



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

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The ANZSOG Institute for Governance (ANZSIG)

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About this Report

– Celebrating the Contribution of Women to Public Sector Excellence

This research was sponsored by the ANZSOG Institute for Governance, at the University of Canberra and six Australian Commonwealth departments, as part of a broader project that was launched in 2010 entitled 'Celebrating the Contribution of Women to Public Sector Excellence'. Members of the Institute were concerned about patterns identified in the data on the representation of women in the senior echelons of the public service in Australia. We therefore decided to establish both a Canberra-based reference group and an overseas reference group to investigate these patterns. This led to the interrogation of the different dimensions of the following observation – we all know that the principle characteristics of leadership – wisdom, courage and vision – are not gender traits. So, why then, has leadership traditionally been a male domain? Does gender change the focus or style of leadership? And should it? Or has an unconscious bias in the workplace encouraged women to adopt a male model of leadership? Is any difference real, or perceived? And what has gender stereotyping got to do with it?

The project commenced with several high profile public events in Canberra at which notable senior women told stories about their journeys to the top, as well as identifying the barriers they confronted and the coping mechanisms that they developed to navigate around them. The panelists at these events included: the Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC, Governor-General of Australia; Katy Gallagher MLA; Virginia Haussegger; Wendy McCarthy AO; Roxanne Missingham; Christine Nixon APM; Lisa Paul AO PSM; Tu Pham PSM; and, Natasha Stott Despoja AM.

It is noteworthy that, most of our high performing women had been counselled at some time to be more 'male' in their approach, if they were to gain more respect and be more effective in their leadership roles. Overwhelmingly, they saw that it was preferable to display leadership qualities based on personal authenticity and integrity;

although this was not easy. They all viewed the development of personal support networks as critical to their success in coping with the "male-streamed" culture they experienced.

After a series of these events, in the absence of primary research findings to reinforce the emerging perceptions of a relatively small sample of women elites, the Reference Group decided that it would be valuable to investigate a broader set of perceptions of senior public servants. In particular, the Reference group sought to identify which barriers appear to impede women's progress through to the senior ranks of the APS i.e. the Senior Executive Service (SES). This is the subject of this report.

The report was authored by Bill Burmester, Meredith Edwards, Mark Evans, Max Halupka and Deborah May (ANZSIG), with additional guidance and input from Institute colleagues involved in the study of participation. We would particularly like to thank Sadiya Akram and Selen Ercan for their thoughtful and erudite comments on an earlier draft of this report. Any errors or omissions, however, remain the fault of the authors alone.

The Institute would like to thank a number of people who have advanced our deliberations. Firstly, our Reference Group: Glenys Beauchamp PSM; Catherine Fox; Virginia Haussegger; Roxanne Missingham; Sally Moyle; Tu Pham PSM; Monica Pfeffer; Judy Tyers; Penny Weir; and, Elizabeth Whitelaw, for their dedication and support. Many thanks also to Nandita Dutta, Coco Liu, Nilima Mathai, Alison Plumb and Richard Reid for their help with the production of the report.

While our recommendations have been designed to provoke and stimulate debate on the problem of the barriers to the progress of senior women in the Australian Public Service they do not represent the views of ANZSOG.

Women and Leadership in the Senior Australian Public Service – a Snapshot

The quest for gender equality in the workplace is an ongoing struggle in a “Good Society”. In most countries around the world women remain in the minority when it comes to senior positions in both the public and private sectors (e.g. OECD 2009; McKinsey and Company 2010, 2012; Ernst and Young 2013). 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 barriers to progression in the public sector might differ from those in the private sector. Existing academic and grey research 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 behaviour without conscious knowledge. 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 against them unconsciously through organizational norms and values. Surprisingly, there has been a stark absence of empirical studies in the field of Australian public administration to investigate these assumptions and to assess the policy implications.

The purpose of this report is to help bridge this gap. It does this through a study of the perceptions of senior men and women about the cultural and systemic barriers affecting the recruitment, retention and promotion of senior women in six Australian Commonwealth departments in the Australian Public Service (APS). The report then proposes a range of mitigating strategies for navigating around these barriers and achieving and maintaining a better gender balance across the APS. 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 findings:

Key: SES = senior executive; EL = executive level

Male-streamed = Departments with less than 40% of their SES being women.

01

Men overwhelmingly consider 'commitment to family responsibilities' as the most important factor hindering women's career prospects; this factor stood out as the main barrier perceived by both male SES and EL cohorts.

02

A significant minority of EL men perceived there to be no barriers at all.

03

Interview narratives betray a range of negative perceptions of women: having a family is seen as a sign of a lack of commitment; a tension is identified between being at work and visible OR wanting to be a parent and if not actually in the office are assumed not to be working.

04

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.

05

'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.

06

Two factors at work crystallized 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 reliability, availability and/ or commitment. In both cases, they miss out on opportunities to take-on challenging and high profile work, which is needed to develop their experience and reputation to progress their careers.

07

Across departments three critical success 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 or not the department was male-streamed.

08

In more male-streamed departments, the culture was described as: being 'driven' and 'outcomes focused' which, in turn, requires a more masculine communication style and the need to fit-in with the dominant culture.

09

In departments with higher numbers 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, greater emphasis on communication and networking skills, collegial values and the importance of a focus on relationships. More support was also provided for family friendly work practices.

10

Our findings show that men were more likely to promote themselves than women, giving them an advantage within the APS where it is considered essential to be visible in order to develop a reputation for success.

11

There was a marked difference between the cultural and organizational barriers for women to progress depending on the proportion of senior women in the organization.

12

Ranking 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, women ranked their departments as closer to the 'lip service'/'tokenism' end of the gender continuum than men.

13

Women in male-streamed departments were consistent in their views around 'lip service'/'tokenism' whereas women in other departments considered their departments reflect a 'critical mass/acceptance' culture.

14

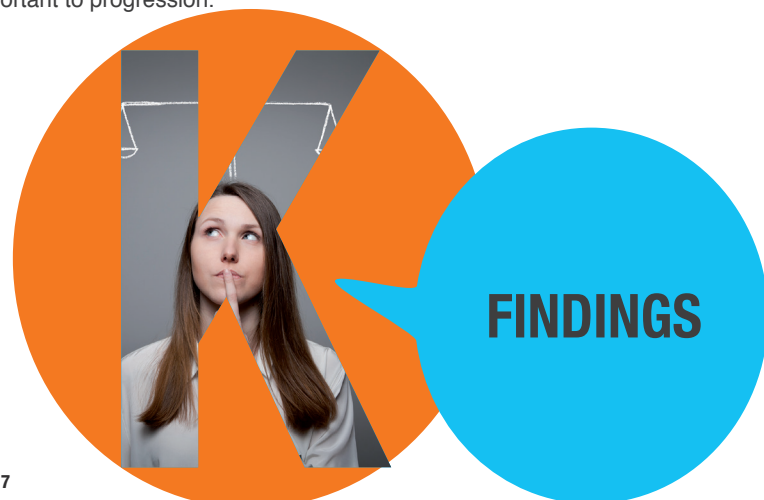
Men in male-streamed departments felt that their departments exhibited a 'tokenism'/'critical mass' culture, whereas men in other departments, saw their organizations as being accepting of women.

15

Senior women attach considerable importance to 'lack of confidence and self-belief' as a powerful impediment to the progress of women.

16

The issue of low visibility is much more of a perceived barrier felt by women than by men. Over half of the women in male-streamed departments felt excluded from networks that are important to progression.



“

In the nineteenth century, the central moral challenge was slavery. In the twentieth century, it was the battle against totalitarianism. We believe that in this century the paramount moral challenge will be the struggle for gender equality around the world. ”

— Nicholas D. Kristof, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*.

“

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*.

1 Introduction – 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*. There are statistically significant data that show that perception of gender is a powerful determinant of attitudes (Genat *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, these attitudes are sustained through a culture of ‘one of us’; people apply to work in fields of endeavour in which they share the same values and are likely to have success. As Ian McEwan (2011:140) observes through his character Susan Appelbaum in the novel Solar:

A hundred years ago, many scientific reasons were advanced for why women couldn't be doctors. Today there remained unconscious or unintentional, widely diffused differences in the ways boys or girls, men and women, were understood and judged. From cradle to first job application and beyond, in a sustained arc of development, these cultural factors were shown by empirical investigation to be vastly more significant than biology.

The core policy insight from Appelbaum’s observation is self-evident – 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 report 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). The report then proposes a range of mitigating strategies for navigating around these barriers and achieving and maintaining a better gender balance across the APS.

2 What is the problem?

From the standpoint of June 2012, 57% of the APS workforce was comprised of women, but women made up just fewer than 40% of the Senior Executive Service (SES) (APSC 2012: 148). In all but four departments, women outnumber men. In contrast, at the SES level only four out of 19 departments have more women than men. There is also considerable variation in representation by both SES level and by agency portfolio – 37% of Band 2 positions are held by women (equivalent to head of division) and 28% of Band 3 positions are held by women (the most senior ranks of management below the Secretary/head level) (APSC 2012:150). Only 20% of departments are headed by women.

Three of the four women secretaries lead departments where traditionally women have been well represented in senior positions – Education, Human Services and Health (see: Burgess AFR: 2013:40). Indeed, unsurprisingly when the data are disaggregated by agency, women hold the highest proportion of senior positions in these types of department – FaCASHIA (59%), Education (57%) and Health (57%) (*ibid*). In contrast, women are poorly represented at senior levels in traditional male domains such as the Treasury (26%) and the Department of Defence (27%). The statistical evidence is therefore compelling – women are generally under-represented in senior positions in the APS and this under-representation is compounded in traditional male domains of activity.

Is this pattern of under-representation of women amongst the senior echelons of the APS important? Crucially, it exposes a fundamental disjuncture between the formally espoused values of the APS and its practices. The underrepresentation of women in APS leadership is anathema to the notions of merit, equality and fairness on which the service is founded and is bound to follow in law. Yet this inequality is widely accepted without question, undermining the integrity and capacity of the service itself.

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, Dr Martin Parkinson once held this view, but no longer: he argues that the only way to correct the imbalance is to pursue a systematic and structured approach to probing that imbalance (Parkinson 2012a:2). Parkinson is of the view that in a world of uncertainty and having to do more with less it is more important than ever to increase diversity in leadership (*ibid*). There are obvious reasons of gender equity and fairness for pursuing strategies to increase the proportion of senior women in an organization, but Parkinson argues that diversity is needed to improve outcomes for organizations, as well as improving Australia's overall well-being: the tax base rises, a greater pool of workers can support an ageing population and individual savings for retirement increase (Parkinson 2012a:2). This view is shared by the current head of the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC), Steve Sedgwick, who sees diversity as a business imperative (APSC 2012:7). Almost twenty years ago, when he was head of the Department of Finance, Sedgwick wrote:

I have a 'vested interest' in pursuing good EEO policies. The reason, baldly stated, is that as an APS agency head I am responsible for achieving value for money in the delivery of government programs – and clearly, that is best done by having the best people (Sedgwick 1994:1).

An effective APS needs leadership diversity and to ensure that organizational values are aligned to leadership behaviour. Relevant to this are the APS Employment Principles contained within the amended Public Service Act which include: fair employment decisions; promotion on the basis of merit; and workplaces free from discrimination (APSC website). This is of course an equity issue but also a business imperative: an

inclusive culture will lead to productivity gains if the best people have the opportunity to be employed.

At a time of 'downsizing' of the APS there is, as Parkinson suggests, a need to increase rather than decrease the proportion of senior women in order to improve organizational outcomes. Yet if attention strays from gender equity, there is a real danger that many of the gains so far made could be rolled back.

In sum then, 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 and economic wellbeing. But why are women generally under-represented in senior positions in the APS?

3 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 the private sector (e.g. OECD 2009; McKinsey and Company 2010, 2012; Ernst and Young 2013). 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 barriers to progression in the public sector might differ from those in the private sector. Myths abound as to the reasons why this is the case – including for example, that women are not as ambitious as men; or, that they don't have the necessary leadership qualities; or that it is just a matter of time before '50/50' representation will be achieved (see: Defence 2011:44; Evans *et al* 2012; Fox 2012). Surprisingly, there has been a stark absence of empirical studies in the field of Australian public administration to test these assumptions. 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 behaviour without conscious knowledge. 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 and to succeed in systems where bias is mobilized unconsciously through organizational norms and values. In short, senior women may not be playing on a level playing field.

Several studies lend support to this observation. Bain and Company, for example, has been surveying the Australian business community for the past three years and have focused directly on investigating why the representation of women at senior levels is so low (see: Sanders *et al* 2011:2; Bain 2013). Bain and Company found two distinct 'schools of thought' about what prevents women reaching leadership positions (Sanders *et al* 2011:4). Firstly, that women have competing priorities (such as taking on a greater share of family responsibilities); and, secondly, that they have differences

in leadership style. They found 'that the barriers to women's progression into leadership roles are in large part due to perceptions of a woman's ability to lead' (Sanders 2011:3). Four key findings crystallized around the concept of leadership style were identified: (1) adverse perceptions about competing work-life priorities; (2) perceptions that the leadership styles exhibited by women are not as valued as those displayed by men; (3) perceptions that men do not consciously recognize the obstacles that a different style of gendered leadership presents; and, (4) that these underlying views about women's style inform perceptions of their ability to lead (Sanders 2011:3).

This recognition of differences in perception between men and women of the barriers to women's progression at senior levels is a crucial insight for our study which we decided to test. In the Bain study, the majority of men (61%) perceived competing priorities as the main barrier, whereas only 22% of women agreed with this observation. However, other studies, such as one by McKinsey, showed that senior women as well as senior men, perceived competing priorities to be the most significant barrier to women's progress when this is combined with an 'anytime, anywhere performance model' (McKinsey 2010:6). With regard to differences in style, 78% of women but only 39% of men perceived leadership style to be a barrier to women's advancement in the Bain study. In this context men were viewed to be more likely to promote someone of a similar style to their own; women undersold their experience and capabilities; and the different perspectives that women can bring to a team were not valued (Sanders *et al*: 2011:4-6; Bain 2013: 5-6).

This category of differences in leadership style, between aspiring men and women is underpinned by a set of norms about what makes for a good leader. This manifests itself in the kind of 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). This is in stark contrast to the findings of Bain and Company's (2013:3) research over the last three years which 'consistently found that women aspire to become senior business leaders at almost the same rate as men'.

A 'double-bind' dilemma can occur when a women's leadership style is evaluated against a masculine leadership norm (Catalyst 2007:9). Catalyst's research on women leadership styles exposes perceptions that women can be 'too soft' or 'too tough'; 'competent' or 'likeable' but rarely both (2007: 8). If they are strong they are seen to be aggressive, and if they work in a more consultative way they are seen to be weak (Catalyst 2007:13). If women leaders are seen as 'a-typical' then it is not surprising that they will be seen as less effective than male leaders. This empirical observation was confirmed recently in a meta-analysis of over one hundred studies of experimental comparisons of men and women in which they were matched on all dimensions except gender or particularistic personal traits (Genat et al 2012). The study found that when 'compared with their male peers, women are rated down irrespective of whether they behave in a stereotypically masculine or stereotypically feminine way' (Genat et al 2012:4). Lack of self-confidence arises as a consequence.

Gender stereotypes can be so 'deeply embedded in organizational life as to be virtually indiscernible' (Piterman 2008:15).

'Unconscious Bias' has been defined in various ways but is best understood in the following definition: as 'ingrained stereotypes that we hold and that inform our decision-making but of which we are unaware' (AIM 2012:5). In the workplace this refers to, in the words of McKinsey and Company, the 'invisible barriers' to obtaining gender diversity – as 'mind-sets widely held by

managers, men and women alike, that are rarely acknowledged but block the way' (AIM 2012:10). An example might be mixing with and promoting like-minded people, which is behind the term 'boys clubs' – where people are not aware that they possess these preferences but which can at an unconscious level distort the merit based appointment process (*ibid*). Another example can be found in policies surrounding maternity leave, which embed the view that women are the primary carers (AIM 2012:11).

Workplace structures and cultures privilege certain norms and values, distilling processes of unconscious bias, that afford comparative advantage to men with the requisite attributes. 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'. A Melbourne Business School *Gender Equality Project* (2012) found that work environments dominated by men have different characteristics to those with a better gender balance. They found that power imbalances between men and women within organizations unintentionally affected the hiring and promotion of women (Sojo and Wood 2012:8).

These power imbalances also inform a range of negative outcomes for women such as the lack of confidence women display on the job. Piterman (2008:48) found that 'a number of senior men view women's attempts to blend into an extremely masculine environment as signalling weakness, poor judgement, and poor suitability for leadership. She found 'that a high level of personal compromise not only interferes with women's performance but undermines their sense of self and their ability to assert authentic presence and authority' (see also Fitzpatrick 2011:13). In contrast, in organizations where women have an equal or greater representation and influence

there were factors at work assisting women to remain healthy, satisfied and involved in their work and able to advance (Sojo and Wood 2012:7). In short, the evidence base provides strong support to the proposition that there is a relationship between distinctive organizational cultures and behaviour towards women.

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 in this area, there have been some important insights provided through practice-based literature. The APS has a long-standing commitment to combat gender inequality bolstered by legislative changes, that sought to reduce discrimination and ensure maternity leave provisions. Nonetheless, as we have already noted, the gender balance in senior leadership positions remain uneven across agencies and few studies have sought to find out why. However, 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 the Department of 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, lack of appropriate leadership qualities including an assertive and masculine leadership style (Defence 2011:32-36). There was general agreement that 'senior leaders

in Defence adopt a traditionally masculine leadership style with traditionally masculine qualities to fit in with the male-dominated culture' (2011:36). 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 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, the Australian Treasury undertook a survey in 2011 which was reported in the document *Progressing Women – a Strategic Priority*. The details of the findings have not been publicly released but we have been given permission to identify its central findings here. The report notes 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 the management judgements and leadership styles in the organization. The Head of Treasury, Dr Parkinson described certain members of the top bands of the SES in his department as 'stubbornly unresponsive' to changes lower down (2012b:4). He also observed some: 'unrecognised biases at play... (which) included some institutional biases toward a homogenous leadership style, biases toward conceptual and analytic skills over coordination and people skills, unconscious assumptions about the capacity and credibility of people with commitments outside of work, and some issues with the way (the) performance management system was being implemented' affecting women disproportionately (Parkinson

4 Our research design

2012b:6). As has been found in many studies (see, for example, Fitzpatrick 2011; Evans et al 2012), 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. For many in Treasury, especially at senior levels, the findings of the study were ‘confronting and confounding’ (Parkinson 2012b:6).

Three core 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 report.

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; hence the personal confidence of women is undermined.

It is also important to emphasize that there are important overlaps between these propositions, but we have chosen to distinguish between them in this report for analytical purposes. This is in keeping with leading methodologies in participation research (see Font, della Porta and Sintomer, 2012). As we will see in Section Seven of the report, our empirical findings show how these different barriers interact with each other, leading to the unconscious mobilization of bias against women through workplace norms and values.

As noted in About this Report, we were fortunate that a study very similar to the one we were considering had recently been completed for the Australian Treasury by Deborah May, Principal of the May Group. It was therefore decided to combine our efforts to evaluate the three propositions outlined above through both the identification of critical barriers to the progression of women and strategies for enhancing and maintaining the full participation of women at all levels of the APS. 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 less than 40% of women at the senior levels of the 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 longstanding history.
4. Departments/agencies unlikely to have embedded norms and values due to a recent history.
5. Large and small departments.

With these criteria in mind the departments and agencies selected were:

- The Department of Human Services (criteria 2 and 3);
- The Department of Defence (criteria 1 and 3);
- The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (criteria 2 and 3);
- The Department of Infrastructure and Transport (criteria 1, and 4 – though it was annexed from a well-established department);
- The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (criteria 2 and 3); and,
- The Department of Finance and Regulation (criteria 1 and 3).

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

5 Empirical findings and analysis

A mixed methods approach was deployed, encompassing qualitative 'one to one' interviews and focus groups in each of the departments and agencies and a randomized quantitative on-line survey of the APS. In each department approximately 20 SES officers were selected (114 total) for 'one to one' interviews with roughly equal numbers of SES men and women. In addition, one focus group was undertaken with EL men and one with EL women (two levels below the SES) with a total of 58 men and 79 women. Interviewees were selected to ensure representativeness across departmental functions and levels of seniority. Findings were collated from the interviews and focus groups and a report was provided on the findings to each agency.

The purpose of the quantitative survey was to validate findings emerging from the qualitative work and to identify any inconsistent knowledge claims. The questions mirrored those asked in the focus groups.

The findings of our research are reported against the three core propositions on the under-representation of women in leadership positions identified above. These propositions are derived from the perceived barriers to career progression experienced by women. Table 2 lists the top ten barriers that inhibit the progress of senior women 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 a more balanced 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'.

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.

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

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

The majority of EL men did not identify any other major barriers (although a significant minority perceived no barriers at all). Indeed, the only other factor nominated by the majority of SES men was the related variable of the adverse impact of career breaks. As Box 1 indicates, interview narratives betray a range of negative perceptions: having a family is seen as a sign of lack of commitment; or a tension between being at work and being visible; or wanting to be a parent and if not actually in the office, assumed not to be working.

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. This perception was often made in the context of '24/7' workload expectations in the SES, but as illustrated in Box 1, assumptions and stereotypes also explain why this variable is considered particularly important (Box 1).

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 reflecting 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 reliability, availability and/or commitment. In both cases, they miss out on opportunities to take-on challenging and high profile work, which is needed to develop their experience and reputation to progress their careers. 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 (May 2013a).

Box 1. Narratives on family commitments

'There is a tension between wanting to be a parent and been seen at work. Some people feel if you're not in your office, you're not working' (SES man).

'It's obvious. Can I depend on a woman for 3 years when she's likely to have a child?' (SES man).

'It's subtle. I've had pregnant staff doing public speaking... and I get the impression that people think they're starting to be less important' (SES woman).

'I miss the power hour. I'm not prepared to (forgo) after and before school care so I miss out after-hours and being seen to be there' (EL woman).

'The type of job and the expectations of an SES role means I am not interested' (EL woman).

'Until assumptions of 10-12 hour days at work are tackled,

many women will quite realistically assess that promotion is simply incompatible with the needs of their children' (SES woman).

'We have on paper all that stuff about flexibility.... But there is little evidence that we support it.... I promoted someone as an EL2 when she was pregnant and they thought she shouldn't apply and to put her in a job that's below her skills' (SES woman).

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

In the survey, 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 such departments. And 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, requires a more masculine communication style and fitting in with that type of culture. Challenges for women in such departments included

having to deal with 'Boys clubs', assumptions about women's communication style and commitment and generally finding it difficult to fit into male-streamed areas, especially if the additional barriers of family responsibilities were present. Subjective recruitment practices were commented on, as well as a lack of tolerance for flexible work practices (especially at the SES level), a lack of structured career development and the absence of role models. The lack of a critical mass of women was often seen as an additional barrier faced by women.

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 described quite differently: much more emphasis was placed on communication and networking skills, organizational cultural values of collaboration and collegiality 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.

Box 2. Narratives on leadership styles

'If you're not cut in the same way as the senior executive, or operate that way, you're considered less competent and of less value' (SES woman).

'Authority has a masculine voice. So when we tell a narrative, we talk about feelings.... Men talk in dot points... The senior women I know talk in dot points. So personal style remains a barrier' (SES woman).

'Women are seen as 'soft' and 'fragile'. One of my staff, an EL2 was on maternity leave and wanted to do a leadership course.... (an executive) said it would be very confronting, she'd get direct feedback and he considered her too soft and vulnerable for it' (SES woman).

'There is still an undercurrent of preconceived ideas about who is able to do the job' (SES man).

'The boy girl thing is very evident. I keep probing, asking questions respectfully. I don't want to challenge them so they feel threatened, but if you don't realize this is the situation you will be behind the 8 ball. You have to tailor your style' (SES woman).

'There are preconceptions that women don't have the ability to take on the tough roles but it varies amongst groups.... Those groups that are more female friendly aren't seen as doing serious work. Serious work is done by the men folk (EL woman).

'In some cases there is a tension between how feminine can I be in a male dominated environment or not and how natural can I behave? Do they feel they need to overcompensate and then become more aggressive and male like? It must be very difficult. I see these things and the dilemma. They want to be part of the group and team and don't know how to do this, especially in all male environments' (SES man).

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 (May 2013b). In our study, this was reflected in a wide range of ways: a preference to 'clone' or to employ people 'like us' and hence be perceived as practicing subjective recruitment practices; in the perception of strong 'Boys clubs', and not having the same support from networks or champions; in holding stereotype views including about those staff with children being less committed and less reliable; or stereotyping behaviour, where there is a distorted belief about the capabilities of certain individuals or groups; and, intolerance of family-friendly work practices (see Box 1). The mobilization of bias through stereotyping is unconsciously acted upon often resulting in inequitable decisions as the quotes in Box 3 illustrate.

Hierarchical organizational structures underpinned by masculine qualities of leadership tend to be favoured in the APS and this is reflected in the privileging of these qualities in the promotion

process. Indeed, our findings show that, men were more likely to self-promote than women, giving them an advantage within the APS, where it is essential to be visible in order to develop a reputation for success.

As would be expected, and as the findings in relation to Proposition 2 indicate, there was quite a marked difference between the cultural and organizational barriers for women to progress depending on the proportion of senior women in the organization. However it is noteworthy that regardless of the type of department, the “24/7” culture combined with the lack of sufficiently flexible work place practices seemed to be pervasive and acted as an additional barrier, especially for women with families.

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 around ‘lip service’/‘tokenism’, whereas women in departments 123 considered their departments to reflect a critical mass/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.

If a breakdown by EL and SES levels is considered, there can be seen to be a difference in perceptions between SES and EL women. SES women with relatively few women colleagues in their peer group could be expected to have a more heightened awareness of exclusionary practices than EL women, particularly in ABC agencies. Here attitudes are more likely to be affected by male cultural norms and unconscious bias. At the EL level, it is still possible for EL women to work in gender balanced or even women dominated work groups which could influence their experience and hence perceptions.

Box 3. Narratives on workplace structures and cultures

“Like tend to recruit like. It’s not conscious but is there’ (EL woman).

‘When I joined the Department I joined a division with a boys’ club. I left because I wasn’t going to progress’ (EL woman).

‘It’s not a boy’s club but there is still an expectation that you need to look and think a certain way. It’s a styles thing: ‘walk fast’-‘talk loud’ thing. Guys will jump in and get to a solution. Women are quieter and this creates a perception that they’re not as on the ball’ (SES man).

‘There’s a notion that when there are 3 men in suits they talk business, when there are 3 women in the corridor talking, they’re having a chat. Subconscious and fundamental discrimination (exists) that they’re not aware of’ (EL woman).

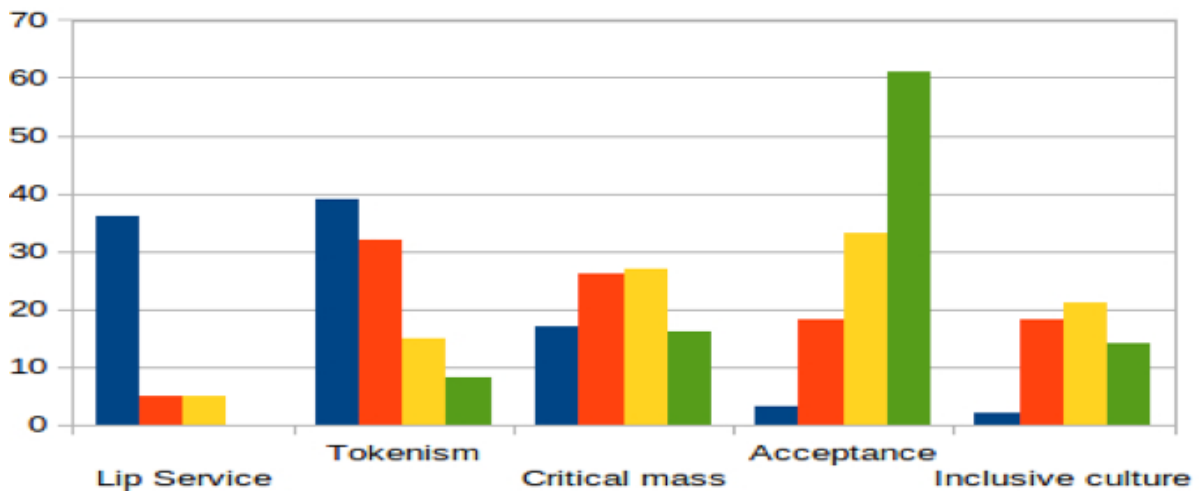
“Since I’ve been here my confidence has gone down quite a bit because it’s a hierarchical environment. I’m always trying to find out what is going on and feel very disempowered. This is impacting my ambition and creates a lot more uncertainty’ (SES woman).

‘It’s linked to confidence and self-promotion. Women don’t promote themselves as much and don’t put themselves into the spotlight’ (SES woman).

‘You have to be aggressive. If people aren’t prepared to be aggressive, it tends to mean they won’t get exposure or it’s more limited’ (SES man).

When SES men are compared with EL men, 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. EL men appear to have far less awareness of exclusionary practices and the impact of male norms on women. EL men commonly referred to their immediate experience of working with many women in their teams; their immediate experience therefore appears to have influenced their perceptions.

Chart 1.Perceptions of the workplace culture by gender and type of department (%)



Key: Blue = ABC women; Red = ABC men; Yellow = 123 women; Green = 123 men

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

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

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. As Box 4 indicates, women are seen to apply high standards when assessing whether they could do the job and often express reluctance to seek promotion themselves, whereas a very common response was that men will apply even if they do not feel ready. Moreover, some women tend to doubt that they have the necessary skills or ability and do not want to risk rejection. However, women also noted that the lack of encouragement or lack of feedback about their performance affected their confidence.

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. 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. These women also feel that progress was impacted by personal style differences and male stereo-typing. 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 nominating lack of confidence as the key barrier to their progress.

It is important to give due consideration to this finding. Women often undervalue their capability and expertise. This is less an indication of inadequacies in women themselves, than an indication

of poor management practices. It is organizational gender biases, assumptions and stereotypes that 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 (May 2013a).

Box 4. Narratives on women's lack of confidence

Women apply for jobs they know they can do and men apply for jobs they think they can do' (EL man).

'I don't put my hand up because I don't think I can do it all and I don't want to take the risk' (EL woman).

'When I've been asked to be referee – I have to tell women they can do the job and to go for it. They think if 'I don't get the job, it's a huge slight'. If the bloke doesn't get it he'll brush it off as it's their loss'. I'd feel that way too, personally. Being told I'm not good at something would be devastating' (SES woman).

'It comes from lack of positive feedback. They are all very smart people, there's no reason for them to lack confidence' (SES man).

'My experience being younger is that there are a lot of senior men in the public service who expect deference and if you don't give it, the relationship can go badly....' (SES woman).

'They may suffer from managers who have seen them as threats and competitors rather than harnessing their skills.

Their confidence has been eroded because they are smarter than others who haven't liked it and put them in their place. I find it more in young women than I do in young men. Men don't have the same problem' (SES woman).

'By the time (women) are aiming for promotion to EL or SES level, they have often been overlooked, excluded, spoken over, or discouraged by overly aggressive/competitive environments. Without unpacking the 'lack of self-confidence argument, it is too easy to see this as a problem of the women, that we should fix the women rather than fix the workforce.' (SES woman).

As noted above, the purpose of the quantitative survey was to validate findings emerging from the qualitative work and to identify any inconsistent knowledge claims. The questions mirrored those asked in the focus groups. The survey obtained 92 responses at EL and SES level to the equivalent question asked at focus groups about barriers faced by women. The results presented a very similar pattern of results to the findings derived from our qualitative work. We can therefore be confident in the empirical standing of our qualitative findings.

6 Navigating around 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. This qualification is important because it recognizes that some men may also suffer from alienation for similar reasons i.e. they may not be members of the 'Boys club', they may suffer from confidence issues and they may choose to spend leisure time at home with their families rather than in the department or on the golf course or other havens of male elite networks. But what is the way forward? What interventions could be introduced to help navigate around these barriers and so achieve and maintain a better gender balance across the APS?

We asked our informants for their suggestions about what their department and more broadly the APS could do to facilitate the progression of senior women in the APS. 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 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 our focus groups and 'one-to-one' interviews mirrored the ingredients of better practice that can be found in the academic and grey literature (see, for example: Sanders et al 2008; Defence 2011; Piterman 2011, Human Rights Commission 2013 for similar lists). Moreover, 'emerging good practice from industry and research' informed the 2011 Defence study (2011:9). Chart 2 below links the main barriers identified in our study to the mainstreaming strategies identified in the Defence study. 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 presented in Box 5

and articulated within a behavioural change management strategy in Figure 1. This operates from a systems perspective to remove barriers to participation to make it easier for women to act, to provide incentives and disincentives to achieve the right behaviours and interventions to distil a whole of government responsibility for achieving and maintaining a better gender balance across the APS.

Chart 2. Linking mainstreaming strategies with perceived barriers

STRATEGIES	PERCEIVED BARRIERS									
	Confidence	Culture	Style	Breaks	Visibility	Family	Mentoring	Male stereotyping	Exclusion	No barriers
Leadership	↙	↙	↙	↙	↙	↙	↙	↙	↙	↙
Support and development	↙	↙	↙	↙	↙	↙	↙		↙	↙
Talent Management	↙	↙	↙	↙	↙		↙	↙		
Workplace flexibility	↙	↙	↙	↙		↙		↙		
Recruitment	↙	↙			↙					
Governance	↙	↙	↙						↙	↙

Box 5. Pathways to inclusive 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 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.
- Set targets (c.f. Treasury)

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 program 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 (e.g. ANZSOG courses)
- 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 and Infrastructure

- The APS should collect and disseminate annual data on diversity achievements (including women).
- Establish departmental committees (or 'Diversity Councils') with external membership to oversee departmental progress (cf Treasury)
- The Diversity Council should measure success in achieving gender diversity across the APS

7 In conclusion – “Men, Lean-in and Listen!”

The Australian public sector has performed better than the private sector on gender equity outcomes. But as the gravity of evidence in this report 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 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). The Commissioner assisted in setting up an Australian ‘Male Champions of Change’ group which represents leaders from the public as well as the private sector and they recently wrote a public letter to other leaders where they describe it as a ‘cultural imperative to capture the diversity advantage’.

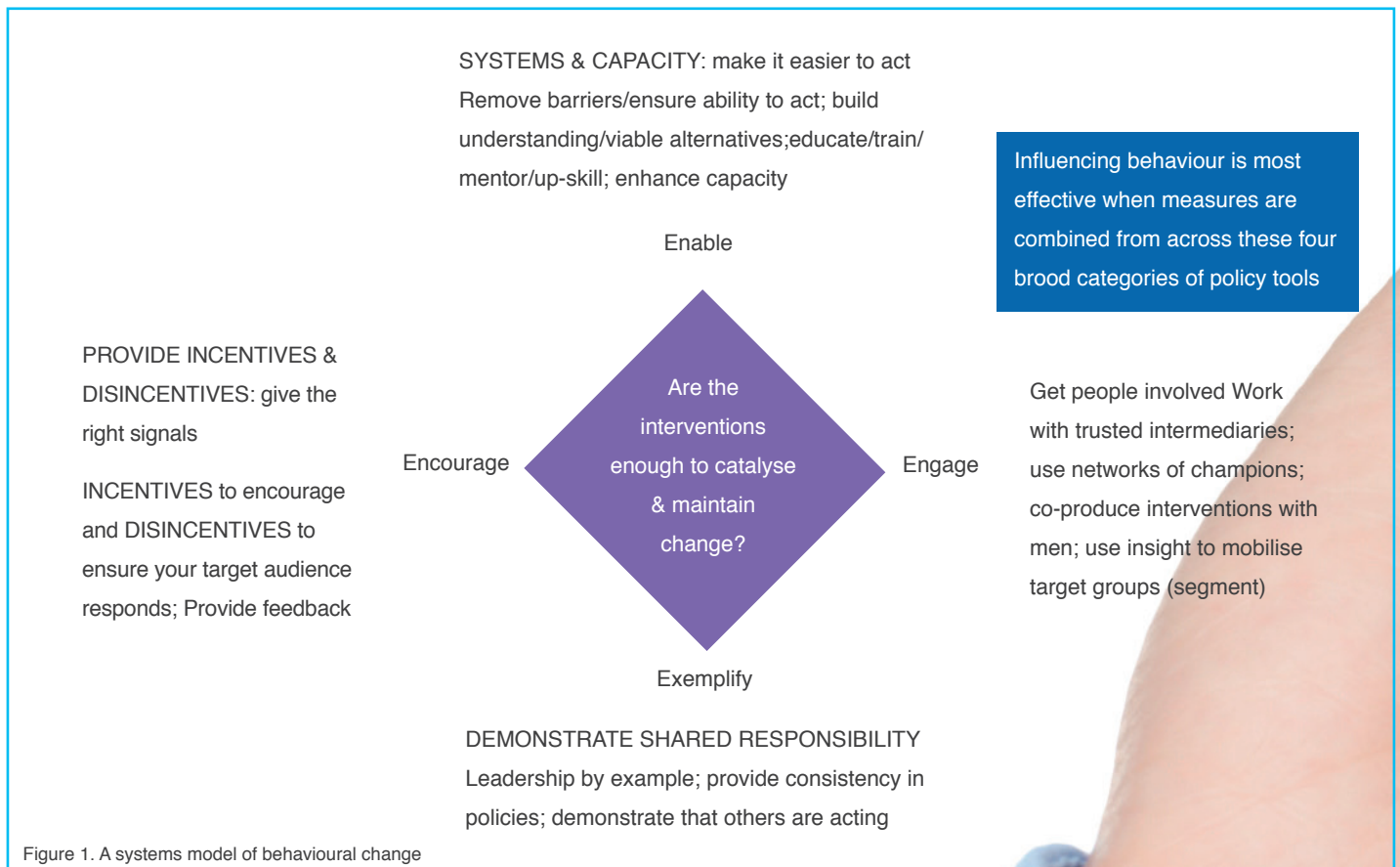


Figure 1. A systems model of behavioural change

The strategies identified above in Box 5 and integrated within our systems model of behavioural change in Figure 1 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. In short, gender equity is a prerequisite for meeting broader diversity challenges.



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