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Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Gender Equality at the Executive Level of the Northern Ireland Public Sector

Professor Joan Ballantine, Ulster University; Dr Graeme Banks, Ulster University; Mr Tony Wall, Ulster University; Prof Kathryn Haynes, Newcastle University; Dr Melina Manochin, Aston University

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Abstract:

The issue of gender equality at senior levels in the private and public sectors is receiving ever increasing worldwide attention. Reflecting this, a body of research exists for the private sector which indicates that progress towards achieving gender equality at senior levels is slow. However, limited research has considered this issue in the context of the public sector. Where statistics exist, they indicate that males continue to dominate senior positions and public appointments in both the Northern Ireland and Home Civil Service. Whilst some limited data is available for specific segments of the Northern Ireland public sector, to date no study has investigated this issue across the entire sector. In this briefing, we report the broad findings of an OFMDFM funded research project which aimed to investigate and address this gap. Stage one of the project provides a baseline for gender equality across the Northern Ireland public sector, with findings indicating that females account for just 29% of senior positions. Stage two reports on a survey of some three thousand current and aspiring male and female executives' attitudes to gender equality issues including enablers and barriers to achieving gender equality at senior levels in the Northern Ireland public sector. The findings are of particular relevance given OFMDFM's commitment to gender equality in terms of increasing women's representation in decision making and the current revision of the gender equality strategy.

Context of Research:

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a statutory requirement on public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to promote equality of opportunity across a number of groups, including gender. Since its implementation, a number of studies have investigated aspects related to the effectiveness of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. However, whilst an extensive literature exists in relation to Section 75, no specific study to date has focused on investigating the effectiveness of Section 75 in the context of gender equality at the executive (or senior) level¹ of the Northern Ireland Public Sector². Additionally, whilst some recent statistics are available regarding gender balance at senior levels for specific segments of the Northern Ireland public sector³, there still remains a significant gap in data regarding gender equality at executive level right across the Northern Ireland public sector. The research discussed in this report addresses this important gap and in doing so aims to advance our understanding of the effectiveness of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1988 in the following ways: providing baseline data on various aspects of gender equality at executive level across the Northern Ireland public sector; identifying enablers or facilitators, barriers, and best practices towards achieving gender equality within the public sector; and engaging in meaningful consultation with key stakeholders.

The Research Project:

The research project consists of three stages: a content analysis of publicly available data for the year ended 31st March 2012; a survey of the attitudes of current and aspiring executives/senior managers with respect to a number of gender equality issues in the Northern Ireland public sector (including enablers or facilitators and barriers to gender equality); and a series of in-depth interviews with current and aspiring executives/senior managers in the Northern Ireland public sector to investigate in more detail a number of gender equality issues at the executive level. This briefing document discusses the findings of stages one and two of the research.

Stage One: Findings

The findings from stage one have identified a significant degree of inequality in the gender composition at executive level of the Northern Ireland public sector: males and females holding 70.8% and 29.2% of all positions respectively. Additional findings from stage one are as follows:

- Variation exists in the overall gender composition of all executives⁴ in the five organisational types⁵ of the Northern Ireland public sector which comprise our sample.

¹ The term 'Executive level' is used to refer to the membership of an organisation's most senior management board. This membership comprises both 'executive directors' (more commonly referred to as board members in the private sector) and 'non-executives' (more commonly referred to as non-executive directors in the private sector).

² The 'Northern Ireland Public Sector' is defined as comprising organisations designated for the purposes of Section 75 with some notable exceptions.

³ See for example, The Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland, 2014; Department of Finance and Personnel, 2012; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2013; Potter, 2014.

⁴ The term 'all executives' comprise both 'executive director positions' and 'non-executive positions'.

⁵ The five organisational types included in our sample are the Northern Ireland Civil Service including Executive Agencies; Local Government organisations (twenty-six local councils); Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs); Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland (HSCNI) organisations; and Further and Higher Education organisations.

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- The gender composition of both executive director and non-executive positions is most equitable within the Health and Social Care (HSCNI) sector which contrasts with the remaining four public sector types.
- Notable differences exist in the gender composition of all executives when organisations are analysed by sponsoring government department:
 - DHSSPS, OFMDFM and DSD have gender compositions which comprise between 50% and <60% males;
 - DE, DEL, NIO, DCAL, DETI, DOE and DOJ have gender compositions which comprise between 60% and <80% males; and
 - DARD, DRD and DFP have gender compositions which comprise in excess of 80% males;
- Occupational segregation (both vertical and horizontal) exists within the Northern Ireland public sector:
 - Males hold the majority (79%) of Chief Executive roles within the Northern Ireland public sector, indicating the existence of vertical segregation⁶;
 - Horizontal segregation⁷ is particularly evident in the following roles: operations (70.4% male); corporate services (65.5% male); strategy, policy and development (64% male); and finance (63.9% males).
- Organisations with a female Chief Executive are more likely to employ greater numbers of female executives at board level;
- Organisations with a female Chair are more likely to have a greater number of female non-executives.

Stage Two: Findings

Stage two reports on a survey⁸ of attitudes of current and aspiring executives/senior managers with respect to a number of gender equality issues in the Northern Ireland public sector (including enablers or facilitators and barriers to gender equality). A total of 3,186 responses were received. Figure 1 provides some demographic data for the respondents.

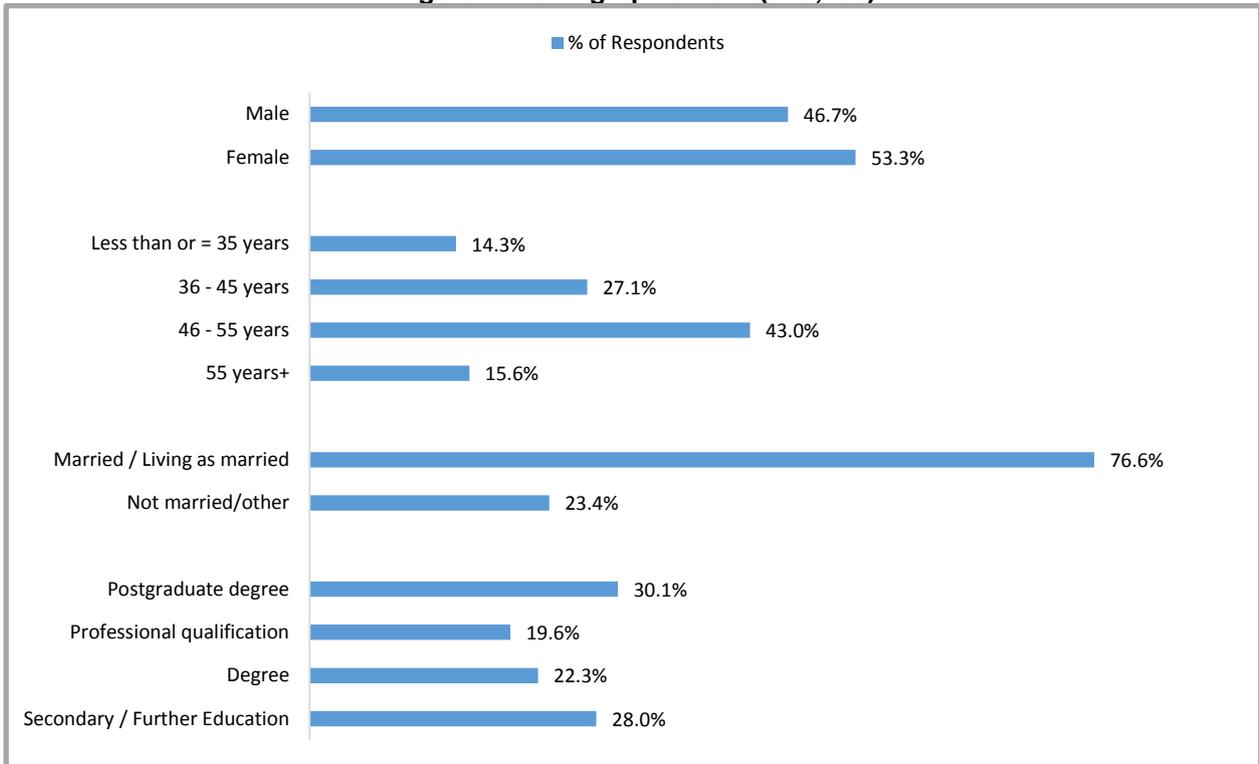
⁶ Vertical segregation refers to the tendency for men and women to be employed in different positions within the same occupations or occupational groupings. The existence of vertical segregation in the Northern Ireland context has also been reported by Potter (2014) who reports that women comprise 37% of managers, directors and senior officials.

⁷ Horizontal segregation refers to the tendency for men and women to be employed in different roles or occupations.

⁸ Perceptions were ascertained by distributing an electronic survey via Survey Monkey across the five organisational types of the Northern Ireland public sector between May and July 2013.

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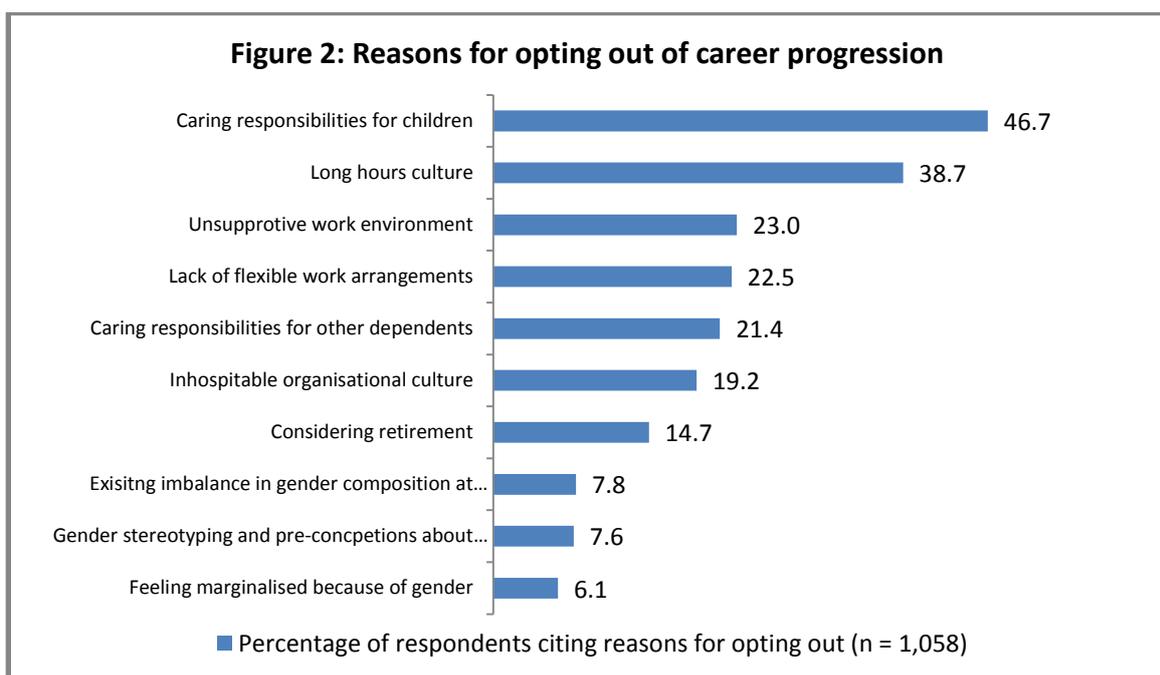
Figure 1: Demographic Data (n=3,186)



The key findings of the stage two survey were as follows.

- A large number of respondents (n=1,058) have opted out of career progression, either temporarily or permanently, for various reasons shown in Figure 2. Respondents opting out are more likely to be female, older, have greater caring responsibilities, work in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Local Government or Further and Higher Education organisations, are employed at lower seniority levels and work in smaller organisations.

Figure 2: Reasons for opting out of career progression



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- Just over half of the respondents avail of 'flexi-working' and there is a low take up of other flexible working patterns (e.g. compressed work week) which might facilitate improved work life balance within the Northern Ireland public sector.
- Respondents who hold a non-executive position believe it is beneficial to their career prospects in terms of developing their management/leadership skills and experience and enabling them to obtain opportunities to work on challenging assignments, which would not be available in their main employment.
- There is variation across the Northern Ireland public sector in terms of the provision and awareness of career development policies and practices for aspiring executives.
- A number of enablers (or facilitators) of career progression at the individual and organisational level were identified by all respondents:
 - The top five individual enablers are a supportive spouse/partner; consistently exceeding performance expectations; access to affordable childcare; demonstrating loyalty/commitment to my organisation; and seeking out difficult or highly visibly job assignments.
 - The top five organisational enablers are access to acting up opportunities; access to external leadership training and development programmes; in-house leadership training and development programmes; flexible work arrangements and formal mentoring.
 - Females indicated that all enablers were more important than male respondents; females also indicated that gender impact assessments were an enabler of career progression whilst males did not.
- A number of barriers to career progression, at the individual and organisational level, were also identified:
 - When male and females views are combined, respondents did not view factors related to them as individuals as barriers to career progression with the exception of a lack of management or leadership experience;
 - Respondents were more likely to view organisational factors as barriers to career progression. The top five organisational barriers identified were: limited advancement opportunities; limited acting up opportunities; lack of mentoring; lack of recognition for work life balance; and lack of opportunities to gain visibility.
 - Females perceived the following factors related to them as individuals as barriers whilst males did not: caring responsibilities for dependent children; lack of awareness of organisational politics.
 - Females viewed the following organisational factors as barriers whilst males did not: colleagues negative reactions to the use of flexible work arrangements; lack of recognition for work life balance; exclusion from informal networks of communication; a lack of opportunities to work on challenging assignments; and long hours culture.
- A number of policies and practices were identified as ways to improve gender equality at executive level in the Northern Ireland public sector.
 - The top five policies and practices identified were: providing unsuccessful candidates with constructive feedback; targeted in-house leadership training and development programmes; inclusive organisational culture at executive/senior managerial levels; interview panel training to avoid gender bias; regular monitoring of executive/senior management level applicant data and;

- Female respondents indicated that all policies and practices identified were more important than males.
- Female respondents support the use of 'quotas for gender balance at executive/senior managerial levels' whilst males do not.
- Female respondents were more likely to agree that female stereotyping exists in the Northern Ireland public sector when compared to males.
- Females are less positive about their organisation's gender culture than males with respect to the existence of cronyism, the existence of a balanced management board, and the allocation of sufficient time and financial resources to promote gender equality at executive level.

Conclusions

The findings from stage one of the research project indicate that a gender imbalance exists in the Northern Ireland public sector with only 29.2% of all executive positions held by females. This finding confirms other work which has explored gender equality in public life in the Northern Ireland context. For example, Potter (2014) has recently noted that women are significantly under-represented in elected office in the Northern Ireland Assembly and on public bodies with only 23.4% of Members of the Legislative Assembly, 23.5% of local councillors and 22.2% of Members of Parliament being female. The finding of the current research also mirrors that recently reported by the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Northern Ireland (The Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland, 2014), who has stated that whilst 35% of all public appointments were held by females in the late 1990s, this figure had dropped to 33% by 2011-2012. Whilst the data collected during stage one of the current research project did not permit the researchers to observe progress over time, the results would suggest that public sector organisations still some way to go in terms of their statutory duty under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between males and females at the executive level. The results of the second stage of the research project also identified that females are more likely to opt out of career progression for a number of reasons. In addition, a number of barriers still exist for females seeking to progress within the public sector including, for example, those related to caring responsibilities, a lack of recognition of work life balance, long hours' culture and exclusion from informal networks of communication. Taken together, these results suggest that there is room for improvement within the Northern Ireland public sector in terms of improving gender equality at the executive level. During the final stage of the research project, a series of in-depth interviews with male and female, current and aspiring executives across the Northern Ireland public sector will be carried out to further explore some of the issues discussed in this briefing document, the results of which will be published in early 2015.

References

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