

Affirming women in managerial positions in the South African public service

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Abstract

Democracy requires all members of the public to be afforded equal opportunities. South Africa is still a young democracy grappling to redress the imbalances of the past, which were not only about colour but also about gender and many other inequities. Prior to 1994, the South African public service systematically marginalised women across the colour spectrum. The introduction of the enabling legislation on affirmative action after 1994 meant that women were classified as a category of the previously disadvantaged. Government departments have since then been expected to comply with this legislation and advance women who have the right qualifications and experience to managerial positions from which they were previously excluded. The first part of this article examines the legislative framework and progress that has been made in the appointment of women to managerial positions in the South African public service. Statistics are used to quantify the progress that has been made. The second part of the article analyses obstacles that hamper the advancement of women. Lastly the article focuses on possible ways of addressing obstacles to the advancement of women.

INTRODUCTION

Before 1994 women in South Africa were not provided with opportunities (equal to those of their male counterparts) to express their managerial abilities and expertise, particularly in public service management positions. However, the present democratic dispensation provides them with employment opportunities through programmes such as affirmative action. This article intends to identify

possible barriers that should be overcome to ensure that women are promoted to managerial positions in the public service. Remedies to existing problems are explored and discussed. Data collection was the method of research used in this study, especially a literature review. This approach is important to ensure that the empirical and conceptual understanding of the advancement of women in the public service departments receives holistic attention. This article focuses on the policy framework that is necessary to facilitate the advancement of women to managerial positions in the South African public service. Although the laws in place for the advancement of women level the playing field, a number of obstacles tend to counter the noble intentions of such legislation. Finally, this article suggests a number of remedies that could support the legislative framework in advancing women to managerial positions in the South African public service.

POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR FEMALE ADVANCEMENT IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICE

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (hereafter referred to as the 1996 Constitution), the Employment Equity Act, 1998 (Act 55 of 1998) and other policy documents, such as the White Paper on Human Resource Management of 1997 issued by the Department of Public Service and Administration, form the basis on which women can be advanced to managerial positions in the South African public service. These policy documents are described below.

Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996

The 1996 Constitution is the supreme law of the country. The supremacy of the 1996 Constitution means that its provisions relating to the advancement of women and other designated groups cannot be ignored. Any action of a state department that fails to comply with the 1996 Constitution may be declared unconstitutional and therefore null and void. Section 9(2) of the 1996 Constitution outlaws direct and indirect unfair discrimination on the basis of, among other things, gender, sex, pregnancy and marital status. These provisions of the 1996 Constitution indicate that neither the state nor any other person can disadvantage women by excluding them from influential and managerial positions in the South African public service.

However, 'fair' discrimination that promotes equal opportunity is regarded as legitimate when applied to the advancement of women and other previously disadvantaged groups. Section 9(2) of the 1996 Constitution should be a point of departure in the South African public service to ensure that the constitutional mandate prevails in the appointment of female candidates to management positions. The legislation and policies described hereunder were intended to further the objective of section 9(2) of the 1996 Constitution.

Employment Equity Act, 1998 (Act 55 of 1998)

The Employment Equity Act, 1998 (Act 55 of 1998) aims to further the aspirations of the 1996 Constitution in promoting equity. However, equity is not possible if men and women competing for the same position are not equal due to previous policies that were not gender-sensitive. To address the imbalance and to ensure that women are afforded managerial positions in the public service, the Employment Equity Act prescribes the implementation of affirmative action. In terms of section 15(2) of this Act, policies implementing affirmative action are also expected to eliminate employment barriers to and unfair discrimination against women as well as other designated groups.

Preferential treatment of women can include numerical goals but should exclude quotas. Preferential treatment of women and other designated groups envisaged in the Employment Equity Act is coupled with the merit principle laid down by section 11 (b) of the Public Service Act, 1994 (Act 103 of 1994). It is therefore important to note that both the preferential treatment of women and the merit principle are critical aspects of accelerating the appointment of qualified women to managerial positions in the public service.

Other policy documents

According to the Commission on Gender Equality (2000), between 1994 and 1998 there were marginal changes that favoured women in management positions. The Commission on Gender Equality is a Chapter Nine institution in terms of the 1996 Constitution that is aimed at promoting respect for gender equality as well as the protection, development and attainment of gender equality in South Africa. Therefore the task of transforming the public sector, as envisaged in policies such as the White Paper on Human Resource Management, 1997, the Employment Equity Act, 1998 (Act 55 of 1995), the White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service, 1995 and the White Paper on Transforming Service Delivery (*Batho Pele*), 1997, is still of paramount importance.

Whereas the Employment Equity Act of 1998 focuses on all employment sectors, the 1998 White Paper on Affirmative Action in the Public Service focuses specifically on the public service, an environment that is unique in comparison to other sectors. The White Paper on Affirmative Action in the Public Service of 1998 sets out mandatory requirements and guides the public service on how to implement affirmative action for the benefit of women and other designated groups. The White Paper also identifies role players and responsibilities such as accountability, monitoring, reporting and coordination. These responsibilities were put in place to ensure compliance with the proper procedures in advancing women to managerial positions in the public service.

The White Paper on Human Resource Management in the Public Service (1997, 4–16) focuses on two important aspects relating to the advancement of women to managerial positions. This White Paper regards recruitment as the prime instrument

for achieving equity by opening up the public service to people of all races, and to women in particular. It also makes provision for diversity management in the public service. Diversity management is important in order for male employees to value gender differences and appreciate the important contribution that women can make in the workplace. The White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service (1995, 41–43) provides guidelines for departmental affirmative action programmes, and denounces tokenism and reverse discrimination against men.

The White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service (1995, 44) envisaged that, within four years of implementing an affirmative action programme, at least 30% of senior management in the public service should be women. It is therefore important to use the objective set by this White Paper as a basis for evaluating the progress made in the advancement of women to managerial positions in the South African public service.

Although the provisions of other policy documents such as the Public Service Regulations, 2001, have not been described in this section, their importance in affirming women to managerial positions cannot be overemphasised. Morris and Nott (1991, 69) concur that in accordance with the Public Service Regulations, women appointed to managerial positions should be remunerated and treated as men in similar positions. Consequently, the rights of women are protected to the same extent as those of men in terms of the 1996 Constitution.

PROGRESS IN THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SERVICE

South Africa has a history of institutional racism whereby rights and opportunities depended on race and gender. Sociocultural theories defined women as inferior to men and regarded them as minors in the private and public spheres of life. This historical patriarchy influenced formal and informal human relationships and the opportunities accorded women in the workplace (Hendrickse 2004, 2).

Historically, women have been marginalised and treated with contempt. This trend was not only South African but also an international phenomenon that has sparked global attention (Davidson and Cooper 1992, 3). According to the report of the Commission on Gender Equality in South Africa of 2000, reflecting its findings between 1994 and 1999, South African society has traditionally presented gender-related favours to men, and has further expected women to "be subordinate to men, have less power, less opportunities, less access to resources than men".

However, women should not be undermined and marginalised because of the glass ceiling that bars them from accessing higher positions. According to Hays and Kearney (1990, 217) the reason for the slow inclusion of women in top and senior positions is that they must demonstrate their abilities before being promoted. Hays and Kearney further argue that if a woman fails, then she is unfortunately seen as representative of all women.

According to the report of the Commission on Gender Equality of 2000, the ceiling for African women between 1994 and 1999 was the position of deputy director-general (DDG). This is the highest public service position below that of the director-general (DG), who is the accounting officer of the department and reports directly to the minister. However, white women managed to break through and occupy the post of director-general during the same period (1994–1999). This statement is corroborated by Mello (2000, 44), who states that in 1998, only 40 senior management positions were occupied by women (black and white) while men occupied 255 such positions.

It is imperative to indicate that this discussion presents positive prospects for women of all races in advancing to senior managerial positions in the public sector. The rate at which women are promoted to managerial positions in the public service differs from one department to another. The Department of Communications went from zero women managers in 1994 to ten in 1999. The Department of Justice had only two women managers in 1994, but 12 in 1998. The Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology had six women managers in 1994 and added 16 to make it 22 in 1998. The study conducted by the Commission on Gender Equality during 2000 within 19 national government departments found that only three women held the position of director-general in three departments. That is, women occupied 18% of top management positions. The report further mentions that positions for women tend to be clustered around the rank of director.

Some departments have reported successes in achieving the objectives of the White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service (1995, 41–43). These departments exceeded the 30% target set by the White Paper and ensured that, within four years of implementing affirmative action programmes, women occupied at least 30% of the top and senior management echelon. The Department of Welfare even exceeded the target, with 71% of senior management positions being held by women. The Department of Public Service and Administration bettered this with 82%, while the Department of Safety and Security equalled the target of 30%.

Among these great successes there were, as one would expect, dismal failures. For instance, in 1998 women occupied only 2% of senior management positions in the Department of Defence. Such failures suggest that much still needs to be done to remove obstacles to the advancement of women. The lack of sufficient progress in appointing women to managerial positions in departments such as the Department of Defence can be attributed to the stereotyping of certain occupational classes. Traditionally, women have been inclined to choose occupations such as teaching and nursing, while a career in defence would not really have been an option to consider. These stereotypes are expected to wear off as the social roles of men and women in South Africa change.

Table 1 below provides an overall picture of the appointment of women to managerial positions in the public service between 1996 and 2004. The statistics presented in the table indicate that in 1996 women occupied only 10.4% of the positions from level 13–16. In the same year men occupied 89.6% of similar

Table 1: Salary level 13+ by gender and race 1996–2004

Year	1996	1996	1997	1997	98	98	99	99	00	00	01	01	02	02	03	03	04
African female	172	4.6%	238	6.3%	269	6.6%	168	6.0%	441	9.4%	512	11.1%	638	13.8%	803	15.2%	826
Asian female	21	0.6%	28	0.7%	41	1.0%	32	1.1%	62	1.3%	67	1.4%	72	1.6%	88	1.7%	85
Coloured female	17	0.5%	29	0.8%	40	1.0%	42	1.5%	69	1.5%	60	1.3%	78	1.7%	90	1.7%	86
White female	178	4.8%	192	5.1%	231	5.7%	231	8.3%	355	7.5%	307	6.6%	313	6.8%	352	6.7%	304
Subtotal	388	10.4%	487	13.0%	581	14.3%	473	17.0%	927	19.7%	946	20.5%	1101	23.8%	1333	25.3%	1301
African male	934	25.2%	1007	26.9%	1151	28.3%	673	24.2%	1460	31.0%	1573	34.0%	1635	35.3%	1891	35.9%	1850
Asian male	96	2.6%	141	3.8%	172	4.2%	111	4.0%	223	4.7%	221	4.8%	267	5.8%	309	5.9%	256
Coloured male	81	2.2%	119	3.2%	134	3.3%	128	4.6%	210	4.5%	222	4.8%	249	5.4%	293	5.6%	265
White male	2214	59.6%	1996	53.2%	2028	49.9%	1400	50.3%	1887	40.1%	1661	35.9%	1380	29.8%	1441	27.4%	1088
Subtotal	3325	89.6%	3263	87.0%	3485	85.7%	2312	83.0%	3780	80.3%	3677	79.5%	3531	76.2%	3934	74.7%	3459
Total	3713	100%	3750	100%	4066	100%	2785	100%	4707	100%	4623	100%	4632	100%	5267	100%	4760

Source: Department of Public Service and Administration 2004

positions. This is a clear indication of the gross imbalance that the policies described above seek to correct. Seven years later, women were still not on a par with men. In 2003, women occupied 25.3% of managerial positions, while their male counterparts occupied 74.7% of such positions. These statistics suggest that, between 1996 and 2000, women were appointed to an additional 14.9% of managerial positions only. Although one cannot argue that this was desirable progress, the minimal percentage change can be understood within the context of the larger public service. Labour laws do not allow the public service to discharge male employees to pave the way for women without valid reasons. The public service has to rely on natural attrition and severance packages to advance women.

Table 2 elucidates the progress made in the advancement of women to managerial positions. This table indicates that there are more women occupying the position of director as compared to the positions of chief director, deputy director-general and director-general, of which women occupy 39.28%; 33.58% and 36.08%, respectively. There are 2 220 women and 5 084 males occupying managerial positions in the public service. This implies that women occupy 44% of managerial positions. According to Statistics South Africa (2006), the population of South Africa is 47.4 million. Approximately 51% of the population is female. It could therefore be argued that women are still underrepresented.

For the public service workplace to reflect the demographics of South Africa, women should occupy 51% of managerial positions. Only 7% of positions still have to be filled by women before the desired 51% is reached. This gives rise to the question whether it is still necessary to continue affirmative action policies in South Africa. Although this article gives a limited view on the implementation of affirmative action, a timeframe is necessary for abolishing affirmative action in employment categories where equity has been reached. The challenge after the abolition of affirmative action policies will be to maintain equity so that history is not repeated.

Table 2: Adapted from race and gender distribution by salary level as at September 2006

Post levels	Women	Men	Percentage of women
I3 Director	1 571	3 350	46.89
I4 Chief Director	445	1 133	39.28
I5 Deputy Director-General	169	507	33.33
I6 Director-General	35	97	36.08

Source: Department of Public Service and Administration, 2007.

BARRIERS TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

Statistics and arguments presented in the foregoing section suggest that women are being afforded more opportunities to occupy managerial positions in the public service. Existing legislation on employment equity is an important instrument directed at addressing overt forms of discrimination and obstacles in the public service. However, some barriers may be subtle and could undermine all efforts put into the development of legislation and related policies aimed at the advancement of women to managerial positions in the public service.

Although the government can create conditions that favour women's career advancement, removing barriers to their success will remain the single most challenging task for human resource managers, which is why men still outnumber women in managerial positions. Individuals can choose either to be blocked by some of the barriers encountered or to focus on the positive side, the strengths and opportunities that are offered in the advancement of their careers through the existing legislation.

In some instances it is clear that gender segregation still continues in the workforce, and men are opting for male-dominated careers despite the legislation in place to counter this. Tsoka (1999, 31) cites the lack of necessary support for the personal advancement of women in the workplace as one of the biggest barriers. Gillward (2004) highlights the following important information regarding the global position of women.

Gender inequality knows no borders. Recent United Nations' statistical analyses have revealed that women perform two-thirds of the world's work, earn one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property. These conditions are not only immoral, they are unsustainable and we must – all of us – act now before it is too late.

The conditions Gillward describes above require urgent attention in order to eradicate barriers that constitute a glass ceiling to the advancement of women to managerial positions. The public service has the important task of making sure that obstacles in the way of women's empowerment are addressed urgently to allow qualified women to move to the top management echelons. Some of these obstacles are discussed below.

Male stereotyping

Male stereotyping is one of the key obstacles to the advancement of women (*Women in the US, Canada . . .*, undated). Gender stereotyping occurs when employees are judged according to traditional stereotypes based on gender. Culturally based prescriptions of acceptable gender behaviour are salient features of such discriminatory attitudes. Women are traditionally socialised to be passive, deferential and soft-spoken while men have traditionally been socialised to be

aggressive, forceful and dominant. Individuals not conforming to these attributes are subject to criticism, outright prejudice and hostility and therefore it becomes difficult for them (women) to find a place in top and senior management positions in the public service (Kelly, Young and Clark 1993). Furthermore, employment decisions, from appointments to promotions, involve a variety of objective and subjective factors, and decisions are often made by males whom the female candidate will be joining.

Conflicting roles

Women sometimes encounter difficulties in combining family and work responsibilities. These difficulties discourage them from taking on the fast pace and demanding schedule of a career. Women have to make difficult choices. For instance, once on maternity leave they have to decide whether to resign from their jobs or go back to work, and if they return to a fast-track career, their jobs take over their lives and leave limited time for their family (*Career outlook rosier* . . . , undated).

Poland, Curran and Owens (1996, 17) have found higher percentages of women than men who believe that the jobs of their partners and having children have in some way restricted their career advancement. Poland, Curran and Owens (1996, 17) outline barriers to career progression on the basis of questions such as the following:

- What aspects of family commitments are perceived as restricting career progress?
- Do women have less positive attitudes towards career advancement?
- Does "choosing a family" necessarily mean actively turning away from career advancement?
- What do senior managers perceive as direct barriers to career advancement?

These questions highlight some key aspects of management that women desiring top positions in the public service should be in a position to decide on.

Insufficient role models

The limited number of female role models and mentors and the exclusion of women from informal networks serve as obstacles to the advancement of women in the public sector (*Women in the workplace* . . . , undated). Valentine and Godkin (2000, 117) undertook a study using a national sample of 7 733 young working adults to explore the relationship between supervisor gender and perceived job design in the United States of America. The study found that female supervisors value greater interpersonal aspects in their jobs such as enthusiasm, sense of humour and ambition, while men place greater value on qualities such as integrity and loyalty. The study further revealed that the sample members who had male supervisors perceived greater autonomy and significance in their jobs, while the

sample with female supervisors perceived greater opportunities to develop friendships (Valentine & Godkin 2000, 119–121).

This study should guide enquiries into whether the South African public service has similar experiences of different managerial styles between men and women, in which women are more socially and emotionally oriented while men are generally task oriented. If women can find role models and mentors among other female managers in the public service, then group productivity is generally enhanced. This argument suggests that female employees tend to understand female managers better than males (Valentine and Godkin 2000, 119–120).

Lack of support from other managers in the public service

There do not appear to be any interdepartmental, sectional or divisional meetings and programmes of action in government departments. The existence of such initiatives may ensure that regular reviews and adjustments are made and that general challenges are confronted using a uniform and concerted approach (Lemon 2005, 42–44). It is therefore imperative that such support initiatives are put in place to expedite the training and development of women in managerial positions as well as potential women managers.

Lack of equity targets

According to Allais (2005, 44) equity demands that the public service remove glass ceilings. Allais (2005, 45) further mentions that glass ceiling barriers continue to deny untold numbers of qualified women opportunities to compete for and hold executive-level positions in all sectors, including the public sector. The development of equity targets in all government departments will ensure that line managers implement and are held accountable for ensuring gender-mainstreaming practices when discharging their duties.

Community involvement

Where issues of gender mainstreaming are concerned, the involvement of society as a whole becomes imperative. The government should ensure two-way communication between itself and those community members involved in gender-mainstreaming issues, including women's advancement to management positions in the public service. While the government has a responsibility to improve the skills of the participating community, the community should ensure active involvement in those issues that are identified as pressing. Thus, the community should establish its openness to gender-mainstreaming activities to promote women's advancement to managerial positions (Mazibuko, Kovacs & Byrne 2005, 56–58).

Lack of public service strategy

The development of a public service strategy on gender mainstreaming, which should address equity targets, could be an important initiative. Currently, the South African public service has a strategy for the development of human resources that attempts to address challenges confronting the development of human resources in the public service (Department of Public Service and Administration 2002). These challenges include effective financial practices, integration of career and life goals, and the meaningful advancement of women and disabled people in the public service and performance management system. Unfortunately, the important issue of the meaningful advancement of women is not really addressed in the strategic objective, its key results and the overall vision of the development strategy (Department of Public Service and Administration 2002).

The above exposition highlights important issues that the South African public service will have to consider in order to identify and address possible barriers to the advancement of women to managerial positions. Some of the possible remedies suggested in the literature to address problems relating to the advancement of women in the public service are discussed below.

POSSIBLE REMEDIES TO PROBLEMS IN ADVANCING WOMEN TO MANAGERIAL POSITIONS

The public service in South Africa has been a male-dominated environment for a very long time. This has left a lasting legacy that has hampered the inclusion of women through numerous challenges, one of these being the lack of proper career paths for women to advance to managerial positions. Issues relating to women's advancement in the public service are directly relevant to gender equality. Therefore it is important for each department in the public service to establish gender equity targets. That is, women should receive preference when posts are advertised, as well as for promotions.

However, the approach to and the need for gender streamlining in the public service might be challenged, perhaps as a result of pro-male thinking. Pro-male thinking argues that gender equality and women's advancement sideline the need for men in the public service. This way of thinking also contests that men are no longer needed to serve the public since there are no policies advancing men, especially to management echelons. The answer to this is simple: men in the public sector clearly do not face advancement problems since they are already in the majority in management echelons (Erasmus, Swanepoel, Schenk, van der Westhuizen & Wessels 2005, 32–33). Therefore, there is a need to ensure that gender mainstreaming in managerial positions is addressed. However, it would be ridiculous for policy implementers to continue enforcing gender policies even when equity has been reached in the public service. It is therefore imperative to indicate that the roles of both men and women are important in the developmental role that the government

needs to perform in order to ensure that public services are provided. The different qualities of both men and women are important for the benefit of the South African public service institutions and the public.

It appears from the literature that sufficient progress has been made in advancing women to managerial positions in the public service. The number of women managers in 1995 represented 17% and in 1999, 35% of the total number of managers (FW de Klerk Foundation 2005a, 4-5). However, this figure dropped between 1999 and 2001. According to the FW de Klerk Foundation (2005b, 11), women represent 41.3 % of the worker population in South Africa, although only 19.8% serve as executive managers, 10.7% as directors and 6.2% as chief executive officers. That is, women hold only 306 of a total of 2 851 directorship positions in all sectors in South Africa. These figures indicate that while the narrow focus on the public service may show an improvement relative to other sectors, it is important that all employment sectors should ensure that the issues of women's empowerment and gender mainstreaming are managed coherently. It is important to emphasise that the South African public service faces serious challenges in improving its conditions regarding gender mainstreaming, since women are underrepresented in management positions. A successful implementation of gender policies would result in a transformed public service, representative of both male and female employees in the senior management echelons (FW de Klerk Foundation 2005a, 4).

The obstacles discussed above should be seen as challenges to the South African public service. Various courses of action may be suggested to meet these challenges. The first step is for public service institutions to change the negative stereotyping of women by men. This could be done through training and the publication of success stories about women in departmental in-house journals and the media within the public service. Furthermore, it is necessary to reconsider work schedules to accommodate women who become pregnant. Work schedules should be negotiable and flexible, allowing for the individual needs of professional women with husbands, partners, children and ageing parents, whose needs are woven into the fabric of their daily lives (*Women in the workplace . . .*, undated).

Mentoring can also assist women in their advancement. Some women need active mentoring to realise their strengths and potential to advance as members of working teams, creative individuals and professionals. Mentoring of women by women is the contemporary counterbalance to the "old boy network". Proactive and institutionalised mentoring programmes designed to help women enter public institutions, develop and stay there, should be put in place (see Lemon 2005, 42-44).

CONCLUSION

The South African government has developed a comprehensive policy framework that promotes equity while supporting the advancement of women to managerial positions. From the foregoing exposition, it may be inferred that the South African public service has made significant progress since the introduction of affirmative

action policies. Government needs to continue to remove obstacles in order to achieve equal representation of women in public service managerial positions. Existing obstacles, however, require government to go beyond the current legislation and consider remedies to counter these more subtle obstacles. Lastly, women also need to continue to develop themselves and to apply for top positions in larger numbers.

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