

Middle managers lack resources to achieve gender equity, new study shows

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Credit: University of New South Wales

The managers who make the most decisions about hiring staff need more support to achieve greater gender equity in the workplace, a new study including UNSW Canberra researchers shows.

Middle managers hold the key to helping organisations achieve gender equality, but often lack the time and resources needed to implement best practice procedures, a new UNSW Canberra study has found.

UNSW Canberra researchers teamed up with the University of Sydney, CQUniversity, the Australian and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) and the UNSW, Queensland, South Australian and Tasmanian state governments to examine how middle managers can achieve greater [gender equity](#) at work.

They found that many middle managers are supportive of their organisations' efforts to tackle unconscious biases and improve access to flexible working arrangements, but needed more support from upper management.

The project encompassed conversations with 300 middle managers, senior [public sector](#) leaders and human resource professionals in the four jurisdictions.

UNSW Canberra Senior Lecturer Dr Sue Williamson says middle managers play a key role in ensuring organisations have inclusive cultures.

"Middle managers are the lynchpin between employees and senior managers, being responsible for the daily implementation of gender equity and diversity initiatives, as well as for higher level strategy," Dr Williamson says.

"The overwhelming majority of managers we spoke with are committed to increasing and embedding gender equity in their teams and their agencies.

"The main challenges arise from a lack of time and resources to improve

gender equity on the ground, as well as at the strategic level. For example, managers regularly recruit staff, yet often lack the time and resources to conduct an analysis of the materials and processes to make sure that the most equitable outcomes are achieved."

ANZSOG Dean and CEO Professor Ken Smith says Australia needs a public sector that reflects the community, and that means ensuring that women are represented at all levels.

"This report demonstrates that gender equity will only be achieved if it is something that is embraced right through public sector organisations and that importantly middle managers, who incidentally make the bulk of hiring decisions, need to be part of efforts to increase the representation of women as well as other poorly represented groups," Professor Smith says.

"There are still a lot of barriers preventing us from making the most of the potential of women in the public sector.

"Part of the solution needs to be cultural change and recognition of hidden biases against women, and part needs to be greater provision of flexible working arrangements for both men and women."

Queensland Public Service Commission Deputy Commissioner Sonia Cooper welcomed the report on the study and the recommendations made.

"The report findings align with work undertaken in the Queensland public sector in recent years to implement a gender equity strategy and to examine gender pay inequity," Ms Cooper says.

"As the research shows, addressing the cultural barriers to gender equity is vital. Making flexible work practices an option for all employees is a

key part of the strategy, along with encouraging male and female senior leaders to role model a flexible approach to balancing their work and life."

South Australian Commissioner for Public Sector Employment Erma Ranieri says the South Australian Public Sector must set an example for businesses by showing that diversity in leadership makes a positive difference to productivity, effectiveness and innovation.

"We must continually work to ensure we are an Employer of Choice, offering excellent career paths and embracing innovation, diversity and flexibility," Ms Ranieri says.

"Our intention is to ensure women are equally represented, valued and rewarded."

Head of the State Service in Tasmania Jenny Gale says considerable progress has been made in advancing women over the past two years in the State Service.

"It is through participating in research studies like this that we are able to get a better understanding of the issues and the further work we need to do," Ms Gale says.

"The opportunity to work with the researchers to develop an action plan and supporting tools will significantly advance that work. Removing barriers to gender equity in the workplace is really important, and this work will also assist other under-represented cohorts who face barriers to employment."

The project found that many middle managers were already employing best practice, which has informed a guide on how others can progress gender equity.

It outlines how managers can create a culture of awareness, adapt human resource processes to progress [gender equity](#) and enable flexible working arrangements.

Provided by University of New South Wales

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