DEBATE

'Not yet 50/50' – Barriers to the Progress of Senior Women in the Australian Public Service

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In most countries around the world women remain in the minority when it comes to senior positions in both the public and private sectors. That there are barriers to their progression is not in doubt. What is not well understood is the nature of those barriers and the extent to which they are consciously or unconsciously constructed. Moreover, there has been a stark absence of empirical studies in the field of Australian public administration to investigate these issues and assess the implications. The purpose of this abbreviated article is to help bridge the gap (the full study is published at https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/not%20yet%2050%EF%80%A250%20report-Final%20Version%20for%20print(1)[1].pdf). It does this through a study of the perceptions of senior men and women of the cultural and systemic barriers affecting the recruitment, retention and promotion of senior women in six Australian Commonwealth departments. The article then proposes a range of mitigating strategies for navigating these barriers and achieving and maintaining a better gender balance at the Senior Executive Service level across the Australian Public Service. These strategies are integrated within a systems model of behavioural change which we hope will prove useful to public organizations embarking on diversity reform initiatives.

Key words: *behavioural change, diversity, gender, equality, leadership, unconscious bias*

'A woman is human. She is not better, wiser, stronger, more intelligent, more creative, or more responsible than a man. Likewise, she is never less. Equality is a given. A woman is human'.

– Vera Nazarian, *The Perpetual Calendar of Inspiration*.

Has the Case for Gender Equality been Won?

The scientific case for gender equality in the workplace has been won. The evidence is clear – there are no significant differences in cognition that give males an advantage. The social case is less clear – perceptions and expectations are far stronger indicators than objectively measured differences between men and women. The quest for gender equality in the workplace (indeed any form of equality) is an ongoing struggle which should not stop with the achievement of a performance target. The purpose of this study is to contribute further empirical evidence in support of this claim. It does this through a study of the perceptions of senior men and women of the cultural and systemic barriers affecting the recruitment, retention and promotion of senior women in six agencies of the Australian Public Service (APS). We then propose a range of mitigating strategies for navigating these barriers and achieving and maintaining a better gender balance in the Senior Executive Service (SES).

What is the Problem?

In June 2012, women made up 57% of the APS workforce, but only 40% of the SES (APSC 2012: 148). In all but four departments, women outnumbered men, but, by contrast, only four out of 19 departments had more women than men at the SES level. There was also considerable variation between the representation of women at different SES levels; so, 37% of Band 2 positions (equivalent to head of division) were held by women, but only 28% of Band 3 positions (the most senior rank of management below the Secretary/head level) (APSC 2012: 150). Only 20% of departments were headed by women. There were also clear differences across Departments and Agencies, with Education, Human Services and Health being traditionally well-represented (Burgess 2013).

What are the implications of this pattern of under-representation amongst the senior echelons of the APS? Crucially, it exposes a fundamental disjuncture between the formally espoused values of the APS and its practices. The under-representation of women in APS leadership is anathema to the notions of merit, equality and fairness on which the service is founded and which it is bound to follow by law. No longer can it be argued that it is just a matter of time before talented women will rise to leadership positions. The head of the Australian Treasury, Martin Parkinson, once held this view, but no longer: he argues that the only way to correct the imbalance is to pursue a systematic approach to interrogating that imbalance (Parkinson 2012: 2).

In sum, there are both moral and instrumental imperatives for closing the gender gap in public service leadership. The moral imperative is bound up with the notion that the public service should be the moral guardian of the 'Good Society' and gender equity at all levels of the service is a key component of how we understand a 'Good Society'. The instrumental imperative is that diversity (including gender equity) is a key policy instrument for achieving social as well as economic wellbeing. But why are women generally under-represented in senior positions in the APS?

What Does the Existing Evidence Tell us?

In most countries around the world, women are in the minority when it comes to senior positions in both the public and private sectors (e.g. OECD 2009; McKinsey 2010; Ernst &Young 2013). That there are barriers to their progression is not in doubt. What is not well understood is the nature of those barriers.

Surprisingly, there has been a stark absence of empirical studies in the field of Australian public administration. The existing literature is mainly drawn from the private sector suggesting a range of interrelated factors including the problem of 'unconscious bias'; where perceptions of individuals affect an individual's behavior without conscious knowledge (Piterman 2008; AIM 2012). This means that it is not easy to detect cultural bias which can be embedded in organizational structures and practices. In consequence, it is extremely difficult for women to adapt in systems where bias is mobilized unconsciously through dominant organizational norms and values. In short, senior women may not be playing on a level playing field.

This is manifested in the gendered language we sometimes hear in the workplace and in 'the perceptions' that surround women in leadership. For example, that 'women are not as ambitious as men' (AIM 2012: 5). A 'double-bind' dilemma can occur when a women's leadership style is evaluated against a masculine leadership norm (Catalyst 2007: 9). There is also compelling evidence that workplace structures and cultures reinforce certain norms and values and perpetuate processes of unconscious bias that afford men comparative advantages. As Piterman (2008: 12) observes, developing organizational strategies that expect women to adapt their behaviours to fit better into the prevailing culture is like giving 'women skills to play on an uneven field, but [it] doesn't flatten out the field itself'. These power imbalances also contribute to women displaying a lack of confidence on the job.

The academic studies that we have cited so far focus on the private sector but what of the public sector? While there is a paucity of Australian academic research on the public sector,

there have been some important insights provided through grey literature. Recent studies from two agencies with relatively few senior women provide a valuable base-line for our empirical study. These studies confront the reality of 'unconscious bias' and identify similar barriers to women to those identified in the private sector.

Firstly, the *Review of Employment Pathways for APS Women in the Department of Defence* (2011) used a variety of data sources in order to understand views about the representation of women in Defence. Focus group research on the department's culture reported: a strong military culture where women found it difficult to break into 'Boys clubs' (a male-dominated culture); a lack of emphasis on people skills; high prevalence of gender stereotyping and a 'predominant perception of women as nurturers'; lack of willingness to provide flexible working practices and a culture of 'needing to be seen'; and, leadership narrowly defined to be assertive and masculine in style (Defence 2011: 32–36). It was concluded that women form a stigmatized group (2011: 38).

Secondly, a review of the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) was conducted concurrently by Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner. It identified the main barriers in preventing an increase in the representation of women in leadership as: a lack of critical mass of women due to attraction and retention difficulties: rigid career structures with a high degree of occupational segregation; difficulties combining work and family; and, a culture with occasional poor leadership and unacceptable behaviours (AHRC 2012: 17).

And, thirdly, Treasury undertook a survey in 2011 which was reported in the document *Progressing Women – a Strategic Priority*. Here it was noted that staff consultations 'provide a compelling case for some changes to the way we work and, perhaps most importantly, the way we think' (2011: 2). It identifies underlying and unrecognized bias as impacting on leadership styles in the organization.

Similar findings have been found in other studies (see, for example, Fitzpatrick 2011; Evans et al. 2012), where women were found to have lower application rates for promotion relative to their male colleagues and were less likely to put themselves forward for promotion with lack of self-confidence articulated as a significant barrier.

Four propositions on the under-representation of women in leadership positions can be extracted from this brief review of current academic and practice-based thinking and will be the subject of empirical investigation in the remaining sections of this article.

Proposition 1: competing priorities/family responsibilities *hinder* women from taking up demanding leadership roles.

Proposition 2: negative male perceptions of a woman's ability to lead *impede* women's progression into leadership roles

Proposition 3: workplace structures and cultures *hamper* women's progress by distilling processes of unconscious bias that afford comparative advantage to men with the requisite attributes.

Proposition 4: workplace cultures and practices *undermine* the self-confidence and self-belief of women in seeking career advancement.

It is crucial to emphasize that there are important interconnections between these propositions.

How did we study the problem?

To ensure a broadly representative APS sample we developed a typology of Commonwealth departments that exhibited the following characteristics:

1. Departments/agencies most likely to have a male-streamed culture (agencies with fewer than 40% of women in their SES).
2. Departments/agencies most likely to possess reasonable representation of women at the senior levels of the SES (agencies with more than 40% of women at the senior levels of the SES).
3. Departments/agencies likely to have embedded norms and values due to long-standing history.

Table 1. **Proportion of Female Executive Level (EL) and SES staff at June 30 2012 (%)**

Department	EL	SES1	SES2	SES3	Total SES*
Defence	28.2	28.9	23.3	25.0	27.0
DIT	42.0	28.1	30.0	50.0	28.9
Finance	47.6	37.7	13.6	66.7	34.0
PM & Cabinet	60.3	32.5	62.5	50.0	42.1
FaHCSIA	62.2	64.5	44.4	60.0	59.3
Human Services	52.4	44.2	66.7	44.4	48.4
Total APS	46.5	40.4	37.3	28.1	39.2

Sources: information provided by departments; APSC (2012: 150).
*Includes departmental secretaries.

Table 1 above disaggregates the six departments by the proportion of women in EL and SES positions.

A mixed methods approach was deployed, encompassing qualitative 'one to one' interviews and focus groups in each of the departments and agencies.

Empirical Findings and Analysis

The findings of our research are reported against the four core propositions on the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions identified above. Table 2 lists the top ten barriers that inhibit senior women's progress as perceived by both men and women at EL and SES levels in the APS and also according to whether departments had a male-streamed culture or reasonable representation of women at the senior levels of the SES. The former have fewer than 40% of women in their SES and are identified as ABC and the latter have over 40% and are identified as 123. We identify differences in perception at three levels: between men and women across all departments; between men and women in departments with fewer and with more than 40% of women in their SES; and between men and women at EL and SES levels.

Proposition 1: competing priorities/family responsibilities *hinder* women from taking up demanding leadership roles

When the main barriers to women's progress to senior levels are analysed, men overwhelmingly consider 'commitment to family responsibilities' as the most important factor impacting on women's prospects. Table 2 shows that, in keeping with evidence from the private sector, this factor stood out as the main barrier perceived by both SES and EL men. The majority of EL men did not identify any other major barriers (although a significant minority perceived no barriers at all).

Senior women agree that family responsibilities are an important barrier. SES women nominate family commitments as the most salient barrier but not to the exclusion of others. However, EL women do not see this factor as quite as significant as some others. Some senior women identified a conflict in role between being in the SES and having a family.

The perceived barrier of 'commitment to family' impacting adversely on women's careers is related to several other barriers to the progress of women: 'career breaks' were identified by over half of SES men and women in male-streamed departments which would seem to indicate less tolerance in those departments for career interruptions, perhaps emanating from related barriers such as a lack of visibility, exclusion from networks, male stereotyping and an inhospitable culture (see Table 2).

In sum, we found two factors at work relating to perceptions crystallizing around the commitment of women to their families: either women choose to place a priority on their family responsibilities over the demands of their career or assumptions are made about their commitment. In both cases they miss out on opportunities to take-on challenging and high profile work which is needed to develop their careers.

Table 2. Ten main barriers to career progression by gender and department (%)

TYPE OF BARRIER	EL women		SES women		EL men		SES men	
Type	ABC	123	ABC	123	ABC	123	ABC	123
Sample size	35	44	30	27	34	24	30	27
1.Lack of confidence	**51**	**50**	**73**	**67**	38	21	47	41
2.Family commitment	43	41	**77**	**78**	**68**	**79**	**77**	**59**
3.Impact of career breaks	29	9	**53**	33	27	33	**77**	44
4.Lack of visibility	43	46	33	33	32	4	37	15
5.Exclusion from networks	**60**	25	**53**	15	9	21	23	11
6.Lack of mentoring	43	41	47	26	9	17	33	22
7.Personal style differences	26	11	**67**	33	6	21	20	7
8.Male stero-typing	26	9	**63**	15	3	25	47	19
9.Inhospitable culture	20	11	33	14	12	13	40	7
10.No barriers	3	7	3	19	41	42	7	15

There are cultural biases that women take on primary care responsibilities for families; organizational biases that favour those without family commitments; and, gender biases which result in men and women assuming that women with children must choose between families and a demanding career.

Proposition 2: negative male perceptions of a woman's ability to lead *impede* women's progression into leadership roles

Interviewees were asked about critical success factors for career progression into the SES. Across departments three factors stood out: a reputation for responsiveness and delivering results; a champion and/or executive sponsor; and 'cultural fit'. But these factors played out differently depending on whether the department was male-streamed or not. Reputation and high profile work requires visibility and inclusion in networks which particularly favour men in male-streamed departments. Moreover, men were more likely to have executive sponsors than women, especially in male-streamed departments.

The meaning of 'cultural fit' was distinctly different depending on whether the department was in the category of being 'male-streamed' or had more than 40% women in their SES. In the more male-streamed departments, the culture was described as: being 'driven' and 'outcomes focused' which, in turn, required a more masculine communication style.

In contrast, in departments with a prevalence of women in the SES, there was greater acceptance of a range of leadership styles. Aspiring women leaders described many more opportunities for them in these departments. They considered that the potential for male bias was reduced and this was likely to attract other women. SES women demonstrated that career progression was possible; they helped motivate and/or sponsor other women and normalized diversity in women's communication and leadership styles.

The culture was also described quite differently: much more emphasis was placed on communication and networking skills, collaborative and collegial values and the importance of a focus on relationships. More support was also provided for family friendly work practices. Here the challenges for women were quite different including more assertive or more direct women not being perceived as 'nice'. However, as many women fitted the prevailing organizational culture as did men.

Proposition 3: workplace structures and cultures hamper women's progress by distilling processes of unconscious bias that afford comparative advantage to men with the requisite attributes

Biases inform decisions and actions. They can arise from cultural norms, organizational values and structures that reward certain behaviours and outcomes, or from gender

dynamics in organizational relationships. In our study, the mobilization of bias through workplace structures was widespread: a preference to 'clone' people 'like us' which was reflected in perceptions of subjective recruitment practices; in the perpetuation of 'boys clubs', and limited support for women through departmental networks or champions; in stereotyping including staff with children being assumed to be less committed and less reliable; or a distorted belief about the capabilities of certain individuals or groups; and, intolerance of family-friendly work practices.

Questions were posed explicitly to provoke some reflection on how inclusive the workplace culture was for women. Interviewees were asked to rank their department according to where it was on a gender continuum which had at its extremes an 'exclusive' and an 'inclusive' culture with 'lip service', 'tokenism', 'critical mass', and 'acceptance' in between. It is not surprising, given the differing male and female perceptions of cultural barriers which impact on women's career progression, that women ranked their departments as closer to the 'lip service'/'tokenism' end of the gender continuum than men (see Chart 1 and Table 3). As expected, women in male-streamed departments (ABC) were consistent in their views that their department paid 'lip service' or were 'tokenistic' in supporting their needs; whereas women in departments 123 thought that their department promoted a critical mass or acceptance culture. Men in male-streamed departments felt that their departments exhibited a 'tokenism'/'critical mass' culture whereas men in departments 123 saw their organizations as being accepting of women.

A clear difference in perceptions between SES and EL women can be identified. SES women with relatively few women colleagues in their peer group have a more heightened awareness of exclusionary practices than EL women, particularly in ABC agencies. SES men in ABC departments appear to be more aware of the gender imbalance in their culture than EL men. This is presumably because it would be more self-evident to them at their level that the workplace is exclusionary and impacting negatively on women.

Proposition 4: Workplace cultures and practices *undermine* the self-confidence and self-belief of women in seeking career advancement

What is striking about the data presented in Table 2 is the importance senior women attach to their 'lack of confidence and self-belief' as an impediment to their progress. SES women in particular feel this and especially in male-streamed departments. Indeed, EL women rank this barrier ahead of all the others; even higher than family responsibilities. What is equally as striking is that men have a very different perception.

Many reasons are advanced by both men and women to explain this; they relate to and result from the cultural and organizational systems that have already been identified and which reinforce messages about women's place or 'lack of fit' in leadership positions. Narratives from this study indicate that women can apply high standards when assessing whether they could do the job and often express reluctance to promote themselves, whereas a very common response was that men will apply even if they do not feel ready.

Poor confidence is closely related to other barriers identified in Table 2, which, in turn, reflect the unconscious mobilization of dominant norms and values that provide men with comparative advantage. Of particular importance are family commitments and the prevalence of cultural, organisational and gender biases such as the expectation of women as primary carers and work places favouring those without family commitments. The issue of low visibility is much more of a perceived barrier by women than by men. Over half of the women in male-streamed departments felt excluded from networks that are important to progression. Lack of mentoring was also important. These women also feel that progress was impacted by personal style differences and male stereotyping. For these women, unconscious bias is the most significant barrier that they have to face so it is not surprising that they are the group

Chart 1. Perceptions of the workplace culture by gender and type of department (%)
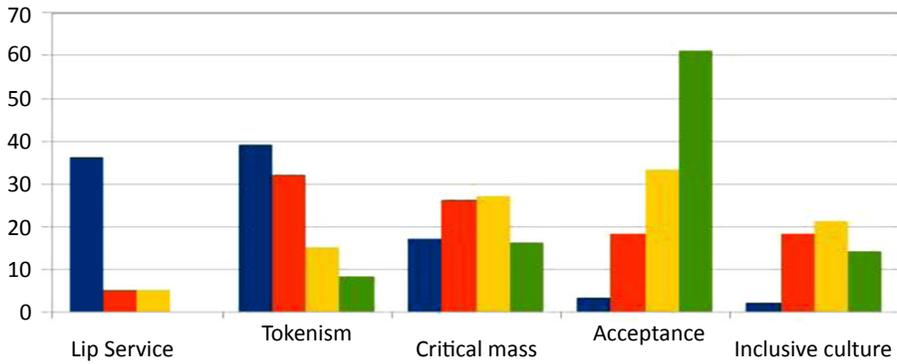
Key: 1ˢᵗ column = ABC women; 2ⁿᵈ column = ABC men; 3ʳᵈ column = 123 women; and 4ᵗʰ column = 123 men

Table 3. Perceptions of workplace culture by gender, level and type of department (%)

Continuum categories	EL women		SES women		EL men		SES men	
Type	ABC	123	ABC	123	ABC	123	ABC	123
Sample size	34	41	30	26	32	22	30	27
Exclusive Club	3	0	3	0	3	0	0	0
Lip Service	35	7	37	0	0	0	10	0
Tokenism	50	24	27	0	16	14	50	4
Critical Mass	6	29	30	23	28	18	23	15
Acceptance	3	22	3	50	25	55	10	67
Inclusive culture	3	17	0	17	28	14	7	15

nominating lack of confidence as the key barrier to their progress.

It is important to give due consideration to this finding; that women so often undervalue their capability and expertise does not point to inadequacies in women *per se* as it exposes poor management practices and organizational gender biases, assumptions and stereotypes which convey the message that women are not quite as good as their male colleagues. It is therefore not surprising that women often feel that their confidence has been battered into submission.
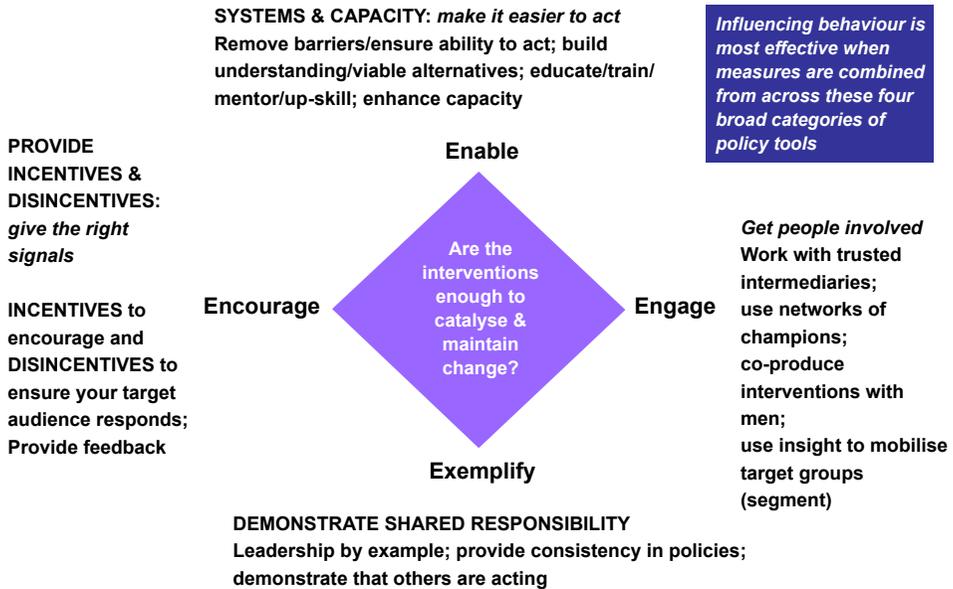
Navigating Barriers to Participation

The empirical evidence presented above lends strong support to the existence and unconscious mobilization of bias against women in the workplace and is reflected in dominant norms and values that advantage men with the requisite attributes. It needs to be recognized that some men may also suffer from alienation for similar reasons. However it is evident that the erosion of confidence is likely to be much more debilitating for women than it is for men because of how it manifests itself and is perpetuated by societal, cultural and organizational factors.

But what is the way forward? What interventions could be introduced to help navigate these barriers, achieve and maintain a better gender balance across the SES? We asked our informants for their suggestions about what their department and more broadly what the APS could do to facilitate the progression of senior women. Despite different departmental cultures and proportions of women in senior positions, the prescriptions were uniform across interviewees from all sampled departments. Most significantly, our informants recognized that the key mechanism for achieving

Figure 1. A systems model of change governance

SYSTEMS & CAPACITY: *make it easier to act*
Remove barriers/ensure ability to act; build
understanding/viable alternatives; educate/train/
mentor/up-skill; enhance capacity

*Influencing behaviour is
most effective when
measures are combined
from across these four
broad categories of
policy tools*

PROVIDE
INCENTIVES &
DISINCENTIVES:
*give the right
signals*

Enable

Get people involved
Work with trusted
intermediaries;
use networks of
champions;
co-produce
interventions with
men;
use insight to mobilise
target groups
(segment)

INCENTIVES to
encourage and
DISINCENTIVES to
ensure your target
audience responds;
Provide feedback

Encourage

**Are the
interventions
enough to
catalyse &
maintain
change?**

Engage

Exemplify

DEMONSTRATE SHARED RESPONSIBILITY
Leadership by example; provide consistency in policies;
demonstrate that others are acting

a gender neutral culture was to achieve a gender balance at all senior levels of the service.

It is notable that the repertoire of prescriptions identified by focus groups and in 'one-to-one' interviews mirrored the ingredients of better practice that can be found in the academic and grey literature (see Sanders et al. 2008; Defence 2011; Piterman 2008; and Human Rights Commission 2012). The two strategic themes that stand out as relevant to all or most of the perceived barriers to progression are 'committed leadership support' and 'support and development'. The individual elements of each strategy are articulated within a change governance strategy shown below in Figure 1.

In Conclusion – 'Men, Lean-in and Listen!'

In contrast with the private sector, the Australian public sector has performed better on gender equity outcomes. But as the gravity of evidence here indicates, a fully effective APS that reflects its stated values will not be attained until there is '50/50' men and women

at senior levels. Only when unconscious bias is eliminated can we say that the merit principle for appointments to senior positions applies and the evidence suggests that this will be an ongoing struggle.

In addressing this issue, the APS will need the committed support of APS leadership; most of whom are men. The role for these men, if they are serious about pursuing an inclusive culture will be to 'lean-in and listen'. As Elizabeth Broderick, Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner has stated: 'Men listen to other men, so it makes sense to me that men must take the message of gender equality to other men' (*The Australian* 2012).

A range of strategies listed in Table 4 stress the need for leadership commitment to put into practice a culture of inclusive practices. That commitment will need to go beyond individual measures to the introduction of systemic organizational changes that change behaviour. This would not only benefit women but also assist in removing the cultural and organizational biases that are making it currently so hard to attract and retain other minority groups.

Table 4. Strategies to implement gender blind leadership

Committed leadership
- The Departmental Secretary should make an explicit statement to staff reinforcing the value of diversity in management and leadership styles and aligned to values
- Managers should set targets and be held to account in performance agreements
- Develop a culture of inclusive collaborative leadership practices and educate on unconscious bias
- Showcase successful leaders and include senior women in key decision-making bodies

Talent management and succession planning
- Provide structured career development for women with suitable sponsorship or coaching, job rotation and selection for high profile and challenging roles
- Over-represent women in existing development programs
- Target recruitment and identify and develop women for leadership roles
- Ensure effective performance management systems with regular feed back

Workplace flexibility as enhancing productivity
- Develop a 'better practice guide' for employees and managers
- Create a central webpage to promote success stories and provide practical information
- Peer review better practices with other agencies
- Provide job design expertise

Attraction, recruitment and selection
- Explicitly promote senior APS women as role models
- Include in performance agreements efforts made by senior staff to encourage women to apply for positions and promotions
- Implement an SES refresher programme including appointing external representatives on selection panels
- Develop a plain English recruitment guide on merit promotion that includes gender balance on panels
- Review job descriptions to eliminate gender bias and ensure that it is written in inclusive language.
- Report on the proportion of women applying for and achieving promotion

Support and Development
- Seek out leadership programs which focus on gender and diversity training
- Use unconscious bias experiential training programs especially for SES staff and confidence building programs including at EL level
- Establish APS wide mentoring programs for women
- Establish women's networks across each department with senior women in sponsorship roles and include success story telling as a regular activity

Governance
- The APS should collect and disseminate annual data on diversity achievements (including women)
- Departmental committees or 'diversity councils' with external membership to oversee departmental progress should be established
- These committees should measure success in achieving gender diversity across the APS

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