

# Submission:

## Independent Review of the APS

31 July 2018

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## 1. Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Independent Review of the Australian Public Service (APS) (the Review). The analysis and comments in this document reflect the knowledge and considered opinions of the authors, and may not be representative of our respective universities.

UNSW and CQUniversity acknowledge the critical importance of the Review in ensuring that the public sector is equipped to serve government and the Australian community, both now and into the future, including through examining the capability, culture and operating model of the APS.

We contend however, that while the Australian Government's review of the APS is significant for the sector's future direction, it omits a crucial component in ensuring that the APS is 'an employer of choice'<sup>1</sup> and 'exemplar of innovation and adaptability'<sup>2</sup> — that of ensuring that gender equality principles, as part of broader gender mainstreaming,<sup>3</sup> both drive, and are embedded in, the Review program of reform.

We note that this Review (and its particular aims to position the sector to meet the increasingly complex challenges of a globalised world) is the latest development in 40 years of sector reform to shape and refine the structure, approach and operations of the APS. From our perspective, the most significant of reforms implemented by the sector, which have had a transformative impact and whose legacy are key to consider for this review process, are those that increased women's access to APS jobs. These include the extensive equal opportunity and diversity policies that were first implemented across agencies in the 1980s, along with the recent Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy (2016).<sup>4</sup>

Our submission provides background and context on gender equality reforms that have critically driven APS performance and productivity, their progress across the sector and relevance for this review process (**Section 2**), the need for further gender analysis of government policy (**Section 3**), and the necessity for whole of government complementarity and interlinkages between reforms (**Section 4**). We also include critical pieces of research that provide additional evidence on the centrality of gender equity in ensuring a robust, innovative and forward looking public sector (**Section 5**), innovations and best practices examples (**Section 6**); and analysis on the role of bargaining frameworks in progressing gender equality (**Section 7**).

We note that this submission process is, to date, the only mechanism for engagement with the review. We welcome opportunities for further exchange and we further advocate that the panel consultation process include engagement with the Australian Government Minister for Women, the Hon. Kelly O'Dwyer, MP, and the Office for Women.

## 2. Gender equality and APS reform – background and context

The public sectors are major employers of women, and have been amongst the leaders in providing gender equitable terms and conditions of employment for women and have long been seen to be employers of choice<sup>5</sup>. The development and implementation of gender equity policy over the past four decades has proactively drawn on the skills and capabilities of all employees, whilst better representing the diversity of the Australian community.

In the 1970s, less than one in three (28 per cent) of APS employees were women<sup>6</sup>, by 2018, in large part due to the reforms from prior decades, that number had more than doubled to 59 per cent.<sup>7</sup> Women are also increasingly represented at all levels across agencies and have been at

the forefront of leading policy reform, however, despite the extensive policy frameworks now in place, women are still more likely to be concentrated in lower level roles. In 2017, less than half of EL2 and SES positions were held by women (45 per cent and 44 per cent, respectively).<sup>8</sup> Women are overwhelmingly represented at the lower levels, with close to 70 per cent of APS4 employees and 60 per cent of APS5 employees being women.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, women are more likely to be employed in lower level, lower paid and part-time roles, which are less likely to lead to longer term career pathways.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the occupational split between men and women in public service occupation classifications is marked. In 2017, women were concentrated in Health (82 per cent), Service Delivery (74 per cent) and Communications and Marketing (71 per cent). By contrast, male APS professionals were more likely to be found in scientific and technical areas (Engineering and Technical at 84 per cent, Science at 77 per cent and Information and Communication Technologies at 65 per cent).<sup>11</sup>

Primarily, for these reasons, and as part of an international G20 initiative in 2016, the APS released *Balancing the Future: The Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy 2016-19* (the APS GES).<sup>12</sup> The aim of the APS GES is to achieve cultural change across the APS through harnessing gender equality initiatives to increase agency-wide performance and productivity.<sup>13</sup> In this core aim, the strategy is aligned with the APS Review's key aim of driving innovation and productivity in the economy.<sup>14</sup>

We applaud agencies in their efforts to definitively enshrine the GES' principles and aims, and recommend that the initial work thus far undertaken with the APS GES progress beyond the life of the strategy, including strengthening gender focused synergies across departments. Such progress is critical, as is evaluating the legacy of the gender equality initiatives rolled out to date. Despite the considerable good will from government and agencies, true gender equality has not yet been achieved, which impacts upon the APS' ability to establish itself as a competitive employer of choice and attractor of the best talent.

As detailed in this submission, our research has further found a sectoral legacy of policy reform and implementation which has not always aligned with the intent and aims of parallel reforms, (for further detail, see **Section 4 – Need for complementary reforms**). It is crucial in considering new tranches of reform to embed gender equality at the core and to specifically recognise the critical role that gender equality principles play in embedding and operationalising forward-focused government policy.

### 3. The need for gender analysis of government policy

The APS has a solid tradition of conducting gender-focused analyses – both within the sector and beyond, encompassing the totality of government policy platforms. Within the sector, for close to two decades, and under the remit of the *Public Service Act 1999*, the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) has published the *State of the Service Reports*. These have documented the considerable changes experienced by the sector over the past 20 years, and have further tracked the progress (or progress stalls) of women throughout an era marked by greater accountability and performance improvements.

This detailed picture has been built upon through the Australian Bureau of Statistics collection and dissemination of gender-focused data including APS specific information, through its biannual *Gender Indicators, Australia* series.<sup>15</sup> The Workplace Gender Equality Agency additionally publishes the landmark annual *Gender Equity Insight Series*, which focuses on the gender pay gap and the dynamics that drive this across industries, informing a national conversation on the inequities between men and women's pay.<sup>16</sup>

This information has been a critical resource for both departments and researchers to draw upon in applying a gender lens to public policy – with the aim of achieving more equitable outcomes for both women and men – and for eliminating any unintended policy outcomes which may adversely affect women.

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) emphasises the necessity of ensuring a gender perspective is applied across public policy for the ‘very simple reason that ‘[a]ll policies impact on men’s and women’s lives in one way or another’.<sup>17</sup> These considerations have been critical in assisting to redress major inequities, such as the undervaluation of work traditionally undertaken by women.<sup>18</sup> A gender lens applied to government policy has additionally resulted in milestone initiatives focused on eliminating family violence, improving access to affordable childcare, and alleviating and redressing systemic disadvantage and discrimination experienced by Indigenous women, rural and remote women and women with disability.

In a global context, Australia’s leadership in gender equality policies and the application of gender analysis to government policy, is mixed. The OECD notes that across member countries, Australia is a ‘mid-range performer’ across most gender equality outcomes.<sup>19</sup> Analysis undertaken in 2017 notes that despite making significant gains in educational attainment, women continue to earn less than men with a gender pay gap for full-time working women of 87 cents to every male full-time employee’s dollar (the OECD average is 85.7 cents).<sup>20</sup>

Australia is additionally marked by a high share of working women engaged in part-time employment, with part-time work ‘entrenched’ in the Australian economy. Notably, Australia has the third highest rate of part-time work amongst OECD countries, with levels of close to 40 per cent remaining constant for the last decade.<sup>21</sup> This distinctive element of Australia’s workforce reflects the challenges that women experience in combining caring responsibilities with full-time work, and gendered expectations, often reflected within organisational culture, that they continue to do so.

More encouragingly, the OECD commends Australia for leading initiatives on prioritising violence against women through the ‘National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children’ with its strong focus on prevention and education; the Workplace Gender Equality Agency’s engagement with business to help close the gender wage gap, and work/life balance initiatives which include both men and women.<sup>22</sup> However, Australia lags behind other nations in facilitating initiatives focused on enhancing women’s public sector representation and impact on decision making. These include reforms such as senior and middle management accountability for gender diversity within agencies, currently being pioneered by Germany and Spain, and policies to ensure gender balance in the public service, as being initiated in Canada, Germany, Iceland and Japan.<sup>23</sup>

In its consideration of policy mechanisms that the public sector can employ to foster an inclusive sector that drives policy informed by gender equality considerations, the OECD has recommended that national agencies: gather and use reliable evidence disaggregated by gender for informed policy decisions; establish strong and gender-diverse public institutions and mechanisms to ensure accountability and sustainability of gender initiatives and strengthen tools for evidence-based policy making, including gender impact assessments.<sup>24</sup> Australia was once a leader in analysing the impact of federal Budgets on women, however, the annual Women’s Budget Statement is no longer produced by the Australian Government, and researchers and activists have called for a gender analysis of the Budget to be reintroduced.<sup>25</sup>

Gender analysis of the APS’ structure and functions has been vital in pinpointing areas of systemic and operational inequities including recruitment and selection and unconscious bias, career development and flexible work arrangements.<sup>26</sup> As noted, these elements of entrenched disadvantage, which impact upon women particularly, have detracted from the APS vision to be an employer of choice with opportunities for all to utilise their talent to achieve inclusive growth, enhanced productivity and international leadership. The applicability of gender analysis principles and practices in informing the Review’s areas of scope is clear.

#### 4. Need for complementary reforms

In 2015 and 2016 the Australian Government released two major policy documents: the APS GES and *Unlocking Potential: the Australian Public Service Workforce Management Contestability Review* (Unlocking Potential). Both documents have been informed by an identified need for the APS to: facilitate high performance, boost productivity, attract talent and position agency cultures to meet changing needs now and into the future. They overwhelmingly accord with the outlined scope areas of the APS Review. Each report has a series of forward-focused priority areas and actions for change (Table 1).

**Table 1: Comparison of priority action areas for the APS GES and Unlocking Potential**

<b>Balancing the Future: The Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy 2016-19</b>	<b>Unlocking Potential: the Australian Public Service Workforce Management Contestability Review</b>
<i>Actions</i>	<i>Priority areas for change</i>
Driving a supportive and enabling workplace culture	Optimising talent and driving high performance
Achieving gender equality in APS leadership	Attracting and recruiting
Increasing take-up of flexible work arrangements by both men and women	Improving flexibility (which extends beyond flexible working arrangements to include flexible staffing arrangements and flexible organisations)
Working innovatively to embed gender equality in employment practices	Re-designing human resource (HR) delivery models and capabilities
Measuring and evaluating actions	

Unlocking Potential recommends reforms to progress gender equality, such as ensuring that job advertisements highlight the availability of flexible working arrangements. From a gender analysis perspective, however, the table highlights possible tensions between the two documents’ aims and areas for action. Considering that these two documents were released at approximately the same time, and therefore likely to have been developed simultaneously, they are not always aligned, representing a missed opportunity for a gender analysis to be applied to Unlocking Potential to ensure the best outcomes for women, men and APS agencies.

For example, Unlocking Potential includes a large focus on the area of optimising and managing talent, noting that the APS is ‘not sufficiently developing talent to prepare the business for the future’<sup>27</sup>. Strategies for bolstering the APS talent pool however, include a large

focus on quickly drawing people from business for discrete and emerging priorities. Our research has found women working part-time do not consider that they are as ‘visible’ as those who work full-time, and therefore are less likely to be chosen for high profile project teams. As one research participant stated: “visibility is the new selection criteria”.<sup>28</sup> Given the emphasis that Unlocking Potential placed on recruiting talent, the lack of focus on women (and additional diversity population groups) and calibrated strategies to attract and retain an all-inclusive population profile, in a competitive environment, is significant.

Policy synergy and alignment can be aided through mechanisms which monitor and evaluate outcomes. This can be done formally through embedding measurement and evaluation strategies within departments and cross departmentally. At a more informal level, cross-departmental networks can be established where agency staff can initiate conversations and learn from each other.<sup>29</sup>

As noted in Table 1, the GES includes the priority action of ‘Measuring and evaluating actions.’ This action includes agencies’ monitoring their progress against actions undertaken against the strategy, adjusting their approach as required and contributing data and reporting on gender equality progress to the APSC.<sup>30</sup> While we support these measures, we further advocate that to strengthen and embed institutional change, governance measures need to be centred on holding agencies to account in implementing the APS GES, that outcomes are rigorously measured and that agencies are adequately resourced to implement initiatives.<sup>31</sup> We also urge that reports on progress, including supporting data, be undertaken regularly – as may be happening – and be publicly available.

These actions will both assist cross-departmental efforts in implementing their agency-specific strategies, while this information can be further benchmarked against other aligned initiatives focusing on reforming APS culture and operational practice. Significantly, we have not been able to determine the implementation progress and outcomes following the launch of Unlocking Potential, and progress against the APS GES is also not easily publicly available.

These issues warrant further consideration as the Review’s six prospective areas of scope are further developed.

## 5. Findings from recent research

### **Findings from a study of 3 APS agencies**

We have conducted extensive research into workplace gender equity in Australian public sectors, including the APS. In 2016, Dr Williamson evaluated the state of gender equity across three APS agencies and found a high level of commitment to gender equity, some role modelling of gender equitable practices by senior management, and pockets of innovation, such as the introduction of ‘all roles flex’.

Dr Williamson also found, however, long-standing and persistent issues, which included occupational segregation, limited career pathways for some women, the need for men and women to be able to more effectively balance work and caring responsibilities, and a general sense that gender has been ‘done’ in the APS<sup>32</sup>. Emerging issues were also identified, including that while managers and APS employees strongly believed in the merit principle, that limited consideration was given to how merit is achieved and constructed. This finding was strongly reinforced in subsequent research conducted across four state public sector jurisdictions,

discussed below. Given the centrality of the merit principle to public sector, the focus on merit in Unlocking Potential and the likely focus on merit in the current review, this is an important area which requires a gender analysis as any reforms are developed and implemented. Further research findings and recommendations from the study of three APS agencies are at **Attachment 1** *Embedding Gender Equality in the Australian Public Service: Changing practices, changing cultures*.

### **Findings from study of an APS agency**

We refer you to the findings in our article entitled “Gender in the Australian Public Service: Doing, undoing, redoing or done?”, just published in the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* (**Attachment 2**). This research draws from interviews and experiences of staff in one APS agency – this particular agency being one of the three participating agencies in the research study mentioned above. In the article the authors considered how gendered norms and practices are replicated and reinforced, and whether the APS GES is likely to disrupt these norms.

We found many good practices around knowledge of policies, and leadership support for gender equality. We acknowledged that the APS GES was enabling conversations around gender equality to occur<sup>33</sup>, and is possibly the most significant development since the introduction of EEO policies and programs in the 1980s. However, we found that APS HR practices are extremely resistant to change and are path dependent. Our study highlights pockets of continued resistance on the ground to flexible working. Further, perceptions about part-time work sometimes reinforced and entrenched gender differences, and it was unlikely that men would opt to choose to work flexibly until senior role models are in place and working flexibly is not seen as being inimical to career progress.

We concluded that while the APS GES has the potential to progress gender equality, that complementary approaches also need to be adopted, which include gender mainstreaming and strategic interventions to disrupt the replication of gendered norms, within a change management framework. Finally, while our focus has been on gender, there is scope for more focus on intersectionalities of gender and age, race, and other demographic categories.

### **Findings from our ANZSOG study of four jurisdictions**

We have conducted research with eight public sector agencies in four jurisdictions on the role of middle managers in progressing gender equity. A report based on these research findings (funded by the jurisdictions and the Australia and New Zealand School of Government): *The Role of Middle Managers in Progressing Gender Equity in the Public Sector*, will become publicly available on 1 August 2018 (**Attachment 3**).

We found:

- Senior executives and the majority of middle managers have a strong, and demonstrated commitment to progressing gender equity in their agencies,
- The knowledge of middle managers on gender equity policies in their agency is variable and dependent on a range of factors, including the existence of education and awareness activities undertaken by their agencies and the opportunity to discuss the policies and gender equity strategies. Some contrasted this with the more active commitment and resourcing of White Ribbon and domestic violence awareness training,

- Managers welcomed the opportunity to discuss how to implement gender equity in their daily working practices and requested that senior leaders facilitate such conversations,
- Managers are also largely committed to having these conversations with their staff,
- Many managers are committed to enabling employees to work flexibly, but also seek greater support on how to manage requests and how to manage employee performance,
- A high level of awareness on how unconscious bias manifests in recruitment and selection processes was evident in most of the organisations. Managers are committed to addressing the operation of biases, but would also benefit from further support in this area,
- Most managers had a rudimentary understanding of how the merit principle operates in relation to gender equity. While all were committed to employing ‘the best person for the job’, conceptions of how merit is constructed and how merit and gender intersect were at a low level; and
- Within each agency, we identified examples of innovative good practices to progress gender equity, spanning the employment cycle.

The report includes recommendations around some key action areas to:

- Increase managers’ and employees’ understanding of gender equity in workplace practices, through central education and information campaigns, more regular conversations around gender equity and how it can be progressed.
- Challenge and change recruitment and selection processes, to address hidden biases and provide career development opportunities to overcome vertical and horizontal segregation. This would include examination of the intersection of unconscious bias and merit, and introduction of bias disruptors. This could include conversations around the construction of merit and the objectivity of the merit principle, and the use of performance and development frameworks to advance the accumulation of merit for men and women. It also includes gender equity targets and monitoring of progress towards these targets.
- Increase capacity for managers to manage flexible working arrangements and increase usage by men and women. This might include guidance to managers on how to consider requests. It also includes review of part-time work, from considering whether work allocations to ensure equal quality work for part-time and full-time staff, to ensuring part-time staff have opportunities to relieve in higher level roles, and generally enable part-time employees to accumulate experience and merit necessary for career progress.<sup>34</sup>

While this research is specific to state public sector jurisdictions, the findings reiterate many of those found in our previous research in the APS. Newer findings in this report are also likely to be applicable to the APS.

## 6. Innovations and best practice to progress gender equity in the public sector

As noted in this Submission (**Section 2**) globally, public sectors are both significant employers of women, while being predominantly viewed as employers of choice. We refer you to the publication: *Women, Government and Policy Making in OECD Countries: Fostering Diversity for Inclusive Growth* (OECD, 2014) which showcases leading examples of international best

practice in embedding gender equity principles and gender mainstreaming across all tiers of public life.

In Australia, our research has identified challenges in embedding gender equity principles in agencies (see **Section 5**), but has also uncovered an overall deep commitment from the highest levels of departmental management to progress gender equality and has identified many examples of innovation and best practice.

Across APS agencies, we found:

- Managers are committed to tackling unconscious biases. The managers we interviewed showed high level understanding about the existence and operation of unconscious biases, and were supportive of agency steps to mitigate those biases.
- Career development strategies are varied and innovative. We found many positive examples of agencies innovating to provide career development opportunities to staff including mentoring and sponsorship; leadership training and secondment opportunities and role sharing between employees at different classification levels.
- Workplace flexibility is supported and valued. Managers expressed support for flexible work arrangements, and sought to create a culture that embraced flexibility, whilst at the same time highlighting associated challenges.
- Men need—and want—to work flexibly. Employees strongly supported increasing the uptake of flexible work among men.
- Agencies are modelling equality from the top down with senior leadership showing strong commitment to creating inclusive, flexible organisational cultures that foster gender equality; and agencies are further progressing equality from the ‘bottom up’ with the establishment of gender and women’s networks that build grassroots support for gender equity across departments.<sup>35</sup>

Amongst individual agencies, particular strategies are exemplifying leading gender equality practices.

The **Department of Communication and the Arts**’ gender equality plan is outstanding and incorporates mechanisms to ensure gender equality issues are everyone’s responsibility. One of this department’s actions is to develop leaders’ understanding of, and commitment to, gender equality – an action with transformative potential.

The **Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet**’s (PM&C) strategy is also a model for other APS agencies. It goes beyond implementing specific initiatives to progress gender equality for different groups of women, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and those with disability. Such a move is at the forefront of implementing diversity initiatives.

The **Department of Social Services** also recognises the importance of accommodating and valuing people’s multiple identities. One initiative focuses on increasing the numbers of male leaders with disability. In a department which is heavily female-dominated, breaking down barriers for male employees — particularly those from diversity target groups — is another form of securing gender equality.

The **Department of Employment**’s strategy provides a good example of designing gender equality initiatives to have a cumulative impact. For example, in the first year the department

stated it would trial ‘all roles flex’, or a system where flexible working is the default working arrangement. In the second and third years, this initiative will be embedded within the department through sharing success stories and the development of training modules to support the roll-out of all roles flex.

Several of the departments (including the **Department of Industry and Innovation**, the **Department of Social Services, Treasury** and the **Department of Employment**) have committed to implementing an all roles flex trial, and PM&C has already undertaken such a trial.<sup>36</sup>

We further commend the APSC for the establishment in 2017 of the annual APS Diversity and Gender Equality Awards to recognise outstanding contributions to workplace diversity across the APS, with the Gender Equality Award presented to the **Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade** for the implementation of the Women in Leadership strategy. The strategy has “driven deep cultural change in the department...opened up new ways of working to improve gender equality [to] help staff reach their full potential and enhance productivity”.<sup>37</sup>

Across state and territory jurisdictions, our research additionally uncovered leading examples of agencies concretely demonstrating their understanding of, and commitment to embedding gender equity practice and gender inclusive culture. Amongst the many examples of good practice we found:

- A high recognition of the need for change with departmental wide conversations commenced,
- A good understanding of gender equity principles supported through innovative recruitment and selection practices,
- Unconscious bias training in place and good career development processes, and
- Sound flexible working provisions available, developed by consultation amongst teams, rather than individual employees and their manager.

Informed by the exemplary work being undertaken by jurisdictions and to further aid departments in their efforts towards further progressing gender equity, we have compiled a leading practice guide to assist Middle Managers in embedding gender equity throughout their teams and agencies (**Attachment 4: Middle Managers’ Role in Progressing Gender Equity: A leading practice guide**)

The guide aims to build upon jurisdiction-wide gender equity implementation through providing a series of actions middle managers can consider in creating a culture of awareness and change that progresses gender equity, applies human resource change management principles, facilitates career development and employs innovative use of technology to support flexible working arrangements.

## 7. Bargaining and gender equality

Reforms to bargaining frameworks may have impeded the progress of gender equality in the APS. Many have argued that decentralisation disproportionately worsened conditions for women and vulnerable employees, as women were in a weaker bargaining position due to occupational segregation and the undervaluing of their work<sup>38</sup>. Issues predominantly affecting women may also not be included on bargaining agendas and negotiated<sup>39</sup>. Within the APS,

however, gender equitable provisions have been gained through successive waves of bargaining, until relatively recently<sup>40</sup>.

The APS centralised bargaining frameworks may have limited the extent to which gender equality can be achieved. Unlike the private sector, where unions and employers are able to negotiate for terms and conditions of employment which pertain to the employment relationship, APS agencies are only permitted to negotiate according to government policy, where the quantum of wage rises is capped, as are selected employment conditions. From 2014, the successive APS Bargaining Frameworks have stipulated that agencies were not to bargain for increases to paid parental leave, in anticipation of an expected increased quantum in 2015<sup>41</sup>. Even though this increase did not occur, in 2015 the government maintained that conditions of employment could only be increased in exceptional circumstances and with Ministerial approval. The only way, then for employees to have increased employment conditions is through HR policy. Researchers have highlighted that the most effective way to progress workplace gender equality is through a ‘tripod’ of legislation, bargaining and HR policy<sup>42</sup>. Relying solely on unregulated HR policy has the potential to impede gender equality.

## 8. Conclusion

The Australian Government is to be commended for initiating an independent review of the APS’ culture, capabilities and operating model, acknowledging the critical role the APS plays, and will continue to play, in an increasingly complex, competitive world. We noted that the APS remains committed to the goal of remaining an ‘Employer of Choice’ and our analysis and commentary have focused on what that might mean – in an era increasingly marked by principles of equality, diversity and the imperative to attract the best talent.

As we have outlined, however, it is clear that as the APS positions itself to lead in the future; gender equality principles which intersect at all levels in agencies, and across agencies, will play a critical role in ensuring a competitive edge on the global stage in the arenas of the economy, politics and society. In recognition of this we have further advocated that public sector reform incorporates at its core, principles of complementarity and alignment, underscored by rigorous measurement and review and public accountability.

Our research further amplifies the need to ensure that gender equality principles frame and inform the Reviews’ next steps. As the OECD summarises, fully leveraging public sector women’s skills and leadership is essential to maximise a nation’s competitiveness “since diverse leadership is more likely to find innovative solutions to foster inclusive growth.”<sup>43</sup>

We look forward to the next stages of the Review process.

## 9. Attachments

Attachments follow.

## About the authors

### **Dr Sue Williamson**

Sue Williamson is a Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management at the University of New South Wales, Canberra. As a member of the Public Service Research Group, Sue's scholarship focuses on how organisations can create and sustain gender equitable and inclusive cultures, with a particular focus on the public sector. Her work has been published widely in academic journals and media outlets and Sue regularly shares her findings with public sector audiences. In 2017, Sue was awarded a highly competitive grant from the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) to lead the research project which culminated in the report: *The Role of Middle Managers in Progressing Gender Equity in the Public Sector*. Sue was also named a 2017 Telstra Business Women's Award (Public Sector and Academia) Finalist for the ACT. Sue is also the President of the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand.

### **Dr Linda Colley**

Linda Colley is a Discipline Leader in Human Resource Management at CQUniversity. Her current research examines: public sector employment themes of merit and tenure; gender equity in pay, progression and superannuation; affirmative action in political parties; and senior executives in public services. She has received funding from the Australian Research Council and ANZSOG, and her industry partners include state governments, trade unions and superannuation funds. Linda is active in national and international research networks, and her other roles include Vice-President of the International Research Society for Public Management (IRSPM) and Chair of the Queensland Government Work Health and Safety Board.

### **Ms Natalie Cartwright**

Natalie Cartwright is a Research and Projects Officer at UNSW Canberra and has two decades' experience as a research and strategic policy manager across Commonwealth and state government departments. Milestones include: management of research focusing on women's economic security, the National Housing Supply Council and National Disability Insurance Scheme research programs and delivery of the *International Education Sector Strategy* for Victoria. Natalie has received awards from both federal and state government in recognition of her contributions to government policy outcomes including an Achievement Award (2015) from the Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources (Victoria). Natalie's research interests include women's social and economic wellbeing across the life course, and the intersections of women, class and organisational culture.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> ‘Employer of choice’ as outlined in the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) *State of the Service Report 2005-06* comprises attributes such as nature of work, capacity to make a difference, strategic policy development and service delivery, underpinning values framework, workplace flexibility and access to developmental opportunities.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Public Service Commission (2018) *Independent Review of the Australian Public Service*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, <https://www.apsreview.gov.au/about>.

<sup>3</sup> As defined by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, gender mainstreaming is ‘...the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated.’ United Nations (2002) *Gender Mainstreaming – An Overview*, United Nations, New York.

<sup>4</sup> These include the establishment of the *Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) Act 1986*, to establish the AHRC to make provision in relation to human rights and in relation to equal opportunity in employment, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2017C00143>; *The Sex Discrimination Act 1984*, including discrimination in employment, <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/employers/good-practice-good-business-factsheets/quick-guide-australian-discrimination-laws>; the *Equal Employment Opportunity (Commonwealth Authorities) Act 1987*, an Act to require certain Commonwealth authorities to promote equal opportunity in employment for women and persons in designated groups and for related purposes, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2016C00775> and the *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012* which replaced the *Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999* through strengthened legislation aimed to improve and promote equality for both women and men in the workplace, <https://www.wgea.gov.au/about-legislation/workplace-gender-equality-act-2012>.

<sup>5</sup> OECD (2014) *Women, Government and Policy Making in OECD Countries: Fostering Diversity for Inclusive Growth*, OECD Publishing, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264210745-en>; Corby, (2011), ‘Equality in the Public Sector: The Sky Darkens’, in *Working for the State: Employment Relations in the Public Services*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001) ‘Women and Government in Australia’ *Year Book Australia 2001*, cat. no. 1301.0,

[www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/ABS@.nsf/94713ad445ff1425ca25682000192af2/3067a337a2f2c855ca2569de001fb2dc!OpenDocument](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/ABS@.nsf/94713ad445ff1425ca25682000192af2/3067a337a2f2c855ca2569de001fb2dc!OpenDocument)

<sup>7</sup> APSC (2018) APS Statistical Bulletin December 2017 <https://apsc.govcms.gov.au/glance-0>

<sup>8</sup> APSC (2018) *ibid*

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<sup>10</sup> Baxter, J. and Chesters, J. (2008) Perceptions of work-family balance: How effective are family-friendly policies?, *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, 14:2, 139–151; Durbin, S. and Tomlinson, J. (2014) Female part-time managers: Careers, mentors, and role models, *Gender, Work & Organization*, 21: 4, 308–320; Grant, L. (2009) Job design and working hours: Key sources of gender inequality, in Yeandle, S. (ed.) *Policy for a Change: Local Labour Market Analysis and Gender Equity*, The Policy Press, Bristol.

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- <sup>19</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2018) *The Pursuit of Gender Equality: An Uphill Battle*, ‘How does Australia compare?’ <https://www.oecd.org/australia/Gender2017-AUS-en.pdf>
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- <sup>22</sup> OECD (2018) *ibid*.
- <sup>23</sup> OECD (2014) Women, Government and Policy Making in OECD Countries: Fostering Diversity for Inclusive Growth, OECD Publishing, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264210745-en/>
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# Embedding Gender Equality in the Australian Public Service: Changing practices, changing cultures

Sue Williamson  
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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### Dr Sue Williamson

Sue Williamson is a Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management at the University of NSW, Canberra. As a member of the Public Service Research Group, Sue's scholarship focuses on how organisations can create and sustain gender equitable and inclusive cultures, with a particular focus on the public sector. Her work has been published widely in academic journals and media outlets and Sue regularly shares her findings with public sector audiences. In 2017, Sue was awarded a highly competitive \$60,000 grant from the Australia and New Zealand School of Government to examine the role of middle managers in embedding gender equity in State government public sector workforces. Sue was also named a 2017 Telstra Business Women's Award (Public Sector and Academia) Finalist for the ACT.

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Meraiah Foley specialises in the relationship between gender, work, and organisations. As a Research Fellow with the Public Service Research Group, Meraiah is currently examining gender equality in the Australian public sector. Her prior research has focused on the comparative industrial relations frameworks in the United States and Australia and their relationship to gendered labour market outcomes, impact of motherhood on women's careers and self-employment, the impact of paid parental leave on Australian employers, and employee and employer attitudes around the introduction of Dad and Partner Pay.

## ABOUT THE PUBLIC SERVICE RESEARCH GROUP

The Public Service Research Group (PSRG) was established to partner with organisational clients to produce new insights into effective public service implementation and evaluation. The group undertakes timely, high-quality and reliable research into public policy implementation. PSRG brings a breadth of knowledge and a depth of experience to the work, taking an interdisciplinary and inter-methodological approach that recognises the complexity of contexts and plurality of interests involved in any policy implementation. PSRG research projects build local practice while advancing global knowledge. PSRG enables independent practice and collaborative thinking, and provides educational activities that embed new policy and program implementation insights into practice settings.

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The authors would like to thank the senior leadership teams of the case study agencies for supporting this project. We would also like to thank the many participants who so generously shared their experiences and knowledge with us. Finally, thanks are due to those who provided research assistance.



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## KEY FINDINGS

1. **The Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy has started an important conversation** about the nature of equality, how it is achieved, and the opportunities and challenges it represents.
2. **Managers are committed to tackling unconscious biases.** The managers we interviewed showed a high level of understanding about the existence and operation of unconscious biases, and were supportive of agency steps to mitigate those biases.
3. **Career development strategies are varied and innovative.** We found many positive examples of agencies innovating to provide career development opportunities to staff, but part-time workers still perceived lower opportunities for mobility, development, and career progression.
4. **Workplace flexibility is supported and valued.** Managers expressed support for flexible work arrangements, and sought to create a culture that embraced flexibility. In practice, however, some forms of flexibility were perceived to be more manageable than others.
5. **Men need—and want—to work flexibly.** Employees strongly supported increasing the uptake of flexible work among men. However, many male employees perceived a strong cultural stigma against men working flexibly.
6. **Agencies are modelling equality from the top down...** with senior leadership showing strong commitment to creating inclusive, flexible organisational cultures that foster gender equality.
7. **...and from the bottom-up,** with the establishment of gender and women's networks that build grassroots support for gender equality within agencies.



## **GENDER EQUALITY** CAN BE EMBEDDED IN PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANISATIONS BY...

1. Creating waves of change which spread from senior managers through all levels of the organisation, and from employee networks to other employees.
2. Focusing on changing culture as well as changing the numbers. While having gender parity in senior leadership is essential, organisational stories, symbols and behaviours also contribute to, and reflect, a gender equitable culture.
3. Ensuring that individual initiatives — such as unconscious bias training — are ongoing, reinforced, repeated over time and evaluated.

# INTRODUCTION

Achieving gender equality within public sector workforces is a focus nationally and internationally for political, economic, educational, and employment reasons. The business case for gender equality is well recognised: it can contribute to economic growth, workplace innovation and creative thinking<sup>1</sup>. Gender equality is particularly important in the public sector, which has traditionally been considered a model employer for women<sup>2</sup>.

The Australian Public Service (APS) has a long history of providing terms and conditions of employment which have enabled women and men to integrate work and caring responsibilities, to have a career, and to reach leadership positions.

The Australian Government has continued this tradition, adopting a strong policy position to advance gender equality in the APS. In April 2016 the government released *Balancing the Future: The Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy 2016-2019*. This three-year program aims to improve gender equality in the APS, partially fulfilling Australia's commitment to the G20 to boost women's workforce participation by 25 per cent by 2025<sup>3</sup>.

While gender inequality in the workplace has long been a focus of academic research, less research has been conducted on how equality can be achieved: what it means, what it looks like, and how it is done. Drawing on rich qualitative data derived from hundreds of hours of interviews with APS employees, managers, and senior executives, this report identifies some of the opportunities and challenges APS agencies have faced in their efforts to progress — and embed — gender equality.

The following report presents the findings on the major areas we examined. Namely, how the Gender Equality Strategy has promoted conversations within the APS about gender equality; managers' commitment to reducing unconscious bias; innovations to progress women's careers; the importance of, and access to, flexible work arrangements, including for men, and, lastly, but perhaps most importantly, how to progress gender equality from the top to the bottom of an organisation. Each section contains quotes from those we interviewed, to highlight our findings. Next the report details how we conducted the study.

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<sup>1</sup> Wood, R. (2012) *Building a Business Case for Diversity*, [http://genderequity.ahri.com.au/docs/GEP-Building\\_a\\_Business\\_case\\_for\\_Diversity.pdf](http://genderequity.ahri.com.au/docs/GEP-Building_a_Business_case_for_Diversity.pdf), 4.

<sup>2</sup> OECD (2014) *Women, Government and Policy Making in OECD Countries: Fostering diversity for inclusive growth*, [http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/governance/women-government-and-policy-making-in-oecd-countries\\_9789264210745-en#](http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/governance/women-government-and-policy-making-in-oecd-countries_9789264210745-en#), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government (2016) *Balancing the Future: The Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy 2016 – 2019*, [http://www.apsc.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0017/80117/FINAL-Balancing-the-future-the-Australian-Public-Service-gender-equality-strategy-2016-19.pdf](http://www.apsc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/80117/FINAL-Balancing-the-future-the-Australian-Public-Service-gender-equality-strategy-2016-19.pdf).

## HOW WE CONDUCTED THE STUDY

In the second half of 2016, shortly after the release of the APS Gender Equality Strategy, we examined the progress of gender equality initiatives in three APS agencies. We aimed to identify the barriers and enablers to progressing and embedding gender equality in the APS. We asked about:

- the need for gender equality to be progressed in the APS,
- participants' knowledge about their organisation's gender equality initiatives, and
- specific human resource practices, including recruitment and selection processes, access to training and development opportunities and flexible working arrangements.

We conducted 150 interviews and 24 focus groups totalling over 250 participants. We spoke with Senior Executive Service (SES) officers and employees at the Executive Level 2 (EL2), who are line managers. We conducted focus groups with APS and Executive Level 1 (EL1) employees in Canberra and in regional areas. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed, and de-identified. The data was coded and clustered using NVivo11 to create an integrated thematic analysis.

We do not claim that the three organisations which participated in the study are representative of the entire APS. However, the findings may be useful to other workplaces, or serve as a benchmark in assessing popular perceptions of gender equality at the commencement of the APS Gender Equality Strategy's implementation.

*'I absolutely believe that the APS should be a model workplace...I think it's still our role; that we should be demonstrating tolerance, that we should be demonstrating inclusiveness, we should be demonstrating all the things that all make for a healthy society'. – SES, Female*

*'I think the public service should be at the forefront of initiatives like [the APS Gender Equality Strategy] to set an example for the private sector and for citizens in general . – EL2, Male*



## 1. The APS Gender Equality Strategy has sparked an important conversation

We asked participants whether they believed the APS Gender Equality Strategy was necessary and, if so, why. Many participants explained that the implementation of the strategy had placed gender equality firmly on the agenda, enabled people to speak freely about the issue, and opened a constructive organisational dialogue about the opportunities and challenges embedded in progressing gender equality.

## WHY IS GENDER EQUALITY IMPORTANT?

Participants believed that gender equality was important for the APS in order to:

- Create a 'level playing field' which would enable men and women to have the same opportunities, at work and at home,
- Better reflect communities served,
- Benefit the organisation with a diversity of perspectives, and
- Set the bar or be 'a beacon' for gender equality.

*'I actually do think we have a responsibility to reflect society and we have a responsibility to ensure that occurs and overcome the barriers that stop it occurring'. – EL2, Female*

## WHAT IS GENDER EQUALITY?

Understanding what gender equality 'looks like' can inform support for strategies and policies designed to create equality. In our interviews, we found that understandings around what constitutes gender equality were varied, and had different implications for the long-term strategies applied.

- Some participants defined gender equality in terms of parity, such as achieving 50% of women in the SES.
- Other participants were less concerned with parity, and more concerned with ensuring that men and women have equal access to career development and promotion opportunities, irrespective of gender or caregiver status.
- Others believed that gender equality is enabling both women and men to work flexibly.

Many participants were strongly supportive of the APS Gender Equality Strategy, but some held the view that gender equality had already been 'achieved' in the APS, and was no longer an urgent priority.

Managers who expressed this view commonly pointed to the higher proportion of women in senior management roles within the APS relative to the private sector. These managers did not see gender inequality as a 'burning platform' demanding immediate action. This indicates a need to more clearly articulate the rationale for pursuing gender equality strategies and initiatives, to realise the Australian Government's commitment to increasing women's workforce participation.



## 2. Managers are committed to tackling unconscious biases

The APS Gender Equality Strategy directs agencies to raise awareness about the operation of unconscious biases in employment processes, and to mitigate the effects of those biases, in order to ‘create an environment in which merit is applied properly and fairly’<sup>4</sup>.

All three agencies were in the process of implementing unconscious bias awareness and mitigation strategies, including training for managers and senior executives, and promoting an organisation-wide conversation about the effects of hidden biases on employment decisions.

Many of the managers we interviewed were increasingly aware of the effect of unconscious biases on their decisions, and were supportive of agency measures to mediate the effects of those biases.

*'I do think there's this unconscious bias that comes into the way that we recruit, we recruit like-for-like... so I think it's good to break those'. – EL2, Female*

The long-term effectiveness of unconscious bias training is still undetermined. Research suggests that for it to be effective in the short to medium term, the training must be reinforced on a regular basis. Agencies should also monitor the outcomes of bias training in order to determine whether it is effective over the longer term.

Reportable gender targets are a key element of the APS Gender Equality Strategy. Whilst targets were largely supported by the SES, widespread resistance from lower level employees was evident. Although some participants saw gender targets as a necessary, but unfortunate, step to overcome biases, many others considered gender targets to be fundamentally in tension with the merit principal.

**While participants resoundingly agreed with the notion that positions and opportunities should be based on merit, limited consideration was given to how merit is achieved and constructed,** from opportunities arising from educational qualifications, to networking and to how roles and jobs are assigned in the workplace. Further education is required around what constitutes 'merit' and how it is achieved.

*'I really do think you've got to get in and do the unconscious bias training and the education about how to think about these things at multiple and different levels... but for anybody who's in a role where they're in a management role they really should be getting the skill sets and how to think about these things'. – SES, Female*

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Government (2016) *Balancing the Future: The Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy 2016 – 2019*, 3.



### 3. Career development strategies are varied and innovative

The APS Gender Equality Strategy directs agencies to innovate their recruitment, retention and performance management practices to embed gender equality throughout the employment life cycle. This step requires agencies to be more nimble in their approach to human resource management to establish the APS as a competitive employer of choice.

**We found many positive examples of agencies innovating to promote career development for women.** Reports of formal and informal mentoring and sponsorship were widespread, and training opportunities and leadership courses were ample. Secondments to other agencies were also widely utilised and considered to be valuable to career progression.

In one notable example, one agency facilitated a job sharing arrangement between two employees of different classification levels, an EL2 and an EL1. This arrangement provided greater flexibility for the more senior employee, an EL2 who converted from full-time to part-time employment, whilst providing supervisory experience for the more junior employee, an EL1 who assumed the responsibilities of the EL2 two days per week.

*'The opportunities you get here, they pop up every week'. – EL2, Male*

**However, many part-time staff we interviewed perceived a lower level of opportunity, mobility, and career development.**

Perceived barriers included:

- A strong organisational attitude that full-time employees were more committed to their agencies and careers,
- A widespread belief that part-timers were less visible in the workplace and, therefore, not as likely to be considered for acting opportunities or encouraged to seek promotions, and
- An underlying cultural assumption that part-time employees were less available or able to undertake urgent or challenging work.

*'I think there's a very strong unconscious bias towards giving interesting, complex work to men over women that goes on. And I think a bit of that is tied to the fact that women are more likely to work part-time'. – APS Employee, Female*

Some participants, in particular at the SES and EL2 levels, held progressive ideas about job design, and working creatively within budget and staffing allocations to make the most of talent and resources. Examples include creating jobs around projects to be completed, rather than on a per-person basis.



## 4. Workplace flexibility is supported and valued

Flexible work arrangements include options about how, when, and where work is conducted, with a focus on results and outcomes, rather than on hours spent in the office. Flexible work arrangements can include changes to the hours of work, the patterns of work (e.g. job sharing or compressed work weeks) and locations of work.

At the time of our interviews, the implementation of 'All Roles Flex' — or 'flexibility by default' — was in its early stages. The main enablers for default flexibility were deemed to include:

- Enabling team members to shadow each other, to ensure work was completed if an employee was not working on a particular day,
- Utilising a pool of people who could circulate around the workplace, backfilling where teams were working flexibly and required support, and
- Being organised and establishing guidelines. For example, requiring all team members to be present on a certain day, but enabling flexibility on other days.

*'Do you need this person here with you until 10:00 at night just in case you need them? Can they not do this part of the work from home? You just have to think outside the box'. – SES, Female*

Most of the managers we interviewed expressed support for flexible work arrangements and sought to create a culture that embraced flexibility. In practice, however, managers perceived some forms of flexibility to be more manageable than others.

We found little support for home-based work, for example, even though the APS Gender Equality Strategy and the agencies' human resource policies expressly allowed it. In some cases, the lack of support was underpinned by the limitations of technology or the need to protect confidential data. In other cases, managers allowed trusted employees to work from home on an informal or occasional basis, subject to operational requirements, but remained sceptical of formalised home-based work arrangements, fearing the potential for abuse.

Managerial use of flexible work provisions also appeared to be limited. Many managers we interviewed believed that the operational or supervisory requirements of their jobs precluded them from working part-time, for example. The lack of SES officers — or even EL2s — working part-time sent a strong message that senior roles were incompatible with part-time work.

Managers who had worked part-time, however, were often seen as positive role models within the agency.

*'I used to have people who came to me and said "you couldn't have anyone at the EL2 level part-time because they're managers." And I said: "I did it as a Band 1. Of course you can have EL2s who do it"... When you've had people who have done it themselves, it makes a real difference'. – SES, Female*



## 5. Men need — and want — to work flexibly

The APS Gender Equality Strategy aims to make flexibility for men and women business as usual. Specifically, the strategy directs managers to challenge long-held assumptions about the nature of work and establish mechanisms to improve the uptake of flexible work among men.

*'If we're advocating rights and opportunities for women, then we need to be ensuring that men have those same rights and opportunities as well. I think the role of men sharing caring arrangements... that's really important, and so being able to work flexibly as well'. – EL2, Female*

**Employees strongly supported increasing the uptake of flexible work among men.**

**Many male employees, however, perceived a strong cultural stigma against men working flexibly.**

Although we heard many incidences of managers approving flexible work arrangements, and providing employees with the necessary supports and resources, we also heard instances where male employees believed that their managers would not support their requests for flexibility. Approval of flexible work arrangements was also perceived to be dependent on managerial prerogative.

Some men reported using flexible work arrangements on an occasional or ad-hoc basis, but expressed concern that formalising these arrangements could affect their career progression. For this reason, some male employees were hesitant to even ask for flexible work arrangements on a formal basis.

These perspectives reflected the persistence of the 'ideal worker' norm, which favours employees that can work long full-time hours, and do not have commitments or caring responsibilities outside of work. While these views were apparent in some pockets, **we also saw strong evidence that managers were committed to challenging these assumptions, inside and outside their workplaces.**

*'One thing I want people to realise is that it's not all about family, it can be sports, education... whatever they see is their priority in life to work flexibly. It's just getting people's minds around the idea that these issues aren't just women's only issues'. – EL2, Male*

*'Men have different expectations on them still to maybe not be as family friendly, to not do the part-time for the children, and that's something we really, really need to work on'. – EL1, Female*



## 6. Agencies are modelling equality from the top down...

Our interviews and focus groups revealed a strong commitment to gender equality from the senior leadership cohort. Most employees were aware of their senior leaders' commitment to progressing gender equality. Many participants spoke of changing workplace cultures, with an emphasis on increasing the numbers of women in the SES and commitment to enabling employees to work flexibly.

*'Unless you demonstrate it through your action, there's really no incentive. It's easy to talk, but I think you need to model what you're saying before other people will take the lead'. – SES, Female*

Participants provided many examples of managers and SES officers who role modelled positive behaviours. Examples included:

- Male employees who left work early for family reasons,
- Fathers who used the carer's room to look after sick children,
- SES officers who publicly shared personal highlights with their teams,
- SES who let staff know about their morning exercise commitments, and
- EL2s who left early to spend time with their children in the afternoon, logging on later in the evening.

*'Sometimes our senior executives in particular, do not want to see themselves being used [as role models], because it appears to be self-promotion. And so one of the challenges for us is to try and work with the SES to say: we know you don't want to put yourself out there, because you don't want to be seen to be saying, 'Look at me, how great I am'. The flip side is, the way people will see that is: if it's OK for them, it's probably OK for me'. – SES, Male*

*'I spend a lot of time trying to say to EL2s: you've got to model the behaviour that says it's OK to go home... Because EL2s are the future of the department, and the role model for the generation after that... the next generation are taking their lead from them'. – SES, Female*



## 6. ...and from the bottom up

The commitment from senior leadership was complemented by a 'bottom up' approach, where employee networks were established within the agencies.

Each of the three agencies in our study had a gender network, or a women's network. These appeared to be highly effective. Employees were engaged and the networks conducted widespread consultation with employees throughout the organisation.

The level of involvement from employees appeared to be very high. Additionally, the networks seemed to be very well organised, with sophisticated governance structures and strategic plans to progress gender equity.

The gender and women's networks were complemented by gender champions from the SES. These champions role modelled behaviours and also increased awareness about the gender equality initiatives in their organisations.

**The employee networks also had the potential to progress intersectionality.** This enables organisations to recognise that some employees may experience compound disadvantages and, consequently, have a range of needs.

We found some evidence of the women's and gender networks working with other employee networks, such as the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) networks and the Indigenous networks, building awareness of the impact of intersectional disadvantage.

*'I think the introduction of the Women's Network has been a good thing... I think it has really given gender equality a voice, probably, or a platform on which to talk about it. I think the next generation is going to benefit from all the work that is being done now'. – EL2, Female*

## CONCLUSIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

It is clear that managers and employees in the three agencies we partnered with recognised the importance of gender equality. They acknowledged the opportunities for improved performance and increased productivity derived from a workforce reflective of Australian society.

We found many good initiatives underway in the three agencies. Some of the known factors to progress gender equality were present, such as commitment from senior leadership and the rolling out of gender equality initiatives throughout an organisation. We also found, however, that there is still room for improvement in terms of managers' embracing flexibility for themselves, encouraging men to take up flexible work, and ensuring part-time workers have the same opportunities as full-time employees.

Research tells us that gender equality can be achieved when human resource practices are examined and modified to benefit both women and men; when a 'gender lens' has been applied to practices that may be taken for granted<sup>5</sup>. Changing human resource practices can lead to changing cultures. We also know that culture change occurs when the underlying stories, narratives and ways of working together change<sup>6</sup>.

Such change can be achieved by applying systemic workplace interventions, which are based on shared learning throughout an organisation. This is more likely to result in changed attitudes and behaviours, and ultimately, a changed culture, than a sole reliance on adapting and implementing new human resource policies and practices. Such an approach may result in gender equality being embedded throughout the APS.

A shared learning approach relies on managers and employees being responsible for designing and implementing their own change management activities, sharing these lessons with colleagues, then learning from their experiences as the cycle starts again. Research has shown that this cyclical approach not only contributes to changed behaviours throughout an organisation as more and more people become involved, but works to embed the behaviours, leading to equitable outcomes<sup>7</sup>.

Since we conducted this research, all 18 APS departments have released their own gender action plans — a significant milestone. The evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of these strategies will assist agencies to build upon their successes and showcase the progression of gender equity in the APS.

The PSRG is in a unique position to undertake such work, and we look forward to entering into further partnerships with APS agencies. Email Dr Sue Williamson at [s.williamson@adfa.edu.au](mailto:s.williamson@adfa.edu.au) to discuss possible opportunities.

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*'I think gender equality is about people of all genders feeling that they have the same opportunities as everyone else'. – APS Employee, Female*

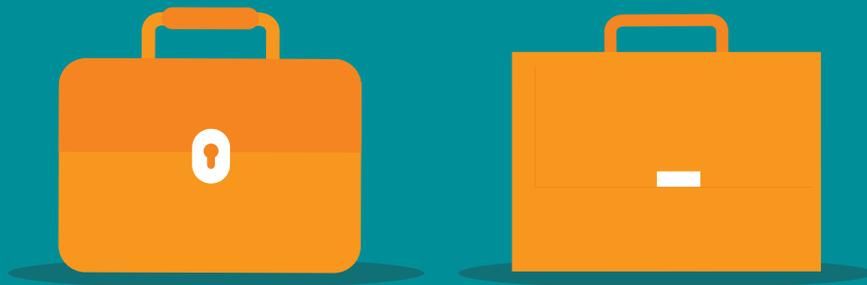
*'I think gender equality is about men and women in the workplace having equal opportunity to contribute, participate, feel comfortable in doing that, particularly in leadership positions'. – EL1, Female*

*'I think it's not about creating a level playing field, it's about getting everybody at the same level. So I guess sometimes different people need a bit more of a step-up'. – EL2, Female*

*'My definition of gender equality would be selecting the best person for the job regardless of gender'. – EL2, Male*

*'For me it is really around [having] the environment that enables people to operate to optimum without it being, "Oh, you're a female therefore you've got carer responsibilities"'. – SES, Female*

*'My definition of gender equality? Equal opportunities, despite gender ... women or men not being disadvantaged by taking time out to have kids, and having to look after kids, and things like that. And having flexible work arrangements not disadvantage you'. – EL2, Female*



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## Special Issue Article

# Gender in the Australian Public Service: Doing, Undoing, Redoing or Done?

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*Attention to gender equity has waxed and waned in public services but, by the 1980s, a series of policy changes placed public services among the leaders in working conditions for women. Conversely, New Public Management reforms since the 1980s focused on leaner, more efficient government and resulted in the gradual downgrading or stagnation of employment conditions for female public sector employees. In the Australian Public Service (APS), occupational segregation remains, as does under-representation of women in senior management. In 2016, the Australian government announced its commitment to progressing gender equality with the release of an APS gender equality strategy. Drawing on frameworks for 'doing' and 'undoing' gender at work, this research uses data from interviews and focus groups to first, identify staff experiences in one large APS agency to examine how gender is done, and second, consider the transformative potential of this strategy to lead to workplaces where gender has been redone or undone, and third, consider the implications for women's equity.*

**Key words:** *public sector, gender equality, doing gender, undoing gender, liberal feminism*

## Introduction

Women's progress in the labour market has been uneven, with large strides forward in women's workforce participation and progress until the 1980s (ABS 2016; WGEA 2016), but much slower progress since. This stalling of progress arguably mirrors developments in the feminist movement, which began as a strong collectivist movement in the 1960s and 1970s but evolved into more moderate forms that reflected the neoliberal focus on individual action (Rottenberg 2014). Rottenberg (2013, 2014) suggests that neoliberalism 'hijacked' the feminist agenda and entrenched neoliberal rationality.

Current political and organisational strategies can appear to be targeted towards gender

equity, but the lack of progress suggests they do not provide a sustainable approach. At national level, policies such as child care, parental leave, and flexible working hours support workforce participation by potentially reducing the clash between domestic and work obligations (Gornick and Jacobs 1998; Mandel and Shalev 2009). However, such policies have not led to any fundamental reordering of gender roles in the home or the primacy of the male breadwinner model.

This article casts a feminist lens over gender policy within public services. Public services' long-term emphasis on equality has not necessarily resulted in equity, amidst contradictory policies to support the participation and advancement of women (Colley 2013) and reforms that deprivileged public employment

and downgraded employment conditions for women (Fairbrother et al. 2012; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011).

This study provides an in-depth look at progress towards gender equality in public services today, in the context of a newly introduced Australian Public Service (APS) policy: *Balancing the Future: the Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy 2016–2019* (the APS GES) (APSC 2016b). It begins with an outline of the conceptual framework. Ely and Meyerson (2000) critique liberal feminist approaches to addressing gender inequality, and suggest an alternative framework. Their framework assists to position the APS GES. We combine theories of liberal feminism with concepts of ‘doing gender’, a term first coined by West and Zimmerman (1987: 137) which refers to ‘creating differences between . . . women and men, differences that are not natural, essential or logical’. We apply this framework to an examination of staff experiences in one APS agency. We argue that, while the APS GES is to be welcomed, it is limited by its gendered liberal feminist approach and evidences a lack of a deep understanding of how to achieve gender equity.

### **Doing Gender in Organisations**

This section combines theories of liberal feminism and ‘doing gender’ in organisations, which developed simultaneously and with points of cross-over such as the development of sex role theories. Whereas feminist theorists identified different types of feminism, the ‘doing gender’ theorists examined how women, men, and organisations create and reinforce gender roles (see, e.g. Abrahamsson 2014; Charles 2014; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Ely and Meyerson (2000) critique the three usual approaches for examining gender equity and change in organisations. All stem from a liberal feminist framework that pursues equality for women within the current institutional structures. The first approach seeks to ‘fix’ individual women, assuming essential ‘male’ and ‘female’ characteristics and providing women with the tools to attain

leadership roles by becoming more like men (Ely and Meyerson 2000: 105–107). The second approach is valuing and celebrating the feminine, achieved through consciousness-raising interventions. Women’s ‘special’ attributes are celebrated, fitting into a diversity management framework where structural barriers to equality are largely unrecognised. Such an approach is essentialist, and can result in strengthening and reinforcing sex categories and stereotypes (Ely and Meyerson 2000: 109).

The prevalence of sex categories in these approaches results in the ‘doing of gender’. West and Zimmerman (1987: 137) identified gender as a social construct that legitimises the assignment of different roles and maintains institutional and social structures that subordinate women. Doing gender results in systems that continually remake gender in organisations and explains the reproduction of essential masculine and feminine traits, where the so-called masculine traits are privileged. The gendering of individuals and interpersonal relations, jobs, organisations, work processes, and social structures entrenches gender in organisations (Acker 1990: 146–147).

A third approach critiqued by Ely and Meyerson is the creation of equal opportunity policy-based interventions that eliminate barriers to recruitment and advancement and include affirmative action measures. This approach has improved women’s working lives, but is also problematic. For example, flexible working arrangements (FWAs) are seen as accommodations to women and can reinforce stereotypes. Ely and Meyerson (2000: 112) note that each of these feminist interventions ‘attempt to change structures that produce inequality without corresponding interventions into beliefs that legitimate the inequality’. This is strongly evident in the APS GES, which aims to transform HR processes, but not the underlying organisational culture.

‘Doing gender’ researchers note that the processes to ‘undo’ gender paradoxically serve to re-establish the gender order in the workplace (Charles 2014), reinforcing the limitations of a liberal feminist approach. It may not be possible to ‘undo gender’, as gender is not fixed and stable (West and Zimmerman 2009).

Instead, gender can be 'redone', which recognises the continuing existence of sex categories (the biological assignment to a sex). Mechanisms to redo gender include an organisation dismantling occupational segregation and FWAs (Abrahamsson 2014: 129; Charles 2014: 378). These initiatives are liberal feminist in nature, but also enable a broader expression of masculinity and hence can be seen to redo gender. In essence, the redoing gender approach has subsumed liberal feminist goals and activities.

A new approach is needed, which goes beyond liberal feminism and the doing/undoing gender approaches. A radical feminist approach would see the restructuring of the bureaucracy, with the removal of hierarchies in favour of consensus and participation (Ferguson, cited in Billing 1994: 181). Increasing understanding of gendered power and collective organisation among feminists within the bureaucracy and women's groups aligns with a collective feminism (Conley and Page 2015: 114, 117, 120). Such a vision of social change opens up space for feminists to generate new knowledge and new conceptions of a workplace which is both gender equitable and progresses equity for women.

As an interim approach on the way to this feminist utopia, Ely and Meyerson (2000) propose a framework that 'disrupts' gender through systemic workplace interventions in which workplace participants critique gendered organisational practices, reflect, and experiment with new ways of working. This disruption of gendering in organisations needs to include a common understanding of what 'gender equality' means, long-term and short-term plans for change, with feedback loops, active involvement of all parties, and experimentation (Benschop and Verloo 2011; Eriksson-Zetterquist and Renemark 2016).

### **Gendered Traditions of Australian Public Employment**

The APS has a long history of being a gendered industry since its establishment by male bureaucrats in 1901 (Caiden 1965). Governments

were often considered to be model employers, providing good wages and working conditions (Fairbrother et al. 2012) but, until the 1960s, this employment relationship largely benefited men. Early public service legislation excluded women from most occupations and every form of advancement, and provided that women would be deemed to have retired from the Commonwealth Service upon their marriage (Sawer 1996). The prohibition of the recruitment or retention of married women was justified on multiple grounds, such as their lesser financial needs and perceived lower productivity due to their higher levels of absenteeism (Anker 1997; Cohn 1985). Organisations also enjoyed the artificial turnover, recruiting young girls on the condition they retire upon marriage, and channelling them into dead-end jobs to ensure more fluid promotion paths for men (Cohn 1985).

From the 1960s, a series of policy initiatives led to some undoing of gender within public services. The marriage bar was finally removed after decades of lobbying, albeit the eventual catalyst for change was the policy problem of labour market shortages rather than a clear goal of promoting equality (Colley 2017; Sheridan and Stretton 2004). To support the retention of married women, paid maternity leave was introduced in the 1970s (Williamson 2015).

From the 1980s, further initiatives included the introduction of recruitment reforms and equal employment opportunity (EEO) laws. EEO policies recognised the need to go beyond individual remedies under antidiscrimination legislation (Strachan et al. 2007). Early EEO policies were usually comprehensive, with analysis to identify systemic issues and extensive planning of remedial strategies. These policies, together with the expanding welfare state, supported an influx of female employees and placed public services among the leaders in working conditions for women (Colley 2013).

These EEO programmes were a step forward and supported by appropriate governance structures. Sawer (2014) studied the trajectory of gender equality architecture in Australia, which was at its most effective in the 1980s. Bodies

such as the Department of Labour's Working Party on Women were tasked with development and monitoring of the Australian Women's Employment Strategy, to foster women's employment and training programmes and tie them into a robust national agenda. Sawyer (2014) notes that the strategies were managed by substantial policy agencies in each participating jurisdiction, and employment ministers often included the initiatives in election platforms. 'Overall, the Working Party was credited with keeping women on the agenda when Australia was heading into a recession and persuading labour ministers of the significance of issues relating to women's employment' (Sawyer 2014: 367).

### ***Gender and NPM***

These advances were undermined by New Public Management (NPM) reforms in the 1980s and 1990s. Institutional reforms reduced the strong central oversight of employment practices, as personnel operations were increasingly devolved to agencies, functions such as industrial relations distributed across a number of central agencies, and a new Public Service Commissioner became responsible for merit, recruitment, promotion, and monitoring of EEO progress (Alford 1993; Enfield 1989; Macdonald 1998). NPM arguably changed the configuration of dominant masculinities to redefine competence in terms of the 'aggressive, workaholic, analytic, calculative, and competitive individual' (see sources and arguments summarised in Davies and Thomas 2002: 464).

NPM redid gender in new ways. Departments became responsible for their own workforces and left to manage equity with little central oversight, which created a disconnection between central policy formulation and local implementation (Corby 1999). EEO policies were replaced with diversity policies, moving the focus from systemic to individual issues and reducing the capacity to address deep-seated inequalities (Bacchi 2009; Strachan et al. 2007; Walby 2005), an approach which currently prevails. This shift effectively negated and

subsumed feminist activism inside and outside the bureaucracy (Conley and Page, 2015: 126).

From 1996, the Liberal/National Party Coalition government led by John Howard continued these reforms, and attempted to align public sector employment arrangements with the private sector. Howard changed the primary employment relationship to being between the employer and employee at agency level, with only general concepts of engagement, promotion, and transfer retained within the APS framework (Macdonald 1998). Managerialism brought increased managerial prerogative, and 'equity based programs, such as Affirmative Action, were downgraded in the interests of efficiency and effectiveness' (Macdonald 1998: 44). The Howard government also stymied the formal influence of the interjurisdictional Working Party on Women and the Workforce (Sawyer (2014)).

By the 2000s, despite extensive procedural change to include EEO processes, many of the underlying issues were not resolved. Bryson (1987: 259) explains that EEO programmes were 'couched in managerial terms' and that 'this technocratic approach is very masculine in style and largely requires assimilation to the dominant male form of management'. She suggests that the focus on formal organisational issues leaves no room for attention to values and other institutions such as the family and, as such, EEO can be undermined by its own design.

### ***The 2016 Gender Equality Strategy***

In early 2016, the Australian government joined international governments and released the APS GES. The Minister noted that this was essential to support Australia's G20 commitment to boost women's labour market participation by 25% by 2025 (APSC 2016b). While a detailed critique of the strategy is beyond the scope of this article, we observe that the strategy combines tenets of liberal feminism with a combination of doing, undoing, and redoing gender. It aims to be transformative and hints at addressing the social construction of gender (such as enabling men to access FWAs). It encourages agencies to review their human

resource (HR) practices, particularly around recruitment and selection and learning and development. Elements of liberal feminism include programs to support women's progression into senior roles to achieve parity (APSC 2016b: 9). Significantly, the language of 'gender' is more prevalent than discussions or recommendations that focus on women, even those which would benefit women more than men, such as developing a domestic violence policy.

In contrast, other elements of the strategy reinforce a gendered APS. Drawing on Ely and Meyerson's framework, the strategy is high on rhetoric, but lacks the formal policies and procedures for implementation. For example, developing training on unconscious bias and gender mainstreaming ('making visible the gendered nature of assumptions, processes, and outcomes: Walby 2005: 321) may be useful, but the strategy lacks a mechanism to evaluate the impact of such initiatives. Gender mainstreaming is also not defined in the strategy, and is a term with multiple and contested meanings (Walby 2005: 322). The strategy also evidences a circumscribed understanding of culture change, with the change actions centred on governance, messaging, or creating a 'respectful' culture. The strategy does not recognise that culture change needs to be a staged, ongoing, and reiterative process.

## Method and Approach

We adopt Ely and Meyerson's (2000) analytical framework, which focuses on social practices within organisations and potentially broadens accepted definitions and practices of masculinity and femininity. In their framework:

... gender is neither an individual characteristic nor simply a basis for discrimination. Rather it is a complex set of social relations enacted across a range of social practices that exist both within and outside of formal organisations that includes (1) formal policies and procedures; (2) informal work practices, norms and patterns of work; (3) narratives, rhetoric, language and other symbolic expressions; and (4) informal patterns of everyday expression (Ely and Meyerson 2000: 114).

This approach – of considering social relations inside and outside of organisations – makes their framework ideal for our study, which questions whether current strategies can deliver sustainable change towards gender equity.

The research is situated in the APS, which is a complex structure of 98 agencies and 160000 employees, predominantly women who are disproportionately represented at lower classification levels (APSC 2016a, 2016c). The case study is a large APS agency we refer to as 'PublicOrg'. PublicOrg released an comprehensive gender equality strategy subsequent to the case study being undertaken, and this study therefore does not comment on the strategy or newer initiatives being implemented.

Kitay and Callus define the case study as 'a research strategy or design that is used to study one or more selected social phenomena and to understand or explain the phenomena by placing them in their wider context' (Kitay and Callus 1998: 103). Case studies are particularly useful when researching workplaces and organisations. They allow for an in-depth examination of the events, processes, and relationships within an organisation, including the interrelationships and the context in which these occur (Kelly 1999). Here, we report on a single case at a single point in time. Prior (2016: 116) highlights that a single case can 'inform us about the essential features of a much larger category'. This single case can inform the appropriateness of the method to be used in other cases. A limitation of this study is that it is confined to one case and therefore the findings may not be applicable to the APS as a whole.

Given that the premise of the research is that gender inequality is embedded in social practices, the appropriate research method was talking to staff to identify their issues. Data were collected from 68 employees in 2016, soon after the release of the APS GES. Thirty-three employees were interviewed, consisting of 15 Senior Executive Service officers (senior managers) and 18 Executive Level 2 officers (EL2s) (middle managers). Interview questions focused on organisational culture, FWAs, career development and promotional opportunities, leadership, recruitment and selection, and

awareness of gender equality initiatives. Thirty-five other employees at lower levels participated in six female-dominated focus groups.

Enabling employees to participate in focus groups incorporates a feminist approach which enables participants to share and discuss experiences, thereby subverting a traditional masculinist approach where power is solely invested in the researcher (Smithson 2009). The same topics were discussed in the focus groups as in the interviews. Interviews and focus groups were de-identified, transcribed, and thematically coded using Nvivo software. The coding frame was initially based on the open-ended questions used by the interviewer, but as analysis deepened, new themes were coded and analysed. The focus groups and interview questions followed the employment life cycle, however, the coding enabled a more fine grain categorisation to be conducted, reflecting participants' responses. For example, participants were asked about recruitment practices and the coding frame listed relevant issues, such as 'unconscious bias' and 'blind recruitment' (whereby names and any other details which could identify a person's gender are deleted). Similarly, participants were asked about the organisational culture. Based on responses, the coding frame was expanded to include items such as 'male-dominated', 'female-dominated', 'entitlement' (referring to some participants describing a 'culture of entitlement'). The detailed coding frame enabled the stories and experiences of the (mostly female) interviewees to be represented more holistically.

### Research Findings

Using Ely and Meyerson's analytical categories, we examine staff experiences of how gender is done in PublicOrg, and the implications for the APS GES. Ely and Myerson argue that 'gender as difference' is central to reproducing gender relations and entrenches a universal truth of male privilege. Organisational policies and practices are therefore seen as gender neutral, whereas, in fact, they can lead to gendered outcomes. The following four areas illustrate these points.

### **PublicOrg: Formal Policies and Procedures**

PublicOrg has a suite of HR policies which includes FWAs, working hours, performance management, and domestic violence leave. Researchers undertook a gender analysis of these policies, but the findings are beyond the scope of this article.

Previous researchers have argued that a consensual and non-hierarchical organisation is part of a radical feminist approach to achieving equality for women. PublicOrg displayed these elements in one small, but important way. PublicOrg had formal procedures in place to progress gender equality. In particular, its extensive employee networks represented employees' interests, provided input into policies and raised awareness throughout the agency. Reflecting conversations occurring across the wider APS, PublicOrg's Women's Network members discussed whether the network should have been a 'gender network' or a 'women's network'. The role of men was questioned:

... some other agencies are sticking with Women's Network because they say the majority of the issues that are dealt with are for women. And but then you have other networks that are saying, "Well, men have to have an active role to create parity or equality" (Women's Network member).

The Women's Network had a sophisticated governance structure, a wide membership (of mostly women) and high levels of interactions across the agency. While the Network had a nominal leader, it was consensual in nature. It also had direct access to the head of the agency (Women's Network member), subverting hierarchy, and the dominant power model. The network may not be sustainable, however, with members often having to do associated work outside standard working hours (Women's Network member). Others critiqued it for focusing too much on mothers or potential leaders (female, EL2).

... there's a lot of showcasing of brilliant, amazing women that have achieved everything, but how does someone that's working at [a lower] level relate to that when they're also in a really hard situation of juggling day care and child care

commitments, in a role where they have zero autonomy? (female, EL2).

Nonetheless, the network provides a voice to allow input into the policy and strategy process, to identify initiatives for undoing gender, and potentially displace hierarchies. While the operation of the Network may act to subvert gender binaries, the issues dealt with further entrench gender norms. For example, the Women's Network encouraged men to work flexibly, which can result in a range of masculinities being displayed in the workplace and begin to address deeper social perceptions around women's roles and careers. Paradoxically, however, focusing on men serves to entrench gender norms, simultaneously undoing and redoing gender, as argued by Charles (2014).

### ***PublicOrg: Informal Work Practices, Norms and Patterns of Work***

While the APS GES requires organisations to review their HR practices to progress gender equality, current practices largely conform to tradition, as evidenced in an examination of FWAs and the long hours culture.

#### *Flexible working arrangements*

Many employees believed that a strong perception existed that full-time employees were more committed to their work and career than were part-time employees. Participants considered that part-time work limited an employee's career and led to fewer opportunities. They reported an underlying assumption that part-time employees were not available or able to undertake urgent or challenging work, and were less invested in career development. Participants who had returned from maternity leave spoke of the need to return full-time, with a common comment being: 'if I had have come back part-time, like, three days a week, I wouldn't be in this [managerial] job' (female, EL2).

Some managers confirmed perceptions that part-time working was incompatible with a career in the agency, particularly in policy areas that required long hours. One reported working on the weekend rather than asking her part-time

employees to complete work, assuming they would be unavailable (female, EL2). This manager reported that her assumptions had been challenged:

...just because you're part-time doesn't mean you're not willing to come in on the weekend. In fact, someone else with a family said, "Well the week-ends might actually be easier because I've got a partner at home and I'm a bit more flexible, whereas during the week I actually have to go home and be there" (female, EL2).

Participants related instances of managers being reluctant to enable employees to work part-time and explicitly informed employees that the work was required to be undertaken full-time. The lack of SES – or even EL2s – working part-time also sent a powerful message that senior roles were unable to be undertaken part-time.

Participants had mixed experiences with the use of other FWAs. Many staff made favourable comments, such as using flexible working hours for caring tasks. Others, however, related instances of managers who would not accommodate their needs, particularly when male employees requested flexible working hours. As one participant stated, while the senior leadership team advocated flexible work, men asking for FWAs remained 'outside of the norm for some managers' and men often would not ask to work part-time or flexibly (Women's Network member). There remained a perception that female employees were the main users and beneficiaries of FWAs, thereby perpetuating gender roles.

PublicOrg was implementing an 'all roles flex' initiative with the aim of embedding, increasing, and destigmatising workplace flexibility. 'All roles flex' means that all positions are flexible by default, whether it be temporal or spatial. It can destigmatise flexibility by encouraging men to access FWAs, and expand conceptions of flexibility. It is therefore potentially transformative and could undo gender in the workplace. While many participants supported this initiative, it was also considered difficult to implement. Some managers did not believe that it would work in their area due to perceptions about the need to be

physically present in the office. There was a lack of understanding about how all roles flex could be translated into practice, with it generally perceived as women working part-time, or staff working fewer hours, which managers considered inimical to completing work. One participant, however, highlighted the need to keep challenging long-held beliefs:

Do you need this person here with you until 10:00 at night just in case you need them? So can they not do this part of the work from home? (female, SES).

Some participants provided positive stories around group work to cover absences, and easier transition from part-time to full-time as workloads changed and all roles flex was implemented (female, SES). One manager discussed how members of her team ‘shadowed’ each other, so when a part-time employee was not in the office another team member was able to undertake the work. This demonstrates a move from focusing on an individual’s work, to conceptualising how the team completes work, which has been shown to be successful in implementing ‘all roles flex’ (Perlow and Kelly 2014).

The operation of FWAs and the introduction of ‘all roles flex’ accords with Ely and Myerson’s (2000) framing to create equal opportunities. The system recognises categorical sex differences and goes some way towards structurally reconfiguring hours and location of work to undo gender. These work processes stop short, however, of degendering the workplace, as the processes of cultural change are missing. Without processes to ensure the active engagement and sharing of lessons, systemic culture change towards a degendered workplace is unlikely to occur (Benschop and Verloo 2011: 284; Ely and Myerson 2000: 107).

#### *Long working hours and presenteeism*

Many participants spoke of a long hours culture where employees were required to be available at night and on weekends. While the work tempo was high, some participants described a culture of presenteeism and self-importance. They questioned whether the work was urgent and the deadlines real, and called

on senior staff to have ‘honest’ conversations about the pressure for constant response. One participant summed up these views:

...one of the strongest messages that came through was this constant pressure to be responsive, responsive, responsive and a lot of us, we’re actually not saving lives ... The biggest pressure we get from our leadership ... is everything has to be done yesterday, everything has to be perfect, we say ‘yes’ to everything, everything, everything and that’s crazy ... (female, EL2).

PublicOrg had almost achieved parity in the numbers of women in the SES, which served to undo gender and disrupt traditional gender roles. Gender roles were being remade, however, through a long hours culture where presenteeism was evident. Policy jobs, which were considered high profile and required long hours, were seen as ‘male’ jobs. Other jobs, such as those in program delivery or corporate services, were seen to be more ‘female’ as they had a lower profile, even if they required long hours. Despite a high level of awareness about gender equality, the conception of jobs was highly gendered:

Because those policy roles are kind of ... men’s expectation that you come in, you don’t have an outside interest. You come in, you work really long hours. So I think we’ve included women, and more women are in those roles, but they’re trying to do them from a gendered language perspective, in a man’s way. As opposed to saying, “I can do the policy job but I can also do it flexibly” (female, SES).

Sex stereotyping of jobs effectively deters many from seeking work in high tempo, prestigious areas. Among middle managers and lower level staff was a widespread perception that working at this agency involved long hours and sacrifice, including not having children until an employee either left or became an EL2. Overall, the long hours entrenched a masculine culture where it was more difficult for women to fit in. It also led to a hierarchical gendering of jobs, where what was considered ‘masculine’ was valued more than the ‘feminine’.

Long working hours is a working practice which is ‘oppressively gendered’ (Ely and Myerson 2000: 116). Long hours not only serve

to mask the operation of gender, but privileges traditional masculine ways of working. The sexual division of labour is reinforced at both an organisation and individual level, where it has become internalised, reflecting wider social structures (Acker 1990: 146).

### ***PublicOrg Narratives, Rhetoric, Language, and Other Symbolic Expressions***

Narratives, symbols, language, and everyday expression – Ely and Meyerson’s third and fourth categories – contribute to gender being done in PublicOrg, and contain lessons for the rest of the APS. Messages from PublicOrg’s senior leadership were strong and supportive, but these messages did not always filter through to lower level employees. Many participants knew of the agency head’s commitment to progressing gender equality and culture change, learned through regular online messages and staff meetings. However, some SES were like ‘vaults’ where messages were not passed on (female, SES). Hierarchical forms of messaging entrench gender hierarchies and, as Charles (2014) suggests, a more collaborative form of communication may serve to redo this particular aspect of gender.

Many men and some women perceived that gender equality had been ‘done’, and there was no need for further action. The rhetoric of gender equality was used in PublicOrg, but the dominant narrative of gender hierarchies and binaries underpinned the rhetoric. Even where participants understood messages about gender equality, they often equated this to implementing FWAs or increasing the numbers of women in the SES. This exemplified the difficulties of envisioning what a gender-equitable culture could look like, and, as Ely and Myerson argued, it is not yet possible to envisage a gender-equitable culture in a gendered system which constantly remakes itself (2000: 132).

Participants noted that the residual culture was ‘male’, and was overly assertive in certain settings, such as meetings. One participant described how the most confident male employees provided hasty or impractical policy solutions, which were then tempered by others to arrive at a more reasonable position. Women

told of not speaking in meetings, due to their own lack of confidence and the more confident and assertive speaking manner of some men. Other women recalled stories of being the only woman in a meeting and being expected to make the tea and coffee, even though they were the most senior person present (female, EL2).

The following incident highlights the distance between the commitment and practice of implementing gender equality:

I sat in on a meeting where I’ve got the information, I’m the only female – they’ve spoken to my male boss. In the same meeting it’s about something quite tricky, they’ve gone, “wish someone would just grow some balls and man up” . . . With all of this rhetoric and the best intentions of the world, we’ve been flooding the messages about this is a real issue and important in our workplace and that’s happening . . . (female, EL2).

These examples confirm the existence of a gendered organisation, even one that is progressive and committed to implementing equality initiatives. As both Ely and Myerson (2000) and Acker (1990) note, language, conduct in meetings, who speaks and who listens, strengthen the dominant gendered power hierarchies in organisations. Individual behaviours, narratives which reinforce male supremacy not only mirror society, but also constructs organisational reality and logics (Acker 1990: 147; Ely and Meyerson 2000: 117).

### ***PublicOrg Informal Patterns of Everyday Expression***

While PublicOrg was trialling new methods of recruitment which could potentially reduce unconscious bias, participants provided examples of bias in the recruitment and selection processes at organisational and individual levels. While many participants believed the merit principle was observed in theory, in practice it was more complex. The following example highlights the difficulties of translating skills to an APS context:

. . . I don’t think people are very good at measuring the non-Public Service experience. So if I take my personal experience . . . I’d worked in the not-for-profit sector for a long time [and] thought

I had very relevant experience. But to get into the Public Service I had to consciously make a decision to take a \$20,000 pay cut, and that's from a not-for-profit pay (female, SES).

Participants identified how selection processes can mask unconscious biases. One interviewee retold how she was required to demonstrate that she was already working at a higher level, whereas her male colleague was judged on potential. Participants mentioned perceptions of favouring men over women for some positions. One participant noted:

I think I see gender inequality quite often . . . I've seen or been aware of decisions being made, based on whether a senior manager likes someone or based on sometimes . . . on the male/female type, gender type thing . . . Some people I think prefer girls in a role and I think some people prefer males (male, EL2).

These examples confirmed that individual interactions uphold gendered structures and perceptions, and simultaneously do and redo gender.

While recruitment and selection processes can lead to gendered outcomes, career progression can also be gendered. Participants described many positive experiences of career development, including being mentored and appointed to high profile projects. Many participants described a very flexible career, undertaking various roles in PublicOrg as well as being seconded to other agencies for short periods. As one female SES officer stated, PublicOrg actively engaged in talent management and mobility programs, which broadened people's experiences and careers. This has the potential to undo gender, as it disrupts a linear career trajectory, aligning it more with careers traditionally associated with women, of moving in and out of the workforce. This then, again escalates undoing gender from the level of the individual, to an organisational level.

While participants resoundingly agreed that positions and opportunities should be decided on merit, little consideration was given to how merit is constructed, from educational qualifications, to networking, to how jobs are assigned in the workplace. Participants

believed that opportunities should be based on previous performance, not on potential that may favour high profile, visible men.

Some women recognised that career advancement to senior levels required networking and visibility rather than just good performance. As one noted:

I struggled with this at understanding why, like, it felt really fake, like somebody saying "you've got to build profile" . . . why do I want or need to get known? But then I started to realise that so many people are so time poor, and they're not necessarily going to notice people that work hard and get stuff done. But if you want to work with other core people you need to strengthen those relationships (female, SES).

Some female interviewees noted gender differences in approaches to promotion. For example:

We were both acting and we applied for the permanent round. He [colleague] was also applying for other agencies at the same time, and actually got offered a job in another agency. And his approach to it was totally different to mine. I was sitting there going, "I hope I get the job, I hope I get the job. All I care about is that I get this promotion and I get this job". And he was like, "So I've got this offer. If I get this offer, even if I don't, I'm going to pit those two against each other. I'm going to go for the highest salary point in this department" (Women's Network member).

This example highlights gendered perceptions and attitudes and the obvious hierarchy, with the female employee content with only being promoted.

Once again, these examples in the above two sections highlight the binaries of gender, with the masculine being privileged under the guise of gender-neutrality (Ely and Myerson 2000: 117). Reliance on the concept of merit, in particular, is grounded in supposed gender neutrality, and acceptance of this concept highlights the masking operations of gendered ideologies and policies within the workplace. Here, we can see the interaction of individual and organisational gendering, compounded by apparently APS gender-neutral policies.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This research has examined the issues and approaches in PublicOrg, and summarised these in terms of Ely and Meyerson's categories. PublicOrg has been relatively successful in the first category of policy and procedural change. The Women's Network enabled a consultative and collective identification of issues and solutions, in contrast to traditional individualised approaches. Further, leadership support for gender equality was evident. However, changes to informal work practices, narratives, and informal patterns have been less successful, and gender continued to be done. Reiterating Acker (1990), gender was inscribed on the organisation (such as the long hours culture), jobs (such as lack of job redesign), and employees (internalising their gender roles), entrenching a masculine culture. We found that the informal work and HR practices in PublicOrg redo, rather than undo, gender.

In light of this study of staff experiences in one major agency, we now consider the likelihood of success of the APS GES. This strategy signals a major change in public policy discourse around gender equality – it is now back on the agenda, possibly the most significant development since the introduction of EEO policies and programs in the 1980s. Organisations are again discussing how to progress gender equality, legitimising such conversations. This may yield significant flow on effects, paralleling the introduction of the right to request FWAs. This right was introduced in the *Fair Work Act 2009* and aimed to change perceptions and 'normalise' requests, as had occurred in the United Kingdom (Himmelweit 2007: 254). It can be argued that this normalising process has also occurred in Australia, and the conversation has now moved on to discussing how all roles flex can operate effectively. The same process may follow the implementation of the APS GES.

To a significant extent, however, the APS is constrained by its history and its HR practices are extremely resistant to change. Changes to 'accommodate' women have been relatively recent and superficial, using the three approaches critiqued by Ely and Meyerson

(2000). The historical context has led to a path dependence from which it is difficult to depart. As discussed earlier, previous gender equity initiatives have been firmly based within managerialism and the masculine culture. While containing many good initiatives, the GES continues this trajectory.

The APS GES actions aim for 'increased take-up of flexible work arrangements by men and women' (APSC 2016b: 13). However, the case study of PublicOrg suggests that resistance to flexible working is evident. As shown in this case study, this view of part-time work redoes rather than undoes gender; while it supports women to participate in work, it also further entrenches gender differences. While encouraging men to work flexibly has the potential to undo gender, this is unlikely to be a widely accepted option until senior role models are in place and working flexibly goes beyond symbolic tokens. This goes to the gendered nature of jobs and work, and without systemic change to alter the conception of work – which we see in its infancy with the 'all roles flex' initiative – HR processes are likely to continue to gender jobs and workplaces.

Narratives, and language contribute to gender being done in PublicOrg and contain lessons for the rest of the APS. Even new narratives are being communicated within traditional public service hierarchies. Reforms such as devolution have moved responsibilities and decisions to lower levels (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011), but often without disrupting these steep hierarchies and thereby creating more silos at lower levels. Centralised messaging, such as the APS GES, need to be communicated down through these hierarchies and silos, where managers have the autonomy to accept or reject the message. As Charles (2014) suggests, a more collaborative form of communication may serve to redo this aspect of gender and employee networks may be a step in the right direction if women at lower levels become involved.

A collective form of feminism is needed to subvert gendered hierarchies and identities, which also needs to be combined with mainstreamed gender equity. While a detailed discussion of mainstreaming is outside the scope

of this article, it is worth noting that gender mainstreaming has transformative potential – the aim is to change the mainstream, rather than individual women (Walby 2005: 323), hence subverting individualistic liberal feminism. Such an approach also aligns with the processes of cultural change found necessary to disrupt gender (Benschop and Verloo 2011).

Gender mainstreaming as a feminist theory and praxis can be overlaid on Ely and Myerson's framework to examine how gender is done and redone in PublicOrg, through an examination of formal and informal work practices and procedures, narratives, and social interactions. As stated earlier, gendered differences form the foundation of these gendered work practices, symbols, narratives, and interpersonal relations. While gender mainstreaming can be applied to working practices to achieve organisational change, such a systemic approach may not change individual behaviours and attitudes, where gender categories are internalised.

Instead, a complementary strategy to degender symbols and narratives is required, one which is reliant on individuals enacting multiple subjectivities, which challenges the gender binary and contests essentialist conceptions of gender (Kelan 2010: 190). Combining collective feminism with gender mainstreaming based on fluid and multiple subjectivities would also subvert the binaries noted by Ely and Meyerson, of public/private, individualism/collectivism, and male/female (2000: 119).

The APS GES appears well intended and contains good initiatives, but it is more likely to redo than undo gender. The initiatives generally take the liberal feminist approach critiqued by Ely and Meyerson (2000) without attention to the deeper social norms, practices, and assumptions. The lack of strategic interventions within a change management framework may not overcome two centuries of history, hierarchy, and adherence to masculinist hegemony. As Billing (1994) noted, it is allowing women to compete within the powerful bureaucracy, rather than abandon bureaucracy in favour of more inclusive organisational forms.

Perhaps most importantly, a feminist implementation of gender equity would

include 'women' in the initiatives, rather than sublimation under the mantle of 'gender'. The category of 'women', however, needs to be dismantled while simultaneously being strengthened. This category needs to be deconstructed to recognise the intersectionalities of identities, a project not included in the APS GES. While equality for different groups of women is a necessary precursor, gender equity also requires the dismantling of binary conceptions of gender. Such an approach would render the categories of 'male' and 'female' irrelevant, recognise the fluidity of gender, and dismantle the gendered construction of jobs and organisations. The APS GES provides the opportunity to have these conversations, while implementing some necessary initiatives.

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# The Role of Middle Managers in **Progressing Gender Equity** in the Public Sector

Produced by

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August 2018



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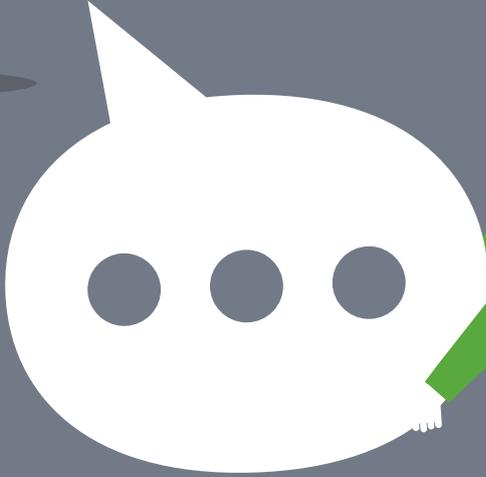


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# Executive Summary

Governments in Australia have expressed deep commitment to progressing gender equity for their workforces, and have developed gender equity strategies, in line with a worldwide trend<sup>1</sup>. Despite the expressed commitment and actions to support gender equity in most jurisdictions, progress towards gender equity in the workplace has been uneven. There remains a gap between expectations and the lived experience of women in public sector workplaces, potentially due to a mismatch between policy and practice. We identified that middle managers, who are responsible for many of the decisions around policy implementation, might be the key to understanding this. Our aim was to talk to middle managers about their role in progressing gender equity.

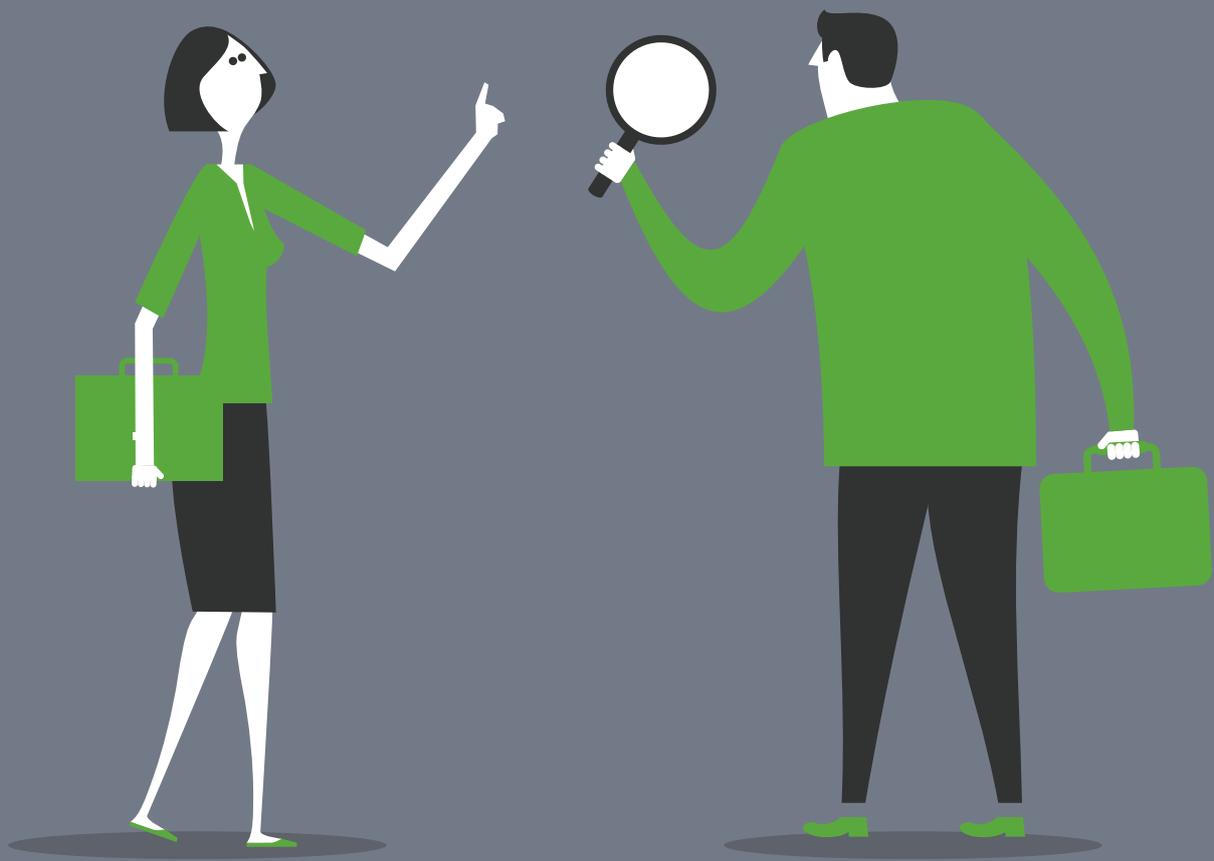
Further aims of the project included to:

1. Identify systemic and structural impediments, and workplace management reforms and policy levers which may be utilised to counter these barriers,
2. Examine the different approaches of the jurisdictions in implementing gender equity and share lessons,
3. Support the development of best practice, providing reports and workshops to discuss the research findings and convert them into policy and strategies for implementation,
4. Develop teaching and case study resources, so that Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) students can become ambassadors for best practice and contribute to policy and practice solutions back in their workplaces; and
5. Deepen our understanding of the role of managers in relation to gender equity in particular, public sector employment and good governance in general.

This report draws together our findings from four Australian public sector jurisdictions: New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania. We conducted fieldwork from November 2017 to February 2018, to gather information from eight agencies, which included 40 focus groups with 273 middle managers and 21 interviews with senior executives and human resource (HR) staff, for a total of 294 participants. We acknowledge the support of ANZSOG, and the four jurisdictions to undertake and complete the research.

Based on a wealth of experience from the participants, we have identified practices and processes to facilitate progress toward embedding gender equity in public sector organisations. We provided each jurisdiction with a report containing findings on their two agencies and suggested actions. This report synthesises the findings from the four jurisdictional reports and contains suggested actions agencies and managers can take. It also contains a leading practice guide which middle managers can use to progress gender equity as part of their daily work (see Appendix A).

Funding for this publication has been provided by the Australia and New Zealand School of Government Research Program.



# Main Findings

- Senior executives and the majority of middle managers have a strong, and demonstrated commitment to progressing gender equity in their agencies,
- The knowledge of middle managers on gender equity policies in their agency is variable and dependent on a range of factors, including the existence of education and awareness activities undertaken by their agencies and the opportunity to discuss the policies and gender equality strategies. Some contrasted this with the more active commitment and resourcing of White Ribbon and domestic violence awareness training,
- Managers welcomed the opportunity to discuss how to implement gender equity in their daily working practices, and requested that senior leaders facilitate such conversations. Managers are also largely committed to having these conversations with their staff,
- Many managers are committed to enabling employees to work flexibly, but also seek greater support on how to manage requests and how to manage employee performance,
- A high level of awareness on how unconscious bias manifests in recruitment and selection processes was evident in most of the organisations. Managers are committed to addressing the operation of biases, but would also benefit from further support in this area,
- Most managers had a rudimentary understanding of how the merit principle operates in relation to gender equity. While all were committed to employing 'the best person for the job', conceptions of how merit is constructed and how merit and gender intersect were at a low level; and
- Within each agency, we identified examples of innovative good practices to progress gender equity, spanning the employment cycle.

# Actions

**Action area:** Increasing managers' and employees' understanding of gender equity, to embed gender equity in workplace practices.

**Suggested actions:**

- Central agencies to develop education and information campaigns around the different elements of gender equity and inequity, and how these manifest,
- Agencies to encourage senior executives to lead routine conversations around gender equity; and
- Agencies to make opportunities available for managers and employees to discuss what gender equity means and how it can be progressed.

**Action area:** Challenging and changing recruitment and selection processes to mitigate against hidden biases; providing career development opportunities to overcome vertical and horizontal segregation.

**Suggested actions:**

- Central agencies to examine the intersections between unconscious bias and merit, how this manifests in the workplace, and how 'bias disruptors' can be effectively utilised,
- Agency leaders and senior executives to lead a conversation challenging the presumed objectivity of the merit principle and encouraging managers to see how recruiting for equity and diversity can improve agency performance,
- A cross-jurisdictional approach to increase understanding of the construction of merit, the operation of the merit principle, merit and targets be cascaded throughout all levels of the public sector,
- Central agencies to consider innovative approaches to increase mobility, including enabling departments to combine their mobility experiences into a central database, accessible to employees across the public sector,
- Central agencies to engage managers in a dialogue about the need for targets, evidence of their effectiveness, and how targets interact with the merit principle and other legal frameworks governing public sector employment; and
- States and departments to monitor progress on their respective gender equity targets, and regularly publish results to ensure accountability.

**Action area:** Increasing capacity for managers to manage staff working flexibly; increasing usage of flexible working arrangements by both men and women.

**Suggested actions:**

- Central agencies to provide guidance to assist managers who are considering requests to work flexibly; also develop training and guidance for managers to increase their capability to manage employees working flexibly,
- Managers to routinely conduct an analysis of work allocation to identify whether part-time staff are being provided with lesser quality work, and accordingly make appropriate changes in work allocation,
- Agencies to formalise arrangements for staff to 'act-up' in roles on a part-time job-share basis,
- Agencies to examine ways to empower managers to create and reform positions as employees move in and out of part-time work, including through amalgamating 'left-over' portions of positions which have become part-time, to form new positions and additional jobs,
- Agencies to enable their part-time employees to accumulate experiences necessary to advance in the organisation while working reduced hours,
- Senior leaders to pro-actively role model flexible working. Agencies to actively promote examples showing not only that it is possible to hold a senior executive position while working flexibly or part-time, but demonstrate how senior executive roles can be attained following a part-time or flexible career path,
- Agencies to develop job-share registers to assist employees to find job-share partners,
- Agencies to undertake workforce planning which realistically reflects actual staffing levels and the necessary resources be provided to enable such planning; and
- Agencies to encourage a 'safe-to-fail' culture, to enable managers to try innovations and not be burdened with fears of reprisal.

The report includes a examples of leading practice by managers to progress gender equity (Appendix A) and the research design used (Appendix B).



## 1. Introduction

Governments in Australia have expressed their strong commitment to progressing gender equity for their workforces and have developed various strategies to advance their equity goals<sup>2</sup>. These strategies have complex and multi-faceted aims, including: increasing the number of women in leadership positions; breaking down barriers to allow both women and men to combine paid work with caring responsibilities; and reducing occupational segregation to enable people to work in areas best suited to their needs and talents, rather than according to gendered social and organisational norms.

Much of the extant research has focused on employees' needs for, and perceptions of, gender equity in their workplaces, and has highlighted significant gaps between their aspirations and expectations and their lived experience at work. With a gap between policy and practice, leaders have a critical role in supporting the implementation of gender equity policy. Prior research has focused on the influence and role of the senior leaders in organisations and of supervisors<sup>3</sup>. Surprisingly little attention, however, has been paid to the role of middle managers in enabling and constraining gender equity strategies in the workplace. This is an omission that needs to be addressed in order to build knowledge and to understand the levers for change toward equity at work.

Our research targeted this gap, examining the role of middle managers in progressing gender equity in four Australian public sector jurisdictions: New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania. A team of researchers from the University of New South Wales, Canberra, CQUniversity and the University of Sydney worked together to produce individual reports for the jurisdictions and this synthesised national report.

The researchers would like to acknowledge the financial and logistical support from ANZSOG and the New South Wales, Queensland, South Australian and Tasmanian governments. We particularly thank the New South Wales Public Service Commission, the Office of the Commissioner for Public Sector Employment (South Australia), the Public Service Commission in Queensland and the Tasmanian State Service Management Office for their support and invaluable assistance in organising access to the case study agencies, their leadership and support of this project. We also thank the individual agencies for their cooperation, and participating executives and managers for generously sharing their perspectives.



## 2. Gender Equity Policy Frameworks

All four jurisdictions have a solid policy framework to progress gender equity. Each state draws on data analysis of their workforce profile to support their case as to why the public sector needs to continue to progress gender equity.

## KEY THEMES INCLUDE:

- (a) Horizontal and vertical segregation in occupation and position level remains an ongoing feature of public sector employment. Horizontal segregation refers to the tendency for men and women to work in different industries or occupations, while vertical segregation refers to the tendency for men to be disproportionately represented in senior roles relative to women. In many of the agencies studied, there remained pockets of horizontal segregation, especially in specialised fields such as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and finance, which tend to have a majority male workforce, and areas such as HR and support services, which have a majority female workforce.
- (b) There was significant evidence of vertical segregation. While each jurisdiction has a majority-female workforce, women remain over-represented in lower employment classification levels and are not proportionately represented in leadership positions. For example, the Queensland Public Service Commission noted the slow increase in the percentage of women in Senior Executive Service positions, from 29 per cent in 2003 to 34 per cent in 2014, and noted '(a)t this rate of change it will take until around 2045 to achieve gender parity'<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, women comprised between 35 and 48 per cent of senior leadership in other jurisdictions studied (35 percent in Tasmania as at August 2016; 37 per cent in New South Wales in 2015; and 48 percent in South Australia in 2017.<sup>5</sup>

Women are more likely to work part-time due to their caring responsibilities, which further limits their career opportunities. The South Australian government noted: 'In 2011, the Executive Feeder Group Survey found that the belief that [women] could not access flexible work arrangements as an executive was a significant deterrent to respondents aspiring to executive levels for both genders, but women chose this reason more frequently than men'<sup>6</sup>.

Three jurisdictions (Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania) have a gender equity strategy; New South Wales does not have a written policy focused specifically on gender equity, but has broad aims detailed on the New South Wales Public Service Commission website. While the approaches differ slightly between the jurisdictions – some focus on leadership while others focus on gender equity more broadly – there are similarities in approaches. Common elements across jurisdictions include a commitment to:

- making leaders accountable and visibly committed to progressing gender equality,
- changing workplace cultures and HR processes to overcome biases; and
- supporting flexible working arrangements for both women and men.

These strategies are complemented by a range of other policies and resources, including on flexible working<sup>7</sup> and encouraging women to work in majority male occupations<sup>8</sup>.



## 3. Findings

### UNDERSTANDING AND RECOGNITION OF GENDER EQUITY

The aim of promoting gender equity in the workplace is to remove barriers to the full and equal participation of women in terms of equal pay for work of equal or commensurate value; access to leadership roles, and removal of gender discrimination, particularly in relation to family and caring responsibilities<sup>9</sup>.

Participants in all 40 focus groups discussed their understanding of gender equity concepts. Many defined gender equity as a phenomenon where fair and equal access to opportunity was available irrespective of gender or family commitments. However, many participants equated gender equity with numerical parity; that is, they said that gender equity would be achieved when women comprised 50 per cent of senior leaders. Consequently, many managers considered that gender equity was not a high priority for their departments, or had already been achieved, due to the relatively high representation of women in senior leadership roles, particularly when compared to the private sector. Comments such as the following were typical:

*It's not something I've come across here...  
gender is not an issue in this Department.*

It could be argued, however, that women holding 50 per cent of leadership positions<sup>10</sup> is not an equitable outcome when women hold around two-thirds of all public sector positions. Indeed, some managers argued that despite the overall representation of women in the public sector, forms of gender inequity remain embedded in the service, but are often overlooked. These include: gendered cultures and behaviours, limited opportunities for individuals (mainly women) with caring responsibilities or working part-time, horizontal and occupational segregation and entrenched sex role stereotyping. In general, managers working in agencies where concerted conversations had taken place around the aims of their respective gender equity strategies were more likely to hold these more nuanced views of gender equity.

Our research suggests that middle managers' understanding of gender equity is contingent on agencies actively engaging their employees in a continuous dialogue about what gender equity means, and how it can be achieved. Many participants believed this dialogue was lacking in their organisations, and contrasted this with their agencies' more active commitment to the resourcing of other strategies, such as White Ribbon and domestic violence awareness training.

While some participants stated that they had discussed gender equity with their staff, many said they did not have the resources or capability to engage in such conversations. However, many participants welcomed the opportunity provided by this project to discuss with their peers the meaning of gender equity and how to progress equity in their daily work. Further, our research highlights the importance of strong agency leadership in promoting conversations about gender equity, particularly in employment contexts where numerical gender parity (or near parity) may mask more subtle sources of inequity.

- **Suggested actions:** Central agencies to develop education and information campaigns around the different elements of gender equity and inequality, and how these manifest; and
- Agencies to encourage senior executives to lead routine conversations around gender equity. Agencies to make opportunities available for managers and employees to discuss what gender equity means and how it can be progressed.

## RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION: THE CONCEPT AND ROLE OF BIASES AND MERIT

All executives and HR staff who participated in our study indicated a desire for equitable recruitment and selection processes. However, awareness of biases and other impediments to gender equity in recruitment and selection processes varied across agencies, especially with regard to the operation of unconscious biases. Many participants confirmed that they had undertaken selection panel training, but generally as a one-off initiative. Most managers in our sample had not undertaken any form of unconscious bias training, but many said that departments should take greater steps to educate managers about the existence of unconscious biases, and to mitigate the operation of such biases in recruitment and selection processes.

Research has shown, however, that in order for bias training to be successful, it must be part of a continuous and sustained effort<sup>11</sup>. There is considerable scope for recruitment and selection training to be followed up, to ensure managers recognise unconscious biases, and are given opportunities to use 'bias disruptors'<sup>12</sup>, such as senior leaders reviewing applicant shortlists, and managers taking time out during the recruitment and selection processes to reflect on any biases that may have been unintentionally triggered<sup>13</sup>.

The operation of unconscious biases is strongly linked to the current understanding of 'merit', which is a deeply ingrained principle in the public sector. The intention of the merit principle is to 'guard against patronage, bias, and other undue influence'<sup>14</sup> by allowing for competitive entry into the public service. Recent academic research has shown that managers in organisations that explicitly promote themselves as 'meritocracies' – recruiting, rewarding and promoting the 'best' people based on their individual skills and capabilities – are counter-intuitively more likely to exhibit gender biases in favour of men over equally qualified women<sup>15</sup>. This so-called 'paradox of meritocracy' occurs because managers rely on the belief that their decisions are objective<sup>16</sup>, and consequently do not examine the role that biases may play in shaping their decisions.

Although many managers said they believed in the existence and operation of unconscious biases, there was little recognition of the various ways in which implicit biases have been shown to disadvantage women and some demographic minority groups in merit-based recruitment and promotion systems<sup>17</sup>. Opportunities need to be provided to increase middle managers' understanding of how biases can shape perceptions of merit.

Merit has increasingly come to be interpreted as 'getting the best person for the job'<sup>18</sup>, a framing that emerged strongly in every focus group undertaken in the project:

*...you're just taking the best person. It doesn't matter what their race, their gender, their colour, whatever, it's the best person...*

The tension between the ideal of merit and the goal of gender equity was widely discussed in focus groups. Overall, there was substantial confusion about how the merit principle interacts with organisational goals around equity and diversity. Some participants expressed concern that recruiting to achieve diversity or equity – by appointing a woman to meet a (formal or informal)

gender target, for example – could be construed as violating the merit principle. A smaller number of managers, however, recognised that recruiting for diversity or equity could contribute to broader organisational goals – such as expanding the creativity or decision-making power of teams, or making departments more representative of the constituents they serve – and was therefore consistent with merit.

Agency leaders and senior executives may wish to lead a conversation challenging the presumed objectivity of the merit principle and encouraging managers to see how recruiting for equity and diversity can improve agency performance. Such conversations are already underway in some public sector organisations and could provide a model for departmental leaders to open this line of dialogue<sup>19</sup>.

- **Suggested actions:** Central agencies to examine the intersections between unconscious bias and merit, how this manifests in the workplace, and how 'bias disruptors' can be effectively utilised,
- Agency leaders and senior executives to lead a conversation challenging the presumed objectivity of the merit principle and encourage managers to see how recruiting for equity and diversity can improve agency performance; and
- A cross-jurisdictional approach to increase understanding of the construction of merit, the operation of the merit principle, merit and targets be cascaded throughout all levels of the public sectors.

## TARGETS

Further misunderstandings in relation to merit emerged in discussions of gender targets, which were largely considered to be incompatible with the merit principle. Targets and other affirmative action initiatives are used to drive gender equity in many public sector organisations, including those participating in the research agencies. Targets are a mechanism used to counter women's under-representation in the senior ranks and over-representation in lower levels of public sector organisations, a phenomena which has been well documented<sup>20</sup>.

Overall, in focus group conversations we encountered widespread resistance to the idea of deploying targets. While some participants considered that targets could be effective in some areas, such as in ICT for example, most participants argued that a stigma may be attached to women who were perceived to have been promoted to meet a target, rather than on the basis of having the required skills, competencies and attributes:

*I don't know that the target is necessarily the right thing because I would hate for a woman to get a job just because she's a woman when there were more qualified applicants out there.*

Some female focus group participants were concerned that targets might subject women to claims of 'tokenism' and raise claims of reverse discrimination, leading to a backlash against the broader goal of gender equity. As noted in the previous section on merit selection, managers who expressed support for the goal of gender targets were also uncertain about how recruiting to meet such targets fits within the rules governing public sector employment. Our findings suggest that while many central agencies are actively pursuing gender targets, managers have a number of concerns which may inhibit the achievement of those targets.

Academic research shows both positive and negative impacts in workplaces where targets have been implemented. In Australia and internationally, targets have contributed to an increased number of women in leadership positions<sup>21</sup>. Some negative aspects do attach to the concept of targets, however, including the possibility that women appointed under this system may be viewed as less competent than the male applicants who were not appointed<sup>22</sup>. We recommend that overall targets be set at the state-wide level – as has been done in New South Wales, for example – and that all departments set appropriate gender targets to contribute to achievement of the state-wide objectives.

- **Suggested actions:** Agencies to engage managers in a dialogue about the need for targets, evidence of their effectiveness, and how targets interact with the merit principle and other legal frameworks governing public sector employment; and
- States and departments to monitor progress on their respective gender equity targets, and regularly publish results to ensure accountability.

## CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Mobility<sup>23</sup> experiences, such as giving staff the opportunity to move into other positions or another agency to fulfil a short-term vacancy, is an excellent form of development. Mobility experiences can be a way of addressing vertical segregation, by allowing women to gain necessary skills to advance up the ladder, and horizontal segregation, by allowing women to gain experience needed to transition across roles. While many of the agencies that participated in the research offered formal training opportunities for employees, access to informal development opportunities was more varied. Generally, mobility was limited in many areas and for different groups of employees, particularly those working part-time and in regional areas. Many managers noted a lack of 'backfilling' positions (replacing a staff member on leave for example, with another staff member) which reduced the opportunities for staff to broaden their work experience and to work temporarily in higher graded positions.

Scope exists for greater clarity around the processes for mobility and relieving opportunities. A recurring theme within the focus groups was a lack of transparency in relation to access to these opportunities. Some managers argued that informal practices such as 'tapping on the shoulder' did not always lead to equitable – especially gender equitable – access to opportunities. Furthermore, some managers expressed that access to such experiences was strongly contingent on the support of individual managers. Jurisdictions need to develop creative approaches to mobility and backfilling to progress gender equity. Allowing employees to access and apply directly for such roles would increase the transparency and equity of the process. It would also

enable employees to gain access to skills and experiences required to advance vertically within the organisation, or to shift horizontally into areas where they may have lacked prior experience.

- **Suggested action:** Central agencies to consider innovative approaches to increase mobility, including enabling departments to combine their mobility experiences into a central database, accessible to employees across the public sector.

## FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

Flexible work arrangements are often seen as essential to the development of gender equitable workplaces, because they enable employees with caregiving responsibilities to reach their full potential<sup>24</sup>. Research has shown that middle managers are critical to enabling employees to access flexible working arrangements, as they determine which employees can and cannot access non-standard working arrangements. Middle managers also mediate work group responses to those who work on a flexible basis<sup>25</sup>.

Participants in our eight case study organisations demonstrated a strong commitment to enabling employees to work flexibly, in a variety of organisational settings, including for customer-facing staff and those working in other operational areas. Some organisations were also implementing 'all roles flex' or 'flexibility by default', where there is a reverse onus on requests for flexible working, so that requests are considered on an 'if not, why not' basis.

However, while commitment was strong, managers also discussed the operational difficulties flexible working can bring and many requested additional support in both approving requests and managing the performance of employees who worked remotely or from home. Many managers spoke of being uncertain of when they could refuse a request for an employee to work flexibly, and requested additional guidance around how to adjust or revoke a flexible working arrangement in the case of poor performance (such as that provided by the South Australian jurisdiction<sup>26</sup>). Additionally, managers were uncertain of the link between working remotely and performance. Managers also stated that they needed more training, and more conversations around how to manage employees working remotely or from home:

*...we're learning that on the job because we don't sort of really, never really sat down and thought about how we will manage with people who are working from home.*

In agencies where remote working was uncommon, managers noted strong pockets of resistance to the practice based on a perceived lack of trust, or concern about the ability to manage underperformers. In agencies where working from home was more commonplace, managers also expressed concern about underperformance, and requested guidance about to manage these staff. Interestingly, managers' concerns seemed to relate to the maturity of these policies. For example, in agencies where working from home was a relatively new phenomenon, managers generally reported that employees worked hard to ensure they could keep accessing the flexibility.

In agencies where remote working was more entrenched, however, managers were more likely to report mixed experiences regarding the reliability and productivity of remote workers. Central agencies therefore need to provide training and guidance to assist managers who are considering requests to work flexibly and to increase their capability to manage employees working flexibly.

- **Suggested action:** Central agencies to provide guidance to assist managers who are considering requests to work flexibly; also develop training and guidance for managers to increase their capability to manage employees working flexibly.

## PART-TIME WORK

Part-time work is a key mechanism by which Australian women combine work and caring responsibilities, with Australia having the third highest rate of part-time work amongst countries in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development<sup>27</sup>. Requests to work part-time or reduce hours were also the most common formal flexible working arrangement request made to managers in Australia in 2012-13<sup>28</sup>. Research in Australia and abroad has shown, however, that part-time work is associated with a lack of career progression, often due to perceptions regarding part-time workers' commitment and a general reluctance in many organisations to further promote part-time workers<sup>29</sup>. There can also be perceptions that senior roles cannot be done in a reduced hours format. An additional challenge is that men are both less likely to request flexible working arrangements and are more likely to be refused when they do so<sup>30</sup>.

The managers in our study reported widespread use of part-time work in their agencies. This was particularly true for women, consistent with broader employment patterns. Participants held mixed views on part-time work and career opportunities. Some managers reported that working part-time could be a career barrier for their employees or themselves, while other managers proactively found career development opportunities for their part-time staff. Some participants noted that certain jobs could not be done part-time, and that working part-time could limit access to mobility experiences (such as temporarily filling a more senior position) or promotions. The importance of being able to access good quality part-time jobs with promotion potential was a major theme that emerged in nearly all of the focus groups. Many managers argued that part-time workers were not given the types of complex projects necessary to advance within their organisations:

*I just feel like you get better opportunities by being available five days a week. You might get a high priority project because they know you're going to be here, they know that you can commit full-time and possibly more to delivering something.*

One way to improve career development opportunities for part-time staff would be to enable job-sharing of higher duties. For example, if a manager were to take a role at 0.6 full time equivalent (FTE), a staff member at the next lowest level could 'act up' in that position at 0.4 FTE, receiving higher pay and training opportunities for those two days. Another innovation involved

amalgamating 'left-over' portions of positions which had become part-time, to form new positions and additional jobs across divisions. Further, part-time employees would benefit from accessing such opportunities.

- **Suggested actions:** Managers to routinely conduct an analysis of work allocation to identify whether part-time staff are being provided with lower quality work, and accordingly make appropriate changes in work allocation,
- Agencies to formalise arrangements for staff to 'act-up' in roles on a part-time job share basis,
- Agencies to examine ways to empower managers to create and reform positions as employees move in and out of part-time work, including through amalgamating 'left-over' portions of positions which have become part-time, to form new positions and additional jobs; and
- Agencies to enable their part-time employees to accumulate experiences necessary to advance in the organisation while working reduced hours.

## Leaders working part-time

The presence of female role models in senior leadership is an important factor in women's mid-career progression. However, research examining the experiences of part-time managers suggests that the sex of senior leaders may be less important than the work-life patterns they model. Female leaders who have no children or work long, full-time hours with the support of full-time childcare can be seen as impressive career women but lacking in work-life balance, a perception which may discourage some women from seeking senior roles<sup>31</sup>. Male leaders who champion flexibility can assist in 'normalising' the practice, for both men and women. We heard many positive stories of both male and female senior leaders role modelling flexible working arrangements, including a very few who worked part-time. Many participants stated that the lack of part-time leadership opportunities was a prime impediment to women being able to participate in senior roles. The lack of male role models working part-time compounded managers' beliefs that senior roles were incompatible with reduced hours.

Job-sharing was perceived to be one of the more viable ways to combine a senior executive role with reduced hours. Participants noted that the burden to organise and negotiate the terms of a job-sharing arrangement was often placed with the individual seeking the arrangement. Managers argued that this limited the supply of job-share positions and made the process difficult and stressful to navigate for individuals. Some managers argued that their organisations might make job-sharing opportunities, including in senior roles, more widely known including at the recruitment stage, or create a centralised database where employees of similar skills and qualifications could 'match themselves' and apply for positions jointly.

- **Suggested actions:** Senior leaders proactively role model flexible working. Agencies to actively promote examples showing not only that it is possible to hold a senior executive position while working flexibly or part-time, but demonstrate how senior executive roles can be attained following a part-time or flexible career path; and
- Agencies develop job-share registers to assist employees to find job-share partners.

## FLEXIBILITY AND PRODUCTIVITY

One theme that emerged from focus groups in two jurisdictions was that flexibility has the potential to compromise responsiveness and productivity. Managers requested that reduced capacity be reflected in realistic deadlines and also in business planning. Participants stated that their senior leaders expected that the same amount of work would be completed, even when staff worked part-time. Participants stated that at times, flexibility had compromised responsiveness and output. A lack of staff to backfill had also exacerbated this situation and consequently, budgetary constraints were seen to impede on flexibility. Managers requested conversations occur about what work they were not going to do when employees reduced their hours. Work plans also need to reflect FTE. This needs to occur in the business planning cycle, as well as on a daily basis. Agencies may benefit from access to resources on workforce planning, such as has been developed by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Sector Employment in South Australia<sup>32</sup>.

Some participants, however, reported that their senior manager recognised that this was an issue and that delivery of projects may be delayed:

*But we've had this conversation at the leadership group just recently and we've actually now extended that to a three year plan acknowledging that we have a lot of part-time staff and flexible working arrangements and the scope of the work that we had planned for the two years was actually quite ambitious.*

Such an approach needs to be widespread across public sector jurisdictions to enable outcomes to be met with appropriate resourcing.

- **Suggested action:** Agencies to undertake workforce planning which realistically reflects actual staffing levels and the necessary resources be provided to enable such planning.

## INNOVATIONS IN FLEXIBLE WORKING

As the public sector generally transforms to become more agile, this will include increasing support for flexibility. Our study identified innovative solutions in addition to those mentioned previously. One was 'flexible flexibility', where an employee could move easily in and out of part-time work, such as employees who worked part-time for most of the year but worked full-time for two months a year during the team's busiest period. Yet others used technology, with one team using shared document editing programs, so multiple authors could work on one document. Others had developed a buddy system and shadowing to manage flexible workers. Another department had moved to ensure that at least two employees had shared responsibility for single tasks or policy areas, to minimise disruptions when one employee could not be present.

Several agencies in our study were trying broader workplace innovations that supported flexible working. 'All roles flex' or 'flexible by default' and activity based working (such as not having a fixed desk position and having workspaces dedicated to specific activities) were trialled in some of the agencies we studied. To date, there does not seem to have been evaluation of how these initiatives are working in terms of productivity or gender equity.

Further examples of good practice are in Appendix A and agencies could also share such examples internally and across the public sector. This may indeed be occurring. Agencies also need to encourage a 'safe-to-fail' culture, as is occurring in the South Australian public sector<sup>33</sup>, to enable managers to try such innovations.

- **Suggested action:** Agencies to encourage a 'safe-to-fail' culture, to enable managers to try innovations and not be burdened with fears of reprisal.



## 4. Conclusion

This synthesis report draws on insights from the reports provided to each state government, and provides suggestions for actions that are likely to have the most impact to progress gender equity in these four jurisdictions, as well as other public sectors in Australia and internationally. Organisations and middle managers are encouraged to use what will work for them, which is dependent on the current level of gender equity in their organisations.

Our research has shown that middle managers are committed and utilise both formal and informal policies and procedures to progress gender equity. These managers are also innovative, developing solutions tailored to their team which could be shared more widely. One of the aims of this project was to share good practices, and the participants generously provided a wealth of experiences and practices which can be utilised across the public sector.

This report has contributed to filling the gap in knowledge around how middle managers are progressing gender equity, yet more remains to be done. Public sector organisations are at the forefront of implementing gender equitable initiatives, and emerging areas include the increasing adoption of 'all roles flex', activity based working, an increasing recognition of the role that unconscious biases play in human resource practices, as well as of the operation of the merit principle. These are all rich areas deserving ongoing conversations and further research.

### For further information

To find out more about this project or to discuss future research partnerships, email the project leader, Dr Sue Williamson at [s.williamson@adfa.edu.au](mailto:s.williamson@adfa.edu.au).

# Appendix A: Middle Managers Role in Progressing Gender Equity: A leading practice guide

This leading practice guide has been developed after almost 300 middle managers, senior leaders and human resource professionals participated in research to examine how managers can progress gender equity in their organisation.

## CREATE A CULTURE OF AWARENESS AND CHANGE

- Recognise the powerful role that middle managers play in promoting and progressing gender equality,
- Encourage conversations about gender equality, the merit principle, unconscious bias and working flexibly. Use resources provided by your agency to assist you,
- Include gender equity topics on the agenda at team meetings, instigate discussions in the lunch room and be part of developing an inclusive culture. Establish momentum and initiate a program of activities together. This will be more successful than a stand-alone event,
- Include men in conversations about gender equity. Explain the business benefits of gender equity to everyone, and encourage men to attend gender equity events,
- Celebrate early wins publicly and share successful stories about positive gender equity figures and new approaches to working flexibly. This will enable employees to see how gender equity benefits them personally; and
- Create a culture where people are recognised for promoting gender equity and feel safe to 'call out' others who may not be behaving according to the organisation's values of respect and equality.

# ADAPT HUMAN RESOURCE PROCESSES TO **PROGRESS GENDER EQUITY**

## Job design

- Use portions of part-time positions to create new positions for acting, higher duties or backfilling opportunities for others,
- Design jobs around a collection of tasks, not necessarily around making up one new full-time position; and
- Implement and analyse job-sharing arrangements to identify the productivity of a six day week (as a job-share) over one full-time equivalent position.

## Recruitment & selection

- Have conversations around merit – what it means, what it looks like and how targets and merit are not mutually exclusive. Consider how recruitment can be undertaken by looking at merit in a different way,
- Consider attracting different genders to non-traditional roles. Identify blockages in recruitment pathways and ask questions about why different people are not applying,
- Go outside of the standard avenues when advertising and searching for candidates. Try different recruitment methods such as: blind recruitment, work tests, presentations, role plays and activities that challenge how candidates respond in different situations,
- Review job descriptions whenever there is a vacancy. Assess for gendered language and inclusiveness. State that flexible hours will be considered and women and those with caring responsibilities are encouraged to apply. Articulate the organisational values, behaviours and competencies, not just the technical skills required for the role; and
- Aim for shortlists to have an even gender split of applicants. If this is not possible, consider revising the job description, advertising and search mechanisms.

## Career development

- Find and encourage mobility opportunities for all staff to increase their experience,
- Cross-train employees to broaden their skills, but to also enable them to move around their agency, other agencies, to backfill or be an additional resource in times of need; and
- Plan work so that everyone – including part-time staff – have the opportunity to work on interesting and prestigious projects.

## TECHNOLOGY & SUPPORT

- Insist on appropriate technology to support staff who work flexibly. Provide laptops, shared calendar access, shared document editing platforms and remote meeting options,
- Use a shared calendar to track leave and employees working flexibly, even if they're just going to be in later,
- Discuss office communication requirements, standards of work and expectations on output. Provide guidelines on working from home; and
- When putting project teams and workplans together, consider those working flexibly and accurately forecast resource needs and deadlines.

## FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

- Make it clear that flexibility is not just a 'women's' issue, it is good business practice - a mutually beneficial arrangement where home and business priorities are met,
- Encourage men and those at higher levels to access flexible arrangements, and promote this as positive case studies,
- Make decisions on workplace flexibility by consulting with the team, so it's a shared response, not just the responsibility of the manager and employee,
- Be flexible across the year and negotiate with part-time staff who might be available to work full-time for the busiest time of the year,
- Cross-train staff and implement shadowing arrangements to broaden employees' skills, to allow them to move around departments and backfill roles; and
- Create an environment where those who are acting, backfilling or working in new roles feel ok to try new things. Support them to make decisions in the absence of others.

This leading practice guide is available as a separate document. It can be downloaded from the Public Service Research Group website [<https://www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/public-service-research-group/research-projects/middle-managers%E2%80%99-role-progressing-gender-equity-leading-practice-guide>] and is available in hard copy by calling +61 2 6268 8074.

# Appendix B: Research Design

The aim of this project was to understand the role of middle managers in progressing gender equity in public service workplaces.

The first phase of the research project involved understanding the context and developing the sample. The research team analysed key policies and strategic documents pertaining to gender equity, which were provided by the central agencies from each jurisdiction. The research team also interviewed key executives, such as Public Service Commissioners, Assistant Commissioners, Deputy Commissioners and their representatives, to further understand the key priorities and strategic initiatives being undertaken to progress gender equity in each state. Central agencies in each jurisdiction<sup>34</sup> identified two agencies to participate in the study based on a range of criteria, which might provide interesting comparisons because of seeming dissimilarity. Criteria were also used to identify which employees were ‘middle managers’, to ensure comparability across jurisdictions. This approach yielded a diverse sample of eight case agencies, each at different stages in their progress toward gender equity.

The second phase of the research involved interviews and focus groups within these eight selected agencies from November 2017 to February 2018. Within each agency, the researchers conducted interviews with at least two senior staff to gain a strategic view of the organisation’s gender equity initiatives, and conducted at least four focus groups with middle managers. In total, the study involved 294 participants, including 21 interviews with senior executives and human resource staff, and 40 focus groups with 273 middle managers.

Each focus group involved 90 minutes of broad-ranging and natural conversation around key themes to gain insight into how middle managers were experiencing gender equity strategies in their local context. The interviews and the focus groups focused on the general themes as presented in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Interviews and focus groups were transcribed and the research team analysed text to draw out key themes within and across organisations. Each jurisdiction was provided with a report containing findings and suggested actions for stakeholders at different levels, including whole-of-government initiatives; senior managers within agencies, senior HR managers, in conjunction with their teams; and middle managers themselves.

## TABLE 1: MIDDLE MANAGERS AND GENDER EQUITY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: INTERVIEW THEMES FOR SENIOR EXECUTIVES

<b>Gender Equity</b>	<p>Objective: To understand the main priorities and challenges in progressing gender equity in the organisation.</p> <p>Key themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Main priorities for the organisation</li><li>• Main challenges</li><li>• Key blockages/inhibitors</li><li>• Key enablers</li></ul>
<b>Career Development</b>	<p>Objective: To understand the mechanisms and/or blockages in the organisation for developing and promoting women's careers.</p> <p>Key themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Unconscious bias</li><li>• Recruitment and selection</li><li>• Training and development</li><li>• Targets/Affirmative Action</li></ul>
<b>Flexibility</b>	<p>Objective: To understand how flexibility operates in the organisation.</p> <p>Key themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Flexible work arrangements policies and usage</li><li>• Sources of support</li><li>• Sources of resistance</li><li>• Accessibility (by role, job characteristics, seniority, etc.)</li></ul>

## **Role of Middle Managers**

Objective: To understand the role of middle managers within the organisation and engagement with the agency's broader gender equity agenda.

Key themes:

- Role and responsibility of middle managers
- Engagement with gender equity
- Sources of support
- Sources of resistance

## **Measurement and Reporting**

Objective: To understand how gender equity is monitored and evaluated in the organisation.

Key themes:

- Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms
- Accountability mechanisms (Key Performance Indicators linked to gender equity, etc.)

## TABLE 2: MIDDLE MANAGERS AND GENDER EQUITY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: INTERVIEW THEMES FOR MIDDLE MANAGERS

### Gender Equity

Objective: To understand how middle managers perceive gender equity in the organisation, and degree of engagement with gender equity issues.

Key themes:

- Gender equity in the organisation: current state
- Perspectives on the organisation's approach to gender equity
- Key blockages/inhibitors to gender equity
- Key enablers
- Rationale for progressing gender equity

### Implementation

Objective: To understand how middle managers engage with and implement the organisation's gender equity agenda/strategy.

Key themes:

- Challenges in implementation
- Sources of support
- Sources of resistance

### Career Advancement

Objective: To understand middle manager perspectives on the mechanisms/blockages in the organisation for developing/promoting women's careers.

Key themes:

- Unconscious bias
- Recruitment and selection
- Performance management
- Career development
- Targets / Affirmative Action

## Flexibility

Objective: To understand middle managers perspectives on access to flexibility in the organisation.

Key themes:

- Experiences/challenges managing requests for flexibility
- Workforce/operational impediments to flexibility
- Cultural impediments to flexibility
- Experiences role modelling flexibility
- Views on the implications for career progression of accessing flexible work arrangements (for men and women)
- Accessibility (by role, job characteristics, seniority, etc.)

# About the Authors

## Dr Sue Williamson

Sue Williamson is a Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management at the University of New South Wales, Canberra. As a member of the Public Service Research Group, Sue's scholarship focuses on how organisations can create and sustain gender equitable and inclusive cultures, with a particular focus on the public sector. Her work has been published widely in academic journals and media outlets and Sue regularly shares her findings with public sector audiences. In 2017, Sue was awarded a highly competitive grant from the Australia and New Zealand School of Government to lead the research project which culminated in this report. Sue was also named a 2017 Telstra Business Women's Award (Public Sector and Academia) Finalist for the ACT. Sue is also the President of the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand.

## Dr Linda Colley

Linda Colley is a Discipline Leader in Human Resource Management at CQUniversity. Her current research examines: public sector employment themes of merit and tenure; gender equity in pay, progression and superannuation; affirmative action in political parties; and senior executives in public services. She has received funding from the Australian Research Council and ANZSOG, and her industry partners include state governments, trade unions and superannuation funds. Linda is active in national and international research networks, and her other roles include Vice-President of the International Research Society for Public Management (IRSPM) and Chair of the Queensland Government Work Health and Safety Board.

## Dr Meraiah Foley

Meraiah Foley specialises in the relationship between gender, work, and organisations. As a Research Fellow with the Public Service Research Group, Meraiah is currently examining gender equality in the Australian public sector. Her prior research has focused on the comparative industrial relations frameworks in the United States and Australia and their relationship to gendered labour market outcomes, impact of motherhood on women's careers and self-employment, the impact of paid parental leave on Australian employers, and employee and employer attitudes around the introduction of Dad and Partner Pay.

## Professor Rae Cooper

Rae Cooper is Associate Dean (Programs), the University of Sydney Business School and Co-Director of the Women, Work and Leadership Research Group. Rae is a leading researcher on the world of work and has a particular interest in gender and work, women's careers and flexible employment. She has received grants from the Australian Research Council, from state and federal governments and has worked in collaboration with leading organisations including the Australian Human Rights Commission, the Australian Institute of Company Directors and the Australian Council of Trade Unions through her research. Rae uses her research expertise to contribute to public debates about work and careers and is a key Australian commentator on workplace matters in television, radio and print media.

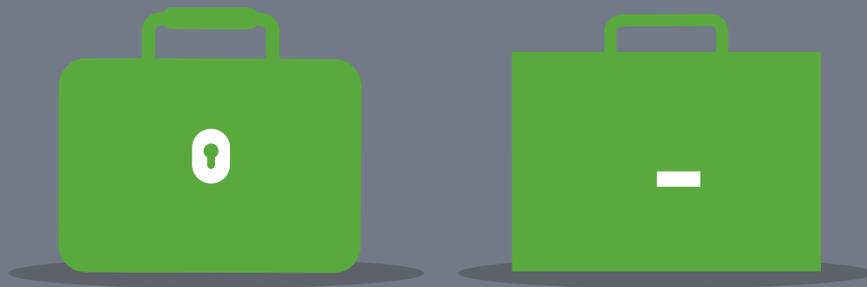
# Endnotes

- 1 See for example, State Service Management Office (2016) *Gender Diversity in the Tasmanian State Service*, Tasmanian Government: Hobart; Public Service Commission (2015) *50/50: On equal footing*, Queensland Government, Brisbane; Government of South Australia (n.d.) *Gender Equality in Leadership: A strategy for gender equality in leadership in the South Australian Public Sector*, Government of South Australia.
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# Middle Managers' Role in Progressing Gender Equity: A leading practice guide



Public  
Service  
Commission



Queensland  
Government



Government  
of South Australia



Tasmanian  
Government



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY  
Business School



This guide has been developed as a product of a 2017-18 research project between UNSW Canberra, the University of Sydney, CQUniversity and the New South Wales, Queensland, South Australian and Tasmanian governments. The project examined how middle managers can progress gender equity at work and was based on conversations with 300 middle managers, senior public sector leaders and human resource professionals in the four jurisdictions.

## CREATE A CULTURE OF AWARENESS AND CHANGE

- Recognise the powerful role that middle managers play in promoting and progressing gender equality.
- Encourage conversations about gender equality, the merit principal, unconscious bias and working flexibly. Use resources provided by your agency to assist you.
- Include gender equity topics on the agenda at team meetings, instigate discussions in the lunch room and be part of developing an inclusive culture. Establish momentum and initiate a program of activities together. This will be more successful than a stand-alone event.
- Include men in conversations about gender equity. Explain the business benefits of gender equity to everyone, and encourage men to attend gender equity events.
- Celebrate early wins publicly and share successful stories about positive gender equity figures and new approaches to working flexibly. This will enable employees to see how gender equity benefits them personally.
- Create a culture where people are recognised for promoting gender equity and feel safe to 'call out' others who may not be behaving according to the organisation's values of respect and equality.

## ADAPT HUMAN RESOURCE PROCESSES TO PROGRESS GENDER EQUITY

### Job Design

- Use portions of part-time positions to create new positions for acting, higher duties or backfilling opportunities for others.
- Design jobs around a collection of tasks, not necessarily around making up one new full-time position.
- Implement and analyse job-sharing arrangements to identify the productivity of a six day week (as a job-share) over one full-time equivalent position.

### Recruitment & Selection

- Have conversations around merit – what it means, what it looks like and how targets and merit are not mutually exclusive. Consider how recruitment can be undertaken by looking at merit in a different way.
- Consider attracting different genders to non-traditional roles. Identify blockages in recruitment pathways and ask questions about why different people are not applying.
- Go outside of the standard avenues when advertising and searching for candidates. Try different recruitment methods such as: blind recruitment, work tests, presentations, role plays and activities that challenge how candidates respond in different situations.

- Review job descriptions whenever there is a vacancy. Assess for gendered language and inclusiveness. State that flexible hours will be considered and women and those with caring responsibilities are encouraged to apply. Articulate the organisational values, behaviours and competencies, not just the technical skills required for the role.
- Aim for shortlists to have an even gender split of applicants. If this is not possible, consider revising the job description, advertising and search mechanisms.

### Career development

- Find and encourage mobility opportunities for all staff to increase their experience.
- Cross-train employees to broaden their skills, but to also enable them to move around their agency, other agencies, to backfill or be an additional resource in times of need.
- Plan work so that everyone – including part-time staff – have the opportunity to work on interesting and prestigious projects.

## TECHNOLOGY & SUPPORT

- Insist on appropriate technology to support staff who work flexibly. Provide laptops, shared calendar access, shared document editing platforms and remote meeting options.
- Use a shared calendar to track leave and employees working flexibly, even if they're just going to be in later.
- Discuss office communication requirements, standards of work and expectations on output. Provide guidelines on working from home.
- When putting project teams and workplans together, consider those working flexibly and accurately forecast resource needs and deadlines.

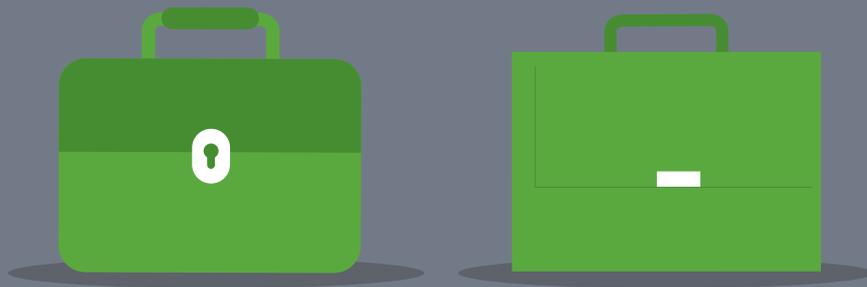
### Flexible Working Arrangements

- Make it clear that flexibility is not just a 'women's' issue, it is good business practice - a mutually beneficial arrangement where home and business priorities are met.
- Encourage men and those at higher levels to access flexible arrangements, and promote this as positive case studies.
- Make decisions on workplace flexibility by consulting with the team, so it's a shared response, not just the responsibility of the manager and employee.
- Be flexible across the year and negotiate with part-time staff who might be available to work full-time for the busiest time of the year.
- Cross-train staff and implement shadowing arrangements to broaden employees' skills, to allow them to move around departments and backfill roles.
- Create an environment where those who are acting, backfilling or working in new roles feel ok to try new things. Support them to make decisions in the absence of others.

This research project was funded by the Australia and New Zealand School of Government and the four state governments. The full report is available at

<https://www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/public-service-research-group/research-projects/role-middle-managers-progressing-gender-equity-public-sector>

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