



Balancing the Future: Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy¹

As at 31 December 2015, women made up 58.7% of the Australian Public Service's² (APS) 155,771 employees, but only 41.8% of the Senior Executive Service³ (SES).⁴ A January 2016 report by Ernst & Young found that women accounted for a relatively high percentage of APS employees when compared with figures in other G20 countries.⁵ Although female representation in public office has improved markedly in recent years, the Australian government has published an ambitious gender equality strategy in an effort to do more on this front.

Plenty of women in public service but the glass ceiling remains

The 1970s and 1980s were a golden age for Australia's working women. The government introduced paid maternity leave in 1973 but progress ground to a halt as New Public Management gained currency. Today, the public sector is a long way behind other organisations when it comes to work-life balance.⁶

Men and women are equally represented across the APS, and some departments even employ more female than male staff. Since 1996, more women have secured senior civil service jobs. There are now twice as many women in Executive Level 2 and SES Band 1 roles, three times as many in SES Band 2 posts, and five times as many in SES Band 3 positions.⁷ Twenty years ago, women accounted for just 19% of senior civil servants. Today, that figure stands at 43%.⁸ Yet at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, female staff make up 57% of the workforce but only 27% of heads of mission.⁹ These figures show that the glass ceiling has yet to be broken, as women still find it hard to reach top public sector jobs.

¹ https://www.apsc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/80117/FINAL-Balancing-the-future-the-Australian-Public-Service-gender-equality-strategy-2016-19.pdf

² The APS is governed by the Public Service Act 1999. As at 1 June 2016, there were 1,924,800 public sector employees (covering Commonwealth and state/territory government organisations, local government authorities, public corporations, universities, non-profit institutions controlled by the government, government marketing boards, legislative courts, municipal authorities and other statutory authorities).

³ <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/389EBF5407C7D5AACA25755A000D09CC?Opendocument>

⁴ <http://www.apsc.gov.au/managing-in-the-aps/ses>

⁵ http://www.apsc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/80117/FINAL-Balancing-the-future-the-Australian-Public-Service-gender-equality-strategy-2016-19.pdf

⁶ [http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-senior-civil-service-womens-leaders-index-UK/\\$FILE/EY-senior-civil-service-womens-leaders-index-UK.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-senior-civil-service-womens-leaders-index-UK/$FILE/EY-senior-civil-service-womens-leaders-index-UK.pdf)

⁷ <http://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/business-law/public-service-begins-long-journey-back-leading-gender-equality>

⁸ <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications-and-media/current-publications/worklevel-standards;http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications-and-media/current-publications/work-level-standards-ses>.

⁹ Australian civil service posts are divided into three categories: Senior Executive Service (senior leadership roles, with band 3 being the highest grade), Executive Level (senior managerial positions, with band 2 being the highest grade), and APS Level (all other staff, on a scale of 1 to 6).

⁸ http://www.apsc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/89225/SoSR-2015-16.pdf

⁹ <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/public-service/government-takes-aim-at-gender-bias-and-inequality-in-the-public-service-20160428-gogx1z.html>

An ambitious, detailed gender equality strategy backed by the government

In an April 2016 address to Australian civil servants, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said he wanted to get more women in top public service roles, setting a goal of 50-50 gender balance in senior jobs.¹⁰ Later the same month, employment minister Michaelia Cash outlined a four-year, five-point strategy to overhaul Australia's "sexist" culture:¹¹

- Government agencies will be told to drive an enabling workplace culture to get more women on board.
- Departments and ministries will be required to report on gender equality in APS leadership roles.
- Recruitment, retention and performance management processes will be overhauled to promote gender equality through innovation.
- Flexible work arrangements will be extended to all men and women, not just mothers with young children. The government will publish guidance and deliver training, men will be encouraged to take paternity leave, and the 1973 maternity leave agreement will be reviewed.
- Action taken under the new programme will be measured and evaluated.

The aim of the strategy is to build on practical initiatives, evaluation and best practice to drive culture change across the public service. The strategy encompasses a series of measures, such as setting up "panel pledges", working with other public sector organisations, delivering training to counter unconscious gender bias, and requiring agencies to report on progress to the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC).¹² The initiative marks the first whole-of-government gender equality strategy.¹³

A more diverse, flexible and efficient civil service

The strategy aims to develop a culture of meritocracy in the APS by harnessing leadership, flexibility and innovation. But bedding in the reforms will require a rethink of management practices. The APSC has therefore developed a practical implementation guide for managers and staff, comprising nine interactive modules.¹⁴

Because women tend to be constrained by family duties, they find it harder than men to build up a professional network. This, in turn, weighs on their career prospects. Figures show that while 20.1% of the APS works part-time, only 3.8% of SES-grade staff do so.¹⁵ The government, mindful of its duty to lead by example, plans to embrace flexible working arrangements – such as teleworking and part-time hours – to give civil servants more time with their families.¹⁶

The government also recognises that work-life balance is an important driver of welfare in the workplace, and that happy, healthy employees are more productive and efficient at work.¹⁷ The APS is therefore determined to harness diversity and unlock the potential of all civil servants. The report notes that organisations that employ large numbers of women and are open to diversity tend to be the best performers.¹⁸

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¹⁰ <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/public-service/turnbull-wants-more-women-in-top-public-service-roles-and-more-techsavystaff-20160419-goagnd.html>

¹¹ <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/public-service/government-takes-aim-at-gender-bias-and-inequality-in-the-public-service20160428-gogx1z.html>

¹² <http://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/business-law/public-service-begins-long-journey-back-leading-gender-equality>

¹³ Individual agencies have introduced "family-friendly" initiatives.

¹⁴ <http://www.apsc.gov.au/gender-equality>

¹⁵ <https://www.dpmc.gov.au/news-centre/office-women/australian-public-service-commission%E2%80%99s-launch-unlocking-potential-and-aps-gender-equality-strategy>

¹⁶ <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/public-service/turnbull-wants-more-women-in-top-public-service-roles-and-more-techsavystaff-20160419-goagnd.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/2016-04-20/address-australian-public-service-canberra>

¹⁸ http://www.apsc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/80117/FINAL-Balancing-the-future-the-Australian-Public-Service-gender-equality-strategy-2016-19.pdf