

# Embedding Gender Equality in the Australian Public Service:





## KEY FINDINGS

1.



## **G**ENDER 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) *Gender Equality in the Workplace: A Guide for Managers*, OECD, Paris.

<sup>3</sup> 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.



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



## 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.

## 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.



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.

### **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.



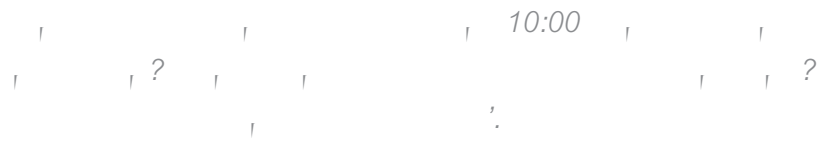


## **4. Workplace flexibility is supported and valued**

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:

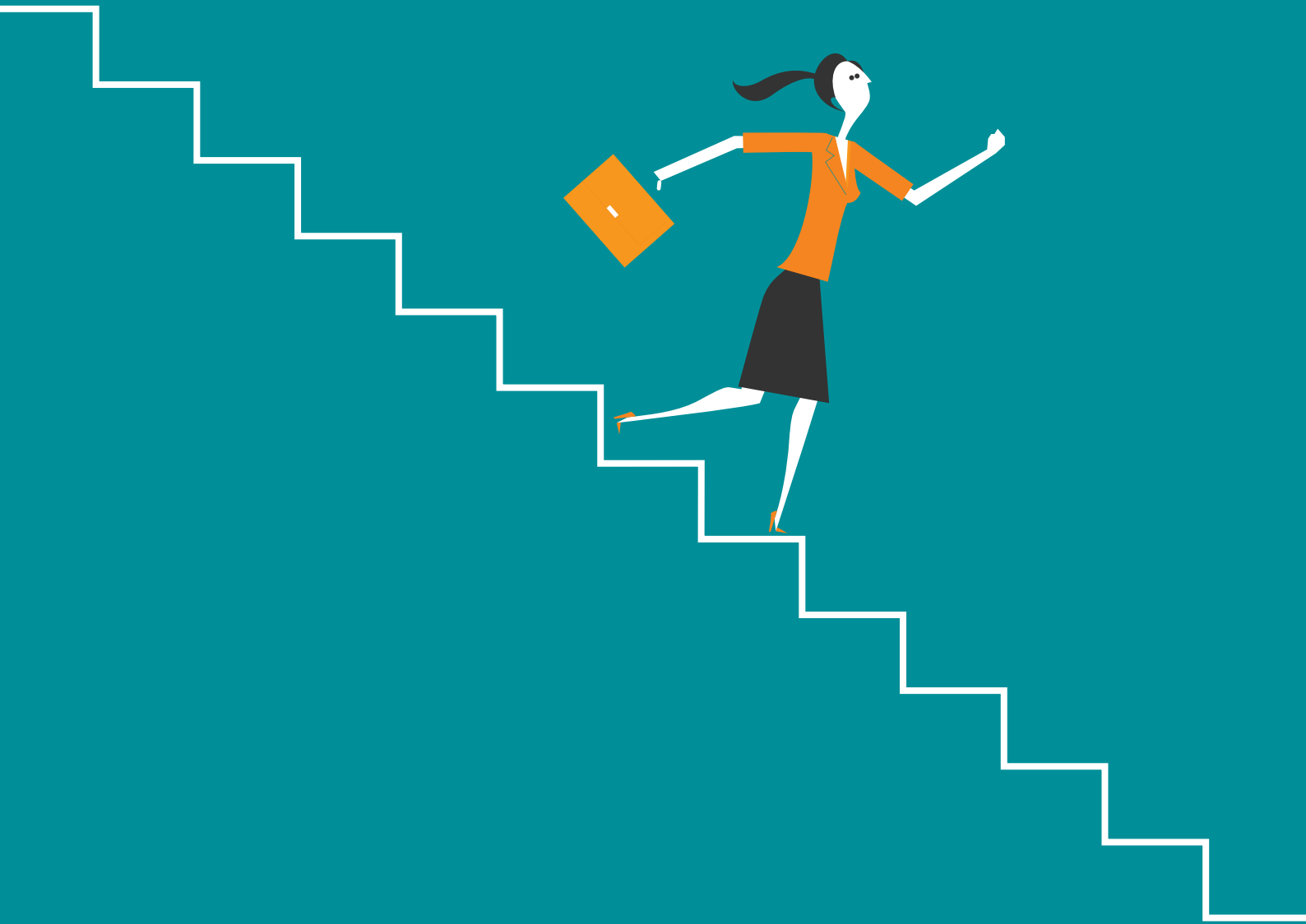
- Enabling team members to shadow each other, to ensure work was completed if an employee was not working on a particular day,
- Utilising a pool of people who could circulate around the workplace, backfilling where teams were working flexibly and required support, and
- Being organised and establishing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











## 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.

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.

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

A

2 :

B

2



## 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

## 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>6</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>7</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



