



The Role of Middle Managers in Progressing Gender Equity in the Public Service

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Executive Summary

Rationale for the research

Gender inequities remain in the public service, including under-representation in leadership positions, a gender pay gap, unevenly distributed unpaid labour outside work, and conscious and unconscious biases towards women workers. This report focuses on the specific challenges that middle managers in New Zealand's public service encounter in progressing gender equity.

The research was conducted by a team of researchers drawn from Victoria University of Wellington, Massey University and AUT, in partnership with the Ministry for Women, *Te Minitatanga mō ngā Wāhine*. It forms part of a wider project looking at public service middle managers' role in progressing gender equity within New Zealand and Australia. Qualitative data was collected from staff drawn from four public service agencies. In all, 69 staff were interviewed individually or in focus groups: 11 senior executive and HR managers, and 58 managers.

What the research tells us

Staff are highly committed to progressing gender equity but significant barriers remain. Middle managers play a crucial role in progressing gender equity within their workplaces.

There is widespread awareness of women's numeric under-representation in the public service, particularly in higher management tiers. Respondents see horizontal segregation as a key contributor to pay inequities in their agencies. Perceptions of 'alpha-dominant' or 'type A' management approaches and masculinist cultures have encouraged the creation of subtle, silent, unseen and overt barriers experienced by women and men. However, there are high levels of executive support and motivation amongst managers to improve equity, with middle managers playing a key role in progressing gender equity in their agencies. Indeed, a broad range of gender equity initiatives operate across agencies with varying degrees of awareness amongst managers.

Challenges in addressing issues of gender in(equity) begin at the recruitment and selection of new staff. Balancing merit and gender concerns remains a challenge.

Biases in the recruitment and selection of staff contribute to the under-representation of women in public service agencies. This begins when women's starting salaries are set though most managers reported selecting on the basis of merit rather than gender.

Career development opportunities are widely available across agencies but women's representation at senior levels have declined. Potential loss of flexible work arrangements,

unconscious bias and perceived gendered leadership models discourage self-selection into senior management roles.

All of the participating agencies offer formal and informal career development opportunities. However, women's representation at senior management levels has deteriorated over the last decade. Few apply for roles at senior management levels due to a range of issues including the potential loss of flexible work arrangements (FWAs); a tendency of senior managers to discount women for senior positions; the 'boys club' discouraging women's upward progress and movement across agencies; women's reluctance to put themselves forward; and the continuing dominance of a male leadership model.

Flexible work is critical to career progression and retention. Middle managers play an important role in facilitating and managing flexible work and report challenges in balancing individual and organisational needs.

Research shows that FWAs have a positive effect on women's career progress and can help prevent their departure. Managers play an increasingly important role in ensuring access to and management of FWAs, and pointed to various benefits of staff working flexibly and for their agency (e.g. facilitation of phased retirement; higher levels of organisational commitment). Despite strong agency support, however, managers reported significant challenges to implementing FWAs with regard to balancing individual and organisational needs.

What can be done to improve the progression of gender equity

When asked what gender equity might look like within their organisations, managers' views encompassed cultural, behavioural, attitudinal and structural change. From their comments, recommendations were developed, including:

- the development of gender equity strategies with interim and long(er)-term goals and benchmarks;
- the development of resources for middle managers to support their role as facilitators of gender equity;
- greater awareness-raising of gender equity initiatives;
- regular assessment of, and responsiveness to, where and how communication and bureaucracy 'blockages' impede gender equity initiatives;
- measures to reduce the dissonance between some women's career experiences and ambitions so as to encourage engagement and positivity about their career options;
- continuation or expansion of resources for support activities (e.g. unconscious bias training; more opportunities for managers to hear women's voices; encouragement of an organisational culture in which women feel confident about developing their careers);

- specific consideration of women's *starting* salaries in public service agencies, and analysis of why they differ from men's;
- greater monitoring of gender equity initiatives, with particular regard to their unintended impacts and interactive effects;
- greater engagement in external support mechanisms for gender equity; and
- follow-up studies of gender equity initiatives in the agencies to assess progress or otherwise for women, and examine their advancement and diversity, including non-binary and intersectional considerations (e.g. around gender and ethnicity, mental health, disability, age and sexual orientation).

1. Introduction

Despite substantive advancements toward gender equity in Aotearoa New Zealand, women continue to face barriers to equal participation and achievement in their working life. Women continue to experience pay inequality (Pacheco, Li, & Cochrane, 2017); be underrepresented in leadership positions (Hurst & Leberman, 2015); and contribute higher amounts of unpaid care and household labour (Gibb, Fergusson, & Boden, 2013; Statistics New Zealand, 2013, Ravenswood & Smith, 2017), which can negatively impact their employment status and pay (Sin, Dasgupta, & Pacheco, 2018). With women representing 60.5 percent of the public service workforce (State Services Commission, 2017), gender equity is imperative both in terms of attaining social justice for women, and in realising the full potential of workforces.

Gender equity advancements occur within social and policy environments that are conducive to progress or change. There are multi-layered social and political factors, ranging from policy or legislation changes to activism by social movements and trade unions, that contribute to achieving gender equity (McGregor & Davies, 2018). Indeed, a range of legislation and policies exist to encourage gender equity in the public service, including flexible working arrangements (Employment Relations (Flexible Working Arrangements) Amendment Act 2007), equal employment opportunities in section 58, and the concept of the ‘good employer’ in section 56 of the State Sector Act (State Sector Act 1988), and the Equal Pay Act (Equal Pay Act 1972). However, as McGregor and Davies (2018) point out, ‘(w)hile there has been equal pay legislation for many decades in New Zealand, progress on women's economic rights has been punctuated by the ebb and flow of political will’ (p. 4). The decision to close the Pay and Employment Equity Unit in 2009 removed the focus on gender inequalities in the public service. Nevertheless, there has been a recent global and local spotlight on gender (in)equality, particularly in the context of the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements. In Aotearoa New Zealand, contemporary movements around equal pay such as the ‘Treat Her Right’ campaign, and recent landmark gender equity settlements for care workers (McGregor & Davies, 2018) are emblematic of current social and political will to achieve gender equality in the workplace.

Although changes in the policy and social context are important for achieving gender equity, these ‘macro’ factors are not the only significant dimension. Significant research shows gender inequity is perpetuated through everyday organisational practices that privilege men, and men’s experiences, over women and their experiences (Acker, 2006, 2012; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Consequently, the everyday practice and implementation of gender equity initiatives in the workplace have a central role in the realisation of gender equality, with much of that responsibility for implementation being with middle managers (Jones & Torrie, 2009; Ravenswood & Harris, 2016).

Accordingly, this study examines the challenges and issues that middle managers encounter in the progress of gender equity across agencies. The public service is an important site to examine the implementation of gender equity initiatives, not only because of the significant number of women employed in it (State Services Commission, 2017), but also because the public service is expected to model equal employment opportunities for women (McGregor, 2011). Although the representation of women in leadership in the public service has improved (McGregor, 2011; State Services Commission, 2017), there remains a lack of movement of women into senior positions and the gender pay gap remains high. Against this background, this research looks at the role of middle managers in progressing gender equity, with a focus on the systemic and structural impediments to initiatives and the levers available to counter barriers to their implementation.

Social, Political, and Industrial Context of Gender Equity

Since the 1960s, there has been a broad legislative agenda to provide a basis for equal employment opportunities for women. Legislation provides the floor for gender equity in the workplace. For instance, Aotearoa New Zealand has legislation against discrimination on the basis of gender (Human Rights Act 1993) and against pay discrimination (Equal Pay Act 1972) and the short-lived yet far-reaching Employment Equity Act 1990. In addition, there have been other adjustments to the regulatory framework aimed at progressing gender equity. For example, section 58 of the State Sector Act 1988 outlines the responsibilities of the public service to provide equal employment opportunities. Accordingly, agencies are mandated to promote, develop and monitor equal employment opportunities which aim to identify and eliminate institutional barriers that cause or perpetuate all forms of inequality, including gender inequality (State Sector Act 1988). Also, section 56 of the same Act outlines the responsibility of the State as a 'good employer' with regard to the employment requirements of women. Despite the legislative framework, movement toward equal opportunities have been described as 'glacial', particularly when more individualist and voluntarist measures became the norm (Parker, Nemani, Arrowsmith & Bhowmick, 2012).

The Ministry for Women *Te Minitatanga mō ngā Wāhine* (formerly the Ministry of Women's Affairs) was established as a standalone agency in 1986 to provide policy advice for advancing gender equity in the public service and beyond (Curtin, 2014). The recent announcement by Minister for Women, the Hon Julie Anne Genter to eliminate the gender pay gap, make flexible work the norm and increase women to 50 percent of leadership positions in the public service signals the Government's commitment to the elimination of gender inequity (Ministry for Women, 2018). The *Eliminating the Public Service Gender Pay Gap 2018–2020 Action Plan* is based on a joint approach between the State Services Commission, government agencies and

the Public Service Association. It recognises that ‘women are still under-represented in leadership and undertake the majority of unpaid work’ and that women who do the same work as men add the same value to their employers but are paid less. It also highlights that female-dominated occupations are lower paid than male-dominated occupations. In short, advancements in gender equity have resulted from sustained changes to policy and legislation – changes that have often been the result of collective action (Parker et al., 2012) and/or the commitment of individuals in positions of influence (Curtin, 2014). Nevertheless, there are two key limitations to focusing solely on macro changes. Firstly, socio-political changes are often subject to the variance of political will and commitment from other groups such as trade unions. Secondly, despite these macro changes, gender inequalities persist within the workplace. Accordingly, the socio-political context sets the scene for gender equity initiatives but cannot provide a full picture for understanding how gender equity may be progressed in the public service.

Factors Contributing to Gender Inequality

Despite women constituting 60.5 percent of all public service employees, they continue to be under-represented in leadership positions, making up 41 percent of leaders at tier 1 and 48 percent at tier 2 and 3 (State Services Commission, 2017). However, the public service has better representation of women in management positions than the private sector, where women make up only 18 percent of senior management (Grant Thornton, 2018).

The gender pay gap continues to be a persistent problem for women. Recent research has established that the current gap for women stands at about 12 percent, virtually unchanged from a decade ago (Pacheco et al., 2017). While the reasons are complex, ‘soft factors’ such as bias, assumptions and negative attitudes about women at work contribute substantially (about 80 percent). The pay gap is worse for Māori and Pacific women, and for migrant women. It is widest for women in senior positions, with smaller gaps for workers in low-paid occupations (Pacheco et al., 2017). Worryingly, it has long-term negative implications for women’s retirement (Groom, 2018), which is of increasing concern because of the ageing population.

Recent research by Sin et al. (2018) into the effect of parenthood on employment and earnings demonstrates that women who become mothers receive a ‘penalty’ on their return to work of lower pay. Further, it can be more difficult for women to return to similar employment after periods of parental leave. In contrast, men experience no significant changes to their employment or pay on becoming a parent. Women continue to take primary responsibility for primary care roles, accounting for the majority of paid parental leave (93 percent) in the public service (State Services Commission, 2017). This uneven distribution of unpaid labour helps

explain why women are reluctant to apply for senior leadership positions in the public service (Jones & Torrie, 2009).

Attitudes towards women in the workplace continue to impede women's career advancement. Evans, Edwards, Burmester, and May (2014) demonstrated that the following factors contributed to gender inequality in the public service: assumptions that women have more family commitments and cannot take on leadership roles; assumptions about women's leadership styles (or lack of leadership capacity for certain positions); a non-inclusive culture for women; and messaging that women are less competent leaders than men, thus undermining their confidence. These negative attitudes also fuel the resulting gendered pay gap (Pacheco et al., 2017).

Implementation of Gender Equity in the Public Service

Foundational work about inequality in organisations has established that gender inequality is perpetuated through 'micro' or social/institutional practices (Acker, 1990, 2006, 2012). These 'micro' practices include a variety of everyday subtle barriers for women such as recruitment and hiring processes, wage setting and supervisory practices, and informal interactions (Acker, 2006; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). While changes may have been made, these are not always sufficient to overcome the many intricate ways that inequalities are perpetuated in everyday organisational practice. Consequently, research has determined that in order to gain a well-rounded understanding of how gender equity can be realised in the workplace, attention must be paid to the everyday practices of employers and employees (e.g., Donnelly, Proctor-Thomson, & Plimmer, 2012; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Jones & Torrie, 2009; Macneil & Liu, 2017; Ravenswood & Harris, 2016).

Flexible work arrangements (FWAs) are an excellent example of the importance of examining the implementation of legislation and other gender equity initiatives. The 'right to request' FWAs in Aotearoa New Zealand was framed as a response to the diverse needs of the workforce (Donnelly et al., 2012; Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2013). In part, the legislation aimed to help develop women's careers by giving them the right to work with employers to find working arrangements that suited their needs (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2013). The implementation of FWA is, however, more complicated in practice (Cooper & Baird, 2015; Donnelly et al., 2012; Kelly & Kalev, 2006). As Cooper and Baird (2015) found in their study of FWAs in Australia, 'While the formal policy context is important to at least establishing a floor of employee rights, that this does not in itself determine the ways in which requests for flexible working are dealt with in practice' (p. 580). Research that pays attention to the actual implementation of FWA policy consistently finds that the promise of these initiatives is often not realised because of other intersecting issues (Choi, 2018; Cooper & Baird, 2015; Donnelly et al., 2012; Gardiner &

Tomlinson, 2009; Kelly & Kalev, 2006). For instance, in the New Zealand public service, high workloads and intense time pressures (both in and out of the workplace) limit women from accessing or capitalising on flexible working arrangements (Donnelly et al., 2012).

The Role of Middle Managers

A singular focus on policy overlooks the systemic and structural impediments and levers which managers grapple with in order to fulfil the promise of policy in daily implementation. To understand how policy is enacted, research must look at the ‘middle’ of organisations to learn how things actually get done. Line managers are internally focused and have a good understanding of the implications of policy on practice and overall strategy (Currie & Procter, 2005). They play a vital role in bringing policy to life as they ‘can decide and propose a decision within the remit of their formal role, they can ask and negotiate an outcome outside of formal policies and procedures, and they can avoid and circumvent policies and procedures’” (López-Cotarelo, 2018, p. 266). Additionally, they also play an important role in influencing the decisions taken by senior management, particularly in the public service (Chen, Berman, & Wang, 2017). Line managers, therefore, are not only responsible for the devolution of policy but also the negotiation and expansion of policy when it falls short of its intended purpose.

In terms of gender equity initiatives specifically, middle managers have long been known to act as a conduit between policy and the realisation of initiatives (Dickens, 1998). They are responsible for the implementation of gender equity initiatives, and their commitment to the policy itself and to its goals is paramount (Cooper & Baird, 2015). (Ravenswood & Harris, 2016). Policy initiatives aimed at gender equity may not create equity in practice (Davies & Thomas, 2000; Dickens, 1998). Structural and systemic barriers affect implementation and realisation of the policy (Cooper & Baird, 2015; Dickens, 1998; Donnelly et al., 2012). These barriers can be subtle and can inadvertently reinforce gender inequality. Middle managers are therefore compelled to negotiate policy limitations to attempt to fulfil gender equity in practice. Paying close attention to how they go about implementing policy is vital as they are faced with an ‘easy to say, difficult to do’ dilemma in their attempts to enact gender equity (Greene, 2010).

There are implications for middle managers in terms of both enacting strategic initiatives and informing tier 1 management of potential future initiatives (Currie & Procter, 2005). Despite the importance of middle managers in realising gender equity, most research continues to focus on the broad social and political factors (Jones & Torrie, 2009). Without an understanding of the everyday implementation of policy and initiatives, however, the realisation of gender equity is difficult to achieve.

2. Methodology

This research forms part of a larger project looking at the role of public service middle managers in progressing gender equity within Australia and New Zealand. The New Zealand project was supported by the Ministry for Women, *Te Minitatanga mō ngā Wāhine*, Victoria University of Wellington, the Gender & Diversity Research Group (AUT) and MPOWER (Massey).

Qualitative data was collected in interviews and focus groups, with staff drawn from across four public service agencies. Managers were invited to participate in the research based on their roles and knowledge of initiatives and challenges related to the progression of gender equity within their workplaces. Participants include those with roles in senior executive teams (tiers 1 and 2), Human Resources (HR) functions and at middle management levels with responsibility for the management of teams or large business units/functions (tiers 3-5). Face-to-face interviews and focus groups were conducted with the use of AV technology as required. On average interviews and focus groups were 60-70 minutes in duration.

The research was advertised and promoted extensively within agencies and through senior management networks. Interviews and focus groups focused on understanding the role of managers in the progression of gender equity in their workplaces. Senior executive interviews focused on understanding the prioritisation and strategic initiatives around gender equity within agencies. HR managers provided further details of the organisational context and gender equity initiatives within agencies, while middle managers provided insights into the degree of gender equity awareness and challenges encountered in the decisions they make around recruitment and selection, career development and flexible work arrangements, and views on how challenges in progressing gender equity might be overcome.

To assess their organisational realities, managers and their executive teams were interviewed about the systems, structures and cultures they operate within, the support they see available to them and the ways in which gender equity operates. The interviews and focus groups concentrated on the general themes of: i) gender equity perceptions and awareness, and factors shaping their development; ii) the role of gender equity in recruitment and selection; iii) the role of gender equity in career development; iv) the operation of flexible working arrangements, including access, enablers and barriers; v) the measurement and evaluation tools; and vi) mechanisms to address gender inequity. The fieldwork was conducted between February and July 2018.

Table 1 outlines the number of research participants by agency who participated in this research. In total, interviews were conducted with 11 senior executives and HR managers. The majority of the senior executives were either tier 1 or 2, with a number of tier 3 executives from HR-related

roles. A total of 58 middle managers (tiers 3-5) participated across nine scheduled focus groups, supplemented by individual interviews.

Table 1 Research Participant Profiles

	Senior Executive Managers	Middle Managers
Government Agency 1 (GA1)	1 senior executive 1 HR director	2 focus groups (10 managers)
Government Agency 2 (GA2)	2 senior executives 1 HR adviser	2 focus groups (13 managers)
Government Agency 3 (GA3)	2 senior executives 1 HR director	3 focus groups (22 managers)
Government Agency 4 (GA4)	2 senior executives 1 HR manager	2 focus groups (13 managers)
TOTAL	11 senior executive & HR managers	58 managers

3. Research Findings

Gender Equity Awareness and Promotion

Senior management play a pivotal role in the promotion of gender equity within their workplaces. Ensuring equitable opportunities and employment outcomes for women requires both considerable commitment from senior management and the development of equitable policies and strategies. Attention to gender equity varies across agencies. While one senior executive noted the early stage of their ‘gender equity journey’, others indicated that their agency has ‘talked about gender equity for quite some time’. No explicit gender equity policy or framework was found to exist across agencies. Indeed, many senior executives noted that a more overt focus on gender had emerged from their wider diversity and inclusion strategies. Not surprisingly, managers’ perceptions of gender equity were frequently framed within wider discussions of diversity and inclusion, as many of the initiatives introduced within agencies were implemented under a diversity and inclusion strategy. Managers noted that the focus within their agencies was more firmly on the creation of ‘diversity of thought’ and the accommodation of ‘people’s diverse styles’ as opposed to addressing gender inequities.

“About six years ago, I noticed quite a difference, in terms of needing a greater diversity of people in the organisation. Gender was mentioned as part of it, but it was about a general concept of diversity. About four years ago we did a cultural audit. We actually took the gender lens, and said, ‘Actually, if we sort out a gender lens, we begin to sort out a whole lot of things about how we include people and how we think about it.’ That was the start of being much more explicit that gender is important.”

Senior executive, GA1

Notwithstanding different agency approaches, gender equity has gained greater priority in recent times. A number of senior executives noted that this is partly driven by a change in government and shift in government attention towards addressing historical and systemic gender inequity. The sector-wide publication of gender pay gaps has further exposed gender inequalities and directed executive attention towards a systematic review of remuneration across gender, occupations, management levels, employment agreements and part-time and full-time workers. Managers felt that the current whole-of-government focus on reducing gender pay gaps has highlighted the need for their organisations to align their gender pay action plans with that of government policy.

“Why is it important to us? It’s important to us just because it’s the right thing to do. No more than that.”

Senior executive, GA2

High levels of senior executive support for gender equity progression are evident across agencies. Having senior leaders who believed that addressing gender inequity is ‘the

right thing to do’ was a further driver for two agencies in particular. For some HR managers and senior executives, examining their gender pay gaps has highlighted a need to address cultural and attitudinal barriers to gender equity and diversity more widely.

While explicit gender equity strategies or policies are not apparent, a broad range of initiatives do operate across agencies, including pay and cultural audits; blind recruitment practices; unconscious bias training; parental leave policies; flexible working policies; gender equity events around international women’s day; speed mentoring events; mixed gender selection panels; and the establishment of diversity and inclusion councils and women support networks as part of wider Government Women’s Network (GWN) initiatives.

Middle managers are broadly aware of gender equity initiatives within their organisations, although some managers indicated low levels of awareness around specific initiatives. Most participants believe there is *‘a considerable way to go’* to achieve positive outcomes. Further, managers perceive gender equity as driven from the *‘top down’*, by senior female leaders (tiers 1-3) who play an active role in championing gender equity issues within their agencies and engaging in role modelling behaviour. Despite this, managers do not believe that senior executives role model gender equity in terms of representation or use of flexible work arrangements.

The appointment of women to senior executive roles can reshape organisational agendas toward gender equity issues. Managers within one agency noted that the appointment of a female CEO signalled for them a new and positive approach to the championing of gender issues within their agency. While gender equity initiatives are widely welcomed by middle managers, in some instances managers do not believe that such initiatives are embedded in a way that ensures inclusivity, nor that initiatives are being monitored or adequately followed up to ensure effective change, and thus require greater attention.

“We have actually done a pretty good job at really persuading a few of our key managers, who have been here for a long time, who do it the old way. Actually, this is the right thing to do. There is a business case. That’s been really powerful, now that we’ve got those people on board. Those people are now champions of our whole new performance management system.”

HR manager, GA1

For example, some managers spoke of their recent unconscious bias training as being *‘rather rushed’*, and some called for closer evaluation of its impact to embed more widespread learning. In contrast, some HR managers with responsibility for the development of gender equity within their agencies noted the importance of promoting the *‘business case’* for gender equity to engage managers’ commitment to implementing initiatives.

Despite the lack of articulation concerning specific gender equity strategies across agencies, there is widespread awareness of the lack of women’s numeric representation, particularly

through higher tiers of management. Managers spoke of women's low representation at senior management levels within their agencies. For example, managers within one agency noted that while over 60 percent of their workforce is female, there remains low female representation rates at tiers 3 and 4. For other participants, there was a perception of both vertical segregation (disproportionate representation of men relative to women in senior roles) and horizontal segregation across business areas, in that women are over-represented in frontline or administration roles, many of which are low paid with older age profiles. Indeed, both senior executives and middle managers regard horizontal segregation as the main contributor to pay inequities in their agencies.

"Even though we have (areas) that might be 40/60 or 45/55, weighted towards men, the big jobs ...men are in them. Whereas women are in some of the smaller jobs."

Manager, GA3

Some managers spoke of clear occupational segregation within their agency, with male dominated occupations attracting higher remuneration. A number of participants believed that within their workplaces men tend to have 'the big jobs' with more complex reporting groups and therefore higher remuneration, whereas women in the same tier are more likely to have 'smaller jobs' with fewer direct reports and less complexity. As a result, there was a view that men transferred and/or were promoted out of frontline

operational work more quickly in comparison to women.

Managers also believed that oversupply in the labour market has traditionally influenced starting salaries, with female applicants in particular seeing the desirability of employment outweighing any desire or expectation to negotiate pay offers. Managers saw this oversupply as contributing to low starting salaries, especially for women.

Drivers of Gender Equity

Reflecting their communities

When asked about the key drivers of gender equity agendas within their organisations, managers noted that a common driver is the need to reflect the communities they serve. This was seen as especially important for front line roles. Ethnicity was perceived to play a significant role in staff appointments, especially where agencies are required or feel a need to reflect the cultural diversity of the communities they serve. For some agencies, that view of 'community' extends to their minister and parliament. The record number of women members of parliament (MPs) (38.4 percent in 2018) is an important contextual impetus for improving gender equity within their agencies (www.parliament.nz).

"The fact that Parliament is changing and becoming reflective of New Zealand, is forcing us to ask that question more about, 'How do we reflect New Zealand?' We've started asking the question, 'How do we?' And obviously, we don't on the most basic level, which is gender."

Senior executive, GA1

Attention to pay inequities

The State Services Commission's whole-of-government plan to make measurable progress in reducing gender pay gaps is also seen as an important but not the only impetus to address gender inequity. Senior management and HR managers regard their gender pay gap agendas as opportunities to examine structural, economic, attitudinal and behavioural barriers to gender equity. For some agencies the progression of gender equity is an integral part of their wider organisational change programmes. For example, in one agency new roles had been created within traditionally male-dominated areas to provide opportunities for women to move into and across the agency. Nevertheless, a focus on the gender pay gap has resulted in closer attention to the collection and dissemination of data, with agencies routinely undertaking gender breakdowns of performance reviews, selection decisions, salary recommendations and pay gaps by geographical regions to understand areas where inequities might unconsciously emerge.

Adverse culture and behaviour

Perceptions of 'alpha-dominant' or 'type A' management approaches and the persistence of a masculine culture, especially within areas of business that men have traditionally occupied, has led to the creation of subtle, silent, unseen and overt barriers experienced by both women and men. One senior executive spoke of the challenge in addressing visible gender inequity at senior echelons of management – that often when she goes to meetings, *'it's a table full of men,*

because that's what we've got'. Some male managers explained that the implications of not adopting 'alpha-dominant' or 'blokey' behaviour meant that they would not 'fit that mould in terms of what is an effective leader' and 'either you participate in that or you are excluded from it'. Interestingly, within two of the agencies, managers believed that having a work colleague undergo a gender change raised consciousness and resulted in more tolerant behaviour in their workplaces.

"I definitely see elements of that behaviour, absolutely, you know, people who clearly have a bias against women. They may not actually know that they're doing it, because that's a part of the generation they've come from, but it's still not acceptable."

Senior Executive, GA2

Some managers felt that regular communication across agencies is needed to embed messages, especially in relation to informing staff of the agencies' pay gap action plan. Others felt better communication processes needed top-down management involvement. Indeed, one senior executive noted the challenge of addressing communication blocks from middle management to the front line and, similarly, from the front line via middle management to senior levels. There was a perceived need by managers that more needed to be done to help initiatives take root, ensure inclusivity, and be properly monitored and followed up.

Recruitment and Selection

Biases inherent in the recruitment and selection of staff contribute to the under-representation of women in workplaces. A number of managers saw that such biases begin when women's starting salaries are set. This leads to the placement of women on lower pay levels to men and ongoing disadvantages for women. Closer monitoring of shortlisting and starting salaries, ensuring mixed gender selection panel membership and unconscious bias training are some of the common approaches adopted by agencies to combat inequity at

"I think the overriding philosophy has been merit-based appointments. I've always been involved in conversations that have talked about balance as well, between candidates, but the overriding philosophy and principle has been merit-based appointments."

Manager, GA2.

recruitment and selection stages. Shortlists need to reflect diverse applications and it is here that HR see an immediate impact from unconscious bias training programmes. In areas where there is a dominance of women or men, one senior manager takes an interventionist strategy in guiding managers through their recruitment approaches to disrupt any unconscious bias. Managers also attributed women's weak representation in leadership, particularly at senior levels, to traditional 'like-with-like' recruitment approaches, where senior male managers, often

with long service records, recruit staff that reflect themselves, thus propagating the ‘old boys network’.

While a balance of gender is seen as important, managers reported that conflicts can exist between merit and gender diversity goals. Most managers reported selecting on the basis of merit rather than gender. However, managers may adopt a ‘*path of least resistance*’ and ‘*quite rational*’ approach when faced with two equally well-qualified candidates, one of whom works part-time with family responsibilities while the other works full-time without such responsibilities. Conversely, HR suggested that it would be encouraging to see managers use diversity (including gender and ethnicity) as a selection criterion.

Career Development

Career development opportunities targeted at gender under-representation within and across jobs are frequently promoted as a means to address vertical segregation in particular. All agencies who participated in this research have formal and informal career development opportunities in place, many of which are targeted at specific employee groups including young professionals’ networks and emerging leaders’ programmes. In addition, talent and career

“We’re not having the conversations with women that we could be. I know, you’re all saying we’re having lovely influence conversations. But, we are not. Because if we were, we would have more women in senior leadership teams.”

HR manager, GA1

development boards operate within agencies to ensure consistent supply within their talent pipelines and to assist employees in their career assessments. Managers noted a conscious shift in the intent of their performance management systems from performance assessment towards identifying growth and development needs.

“We’ve just seen the reshuffle of lots of men into senior roles. They’ve just tied up seven years. Some of the top roles have been tied up for men without even going through a process and the State Service Commission saying, ‘we’ve got these other roles that women can apply for’. Women have to go through all the hurdles and jump, go through a process and it’s not fair from a general equity... it’s a question about what’s the public service that we want.”

Manager, GA4

While there was a clear articulation of support for women to actively engage in leadership programmes, with numerous examples of ‘shoulder tapping’ women to apply for leadership positions and informal mentoring, senior executives noted difficulties with ‘*leaky pipeline*’ in that few women apply for senior positions and often ‘*drop out*’ at senior management levels. Managers noted a range of reasons as to why this might happen, including the potential loss of flexible work

arrangements. Others noted the tendency of senior managers to discount women for senior positions because they *'had a lot going on'* or *'the timing wasn't right'* for them. In addition, some managers noted the recent reshuffle of chief executive roles as inequitable, sending signals that women have to try harder and prove themselves more than their male colleagues. One manager noted that the *'boys club at the top'* acted as a barrier to the progression of women and discouraged them from moving across agencies.

One participant observed that New Zealand women are not very good at putting themselves forward or *'rocking the boat'*, calling for senior managers to actively identify and support candidates in applying for these opportunities. Work life balance concerns were seen to contribute to women's lack of progression into leadership positions, resulting in calls by managers to examine flexible work options as a mechanism for retaining senior talent. Despite opportunities to rotate across business areas and

"This goes to my point around consistency. Having sat on several leadership teams now, it's all done very differently. It would be fair to say that they do have different conversations about women than they will have about men. We've pulled ourselves up on it, but it's different... It's, 'She has a lot going on'."

Senior executive, GA2

roles, some managers felt that women with caring responsibilities are unable to take advantage of these opportunities. The need for role modelling and higher visibility of women who successfully overcome *'motherhood penalties'* in advancing their careers was viewed as one way in which agencies could promote career progression. Examples of successful efforts by and for women that encouraged others were seen to be growing.

Other managers had a different perception of their promotion process. Although they agreed that women were not put forward for promotion, one participant questioned *'whether they've also had managers tell them, "Oh, you're not ready"'*. Others noted that women tend to be placed in the *'strong reliable'* category as opposed to *'ready for next move'* category in talent maps. While some managers called for professional training to help women gain confidence in their career progression, others observed that women are spoken to differently in career progression conversations. They felt that pervasive views of women as *'lacking confidence in their own ability'* reinforces gender biases. A senior executive remarked that, *'I've had an experience where it wasn't subtle at all. It was on a talent board conversation, it was all about, that person's got young children, so they're not going to be able to take a step up. I had challenged that, but I was quite taken aback that that was considered okay to say.'*

The availability of *'acting up'* roles provides opportunities for short-term exposure to senior leadership roles. However, managers noted the importance of ensuring opportunities are contestable, particularly short-term acting up roles, to guide against potential bias. This was

confirmed by some senior leaders who also saw a need for closer examination of the selection of candidates for 'acting up' roles.

"There's always this missing piece about how do we change people to become leaders, we never look at how do we change leadership."

Manager, GA2

Managers noted a further barrier to women's participation and progression was the continuing dominance of a male leadership model. Participants reported that male values and norms of leadership style were still viewed as the 'right' ones. As women and ethnic minorities begin to progress within an agency, they struggle to have their different leadership approach and values seen as valid. In addition, traditional leadership models characterised by long hours and full-time jobs was seen to discourage both men and women. Against a

historically masculinist approach, where inequality in appointments and career progress along gender lines is apparent, interviewees concurred that recent initiatives are starting to help women progress at work, particularly in terms of accessing lower management but that long-term progress required a cultural or mental shift by leadership teams to examine their leadership models.

Managers acknowledged some career progress by women which is largely attributed to gender equity initiatives but noted an overall deterioration in the representation of women at senior management levels in the last decade. Participants recognised this limited progress, that the unanticipated impacts of active measures to address gender equity could take time to change, and that managers needed better training to ensure change.

"Women tended to get things about, 'you need to be a bit more confident'. You wouldn't see that in many men's feedback."

Manager, GA3

Participants believed the under-representation of women in certain occupations results in three particular challenges: a sense of isolation and lack of inclusivity for women in existing jobs; reinforcement of an 'alpha male culture' where it exists; and persistence of unconscious biases.

Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexible work arrangements are pivotal to the career progression of employees, especially those with caring and other responsibilities. Research shows that flexible work arrangements affect the career progression of women and can help prevent women's departure especially as they progress up organisations (Ministry for Women's Affairs, 2013). Managers play an increasingly important role in ensuring access to and management of flexible work arrangements in workplaces.

Support for flexible work arrangements to accommodate men's and women's changing work needs was evident across agencies, with formal, flexible work policy provision in two of the agencies examined. Despite widespread support and, in some cases, formal framing within policy, managers noted that implementation typically occurs on a more informal basis, and is reliant on personal support from managers, many of whom felt they could not access flexible work themselves. While such arrangements are available to all, a disproportionate number of women and, to a lesser extent, older workers nearing the end of their careers take them up. Encouraging men to make use of flexible work policies was a central focus of one agency which noted the recent rise in the number of men taking up part-time work and parental leave.

"As a manager, I'm really supportive of people on my team to do it (work flexibly). But then, you are the manager, so you've got to make it work. That's more difficult."

Manager, GA1

Managing flexible work

Managers pointed to a range of benefits for staff working flexibly, including higher levels of organisational commitment and facilitation of phased retirement. (For some, this meant retaining key skills in the organisation). Demand for flexible work was found to be largely employee driven. However, managers also noted that business continuity concerns in the wake of recent natural disasters, the availability of reliable technology that facilitates remote working, and the introduction of flexible workspaces has driven the promotion of flexible work across agencies.

Despite strong agency support towards flexible work, managers reported significant challenges to implement such arrangements in a manner that balances individual and organisational needs. These challenges include the restrictive nature of certain jobs, operation of shift and roster work systems, traditional male-dominated behaviours and attitudes towards flexible work, intensification of work and the need to meet organisational goals. Many participants noted tensions between allowing staff to work flexibly and having the resources to facilitate such arrangements, in some cases resulting in the refusal of informal flexible work requests. Managers reported that facilitating flexible work is difficult as they are 'trying to get the job done', meet their operational objectives and adhere to policy whilst accommodating a range of diverse requests (not just from women with children but

"Because your FTE is associated with a staff member, and I have got enough people who are working 0.8, which meant that actually, if you totalled it all up, I was 1.4 FTE's short across my group, so that's actually quite considerable."

Manager, GA2

also from people with elderly parents, chronic illnesses, engaged in representing New Zealand in sports, and so on).

Some managers were further constrained by input control rules within agencies. Managers reported that often when staff move to part-time or reduced hours there is no capacity or resources to manage the operational shortfall created by those new work arrangements. One manager explained, *'I'm now in a situation where I've got two women, one who came back from maternity leave, and one coming back in two weeks' time. They are both going to be working 25 hours a week, and I have no way of making up the extra 30 hours' worth of effort under our current input control rules.'* Providing managers with the ability to 'reshape' proportions of full-time equivalent roles into new positions was seen to be crucial in balancing organisational outputs with rising and diverse demands for flexible work.

Persistence of gendered roles

Participants also pointed toward the gendered nature of the discourse on flexibility within their workplaces. These discourses assume flexibility can only be used, by men and women, for 'acceptable' reasons such as looking after children, and that women are usually the primary carers of children. For instance, one male manager indicated that, when he shares childcare with his wife, he is questioned about why his wife is not doing it. While this discourse subtly differed by work area, such assumptions about carer roles played out as a lack of empathy and tolerance at times for those with caring responsibilities and other commitments that impact on their work arrangements (e.g. as full-timers or in jobs with regular travel).

"We talk about child care and child raising as though it's an issue that women need to be responsible for but I think men need to think about themselves as parents....Until men think about themselves as parents in the same way that women do, we're going to continue to have these kinds of conversations."

Manager, GA2

Challenges of flexible work

The nature of work is often cited as a constraint on the availability of flexible work. Managers pointed towards the logistical challenges of managing shift and rostered work, and requirements to 'be present' on sites as impediments. A prevailing view among participants was that front line and customer interfacing roles are more difficult to manage in a flexible work capacity. A further barrier (aside from jobs that require an onsite presence) is the attitude of senior managers to flexible work arrangements. One manager noted their own preference for staff to be in the office so they could see them working. In contrast, some HR managers called for a change of

cultural mind-sets – for managers to move beyond requiring staff to be visible in workplaces, perceptions that ‘one size fits all’ and lack of trust in colleagues. Positive role modelling by senior management teams was something that HR managers viewed as critical to changing cultural mind-sets.

Management’s uncertainty as to what constitutes a ‘reasonable’ workload for staff was also linked in some cases to staff working shorter weeks (i.e. fewer weekly hours) yet undertaking more work (and/or taking it home). Concerns around work intensification led some managers to consciously question staff to ensure they are not ‘*overdoing it*’. However, the strong public service ethos of ‘doing good’ is seen by many to encourage a personal, if not gendered, tendency to feel obliged to do all the work tasks received in order to prove one’s role worthiness. Further, employment contracts reportedly state that the standard hours are 40 hours a week but managers reported working in excess of those hours in order to ‘*deliver on expectations*’, reinforcing the vocational or care orientation towards their work. Finally, responding to ministerial requests requires a high degree of flexibility in managers’ own work schedules (i.e. often working late into the night to respond to requests), which ironically was reported to be preventing managers from availing themselves of formal flexible work arrangements. While measures were suggested to help improve the operation of flexible work in the organisation (including greater use of technology, and ability to manage labour capacity), managers reported scaffolding formal FWAs with more informal approaches.

Improving the Progression of Gender Equity

When asked what gender equity might look like within their organisations, managers’ views centred on changes to cultures and behaviours. More specifically, managers recommended the identification and removal of conscious and unconscious biases around selection, performance review and promotion practices. Mixing the messaging around gender equity and promoting men’s voices were also seen to be important in reducing resistance to gender equity initiatives within agencies. For one manager, the challenge was in changing traditional made mindsets. As she explained, ‘*I just don't think they understand what it is to be a woman experiencing work in the early part of the 21st century... I just don't think they understand the subtle and silent and unseen barriers that exist and they certainly feel quite defensive about any suggestion that they are part of that. Sometimes they see it as a zero sum game: if women win, men will lose.*’ Another manager believed that part of that change to mind-sets and resistance to gender equity was less likely if men spoke about gender equity more broadly within their workplaces.

“I think there needs to be support for managers, because sometimes you're trying to overcome structural things, and unless you're actively training and you have an organisation working together to an end, you're not going to get there.”

Manager, GA3

Aside from more open discussion around gender equity within workplaces, managers recommended the measurement and evaluation of gender equity initiatives, the development of plans to ensure implementation, and greater support to ballast managers' roles in the implementation of gender equity initiatives. Some managers believed the best course of action was to embed gender equity initiatives into performance systems, while others believed a developmental approach to supporting managers would be more effective. A number of participants, including senior executives, recommended greater examination of the inter-relationship between flexible work, gender pay and women's representation at senior levels. Calls to '*normalise part-time work*' and for greater pay transparency, especially in the advertising of pay bands within jobs, were made by a number of managers. Finally, greater flexibility in staffing levels, specifically with respect to the resourcing of gaps created by staff movement to flexible positions, was seen to be critical to the achievement of an '*all roles flex*' policy.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this study are based on the comments and perceptions of 69 participants from across four state agencies who took part in individual or focus group interviews in Wellington and Auckland in 2018. In large part, they fit with and confirm earlier findings that women continue to lag behind men in terms of their ongoing over-representation in lower-paying, traditionally female-oriented jobs (e.g. Ministry for Women, 2016). Change has been slow and patchy, partly due to organisational and environmental imperatives.

Across all four agencies, general commitment to improving gender equity emerged among senior executives, many managers and staff. At the same time, a considerable range in the scope, level and character of gender equity initiatives was found to exist within agencies. It was notable that gender equity policies and initiatives were often fledgling in nature, and many managers had limited knowledge of their scope, character and application.

Furthermore, managers varied in terms of their ability to facilitate gender equity initiatives across their agencies. In part, this reflects the barriers they themselves face in terms of implementing initiatives, some due to tensions with the nature and logistics of the work they manage; attitudes and approaches adopted by senior managers and the scope of HR policy; and perceived blockages in vertical communications in their organisations. Of note, the recent reshuffle of senior males across chief executive roles signals the persistence of a system that differentiates on the basis of gender whereby males were 'shoulder tapped' while women were 'open to apply' for senior roles. Nonetheless, participants identified various contextual aspects that help to shape some women's reluctance to apply for more senior positions. They also came up with a number of recommendations and future research areas, some of which are outlined below.

The four agencies were perceived to be actively working to promote gender equity through training, particularly on unconscious bias, though this is at different stages of implementation. Unconscious bias training was perceived to have had some influence on recruitment and career development processes. Indeed, participants spoke of their own enhanced awareness of gender bias and how they were changing their own practices as a result. It also emerged that 'gender' is often subsumed under a 'diversity and inclusion' approach – sometimes as a deliberate move in order to avoid resistance to change. This, and the perception that if men championed gender equity it would be received more positively, suggests the persistence of gender stereotypes and unconscious biases throughout the agencies.

However, in line with Parker et al's (2017) study of women workers in New Zealand's public and private sectors, in relation to communication issues, participants widely believed there was a dearth of comprehensive monitoring and reporting on gender equity initiatives and their (inter-

related) impacts across the public service. This has implications for the take-up of gender equity initiatives and ‘momentum building’ on equity. Furthermore, unintended consequences of initiatives within agencies were detected (e.g. new, lower-level flexible work roles that have mostly been assumed by women in one agency have inadvertently exacerbated its overall gender pay gap).

Overall, the study identified recognition that gender inequities exist in the public service, along with a general willingness and motivation to improve equity. However, entrenched masculine cultures around performance, ‘ideal’ employees and leaders, care and flexible work mean that significant change requires cultural and structural change. As noted earlier, middle managers have had, and potentially have, a significant part to play in progressing gender equity in their agencies. We look forward to the day when women have leadership parity, all public servants are able to work flexibly, and bias and discrimination in recruitment and pay systems have been eliminated.

Recommendations

Based on key findings from this research, our recommendations to help develop and further embed gender equality in the agencies are:

- The need for a gender equity strategy that includes both interim and long(er)-term goals and benchmarks. Because the current career status of women in the public service, as elsewhere, reflects institutional, systems-related, behavioural and attitudinal influences, it is unrealistic to anticipate seismic shifts in workplace culture and structures in the short term. Longer-term initiatives need to be girded by features such as a clear vision, measurable goals, top-down commitment and alignment with other organisational and diversity priorities. As noted by the Ministry for Women’s Affairs (2013), gender balance or equity needs to be regarded as ‘a business imperative on the strategic agenda and given the focus and attention required’ (AHRC, 2011). However, focus must be given not only to the business case, but to legitimising equity as a desirable outcome in itself. This will support the long-term cultural change that is necessary.
- Regular assessment of, and tailored responses to, where and how communication and bureaucracy ‘blockages’ occur and impede the implementation and progress of gender equity initiatives in the agencies, with a view to their removal.
- Measures aimed at reducing the dissonance for some women between their career experiences and ambitions so as to minimise disengagement and disillusionment about their potential and available career options. ‘Reality check’ research and commentaries on career aspirations have largely focused on young people (e.g. Mann, Massey, Glover et al., 2013). Related to this, activities that support women (and men) outside work (e.g.

with their carer roles) need to be much more extensive and integrated into workplace gender equity initiatives.

- Extension of opportunities for managers to hear women's voices. Many participants held clear views about the (multiple) measures that could be initiated by their agency to ameliorate gender equity. Equally, future research might seek managers' and leaders' views as to the perceived viability of such measures, given resources (including middle management training on such).
- Continuation, if not expansion, of resources for existing support activities, including unconscious bias training initiatives in agencies, and encouragement of an organisational culture in which women feel confident about seeking to develop their careers.
- Greater awareness-raising of existing and forthcoming initiatives by (middle) managers. For instance, participants made no reference to the flexible work arrangement options enshrined in the Employment Relations Act 2000.
- Examination of resources at middle managers' disposal (e.g. time, budget, competing priorities) in developing their role as facilitators of gender equity (initiatives).
- More regular and comprehensive monitoring of gender equity initiatives, with particular regard to their unintended impacts and interactive effects. There is a need for pre-emptive and responsive measures to mitigate against unintended impacts, including a consideration of how women might engage somewhat differently than men with their work and workplace (e.g. Robertson-Smith and Marwick, 2009; cf. KPMG LLP, YSC, 30percentClub, 2014). Such information can be fed into subsequent strategy and initiative iterations.
- Specific consideration of women's *starting* salaries in public service agencies, and analysis of why they differ from men's. This should include analysis of appointment panel composition, job requirements and expectations of how pay scales are to be applied within job bands.
- Research into, and greater middle management engagement in, external support mechanisms for gender equity in agencies (e.g. via the Government Women's Network).
- A follow-up study of gender equity initiatives in public service agencies in several years' time to assess areas of progress or otherwise. Other parties (e.g. State Services Commission) might also be involved.
- Subsequent research to examine women's diverse characteristics and circumstances in the public service, including non-binary and intersectional considerations (e.g. around ethnicity and gender, mental health and gender, disability and gender, age and gender, sexual orientation and gender) which have a bearing on a person's workplace location and experience.

**Table 1: The Role of Middle Managers in Progressing Gender Equity in the Public Service:
Interview Themes**

Gender Equity	<p>To understand how managers perceive gender equity in their organisation, and degree of engagement with gender equity issues.</p> <p>Key themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of organisation’s approach to gender equity • Perceptions of gender equity • What would gender equity ‘success’ look like in your agency? • Key blockages/inhibitors to gender equity • Key enablers
Implementation	<p>To understand how managers engage with and implement the organisation’s gender equity agenda/strategy.</p> <p>Key themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation • Challenges in implementation • Sources of support • Sources of resistance
Career Advancement	<p>To understand manager’s perspectives on the mechanisms/blockages in the organisation for developing/promoting women’s careers.</p> <p>Key themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unconscious bias • Recruitment and Selection / Labour Market Pool • Performance Management • Career development (training, mentorship, sponsorship) • Targets / Affirmative Action
Flexibility	<p>To understand managers’ perspectives on access to flexibility in the organisation.</p> <p>Key themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences/challenges managing requests for flexibility • Workforce/operational impediments to flexibility • Cultural impediments to flexibility • Experiences role modelling flexibility • Views on the implications for career progression of accessing flexible work arrangements (for men and women) • Accessibility (by role, job characteristics, seniority, etc.)

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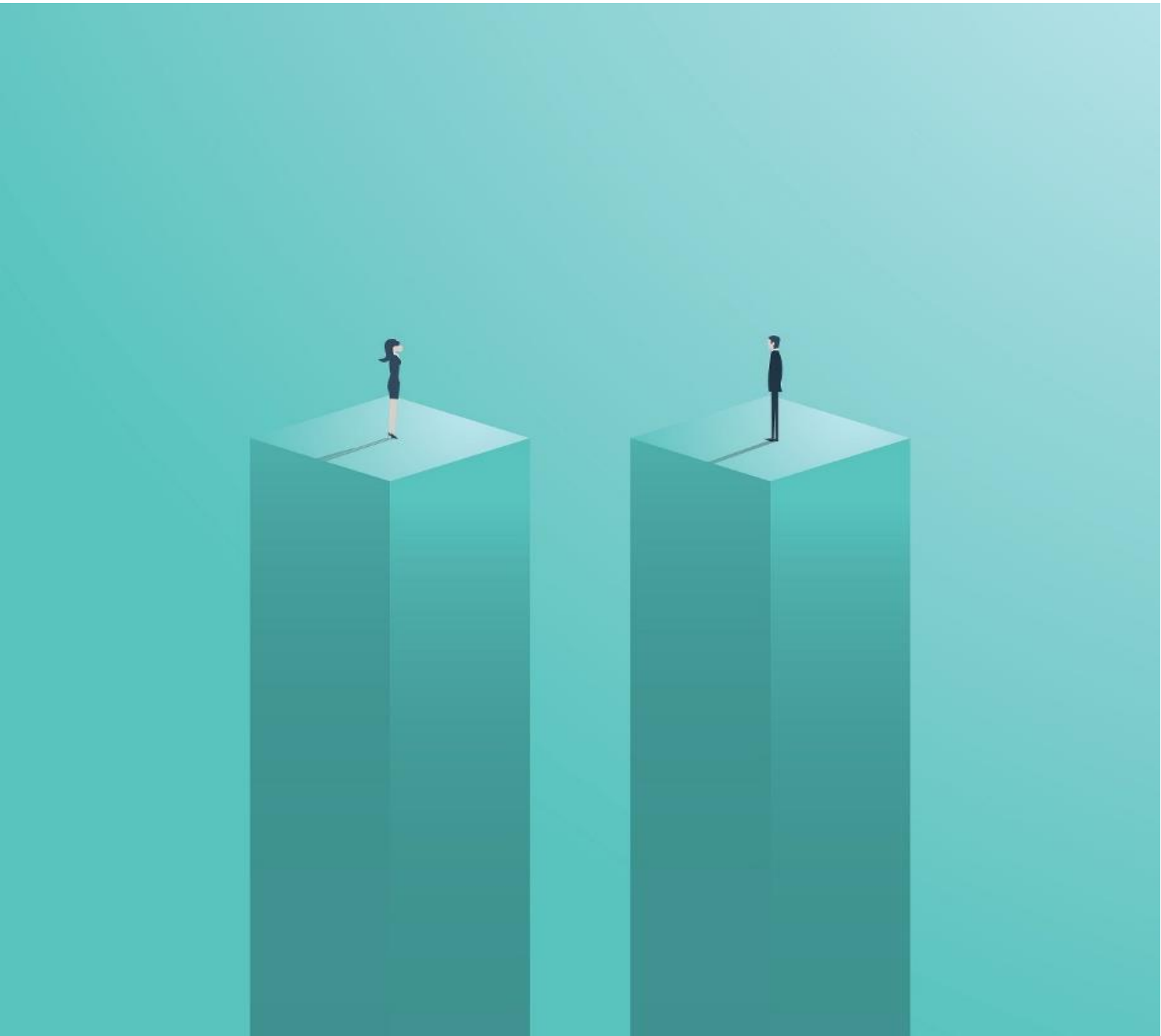
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Ruth Weatherall is a Lecturer at University of Technology Sydney and a PhD candidate at Victoria University of Wellington. Her research looks at how people in organisations can create social change, particularly in relation to social issues such as domestic violence and gender inequality.



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