Senior Management Women and Gender Equity: A Comparison of Women in the Private and Public Sectors

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New England

By

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December 1999

Abstract

Men still heavily dominate the context in which senior management women operate in Australian organisations. Legislative initiatives such as Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action over the last twenty years have not substantially changed the gender balance at the senior management level. A complex interplay of structural and individual factors combine to act as barriers to addressing the gender imbalance, the most salient of these being the 'male-gender-system' dominant within the culture of many Australian organisations.

Existing research in Australia has not explored the values, norms and practices of senior management women in terms of the persistent barriers to gender equity. Consequently, myths of senior management women as 'Queen Bees' have developed which tend to stereotype the image of woman in positions of power. This thesis intends to explore the values, norms and practices of the small cohort of women incumbent in senior management positions. The five aims of the study are: to explore senior management women's experiences with, and views of, the use of power and the dominant culture within their workplaces; their views of Affirmative Action programs and quota systems; the differences and similarities between women working in the private and public sectors; and the effects of independent variables on their values, norms and practices regarding gender equity.

Data were collected in two phases. The qualitative phase consisted of 43 interviews with senior management women in Sydney. This was followed by the quantitative phase, which consisted of questionnaire data from 580 senior management women across Australia. The quantitative data were divided equally between public and private sector organisations for direct comparison.

The results showed that senior management women were not a homogeneous group and therefore cannot be stereotyped. After content analysis of the qualitative data four categories of respondents emerged, Conservatives, Moderates, Reluctant Feminists, and Definite Feminists. The values, norms and practices of the women studied varied

widely from a belief in the status quo and an unwillingness to consider change, to a sense of frustration with current practices and the promotion of methods such as quota systems to increase the number of women in powerful positions. Senior management women do not share an understanding of methods to address gender inequity or undertake the type of practices that would bring about increased gender equity. Women working in public sector organisations were significantly more likely to call themselves feminists and be more willing to agree with strategies to assist other women in the workplace compared with women working in private sector organisations. However, these differences did not make women in either sector more likely to take actions that would address gender inequity. The results are discussed in relation to their ramifications for public policy toward gender equity.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor Elim Papadakis, Dr Peter Corrigan and Mr Peter Lucich, for their expertise, patience and persistence in dealing with the content of the thesis. I would especially like to thank Elim Papadakis for his kind words of support during the trying times of the thesis and Peter Corrigan for his prompt and professional efforts in the final stages of the thesis. Dr David Gray was very helpful in the initial stages of the quantitative data analysis and Professor Ray Cooksey was of invaluable assistance in analysing the quantitative data. Vivienne Chaplain very expertly transcribed the interviews from my qualitative data. My thanks also goes to a number of close friends who assisted me in filling envelopes with questionnaires for the quantitative study. I would like to thank my mother, father and two sisters for their constant support. Lastly, thank you to all of the women who took part in the research for the PhD.

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