

Embedding Gender Equality in the Australian Public Service: Changing practices, changing cultures

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Achieving gender equality in the workplace 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.** Gender equality is particularly important in the public sector, which has traditionally been considered a model employer for women.

The Australian Government has adopted a strong policy position to advance gender equality in the Australian Public Service (APS). In 2016 the government released *Balancing the Future: The Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy 2016-2019*. Shortly after the release of this Strategy, we examined the progress of gender equality initiatives in three APS agencies. We identified the barriers and enablers to progressing and embedding gender equality in the APS.

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.**

'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

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.**

'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

3. **Ensuring that individual initiatives — such as unconscious bias training — are ongoing, reinforced, repeated over time and evaluated.**

'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

WHAT'S NEXT?

Since Dr Sue Williamson and Dr Meraiah Foley conducted the research for *Embedding Gender Equality in the Australian Public Service: Changing Practices, Changing Cultures*, all 18 APS departments have released their own gender equality action plans. Various state and local governments have also established their own gender equality strategies and action plans. 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 across the public sector.

The PSRG is in a unique position to undertake such work, and we look forward to entering into further partnerships with public sector agencies.

Email Dr Sue Williamson at s.williamson@adfa.edu.au to discuss possible opportunities.

'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

ABOUT THE PSRG

The PSRG was established to partner with organisational clients to produce new insights into effective public service implementation and evaluation. We perform timely, high-quality and reliable research into public policy implementation.

The full report of *Changing Practices, Changing Cultures* is available on the PSRG website.