Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Gender Equality in the Northern Ireland Public Sector - a View from the Top

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Executive Summary

The highly contentious issue of gender equality in the workplace within executive and non-executive director positions has received considerable attention in the context of the private sector. However, substantially less is known about gender equality issues at the senior levels of the public sector, including that of NI. While the limited statistics available for NI indicate that males dominate senior positions, there is a lack of data which enable an understanding of why this is the case. In this briefing, we report on the final stage of an OFMDFM funded research project which involved 107 in-depth interviews with male and female current and aspiring executives, employed across the NI public sector. Drawing on interview data, we report on the findings with respect to a number of themes including, gender culture, work life balance and promoting gender equality at senior levels. The briefing will conclude with recommendations to improve gender equality within the NI public sector. The research is timely given the recently published draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-21, which was surprisingly silent on the issue of gender equality in the workplace

Introduction

The research project consisted of three stages: a content analysis of publicly available data for 143 public sector organisations; a survey of the attitudes of current and aspiring executives/senior managers (3,186 respondents)with respect to a number of gender equality issues in the NI public sector (including enablers or facilitators and barriers to gender equality); and a series of in-depth interviews (107) with current and aspiring executives/senior managers in the NI public sector to investigate in more detail a number of gender equality issues. This briefing document focuses primarily on the findings of stage three of the research. In order to set the findings of stage three in context, the summary findings of stages one and two are briefly outlined below.

Stage One Findings

- A significant degree of inequality in the gender composition at executive level of the NI public sector exists: males and females hold 70.8% and 29.2% of all executive positions respectively.

- Variation exists in the overall gender composition of executive positions in the five organisational types investigated: NI Civil Service including executive agencies; Local Government; Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs); Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland (Health); and Further and Higher Education (Education).

- The gender composition of both executive director and non-executive positions is most equitable within the HSCNI sector, which contrasts sharply with the remaining four organisational types.

- Occupational segregation exists within the NI public sector: males hold the majority (79.0%) of Chief Executive roles (vertical segregation); males dominate the following roles: operations (70.4%); corporate services (65.5%); strategy, policy and development (64.0%); and finance (63.9%) (horizontal segregation).

- Organisations with a female Chief Executive are more likely to employ greater numbers of female executives;

- Organisations with a female Chair are more likely to have a greater number of female non-executives.

Stage Two Findings

- Large numbers of respondents have opted out of career progression, either temporarily or permanently, for a number of reasons.

- Just over half of the respondents availed of 'flexi-working' and there was a low take up of other flexible working patterns (e.g. compressed work week) which might facilitate improved work life balance.

- There was variation across the NI 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 were identified:

- o Individual enablers: 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.
  - o Organisational enablers: 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.
  - o 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:
  - o Individual barriers (males & females):
    - ▪ lack of management or leadership experience.
  - o Organisational barriers (males & females):
    - ▪ limited advancement opportunities; limited acting up opportunities; lack of mentoring; lack of recognition for work life balance; and lack of opportunities to gain visibility.
  - o Individual barriers (males vs females): females perceive the following barriers
    - ▪ caring responsibilities for dependent children; lack of awareness of organisational politics.
  - o Organisational barriers (males vs females): females perceive the following barriers
    - ▪ 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.

- Females respondents were more likely to agree that female stereotyping exists in the NI public sector when compared to males.

- Female respondents are less positive about their organisation's gender culture than males with respect to:
  - o 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.

Stage Three Findings

Building on the results of earlier stages of the research, stage three addressed a number of themes relevant to gender equality at executive level of the NI public sector: perceptions of the gender composition of senior management boards; gender culture; flexible work arrangements; work life balance; opportunities for advancement; recruitment and progression; opting out of career progression; benefits of a balanced gender board; and promoting gender equality at senior levels.

Theme One: Perceptions of the Gender Composition of Senior Management Boards

The majority of interviewees recognised that the gender composition of their senior management board was an issue, with females holding fewer senior positions than males. Some notable exceptions to these general views were found within the Health sector, some smaller NDPBs, where the gender composition of senior boards is more balanced, and within Local Government where significant progress has been made in terms of improving gender equality over a sustained period of time.

Theme Two: Gender Culture

Differing descriptions of organisational culture exist across the public sector. Females described the culture of the Senior Civil Service as male dominated in addition to making references to a competitive, unsupportive, blame culture within some departments, which has the potential to impact upon females more so than males. The Permanent Secretaries Group was seen by the majority of female executives as a cold, unwelcoming environment and public committees, where senior civil servants were questioned by Members of the Legislative Assembly, were also seen as inhospitable cultures for both males and females, but more so for females. The majority of interviewees within the Local Government sector perceived their organisation's gender culture as positive and as having improved over time, with improvement largely attributed to the Local Government Staff Commission's Women in Councils Initiative (implemented in 2006). Within both the Health sector and NDPBs, both positive and negative views regarding the gender culture were expressed. Some interviewees within Health identified an unhealthy performance and blame culture and an environment where macho expectations exist. Within some

NDPBs, the existence of a macho or male dominated environment was also identified. Positive views were generally held by those in the Education sector.

In terms of the interaction between males and females in the workplace and during meetings, some females reported that they felt marginalised and isolated within the Senior Civil Service. This contrasts with Local Government where the only issue of note was that related to the timing of Council meetings. Elsewhere, mixed views were expressed. The majority of interviewees suggested that the workings of what would have been described as the 'old boys' network' had dramatically declined over the years. Despite this, interviewees across the public sector recognised the continued existence of informal male networks, generally based around sporting activities, from which they perceived themselves to be excluded. Other limited informal networks also existed around social activities, with many females feeling excluded due to caring responsibilities.

Theme Three: Flexible Work Arrangements

Without exception, all interviewees indicated that their organisations have in place a variety of policies to support flexible work arrangements including for example, part-time hours, job share, compressed working week and term time working. However, despite their existence, there is a considerable gap between the rhetoric and reality of flexible work arrangements at senior levels within the public sector. The overwhelming view of interviewees, regardless of gender or part of the public sector (with some minor exceptions in the Health sector), suggest that whilst public sector organisations have flexible work arrangements in place they are not readily available at senior or executive levels. This view is supported by the perceptions of the majority of interviewees who indicated that their organisation expects senior managers to work on a full-time basis.

As a result of views around expectations of full-time senior positions, the majority of interviewees (both males and females) perceived that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to progress to senior levels whilst availing of flexible work arrangements. The few people currently availing of flexible work arrangements expressed feelings of guilt when leaving work or being absent from the physical workplace. Moreover, some negative perceptions of those availing of flexible work arrangements were also expressed by interviewees in terms of the difficulty of managing staff on such arrangements and the subsequent problems arising from their absence from the physical work place. There was very little evidence found to suggest that organisations engage in active job-redesign when individuals avail of flexible working. Finally, some interviewees suggested that those availing of flexible work arrangements were potentially viewed as being less committed to their organisation.

Theme Four: Work Life Balance

The work life balance of the majority of individuals interviewed was described as poor. This was largely attributed to a long-hours culture within the NI public sector. Aspects of the long-hours culture and subsequent poor work life balance were attributed to the demanding nature of the job and the demands of politicians, with both of these impacting on males and females; however, some interviewees suggested that a poor work life balance represented a barrier to females in particular. Caring responsibilities for elderly relatives was also identified as a further factor which had a negative impact on an individual's work life balance. While this issue has the potential to impact on both males and females, it was reported as impacting more on females. The ability to delegate and empower others was identified as an important factor in maintaining a good work life balance. It was noted that females were often reluctant to delegate and that this may be a factor contributing to their poor work life balance. Little evidence was found to suggest that senior staff lead by example in terms of promoting an appropriate work life balance within their organisations. Finally, a general view was expressed by interviewees that work life balance deteriorates as a result of progression to senior levels.

Theme Five: Opportunities for Advancement, Recruitment and Progression

The majority of interviewees, recognised the importance of training and education for career development and progression. Mentoring was viewed as important for career development and progression, with female interviewees placing greater emphasis on this as a key factor in their career progression. However, variation was reported in the provision of mentoring programmes across the public sector and some difficulties (e.g. matching mentees and mentors) with the mentoring process were identified. There was also widespread agreement that undertaking secondments, acting up opportunities and challenging/visible assignments are beneficial for career development and progression. However, some concerns were expressed by a number of interviewees with regards to the allocation of secondments, acting up opportunities and in particular challenging/visible assignments.

The majority view of interviewees was that the performance appraisal (or annual appraisal) process within their organisation was increasingly passive and little more than a 'tick box exercise'. However, some females did highlight positive aspects of performance appraisals (e.g. mid-year reviews and personal development plans). There was also a widespread view throughout much of the public sector (with the exception of some organisations in the Health and Education sectors) that there was little in the way of succession planning together with a general perception across the public sector (with the exception of some organisations in the Health and Education sectors) that there are fewer quality training and education opportunities available when compared to a few years ago. This was generally attributed to budgetary constraints.

There was very broad agreement that recruitment and selection should operate on the merit principle so that the best candidate gets the job. Furthermore, most interviewees perceived recruitment and selection processes in the public sector as generally fair and transparent. However, competency based interviews were perceived as favouring males who are generally viewed as better at 'selling themselves' while assessment centres were perceived as providing a more equitable environment for male and female candidates. Females were more likely to opt out of career progression due to issues such as caring responsibilities, the pressures associated with senior roles or an inhospitable work environment. Males were more likely to opt out of career progression due to imminent retirement. Finally, confidence and resilience were viewed as particularly important personal attributes for career progression, with most interviewees suggesting that males displayed these attributes more often, and perhaps more naturally, than females.

Theme Six: Benefits of Gender Balanced Boards

The majority of interviewees were in broad agreement that there were significant benefits of gender balanced boards, irrespective of which part of the public sector the interview is employed within. A number of benefits of gender balanced boards was identified: facilitating different perspectives or points of view in terms of decision making; positively changing or moderating behaviours; and facilitating the incorporation of softer skills, such as empathy and emotional intelligence, into decision making. Finally, gender balanced senior boards were seen as synonymous with the effective functioning of the board in terms of making more deliberate, collaborative and careful decision making.

Theme Seven: Promoting Gender Equality at Senior Levels

The majority of interviewees within the Civil / Senior Civil Service and the Local Government sectors, expressed greater support for the use of targets, as opposed to quotas, as a means of addressing gender equality at senior or executive levels. However, mixed views regarding the appropriateness of quotas were identified in the Health, NDPB and Education sectors. Some interviewees identified a number of problems with targets including difficulties associated with setting unrealistic or unachievable targets, the achievement of targets and the potential consequences of not meeting targets.

Interviewees generally supported the idea that a senior member of staff should assume the role of gender champion within their organisation. Furthermore, interviewees generally supported the potentially positive role of gender champions in terms of improving the gender culture of public sector organisations and mainstreaming gender issues at a senior level. Within the Local Government sector, the concept of a gender champion is well established as a result of the Local Government Staff Commission's Women in Local Councils Initiative. Indeed, consistent with best practice, the majority of Gender Champions within the Local Government sector are employed at senior executive levels. Unfortunately, the concept of a gender champion at senior levels is not well developed in the Civil / Senior Civil Service, Health, NDPB or the Education sectors.

Recommendations

The evidence gathered from the three stages of the research project has identified a number of issues which are relevant in terms of achieving gender equality at the executive level of the NI public sector. In order to address these issues in an open, measurable and timely manner a number of recommendations are made; these are categorised under four key headings, namely strategic, policy, process and data analysis.

Strategic recommendations include setting targets to ensure the achievement of equal participation of males and females (i.e. a minimum representation of 40% males and a minimum representation of 40% females, with the remaining 20% representation comprising either males, females or a mix of males and females) on public sector executive management boards by January 2023[1]. An additional strategic recommendation relates to the role of Gender Champions where public sector organisations should identify a Gender Champion (either a male or female), employed at the most senior level of management (e.g. Chief Executive, Permanent Secretary, Director) within their organisation, to take overall responsibility for setting and ensuring the achievement of measurable gender equality targets at senior levels and for the promotion of a gender inclusive culture within their area of responsibility.

Policy recommendations are made in relation to developing a gender inclusive culture at senior management levels which promotes the acceptance and use of flexible working arrangements at senior levels and developing a culture which promotes an appropriate work life balance. Process recommendations are made with respect to career development opportunities (i.e. review policies for allocating opportunities to ensure they are fair, transparent and based on competitive principles), mentoring (i.e ensuring formal mentoring is available, communicated clearly, and there is equal access to senior management) and linking performance management more clearly to career development (i.e. review existing policies to ascertain if they effectively promote career development). Finally, data analysis recommendations are made regarding the collection and publication of robust, comparable disaggregated data on senior appointments and on-going data collection related to the barriers to achieving gender equality at senior management levels.

Examples of Best Practice Cases

While our research indicates that more work needs to be done to address the current imbalance in gender equality at executive or senior levels of the NI public sector, our findings have also uncovered some examples of best practice within the public sector. For example, the Chief Executives' Forum: Women's Leadership Initiative and the Local Government: Women in Local Councils Initiative have been successful in terms of developing leadership capacity and addressing gender imbalances at senior levels. In addition, we noted exemplary practice in terms of the implementation of flexible working, succession planning and coaching/mentoring within one health organisation which has helped the organisation reduce the barriers for females progressing to senior levels and aided the development of a positive gender culture.

Recent Developments

Since the publication of our research, some recent developments within the NI public sector are worthy of note. The reforms within Local Government have resulted in substantially improved female representation at Chief Executive level (23.6%). Furthermore, when Chief Executive and Director level posts are combined, females hold approximately 44% of all such positions. Within the Civil Service, a number of developments have also recently taken place. These include the appointment of a Diversity Champion[2] at the Permanent Secretary level and the setting up of a Senior Women's Network within the Senior Civil Service. Despite these developments, more remains to be done. If we as a society wish to capitalise on the benefits of gender balanced boards, we need further change. For example, we need public sector organisations to commit to setting and achieving gender targets at senior levels and we need more senior males to champion the gender equality issue within the sector. Greater sharing of best practice across the NI public sector is also required. The authors of this briefing are hopeful that their research findings can act as a catalyst to bring about further change in the gender composition of senior management boards.

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[1] The 40% figure was chosen as being situated between the minimum of 30%, deemed necessary for a 'critical mass' and sufficient to have a sustainable impact on board performance, and full parity at 50%. The time period of seven years to achieve the target of 40% is consistent with that set by the European Union for achieving a target of 40% of the "under represented sex" among non-executive directors of listed companies.

[2] The Diversity Champion position within the NI Civil Service is held jointly between Peter May, Permanent Secretary, Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and Noel Lavery, Permanent Secretary, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).