_we_have_too_few_women_leaders.html)
ambitious in any pursuit” (ibid:10,11). She recognises that she will be attacked by those who see her as “blaming the victim” but she sets out her belief that “female leaders are key to the solution” (ibid:11). Sandberg says that she proudly calls herself a feminist and that the book is “a sort of feminist manifesto, but one that I hope inspires men as much as women” (ibid:9,158). She talks of a “more equal world” and how “[w]e move closer to the larger goal of true equality with each woman who leans in” (ibid:11). In contrast to the people I met during fieldwork, Sandberg does not spend much time in the book on the business case for gender diversity, although, like many I talked to, her focus is on changing the societal expectations that mean neither men nor women have real choices about their careers and roles within the home (ibid:160). That leaning in is framed as important due to men and women being equal creates a tension with those who are instead shaping women’s difference as a commodity and underutilised resource in senior business teams.

Sandberg (2013) discusses many of the same topics I heard discussed in London, such as ‘the impostor syndrome’, the ‘fake it till you feel it’ strategy, the bringing of whole selves to work, guilt management for working mothers, and women who pull up the ladder behind them to become Queen Bees in the workplace. Karren Brady is one of the British businesswoman commenting on the role senior women have in changing attitudes within the business community. Brady, born like Sandberg in 1969, gained notoriety in Britain when she became the manager of a football club at the age of twenty-three. Her current media profile is also strengthened by her appearance in the recent UK series of the business-based reality TV programme The Apprentice. An op-ed piece by Brady (2013) appeared in a British newspaper in April 2013, a month after Sandberg’s book was published and a few days after the death of Baroness Thatcher, the first female Prime Minister in the UK. Starting by saying “Margaret Thatcher used to say, "If you want anything done, ask a woman””, the core of Brady’s message that then followed was similar to Sandberg’s:

Now is the time for more women in business to recognise their own potential and have the confidence to aim high. We cannot wait for our male colleagues to champion our cause. Nor should we be held back by any guilt that being ambitious and successful at work is somehow not acceptable for women. Too many women don’t see themselves in senior leadership and so don’t push themselves to advance their careers as their male peer group do.

Throughout the article Brady emphasises the role of business leaders (rather than businessmen or businesswomen) to instil confidence in women since women need “self-belief to challenge

24 In the UK version of The Apprentice Lord Alan Sugar, founder and chairman of technology company Amstrad, is advised by Karren Brady and others as he eliminates contestants after weekly tasks. The final contestant becomes Lord Sugar’s new business partner. See: bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0071b63/features/about
stereotypes”. She calls specifically on “every woman who [has] got to the top [to bring] just two up behind her” and so achieve a tripling in the number of women in the boardroom. Both Sandberg and Brady appear to court the media to gain the opportunity to speak out about, in Brady’s words, “too few women in senior business roles”. Both appear to take for granted a responsibility for senior women like themselves to take action to dispel what Sandberg (2013) terms a “leadership ambition gap” for women. Brady (2013) connects this gap to guilt women face about “being ambitious”. A part of both women’s narratives is what they have done in their day jobs for other women, for example with Brady talking about increasing female directors on the board of West Ham football club from none to 50 per cent. The other part of their narratives is how they impact the lives of a wider community. Sandberg has created the Lean In Foundation25, a non-profit organisation which provides lectures and materials for Lean In Circles around the world. Brady acts as ambassador for LifeSkills, a programme providing young people in the UK with skills, information and opportunities.

During my visits to London following the release of Sandberg’s book, I noticed how lean in had become a shorthand for a particular attitude that women could adopt in relation to their careers. Sandberg reveals that one of the posters at the Facebook office in Silicon Valley intended to encourage employees to take risks asks: “What would you do if you weren’t afraid?” (2013:25). Lean in seems associated with conquering fear, and is also closely linked to other short phrases often given out as advice by senior women appearing as keynote speakers or as panellists in discussions: Just do it! Go for it! Give it a try!

The phrase lean in no doubt has more salience in the US business world than in London. However, an example of how the phrase has become a reference point was when I asked Rebecca, a junior researcher at a think tank, about the working title for her research report Leaning In to Change Dominant Cultures. Straight away she told me that she didn’t like the title and then explained that up until recently the team had used the title How to Ensure Women Reach the Top. Rebecca said that they wanted “something that’s more like Lean In, something that’s catchy and short and like a soundbite” but they also wanted the title to show that the report was about changing culture26. They were having problems coming up with something “snappy” that combined lean in and culture. It seemed that Rebecca and her colleagues recognised a certain cachet in the phrase lean in and its function as shorthand. For me the phrase reflects a perspective where respondents talk of how women need to dare to

25 See: leanin.org/
26 See section Feminising UK Business Culture in Part Two on what this research report was about
pursue their ambitions, and that by individual women daring (or as some people express it, making sacrifices), all women in business will benefit. Lean in also connects to calls to women to think beyond fitting in at work, doing a good job at work, and progressing in their careers and instead to think how they can be role models for other women.

At a senior professional women’s networking event on a grey Thursday evening in Manchester, high up on the conference floor of a law firm’s modern glassy skyscraper, I got chatting with three women in their early fifties about my research. All three women told me that they had been invited by existing members of the network to come along that evening to find out about the network, and that they had been drawn by the topic of the presentations: *On the Non-Executive Trail? What’s Expected of You as an NED and How to Secure Your First NED Position*. One woman mentioned not having attended women’s networking events for a long time, while the others said that they could not remember ever having been at a business event for only women. They spoke straightforwardly about “finding their own way” and having “just got on with it” in their careers. This fitted with the idea of what leaning in involved. One woman then commented on how she was not interested for herself in changing the world of business, but for her teenage daughter, echoing the collective dimension to the purpose of leaning in. Rosie, a partner in her early fifties at a law firm, then brought up how her firm was holding a series of workshops based on Sandberg’s *Lean In* in the coming weeks across their offices in the UK. Her firm was part of a global group of law firms, headquartered in the US. Rosie said her impression of Americans is that “they’re very vocal about women’s rights.” Her US colleagues had already attended workshops at their offices and the group’s leaders in the US now wanted to roll out the workshops to all the offices globally. Rosie explained how the workshops would involve senior partners at the firm presenting the key messages from the chapters in *Lean In* and then leading a discussion on how these related to the firm.

Rosie had not yet read the whole book, but she told us about the chapter she would present. She described how Sandberg references a study that demonstrated how the exact same CV was assessed very differently when the name at the top of the CV was listed as Heidi or as Howard. Rosie described how Heidi was judged to have been aggressive based on her career experience, whereas Howard was accepted as someone who would be a good colleague and an asset in a team. The three women seemed to agree that women being treated and perceived differently to men in business all sounded like common sense to them, with one of them saying that research on these kind of double standards was “old hat”. They began discussing how in their experience it can actually be an advantage to be a woman in a male-
dominated world, and that they had benefitted from their presence as the only woman in the room during their careers. Sandberg mentions in her book that the first wave of female leaders were more concerned with fitting in with how men acted in the workplace (2013:171). For these women I met in Manchester fitting in did not exclude using their “feminine power”, to use Sally’s phrase, or at least their presence as women, powerful because of their difference. Feminist history was being restated in these ideas, with the first wave concern for equality (here as fitting in), and the second wave emphasising difference, although feminism’s waves were mapped onto the few decades women have worked in senior business positions.

A concern for “beating the boys” sums up reactions to some of the messages from Lean In that I observed during a Saturday morning event for junior professional women. About twenty-five women, most of whom had worked two to five years since graduation, met in the upstairs library of a private members’ club in Mayfair, one of the most affluent areas of London. We started by watching a lecture by US sociologist Shelley Correll (2013) available on the Lean In Foundation’s website. Correll covered how the effects of stereotypes build up during a woman’s career, particularly the stereotype that makes it hard for women to be seen as both competent and likeable. She argued that bias can be reduced or even eliminated. I watched afterwards as four attendees discussed the video. All were working in finance. They took turns to exchange stories about the most shocking practices of their male colleagues that reflected the scale of the challenge in Creating a Level Playing Field, the topic for the morning. One of the young women said that her colleagues had talked at length after a meeting about the attractiveness of a female client and had concluded that they “must get her back to present” at future meetings. Another was close to tears telling us that her colleagues had cruelly teased her for being a lesbian as she enjoys playing lots of sports, including rugby, and does not have a partner. The women discussed their backgrounds at all-girls schools, with one of them saying she was “used to women doing everything and anything” but she understood now that in the workplace there are certain things that young women are expected to do or not to do. Another said that it was this that drove her to want to “beat the boys”.

The two invited speakers, Hanna and Meryl, are the only two female Directors at an investment bank located in London. Hanna is in her late thirties, Meryl is a little older. They had been chosen as speakers because they had “remained very personable, open and warm” while “dominating in a male-dominated environment”, according to the event promotional information. Meryl was asked what had driven her during her career, with the young woman asking the question prompting “Was it to beat the boys?”, and so using the same phrase from the earlier discussion even though she had not been part of that group. Meryl did not directly
answer this but instead talked about her desire to gain new responsibilities, and her motivation to be one of the decision-makers. The conversation turned to how it can be an advantage to be a woman in a team otherwise made up of men, as a woman will be more easily noticed. Hanna advised the young women to take advantage of being the only woman at a meeting. She urged us to remember that they will be scrutinised. She suggested asking ourselves: “How will people look at me and see what I’ve achieved?” I understood this as the belief that women must make more effort than men to wear their success on their bodies, through their clothes, hair, make-up, and accessories in order to prove themselves to their male colleagues before they speak. On a separate occasion a senior woman in finance told me that she kept her hair cut short as a young woman to avoid being mistaken for a secretary.

Role models emphasised the use of physical presence to make an impact. At many events, presenters almost reprimanded female audiences for their low power postures and failure to take up space like men. They were not to imitate male colleagues though, but instead to think of how to use their bodies powerfully in a feminine way. Talking on the subject Charisma - Helping You Turn Up The Power!, Audrey, an executive coach, used a presentation that included images of Usain Bolt and Mick Jagger, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, Martin Luther King and the Dalai Lama. Other than an image of Princess Diana, praised for her warmth, the only images of women were given as examples of failure to project charisma. Audrey told us that the three components of charisma are power, warmth and presence. When asked if she thought that everyone could be charismatic, Audrey said that everyone can improve in terms of presence and warmth. This comment, and the images of charismatic men, seemed an admission of the belief that it is harder for women to be powerful. For an example of a charismatic woman, Audrey turned to fiction and urged us to bear in mind the example of Lynda Carter as Wonder Woman in the 1970s TV show, standing with her hands on her hips, although presumably not necessarily to wear the figure-hugging costume of red corset, blue shorts, red knee-high boots, indestructible bracelets, golden lasso and gold headband.

Much of the discussion about presence as a leader acknowledged a difficulty to reconcile power and female bodies. In her media characterisation as the Iron Lady, former Prime Minister Baroness Thatcher serves as a cautionary tale for female respondents concerned with maintaining their femininity at work. Femininity was closely related to authentic female selves and natural female bodies. Presence appeared to be understood as the feminine form of

27 For images, see wonder-woman.wikia.com/wiki/Wonder_Woman_%28Lynda_Carter%29/Gallery
masculine power. It was clear that the collaboration on gender balance in London required women to not only lean in, but instead to lean in as women (perhaps through being “personable, open and warm” as Hanna and Meryl were described) to allow the maximum ROI from gender balance. Senior women in business were shaping a female masculinity of sorts (Halberstam 1998), at times using a mask of womanliness (Riviere 2000) to fit with the dominant gender system in UK business. That shaping of female masculinity interacted with hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987). Masculinities and femininities are not fixed entities embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals, but instead are “configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action...[that] can differ according to the gender relations in a particular setting” (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:836). The emergent discourse on gender relations in UK business created an even clearer dichotomy of masculine and feminine practices. In the ongoing activity of doing gender in everyday interactions, how did women move between the masculine and the feminine, anticipating the gender assessment they would be subject to (West & Zimmerman 1987:130, 136)?

**Feminisation of Leadership: Accentuating the Positive**

I noticed that female respondents seemed to reject some stereotypes about women, while owning others, such as those that Paula related to nurturing. German sociologist Georg Simmel discusses how a differentiation of tasks had developed (by 1911) according to the different natures and abilities of men and women (1984[1911]:75). Referring to the medical profession, Simmel argues that one could expect a qualitatively better “medical culture” from a “female physician” as instinctively she is able to “empathise with the condition of the patient” (ibid:76). This “subjective knowledge of the...patient” (ibid) enhances the “objective and clinical methods of examination” (ibid). From this, Simmel argues that women would be able to produce more accurate diagnoses than men, since men focus only on objective methods (ibid:77). Similar views of women’s natural instinct and empathy are used to create women’s value in the concept of gender balance. These positive stereotypes were embraced by many women I met when talking about emotional intelligence (EQ).

At the evening event in Manchester when I met Rosie, each of the five round tables of seven or eight attendees were asked to discuss the desirable behaviours in an NED during Carol’s presentation on *Presence, Authority and Impact from Interview through to Boardroom*. As the women at my table started chipping in with behaviours, one of the women commented that most of these related to EQ “and that’s what women are good at.” As we continued with the exercise, we moved further away from the question Carol had asked.
The women began to discuss, as during the mingling earlier, how a woman provides a disruptive presence in groups of otherwise only men. One woman brought up how it can be difficult “waiting to make your presence felt”. She then suggested that since NEDs are meant to be hands-off and ask questions rather than provide answers, “maybe taking a backseat works well”. The women then talked about how “men always feel the need to grandstand”. By the term grandstanding they meant making your presence felt by being argumentative during discussions, and proving you are right and someone else is wrong. One of the women commented that the best way to handle grandstanding was to not get involved. When this was later discussed in plenary, Carol suggested that the Chair of the board would appreciate help from the NEDs in keeping the discussion focused on business critical decisions. Having tactics to deal with grandstanding is a part of being an effective NED. For a woman, such tactics would involve acknowledging that “men are better at banter.” She told the audience that when a man is grandstanding, a woman should “break the tension with the chap by remembering the three Is – being intelligent, irreverent and irrepressible”.

At a film showing hosted by a company’s women’s network where clients had been invited as well as employees, I saw how some of the stereotypes about women, perceived negatively, are attributed to other women. Wrapping up the event with just over two hundred City women, Esther mentioned how she had recently been a member of a panel recruiting from within the company to fill a vacancy. She commented on how she knew that “none of us here would be like this”, but that she had noticed that when the candidates had been asked about salary expectations for the role, there were considerable differences in how men and women answered. On average, the male candidates had expected a salary increase of 15 per cent. In contrast the women’s salary expectations averaged just 1 per cent more than their current salaries. This was due to two women saying they would be happy to take a lower salary as they were so keen to gain the experience that the job would provide. A feminine lack of self-confidence in negotiating salaries was often brought up as the reason men on average earn more than women.

On several occasions I observed Beth correct other women for living up to female stereotypes. For example, when one executive coach failed to promote her coaching services at the end of a presentation, Beth reprimanded her for being modest “like we women are” and then described how the presenter had built up her coaching firm in a short time and received excellent feedback from clients. Both the negative and the positive female stereotypes were taken as connected to femininity. Sometimes women needed to be more feminine, other times to be less so, to have an advantage in a situation. Noting a move from most professional
women being “associated almost exclusively with an overtly masculine type” to it being “hard
to say [in 1929] whether the greater number are more feminine than masculine in their mode
of life and character”, Riviere provides a list of the criteria of “complete feminine
development” at the time of her writing in 1929:

They are excellent wives and mothers; capable housewives; they maintain social life and assist culture;
they have no lack of feminine interests, e.g. in their personal appearance, and when called upon they
still find time to play the part of devoted and disinterested mother-substitutes among a wide circle of
relatives and friends. (2000:131)

I noted that such criteria were very important to many women in their presentation of self. It
appeared out of place to speak so frequently in a business context about the importance of
family and of personal appearance, but it was through bringing this otherness that women
were valued. Womanliness, more like a comfort blanket than a mask, protected women from
their fear of being read as masculine and made them recognisable as women who accept the
collaboration’s view that women are different and are valuable for their difference.

Enhancing Personal Brand through Becoming a Role Model

Frequently respondents spoke of personal brand, such as the advice to women to spend time
reinventing their personal brands after parental leave. This would (re)establish their position
within a team. At a women-only event, Kerry, a trainer and coach, brought up differences on
how men and women manage personal brands, telling the women delegates not to make the
mistake of thinking a mentor or sponsor would promote their brand to others. Kerry told the
women delegates: “You’re responsible for your own brand.” She also advised the women that
in order to “get the right brand out there”, they had to think carefully about the social
expectations for women, and observe both male and female leaders. She urged the audience:
“Use what you learn and work it into your style.” Later Kerry stated: “I’m comfortable saying
I’m intelligent, strong, direct and powerful. Other women wouldn’t be comfortable with that.
Get hold of your brand and be able to own that professionally.” In this section, I look at how
being a role model can enhance a businesswoman’s personal brand as a leader, turning her
into a marketable commodity in demand by companies, and making it possible for other
women to consume her stories, recognisable as versions of the ideal type of senior
businesswoman. The businesswoman becomes a corporate mascot (Manning 2010:40,46) able
to enhance employer and corporate brands through replicating a type at events.

The night before an all-day conference on management, the female Chief Executive of the
host firm organized a Women in Management evening event for about 120 women. After
presentations from two keynote speakers on encouraging women to “enter and grow” in
financial careers and in public sector careers, Wendy, a female journalist, chaired a panel
discussion with four female business leaders. Wendy asked the panelists whether they thought
it was true that “women don’t support other women.” Gina, the co-founder of an advertising
agency, said that it was “a duty” when you get to a certain level to help others saying: “People
need to hear that there are humps and that you can get over them. We all find it hard.” Cindy,
an expert on financial structuring, said it was “trendy to be a woman and help other women.”
She asked rhetorically “What are we looking for in a role model?” and referred to the value of
sponsorship, both for the junior person being sponsored and also for the person being the
sponsor. Cindy said being a sponsor was “incredibly rewarding in your career” and that
“helping others makes you look like a leader.” Leigh, director of diversity and inclusion at a
professional services firm, added that while “men piece together a role model from different
people, women expect to find one person who can be held up as a role model”. Wendy
brought up the Queen Bee syndrome and women who go out of their way to be different from
other women, with the result that that “gets them in with the chaps”.

Being a role model was presented as a duty but one that could enhance someone’s own
career. Contrasted to this was the Queen Bee who did not respond to the call of duty nor help
other women. While it seemed understood that women could progress in their careers as a
Queen Bee, the implication was that they would suffer from trying to fit in with men instead
of bringing their true selves to work. At one event two young management trainees within the
NHS told me about their fears that the stress of the job would mean they would become
Queen Bees rather than role models taking the time to help other women. Role model was a
central term for the people I met and businesswomen had to relate to the position, perhaps
feeling guilty that they would not be a good enough role model as the NHS trainees feared. It
did seem to have become “trendy”, as Cindy said, and to be understood as an essential part of
being an ambitious senior businesswoman leaning in today. Women who rejected the call to
be role models, and the emotional work involved in presenting their selves as inspiration for
others publicly, would not be recognizable as someone who understood their role within the
collaboration on gender balance. In not utilizing this option to gain visibility in the business
community, they risked being taken as not ambitious, becoming further examples of the
“leadership ambition gap”.

I saw what could be described as the production of the ideal type of role model at three
training days, a month apart, held in different cities, and with different themes, arranged by
Joanna’s company. The themes were: Communications & Managing Conflict; Mental
Toughness for Women; and Critical Thinking & Strategic Mindedness. After introductions
from Joanna or one of her colleagues, a female trainer led the morning session, providing tips and tools appropriate to the day’s theme. In the afternoon a female role model speaker would speak about her personal journey and then take questions from the audience of 80 to 150 women. The trainer then concluded the day with the second session of training. At the first event on managing conflict, I asked the trainer why it was that women particularly needed to learn what seemed to me skills useful for men and women. She did not answer the question directly but instead emphasised how the day provided delegates with the chance to network with women working in other sectors. She believed that men had an advantage in business through informal men’s networks such as playing football, squash, golf or going down the pub, as well as more formal networks. Anthropologist Karen Ho (2009) makes a similar point in her exploration of how the cultures of hard work and smartness that characterize the investment banks on Wall Street, are learned in white male spaces like country clubs.

While the largest part of these training days was spent listening to the trainer, it seemed the women delegates were to gain most from networking with their peers and from hearing from the role model speaker. These all-women events provided a learning environment for thinking about and promoting their personal brands as leaders, before returning to the workplace. It was a counterpart homosociality to that of male homosociality, where men gain masculine ritual knowledge in age sets. At these networking events cohorts of women would gain knowledge about business leadership. Such gender segregation reinforced the gender binarism of men and women requiring different training, and linked to the representation of the problem as women lacking skills in networking. As for the women on Wall Street, all-women networking spaces allowed women to hone their market feminist habitus (Fisher 2012:8). However, while the habitus of the businessman may be internalised unconsciously, the habitus of the businesswoman seemed to be understood as requiring conscious effort.

Bourdieu conceptualises habitus as:

systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (1990:53).

Within the Aristotelian tradition, however, habitus “implies a quality that is acquired through human industry, assiduous practice, and discipline” (Mahmood 2005:136). This effort leaves “a permanent mark on the character of the person” (ibid:135). Anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2005) uses this conceptualisation of habitus in her ethnography of the women’s mosque movement in Cairo. Her focus is on how, through attending lessons, the women acquire the necessary skills to coordinate their inner states with their outward conduct and to hone their
rational and emotional capacities to ensure they are exemplary models of the pious self (ibid:31). These lessons demonstrated, for example, how “the desire to pray could be cultivated and strengthened in the course of performing the sort of routine, mundane actions that occupied most women during the day” (ibid:123). As Mahmood says:

the intentional nature of this cultivation problematises the narrow model of unconscious imbibing that Bourdieu assumes in his discussion of habitus...Bodily form does not simply express the social structure but also endows the self with particular capacities through which the subject comes to enact the world (ibid:139).

Through her argument that “norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted,...but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways”, Mahmood questions the focus within feminism on the subversion or resignification of social norms as the only form of agency (ibid:14,22). By holding public meetings in mosques to teach each other Islamic doctrine, women alter the historically male-centered character of mosques and Islamic pedagogy (ibid:2). While she makes clear that embodying the feminine virtues of shyness, modesty and humility are necessary for the women’s enhanced public role, Mahmood discusses how the women’s ethical practices and moral autonomy produced “unanticipated effects in the prevailing social field” (ibid:6,152). As women rise in the corporate hierarchy in London, they too strive to be exemplary models and to embody the prevailing feminine virtues. Women’s networking events are homologous to the lessons attended by the women of Mahmood’s study. The women cultivate their habitus, learning the habits required for women to be successful in business. Through conscious, repeated practice a woman learns what is expected of her as a role model and how to make herself recognisable as a role model. These women will then help junior women also to develop the habitus.

One of the role model speakers, Eileen, a senior lawyer with experience as a board director, said she had seen how “most men have got no fear about bragging their way through everything.” She urged us to learn to be like that but also to listen to others and to “appreciate your people.” Eileen, a parent of two, mentioned how “the most stressful thing that can happen is not having good childcare.” She urged the women to “pick your partner wisely”, saying: “Most women I see who are struggling in the work environment, do not have a supportive partner who shares their career goals.” When asked: “What advice have you got about work-life balance for someone due to return to work part-time after maternity leave?”, Eileen responded, jokingly and conspiratorially, that “the corporate world is like children in a playpen”, adding that “women do not indulge in that.” She urged the woman who asked the question to reflect on parenting children and “bring that back with you. Sometimes you have to bribe people. Sometimes you have to be very strict.” Clearly for Eileen, workplace
practices made the experience of mothering\textsuperscript{28} valuable at work. Like others, she suggested recognizing how to fit in with dominant practices, bragging, but by coupling it with additional practices, listening to and appreciating others, that she implied men do not use.

The agenda for the second of these events, said that the speaker would talk about “The Journey to Becoming a Role Model ___” [name for members of the network], implying that she was a model example of a network member. Eddie had been a member of the network for several years. She sat at the front of the auditorium next to her senior colleague, Adrienne, a woman involved in promoting their company’s involvement as sponsor of the network. They staged a conversation intended to demonstrate how being a member of the network had helped Eddie’s career. Eddie said of a recent promotion at work that “being a [member of the network], made me go for it” and how attending events had “really improved [her] confidence.” Adrienne prompted her with: “Being a ___ [member of the network] is about the responsibility of paying it forward, or paying it back, if you want to call it that.” Eddie described how she now mentored other women, teaching them about the learnings from the network’s events. She said she was proud that three of these women had now been chosen to join the network (the membership fee paid for by the company she, Adrienne and the three women worked for). Eddie mentioned the mantra of “You lift as you climb”, and Adrienne asked her: “Having accepted you are a role model, what does it feel like? What are your three tips?” Eddie replied that being a role model was a responsibility “all about helping others”. She implied that it was necessary to take the position seriously, saying: “Be responsible for being a role model.” She urged the delegates: “Be authentic. Be true to yourself.”

The role model speaker at the final one of these events, Margo, started by responding to the introduction by the facilitator of her as a role model, saying “I want to be a bit humble around that. Am I really a role model?” She went on to warn the delegates “Don’t expect my journey to be perfect!” As she described her “professional adventure” in which she had never stayed with a company for longer than five or six years, she said that her advice to others would be: “Recognize that sometimes you need to lean back.” She felt that for her the “frontier between professional and personal life is very blurry” but said she respected “others who are better able to segment” their lives. She expressed a wish that she had “taken the chance to lean back from [her] career at certain points.” Margo urged the delegates to “learn

\textsuperscript{28} Mothering rather than parenting, since fathers were not understood by my respondents to take the same role in bringing up their children. Fathering did not imply the same skills or experience as mothering to the people I met.
to manage [their] energy rather than [their] time”; to think about how to give back to those in
their network; and to “embrace change and risk, but be clear about what does not change.”
She finished by saying: “I really do believe in the Lean In message, but I also think it’s really
important to mix the two messages”, at times leaning in, and at times leaning back.

There are common themes in the narratives of these role models. The women strive to
show that they are not perfect, that they make mistakes and they struggle to feel they are
doing a good job (at work and at home). They tell us that they recognize the responsibility of
being a role model, even if unsure whether they deserve the role. We also learn how these
women have created their personal brand from observing the practices of the men and women
who have been colleagues, bosses, mentors and sponsors.

*Invite the Women – Just as They Are*

The theme of guilt management for working mothers was never far away when barriers for
women in their careers were discussed. One female recruitment specialist working in-house at
a company said during a small group discussion: “We need role models with rounded lives
rather than unmarried women without children who make it look like women have to choose.”
This respondent clearly assumed that *all* women want children, but that most who pursue
senior careers in business are forced to abandon this desire. Distinguishing between female
role models with rounded or non-rounded lives forced a decision for individual women: Did
stories about their career have to also include how decisions in their personal life had affected
their career? Did those who were parents have to talk about managing childcare as if part of
their career? Did those without children have to acknowledge that managing their career had
not been so difficult as for those with children? The idea of role models with rounded lives
implied that women should demonstrate how it is possible to be devoted both to career and
family. Women without children, without rounded lives, seemed to be deemed less
inspirational somehow. No doubt a rounded life implied care for a husband. During fieldwork,
Adrienne was the only female speaker I heard mention her female partner.

Some women clearly stated that if there was an onus on women to present strategies on
how to balance work and family, then that onus must also be on men. They dismissed the
questions directed only to women about how they managed (to have it all). One female
panellist at an evening panel discussion titled *How Does She Do It?* arranged by a women’s
network, said: “From Day One I refused to be guilty. It’s a choice based on economic reality
in the UK. It’s futile that working and non-working mothers are made to feel guilty about
their choices.” Most role model speakers emphasised their guilt *and* their ability to manage it,
as a way to inspire others that they too could be business leaders. The majority I met perpetuated the idea that women face the competing devotions of work and family (Blair-Loy 2003), did not question how the two devotion schemas, seen as mutually exclusive, also remove choices for men (or if they did question how the schemas impacted men, concluded that working fathers did not face the guilt working mothers did), and implied a denigration of the professional success of women not living a rounded life with a husband and child(ren).

The idea of role models with rounded lives also links to ensuring that roles models are women who the ‘average woman’ can relate to. Role models needed to be simultaneously extraordinary and ordinary. While speaking and acting as role models required that a woman recognise she was one of the few extraordinary female business leaders, role models were also to reflect the stereotypes of women’s lives and competences and so appear ordinary. Earlier I discussed how the stereotype that women naturally possess EQ is embraced within the UK’s collaboration on gender balance. Below I quote at length from an article titled Emotional Intelligence and Diversity that was posted to LinkedIn by the female director of a company offering consulting services to companies looking to improve their gender diversity.

Authenticity is one of the key competencies of emotional intelligent leadership. A comprehensive study of leadership culture from ‘The Leadership Circle’™ analyses the effectiveness of 200,000 leaders globally finding that those with the strongest emotional intelligence are leading the most successful companies. These leaders are good at fostering collaboration and responsiveness excelling in skills such as empathy, conflict management, self-awareness and integrity. Competencies that come naturally to women are now recognized as harnessing a culture that inspire and motivate teams.

Instead of asking our female leaders to ‘lean in’ perhaps we should be asking them to ‘show up’.

In this way we will be harnessing the emotional intelligence of leadership teams while fostering diversity that already exists.

When we talk about diversity we are talking about encouraging and accepting difference.

You want a diverse leadership team?

Invite the women - just as they are, (bold in original, Beacon Women 2013)

Here ideas of the authenticity and naturalness of women’s EQ competencies are understood to mean that women should be “invite[d]...just as they are”. By saying “invite the women”, the female author intends her message for businessmen, rather than businesswomen who would instead be asked to invite other women. The author calls on businessmen to reach out to women and to welcome women’s natural difference. She contrasts showing up with leaning in which appears associated by the author with fitting in with men. The natural woman is essentialised.

As I have discussed though, speakers at events had plenty of advice for women on how to develop themselves, making themselves board ready, a better networker, or more charismatic,
for example. The idea of authenticity, or showing up “as they are”, confused most businesswomen I met. They did not believe that they, any more than a businessman, would be welcomed if they simply showed up, but instead accepted that certain practices, always gendered, would be required of them. Senior women in business, in taking up the position of role model, demonstrate their relation to the idea of women “just as they are”, accentuating the positive female stereotypes, giving advice on how to overcome the negative ones and showing how they bring their feminine presence to work. It was clear from their stories that they shaped their brands and their femininity as they climbed the corporate ladder. Each knew what advice she would give to her younger self and provided that advice to the junior women listening, making it clear that no woman shows up just as she is. A role model’s gender was not embedded in her body or personality traits, but instead was configurations of practice differing according to setting (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:836) and changing over time.

In this Part of the thesis I have discussed a call for more women to step up as role models as part of leaning in. Calling on more women to speak out publicly as role models is perceived as a vital part of tackling the leadership ambition gap. This understanding of the necessity of role models assumes that women lack self-confidence. Being a role model is framed as a duty but also as a practice that will enhance a businesswoman’s personal brand. In recognising her duty to help other women, a businesswoman also enhances her femininity in contrast to the Queen Bee who thinks only of her own career. I have discussed how becoming a role model requires observing practices by male and female business leaders, and rather than fitting in with men, finding a way to lean in in the workplace using their “feminine power” to ensure that leadership teams are more diverse. The ideal type of role model helps other women understand the potential for being feminine in a masculine world. She helps build the idea that collectively businesswomen will change the corporate world so that women in time can show up “just as they are”, even if this femininity is learned over time through concerted effort.
Part Five. Conclusion: Market Leadership on Gender Diversity

Rachel, a fellow greeter for Ruth’s network, speaks at the network’s annual lunch in late November 2013 in front of over three hundred guests. She explains how she joined the greeting team to connect to City professionals, and how she has found the annual award winners’ speeches “motivating and inspiring”. She then reveals she has recently completed a Master’s at ____ Business School (audience applauds) and that she is “looking for any relevant work experience within finance” (roars of cheers coupled with applause). Later I notice Rachel removing the potted plants that had been the centre pieces to the tables that the guests sat at for lunch. She takes out one plant at a time to the main foyer so that they can be sold to lunch guests donating to charity, and then returns for the next plant. Rachel tells me that Ruth has asked her to do this so that she will pass the guests as they make their way to the cloakroom to collect their coats. An hour later, I glimpse Rachel marvelling at the pile of business cards she has been given.

In an e-newsletter three months after the lunch, Ruth described how the network had helped Rachel start her career – Rachel is now working for one of the lunch guests who was impressed by her “courage and initiative”. Disappointingly my fieldnotes do not capture more of Rachel’s comments that day. I remember her gushing with praise about the female award winners. What she did say, got her what she wanted (a role as executive assistant to a finance director, not as a plant arranger!). She showed herself grateful to Ruth for the opportunity to speak at the event, grateful to the senior women receiving awards who inspired her and clear about what she wanted to do next in her career. As I said in Part One, I have also had to relate to the discourse on gender and think about my own career during this project. The widespread discourse on women in business impacts the labour market in Stockholm too, leading to more networking events intended to help companies find female talent. International Women’s Day 2014 (8 March) saw me and several hundred others at a hotel for the Women in Technology conference in Stockholm. Chatting to other women in the hotel bar in the post-conference mingle, I talked about how the ideas in this thesis overlap with my job search in Stockholm.

As I write, it is just over three years since The Davies Report was published. The debate about women in leadership, women on boards and gender diversity in business continues to make news in both the UK and Sweden. In February 2014, Jens Spendrup, the Chair of business lobby group Svenskt Näringsliv, was widely criticised in the Swedish media for declaring that the low number of female board directors is due to a lack of competent women. In late March 2014, the fifty largest UK companies with all-male boards were named and
shamed in the UK media. As Sweden moves towards an election later in 2014, and as the UK prepares for an election in 2015, *Women on Boards* is one of the many areas that politicians are questioned on. Among the network that I observed during my fieldwork in London, there is a general feeling of self-congratulation that so much ‘progress’ has been made. With 20 per cent of FTSE 100 board directors now women, a quota has been ‘proven’ unnecessary after all. The target of 25 per cent by 2015 recommended in *The Davies Report* is believed to be within reach. “Only 48 more women needed to meet the 25% target” said the headline heralding the release of the latest *FTSE 100 Board Report* (Cranfield University School of Management 2014). The same people also note that there is more to be done to fix the talent pipeline and increase the number of women holding executive directorships. The press release from the Department of Business, Innovation & Skills quotes Lord Davies:

> The rate of change that we have seen at the heart of our biggest companies over the last 3 years has been impressive. The voluntary approach is working and companies have got the message that better balanced boards bring real business benefits. We are finally seeing a culture change taking place at the heart of British business. However, the eyes of the world are on us as we enter the home straight. They are judging us as to whether the voluntary approach, rather than regulation, will work – we need to now prove we can do this on our own. (BIS 2014)

I began this project wanting to explore ethnographically what was happening in the UK to reconfigure gender relations in business, or, as Lord Davies would put it, to bring about a “culture change”. Rather than add to the volume of studies intended to ‘prove’ why more women are needed in business leadership and how companies can recruit, retain and promote more women, in this thesis I have problematised the discourse about women in business leadership. I first explored the ideas set out in the business case for gender diversity. I showed how the concept of gender balance indicates a belief that men and women naturally complement each other, and how the business case assigns a value to adding women’s difference to leadership teams. I then discussed some of the practices used to demonstrate a collaborative network united against a quota: events to diffuse the business case; company presentations of best practice in managing the female talent pipeline; the monitoring of numbers of women in companies; and senior women speaking as role models for others.

Taken as a whole, this thesis has explored how a market is being created around gender balance, helping to shape new practices that may enhance personal and corporate brands. While I have not specifically focused on the experts or brokers within this marketplace, they are ever-present advising, as well as monitoring the magical numbers that for Lord Davies will “prove we [the UK] can do this on our own”. The collaboration in London is an example of the transnational discourse that builds on women’s supposed innate nurturing and risk-averse qualities. It is but one moment in one context. What is striking is how adopting a
position within this discourse has a value in the marketing of self and of organisation. As I have explored, emphasising the business issue is important to the collaboration when they imagine how the UK voluntary approach is different to the social policy approach of those whose ‘judging’ eyes are on the UK. I have considered how the collaboration’s ideas relate to the concept of market feminism. The logic of markets shapes the way that individuals understand what is to be gained in the marketplace from being seen as part of the collaboration; and explains why a business case that financialises women’s value is required. Company leaders collaborate while also competing to lead the market on gender diversity.

From the start I was concerned about the stereotypes of men and women that are promoted within the debate connected to Women on Boards and how ‘women’ is becoming an asset on a checklist of the essentials for strong business performance. This is but one example of many feminisms. As with other feminisms, it is shaped by and for a particular group of men and women in a particular gender system. While I believe there is space for multiple feminisms making impacts for men and women in different contexts, as this is a feminism diffused by such powerful individuals and through the organisations they work for, representing mainly white middle and upper class interests, there must be concern that this feminism becomes hegemonic and drowns out other feminisms as versions of the business case circulate transnationally. This feminism does not critique political economy, ideology and culture or even, I believe, intend to significantly change corporate practices. It is limited to monitoring numbers of women and assuming that this means ‘women’ are represented.

Carrying out fieldwork in the country where I grew up, led me to explore how cultural models are being re-shaped, rather than focusing on how these models were historically shaped. I have only provided a partial view of how ideas of femininities are being incorporated into the gender systems of UK business. More studies are required on how businessmen relate to practices now desirable within business but deemed as naturally feminine. While I have referred to ideas of hegemonic masculinity and female masculinity, without having spent time in male homosocial environments, I cannot conclusively talk about how gender relations in UK business are being reshaped. What I have shown is how ideas of the feminine and the masculine feed into the role model position for senior businesswomen; and the role that senior women play within the collaboration on gender balance – inspiring other women in ‘intimate’ all-women environments; persuading men of the business case and appropriate practices; and bringing men and women together on the business issue. It remains to be seen in what ways practices and ideas in the UK further adapt in response to what some consider a new demand for the feminisation of business leadership.
Bibliography


M&S. 19 August 2013. *Only M&S: Marks & Spencer Invites You to ‘Meet Britain’s Leading Ladies’*. Accessed 4 February 2014 from: [corporate.marksandspencer.com/investors/press_releases/only_m_s_marks_spencer_invites_you_to_meet_britains_leading_ladies](http://corporate.marksandspencer.com/investors/press_releases/only_m_s_marks_spencer_invites_you_to_meet_britains_leading_ladies)


Merry, Sally Engle. 2009. *Measuring the World: Indicators, Human Rights, and...*


Strathern, Andrew. 1971. The Rope of Moka: Big-Men and Ceremonial Exchange


Appendices

Glossary
CEO: Chief Executive Officer
COO: Chief Operating Officer
C-Suite: Corporate executives at C-level, such as the CEO, Chief Financial Officer, and COO
EQ: Emotional Intelligence
ESF: Executive Search Firm
EU: European Union
EVP: Executive Vice President
FCA: Financial Conduct Authority
FTSE 100: The 100 companies listed on the London Stock Exchange with the highest market capitalisation.
FTSE 250: The 101st to the 350th largest companies on the London Stock Exchange
FTSE 350: The largest 350 companies by capitalisation which have their primary listing on the London Stock Exchange, including the FTSE 100 and the FTSE 250
M&A: Mergers and Acquisitions
NED: Non-executive director positions within corporate boards, contrasted to the executive directors such as CEO
NHS: National Health Service
PC: Politically Correct
ROI: Return On Investment
The City of London

Within central London lies the City of London - the City within a city. The City, nicknamed the Square Mile, is the historic heart of UK finance and trade. Today financial services are split between the City and Canary Wharf. Most events I attended were in the City or very close by. Fieldwork also took me to Canary Wharf three times. Canary Wharf is an area in East London developed since the late 1980s and which contains some of the UK’s tallest buildings. Around 9,000 people live within the City and about 380,000 work there (contrasted to the 130,000 who work in Canary Wharf). Arriving for, or leaving after, evening networking events, I saw the City’s workers streaming towards Liverpool Street station or over London Bridge towards the train station of the same name that lies south of the River Thames.

Services within the City are administered by the City of London Corporation. The ceremonial position of Lord Mayor of the City of London heads this local council. This role is quite different from that of the political position of Mayor of London. The Mayor oversees the London Assembly’s work for all of Greater London. In September 2013 Fiona Woolf became the second woman (in over 800 years) to be elected to the position of Lord Mayor. When she took up office in November 2013, my respondents blogged and talked about the ceremony.

Some of the livery companies, guilds that date back to the Middle Ages, still have their halls within the City. Members of these livery companies continue to have important roles in the City’s governance. In October 2011, following action by Occupy Wall Street in New York, Occupy London protestors camped outside St. Paul’s Cathedral, pitting themselves against the City of London Corporation. It took until February 2012 for the camp to be torn down. Many of the protestors’ demands concerned the lack of transparency about how the City is governed, such as how businesses with offices within the City receive votes in City elections.

The City of London Corporation works to “support and promote the City as the world leader in international finance and business services” 29. In May 2014 some of the statistics listed on the Corporation’s website were:

- 37 per cent of the global share in foreign exchange occurs each day in London
- 598 foreign companies are listed on the London Stock Exchange – 18 per cent of the global total
- 70 per cent of global eurobond turnover is traded in London

__________________________

29 See: cityoflondon.gov.uk/about-the-city/who-we-are/Pages/key-facts.aspx
This appendix lists all the respondents mentioned in the thesis. I have given them pseudonyms and do not name the companies for which they work. The vast majority of the people I met are white British. I have omitted details on ethnicity and nationality (or country/region of the UK that a person comes from) as these would make anyone not white British easily identifiable. While this approach to anonymity is characteristic of anthropological writing, it is at odds with how publicity and branding opportunities seem to influence many of my respondent’s actions in relationship to gender diversity in business. I have stripped respondents of this opportunity for promotion of self or company.

I met many more people than listed here, but the list gives a partial representation of the ages and occupations of the people I met. Where I refer in the thesis to newspaper articles, posts to LinkedIn, online videos or books that are publicly available, I use actual names.

Adrienne: Forties, employed by the main corporate sponsor of Joanna’s company to be the link between the two companies

Alice: Early fifties, solicitor

Audrey: Late forties, executive coach and motivational speaker

Beth: Mid-thirties, chair of a national network for women working in a particular industry

Bob: Early sixties, team leader at a public authority working on corporate governance

Carol: Late forties, director at an executive search firm

Catherine: Forties, executive coach and co-founder, along with Sally, of a consultancy helping companies set up sponsorship programmes for women

Cindy: Forties, expert in financial structuring at law firm

Claire: Mid-forties, founder of a group of company Chairs advocating more women on boards, and senior leader in finance sector.

David: Early fifties, senior director from the main sponsor for Joanna’s company

Diana: Early forties, founder and owner of company with online network for women working in the City of London

Eddie: Late thirties, working in finance at same company as Adrienne, David and Esther

Eileen: Fifties, senior lawyer with experience as a board director

Ellen: Late forties, director at an executive search firm with responsibility for searches within the financial sector

Emily: Late thirties, works within finance at a professional services firm, and is developing the existing women’s network for her division

Esther: Late thirties, chair of committee coordinating activities of a company’s internal women’s network, works in finance at same company as Adrienne, David and Eddie

Felicity: Thirties, operations director at Joanna’s company

Gina: Late forties, co-founder of an advertising agency

Hanna: Late thirties, managing director at an investment bank
Jackie: Forties, founder of a company providing training in networking skills

James: Mid-fifties, chief executive at a company within the financial sector

Joanna: Mid-forties, founder and chief executive of a company with a women’s development programme; a national network for senior women with five regional centres; and an annual conference

Judith: Fifties, journalist and presenter,

Julia: Fifties, president of a women’s network in London

Kerry: Forties, executive trainer and coach

Leigh: Late forties, director of diversity and inclusion at a professional services firm

Louise: Late forties, co-founder of company providing global webinar platform, public workshops, corporate programmes and coaching with previous experience within finance sector

Margo: Late forties, general manager of online events site

Melissa: Fifties, executive coach and gender diversity consultant

Meryl: Early forties, managing director at investment bank

Paula: Mid-thirties, senior researcher in occupational psychology at a consulting and research institute

Pippa: Forties, executive Director of membership organisation helping women become ‘board ready’

Rachel: Twenties, greeter for Ruth’s network and recent graduate in finance and management

Rebecca: Twenties, researcher at a think tank

Rosie: Early fifties, partner at Manchester law firm

Ruth: Early sixties, speaker on business networking and founder of a women’s network in London

Sally: Forties, executive coach and co-founder, along with Catherine, of a consultancy helping companies set up sponsorship programmes for female employees

Sara: Forties, co-founder and director of a gender balance consultancy

Simon: Fifties, journalist and event facilitator

Stuart: Sixties, CEO of law firm sponsoring annual conference on gender balance

Tina: Mid-forties, US economist and CEO of a company encouraging investment in women-owned companies

Val: Forties, Rebecca’s boss at the think tank’s research team

Victoria: Fifties, senior lawyer at a telecommunications company

Vivian: Late thirties, founder and CEO of law firm

Wendy: Forties, journalist and associate editor of national newspaper