WOMEN IN SOUTH AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE: FACTORS INFLUENCING CHOICES FOR LEADERSHIP CAREER

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Abstract

The broad purpose of this paper is to analyse what factors continue to hold more women back from achieving leadership positions in public sector employment. To do so the paper adopts a case study approach utilising primary data gleaned from interviews with 28 female South Australian public servants aged from 30 to 55. The paper critically examines the post-feminist argument that individual choice and psychological factors today have significant impacts on women's career and lifestyle behaviours. The case study focuses this approach by investigating the choices available to a group of middle managers who are in the pipeline for leadership roles in the state public service in South Australia. The findings suggest that whether these women aspire for a leadership career or not, many structural factors still exist to either obstruct or influence their career progression. The impact of these factors is more severe when they want to progress their careers, particularly into the senior executive levels. Therefore, these women do not appear to have free will in their choices in pursuing a leadership career.

Keywords: Career, Choice, Leadership, Opportunity, South Australian Public Service

Introduction

Today there is a wide spread perception amongst young women that career choice and advancement are matters of lifestyle preference of men and women as no structural barriers based on gender discrimination prevail in organisations. One very thought provoking yet controversial argument relating to this is that women themselves in many instances choose not to seek leadership positions. In this view the factors in their decision making are less of a socio-economic nature but rather to do with personal factors such as their chosen goals, values, aspirations, motivations and priorities.

Despite a widespread perception of freedom of choice and equal opportunity among the new generation of women, a number of studies demonstrate that inequality and a discriminatory gender culture still exists in the labour market and within workplaces. For example, the gender pay gap persists and a majority of women are employed in insecure, part-time positions where they earn a lower rate of pay. Further, women remain under-represented in senior roles. This, of course, gives rise to an obvious query: Why? Why is this new generation of highly qualified women so sanguine about opportunity and freedom of choice when they continue to be under-represented among the top managerial and executive jobs proportional to their participation?

To answer this question, I have chosen the South Australian public sector as a case study for examination. This is because employees within the public sector throughout Australia provide

a kind of 'best case' exemplar. They experience predominantly favourable conditions for achieving gender equity within the workplace, yet even here it would seem the glass ceiling continues to exist.

Research Problem

In the Australian Public Service, 57% of employees are women and nearly half of the executive level jobs are also occupied by female executives (ABS, 2010). Surprisingly though, women are disproportionately under-represented in the Senior Executive Services where there are fewer female executives in senior executive roles than males (Bourke & Andrews, 2011). It seems that access to senior leadership positions remains a challenge for female employees in the Public Service of Australia. Moreover, turnover rate is also high among women executives (Nauert, 2010).

Two decades ago when Guy had completed her research on women's status in the public service of the United States of America, she concluded that women's career progression is never static nor linear and described it more accurately as 'three steps forward, two steps backward' (Guy, 1993, p. 285). Guy argued that women have a long way to go before they would reach parity. She also contended that females would continue to hold the same status in the public service. They would always have to convince men in the higher positions in order to achieve their demands and desires to be fulfilled through legitimate government actions and through implementing new or reformed policies, programmes and services. Gender equality in the public service, therefore, is a difficult political ambition and not easy to achieve(Guy, 1993).

Twenty years after Guy published her findings, a similar notion was shared by scholars who presume that it will not be possible in the near future to achieve leadership equality (Cassells, 2010; Rodgers-Healey, 2013; Summers, 2010). That is, it is a long way to the top for women, particularly in the public service (Summers, 2010).

While the public sector is to be praised for its affirmative action strategies, the study 'Far from Equal: The Glass Ceiling in the Australian Public Service' completed by the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) in 2008 suggested that a conscious and unconscious bias - as well as discrimination - is still a part of the organisational culture in Government workplaces. This is one of the primary reasons for women's lack of upward mobility toward leadership roles. The CPSU summarised the findings of their study by establishing the following four points:

•   Pay inequalities between agencies that are female dominated and those that are male dominated are significant and easily identifiable.
•   Agencies which are vastly feminized are necessarily service delivery organisations, including, for instance Medicare and Centrelink.
•   In all agencies, regardless of whether they are male or female dominated, more women than men are clustered at the lower end of the job spectrum. Although more women are in the pipeline for senior positions, in all agencies men are securing those roles more than women.
•   There is clearly a glass ceiling for women in the APS that obstructs their career progression up toward the highest policy making levels. (CPSU, 2008)

This paper attempts to critically examine the reasons why this should be so through a case study of the South Australian Public Sector that is based on interviews with a number of women employed at middle management levels. In doing so it also aims to critically explore the existing debates about the lack of women in senior positions – in particular in relation to the strands of feminist theories on this issue.

Literature Review

In attempts to answer the question of why women continue to face a glass ceiling and remain under-represented at senior levels of organisations, researchers and commentators have offered a variety of conflicting explanations.

The mainstream feminist arguments recognise the adverse impacts of social and organisational obstacles which create labour market and workplace inequalities, and hence the need for government intervention to promote more egalitarian and non-discriminative workplaces for women. In relation to the glass ceiling, they suggest that if there were less or no social and structural barriers, women would automatically progress to the highest levels of the organisational hierarchy. Feminist researchers have also argued that even in the Public Service where many gender advances have been introduced, a genuine non-discriminatory gender culture is yet to be achieved (Connell, 2005, 2006; CPSU, 2008; Dolan, 2000, 2004; Nutley & Mudd, 2005; O'Faircheallaigh, Wanna, & Weller, 1999; Olsson & Pringle, 2004; Whelan, 2011).

In contrast, a group of post-modern feminists have argued that the reason why women remain under-represented at senior levels is more directly related to the individual choices that they are now free to make rather than any remaining structural barriers to their advancement. For example, prominent British sociologist Catherine Hakim has argued that evidence of women's inequality in employment within affluent, post-modern societies (such as a lack of women in senior executive positions in organisations, company boardrooms and on decision-making tables) is not a result of gender discrimination. Rather, it is the outcome of 'choices' that women can afford to make in the changed context of the twenty-first century (Abbott, 2011). Hakim's argument is further supported by other post-feminists who think that 'choice' is becoming an increasingly important variable in influencing women's career goals and other life aspirations (Boyes, 2012; Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Murphy, 2012).

Therefore, this paper places a significant emphasis on exploring the role of women's own agency, their choices and aspirations for career, as an explanation for the continued presence of the glass ceiling. However, the paper also explores the role of the many contextual factors which remain influential in determining female career choices and behaviours, particularly since women's career choices cannot be made in a vacuum. While central feminist analyses suggest that female career development is still very much dependent on social and structural variables including work/family conflict, organisational culture, policies and practice, social norms, values and expectations, this paper argues that in attempting to balance 'structural' and 'agency' forces, feminist research has generally undervalued the role of women's own agencies/choices.

Methodology

To address the key research problem, this paper develops a case study utilising primary data gleaned from interviews with 28 female South Australian public servants aged from 30 to 55. The South Australian public sector is the focus of the case study research because this sector accounts for more than 12 per cent of employment in South Australia; therefore, its employment pattern and practices can directly impact employment and career opportunities for under-represented groups such as female workers (State of the Service Report, 2013).

Data Analysis and Findings

Aspiration for senior executive role

As all the participants were mid-career executives, I initially planned to explore their career plans and leadership aspirations; that is, to know how eager they were to progress their career into the next senior executive levels. I asked them about their aspiration and

readiness about securing these roles. A considerable number of the interviewees (13 out of 28 women) said they aspired to senior executive roles; however, four of them also said that they were not looking for opportunities for the time being because of family issues. The remaining eight showed no interest in securing senior roles.

I observed that the female executives who aspired to leadership roles were mostly mothers with grown-up children or with no children. The mid-career executives who had young children were not looking for opportunities to progress their careers even if they did want a leadership career. At the time of these interviews, these women were mostly working part-time; but, most of them showed a willingness to go back to full-time work when their children were older. The interviewees who did not show any interest in pursuing leadership roles were either older women who were planning for retirement or working mothers who feared losing their work-life balance in the senior leadership roles.

It came as a surprise in this study to discover that those mid-career women who wanted to progress into leadership levels were unable to fulfil their aspirations because of lack of suitable and available opportunities at those senior levels. Danielle (42, ASO 8), who had two school-going children, thought she was ready for senior roles and was actively looking for opportunities to progress her career. However, she complained, 'I think I am ready because I have skills. But there are not many opportunities'.

Isabel (44, ASO-7), who also had one school-going child, said, 'My goal is to jump to senior executive level, but because of reduction and retrenchment in the public service, opportunities are very few in number nowadays. So my goal of becoming an executive director has become like a dream.'

However, there are a few women who did not aspire to leadership roles said that even if they had opportunities they would not progress their career anymore; they showed a tendency to self-select out. For example, Emily (50, ASO-8), one of the older participants in this study, said, 'No, I don't want to progress my career any further. If possible I want to sit here until I retire. If I am forced to move I will look into a different industry but I don't aspire to be in the senior executive levels.'

Again, a number of interviewees who did not aspire to a leadership career said that they did not want to progress their career because they did not want to lose their current work and life balance. When asked about aspiration to climb to leadership levels, for example, Judith (54, ASO-8) replied, 'Hell no! I am actively not looking for senior executive roles. I think the current work atmosphere in the SES is barbaric and hostile to people's work-life balance. I actively do not seek opportunities because I actually do not think it is a decent workplace or work sector; the cost to your family life is too high, for minimal rewards … I think it is endemic across the sector and I think it is particularly difficult for women. Although the policies talk about work-life balance, talk about being family-friendly, I think it is still difficult for most of the women in senior executive positions to have those things taken into account. Because the demands and expectations are so great, if people seek to have a work/life balance, then it may put their positions or their career paths in jeopardy'.

She added, 'My present role is fairly a high level executive role and I have significant management responsibilities. But, I don't have to juggle much, it suits me. I control my own time. I occasionally work overtime but I am happy because I can take time off when I need it. It is very important to have control over your own time. I have access to flexible work arrangements and there are also informal arrangements.'

A similar tone is echoed in Kelly's comment. Kelly (36, ASO-7) was a young mid-level executive with two young kids. She said, 'I don't want to be a manager or a senior executive. In terms of managerial career I see my present manager as pretty good, she handles things

very efficiently. I try to emulate her. In terms of a personal life, I don't want her personal life. I admire her a lot but in terms of work-life balance I don't like the way she does it. After putting her children to bed she works three hours at night. I feel that I don't want to be like that. I admire that she has made it so far. But what I see is that friends of mine who are really happy at home and have a good work-life balance tend not to be senior executives and that is the choice they have made. I like the idea actually. May be I don't want to put up with any more work loads.'

Career goal, ambition and career trajectory

To understand the difference in their career aspiration for leadership roles I first asked the mid-career executives about their overall career goals and ambition. A significant number of these interviewees indicated that they had no clear career goals in their lives. Others, however, showed ambivalence about their career goals and ambitions. As Emily (50, ASO-8) said, 'I don't think I had a strong career goal in my early years; perhaps, it is not quite true. I did have and it was affected by several life events, such as- marriage, child birth. I think coming out of the workforce for a substantial amount of time and then working part-time have impacted my career trajectory; I could not go where I would have been going normally, it is the reality.'

Even though most of the older women did not have career goals, comparatively younger ones did have plans for career advancement; however, those plans seemed to be mostly short-termed and unstable. Camila (36, ASO-7) said, 'My career plan is to pursue a management role. I want to be a manager or leader after climbing one more ASO level, that is, to ASO-8. Danielle (42, ASO-7) said the same thing, 'I have a goal to go one step further.' It is understandable that most of these women had aspiration for career advancement but they did not have specific ambition for senior executive roles.

As previous research has found that there is a positive correlation between job satisfaction, employee performance and career growth (Hodson, 1989); I asked the participants about their job satisfaction and its impact on meeting their career goals. Most of the permanent full-time participants in this study gave overwhelmingly positive responses. However, neither of these participants aspired to progress to senior leadership levels, even though they were highly satisfied in their jobs and had good work records as managers in their own organisations.

By contrast, interviewees in this study who were working in contract-based temporary positions or part time generally shared negative impressions about job satisfaction. In their experiences, they felt that their jobs were insecure and their work was not valued adequately. Mary (42, ASO-8), who used to work full-time in an ASO-8 position with extensive management responsibilities, decided to apply family-friendly work benefits by working part-time for a while after returning from maternity leave. She was told that after becoming part-time she was no longer eligible for a management position. As management required constant supervision and being available at work whenever needed, it could not be done part-time. She, then, had to move to a new role, which was also an ASO-8 level position but could be done part-time. However, soon after joining the new role she found that her current role was not entirely a match to her expertise and ability. Again, in that post there was no scope for any career progression let alone to senior executive roles. She said such a sideways shift seemed to happen a lot in the public service to the women who wanted to work part-time after childbirth. To those women who aspired to having a career and children together, it seemed a kind of covert discrimination.

To explain her situation she told, 'It is damaging. They really do not know what to do with me? They do not know what to do with my skills? It feels like I am parked somewhere ... There is a real perception that managerial roles have to be full-time. So it automatically

excludes females like me. The stubborn idea that only full-time employees would be taken very seriously is bullshit! And there is also a culture that automatically assumes that when women have babies their IQ automatically drops, their ability drops, their focus is always going to be elsewhere, and their professionalism goes out of the window! ... If they decide to work part-time, they have to sit and watch while their peers accelerate past them, not necessarily because of talent, but because they are a parent working part-time, and are not even allowed to be a contender, or are discounted as only a part-timer.'

Kelly (36, ASO-7) was working a contract-based part-time role during this study. She chose to work part-time because her daughter was very young. Her experience seemed to be the worst amongst all of these interviewees. She was actively looking for opportunities, because her one-year contract was going to finish soon. Again, as she worked part-time she saw no hope of getting a job anytime soon as there were usually very few career and employment opportunities for part-timers. She said, 'There is no job security in contracts. As I work part-time, opportunities have shrunk. It is difficult when you are a part-timer.' She also added, 'I wanted to do a more meaningful job, not contract-based ones, where you always have to look for opportunities - just a job, not a goal. But opportunities are not there for women like me who get trapped into contract-based jobs ... you are always looking for opportunities, whatever it is. You are even ready to downgrade yourself ... Therefore, my career goal becomes piecemeal. I don't have many long-term expectations ... I always need to change my career goal. It is like going backwards and forwards and thus staying in the same position. Goals cannot be fulfilled anyway!'

Although part-time and contract based employees in this study were dissatisfied in their present roles, they showed aspiration to progress careers to the leadership levels if the opportunity arises for job security and better work-life outcomes.

It seemed that even with potential and aspiration there were a few factors that determined the career decisions and behaviours of the mid-level female executives in relation to advancing to leadership levels. Depending on career ambition and behaviour, I observed that, broadly, there were three types of mid-career women, those who:

- had unfilled leadership aspirations
- did not wish to progress careers into the senior leadership for the time being
- did not aspire to leadership at all

I discuss the factors that determined their different aspirations and personal career choices further in the next section.

The factors that influence choice and aspiration for leadership career

Although a considerable number of these executive do aspire to career progression, most of them do not see career progression into the SES as ever possible. For the most part they have not deliberately 'chosen' not to seek career progression into the leadership levels. Their experiences suggest their choice and aspiration for career progression is still bounded by many systematic and non-systematic factors that are beyond their control.

One of the major issues is lack of adequate and suitable opportunities for career progression. The interviewees who were actively looking for such opportunities suggest that positions for leadership roles are not only very limited but also are advertised rarely. Therefore, female mid-career executives who want to progress their careers experience extreme competition for leadership-level jobs. Because of continuous restructuring in the public service, new opportunities are not created. Again, because of the impact of recent austerity and job cuts, mostly in the SES levels, the scope becomes very narrow and limited. Although it impacts both male and female employees, it makes career progression of female employees more

difficult as they are more likely to have breaks in their careers, became less known faces in the executive streams and have lesser flexibility in choosing careers.

Moreover, even if positions are created in the leadership levels, opportunities are not likely to be available for many of these women, as it is easier for those public servants who work in permanent full-time positions to secure them. The part-time and the contract-based workers in this study seemed to be more vulnerable in terms of career progression and acquiring family-friendly work benefits. Equal opportunity, therefore, seems even now not to be a universal phenomenon in the public service.

Many of the interviewees have also identified a covert but persisting bias for males for leadership roles in the public service, which often excluded qualified female candidates from achieving these roles. Even though the overall recruitment and selection process in the public service seems fair and merit-based; in the SES recruitment often happens not on merit but by knowing someone. Some of the participants also argue that as males are most of the known faces because of their greater networking capabilities they are generally the preferred ones. They say, females are rarely appointed to the leadership roles; they are appointed only if they can prove that they are extraordinarily qualified and have the ability to comply with the workplace culture within the SES. The presence of the boy's club also often influences the recruitment process, favouring males for key executive/managerial roles even when female candidates possess higher qualifications.

Such bias towards male executives and full-time employees becomes more prominent when many of these female executives decide to work part-time for a while after having children. They say the part time work option when children are very young (a popular family-friendly work arrangement, particularly for females who want to combine motherhood and employment in the public service) is an effective work-benefit for young mothers; however, it also comes at a cost to their careers. As these family-friendly work benefits are not properly linked to job security and/or career progression and do not provide a career safety net, these women are often trapped in low-quality part-time jobs without the opportunity for career advancement or skill enhancement. Thus, they are either excluded from leadership career opportunities or discouraged from any further career development.

While the interviewees who aspire to leadership roles have identified the above-mentioned factors as barriers, those who do not have identified other factors that have actually deterred them from seeking such career progression.

Lack of job security in contract-based leadership positions is identified as one of the things that put many mid-level female executives off in pursuing leadership roles. Most of the working mothers in this study said that they would always prefer job security to higher pay and more prestigious roles.

Job design and the workplace culture of the SES were two other major reasons why many of the mid-level executives do not want senior executive roles. They perceive that to be a successful leader in the public service one needs to have a unique personality or personal circumstances which enable them are able to comply with the workplace culture and job requirements of the leadership roles. These jobs often require extraordinary intelligence, a level of toughness, the ability to participate in nasty workplace politics and be able to comply with the boy's club. For some of these women such behavioural change is undesirable and contrary to their ethics; therefore, they prefer to stay away from such a work culture.

Interviewees working in male-dominated organisations had the worst perceptions about the work culture in the leadership levels and have generally shown the least faith in their employers' ability to provide equal opportunities for career progression. A number of them observed that in male-dominated organisations females are either directly or indirectly

discriminated against. For example, it is tougher for women to secure full-time permanent roles in male-dominated agencies and departments. Again, many males are appointed to executive roles without having tertiary qualifications, whereas females always have to have tertiary qualifications and skills to secure these roles. Female executives in these organisations often feel excluded and somewhat unwanted in the senior roles when they see that those working in the top roles are all men.

The majority of the interviewees who say they do not aspire to leadership roles also say that they do not prefer these roles not only because of the job design but also because of the worse work-life outcomes. While they appreciate those women, who have acquired leadership positions despite being aware of its impact on their work-life balance, they do not want such a situation for themselves.

Conclusion

The central research question of this paper is to identify the factors that still hold women back from acquiring into the senior leadership positions in the public service of Australia. It can be concluded from the findings of the interviews with the mid-career executive women in the South Australian Public Service that whether they aspire for a leadership career or not, many structural factors still exist to either obstruct or influence their career progression. The impact of these factors is more severe when they want to progress their careers, particularly into the senior leadership levels. Therefore, these women do not appear to have free will in their choices in pursuing a leadership career. Although they identified a number of factors that acted as positive influence on their motivation for career success; these also depend on the organisational work culture and the particular family atmosphere. While some choices might be there for the full-time executives, this is not universal for all public service women. Rather, it again shows that the career and lifestyle choices of these women are still bound by the structure of opportunity within their organisation.

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