Are women really such poor leaders?

I am a new woman and I know it. I mean, an awakened woman, awakened to a sense of capacity and responsibility, not merely to the family and the household, but to the state.

Catherine Spence, 1899.

At a time when Australia appears blessed with women of substance as Prime Minister and Governor General it remains a disturbing anomaly that so few are making it to SES positions in the Australian public service (APS). So what explains this inequity? Let’s review the evidence.

An inconvenient truth

Gender equity has been reported on in the APSC’s State of the Service report (SOTS) for many years. It regularly reports that more than half of employees in the APS are women but that the ratio of women to men declines as level increases. The 2011 SOTS reports that at all levels below EL1, females out-number males, but by the EL1 level, males exceed 50%. By the SES Band 2, females constitute just 35% of the cohort and at the levels of Associate and Deputy Secretary, less than 30% are female. At the Departmental Secretary level, just 4 of 22 (or 18%) are female.

What remarkable individuals these four women must be! Given the data, it is evident that reaching the top of the APS (and we are yet to see a female head up the APS) cannot be an expectation of women entering the APS, and only a few exceptional females can aspire to leading their agency.

Several recent reports also go to the heart of this issue. In the last few months we have seen enquiries on Employment Pathways for APS Women in the Department of Defence (undertaken, but not yet released by Deputy Public Service Commissioner, Carmel McGregor), a companion report into females in the Defence Forces (released last year as the Broderick Report) and the Australian submission to the OECD Survey into public sector employment. To its credit, Treasury has recently undertaken a review of female progression and placed its report on its website along with the declaration that increasing the proportion of female SES officers to 40% is a strategic goal for the organisation. It is noteworthy that agencies with female secretaries have higher achievements – for example, 58% women in Health and Aging and 56% in DEEWR at the SES level.

The facts speak an inconvenient truth for a service which makes claims to be a non-discriminatory, merit-based, values-lead service – the APS is not ‘ahead of the game’ on issues of gender equity.

Debunking the Myths
So how can we explain the gap between intention and achievement? Many attempts have been made to shed light on why we have witnessed declining proportions of women in higher level leadership positions. Some of these are worthy of debunking.

“Women don’t possess key leadership qualities”

This observation suggests wrongly that there is a narrow range of leadership qualities acceptable in the APS and that few women “have” these characteristics. Presumably some male, values-based, non-discriminatory APS officers actually agree with this view enough to suggest it as a plausible explanation for their success and women’s failure! Bain and Company recently observed in What Stops Women from Reaching the Top, a report on practices in private sector companies, that many women were perceived as either being strong and therefore ‘too aggressive’ or ‘too consultative’, and therefore ‘soft or weak’ – a no win situation! A major conclusion of this report (and of Treasury’s) was that ‘valuing diverse types of leadership is key to improving gender equality in Australian companies’.

“Women’s careers are prone to damaging interruptions due to having children”

Given that most public servants have careers spanning periods of at least 25 years (and this is a conservative estimate), five years of “career interruption” due to family responsibilities should hardly be a disqualifying penalty or one that that should lead women to abandon hope that they might be able to lead an agency.

A real difficulty experienced by returning women is the negative attitudes they experience to taking leave. Moreover, on returning from leave they often find that their professional networks (managers and peers) have moved on; so re-establishing one’s professional standing with new colleagues and potential gatekeepers to advancement presents a significant challenge.

The Bain and Company study found that while the majority of men believed it was family responsibilities that hindered progression, less than a quarter of women held the same view; the latter predominantly put it down to having a different style of leadership. Treasury’s review showed staff held similarly divergent views. Would an APS-wide survey yield the same result?

“Women simply lack ambition”

The argument goes that in a service of over 96,000 females, only four have sufficient ambition to lead, and the rest are obviously content with lesser roles in the service of male “role models”! Given that the appointment of Secretaries is more of a matter of “having greatness thrust upon one” than competitive recruitment, the disproportionate number of males must be more a reflection of antiquated recruitment methods than of the poverty of potential female candidates.

There is plenty of evidence at other levels of the service to show no lack of feminine ambition for higher office. The Bain and Company survey found that men and women did ‘not have materially different levels of ambition’ but that nevertheless, only 15 per cent of women believed that they had equal opportunity.
Critical dilemmas

The academic literature identifies two major causes of lower female representation which are worthy of further examination. One is “unconscious bias” (where perceptions of individuals affect their behaviour without their conscious knowledge). It is understood that this is an issue that the McGregor investigation in Defence has identified. Furthermore, Treasury noted an “underlying and unrecognized bias which was impacting on management judgements and leadership styles”.

Not to address issues of unconscious bias and instead, continuing to rely on explanations that blame the female workforce for their lack of advancement (they don’t possess key leadership qualities, are prone to damaging career interruptions and simply lack ambition) is tantamount to conspiracy in the act of prejudice. Clearly, if there was no evidence of unconscious bias in the decisions of senior appointments, all departments would look more like Health and Education where over half of the SES is female. Does it require the presence of a female secretary to change the perceptions of bias in interview panels? And would it take the appointment of a woman to head the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) to change dominant perceptions across the APS?

Concerted action is needed to combat processes of unconscious bias in the APS. The Public Service Commissioner should become more visible in his scrutiny of SES appointments, and question Selection Panel Chairs personally and directly where there appear to be good female applicants who do not get recommended for a position. Perhaps an index of panel members and their “appointment rate” of females could be established to identify chronic “male” favouring by panel members. The APS could also adopt progressive practices found in several private sector firms where experiential training in combating unconscious bias has been introduced; Treasury intends to do this. Indeed, leadership development activities service-wide, should embed experiential training in gendered inclusion as a core component for not only building a world class public service that attracts the best and the brightest in a highly competitive labour market but achieves basic integrity in public administration.

The second main factor identified in the academic literature for low female representation in the public management elite is the persistent reporting by women themselves of their lack of self confidence or self belief. According to Deborah May who has undertaken extensive interview work on the barriers to women’s career advancement in the APS, lack of self-confidence is the single greatest barrier identified by most senior women. Treasury found this to be the case amongst its own staff, supported by data showing lower application rates for promotion by women relative to their male colleagues. Women are less likely to put themselves forward for posts where they do not meet every detail of the job description. In short, men will wing it and be more economical with the actualité. The low esteem in which women in the APS hold themselves is hard to explain and needs unpacking. The answer could well turn on the dominant process of socialisation occurring within the APS, a lack of appreciation of the value of female leadership qualities and biased role definition processes within the public sector. What is certain from the evidence is that women continue to undersell their experiences and capabilities.

To the extent that our education system is failing in ensuring that women enter the workforce confident in their ability to succeed and lead an organisation, it falls to the APS not to squander the talents and
capabilities of its workforce. So again, a more proactive approach is warranted, and a series of gendered inclusion strategies should be developed and implemented across the APS as a matter of urgency.

**Parting shots**

The existence of strong women role models at the forefront of public discourse can mask entrenched obstacles to gender equality from public view. The APS should take advantage of the present opportunity with a woman Prime Minister and a woman Governor General to win the war of ideas within the ancien régime and create greater opportunity structures for women to realise their aspirations. For one fact remains constant in the academic literature on gendered exclusion – *women excel where merit systems and networks of support flourish.*

The Governor General gracefully agreed to open the ANZSOG Institute for Governance luncheon last year on *Celebrating the Contribution of Women to Public Sector Excellence.* In a powerful address she commented that times in the public administration had changed from when openly sexist material was issued as recruitment directives, and a marriage bar existed. Nonetheless, clearly times have not changed enough to ensure that there is in fact gender equity in the APS.

As part of its ongoing project on *Celebrating the Contribution of Women to Public Sector Excellence,* the Institute intends to survey senior public servants across agencies to compare the perceptions of men and women on the barriers to progression of women to senior positions. Some of the issues to be canvassed will include: are perceptions different between agencies where women are well represented in SES positions, such as Education and Health, compared with agencies where they are considerably less, such as Treasury and Defence? What are the views of male and females about the business case for gender parity in the SES? What do women see as the main cause of their lack of confidence – is it to do with work policies and practices or more to do with cultural factors such as structures of patronage, beliefs and stereotyping or some other set of factors?

(FOR BOX ALONGSIDE ARTICLE) The ANZSOG Institute for Governance is very eager to get the views of present public servants on the above issues and they can be posted on its website at www.governanceinstitute.edu.au/blog. The website also contains a video of the Press Club event last year together with a range of supporting learning materials.

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