

Gender and Topic Management in Discourse: The Glass Ceiling as a Reality for Women in Corporate Kenya

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Abstract

This paper describes the workplace situation in Kenya in relation to gender and discourse. Although there are many reasons why many women never make it beyond middle management level, the paper identifies discursive practices as obstacles and discriminative practices that women have to deal with in their upward mobility in the workplace, which has traditionally been a male dominated domain. Specifically, this paper explores topic organisation as an important aspect of conversation management and control. This is looked at within the context of Management Committee meetings within the workplace, which few women actually have the privileged to attend and participate in due to their corporate positioning. We therefore investigate how topics are selected and changed within institutional discourse in an asymmetrical fashion that is dependent on gender and/or status. This is discussed with 'real' data from fieldwork collected in the Management Committee meetings within the corporate firms visited in Kenya. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used as an interpretative framework in looking at gender and the discursive practices whereas Conversation Analysis (CA) is also used as both theory and method of data analysis in looking at the turn taking processes involved. Amongst other things, it was found that men raised more topics, changed more topics, women supported men's topics and yet their own topics never went far.

Introduction

Language constantly reflects and helps to create the social structures and systems that control us. As a result, one comes to recognise the relationship between language and power. Since positions of power are in general, more

often held by men in particular interactions they (men) contribute to the construction of normative masculinity. As a group, women rather than men are more often excluded from power. With women entering situations that were previously all male, where established norms of verbal behaviour are based on the ways men behaved in those roles (Coates 1993), they (women) are faced with real challenges. Because boardrooms and work-based meetings among professionals tend to be dominated by male talk, it is generally male ways of interacting, which predominate. Many interaction problems may thus be the result of structured inequality in the society and power is the issue (Henley and Kramarae 1991). This paper thus examines the relationship between gender and discourse. The element of power and professional status is also explored. This is made possible through the use of Critical Discourse Analysis; hereafter CDA (Fairclough and Wodak 1997), for the interpretative frame. Actual analysis of conversation is done using Conversation Analysis (Sacks et al. 1974) as an analytic tool. The focus is meetings within the corporate world in Kenya. Situations in the meetings where topic issues occur are noted, described and analysed.

The workplace is characterised by certain assumptions (Yieke 2002a) that we need to take cognisance of, if we are to investigate it. We assume that power relations(s) somehow exist and determine the course of actual concrete encounters, by focusing on the local management of talk-in-interaction. This power may be viewed in terms of differential distribution of discursive resources. These discursive resources enable certain participants to achieve interactional effects that are not available to all, or are differentially available to others in the setting. Topic organisations and Topic control within the Turn taking process, are examples of discursive resources that may place constraints on the discourse options that are available to actors/agents/speakers in a discourse situation. The more powerful people/speakers in a workplace situation in terms of professional status may employ the use of Topic organisation and control, which may suppress and/or oppress their less powerful interlocutors. However, the less powerful interlocutors in most cases, in the corporate world, are women.

With the above assumptions stated, Topic organisation as a discursive resource within conversations is investigated. It is seen how it may relate to gender and hierarchical relations at the workplace.

Meetings as Power Struggle Sites

In order to describe the workplace situation in Kenya in relation to gender and discourse, meetings were examined. In total, seven management/committee meetings of about two hours each were recorded, and transcribed. These were taken from three Kenyan corporations.¹ However, of the seven, only two which I name meeting A and meeting B have been used for this analysis. Management meetings are important because they are pivotal to the whole company (Boden 1994). It was however important to ensure that the composition of members in the meetings was both male and female. Meeting A had 5 members; 3 females and 2 males and the chairperson was female. Meeting B had 10 members; 5 males and 5 females and the chair was male. The two meetings were chosen for variability and comparability. They were also to show the effect the gender of the chairperson had. The Meetings were in English. However, any code switching in Swahili, etc, or digression from English was all taken into account as part of the data.² Interviews were also conducted with women in managerial positions who were also a part of the meetings. These interviews were specifically to enhance the corpus.

Meetings were preferred because they are perceived as a necessary and pervasive characteristic of organisational life. They are events that people are required to engage in, if decisions are to be made, and goals to be accomplished. While this is the one ostensible rationale for meetings, they also function as one of the most visible and important sites of organisational power (Mumby 1988: 68). They are therefore a good example of the symbolic structuring of power, and of the reification of organisational hierarchy. Mumby thus reiterates that meetings can be viewed as important, not so much by virtue of what they accomplish, but because they provide a context in which various organisational issues can be played out between those members and interest groups that structure organisational agenda. This is further echoed by Iedema and Wodak (1999), in looking at organisational discourse and practice; Iedema (1999), in his discussion of organisational meaning; Weiss (1999), on his remarks on decision making in

¹ This study was carried out between October 1999 and November 2002. Actual fieldwork was done between May 2000 and October 2000.

² In Kenya, English is an official language, while Swahili has the status of both official and national language. Apart from these two languages, there are at least forty different local languages and numerous dialects.

European union meetings and committees; Menz (1999), on decision making in business enterprises; Iedema et. al. (1999), in their analysis of meetings in school committee meetings; and Wodak (1995, 1996 and 1997), on her analysis of power and discourse styles of female leadership in school committee meetings.

In discussions of organisations, and consequently meetings, issues of power and authority come up. Mumby (1988: 68) asserts that "meetings are quite symbolic insofar as those people who occupy positions of power in the organisational hierarchy use this context to signify their power, and thus to reaffirm their status. The role of the chair(person) in a meeting, and the power and authority that this position carries, is thus stressed. There certainly is a relationship between discourse and social power. Consequently, power is interpreted as discursive control (Foucault 1997; Bourdieu 1987; van Dijk 1989). This control is insofar as; „who has access to the various types of discourse, who can and cannot talk to whom, in which situations, and about what circumstances. The more powerful the people, the larger their verbal possibilities in discourse become“ (Wodak 1996: 65ff). Wodak further says that this is particularly apparent in institutional discourse.

A critical approach to organisational discourse is interested in certain issues. Firstly, it explores how social reality is created through discourse. Secondly, and more importantly for this study specifically, the critical approach focuses more intensely on the question of power and control in organisations. Critical discourse studies see organisations not simply as social collectives where shared meaning is produced, but rather as sites of struggles where different groups compete to shape the social reality of organisations in ways that serve their own interests. Critical Discourse Analysts tend to see power as already accruing to some participants, and not to others, and this power is determined by their institutional role as well as their social economic status, gender or ethnic identity (Fairclough 1992; van Dijk 1993). In this sense, social relations of power pre-exist the talk itself, 'power is already there as a regime of truth' (Foucault 1980: 131). As a result, in CDA, approaching the role of power in discourse tends to be a question of examining how those members of society who possess it, reflect, reinforce and reproduce it through the language they use; their discourse practices (Thornborrow 2001).

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations in Topic Organisation

The term 'Topic Organisation' is to some extent self-explanatory in that it refers to the initiation, maintenance and change of topic in conversation. The domain of topic in conversation was originally proposed by Sacks (1974 et. al.) to be organised by procedures that work to ensure that topics 'flow' into one another without discrete boundaries. These procedures, he suggested, were the product of a pervasive conversational orientation to produce each current utterance so as to display its relatedness in its prior. This relatedness, Sacks insists, is always an achieved relatedness, which is not given by simple co-referentiality (or even the sharing of concepts) across turns at talk. It has however not proved easy to move from these statements to a more specific characterisation of the procedural bases of topic maintenance and topic shift.

Recent developments in Conversation Analysis were reviewed by Heritage (1988) under five main topics. These are Preference organisation; Topic organisation; the use of non or quasi-lexical speech objects; the integration of vocal and non vocal activities; Institutional discourse. Although these main topics are all important and related in so far as conversation analysis is concerned, we are at the moment more interested in focusing on Topic organisation within conversation.

Researchers of Conversation Analysis tend to argue that instances of a clear-cut topic change are difficult to identify. Atkinson and Heritage (1984: 165) state that 'topic is an extremely complex and subtle matter, and there are no simple or straightforward routes to the examination of topical flow'. Sacks (1992) also warns against easy identification of topic changes. Topic shift is thus a gradual process, which can be seen as imperceptibly shifting utterance to utterance.

Although topics normally proceed in a stepwise fashion (Sacks 1992: 566) as speakers relate their utterances back to the other speaker's preceding utterance, when two speakers are competing over topic control, the norm is not however usually followed. What all these suggest is that in order to gain control over topic shift, a speaker needs to obtain a response from the other speaker's following turn. If on the other hand a speaker's utterance does not receive any direct response, he or she does not control topic shift. If one speaker is successful in receiving direct responses from the other speaker more frequently, then he or she can be seen as dominating the topic of the

conversation. In meeting A, for instance, AFa as chair always received support for her topics in terms of positive responses (see Excerpt 1 below for a demonstration of this). The same always happened to BMa who was apparently the second most important committee member as far as professional status was concerned.

Excerpt 1

A009

AFa: ...If I start with the matter arising, aah, one thing, the

A010

AFa: operator who's performing evening duties is still there.(.) I

A011

AFa: don't know what (actions) affects cordless admin. I think (xxx)

A012

AFa: sixty or beyond.

BMa:

DFa: (xxx) are we to continue him with the morning?

EFa: Even

A013

DFa: hmh

EFa: last week he was in the morning(.) I think he is now performing

A014

AFa: He is not changing? I can remember giving him some

EFa: his duties. yeah.

A015

AFa: (xxx) where we found he has been changing, and he has been ...

CMa: yeah

Source: Yieke 2002b; Field data in Kenya, May to October 2000

When a speaker takes a turn in conversation, s/he can begin by explicitly acknowledging the contribution of the previous speaker(s), and can then continue the current topic, or talk on a topic directly connected with what has gone before. It seems that this is a pattern typically adopted by women. Men on the other hand do not feel they have to make a link with the previous speaker's contribution. On the contrary, men are more likely to ignore what has been said before, and concentrate on making their own

point. Line A152 in Excerpt 2 shows BMa interrupting AFa who had just completed a topic and was beginning on a new one. What BMa had to say was now the new topic of discussion and AFa was ignored even though she was the chair of the meeting.

Excerpt 2

A150

AFa:... line you are testing, you are now a customer you are trying

A151

AFa: to find out how long we, we take to answer a customer. Let

A152

AFa: us be doing that. The other thing was eehhh

BMa: madam but we need the duration (xxx)

DFa: ((coughs a lot))

A153

BMa: and we are likely to get suggestions (xxx)coming out from this

A154

BMa: committee. Even if Hermann is going to be away for that ...

Source: Yieke 2002b; Field data in Kenya, May to October 2000

Research on domestic discourse between female and male partners shows an asymmetry in the take up of topics; women offer more topics than men, but it is men's topics, which are more often accepted by women than vice versa (Fishman 1983). Although ethnomethodological research on topics is based on conversation, and on an assumption of equal rights and obligations between participants, this is never so. In interactions, topics are introduced and changed only by the dominant participants, often according to a pre-set agenda or routine, which may or may not be overtly set in the discourse. In fact, topic organisation and control in most cases is never symmetrical, although this may depend on a lot of factors such as status/power (see excerpt 1), expertise, or even gender. The context also matters greatly, and when you are talking of institutional discourse in the workplace, these factors affect a great deal the manner in which topics are organised and handled. Here is where CDA comes in as method and theory and as a backdrop against which instances of topic control, change and initiation are interpreted and discussed.

Topic Control in Relation to Gender and Professional Status

Control of topic is an important aspect of conversation management. Control of topic includes among other things, the initiation of the topic, topic development, and topic change. A change of topic or lack of topic development denies the speaker the opportunity for continued evolution of his/her thoughts. Although research is limited in this area, it suggests that men do less work than women in maintaining conversations and more frequently cut off the development of women's ideas than women cut off men's ideas.

West and Garcia (1988) in a study of mixed sex dyads found that men were responsible for initiating more changes of topic than women (64 percent versus 36 percent). However, other researches conducted of conversations between strangers found no gender differences in the number of topics initiated for discussion or the number of topics developed. Fishman (1983: 89-101) tried to find out why some topics by both men and women sometimes failed, and yet some others succeeded. She found that women in household settings raised more topics than men, and they worked harder to develop those topics. At the same time, while all the topics raised by men produced conversations, only 38 percent of the topics raised by women were successfully developed.

There has been a widespread belief that women generally talk more than men, but research findings now consistently contradict this (Yieke, 2002b). One has to look at the background or context in which the talk takes place. Women have been associated with verbosity and triviality. The idea that women discuss topics, which are essentially 'trivial', has probably contributed to the myth of women's verbosity, since talk on trivial topics can more easily be labelled 'too much'. The evidence is that women and men do tend to discuss different topics (Aries 1976; Haas 1979; Aries and Johnson 1983; Coates 1989; Seidler 1989), as do girls and boys (Coates 1993). However, the fact that topics such as sports, politics and cars are seen as 'serious' while topics such as child rearing and personal relationships are labelled 'trivial' is simply a reflection of social values which define what men do as important and conversely what women do as less important, and this is unfortunately deeply rooted in the ideological framework of the various traditional cultures involved.

It has been suggested that the person who controls the topic is the person who controls the interaction (Shuy 1987; Walker 1987). This is especially so in legal settings. In most settings however, a topic cannot become a topic simply because someone raised it; someone else must pick it up. There has to be, in McDermott and Tylbors' (1987) terms; collusion. In this regard, it is not sufficient to consider what is in the transcripts, or even in the interaction. We have to ask what else could have happened in order to see that what did occur was a joint production (working towards a common cause). Control of the topic, either in tabling topics, selecting and ratifying, shifting the perspective or topics, etc, entails activities in which all the participants are continually involved, and for which credit is given or withheld. Thus topic control is a crucial factor in measuring the status of a member in an emergent network³, and in judging how power is distributed (Watts, 1991: 47-48). In fact, a member who manages to have a proposition accepted as a topic will gain status within the group (Watts 1991: 50).

Summary of Findings on the Turn taking Process and Topic Organisation in the Management Committee Meetings

Sacks et. al. (1974) had posited the nature of Turn taking, as 'one speaker at a time'. Ideally, this is what you would expect in an organisation where things are supposedly 'highly organised' unlike for example in a casual conversation with friends, where you would expect a kind of 'jam session', where people talk collaboratively at almost the same time. It was however found that this did not always follow in the meetings in the Kenyan workplace. This was hardly surprising to me since we had initially identified organisations as places where people have vested interests, and thus 'sites for struggle', where different groups compete to shape the social reality of organisations in ways that serve their own interests. Consequently, the meetings were seen as symbolic insofar as those people who occupy positions of power in the organisational hierarchy used this context to signify their power, and thus reaffirm their status. If this is one function of meetings, then you would expect to see participants fighting for the floor. Here is where issues of Gender and professional status that we have just discussed come in.

³ Watts (1991) distinguishes two social networks – emergent and latent. Emergent network refers to the interpersonal relationships enacted by the participants in the discourse itself. Latent network refers to the kinship structure immediately prior to the discourse.

It was found that the more powerful persons hierarchically within the interactions in all the meetings appeared to claim the floor more often. In terms of the amount of talk also, they seemed to have more contributions in comparison to the less powerful members within the organisation hierarchy. Both chairs of the two meetings in each case claimed the floor more, had longer turns and had more amounts of talk than their counterparts in their respective meetings (see fig 1). At the same time, it was noted that the more powerful participants did not always wait to be nominated for the turns. They almost always invariably did it for themselves. It was also interesting to note that most topics by males got more approvals from males and even the females themselves. This was even in situations where the female had earlier raised an issue, and was ignored, but upon uptake by a male counterpart, this topic then became an interesting issue.

It was found that women within the two meetings had fewer turns, and had less amount of speech (apart from the chair in meeting A, who was a woman). It was questioned whether it was because of their less powerful roles as far as status is concerned, within these traditionally male spheres that they performed differently from their male counterparts. It is often said that when you observe 2 chairpersons together, one male and one female, the male chair would invariably have more turns and more amounts of talk. However, in the meetings under observation, the female chair in meeting A had more turns and more amounts of talk compared to her male counterpart in meeting B. It was not immediately clear why this was so although we would question if this possibility came due to the fact that meeting A had fewer members than meeting B, and so the chair had larger opportunities to talk whereas in meeting B, the chair was competing against 9 other members of the committee meeting. See Figure 1 below for a summary of this information.

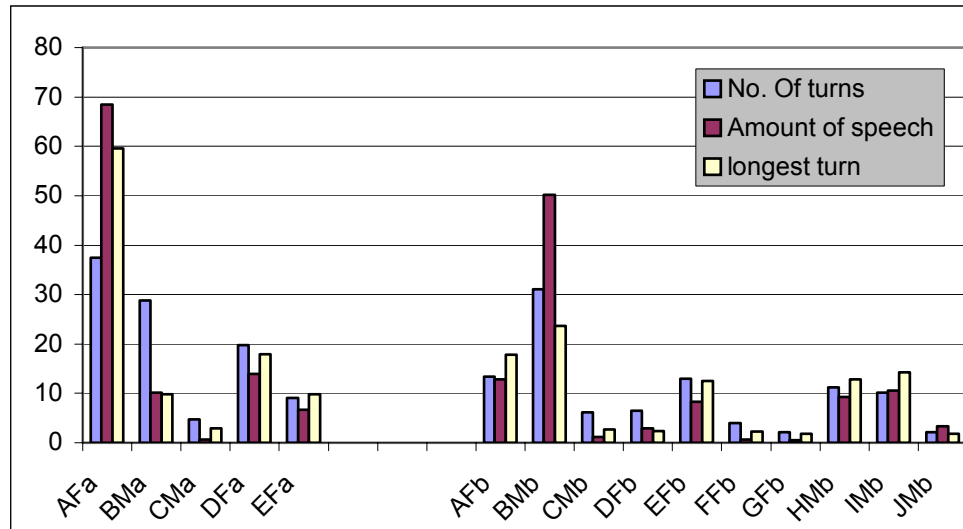


Fig. 1: Distribution of Turns in Meeting A and B

On Topic organisation, it was observed that turn taking issues are central in interaction, especially so when one is interested in looking at power. It was noted that the person who controlled the topic was also by extension the person who controlled the interaction. Topic control was thus seen to be a crucial factor in measuring the status of a member within the interaction and also in judging how power is distributed. Like in the other interactional controls such as Interruptions and Questions (see Yieke 2002a, 2002b, Fairclough 1992), the role of the chairperson here was found to be crucially important. Most times, the chairperson initiated topics, shifted them occasionally and also closed the topics. It was found that the laying out of the agenda was always the prerogative of the chair (see Excerpt 3 below), and this was regardless of the sex of the chair. However, it was noted that the chair for meeting A had her topics interrupted much more than the chair for meeting B. It was not immediately clear that this happened because she was female, although this could have been the most likely reason.

Within the agenda framework, 30 topics in meeting B were introduced, although most of them were interconnected and could have formed larger and much fewer topics. Of these 30 topics in the meeting, the chair (BMb) raised 16 of them, making 53.3 per cent of the total; HMb had 5 topics, AFb had 4, IMb had 3 topics and DFb and Efb had 1 topic each. The rest of the committee members (CMb, FFb, GFb, and JMb did not raise any topics. The males in the meeting, apart from the chair, thus raised a total of 8 topics making 26.7 per cent, and the females in the meeting raised a total of 6 topics, making 20 percent.

Although there was interplay between status and gender, it was observed that committee members like CMb, FFb, GFb, and JMb raised no topics although they were of varying statuses within the organisation. From observations, they only participated in as far as the topic maintenance and development was concerned. However, it is interesting to observe that as far as topic initiation was concerned, this depended a lot on the status of the member, and more so, on his or her seniority in the organisation, i.e.; chair (BMb) was senior most and he had 16 topics, AFb was second senior most, and she had 4 topics, EFb was third in seniority and she had 1 topic, EFb and DFb were both in fourth senior most positions, and they each had 1 topic, whereas IMb who was the fifth, but the least senior out of the members raised 3 topics. Also interesting to note is the fact that although status was a very important factor in determining the number of topics that each person raised, the gender factor can not be overlooked. EFb, although third in seniority initiates only one topic unlike HMb in fourth position in terms of seniority who initiated 5 topics. His counterpart in the same rank (DFb) initiated only one topic. Similarly, IMb who is fifth in position initiated 3 topics, which is higher than both DFb and EFb, who he is actually junior to, although they are female. These figures may not be significant quantitatively, but qualitatively this gives ground to talk about the role of gender, in the way topics are raised in organisations.

Meeting A on the other hand had a total of 17 topics. AFa as chair raised 15 topics making 88.2 per cent of the total. The only other person who raised topics in this meeting was BMa, who had 2 topics that translated into 11.8 per cent. Incidentally, BMa was male and the second most powerful person in the committee in terms of status. It might be important to mention that in meeting A, most of the topics were quite distinct from each other, although sometimes some were distantly related. Figure 2 gives a summary of distribution of topics among speakers in meeting A and B.

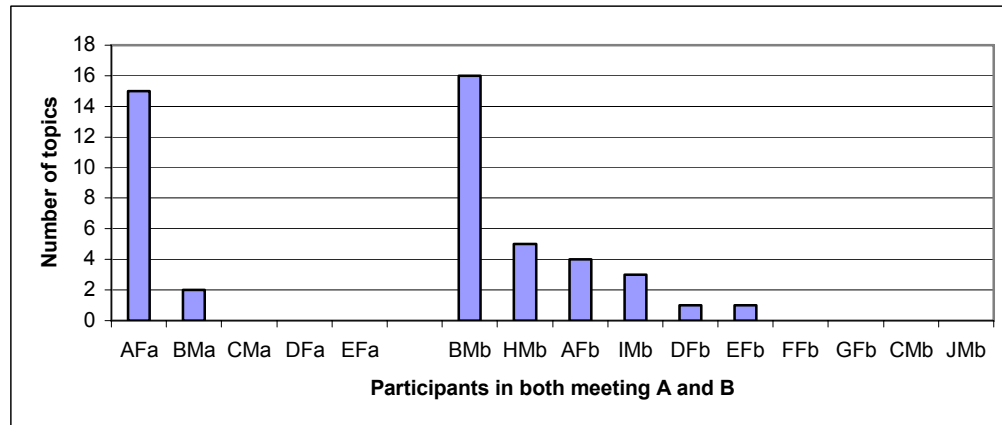


Fig. 2: Distribution of Topics among Speakers in Meeting A and B

Generally speaking, both men and women regarded topics introduced by women as tentative, thus many of these topics were dropped, if ever started. This phenomenon was witnessed in both meeting A and B. In contrast, topics introduced by the men were treated as topics to be pursued, and they were rarely rejected. The women worked harder than the men did in the conversation, because they had less certainty of success with the topics they raised. The women did much of the necessary work of interaction, starting conversation, and then working to maintain them. Even in situations where women's topics were twice the number of men's, it was always men's topics (despite being fewer), which were taken up as mutual topics. What this means is that women try more often, but succeed less often (what leads Fishman 1983:99 to describe women as 'shitworkers'). However, in topic raising, both the female chair and the male chair performed in relatively the same fashion. Here is where professional status as chairpersons goes some way in levelling out the gender differences that might exist.

Through 'violations' of the turn taking model, men denied equal status to women as conversational partners with respect to rights to the full utilisation of their turns and support for the development of topics. This paper provides therefore provide evidence to suggest that the power generally assumed by males is reflected in domination of conversational interaction.

Conclusions

Having gone through the analysis process of the data, three things became evident as far as Topic organisation in meetings is concerned. The first point

is that topic initiation, topic development, change and closing is influenced by the gender of the participants in the meetings. Gender here is relevant to both the member who initiates the topic, and also to the rest of the interlocutors in the set-up. The second point is that the different occupational status or power, so to speak, also has adverse influence on who raises topics, and how these topics are received and organised throughout the course of interaction. Intertwined with these two variables (gender and status) is the issue of context, which is the third point that invariably has an effect on how the topics are organised. Context thus additionally brings in the issue of expertise [defined by Itakura (2001: 21) as possession of knowledge about a topic], role or functionality and relationships in the meetings, and also basically what type of meeting we are dealing with. Additionally, the degree to which men and women are willing to work to develop a topic may be related not only to gender, but also to the topic matter itself. Further research may be needed to determine whether there are contexts in which women exceed men in topic extinctions and men exceed women in topic development. We would thus submit that both gender and occupational status influence asymmetries in conversation.

We conclude that most interaction problems such as the unequal distribution of talk in public contexts are the result of structured inequality in our society. Women's ways of talking differ from men's because each group has developed interaction strategies, which reflect their societal positions. Most cross-gender communication problems in public contexts are women's problems because the interactional rules in such situations are men's rules. So conscious-raising and mutual understanding may resolve not only some problems of cross-cultural miscommunication between the sexes, but also in the real world situation. Women in the public domain thus need to work towards negotiating and struggling against the conditions of their oppression in these kinds of settings. Since it is suggested that women are better at support work, they should be sensitised to help in supporting other women's topics in institutionalised settings such as workplaces. This may not seem so directly obvious, but it may certainly go a long way to a revaluation of women's work in the corporate world, and probably (re)claiming their rightful positions as well as breaking the glass ceiling within these set-ups and organisations.

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