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# **A Postfeminist Sensibility at Work**

Rosalind Gill, Elisabeth Kelan and Christina Scharff

**Postfeminism remains a relatively unexplored concept for scholars in the area of gender and organizations. In this article we first provide theoretical perspectives on postfeminism and elaborate a critical approach to it. Postfeminism is seen as a concept, rather than an identification, that can assist in understanding the patterning of gender in the modern workplace. The second part of the article illustrates different discursive moves that we observed in our own research exploring how sexism is repudiated and how gender fatigue is enacted. This meta-theme is supported by four discursive moves: first, gender inequalities are routinely allocated to the past or, secondly, to other countries or contexts; third, women are seen as the advantaged sex; and fourth, the status quo is accepted as just how workplaces are. The article thereby makes a contribution to understanding the patterning of a postfeminist sensibility both theoretically and empirically in the work context.**

*Keywords:* discourse analysis, gender inequality, organization, postfeminism, sexism

## **Introduction**

The contemporary analyst of gender, work and organizations is faced by a bewildering array of contradictions. Feminist ‘manifestoes’ and self-help books top the bestsellers list, enjoining (middle and upper class) women to ‘lean in’ (Sandberg, 2013) or close ‘the confidence gap’ (Kay and Shipman, 2014), yet official figures

show the stubborn persistence of inequalities and how very far we are from ‘getting to 50-50’ (as another popular title would have it). In the UK, the (neo)liberal feminist topic de jour – ‘women on boards’ – has reached saturation point in the media, with the London *Evening Standard* championing the cause on its pages almost every day, whilst other feminist issues remain stubbornly ignored – particularly those concerned with low pay. Hashtag feminism or ‘clicktivism’ marshal enormous energy and promise to change the world, yet empirical studies highlight the difficulty of even speaking about gender in many workplaces – the animosity, fatigue or simply blank incomprehension that makes inequality unspeakable or even unintelligible.

In the last two decades the notion of ‘postfeminism’ has become a key feature of the feminist lexicon, a way of making sense of this contradictory landscape of contemporary culture – a landscape deeply marked by struggles for equality, yet in which a feminist ‘revolution’ remains unfinished and progress is at best uneven, at worst characterised by myriad processes of backlash, ‘recuperation’ and commodification. Across many fields of Sociology, Media and Cultural Studies and Arts and Humanities disciplines, postfeminism has been widely discussed. Amongst feminist scholars it has been the subject of animated debate and contestation, not least, it would seem, because of its ability to speak to some of the distinctive and contradictory features of the current moment. However, whilst it has achieved prominence across some areas of intellectual endeavour it has attracted little attention within Gender and Organization Studies (GOS) – with a few significant exceptions (for example, Kelan, 2009a; Lewis, 2014).

The aim of this paper, then, is to introduce postfeminism and to elaborate a critical approach to it – highlighting its analytical value for thinking about key issues in work and organizations. The paper is divided into two broad parts. In the first, we

discuss the literature about postfeminism, differentiating a number of contrasting perspectives, articulating our own critical approach, and examining some of the key features that constitute a postfeminist sensibility or regime – including the prominence accorded to ‘choice’ and ‘agency’, the emphasis upon individualism, the retreat from structural accounts of inequality, and the repudiation of sexism and (thus) of the need of feminism. Following Lewis (2014), in the second part of the paper, we look at how themes or tropes of postfeminism play out in contemporary work situations, drawing on our own research. Examining sites as diverse as information and communication technology companies, business schools, and classical music performance, we analyse four key features of a postfeminist repudiation of gender inequality: the ‘pasting’ (Tasker and Negra, 2007) or ‘overing’ (Ahmed, 2012) of inequalities such that they are safely located in the past; the relocating of gender inequalities to other places, frequently using a racist/Islamophobic discourse in which inequalities are positioned as not here but ‘there’; the construction of being female as an advantage in the workplace; and a discursive repertoire we call ‘*c’est la vie* accounting’ in which inequalities are presented as ‘just how it is’, in a way that does not require social transformation, but simply (harder) work and entrepreneurialism on the part of each individual woman. Each of these discursive moves act in concert to repudiate sexism and to display gender fatigue, the simultaneous acknowledgement that gender might play a role but does not. These discursive moves, we contend, comprise an element in a wider postfeminist sensibility, or, to use Joan Acker’s (2006) potent phrase, inequality regime. These elements are historically and culturally specific and patterned, coming to constitute a postfeminist logic or structure of feeling that traverses individual workplaces. Postfeminism as a concept, we want to argue, helps us to see and identify the patterning of this cultural sensibility or regime.

The contribution of this paper is thus both empirical and theoretical.

Theoretically its aim is to articulate a critical perspective on postfeminism, but to do so in a way that works from the ground up, starting from the identification of the elements, ideas and discourses that make up this sensibility. As we explain more fully below, our approach takes postfeminism to be our analytical object, not our theoretical stance. That is, we are interested in critically interrogating postfeminism as a distinctive sensibility or gender regime, not in ‘signing up’ to postfeminism. In this sense we are *analysts of postfeminist culture* rather than postfeminist analysts – a problematic slippage which characterises much writing about the notion. Our approach is also distinctive in three other ways. First, in its concern to connect postfeminism to what we understand as a wider neo-liberalisation of contemporary culture – explicitly extending the notion of neoliberalism to culture and subjectivity, not merely political and economic domains. Secondly, in our intellectual heritage in critical discursive studies and psychosocial studies – which brings with it attention to language and discourse, and to the ‘psychic life of power’ (Butler, 1997), as we discuss below. Finally, we are interested in the *dynamics* of power and inequality – for example, in thinking of sexism not as a single, unchanging thing, but as a fluid and malleable set of practices of power: its forms change, mutate, adapt, are reinvented – and it is precisely this combination of dynamism and stability that the concept of postfeminism seeks to address, capturing sexism in its ‘endless variety and tedious monotony’ (Fraser and Nicholson, 2010, p. 234).

### **Postfeminism: a contested concept**

The term postfeminism was first used in the 1920s to describe the reaction against women’s activism in the early part of the 20th century (Faludi, 1991). However, it fell

out of use for many decades, only coming to prominence again in the 1990s – most notably in the fields of cultural studies, media studies and gender studies. The term is hotly contested and has animated significant debates amongst feminist scholars. As Dick Hebdige (1988) noted of the similar proliferation of meanings around the notion of postmodernism, this is partly because there is perceived to be something worth struggling over; the term matters. As with postmodernism, many debates about postfeminism circle around where it is situated ideologically and how exactly the ‘post’ in postfeminism should be understood. For some, it signals a break with feminism; for others the continuation of a (different) feminist project. As Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon (2009, p. 3) argue, this contestation extends to the written presentation of the word, including the significance of the hyphen (or not), something that ‘might imply a semantic rift between feminism and postfeminism, instantly casting the latter as a negation and sabotage of the other’.

It is possible to identify four broad ways in which the notion of postfeminism is used: to mark out an ‘epistemological break’ within feminism, signalling the emergence of a new perspective influenced by poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonial thinking; to posit an historical shift and a generational ‘moving on’ within feminism – sometimes allied to the third wave; to signify a backlash against feminism; or to capture a distinctive sensibility. In the remainder of this section we will contrast theoretical, historical and backlash perspectives, then in the next section elaborate our development of the notion of postfeminism as a sensibility, intimately related to neoliberalism.

For a number of writers, postfeminism is understood as an epistemological break with second wave feminism and marks ‘the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including post-modernism, post structuralism

and post colonialism' (Brooks, 1997, p. 1). 'Post', as it is used in this sense, implies transformation and change and signals a critical engagement with earlier/other forms of feminism. It represents a challenge to 'hegemonic' Anglo-American feminism, with its 'dominant and colonising voice' (Alice, 1995, p. 11). It is alleged to have arisen partly as a result of critiques from black and Third World feminists, which destabilised dominant feminist theorising and interrogated the right of (predominantly) White Western (Northern) women to speak on behalf of all others. Combined with this were the critical challenges mounted by post-modernism and post-structuralism, which called into question the ways in which feminist theory relied on dualistic thinking and upon totalising concepts (such as 'patriarchy'). Postfeminism in this sense marks a shift away from a focus on equality to a focus on debates about differences, and a shift away from structural analysis and meta-theorising towards a more 'pluralistic conception of the application of feminism' that 'addresses the demands of marginalised, diasporic and colonised cultures for a non-hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and postcolonial feminisms' (Brooks, 1997, p. 4).

According to Anna Yeatman (1994), postfeminism represents feminism's 'coming-of-age'; able to tolerate difference and to reflect upon its location in relation to other political and intellectual movements. This would seem to suggest that postfeminism is a theoretical orientation or perspective, yet in practice it is hard to find work that actually operationalises the term in this way. Despite these programmatic statements, indeed, few scholars *identify as postfeminist* in the way that they might identify as a postcolonial or poststructuralist scholar.

By contrast, some scholars regard postfeminism as an historical rather than epistemological or theoretical shift, but one that very much remains *within* feminism

(rather than a backlash, break or aftermath, as others would have it). This approach attempts to periodise feminism and regards postfeminism as a period after (the height of) second wave feminism. Robinson argues that postfeminism is ‘part of the continuing transformation of feminism ... a way of thinking through the implications of feminism with mainstream culture’ (2011, p. 114). It has a strong generational ethos, kicking off against ‘older’ feminism and offering itself, as Patricia Lewis (2014) has argued, as a more ‘girly’, ‘sexy’ brand of feminism. Sometimes it is used synonymously with Third Wave Feminism (particularly in the US context, where the notion of a third wave is more fully developed). It seeks to mark a time not after feminism per se, but after a particular moment of feminist activity and a particular set of feminist concerns. For Joanne Hollows (2000), postfeminism is not necessarily anti-feminism, but represents a new kind of feminism for a new context of debate. Hollows is angered by a type of feminist analysis that holds new writing and contemporary cultural texts (whether films or sitcoms or chick lit novels) up against a ‘1970s version’ of feminism – only to find them wanting. The feminism in such popular texts is always said to have been ‘neutered’ or ‘co-opted’ or ‘emptied of its radical potential’ she argues, whereas it may in fact have simply changed – for a new moment. Such critique, Hollows suggests, serves to reify feminism and works on a ‘recruitment’ model, rather than thinking of feminism as dynamic, negotiated and in a process of permanent, on-going transformation.

This is a powerful argument and the critique of second wave ideas as the ‘one, true way’ is an important one. The problem comes in specifying what, if anything, might constitute the content of postfeminism – how it is to be distinguished analytically? Are all features of culture, which post-date the second wave to be treated as automatically and necessarily postfeminist? If so what value does the term have, if



it is merely co-terminous with particular decades? Furthermore, how might it be possible to distinguish between different ideas or discourses *circulating simultaneously* at any one time – ideas associated with a pre-feminist era, anti-feminist ideas, feminist ones? It is striking also to note the absence of attempts to claim a postfeminist identity – which stand in stark contrast to the enthusiastic embrace of third or fourth wave feminisms as identity positions.

A third way in which postfeminism is used is to refer to discourses that constitute part of a backlash against feminist achievements or goals - the ‘post’ in postfeminism, here signalling a reaction against feminism (Faludi, 1991). Backlash discourses take many contradictory forms. They often work by attributing all women’s unhappiness to feminism, but may also suggest that ‘all the battles have been won’ or, conversely, that ‘women can’t have it all – something has to give’; that ‘political correctness’ has become a new form of tyranny; that (white) men are the real victims, and so on.

Important proponents of this perspective include Susan Faludi, whose 1991 book popularised the notion and has been germinal in formulating ideas about reactions against feminism. The work of Imelda Whelehan (2000) and Judith Williamson (2003) has also been important in thinking about the revitalised forms of sexism in the media after – and in response to – the height of second wave feminism. Interestingly, both writers point to the existence of a new/old ‘retro sexism’ in which period framing or retro styling (for example, from the 1950s) come to constitute an alibi for constructions of men and women which, if expressed directly or in contemporary settings, would garner significant critique – viz for example the ‘ironic’ reclaiming of terms like ‘totty’ or ‘filly’ to describe women.

Notions of backlash may help to make sense of the affective force and power of some of the anti-feminist ideas circulating in contemporary culture. Social media, in

particular, have become a key site of hate speech or ‘e-bile’ (Jane 2014) directed at women – whether they are journalists, academics, campaigners or celebrities.

Journalist Caroline Criado-Perez, who argued in favour of having a female figure on one of the British bank notes, was subject to intense abuse online and received multiple death threats and rape threats in response to her mild-mannered campaign. In the same year (2014), actor Emma Watson was ‘punished’ on social media for speaking at the UN about women’s rights by further vicious hate speech and threats to expose her private pictures. A recent analysis of more than 5,000 comments on mainstream news sites such as BBC and Huffington Post in response to a campaign to ‘lose the lad mags’ revealed the dominance of vicious constructions of the campaigners as totalitarian ‘feminazis’ with no interest in equality or democracy – clearly evidencing a hostile backlash (García-Favaro and Gill, 2015).

As we have argued elsewhere (Gill and Scharff, 2011) backlash arguments are valuable for trying to speak to the normative or ideological content of postfeminist discourses, but they do not tell the whole story. In particular, the focus on harking back may miss what is new about contemporary depictions of gender, as well as tending to underplay the extent to which the entire history of feminist struggle has been characterised by ‘strategies of resistance, negotiation and containment’ which a linear model of backlash understood as ‘achievements won and then subsequently lost’ cannot illuminate (Tasker and Negra, 2007, p. 1). Moreover, whilst notions of backlash and retro sexism have been crucial in highlighting the reactive (as well as reactionary) nature of many contemporary representations and discourses, the elision of postfeminism with anti-feminism misses a crucial feature of current gender regime, namely the entanglement of feminist and antifeminist ideas (McRobbie, 2008). It is

precisely this entanglement that endows postfeminism with its cultural force – as well as making it so hard to critique.

### **A critical approach: postfeminism as a sensibility**

A different way of approaching postfeminism is to be found in the work of scholars such as ourselves who regard it as a ‘sensibility’ or ‘discursive formation’ or ‘cultural dispositif’. In this body of work, postfeminism is neither a new theoretical approach, nor a historical development within feminism, and nor is it simply a backlash – though it may indeed have many reactive and regressive elements. Instead it is the *object of study*, rather than an analytical perspective or theoretical stance. As analysts of postfeminist culture, we are interested in critically interrogating the ideas and discourses that comprise the ‘common sense of postfeminism’. The term is used to describe the empirical regularities observable in contemporary beliefs about gender. A growing body of scholarship has developed over the last decade attempting to identify and map these – outlining the contours of a postfeminist sensibility – across a range of empirical examples (for example, popular film and media, self-help, body culture). From analyses of these broad popular cultural sites – as well as a growing body of research looking at work experiences within the cultural and creative industries (Conor et al, 2015; Gill, 2002; Kelan, 2009a; McRobbie, 2008; 2015; Scharff, 2015a), it is possible to point to a number of broadly agreed upon features of postfeminism as a distinctive sensibility: a focus upon empowerment, choice and individualism; the repudiation of sexism and thus of the need for feminism alongside a sense of ‘fatigue’ in gender; notions of make-over and self-reinvention/transformation; an emphasis upon embodiment and femininity as a bodily property; an emphasis on surveillance and discipline; a resurgence of ideas of sexual difference. This is not a definitive list –

and nor should it be regarded as beyond contestation – rather it is an interpretation, a way of capturing something about the patterned nature of social life – even while it keeps moving and changing – a shorthand, it might be said, for a particular and historically specific constellation of ideas about individualism, choice, entrepreneurialism, gender difference, and so on.

Writers from this perspective share several broad concerns. As noted briefly already, most importantly they take postfeminism to be the object of analysis and think about it as a cultural sensibility with particular patterned features. There are differences among analysts in how the ‘post’ in postfeminism is understood from this perspective. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra articulate a widely-shared view when they note that it concerns: ‘A set of assumptions ... having to do with the ‘pastness’ of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned or celebrated’ (2007, p. 1). A slightly different emphasis is placed by Angela McRobbie who highlights the ‘*undoing* of feminism’, in which feminism is ‘taken into account’ only to be repudiated:

(Postfeminism) positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality has been achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force (2004, p. 255).

Although McRobbie here highlights a temporal dimension – it is ‘no longer needed’ – we believe that the notion of undoing feminism need not necessarily refer to a particular historically located movement, but rather it is connected to a disavowal of any need for radical social transformations of gender.

In an important intervention, Simidele Dosekun (2015) asks whether postfeminism is a transnational phenomenon or merely one limited to

Western/Northern countries. Examining new forms of ‘spectacular femininity’ in Lagos, Nigeria, Dosekun draws on interviews with young Lagosian women to argue that they are postfeminist subjects par excellence, constructing their sense of self out of discursive resources that would be recognisably postfeminist whether they occurred in London, New York or Lagos. Dosekun is able to make this argument, we contend, despite Nigeria not having experienced a feminist movement resembling those in Europe or the US, and therefore not being postfeminist in a simple historical sense, because of the notion of postfeminism as sensibility on which she draws (Gill, 2007). This formulation allows for the de-anchoring of postfeminism from a rigid and sometimes teleological view of history, highlighting that to speak of postfeminism as a sensibility is to speak of a constellation of beliefs, ideas and practices that are dynamic, that travel, and that change.

Another shared theme in contemporary writing about a postfeminist sensibility concerns the extent that it overlaps with neoliberal ideas. Whilst neoliberalism is traditionally understood as a political and economic rationality characterised by privatization, deregulation and a rolling back and withdrawal of the state, it has also been conceptualised as a novel form of governance (Harvey, 2005) that is ‘reconfiguring relationships between governing and governed, power and knowledge, sovereignty and territoriality’ (Ong, 2006, p. 3). Foucault characterised neoliberalism as an operation of power in which the enterprise form is extended to all forms of conduct and encompasses subjectivity itself. It thus becomes a mobile, calculated technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising.

Much critical work on postfeminism highlights its resonances with neoliberalism (McRobbie, 2008; Gill and Scharff, 2011), whilst more recently there has been

discussion of the extent to which neoliberalism may in fact be colonising feminism (Fraser, 2013; McRobbie, 2013; Rottenberg, 2013), ‘making it over’ in ways that render it safe and unchallenging for corporate culture, for example, through ‘individualising technologies’ that put the focus on changing women, rather than challenging an unjust world (Gill and Orgad, 2015). There is not space to discuss this in detail, but here we want to highlight three connections between postfeminism and neoliberalism. First, both appear to be structured by a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves in wider society. Secondly, it is clear that the enterprising, autonomous, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely-choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism. Thirdly, it would seem that women, to a much greater extent than men, are called on to work on and transform their selves – and particularly to remodel their interiority, their subjectivity, for example to make themselves into more confident or ‘resilient’ subjects in the workplace (Sandberg, 2013; Kay and Shipman, 2014). This alerts us to think about the psychic life of neoliberalism and postfeminism (Gill, 2016) by which we mean the ways in which neoliberalism and postfeminism are registered, negotiated and lived out on a subjective level (for a discussion of the term ‘psychic life’, see Scharff, 2015c).

Patricia Lewis and Ruth Simpson (in press) have argued that Catherine Hakim’s preference theory represents a key example of postfeminist ideas in an academic context – in downplaying social or cultural influence, and structural inequalities, and highlighting women’s power as the architects of their own destinies. In this way, gender differences in employment come to be seen as the outcome of personal preferences, tied to an understanding of profound differences between men and most

– if not all – women. The re-animation of a language of gender difference has itself been identified as a stable and recurrent feature of a postfeminist sensibility – evidenced in the popularity and uptake of ideas from evolutionary psychology as well as the pervasiveness and tenacity of ideas such as ‘Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus’ (Gray 1992).

One of the central features of postfeminist common sense is its adherence to an individualist project, and its tendency to formulate issues in individual terms, that point away from structural understandings or collective solutions. A watchword of the sensibility is ‘choice’, constructed around a view of the female subject as autonomous and unconstrained by any lasting power differences or inequalities. It is this preoccupation with ‘choice’ that we turn to next in the empirical part of the paper, as we attempt to show how a postfeminist sensibility animates contemporary experiences and sense-making about gender at work.

### **Methodology and methods**

In addition to discussing what can be analysed as a postfeminist sensibility in the modern work context, we want to explore how a postfeminist sensibility might express itself in studies on gender and organizations. In order to do so, we decided to focus on specific examples from our own research, which has explored the negotiation of gender inequalities in the workplace. The empirical data presented in the following sections draws from various research projects. These projects included extensive interviews with female and/or male employers, took place in several countries, such as the UK, Germany, Switzerland, and spanned 10 years (2003 to 2013). The studies also focused on different sectors, including the cultural sector and the classical music profession more specifically, as well as information

communication technology work, professional service firms and a business school.

Some of the studies have been published, others have not been published yet.

*--- Table 1 here ---*

Methodologically, our work is based on the understanding that words are constructive of and constructed by social realities and that one can start to understand these constructivist processes by analysing discourse (Gill, 1996; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). For this, we draw on the basic tenets of discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). These include the idea that discourse is seen as a social practice, that discourse is not a proxy to tell us something beyond the text, discourse is constructive and constructed by the social world, discourse is action-orientated and functional, discourse is occasioned and finally discourse is rhetorically organised (Kelan, 2009b). The central question that discourse analysis seeks to answer is ‘how is participants’ language constructed, and what are the consequences of different types of construction?’ (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 55). One of the key analytical tools of discourse analysis is the ‘interpretative repertoire’: ‘A recognisable routine of arguments, descriptions, and evaluations distinguished by familiar clichés, common places, tropes and characterisations of actors and situations’ (Edley and Wetherell, 2001, p. 443). An interpretative repertoire can be linked to a register that is drawn upon to make a point and that often follows similar stylistic constructions (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In analysing texts and interpretative repertoires, discourse analysts adopt approaches that are ‘etic’ (imposing a frame of reference) (Edley and Wetherell, 1999, 2001) or ‘emic’ (drawing on the conceptual framework of those studied) (Speer,



2005; Speer and Potter, 2000). An etic perspective informs our work where elements beyond the text can be included in the interpretation.

All of the three authors have used versions of discourse analysis in their research to explore how gender inequalities in the workplace are negotiated in and through discourse. We draw on our own work to illustrate what we term postfeminist discursive resources that we have found in our prior work. These postfeminist discursive resources can best be understood as interpretative repertoires that structure sense making on gender in the work context by drawing on elements of a postfeminist sensibility. The aim of the article is to make the interpretative repertoires, the unquestioned tropes and the ‘winning arguments’ in everyday talk on gender visible, in order to show how postfeminism expresses itself in novel forms of ‘common sense’.

### **Analysing a postfeminist sensibility at work**

In our various research projects, we identified recurring interpretative repertoires that occurred in talk about gender inequalities at work. These repertoires came to the fore in individual research projects, but also characterised discussions of gender issues across the different studies. In the following, we will explore one overarching meta-level interpretative repertoire: that of the repudiation of sexism, where the existence of sexism in modern workplaces is minimised. We will then look at four subsidiary postfeminist interpretative repertoires which in concert support and underwrite the meta-interpretative repertoire, and in which an air of ‘fatigue’ pervades discussions of gender. These are: 1) the allocation of gender inequalities to the past and 2) to other countries and contexts, 3) the portrayal of women as the advantaged sex and 4) the acceptance of the status quo. Each section will include empirical examples from our

various studies, and foreground how gender inequalities tend to be disavowed at the level of talk and discourse.

### *Repudiating sexism and gender fatigue*

Even though gender inequalities are prevalent in the industries and contexts that we have researched (Scharff, 2015b; Kelan, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, Kelan and Dunkley Jones 2010, Kelan 2014), female research participants frequently state that they have not had any personal experiences of sexism or other forms of gender discrimination. This is despite the fact that some inequalities are very visible as they relate, for example, to the very low numbers of female conductors (Scharff, 2015b) or the underrepresentation of women in technology professions (Kelan, 2007, 2009a, 2009b). Our discursive approach, and our analysis of a postfeminist sensibility help us make sense of this apparent paradox. Common expressions used by research participants in the classical music profession which disavow sexism and express a postfeminist sensibility included statements such as ‘I haven’t ever experienced actual sexism’ (Christine), ‘I really haven’t felt like I’m in a bad position because I am a woman or something’ (Daniella), and ‘I have never detected a gender problem’ (Jana) (Study A). Similar statements were used in the management education context when gender in the business school was discussed (Study B). In this study, the Master of Business Administration (MBA) students regularly disavowed that gender matters in the business school context. Caroline, for instance, was asked if it matters that three quarters of students on her MBA programme are male and she said: ‘No. No, I don’t, I don’t register [gender]’. She continued by saying that in business schools gender and race fall away because they do not matter much. Caroline also stated in another part of the interview: ‘I never saw a glass ceiling. There never was’, thereby discounting that

any gender inequality might exist in the workplace. Others like Peggy claimed: 'It's [gender] not an issue at all'. Similarly, Andrew stated: 'It [gender] doesn't mat- it it it, honestly doesn't matter to me'.

Even if research participants acknowledged existing imbalances, such as the lack of female composers in the classical music profession, they presented these inequalities as not having an effect on their personal lives (Study D). Carolyn commented that there are 'very few female composers'. A composer herself, she however went on to say:

But it is not actually something I've ever been bothered about. I don't really think it's important in any way. I don't think it makes my career stronger or weaker. It doesn't seem to impact.

Carolyn's statement includes a disclaimer (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975), which is a rhetorical device that allows speakers to ward off potential interpretations of their statement. Carolyn's initial observation of the underrepresentation of female composers could be interpreted as highlighting gender inequalities. This interpretation is however undone through Carolyn's subsequent assertion, introduced by the conjunction 'but', that the low number of female composers has never affected her career. In repudiations of sexism, disclaimers are frequently used. Similar to Carolyn, Jasmin, a flautist, observed: 'In all the big orchestras, there simply really are fewer women. But I've never had anything to do with this and never had a problem with it'.

Another way of repudiating sexism is through minimizing negative experience by claiming that it was a rare – if not unknown – phenomenon. For instance, when Charlotte claimed 'it only happened once' when explaining that she was not accepted with a client because she was a woman (Study A). Another woman, Laura, in this study reported that when 'the customers did not know me, I always had to prove

myself', but once she did that, she said 'that was my breakthrough'. This means that even when gender discrimination occurs and is difficult to deny, women often construct it as a one-off. This minimization of gender discrimination might be a way to cope with the experiences of gender discrimination that women have.

By focusing on personal experiences, using rhetorical tools such as the disclaimer, or minimising experiences of sexism, female research participants disavow the potential impact of gender inequalities on their working lives. More specifically, their narratives are marked by individualisation (Bauman, 2000), where personal experiences become uncoupled from broader social dimensions, such as gender. In female workers' accounts, there is a marked focus on individual experiences, which means that gender is not framed as a structuring force. Interestingly, and tellingly for the postfeminist era, female workers much more readily admit that other factors, such as age, affect their working lives (Allen et al., 2011; Kokot, 2014):

I sometimes – and that doesn't have anything to do with the fact that I'm a woman – have the feeling that I'm underestimated, and I find it difficult to deal with that ... But it's simply because, it has often had to do with the fact that I worked with people who are older than I am, sometimes five, six or seven years older. (Silke)

When I was on trial with that orchestra and there was another person on trial and he was male, and was older. He was in his 30s, and then he was obviously a lot more comfortable. I still think my age was the issue there, rather than the fact that I am female. (Robyn)

These statements attribute difficulties at work to factors other than gender. Of course, dimensions such as age may also affect individuals' experiences. It is, however,

notable that gender is consistently taken out of the equation. This resonates with a postfeminist sensibility, where gender inequalities are associated with a bygone era (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008). There is also an acceptance among some younger women that sexist terms are not necessarily derogatory. April said:

Occasionally you get referred to as doll or whatever but it's never a sort of derogatory way since I have been here I have not been treated like a secretary or anything like that being young and female occasionally you know you might think it might happen, I have never had anything like that.' (Study C)

Related to the repudiation of sexism, gender inequalities and the ways they may affect individual working lives seem to be unspeakable (Gill, 2014). When asked whether musicians talk about gender issues, Monika responded: 'Gender and gender equality is, for us, simply a bit – it's not a big deal because it doesn't concern us directly' (Study D). Indeed, gender inequalities seem to be not only unspeakable, but also unintelligible – the phrase 'I don't know' punctuated our interviews across diverse fields. If sexism is disavowed, then it becomes difficult to make sense of particular experiences or trends that suggest the persistence of gender inequalities.

Amanda observed:

A lot of harpists are women. My teacher at the [prestigious orchestra], he is a male, and the principal in [another prestigious orchestra] is also male.

(Interviewer: Do you know why that is?)

No, I don't.

Equally, Eve stated:

I guess you could say that women are really underrepresented as well, especially in the areas I have been in. There is not a lot of promotion or hype around female artists. Why, I don't know.

In these statements, gender inequalities do not figure as a possible explanation. The research participants do not seem to know how to make sense of their observations, suggesting that sexism is not simply repudiated, recognised and denied, but also increasingly unintelligible. After reviewing this meta-interpretative repertoire, we will now proceed to discussing the ways through which this overarching theme was substantiated further.

*The historical view: gender inequalities happened in the past*

In the postfeminist era, gender inequalities are frequently presented as something that happened in the past and that no longer characterise the contemporary world (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008). The work on the classical music profession found that research participants frequently located inequalities in the past (Study D). When asked about her experiences as a woman working in the classical music profession, Linda stated:

I don't really think about it, to be honest. I don't think it is so much of an issue now as perhaps it was, so I mean I might be aware that a lot of the players in orchestras. At the moment, there are a lot more men than women, but I think that is sort of a leftover from a generation ago, when that was the norm. But as new players are coming in, I think women are, you know, accepted as valid musicians just as much, if that makes sense. So I don't feel that it is a barrier in any way, I suppose, at the moment.

Similarly, Ursula remembers that she and her female colleagues who are technical specialists were often mistaken for call centre workers, who tended to be female and not technically qualified in that organization (Study A):

I never had [an experience of gender discrimination], well, in the beginning, when I started, I had such problems ... But that only happened for one or two years and then the customers knew me ... That only happened right at the beginning.

While first stating that she never experienced gender discrimination, Ursula goes on to provide an example of how gender discrimination happened in the past. By situating the experience in the past, she is minimising the experience and suggests that it could not happen today.

The trope of generational change is frequently evoked in the portrayal of gender inequalities as passé (Whelehan, 2000). A research participant in Study D discussed her experiences as a woman playing for a prestigious orchestra. She first commented on the traditional views of some older, male members of the orchestra, but then went on to say ‘Obviously, the good news is that my generation is completely fine’.

Similarly, in the professional services context generational change was often mobilised to talk about gender inequality (Study C). Dan spoke, for instance, about how his father would not have accepted female leaders because ‘they’re not going to be strong enough’. He then goes on to disavow that gender plays a role in today’s workplace, saying: ‘But it’s not like I’ve actually ever seen that [that women are not strong enough] ... I think maybe it’s a little bit more balanced now’. Here the prior generation, embodied in his father, is used to justify that change has happened. This enables Dan to state that he has not noticed any gender inequalities. Interestingly, however, he went on to talk about the fact that men still earn more than women (‘I

think maybe men earn a little bit more still on average'). This acknowledges gender inequality while equally minimizing it through saying that generational change has happened. Similarly, Kareena reflects on her female dissertation supervisor at university stating that she feels equal now but that when the supervisor was younger, she was not equal:

By the very nature of her generation she had to act and behave differently. But because she did I don't have to and so that's, I think that's the generation difference.

This presumes that due to the fact that an earlier generation of women acted differently and challenged gender inequality, Kareena and other younger women can now enjoy being equal without having to fight for it (Study C).

In these accounts, change tends to be constructed as always-already progressive, implying that gender relations are bound to become more egalitarian (Edley and Wetherell, 2001). Reflecting on the under-representation of women in conducting, Michaela noted: 'Actually, there are already quite a few female choral conductors, but just not so many high-profile conductors. So that's the point. But it's getting more and more and this is really a very big change' (Study D). Similarly, Saaga observed:

I think the time is changing. I think that generally it has been such a male-ish profession, earlier on, like everything else, like scientists as well, and it has been that the big jobs have been men's things and I think it is slowly starting to change.

The construction of change as progressive forecloses the possibility that things may change for the worse and that different forms of sexism may persist.

Resonating with other tropes that are commonly used in disavowals of sexism, such as the positioning of women as the advantaged sex (see section on women as



advantaged), the pace of social change tends to be portrayed in a way that suggests women are now privileged:

I think within orchestras, particularly now, in a lot of the orchestras that I play for, it's almost swung the other way, there's almost more women than men. And not just in the string sections, in the violins or whatever. You go in and men are in the minority. (Hope)

We have so many women in the orchestra [Interviewer: especially in the violins, right? There are probably a lot of women]. Yes, but it is also always becoming more amongst brass players and in percussions. Now they are everywhere. So, I think, soon there'll be a big surplus of women. I'm pretty sure about that.

(Kristina)

These statements suggest that gender equality has almost gone too far by stipulating that women now populate many sections of orchestras and men are in the minority (but see Scharff 2015b). The allocation of gender inequalities to the past and to an older generation, as well as the portrayal of change as progressive and fast-paced, discourages critique of current, and potentially on-going, gender inequalities. Change is portrayed as something that happens inevitably with time, which also means that more proactive approaches to tackling inequalities tend to be considered unnecessary. Equally, social movements, which seek to address issues of inequalities and social justice, such as feminism, are rendered redundant. If change is always progressive, and if it happens seemingly automatically and quickly, feminism is not needed. As discussed in the section on repudiating feminism, feminism is considered redundant in the postfeminist era.

*The spatial view: gender inequalities happen elsewhere*

In addition to locating gender inequality in the past, it is also not uncommon for research participants to construct gender inequalities as happening elsewhere. This ‘elsewhere’ could mean outside of the company (Study A). Interviewees regularly stressed that the scarcity of women in the two studied organizations was not due to any discrimination on the side of the company; much the contrast. Robert for instance stated: ‘But I don’t think it is due to the company that we have no women in this area (technology). [The company] is very open in this respect’. Here Robert denies that the organization he works for is responsible for the lack of women in technology.

Similarly, Marcel stated: ‘But I don’t think they [women] are disadvantaged in any way. [The company] tries very hard to be really neutral, what concerns gender’. What we see in these accounts is that responsibility for gender inequality is relegated away from the organizations. Instead, location is often blamed in particular specific local cultures such as by Marcel saying: ‘We have fewer women here in Switzerland on the market and consequently we have few women in the company’.

Prior research by Czarniawska and Calás (1997) found that students often associate gender discrimination with happening in a different country. This shines through in Danielle’s account, when she claims that male colleagues who are insecure and lack confidence sometimes have issues with women (Study A): ‘I mean with the ones that are generally macho types (...) Often it is men who are a bit Latin<sup>1</sup> or are just a generation behind’. Here we not only see a reference to temporal arguments to deny the importance of gender (see previous section) but also a reference to location – loaded with implicit racism – where ‘macho’ men are associated with Latin or Southern men, most likely coming from Southern Europe. These Latin men are constructed as being behind on gender equality. Other countries were also associated

with less progressive views on gender issues (Study D). Reflecting on the risk of sexual harassment, Alice pondered:

It depends what country you are working in. You know, different countries – like Germany – I would imagine would be fine, because the laws and regulations, but somewhere like Italy, where men are much more ruling. I don't know.

By locating gender inequalities in other countries, the research participants disavow the relevance of inequalities to their personal lives.

Another way in which spatiality is brought in to account for gender inequality is through reference to working with clients. This became clear in the example of Ursula, who was not accepted by a client. Charlotte's situation with a client was also reflected on by herself as well as by Boris (Study A):

A client came to us and Charlotte was in the meeting as well, she has exactly the same education as we do, and the client said, really bad, that was five years ago, he said 'it's clear who's taking the notes' (gesturing towards Charlotte) ... And she was really there to talk about technical things. (Boris)

Gender discrimination happens here with a client who does not accept Charlotte's technical expertise and relegates her to a note taking, secretarial role. Charlotte reports the following: 'Well, it only happened once, but it was in a bank and it was a bit of a conservative environment'. In her statement, the experience is firstly constructed as a single event, which repudiates the general relevance of sexism, and secondly as taking place in a specific environment, which is seen as fostering gender inequality.

Through these accounts, gender inequality is constructed as happening elsewhere and not in the present organization or work context. The strategies to achieve that include talk about the local culture which influences the gender equality climate in organizations or references to clients or men who come from societal or

organisational cultures that are represented as backwards in relation to gender equality. It parallels a trend in wider culture in which feminism is considered as necessary only in 'other' backward societies (see Scharff, 2012)

*The female advantage: why it is an advantage to be a woman*

Apart from repudiations of sexism, a further common trope in discussions of gender at work is the representation of women as the advantaged sex. This trope came for instance to the fore in interviews with female, classical musicians (Study D). Thinking about her experiences as a woman in the profession, Astrid noted: 'I have never had problems with this, ever. To the contrary, I think, with certain people, it's easier for women'. In discussing her views on gender equality in orchestras, Robyn equally stated: 'I have heard stories about people getting jobs because they are female and they got on particularly well with maybe a male member of the orchestra'.

Interestingly, women's alleged privileged position in the profession was frequently attributed to sexual attractiveness and appearance. According to Ashley: 'There are extra opportunities for ladies who are well-represented for things like television and all that'. Also talking about TV work, Hope expressed a similar view:

Nowadays, I think in some ways sometimes being a woman can be advantageous and I know a lot of the guys feel marginalised because they don't get that type of TV work.

As has been argued elsewhere (Scharff, 2015a), the representation of women as advantaged puts at risk female musicians' reputations and credibility as artists, rests on narrow and exclusionary notions of sexual attractiveness, and is misplaced in a context where sexual harassment is present. For our purposes here, it is worth noting that women are not only constructed as advantaged, but that men's relative privilege

is disregarded and that they are positioned as 'marginalised' instead. This politicised language is rarely used to describe women's position in the workplace. While gender inequalities that affect women tend to be repudiated, men's alleged marginalisation is explicitly named. This can be seen clearly in the recent media interest in the relative pay disadvantage of male models compared to their female counterparts, an issue that received extensive media coverage in Winter 2015/6 after model Colton Haynes 'spoke out', framing his comments as a daring intervention in a devastatingly unfair (to men) world – his 'bravery' reinforced by reporting suggesting a heinous taboo had been broken: 'Finally. Someone said it'. Suddenly the gender pay gap became a newsworthy story – but only when it adversely affected men. The humdrum routine reality of women's earnings disadvantage (calculated as only 85% of equivalent male pay by Fawcett 2015) rarely excites this much interest.

The notion that women are advantaged also surfaced in technology-intensive organisations (Study A). Steven said, for instance:

In an IT-related environment, which is dominated by men, it is certainly an advantage. I think a woman has many advantages that she could use if she wanted to.

Steven here seems to suggest that women are standing out more which is an advantage for them particularly in an environment where there is the political will to increase the number of women such as in technology-intensive professions. The female advantage was also discussed in another piece of work (Study C) which explicates this more:

I think sometimes it's-it's- it's good to be a woman because they just (.) because you STAND OUT straight away HEHE in a team. So when you say something

people will probably remember it because oh that's you know if you are sitting in a room of like twenty people. (Kareena)

Kareena here argues that being in a minority is an advantage because people remember what one said because it is so unusual to have a woman in that role.

Through mobilising a discourse about the female advantage it appears that traditional power dynamics are inversed and rather than being a woman is associated with disadvantage is it actually an advantage.

Within the wider context of the disavowal of gender inequalities, the positioning of women as the advantaged sex also means that there is little understanding of, and support for, measures that address gender inequalities, such as positive discrimination. In research on the classical music profession (Study D), research participants voiced concerns about such measures because they feared they would call into question their achievements and skills. Discussing her experiences as a female composer, Holly stated: 'I know there are some people who think "Oh, you know, maybe she only got that opportunity because she is a woman"'. Hope expressed similar concerns about her playing in certain orchestras by saying:

And, sometimes, I feel a bit odd about that, because I think 'Well, am I here because I tick a box, or am I here because they really want me here, because I can do the job?'

In light of the pronounced gender inequalities that characterise the classical music profession and the current absence of quotas (Scharff, 2015b), it seems almost paradoxical that female musicians fear being regarded as advantaged on the basis of their gender. This apparent paradox can be made sense of by recalling what is absent from these discussions about gender issues at work: men are not presented as a privileged group. The question of whether a man is in a particular role because he is a

man is not asked. This absence suggests that men continue to be the unmarked gender, and that their apparent entitlement to inhabit particular roles in the workplace remains unquestioned (Kerfoot and Knights, 1996; Puwar, 2004; Salzinger, 2004).

Along with reservations about positive discrimination, talk about gender issues at work also seems to be characterised by repudiations of feminism. Responding to a question of whether being a woman had ever worked to her advantage or disadvantage, Julianna stated: 'I have never had anything like that. I have never felt anywhere like that. I think it's nice to be a woman! You know, feminism is over'. While Julianna was one of a few research participants in a study to repudiate feminism explicitly (Scharff, forthcoming), statements such as hers suggest that feminism constitutes a contested terrain in the contemporary, postfeminist era (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008). Linked to wider social, cultural and economic trends such as individualisation and neoliberalism, the disarticulation of sexism means that feminism is not easily claimed (Scharff 2012). Whilst this is not to disregard the resurgence of feminist activism in recent years, which we discussed in the introduction, it is to highlight the ambivalent, fraught and complex nature of engagements with feminism in the postfeminist era. As our research on gender and work suggests, feminist perspectives partly seem to be foreclosed through the disavowal of sexism and on-going gender inequalities.

*This is just how business is: accepting the status quo*

Another interpretative repertoire through which research participants talked about gender refers to an acceptance that there is a status quo that one has to accept, particularly if one wants to advance as a woman. This was present in Study B on MBA students. When asked why she is not a member of a women in business school

club, Frances replied: 'Cause women don't do business, men do. So if you don't, if you want to do business, you have to learn to play business like a man'. It thus appears to Frances that networking with women does not have much value if one aims to advance in business because business is done by men. Similarly, when asked if it bothers her that most of the case studies, the prime teaching method on MBA programmes, are about male protagonists, Emma responds: 'Most of the case studies are about men, but that's just the way the world IS'. Here Emma does not see the fact that there are few women protagonists in case studies as problematic. Instead, she sees it as a reflection of how business is. These statements imply that it is futile to resist the dominant gender order where men run businesses. A better strategy in the view of the female MBA students seems to be to accept the status quo that business is run by men and prepare for operating in such a world. While this might be a strategic and career-oriented choice, it leaves the male domination of business unquestioned. The onus is on women to play the business game based on rules made by and for men. Systemic gender inequality therefore has to be downplayed to keep the hope alive that women can succeed in a male business world.

Another variant of the interpretative repertoire of acceptance surfaced in Study D on the classical music profession. In responding to a question about whether sexism was ever discussed amongst female colleagues, Emilia replied:

Not so much, I mean like there's stuff like – I mean for example this gig that I told you I would do this weekend, the guy wants to have four hot girls you know. So you can use it as well. And so I mean it does come up, I think I don't know you just have to kind of be cool about it.

Prior to this statement, Emilia had reflected on the experiences of some of her female acquaintances who worked in particularly male dominated segments of the classical



music profession, such as the brass section of an orchestra. Here, too, the interpretative repertoire of acceptance surfaced:

And I know the principal bassoon player in [prestigious orchestra] has to deal with like quite a lot of crap from the other guys. And yeah, I think actually, now that I think about it, I think it can be like sometimes there can be kind of sexual comments kind of thing that they have to deal with, and yeah but ... I think they just put up with it.

In these statements, the status quo is accepted, either by expressing the need to be 'cool' about the fact that one was chosen to perform not on the basis of one's skills alone, but because of one's sexual attractiveness or by putting up with sexual comments. In both cases, the word 'just' is used, arguably to trivialize reported incidences of sexual innuendo in the workplace and to downplay the lack of a more assertive or even politicized response.

Material from another study that focuses on young professionals (Study C) offers a slightly different facet of why the status quo is maintained. In this research, young professionals regularly refer to women choosing to leave the workplace once they have children in order to explain why business is male dominated. When asked why there are so few women in the professional service firm she works at, Christine states:

I think that has a lot to do with the fact that women hit about thirty-two and they think, oh I've got to have a baby, and then they kind of go off and have a baby.

Christine follows on from this statement by providing an example of a senior female colleague who had a baby and did not plan to take much time off but who eventually went on maternity leave for a full year. Christine not only uses the example to support her statement that women 'go off and have a baby' but also to provide an explanation as to why there are not more women in her work context. Similarly, Harry talks about

the fact that the promotional tournament in professional service firms intensifies when people are in their thirties as people achieve the coveted partner status:

Like if you've excelled, that's kind of thirty-one, thirty-two onwards, you might make that [partner]. And I guess that's the kind of period which lots of women are looking to start families ... But for senior executives who are women, I mean I can almost count them on one hand.

Harry makes the point that making partner and starting families coincide for many women in their early thirties and draws on this as an explanation as to why there are no more women in senior management. In this account Harry not only accepts that this is how the business world functions, but also offers a rational explanation for the scarcity of women in senior roles. By accepting maternity as an explanation for the lack of women in business, Harry is also complicit in accepting the dominant business model in which one has to forge a career in professional service firms in one's early thirties. These interpretative repertoires thereby create a situation in which not only are women blamed for opting out of work but also accepting business as it is. The masculine shaping of the business world is disguised and made invisible. Instead it is women who are singled out as being different and not fitting in. This acceptance of the status quo thereby discursively functions to make any resistance to the way in which business works impossible.

### **A postfeminist 'common-sense'**

In this article we discussed theoretical perspectives on postfeminism and elaborated a critical approach to it in order to demonstrate how postfeminism can be fruitfully employed to think about key issues in gender and organizations. We have sought to show how a number of stable and patterned postfeminist ideas together constitute the

landscape of common sense about gender inequality in organisations. We discussed the repeated – yet paradoxical – finding that despite persistent gender inequalities in organisations – for example in pay, status, and tenure – gender is frequently downplayed or even completely disavowed as a relevant factor. Sexism is often denied and a sense of ennui or fatigue characterises many discussions of gender in the workplace. We showed how this pattern of accounting is underwritten by four distinctive discursive moves or repertoires: first, gender inequalities are routinely allocated to the past; second, such inequalities are acknowledged but displaced onto other countries or contexts; third, women are presented as the advantaged sex to support the claim that gender equality surely must exist; and finally, there is a repertoire which accepts the status quo as ‘just how things are.’

Our analysis has been designed to show how the concept of postfeminism can be used to illuminate the patterning of accounts and justifications. Those we have highlighted, we believe, will seem ‘familiar’ and ‘recognisable’ to those researching in the field of gender, work and organization. We argue that this is because a postfeminist sensibility, in part constituted by these ideas, is currently hegemonic: these ideas circulate and recirculate. However, they should not be understood as fixed or unchanging. To talk about postfeminism as a sensibility is to draw attention to both the familiar, patterned regularities of its discourses, but also to recognise the possibility of change. The analysis presented here should therefore not be regarded as ‘definitive’ – it is merely a snapshot of a particular set of ways of talking about gender inequalities in this particular moment, a particular constellation of ideas about individualism, choice, entrepreneurialism, female advantage, and so on.

What is striking about the postfeminist sexism discussed here is its dynamic nature – its ability to change, mutate, take on new forms. It is, as we have argued

elsewhere (Gill 2014), best understood as a mobile, agile set of practices of power, not a fixed or immutable body of precepts. Indeed, even in the period during which we have been writing this, it is possible to see new discursive repertoires emerging in the field of gender and organisations. They retain a distinctively postfeminist patina, yet are different from the repertoires we have identified here. First, we can note the way in which a focus upon 'female self-confidence' is coming to prominence in discussions of women and work, particularly in the wake of Sheryl Sandberg's interventions. There has been a turn to confidence in the last few years, exhorting women to work on their self esteem and to 'fake it till they make it', whether this is through embodied 'power poses', software applications that censor unassertive (read feminine) writing styles, or leadership programs that exhort women to 'lean in'. In this way, inequalities in organisations are acknowledged rather than denied, yet the need for structural change is disavowed through an emphasis upon the need for women rather than organisations to change (Gill and Orgad, 2015).

A similar set of ideas can be seen in Anne-Marie Slaughter's (2015) recent calls for women to 'let [it] go' – the notion indexing both a general problematic of female repression that needs to be overcome, as well as the suggestion that women need to loosen their grip at home in order to flourish in the workplace. The implication seems to be that heterosexual men are clamouring to take on more domestic and caring responsibilities but are being prevented from doing so by recalcitrant women who cannot bear to secede responsibility. Slaughter's article for *Time* magazine is tellingly titled 'Women are sexist too' – acknowledging gender inequality but again locating the requirement for transformation in women themselves ('let go'!) rather than patriarchal capitalism.

Both Sandberg and Slaughter are notable for their effectiveness as what we might call ‘stadium feminists’ – able to fill large venues and inspire new audiences – and it is not our intention to launch a critique of their work here (but see Gill and Orgad, 2015). We mention them rather to underscore our point about the dynamism of sexism and its flexibility – including its novel postfeminist forms. These are quite unlike previous forms of sexism: there are few derogations of women, the affective atmosphere is positive and sympathetic, seeking to empower and to enhance choices, expressing regret when – puzzlingly – inequalities persist. What both these accounts have in common with the repertoires we have discussed is that they have become part of a postfeminist common sense – a common sense that simultaneously recognises feminist insights yet repudiates the need for change, a common sense that exculpates organizations and locates responsibility with women. Our aim in this paper has been to open up and explore this taken for granted patterning of justification within organizational contexts and show how – used critically – the notion of postfeminism may help to understand and thus critique it.

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