An Investigation of Gender Equality Issues at the Executive Level of the Northern Ireland Public Sector:

Findings from a Study of Current and Aspiring Executives' Perceptions

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DELIVERING SOCIAL CHANGE

**Department of Accounting,
Finance and Economics**

Foreword

Peter May
NICS Diversity Champion

As Diversity Champion in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS), I warmly welcome this report which is the culmination of an extensive three year evidence based study. It provides informative and valuable insights regarding gender equality at executive or senior level of the Northern Ireland (N.I.) public sector. The report's twelve recommendations are designed to assist delivery of gender equality at executive level across the N.I. public sector.

A new Executive Gender Equality Strategy is under development and the findings of this report will provide robust baseline information against which we can monitor change and the progress we are making towards our goal of achieving gender equality at executive level of the public sector. Two of the key objectives of the current Gender Equality Strategy 2006-2016 are the achievement of gender balance on all government appointed committees, boards and other relevant official bodies; and ensuring the active and equal participation of women and men at all levels of civil society, economy, peace building and government. The findings and recommendations of this report will add significant insights into how these objectives can be achieved.

In relation to the NICS, senior officials are already working to address the issues this report raises. Each Department now has a Board level diversity champion and I chair the Network which draws together all the champions to address diversity issues including gender equality as well as disability, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) and Black and Ethnic Minority (BEM). The Diversity Champion's Network has already commissioned research, additional to this work, on the representation of particular groups within the Civil Service and their distribution across organisations and grades.

While there is real and sustained evidence that the levels of imbalance at senior level are reducing – whether in the NICS, local government or the highest tiers of the judiciary – it is clear there is more to be done. That work needs to include public appointments and in that context, I look forward to working with Judena Leslie, the recently appointed Commissioner for Public Appointments who has already highlighted her focus on gender equality as an issue.

Professor Joan Ballantine and her team have helped to shine a light on the issues which need to be addressed. This research should act as a catalyst in assisting the N.I. public sector in addressing the ongoing gender imbalance at executive level. I look forward to the delivery of further positive change in this area.

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) for providing the funding for this research project. We would also like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of an Advisory Group who provided significant insights into the workings of the Northern Ireland (N.I.) public sector. The Advisory Group played a significant role in the design process and subsequent dissemination of the survey that formed part of stage two of the study. Furthermore, they also played a key role in the design of stage three of the study. In addition to the research team, the

Advisory Group comprised: Carolyne Booth/Ray Morrison/Adela Ginn (Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP)), Gerry Cosgrave/David Cartmill/Renee Quinn (Chief Executives' Forum), Aidan Fitzpatrick (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland), Adrian Kerr (Local Government Staff Commission), Linda McHugh (Department of the Environment), Maura Muldoon (Police Service of Northern Ireland), Janis Scallon (OFMDFM) and Michael Thompson (OFMDFM).

The research team would also like to thank all of the public sector employees who completed the stage two survey. In addition, we would like to acknowledge the valuable time which public sector, current and aspiring executives (both males and females), gave up in consenting to being interviewed during the third stage of the research.

Finally, the research team would like to acknowledge the on-going support and constructive advice provided during the project and in the compilation of this report from our Research Managers at OFMDFM, Janis Scallon and Michael Thompson. All remaining errors and omissions are of course the responsibility of the authors.

Contents

Introduction

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a statutory requirement on public authorities to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity across a number of groups, including gender. Since its implementation, a number of studies have investigated various aspects related to the effectiveness of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

However, to date, no study has investigated the effectiveness of Section 75 in the context of gender equality at the executive level[1] of the Northern Ireland (N.I.) Public Sector[2].

The N.I. public sector provides an interesting context to investigate gender equality at executive level for the following reasons: almost one in every three members of the total N.I. workforce is employed in the sector; and public sector spending in N.I. is estimated to account for almost two thirds (65%) of the economy[3]. Additionally, according to recent statistics:

Females comprise more than half (52%) of the N.I. population[4] yet they are underrepresented in key decision-making roles including Members of the Legislative Assembly (23.4%)[5], members of the UK parliament (11.1%)[6], local councillors (25%)[7] and public appointments (36%)[8].

Whilst some recent statistics are available regarding gender balance at senior levels for specific segments of the N.I. public sector[9]:

There remains a significant gap in data concerning gender equality at executive level right across the N.I. public sector. In this regard, little seems to have changed over the last ten years.

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1 The term 'Executive level' refers to individuals who are members of an organisation's most senior management board. 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 Dar, A. (2013), Public sector employment and expenditure by region, House of Commons Library, SN/EP/5625.
4 NISRA (2015) Mid-year estimates of the Northern Ireland population Census 2011.
5 Potter, M. (2014), Review of Gender Issues in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland Assembly: Belfast.
6 Belfast Live (2015), General Election 2015; After the Voting, Who Are Northern Ireland's 18 MPs? (available at belfastlive.co.uk/news/belfast-news/general-election-2015-after-voting-9212331).

A decade ago, Breitenbach and Galligan (2004)[10] argued that 'apart from data on formal politics and public appointments, data on gender and decision-making in Northern Ireland is very poor' (p.viii). They further argued that 'in other areas, new research would require to be undertaken, including women's representation in senior positions in business, whether as chief executives or board members' (p.67). The research reported in this document[11] addresses this important gap by:

Providing baseline data on various aspects of gender equality at executive level across the N.I. public sector;

Identifying enablers or facilitators, barriers, and best practice towards achieving gender equality within the public sector; and

Engaging in meaningful consultation with key stakeholders in the N.I. public sector.

7 Potter, M. and Kelly, M. (2014), Local Elections 2014: Results by Party and Gender. Northern Ireland Assembly: Belfast.

8 OFMDFM (2014), Public Bodies and Public Appointments Annual Report 2013/14. OFMDFM: Belfast.

9 For example, in a recent DFP (2012) review of Senior Civil Service posts as at 1st January 2010, 31% of executive posts (i.e. Grade 5 and above) were held by females while the remaining 69% were held by males (Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) (2012), 2010 Review of Gender in the NICS. DFP: Belfast).

10 Breitenbach, E. and Galligan, Y. (2004), Gender Equality Indicators for Northern Ireland: A Discussion Document. Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister: Belfast.

11 The research presented in this summary report was commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) following an open call for research proposals as part of OFMDFM's 2011-2012 research programme.

Objectives of the Research

1. To ascertain overall gender equality levels at executive level across the N.I. public sector, thereby providing a baseline for the year ended 31st March 2012;

2. To ascertain gender equality by occupation at the executive level of the N.I. public sector;

3. To ascertain the enablers or facilitators current and aspiring executives/senior managers employed in the N.I. public sector perceive have supported or could support their career advancement to executive level;

4. To ascertain the barriers current and aspiring executives/senior managers employed in the N.I. public sector perceive they have faced or may face in their career advancement to executive level;

5. To ascertain the extent to which various policies and practices would increase gender equality within the N.I. public sector generally;

6. To ascertain perceptions of organisational culture concerned with various gender equality issues within the N.I. public sector;

7. To compare male and female perceptions regarding the enablers or facilitators, barriers, and the effectiveness of organisational policies and practices concerned with improving gender equality at the executive level of the N.I. public sector; and

8. To identify examples of best practice which might facilitate improved gender equality at executive level of the N.I. public sector.

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 N.I. public sector. In order to address these issues in an open, measurable and timely manner, a number of recommendations are made. Recommendations are categorised under four key headings, namely strategic, policy, process and data analysis.

Strategic Recommendations

Ensure the achievement of equal participation of women and men (i.e. a minimum of 40% males and 40% females) on public sector executive management boards by January 2023.

Public sector organisations should develop policies, procedures and practices to:

(a)

Establish measurable targets (over a three year rolling period) for gender representation at executive management board level at an individual organisational level;

(b)

Monitor and review progress against targets on an annual basis;

(c)

Submit monitoring returns (on an annual basis) on gender composition at executive management board level.

Public sector organisations should identify a Gender Champion (either a male or female), employed at the most senior level of management (e.g. The Chief Executive, Permanent Secretary, Director) to:

(a)

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.

Strategic Recommendations

Establish an Academy for developing professional executives/managers across the N.I. public sector. The Academy would:

(a)

Take the lead in the development and provision of leadership development programmes;

(b)

Develop greater capacity for female only training and development opportunities to address gender specific issues;

(c)

Offer specific training and development opportunities designed to address personal resilience and confidence;

(d)

Facilitate mentoring and coaching relationships within and across public sector organisations.

Establish a Public Sector Forum for Gender Equality as a conduit for the sharing of experiences, problems, potential solutions and best practice. The Forum should:

(a)

Comprise senior representatives from across the public sector;

(b)

Be jointly championed by both a senior male and female executive;

(c)

Comprise representatives from relevant external stakeholder groups;

(d)

Comprise an external challenge function;

(e)

Facilitate the establishment of a Gender Equality Working Group to provide an environment for equality and diversity practitioners;

(f)

Be adequately funded and supported in an administrative capacity.

Establish an overarching Public Sector Women's Network for current and aspiring executives across the N.I. public sector to:

(a)

Share their experiences, issues, problems and solutions with respect to gender equality issues.

Policy Recommendations

Organisations shoud develop a gender inclusive culture at senior management levels which promotes the acceptance and use of flexible work arrangements for senior executives/managers. This would require public sector organisations to:

(a)

Collect data on the uptake of flexible working arrangements at senior management levels;

(b)

Identify barriers to the use of flexible working arrangements at senior management levels;

(c)

Reduce or remove barriers to the use of flexible working arrangements through effective job redesign, which should include a debate around the role of home working, remote working and hot-desking;

(d)

Ensure that meeting times accommodate, where possible, those availing of flexible working arrangements;

(e)

Promote job sharing at senior managerial levels by developing practical guidelines on its operationalisation, potential problems and solutions;

(f)

Demonstrate their commitment to flexible work arrangements through dialogue with current and aspiring Executives to understand their views regarding the use of flexible working arrangements.

Organisations should develop a culture which promotes an appropriate work life balance at senior management levels. In order to achieve this, public sector organisations should:

(a)

Improve their understanding of work-life balance issues by engaging in regular dialogue with current and aspiring executives (e.g. through audits, staff surveys, exit surveys);

(b)

Review and develop existing work-life balance policies to ensure they are clear regarding the promotion of an appropriate work-life balance;

(c)

Clearly communicate work-life balance policies and practices to current and aspiring executives;

(d)

Publish guidance on long hours, explaining the disadvantages of working long hours and giving practical examples of ways to achieve a better work-life balance;

(e)

Ensure that senior managers lead by example in the promotion of an appropriate work-life balance.

Process Recommendations

Ensure career development opportunities are allocated in a fair, transparent and competitive manner. Public sector organisations should:

(a)

Review (and revise if necessary) existing policies for allocating career development opportunities to ascertain if they are fair, transparent and based on competitive principles;

(b)

Review (and revise if necessary) existing policies for allocating career development opportunities to ascertin if they provide equality of opportunity for both males and females;

(c)

Review (and revise if necessary) whether existing policies for allocating career development opportunities are consistently implemented at an organisational and sectoria level (where appropriate).

Deliver mentoring opportunities in an open, fair and consistent manner. Public sector organisations should:

(a)

Develop and implement a policy of formal mentoring;

(b)

Develop and implement guidance on the matching of mentors and mentees;

(c)

Ensure senior management commitment and buy-in to formal mentoring;

(d)

Ensure the process of matching provides equal access to senior management;

(e)

Ensure the formal mentoring policy is available and communicated clearly;

(f)

Review the continued effectiveness of the formal mentoring policy;

(g)

Ensure that mentors receive accredited training in the provision of mentoring;

(h)

Produce guidelines for informal mentoring.

Link performance management (annual appraisal process) more clearly to career development. Public sector organisations should:

(a)

Review existing performance management policies and practices to ascertain if they effectively promote career development;

(b)

Ensure line managers take responsibility for discussing issues around career development with line reports as part of the annual performance management (appraisal) process;

(c)

Ensure that competencies for progression are clearly communicated throughout the organisation.

Data Analysis Recommendations

The Equality and Strategy Directorate OFMDFM should collect robust and comparable data and publish an annual report which provides statistics on the gender composition of executive management boards.

Disaggregated statistics should be reported:

(a)
By executive/senior management level;

(b)
By organisational type (i.e. Local Government, Health and Social Care, Civil Service);

(c)
By sponsoring government department;

(d)
By organisation.

Data should be collected at an individual organisational or sectorial basis at regular intervals regarding the barriers to achieving gender equality at senior management levels to:

(a)
Identify levels of, and reasons for, opting out of career development and progression by gender;

(b)
Identify the barriers to achieving gender equality at senior management levels (e.g. long hours culture, work-life balance, flexible working);

(c)
Develop and implement action plans to address issues relating to opting out and barriers to achieving gender equality at senior levels.

Research Approach

A three stage approach was adopted during the research:

Stage One

In stage one, the gender composition of the most senior executive or management board[12] of 143 N.I. public sector organisations, subject to Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998), was ascertained. Organisations studied consisted of the following five N.I. public sector organisational types[13].

Data was collected by obtaining the annual report and accounts for the year ended 31st March 2012 for all 143 organisations and conducting an analysis of their contents. Where gender composition data was not available in the annual report and accounts, a search of other relevant sources located on organisational websites (i.e. organisational charts, minutes of board meetings) was undertaken.

Civil/Senior Civil Service

Local Government

Non-Departmetal Public Bodies (NDPBs)

Health and Social Care in N.I. (HSCNI)

Further & Higher Education

Data for a total of 2,308 executive level positions (comprising 722 executive directors and 1,586 non-executives) were collected.

12 For the purposes of stage one, the most senior executive or management board comprises both executive director positions (more commonly referred to as board members in the private sector) and non-executive positions (more commonly referred to as non-executive directors in the private sector). In the context of the public sector, executive directors would include for example, the CEO and finance director while non-executives would include the Chairperson.

13 For the purposes of the current research, The 'Northern Ireland Public Sector' is defined as comprising organisations designated for the purposes of Section 75 (with some notable exceptions). This includes the N.I. Civil/Senior Civil Service (including executive agencies); Local Government (twenty-six local councils); Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs); Health and Social Care in N.I. (HSCNI); and Further and Higher Education.

Stage Two

During stage two, an extensive survey was undertaken to identify the perceptions of current and aspiring executives, both males and females, with respect to a number of gender equality issues in the N.I. public sector. These included attitudes regarding the enablers and barriers of career progression, and the policies and practices which might be used to improve gender equality at executive level in the N.I. public sector.

The survey was conducted between May and July 2013. A total of 3,186 responses (46.7% male and 53.3% female) were received from the five organisational types of the N.I. public sector.

Stage Three

In stage three, 107 in-depth interviews were conducted (between October 2013 and December 2014) with current and aspiring executives, both male and female. A number of potential interviewees were identified from the stage two survey which asked respondents to indicate if they would be willing to participate in the stage three research. During the interview process further interviewees were identified. Interviews were carried out with public sector employees across the five organisational types of the N.I. public sector.

Gender composition of senior management boards

Promoting gender equality at senior levels

Stage three interview themes

Benefits of gender balanced boards

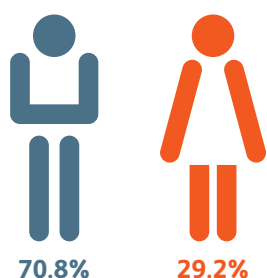Opportunities for advancement, recruitment and progression

Work life balance

Gender Culture

Flexible work arrangements

Stage One Findings

1. Overall Gender Composition of the N.I. Public Sector at Executive Level[14]

All Executive Level Positions
2,308

70.8%   29.2%

Overall, there is a significant degree of inequality in the gender composition at executive level of the N.I. public sector for all positions: males hold 70.8% of all positions while females hold 29.2%.

Executive Directors
722

68.1%   31.9%
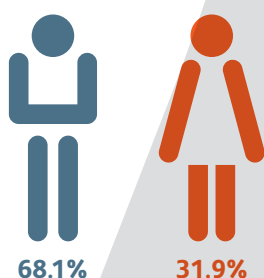
In the case of the gender composition of executive directors, gender equality is marginally improved: males hold 68.1% of all positions and females hold 31.9%.

Non-Executives
1,586

72.0%   28.0%
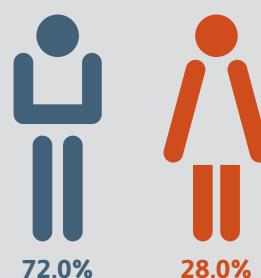
In the case of the gender composition of non-executive directors, gender equality is the most unequal: males hold 72% of all positions while females hold 28%.

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14 The term 'Executive level' refers to individuals who are members of an organisation's most senior management board. 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. Overall Gender Composition of the N.I. Public Sector at Executive Level by Organisational Type

Local Government (721)

Male: 75.0%
Female: 25.0%

Senior Civil Service (191)

Male: 72.3%
Female: 27.7%

NDPBs (937)

Male: 72.0%
Female: 28.0%

Further & Higher Education (237)

Male: 67.1%
Female: 32.9%

HSCNI (222)

Male: 54.5%
Female: 45.5%
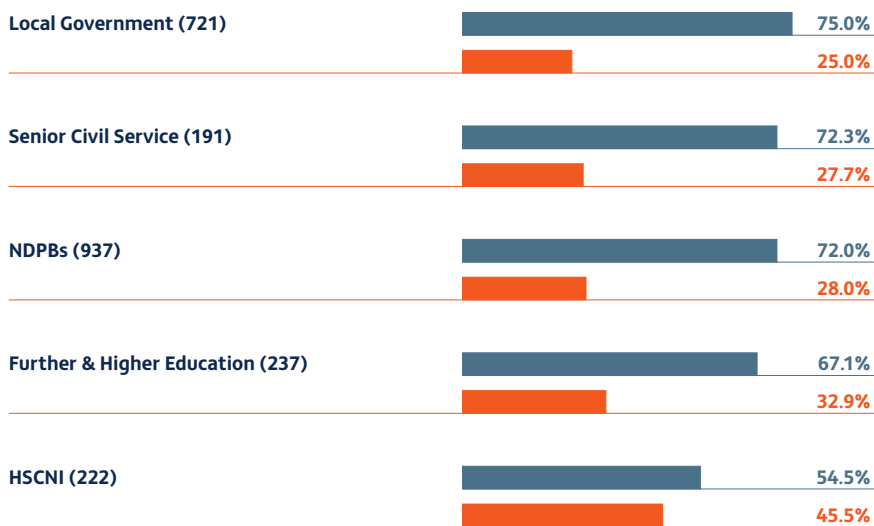
Male
Female

HSCNI organisations have higher levels of gender equality for all executive level positions (i.e. including both executive directors and non-executive directors) in comparison to the other four organisational types.

Figure 1
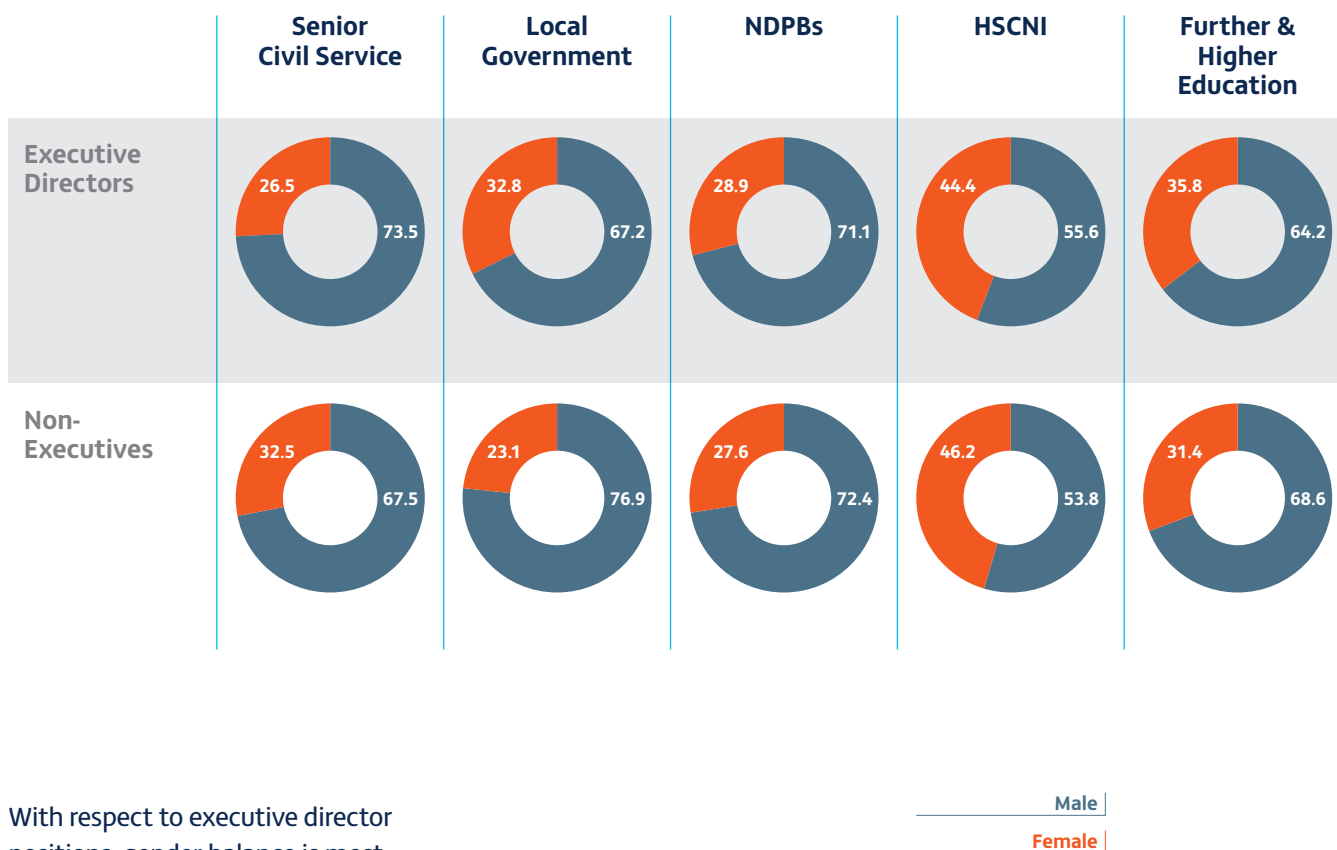Gender Composition for all Executive Level Positions (including Executive Directors and Non-Executives) by Organisational Type

3. Gender Composition at Executive Level of the N.I. Public Sector
by Executive Directors and Non-Executives

The analysis of stage one data indicates that there are some differences in the gender composition of executive directors and non-executives within the five organisational types of the public sector *(see Figure 2)*.

	Senior Civil Service	Local Government	NDPBs	HSCNI	Further & Higher Education
Executive Directors	26.5 / 73.5	32.8 / 67.2	28.9 / 71.1	44.4 / 55.6	35.8 / 64.2
Non-Executives	32.5 / 67.5	23.1 / 76.9	27.6 / 72.4	46.2 / 53.8	31.4 / 68.6

Male
Female

With respect to executive director positions, gender balance is most equitable within HSCNI (55.6% males and 44.4% females), followed by Further & Higher Education (64.2% males and 35.8% females). With respect to non-executive positions, poor levels of gender equality exist within Local Government (76.9% males and 23.1% females) and NDPBs (72.4% males and 27.6% females), in comparison to the other organisational types.

Figure 2
Gender Composition for Executive Director and Non-Executives by Organisational Type

4. Gender Composition at Executive Level of the N.I. Public Sector: Occupational Segregation (Vertical and Horizontal)

The study considered the existence of occupational segregation, both horizontal and vertical[15]. Analysis of the data provides evidence of both vertical segregation and horizontal segregation occurring in the N.I. public sector *(see Figure 3)*.

Chief Executive

Finance **Human Resources** **Strategy** **Corporate Services** **Operations**

Figure 3
Occupational Segregation (Vertical and Horizontal) within Executive Director Positions in the N.I. public sector

Vertical Segregation exists with males holding the majority (79.0%) of Chief Executive positions.

Horizontal Segregation exists with males holding the majority of operations (70.4%), corporate services (65.5%), strategy, policy and development (64%), and finance (63.9%) roles. Females are more likely than males to hold human resources roles.

15 Horizontal segregation refers to the tendency for men and women to be employed in different roles or occupations while vertical segregation refers to the tendency for men and women to be employed in different positions within the same occupations or occupational groupings.

5. Gender Composition at Executive Level of the N.I. Public Sector: Influence of Board Size

The study also considered the influence of board size on the gender composition at executive level of the N.I. public sector.
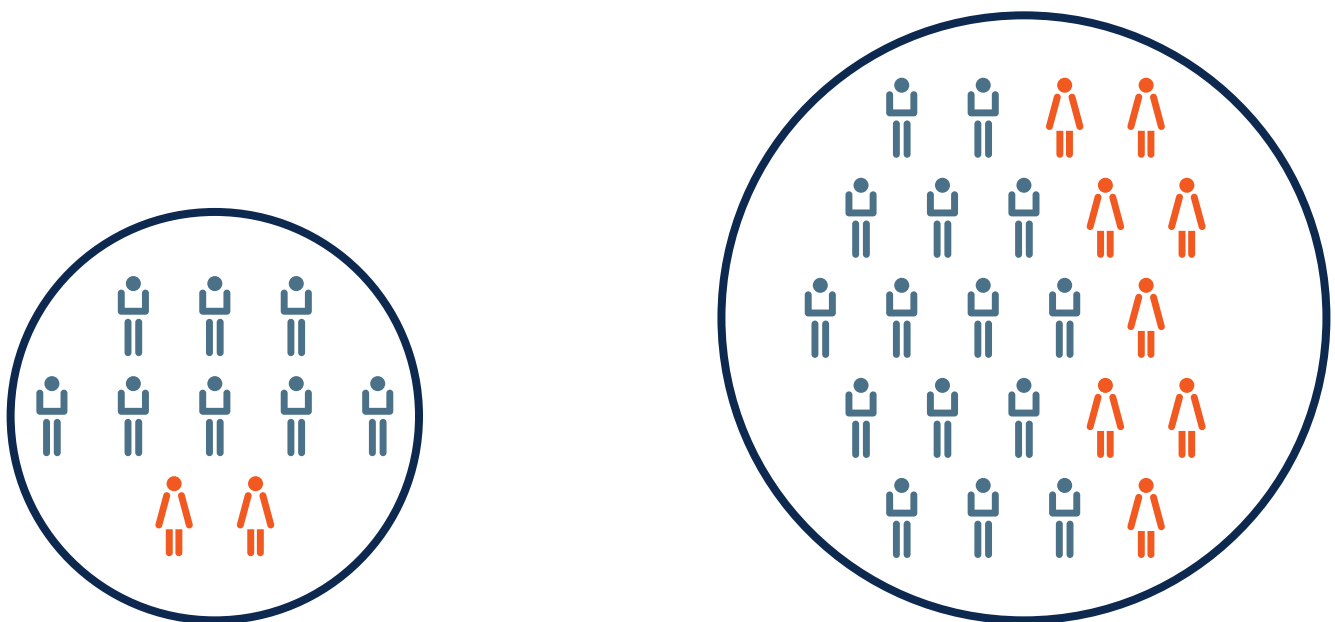
When compared to smaller boards, larger management boards have proportionately more females on the board.
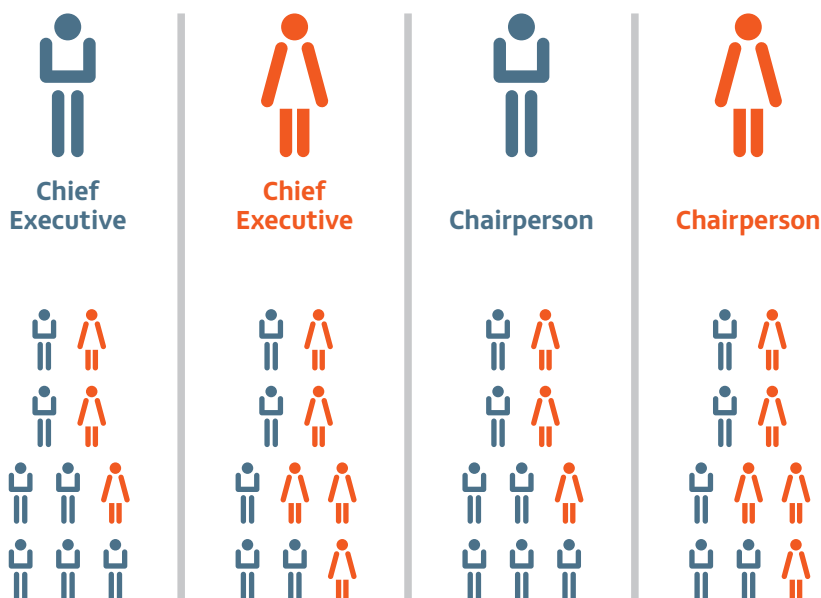
Even in organisations with larger boards, males generally hold the majority of all executive positions.

6. Gender Composition at Executive Level of the N.I. Public Sector: Influence of Gender of Chief Executive and Chairperson

The influence of the gender of the Chief Executive and the Chairperson on the gender composition at executive level of the N.I. public sector was also considered *(see Figure 4)*.

Chief Executive   **Chief Executive**   **Chairperson**   **Chairperson**

Organisations with a female Chief Executive have approximately one and a half times more females employed in all executive positions than organisations with a male Chief Executive.

This finding provides evidence of the positive influence of female Chief Executives in terms of improving gender equality within the N.I. public sector which is consistent with similar relationships found in the private sector.
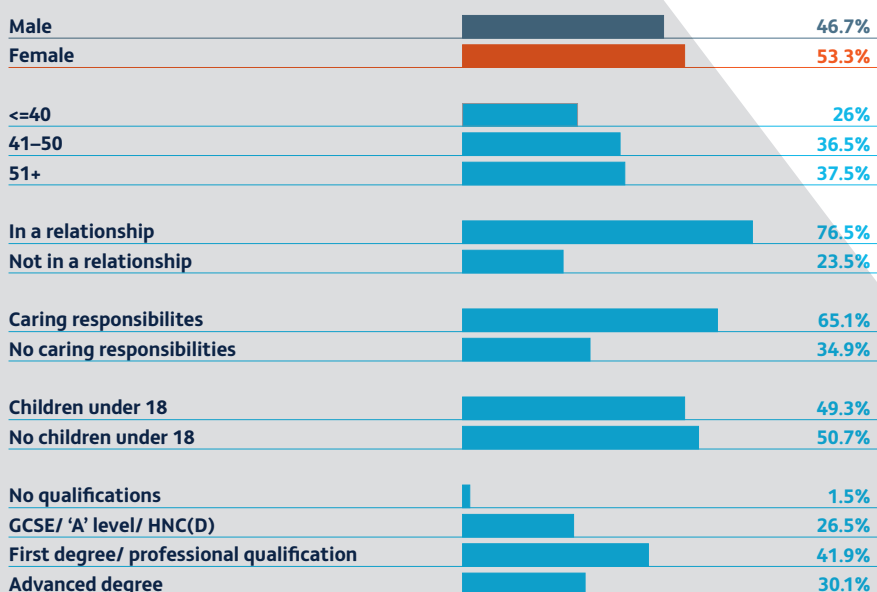
Organisations with a female Chair have approximately one and a half times more female non-executives than those organisations with a male Chair.

Figure 4
Relationship between Gender of Chief Executive/Chairperson and Gender Composition at Executive Level of the N.I. Public Sector

Stage Two Findings

1. Profile of Respondents
Current and Aspiring Executive Directors

A total of 3,186 responses, from current and aspiring executive directors, to the stage two survey were received[16]. The profiles of those responding to the stage two survey are summarised in *Figure 5* below.

Male	**46.7%**
Female	**53.3%**
<=40	**26%**
41–50	**36.5%**
51+	**37.5%**
In a relationship	**76.5%**
Not in a relationship	**23.5%**
Caring responsibilites	**65.1%**
No caring responsibilities	**34.9%**
Children under 18	**49.3%**
No children under 18	**50.7%**
No qualifications	**1.5%**
GCSE/ 'A' level/ HNC(D)	**26.5%**
First degree/ professional qualification	**41.9%**
Advanced degree	**30.1%**

Figure 5
Stage Two Survey - Profiles of Respondents
(Current and Aspiring Executives)

16 Note: an insufficient response rate was achieved for non-executives during stage two of the research. As a result, stage 2 reports on the perceptions of executive directors (both current and aspiring) only.

2. Reasons for Opting Out of Career Progression
Male & Female Responses Combined

A total of 1,058 respondents (33% of total respondents) reported that they had opted out of career progression, either permanently or temporarily. *Figure 6* below identifies the reasons given by respondents for their opting out.

Caring responsibilities for children	46.7%
Long hours culture	38.7%
Unsupportive work environment	23.0%
Lack of flexible work arrangements	22.5%
Caring responsibilities for other dependent	21.4%
Inhospitable organisational culture	19.2%
Considering retirement	14.7%
Existing gender imbalance	7.8%
Gender stereotyping and pre-conceptions	7.6%
Feeling marginalised because of gender	6.1%

Figure 6
Reasons for Opting Out of Career Progression
Male and Female Responses Combined.

Additional analysis of the data suggests that:

Public sector employees most likely to opt out of career progression are female, older, have greater caring responsibilities, are employed at lower seniority levels, and work in smaller organisations.

3. Enablers (or Facilitators) of Career Progression
Male & Female Attitudes Combined

A number of enablers (or facilitators) of career progression, both those related to individual public sector employees and their organisations, were recognised by male and female respondents as important (see Figure 7[17]).

Figure 7
Enablers of Career Progression (individual and organisational strategies) in the N.I. Public Sector - Male and Female Attitudes Combined[17]

When male and female perceptions are compared the following findings emerge:

Female respondents agree to a greater extent than males that each of the individual and organisational strategies shown in *Figure 7* enable or facilitate career progression, with the exception of a supportive spouse/partner and upgrading educational credentials. These differences are reflective of previous research in the public sector which identified similar strategies as enabling female career progression.

Females also identified the importance of their organisation conducting gender impact assessments on their policies and procedures as an important enabler of career progression, while males did not.

4. Barriers to Career Progression
Male & Female Attitudes Combined

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which a number of barriers, both those related to the respondents themselves (i.e. individual or personal barriers) and those related to their organisation, existed in terms of their career progression to executive level *(see Figure 8 below)*. Taking the combined male and female responses, the respondents identified only two personal barriers related to themselves, namely a lack of management or leadership experience and a lack of awareness of organisational politics. In contrast, a significantly larger number of organisational barriers were identified by males and females as important in the context of career progression.

Figure 8
Barriers to Career Progression (individual and organisational) in the N.I.
Public Sector - Male and Female Attitudes Combined

When male and female attitudes are compared the following findings emerge:

Female respondents view the majority of barriers, both individual and organisational *(as shown in Figure 8)*, as more important than males.

In addition to the barriers shown in *Figure 8*, females alone identified a number of additional impediments to their career progression as indicated in *Figure 9* below.

Caring responsibilities for dependent children

Colleagues' negative reactions to using flexible work arrangements

Lack of recognition for work/life balance

Lack of awareness of organisational politics

Exclusion from informal networks of communication

Lack of opportunity to work on challenging assignments

Long hours culture

Figure 9
Additional Barriers to Career Progression (individual and organisational) for Females Only in the N.I. Public Sector

5. Organisational Policies and Practices to Improve Gender Equality at Executive Level
Male & Female Attitudes Combined

A number of policies and practices were identified by both male and female respondents as having the potential to improve gender equality at executive level in the N.I. public sector. These are summarised in *Figure 10* below.

Informing potential candidates about vacancies

Move away from competency interviews

Formal mentoring

Targeted external leadership training and development

Inclusive organisational culture at executive/senior managerial levels

Providing unsuccessful candidates with feedback

Targeted in-house leadership training and development

Interview panel training to avoid gender bias

Greater flexible work arrangements

Regular monitoring of applicant data

Statutory requirements to conduct gender reviews

High level secondments

Figure 10
Policies and Practices to Promote Gender Equality at Executive Level of
the N.I. Public Sector (Male and Female Attitudes Combined)

Male & Female Attitudes Compared

When male and female attitudes are considered together, a range of policies and practices to promote gender equality in the N.I. public sector were identified *(see Figure 10)*.

When male and female attitudes are considered together, there is little support for policies and practices which entail some form of positive discrimination (i.e. quotas at executive/senior managerial level, positive action in the shortlisting or appointment process).

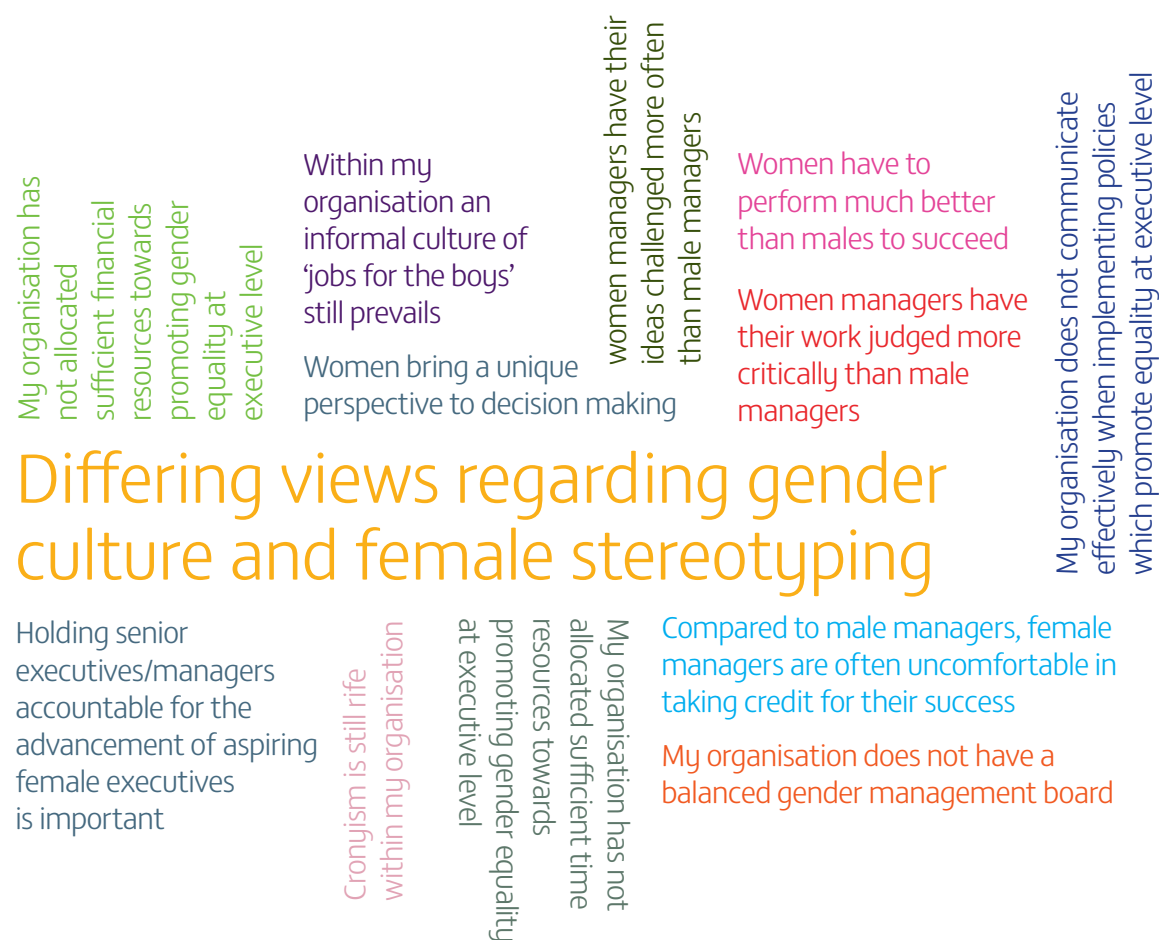When male and female attitudes are compared the following findings emerge:

Females indicated that all policies and practices shown in *Figure 10* are more important in terms of improving levels of gender equality at executive level when compared to their male counterparts.

Females marginally support the use of quotas for gender balance at executive/senior managerial level, while males do not.

6. Other Stage Two Findings

Respondents were also asked their views on a number of additional statements concerned with gender equality in the N.I. public sector, namely their organisation's gender culture and beliefs about female stereotyping. *Figure 11* below provides a summary of the various statements to which females only indicated their agreement, while males disagreed.

My organisation has not allocated sufficient financial resources towards promoting gender equality at executive level

Within my organisation an informal culture of 'jobs for the boys' still prevails

Women bring a unique perspective to decision making

women managers have their ideas challenged more often than male managers

Women have to perform much better than males to succeed

Women managers have their work judged more critically than male managers

My organisation does not communicate effectively when implementing policies which promote equality at executive level

Differing views regarding gender culture and female stereotyping

Holding senior executives/managers accountable for the advancement of aspiring female executives is important

Cronyism is still rife within my organisation

My organisation has not allocated sufficient time resources towards promoting gender equality at executive level

Compared to male managers, female managers are often uncomfortable in taking credit for their success

My organisation does not have a balanced gender management board

Figure 11
Attitudes of Gender Culture and Female Stereotyping
at Executive Level of the N.I. Public Sector

The analysis suggests that conflicting views exist between males and females with respect to organisational gender culture and female stereotyping in the N.I. public sector.

Stage Three Findings

Interviews with 107 current and aspiring executives, both males and females, were conducted (between October 2013 and December 2014) during stage three. Seven themes were explored during the interview process, the summary results of which are now presented.

Theme One
Gender Composition of Senior Management Boards

The first theme of stage three considered interviewees' perceptions of the **gender composition** of the senior management board within their organisation and the N.I. public sector in general. The majority of interviewees in stage three suggested that the gender composition of their senior management board was an issue, with females holding fewer senior positions than males. This finding is consistent with the stage one results. For example the following quotation was representative of views expressed across the N.I. public sector:

"Yes, it is an issue, because even looking at the factual profile of the organisation and indeed in the gender reviews, which we carry out at the NICS, it is clear and the facts speak for themselves, that there is an under representation of females in the Senior Civil Service... if we are thinking particularly about senior grades in the Civil Service [i.e. the Senior Civil Service] the figures and the statistics speak for themselves."

Current Executive
Female | Senior Civil Service

Despite broad agreement in views, the researchers were able to identify some differences between the perceptions of male and female interviewees, with the former more inclined to suggest that the gender composition of senior management boards was less of an issue for their organisation and the N.I. public sector in general. For example:

"Well I personally don't think [gender equality is an issue]. I think that you know we have quite good policies in this regard. .... Although I do have some issues I think in my mind about how much harder it is for women to break through that ceiling because of other reasons you know. I think there's probably a need for more support for [female] talent within the organisation."

Current Executive
Male | Local Government

Theme Two
Gender Culture

Differing descriptions of **organisational gender culture** were expressed by male and female interviewees across the N.I. public sector. With respect to the Senior Civil Service, the majority of females interviewed viewed their organisation's gender culture as an issue for gender equality at senior levels. For example, females made reference to a competitive, unsupportive, blame culture within some departments which has the potential to impact upon females more so than males. For example:

"It is a male bastion and will continue to be. The whole culture of … alpha male … the whole system then potentially needs to change at the top, there needs to be change in that culture."

Current Executive
Female | Senior Civil Service

Of particular note, the Permanent Secretaries Group (PSG), Senior Civil Service, was viewed by female interviewees as a cold and unwelcoming environment. In addition, public committees, where senior civil servants were questioned by Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), were also viewed as an inhospitable culture for both males and females, but more so for females. For example:

"The Permanent Secretaries are all male. It isn't a camaraderie, you know. It's very difficult to put your finger on exactly what I'm talking about. It's hard to break into it."

Current Executive
Female | Senior Civil Service

In contrast, interviewees employed within Local Government generally perceived their organisation's gender culture as positive and having improved over the last ten years. This was largely attributed to the Local Government Staff Commission's Women in Councils Initiative and the influence of female councillors in terms of addressing gender equality at senior levels. For example, the following descriptions of the gender culture within Local Government were provided by interviewees:

"I think it's fair. I think it's aspirational as well. I think we'd like to see more gender equality. More to do."

Current Executive
Male | Local Government

"I think it is contemporary. I think it is supportive, I think it's open and fair and progressive."

Current Executive
Female | Local Government

Elsewhere, mixed views regarding gender culture were expressed by those working in the Health and NDPB sectors. For example, some interviewees expressed concerns around an unhealthy blame culture in Health while a male dominated environment was also identified in some NDPBs. Finally, positive views of gender culture were generally held by those employed in the Further and Higher 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 in meetings. 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 with respect to the interaction of males and females in the workplace.

Finally, It is also worth noting that across the public sector, most interviewees suggested that the workings of what would have been described as the 'old boys' network' had declined over the years. Nevertheless, some interviewees recognised the **existence of informal male networks**, generally based on sporting activities, from which they perceived themselves to be excluded. In many instances, females felt excluded from informal networks due to caring responsibilities.

Theme Three
Flexible Work Arrangements

Theme three aimed to investigate the availability and use of **flexible work arrangements** at senior levels within the N.I. public sector. In doing so, the following aspects were explored:

— availability of flexible work arrangements at senior levels;

— organisational expectations of full-time work;

— progression to senior levels while availing of flexible work arrangements;

— and perceptions of others working with flexible work arrangements.

Without exception, all interviewees indicated that their **organisations have in place a range of flexible work arrangements**, including for example, part-time hours, job share, compressed working week and term time working. Despite this, interviewees suggested that it is extremely difficult for senior managers to avail of such arrangements, thus indicating a considerable gap between the rhetoric and reality of flexible work arrangements at senior levels within the N.I. public sector. This view was expressed regardless of gender or part of the public sector, with the exception of some aspects of the Health sector. For example:

"There is no such thing as reduced hours or part time working [i.e. flexible working arrangements] once you are in the senior level. If you need to be at home with your children, you are at home with your laptop or you are putting them to bed and then doing two hours' work at night and that is the reality."

Aspiring Executive
Female | Civil Service

In terms of **organisational expectations of full-time work**, the majority of interviewees (both males and females) indicated that their organisations expect senior managers to work on a full time basis. Supporting this, interviewees reported that senior positions are generally advertised on a full-time basis and that within organisations there is a lack of willingness to examine job-redesign, agile working or home working to facilitate flexible work arrangements. For example:

"At the senior levels ... I think there is an innate resistance to flexible working. [And why is that?] Because of the presumption that senior jobs are too busy. [My impression is based on] listening to conversations and when people have applied for flexible working and said oh no, I'm afraid that post could never be part time. I think the default position of the most senior staff is oh, we couldn't do that, rather than an attitude of how can we make this work?"

Current Executive
Male | Senior Civil Service

In terms of **progression to senior levels** whilst availing of flexible work arrangements, the vast majority of interviewees stated that it was simply not possible to reach the most senior levels of their organisation while working anything other than full-time hours. This view was common throughout the public sector (with the exception of one organisation in the Health sector) and was held regardless of gender. Finally, a number of **perceptions** were held concerning those availing of flexible work arrangements. First, there was a view that those who avail of flexible work arrangements feel guilty when leaving work early or are absent from work when compared to their full-time colleagues. Secondly, a number of interviewees, predominantly males, also identified the practical difficulties of managing staff availing of flexible work arrangements.

Finally, some interviewees voiced a perception that senior managers view physical presence at work as an indicator of an individual's commitment to their organisation.

Figure 12 summarises the key issues raised by interviewees during stage three interviews concerning the issue of flexible work arrangements.

Difficult to manage staff availing of flexible Work arrangements

Negative perceptions

Lack of active job redesign

Expectations of full-time work for senior positions

Flexible work arrangements

Gap between rhetoric and reality

Feelings of guilt

Lack of commitment

Difficult to progress while availing of flexible work arrangements

Figure 12
Issues Associated with Flexible Work Arrangements

Theme Four
Work-Life Balance

Theme four investigated the issue of work-life balance within the N.I. public sector. The analysis of interviewee data highlighted a number of important aspects of work-life balance including the existence of a long-hours culture and the implications for work-life balance of progressing to more senior levels. The key issues raised by interviewees with respect to **work-life balance** are summarised in *Figure 13* below.

Barrier for females

Demands of politicians

Long hours culture

Poor work-life balance

Poor role models

progression with career deteriorates balance Work life

Demanding nature of senior roles

Figure 13
Work-Life Balance

The work-life balance of the majority of individuals interviewed right across the N.I. public sector was described as poor. This view was expressed irrespective of gender or the part of the public sector in which interviewees were employed. Poor work-life balance was largely attributed to a long-hours culture within the N.I. public sector, this view being expressed irrespective of gender or part of 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 were also identified as a factor affecting work-life balance.

"I don't have any at all [i.e. work-life balance], I would work 7 days a week, I could show you evidence, I could take you to my emails and show you me clearing my emails at 4am in the morning, honestly I don't have any work-life balance whatsoever."

Current Executive
Female | Health

"For those who are committed there are very long hours and I think it's worse for females. I think they work harder to prove themselves in organisations, so they sacrifice more and spend longer hours doing it and they're more conscientious. The conscientious females are far more conscientious than the men."

Current Executive
Male | NDPB

The ability to delegate and empower others was identified as an important factor in maintaining a good work-life balance, with females often being more reluctant to do so, when compared to males. Additionally, interviewees, both male and female, stated that work-life balance deteriorates as a result of progression to senior levels. This view was expressed irrespective of which part of the public sector interviewees were employed in. For example:

"I would certainly like to become possibly a Head of Branch or a Grade five, however, I do have concerns about how I could manage that in terms of the rest of my life. ... I feel confident that I could manage the work, but I would be ... uncertain about the effect that it would on my other commitments, my motherly commitments."

Aspiring Executive
Female | NDPB

Finally, little evidence was found to suggest that senior staff lead by example in terms of promoting an appropriate work-life balance within their organisations.

Theme Five
Opportunities for Advancement, Recruitment and Progression

Theme five explored in greater depth the issues of opportunities for advancement, recruitment and progression, which were identified in stage two as important to career progression. The majority of interviewees, both males and females, recognised the **importance of training and education** for career development and progression. Despite this, there was consensus across the N.I. public sector (with the exception of Health and Education) that fewer quality training and education opportunities are currently available when compared to some years ago, this being generally attributed to budgetary constraints. Interviewees (both males and females) also identified **mentoring** as an important aspect of career development and progression although female interviewees generally placed greater emphasis on mentoring as a key factor in their career progression. Despite the importance of mentoring, variation in the provision of mentoring across the N.I. public sector was reported and some difficulties (e.g. matching mentors and mentees) with the mentoring process were identified. For example:

"I've never been offered formal mentoring. Now that is one area that I think is lacking, also the fact that when I became a Grade 7 there was no induction."

Aspiring Executive
Female | Civil Service

There was also widespread agreement among male and female interviewees across the N.I. public sector that undertaking **secondments, acting up opportunities and challenging/ visible assignments** are highly 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. For example:

"I said at the outset four golden boys. I was never getting that post [i.e. acting up opportunity]..."

Current Executive
Female | Senior Civil Service

In terms of **performance appraisals and succession planning**, interviewees generally reported that the performance appraisal (or annual appraisal) process within their organisation was increasingly passive and little more than a 'tick box exercise'. However, that said, some females did highlight some positive aspects of performance appraisals (e.g. mid-year reviews and personal development plans). Furthermore, there was a widespread view throughout much of the public sector (with the exception of some Health and Education organisations) that there was little in the way of **succession planning** at either an organisational or sectorial level in the N.I. public sector.

"When it [i.e. performance appraisal] takes place it's farcical. [When does it take place?] Rarely. ... It's supposed to be [an annual process] but most of the time it happens by way of ... I think the last one that I had lasted about 15 seconds where my line manager said to me, you've done very well, I have nothing to say, have you any questions."

Aspiring Executive
Male | Civil Service

With respect to **recruitment and selection** within the N.I. public sector, there was broad agreement among male and female interviewees that recruitment and selection should operate on the merit principle so that the best candidate gets the job. Consistent with this view, the majority of male and female interviewees perceived recruitment and selection processes within their organisation and the N.I. public sector as generally fair and transparent. However, that said, **competency based interviews** were perceived as favouring males who were generally viewed as better at 'selling themselves' while assessment centres were perceived as providing a more equitable environment for both male and female candidates.

Consistent with stage two results, female interviewees suggested that they were more likely to **opt out of career progression** due to issues such as caring responsibilities, the pressures associated with senior roles or inhospitable work environments. On the other hand, 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 the majority of interviewees suggesting that males displayed these attributes more often, and perhaps more naturally, than females.

"I think women, probably have a higher level of self-doubt [than men] which may link to all the other commitments that they have to juggle and deal with. So they have to nearly think through all those things before they can imagine say being in a particular [senior] position. And I'm not sure men would have that same challenge, so they wouldn't demonstrate those doubts. Some women manage them to overcome them and others stay stuck."

Current Executive
Female | Local Government

Theme Six
Benefits of Gender Balanced Boards

The majority of interviewees, both male and female across the N.I. public sector, were in broad agreement that there were significant **benefits of gender balanced boards** with most suggesting that one of their main benefits was that of **facilitating different perspectives** or points of view in terms of decision making. Gender balanced boards were also viewed by interviewees as beneficial in terms of **positively changing or moderating behaviours** and in terms of facilitating the **incorporation of softer skills**, such as empathy and emotional intelligence, into decision making. Finally, there was a general view held among interviewees that gender balanced senior boards are synonymous with the effective functioning of the board in terms of making more **deliberate, collaborative and careful decision making**. Futher more, a gender balanced board is more representative of the population survey. For example the following comments were typical:

"The more representative that group [i.e. senior management] can be then probably the better job it's going to do … [in terms of] bringing a diverse range of perspectives. So I think the more diverse it is then it feels better, it breeds more confidence but actually it will make better decisions."

Current Executive
Male | NDPB

"Well I think if you get all men together in positions of power, depending on what they're like, you can get alpha males around the table and it's all about that kind of behaviour, whereas if there's women around as well it tends to soften some of that, balance it out a bit, but as I said it depends on the people really."

Current Executive
Male | Senior Civil Service

Theme Seven
Promoting Gender Equality at Executive Level of the NI Public Sector

The final theme of stage three sought to understand interviewees' perceptions of the mechanisms which might be used to **improve gender equality at the executive level** of the N.I. public sector. The majority of interviewees within the Civil/Senior Civil Service and Local Government, both males and females, expressed greater support for the use of **targets**, as opposed to **quotas**, as a means of addressing gender equality at executive or senior levels of the N. I. public sector.

"My reaction to that [i.e. quotas] is no in the sense that I think it should be about the merit of the individual. And whether it's male/female competing ... I think it's about the right person for the job based on their capability, their attributes."

Aspiring Executive
Female | Local Government

"We set our minds firmly against quotas; we believed that it was not appropriate to advance equality of opportunity by that sort of opportunity."

Current Executive
Male | Senior Civil Service

In contrast, mixed views regarding the appropriateness of quotas were expressed by interviewees employed in Health, NDPBs and Further and Higher Education, with some supporting and others opposing them. For example:

"If there are benefits to be had through a quota system, they're clearly articulated and can be shown; I don't think anybody should say no."

Current Executive
Male | Health

"[No] because, and maybe this is too simplistic but because I believe it undermines the principles of merit, I think that's really what it comes down to."

Aspiring Executive
Female | NDPB

Despite greater support for targets, some interviewees expressed concerns around the potential difficulties associated with targets, including setting and achieving **unrealistic or unachievable targets** together with the potential **consequences of not meeting targets**. For example:

"Targets are okay if you have the means to effect change but there's no point setting targets unless you have levers to pull to hit those targets otherwise you're fooling everybody and being a little bit dishonest."

Current Executive
Male | Senior Civil Service

Finally, interviewees across the N.I. public sector also acknowledged the positive **role of a Gender Champion** in terms of improving the gender culture of public sector organisations and mainstreaming gender issues at the senior level of organisations. An example of the positive influence of Gender Champions was highlighted in Local Government as a result of the Local Government Staff Commission's Women in Local Councils Initiative. Consistent with best practice, the majority of Gender Champions within Local Government are employed at senior executive levels. In contrast, interviewees employed in the Civil/Senior Civil Service, Health, NDPBs and Further and Higher Education noted that the concept of a Gender Champion at senior level was not well developed.

Further Detail

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