Why does workplace gender diversity matter?  
Justice, organizational benefits, and policy

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Despite the ubiquity of discussions about the importance of gender diversity and inclusion, it is a complicated and controversial topic. It is sometimes claimed that there are natural limits to workplace gender diversity, given inherent average differences in the kinds of occupations or roles to which women and men are drawn or suited. Relatedly, attempts to increase gender diversity can give rise to concerns that this will undermine merit, and lead to members of dominant groups being treated unfairly. Even among those supportive of efforts to increase workplace gender diversity, there are concerns about how the case for women’s inclusion is made. Sometimes these efforts are founded on an inaccurate view of women as fundamentally different to men in how they think, feel, and behave. Moreover, there is growing concern that instrumental ‘business case’ arguments are contingent on business benefits from women’s inclusion that are not always realistic or empirically supported, and that such arguments may be less effective in promoting change than is sometimes assumed.

Policy making is likely to be more effective when it is grounded in familiarity with the nature of sex differences and their relationship with vocational behavior and outcomes, and a broad, evidence-based understanding of both justice-based and instrumental reasons to make efforts to achieve greater workplace gender diversity,
and the likely benefits should those efforts be successful. Below are some helpful considerations.

1. Beware of generalizations about what a person is like because they are male or female, about ‘what men are like’ or ‘what women are like’, or about what kinds of masculine or feminine attributes make people suited to particular roles.

2. In diversity discussions and policies, do not lose sight of the underlying purpose of discrimination law, which is to reduce the political, material, and social disadvantages that females, and members of other protected groups, face.

3. Rather than undermining merit, the evidence suggests that increasing workplace gender diversity is associated with less sex discrimination: direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, and sex-based harassment (which can affect all employees).

4. Historically, products and services have tended to be male-biased in terms of the benefit and costs derived from the products, services, and externalities that companies create. Consider the potential benefits, from this perspective, of greater senior female representation in a specific organization or industry.

5. In making instrumental arguments for workplace gender diversity, be aware that the evidence is strongest for positive associations with occupational well-being and governance.

Our review also speaks to some of the advantages and disadvantages of different framings of gender diversity initiatives and affirmative action tools. Some suggestions are below.

1. Do not be too quick to assume that instrumental arguments for workplace gender diversity will be the most persuasive.
2. Particularly for public and socially important institutions, consider pointing to the importance of representation and legitimacy.

3. Framing the reasons to seek workplace gender diversity in terms of leveraging women’s uniquely feminine skills and perspectives are likely to be counterproductive.