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

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August 2018



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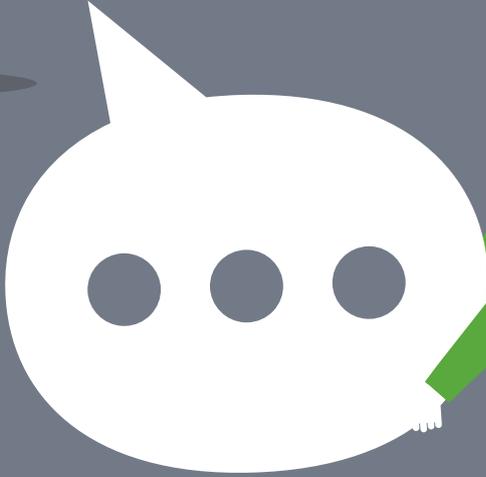


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# Executive Summary

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

<b>Gender Equity</b>	<p>Objective: To understand how middle managers perceive gender equity in the organisation, and degree of engagement with gender equity issues.</p> <p>Key themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gender equity in the organisation: current state</li><li>• Perspectives on the organisation's approach to gender equity</li><li>• Key blockages/inhibitors to gender equity</li><li>• Key enablers</li><li>• Rationale for progressing gender equity</li></ul>
<b>Implementation</b>	<p>Objective: To understand how middle managers engage with and implement the organisation's gender equity agenda/strategy.</p> <p>Key themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Challenges in implementation</li><li>• Sources of support</li><li>• Sources of resistance</li></ul>
<b>Career Advancement</b>	<p>Objective: To understand middle manager perspectives on the mechanisms/blockages in the organisation for developing/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>• Performance management</li><li>• Career development</li><li>• Targets / Affirmative Action</li></ul>

## 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

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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.

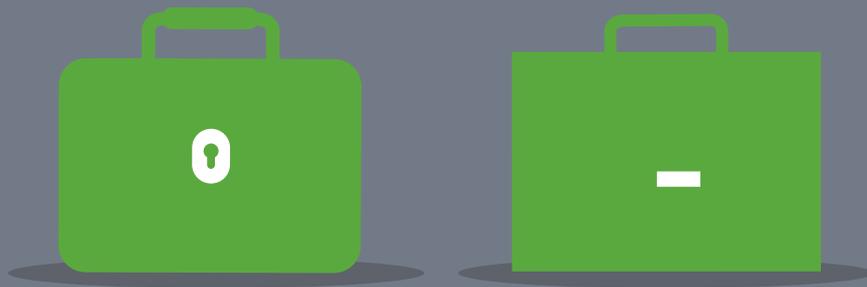
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