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

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ABOUT THE **AUTHORS**

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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 inter-disciplinary 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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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[1]. Gender equality is particularly important in the public sector, which has traditionally been considered a model employer for women[2].

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 responsibilites, 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[3].

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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[1] Wood, R. (2012) *Building a Business Case for Diversity*, http://genderequity.ahri.com.au/docs/GEP-Building_a_Business_case_for_Diversity.pdf, 4.

[2] OECD (2014) *Women, Government and Policy Making in OECD Countries: Fostering diversity for inclusive growth*, OECD, Paris.

[3] Australian Government (2016) *Balancing the Future: The Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy 2016 – 2019,* Canberra.

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'[4].

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[5]. 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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[4] Australian Government (2016) *Balancing the Future: The Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy 2016 – 2019,* Canberra, 3.

[5] Devine et al. (2012), 'Long-term reduction in implicit race bias: A prejudice habit-breaking intervention', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology,* 48:6, 1267-1278.

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.

For example, in two out of the three agencies, we found little support for home based work, 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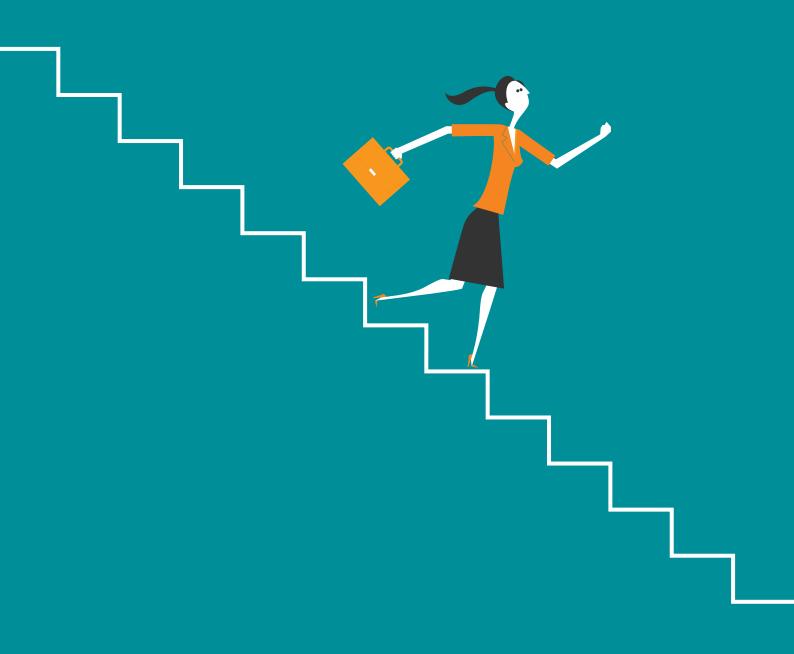 a strong cultural stigma against men working flexibly. Although we heard many incidences of managers approving flexible work arrangements, and providing employees with the necessary supports and resources, we also heard instances where male employees believed that their managers would not support their 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[6]. 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[7].

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[8].

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** to discuss possible opportunities.

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[6] Mastracci, S and Bowman, L (2015) 'Public Agencies, Gendered Organizations: The future of gender studies in public management', *Public Management Review,* 17:6, 857-875: OECD (2014) *Women, Government and Policy Making in OECD Countries: Fostering Diversity for Inclusive Growth,* OECD, Paris.

[7] Ely, R. J., & Meyerson, D. E. (2000). 'Theories of Gender in Organizations: A new approach to organizational analysis and change', *Research in Organizational Behavior,* 22, 103-151.

[8] Nelson, Sa and Yeo, RK (2012) 'Action Learning for Middle Manager Development: The case of an Australian state-based large organisation', *International Journal of Human Resources Development and Management,* 12:4, 292-307.

'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