

## Gender Equity in Australian Universities: The Many Paradoxes of Securing Senior Leadership Positions

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### **Abstract:**

To date western feminist scholarship on gender and work has primarily focused on women providing valuable information as to their discrimination and invisibility, especially in the echelons of power and in senior decision-making positions. Feminist scholars have needed to explore women's under representation in senior leadership positions because of their long term exclusion. This is true for Australian women where most have been unable to secure senior jobs despite their desire to do so and scholarship that supports their suitability. As in other parts of the world, women in Australia continue to be under represented in leadership positions in the workplace despite the feminist agenda. This is true for all occupational groups. A snapshot from the Australian higher education sector and women's place in senior leadership illustrates the many paradoxes women face.

### **Introduction**

To date western feminist scholarship on gender and work has primarily focused on women providing valuable information as to their discrimination and invisibility, especially in the echelons of power and in senior decision-making positions and its benefits, such as personal and institutional power and influence, higher pay and job security, access to credit and retirement benefits. This feminist scholarship was essential it was argued in order to explore women's under representation in senior leadership positions because of their long term exclusion. This exclusion is true for Australian women in all work places where most have been unable to secure senior jobs despite their desire to do so and scholarship that supports their suitability (Bacchi 1993; Cox 1995; Probert 1999). Women's under-representation in the paid workforce is reflected across all occupational groups - from the corporate to the public sector; from the trades and manufacturing to the services industries; and from the professions to higher education and training (Cox 1995; Noble & Moore 2004). Not only has scholarship on gender differences in paid work tended to rely on women exploring the causes and consequence of their disadvantage, women activist have had to come up with social and legislative changes to redress their marginalization as well.

In Australia, from the late 1970s to the early 1990s and as result of a new progressive and feminist leaning Federal Labor Government a suite of policy initiatives were introduced that were gradually adopted across both Federal and State jurisdictions across the country. Policies such as Equal Employment and Affirmative Action (EEO/AA), sex discrimination and maternity leave legislation, provision for work-based child care and leadership and mentoring programs were aimed at changing the culture of male advantage and patronage endemic in the social fabric. These legislative initiatives were designed to enhance women's economic and personal freedoms and provide a more solid footing for women to acquire economic independence so as to open up more life choices than previously available. Women's work was to receive the value it deserved and their contribution to the culture of the workplace was to be rewarded. Organisations that did not adhere to these legislative imperatives were to be 'named and shamed' in the Federal and various state parliaments (Bradley 1999; Thornton 2001; 2008; Bacchi, 2009).

These EEO/AA strategies and training programs seemed for a while at least to give women some hope for a changed future (Sinclair & Wilson 2002) - a future that might include more access to equal pay and opportunity in employment across the workforce; more access to senior roles in public and private administration and higher education institutions; more access to the corporate world of male privilege and patronage across the workforce and in particular the heavily masculine dominated manufacturing, trades and services industries, and the professions and higher education sector. Women were intent on challenging, what has become known colloquially as the 'glass ceiling'. In challenging the 'glass ceiling' women (who were brave enough to leave the domestic realm characteristic of the 1950s and 1960s) would have broad range of policy support in their endeavors to reach the 'top jobs', including the much lauded child care provision and leadership mentoring and training programs.

In furthering the equity agenda, in the late 1990s, the Australian Federal government moved its attention from policy and legislative change to individual organization's behavior by encouraging organisations to mainstream their EEO/AA initiatives (approved as part of the 1995 UN World Conference on Women, Beijing) as a strategy for making the concerns and programs to support their aspirations for gender equality the responsibility of individual men rather than the problem of individual women (Thornton 2001; Walby 2005; Probert 2005; Noble & Pease 2011). There was a proliferation of Equal Opportunity Officers positions and EEO/AA committees established across the corporate and public sectors. Promoting women's equal employment participation and senior appointments became a national concern and a joint venture of both men and women. Indeed Connell (2006) argues that progress on this front was to become the most visible symbol of gender reform across the country.

For example by 2010 Australian women had made great inroads in educational opportunities where women/girls outstrip high school retention rates for boys and their attendance at university is higher than men and women are more likely to hold more post graduate qualifications. In professional and allied professional occupations women have increased their participation to 52% (EOWA 2011). In 2011 Australia elected its first women Prime Minister and the government appointed its first woman as Governor General. Clearly these appointments could be regarded as heralding a real move towards gender equality in senior positions, especially as these two positions represent the highest appointments in the country.

### **So how effective were these policy initiatives?**

However despite these changes the overall picture of women's representation in the senior positions has been idiosyncratic, patchy and uneven. For example, the latest data released in late 2012 by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), the Australian Census of Women in Leadership shows that women make up 3 % of CEOs at ASX500 companies, 9% of executive management and 15% of board directors, while in the lucrative financial industries only 4 per cent were filled by women and 72 of ASX 200 companies do not have a woman on their board. Men in large businesses have 9 times more chance of making it to senior leadership positions, despite women graduating from universities at higher rate than men since 1985 and data showing that women register almost equal levels of ambition to senior leadership positions as their male colleagues. Research conducted by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) in 2011 identified that 17.9 % of Australian University Vice Chancellors were women while 29 % held senior executive positions, 33.4 % of Government board members were women and of seats in the national parliament 30 % per cent were held by women compared to 70 % by men. Moreover 80 % of ministerial positions and senior portfolios were held by men (EOWA 2011).

Overall women made up 45.3% of all employed people and 34 % of managers and professional positions. Women still only earn 82 cents in the male dollar and the gender gap in pay has widened over the last four years and with bonuses and overtime the gap is wider. The current graduate gender pay gap across all occupations is 9.1% (WGEA 2012). It seems that the disparity between men and women's pay still comes down simply to 'being a women' at a cost of the equivalent of 8.5% of Australian GDP and \$93 billion a year in productivity (National Centre of Social Economic Modeling (NATSEM)). So while more young women are choosing education, career and 'maybe a baby' the male worker still dominates senior leadership positions in all industries including those industries where women dominate (Noble & Pease 2011).

This ingrained and enduring sexism has seen Australia drop eight places in the Global Gender Gap rankings between 2006 and 2010, from 15<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> and showed significant deficiency in other areas such as being ranked 40<sup>th</sup> in ministerial positions and 59<sup>th</sup> in wage equality for similar work (The Global Gender Gap Report 2012). The report ranks Sri Lanka and the Philippines ahead of Australia when it comes to gender equity. While no country worldwide has managed to close the gender and subsequent wealth gap, the Nordic countries have succeeded best in narrowing it by providing a wider spectrum of educational, political and work opportunities for women and where equality is embedded in the culture (Bacchi & Eveline 2009).

Although gender equality has been a Government goal for more than three decades and women's equal rights are now embedded in international law, as Human Rights, one can see from the data quoted above that women's equal place in paid work and public life is 'unfinished business'. The promised political, cultural and social change to free women from employment barriers in the workplace, so hopeful in the pro-feminist political discourse of the the 1970s and 1980s, has *not* occurred. Why? What happened? In looking for answers there seems to be a genuine belief that workplaces are still genuine meritocracies and that the gender pay and wealth gap is overplayed and exaggerated because women don't want to step up to the challenge of putting themselves forward for senior positions. That is women are still to blame for their own disadvantage and discrimination and as such myths as to their motivation or opportunity still exist, for example:

- Women have choice in types of employment and choice in determining their career trajectories and promotion opportunities
- Women choose lower level jobs in order to balance home (childcare) and work
- Mothers in the workplace lack ambition or drive (concern as they are for their children's needs and wellbeing)
- If women behaved like men they would succeed more
- There are not enough qualified women for senior jobs
- Many women are not interested in the challenges of management or demands in time and availability that accompany senior roles, choosing rather to opt for more realistic work/life balance
- General belief in the adage 'All will well in the future, no need to worry' (The pipeline or tickle down effect) (CEDA report, Women in Leadership: Understanding the Gender gap 2013 (June).

### **Reasons for women's discrimination in leadership positions**

O'Leary's (2000) work demonstrated that women's career development is still judged through the masculine paradigms of competition, dominance and the dynamics of winners and losers, and where career steps are regarded as fiercely fought tournaments. A significant part of the current literature also identifies the sex stereotyping of male and female leaders as still playing a crucial

role (Zichy 2000). That is leadership is viewed culturally in terms of masculine (agentic) and feminine (communal) qualities in comparison to men, women were seen as lacking the 'right' motivation, the 'right' skill set, and the 'right' leadership aspirations or qualities to aspire for and then secure senior management positions. Marvin's (2001, p.185) research showed that the ever-present domination of male business culture where women managers are still 'travellers in a male world' means that women are treated as 'mothers' while men are treated as 'workers'. Thornton (2008) names this phenomenon as 'Benchmark men' (p.3) where women's competencies, motivations, specific skills or other observable indices, is found 'wanting' against the male norm. Success in promotion was equated with assertiveness, drive and competitiveness (all attributes associated with masculinity so it's almost inevitable that women struggle with recognition of their skills and contribution to the workplace and their share of rewards in the same way as men (Martin 2001; Noble & Moore 2006). For women to succeed they are encouraged to adopt those stereotypical 'male' behaviours in their struggles for an equal place alongside men in public life, and for women to break through the proverbial glass ceiling and to reach positions of power, leadership and influence (i.e. think manager, think male) (Moore & Wen 2004, Noble & Moore 2006; Noble 2014).

There is the underlying assumption that the workplace is a level playing field and that organisational behaviors are gender neutral and men, in occupying the terrain almost exclusively, will move over and relinquish all the power, wealth and privilege that they have enjoyed for centuries (Noble 2014). However, if we see women's access to the workforce in general and to senior leadership positions in particular as seeking entry into the already well formed and entrenched male domain, where privileges, power, influence, status and cultural, political, economic and social rewards are bountiful for the men who hold such positions, then focusing on changing women's behavior (to be more male-like) and continuing to push for social and legislative change seems pointless. While equal pay and access to paid employment and senior positions remains an accepted goal for public policy, it remains a distant dream for most women. For, in spite of these gender equity initiatives, and as in other parts of the world, women in Australia continue to be under represented in leadership positions, across the employment sphere and occupational groups including higher education institutions despite the feminist agenda and research demonstrating women's long standing discrimination in the workplace and securing leadership positions (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006). Given that Government's attempts to promote women's equality in the workplace has been uneven at best and non-existent at worst it might be useful (and timely) to ask what are the organizing factors that materially and symbolically still exist that manufacture and maintain this inequality? A snap shot of Australian Higher Education sector will illustrate the argument while make for depressing reading.

#### **Australian higher education as case example**

Australian Universities have extensive gender equity programs and have been in the forefront in developing and implementing these policies in order to advance women's promotional opportunities and gender equity in employment status and rewards. Programs such as; flexible working hours, permanent part time work, child and family friendly policies, child care on campus, special leave and career break schemes, leadership programmes, mentoring, networking and targeting women on special lists for inclusion in senior management positions are universally available across the sector. Despite these initiatives there is still a clear pattern of vertical segregation by gender in academic, professional and administrative staff (Strachan et al, 2011).

Noble and Mears' (2004) longitudinal study (1992-2002) exploring the extent which EEO/AA legislation has influenced work place change for women in Australian universities was one of the first studies into the sector that demonstrated that EEO policies had been markedly limited. Qualitative material found instances of bullying, resistances, delays and reluctance in

implementing EEO/AA programmes, lack of resources and priorities for women programmes, and in some cases active resistance by senior staff (primarily the Pro Vice-Chancellors) as well as a continued ignorance of the structural issues and their impact on women's employment and 'deeply held fears' by those officers charged with its implementation of women taking 'over the workplace'. In reality as Carrington and Pratt's Policy Paper (2002) on gender disparities in Australian Higher Education System found that the senior executives need not worry about being replaced as men were dominant at the senior levels of academe and administration and looked like they were well entrenched in their strong hold. For example at Level D (Associate Professor), 14% of men compared to 9% of women; at Level E (Professor) 15% of men compared to 7% of women. One-fifth of women (21%) earn over \$104,000 per annum compared with almost two-fifths (38%) of men. While better represented than women executives within the business sector, women in academic administrative positions still only accounted for 29% of senior executives in Australian universities (Carrington & Pratt 2002).

However, and this is the point of this case study, we find that more than a decade later in 2014 there has been little shift in gender disparity in Higher Education across the country. In some cases the situation of women's parity in senior roles has deteriorated. Women still hover around 44% of academics and women are still less than 1/3 of the professional and administrative class. The proportion of women Vice-chancellors had fallen to 20%, just 8 out of 39, and the second women to head up a 'Group of 8', top ranking university starts in September 2014. Across the sector women comprise 40% of all academics, 66% of administrative staff and 55% of academic casuals and 29% of Professors. Strachan et al's (2011) study found that not only were women underrepresented in the professoriate, they were also underrepresented in movements into the professoriate. The 29% is well below their share of the feeder group, Level C (Senior Lecturer) academics of whom 40% were female (p.318). Not only are these figures disappointing they ensure that men and male norms remain entrenched while men make up the majority of senior decision-making positions that frame the policies and maintain the male-dominated culture of the institutions continue.

Reasons for this disparity are posited as:

- Women enter university with less human capital (i.e. less formal qualifications such as PhDs and work experience)
- Women's career is compressed in duration of academic career (i.e. shorter time to succeed)
- More women transition between industry and academia (where professional experience is not as highly valued as research and publications)
- Women are underrepresented on decision-making bodies (academic senate, university council, promotion committees)
- Within academe, criteria determining what is merit and what is success is still embedded in male norms, which are discriminatory towards women
- Women's career paths are far too frequently interrupted by nurturing and home duties creating the inevitable tensions between home and professional life
- Research output and access to competitive grants and industry favour men and men's occupations, and
- Cultural impediments (i.e. the overwhelming domination of white, middle class men in senior roles) peculiar to the academy place organisational obstacles in way of women (Strategy for Women (2011-2014) p.7).

To redress this inequity the Strategy for Women (2011-2014) have developed specific strategies such as:

- Overt and organisational wide commitment to gender equity with targets set for female staff at senior levels
- Gender equity is to be championed by senior leadership
- Gender, cultural diversity, age, race, and disability are seen as assets rather than deficits
- The provision of flexible workplaces is seen as enhancing organisational capabilities and advantaging women's continued caring roles
- Women's promotional progress is to be regularly monitored
- Mentoring support and networks are to be provided for women
- Budgets are encouraged to include funds for diversity and inclusion projects which target women
- Awareness is to be increased amongst men about diversity and how to be inclusive of women in the workplace, and
- Leadership programs for women are to be provided.

For long term feminist policy analysts and gender equity activists these strategies (adopted in 2014) indicate a considerable blow as these are the very same strategies suggested and enacted in the 1980s when the Australian Federal government was first interested in changing promotional opportunities for women across the workforce more generally, not just the Universities. It seems that despite almost four decades of feminist activism and policy and legislative initiatives - the 'think manager, think male' culture is still left unchallenged and uncritiqued despite substantial debate, scholarship and social and legislative change aimed at promoting women's equality in leadership positions. Women are still the target for change, men's privilege and advantage in securing leadership positions is still left unchallenged. As a result any scholars are arguing that the usefulness of gender equity policy's goal is either fundamentally flawed or legislatively toothless and are arguing for abandoning it in favour of more discursive analysis, in particular the concept of masculinities (coined by Connell 1987) and male privilege as discussed by Pease (2000, 2009), in particular, as a way of getting beyond the gender divide.

### **Male privilege**

Male advantage remains the invisible and unchallenged norm of entrenched male privilege which frees all men to act in uninhibited ways to secure their positions of power and influence with confidence because their position as central actors on the cultural turf is culturally and structurally reinforced historically and contemporarily (Noble & Pease 2011; Noble 2014). This invisible privilege is so entrenched in the socialization of both men and women that men as the privileged group can easily ignore, or not see how others, in this case women, are denied the same opportunities as them and thus, without analysis continue (conveniently) to blame women for their lack of success and resist, yet alone initiate, any attempt to change their behavior in the quest for more equality or look to themselves as *the* problem (Noble & Pease 2011). It is the unspoken, unchallenged and ingrained norms of hegemonic masculinity that reproduces male power in the workplace that results in vast number of male workers ride the 'glass escalator' to the top jobs, often at the expense of more qualified women (Noble 2014). As Audre Lorde says 'The masters' tools will never dismantle the masters' house' (2000).

### **Analysis and discussion**

Despite a feminist push and analysis of women's position in the workplace and public life the gender question remains well and truly on the agenda. Women still face discrimination in

recruitment and promotion and will retire with less superannuation and own smaller proportion of the national wealth (Bacchi 2004). Women are more likely than men to live in poverty, particularly after a relationship breakdown (Leahy 2011). Even as Australia has the first woman as Prime Minister lack of legitimacy, lack of trust, and sustained criticism and ridicule of her personal style and appearance suggests there is more at stake for women who assume positions of power and leadership (Walsh 2013). Even though the first woman Governor General has escaped much of the embittered criticism of the first female Prime Minister, her role seemed to have morphed into great commentary on her clothes and demeanour (reference to her sense of style and use of Australian clothes designers) rather than her role as Queens Representative in a democratic monarchy. Australia's answer to this experiment of women leaders, following the defeat of the Labour Government in 2013 was to elect a male as new Prime Minister who leads a right-wing conservative government which has the new cabinet made up of almost entirely male (one female) members who then appointed the new Governor General from the male-dominated senior military ranks.

The ridicule and denigration of successful women is of concern for two reasons. One is that equal rights, equal treatment in private and public life and equal participation in society is a human rights issue and second, excluding women from leadership roles and by implication full and equal partnership in the workplace impacts on productivity and militates against a achieving a diverse workforce characteristic of the community more generally. Models of women in senior positions and in equal numbers generally benefit the institutions offering different perspectives, experiences and contributions women can make, not to mention the waste of talent and diversity in the workplace women managers bring. The intransigence of barriers preventing the equality between men and women at the highest level of management is also destructive to good management and productive outcomes. It seems that the disparity between men and women's pay still comes down simply to 'being a women' at a cost of the equivalent of 8.5% of Australian GDP and \$93 billion a year in productivity (National Centre of Social Economic Modeling (NATSEM) not to mention the unbridled and outrageous public statement of male privilege and the unworthy message encoded for women who might aspire to senior roles.

### **What now?**

Liberal feminism, once equated with equal opportunity feminist initiatives, appears to have run out of steam. Power as exercised through the masculinities discourses still dominates contemporary workplace dialogue, while the work/life balance stifles women's time and focus to achieve in what is still a male dominated work culture. The dominant approach still locates the problem in women and does not fundamentally challenge the gendered nature of organisations or men's power within them. So after nearly four decades of legislative and various organisational supports for more gender equity and inclusive management, the glass ceiling remains an issue for Australian women. It seems obvious that research into the way men and women *do* gender at work is the new frontier for exploring ways to tackle women's continued discrimination in leadership positions. This research just might be more fruitful if *both* women and men engage in the process together so that the way men and women do gender is made more visible. In calling for a gender analysis of power and privilege to be included in re-working of equal opportunity theory might be just the new impetus needed to motivate another wave of activism that characterised the last four decades of feminist activism to go some way towards challenging the long standing gender disparity in senior leadership positions.

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