

Women in Leadership: The Role of Individual Agency in Leadership Career Decisions of
Female Executives in South Australian Public Service

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Dedication

I dedicate this MPhil Dissertation to my mother Professor Sajeda Khanam Choudhury. She was my inspiration to do a research on those women who aspire for success in career and at the same time do not fear to become a mother knowing that it may bring them unavoidable work/life collisions and societal judgements.

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Glossary of Abbreviations and Key Terms

Abbreviation/ Term	Explanation
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
APS	Australian Public Service
ASO	Administrative Service Officer
ASX	Australian Stock Exchange
AWALI	Australian Work and Life Index
CPSU	Community of Public Service Union
EL	Executive Level
PSA	Public Service Association
SAPS	South Australian Public Service
SAES	South Australian Executive Service
SES	Senior Executive Service

Special Clarification

In this thesis, I have used the term 'mainstream feminism' to describe the central ideologies of feminism relation to the emerging concepts of post-feminism. Although the thesis of post-feminism is criticised as a distraction in feminism, it is believed that post-feminism arrived because of the demise of feminism.

Feminism always believed in empowerment of women by establishing equality of rights, opportunities and power between genders. However, post-feminism argues that equality of gender is a back dated phenomena as women living in postmodern, affluent societies have already achieved equality with men. Thus, empowerment of these women now resides in their ability to choose their own fates; their own lifestyles. Post-feminism, therefore, is an anti-concept of all the other feminists' views and opinions. 'Mainstream feminism', therefore, is the argument which rejects post-feminism and at the same time upholds the persisting need for feminism to achieve gender equality.

Papers Written during the Course of the MPhil Program

I published three peer reviewed conference papers during the course of MPhil programme:

Ibrat, Syeda Nuzhat, Women in Leadership: Can Women Have it All? (2014). The Australian Political Studies Association Annual Conference, University of Sydney Paper. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2440508> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2440508>

Ibrat, Syeda Nuzhat, Women in Leadership: Choice or Constrain? (2014). The Australian Political Studies Association Annual Conference, University of Sydney Paper. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=240510> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2440510>

Ibrat, Syeda Nuzhat, Gender Equality in Leadership: A Public Policy Failure? (2013). The Australian Political Studies Association Annual Conference, Murdoch University Paper. http://www.auspsa.org.au/sites/default/files/gender_equality_in_leadership_nuzhat_e_ibrat_syeda_.pdf

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Syeda Nuzhat E Ibrat

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Date

Abstract

Today there is a wide spread perception amongst young women that career choice and advancement are matters of lifestyle preference of men and women as no structural barriers based on gender discrimination prevail in organisations. Numerous recent studies have also argued that gender equality is a less important goal for the new generation of women as women now enjoy genuine choices in their preferred lifestyles. One very thought provoking yet controversial argument relating to this is that women themselves in many instances choose not to seek leadership positions. In this view the factors in their decision making are less of a socio-economic nature but rather to do with personal factors such as their chosen goals, values, aspirations, motivations and priorities. However, the counter argument is that in spite of this perceived increased choice available to women, most still remain unable to achieve top leadership roles in organisations and the gender pay gap is widening instead of declining.

The broad purpose of this thesis is to analyse what factors continue to hold more women back from achieving leadership positions in employment. To do so the thesis adopts a case study approach utilising primary data gleaned from interviews with 30 female South Australian public servants aged from 30 to 55. The thesis critically examines the argument that individual choice and psychological factors have significant impacts on women's career and lifestyle behaviours. The case study focuses this approach by seeking to discover the nature of the choices available to a group of women pursuing careers in a state public service in Australia.

The case study findings suggest that gaining leadership positions in their employment was easier for some of these women than for others. Moreover, promotion opportunities generally are restricted, even in a modern public service where equal opportunity and family-friendly work practices are in existence. Although young Australian women increasingly are showing a desire to pursue a career, this research suggests that while the existing policies and structures in the workplace do facilitate and support women's increasing workforce participation they do not in themselves improve women's success in achieving leadership positions in the workplace. The direct consequence is an ongoing low rate at which women achieve senior leadership positions in their employment.

This study indicates that the women interviewed do not possess a lack of career ambition and are aware of their potential for leadership. However, they are also aware that the scales are tilted against combining a leadership role with motherhood and many express the view that

combining both aspirations is not easy. The common strategy utilised by women with leadership ambitions is to delay motherhood or to not have children. Therefore, although some post-feminists claim that women are now free to choose between career and family, this choice remains highly constrained, particularly in relation to securing career advancement to senior leadership roles while at the same time maintaining a family life.

In conclusion, in addressing the problem of the on-going lack of women in senior leadership positions, this thesis argues for policy reforms which go beyond providing access to employment and allow women to combine work and family. Policies are needed to allow women (and men) to parent and fully participate in family life while at the same time fulfilling their aspirations to career advancement. It rejects the idea of ‘gender neutral policy’ provisions, which are based on the idea of providing free choices of lifestyle for every individual in the society. Society is not yet sufficiently fair or neutral to look after the diverse and sometimes distinct needs of women.