

## INVITED EDITORIAL

# Gender in Public Administration: Looking Back and Moving Forward

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*In an online virtual issue, we explore the history of gender and feminism since AJPA. It is clear that two major silences exist in public administration concerning gender. The first is the place of women and gender equity within public service workforces. The second silence is the role that feminist theories could play in tackling contemporary public management challenges. We argue that there are particular contributions that feminist theories could make in relation to topics such as collaboration, boundary-spanning and skill requirements for future public sector workers. In this editorial we therefore look backwards and forwards, examining how female public sector workers are defined within state bureaucracy, and what feminism can bring to the functioning of this bureaucracy in the future.*

**Key words:** *gender, feminism, equality, leadership*

In a review of articles published in the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* (AJPA) between 1970 and 2015, Althaus (2015) noted a distinct lack of attention paid to the issue of gender in public administration. This seems like a surprising omission in a context where 58% of the Commonwealth government public service workforce are women (Australian Public Service Commission 2014) and at the state level these figures vary from 62% in New South Wales (Public Service Commission 2014b) through to 71% in Western Australia (Public Sector Commission 2014a, 2014b). Although women comprise an important proportion of the public service workforce, on closer interrogation these figures illustrate that far fewer make it to the executive level (41% at the Commonwealth level, 30% in Western Australia, and 34% in New South Wales).

These figures illustrate what is an international trend whereby ‘Women do not yet

participate equally in public administration, especially in leadership and decision-making roles’ (United Nations Development Programme 2014: 8). If women do not participate in public administration to a significant degree then it is unlikely that the interests of women can be fully taken into account. Public administration is a reflection of the jurisdiction it is born from and indicates much about the relative relationships within that context. If, as Althaus notes, the AJPA has also failed to sufficiently take account of issues of gender, then we run the risk of not affording women’s issues the space they deserve.

Against this background, we have curated a virtual issue on the topic of gender to look backwards at what the AJPA has published over time on this theme and what discussions might hold in the future.<sup>1</sup> In this special issue we look at where gender is visible and invisible in the history of the journal from the

1930s to the present day. It is clear from the review that two major silences exist in public administration concerning gender. The first is the place of women and gender equity within public service workforces. Here some progress has occurred with a shift from complete lack of acknowledgement that women could or do constitute part of the workforce, to a noted, but as yet unsolved, gender imbalance in the number of women in senior positions as late as 2014. The second silence is the role that feminist theories could play in tackling contemporary public management challenges. We argue that there are particular contributions that feminist theories could make in relation to topics such as collaboration, boundary-spanning and skill requirements for future public sector workers. In this editorial we therefore look backwards and forwards, examining how female public sector workers are defined within state bureaucracy, and what feminism can bring to the functioning of this bureaucracy in the future.

### **Women in the Public Sector Workforce**

In total, we identified 25 articles in the history of the AJPA that deal explicitly or implicitly with gender or women in the public service. Most (14 in total) of these were published in the last 10 years (see Table 1). We have organised these into three periods of time – pre-women’s liberation (1930s–1950s), the height of women’s liberation and the feminisation of the workforce (1960s–1980s), and the era of managerialism in public management (post 1990; which, as this review reveals, saw gender fall off the radar again). Below, we provide a synthesis of each of these periods of time. Our analysis suggests that although gender and the place of women in the public sector has emerged back onto the agenda in the last 10 or so years challenges noted as early as the 1940s remain largely unresolved.

#### ***1930s–1950s***

Gender makes little to no appearance in the early years of AJPA. For much of this period, no female or gender-neutral pronouns are used

– likely demonstrative of the ‘gentlemen’s’ culture of both the Australian public service and public administration research more broadly. In 1939, when discussing recruitment processes, Benning makes the assumption that only men will be applying for roles in the public service (Benning 1939). This continues into the 1940s, with Benning (1941: 7) again arguing that it is ‘obvious to anyone who gives a moment’s consideration to the functioning of large scale organisations that their successful operation depends upon the interweaving of manpower, and motive power, of men and machines, of men and material, and of men and money’ (see also Richardson 1940). In 1942, the AJPA publishes its first article by a woman, where Elizabeth Govan (1942) writes on the social worker in public administration, but makes no mention of gender and uses all male pronouns. Writing on the culture, behaviour, and emotion of public servants in 1943, Govan (1943) similarly ignores matters of gender.

In the mid-1940s, Woodring (1944: 152, an American researcher) raises sex as an important consideration in selecting employees, resulting from unconscious social and cultural bias. He gives the example that women may be a conductor on a tram, but only men can be drivers. This piece stands out as ahead of its time, arguing that ‘Sex is one of the most important criteria, but because traditions are so strong we often are not aware that this factor is being used as a criterion . . . This difficulty seems to be based not upon any demonstrative superiority of men physicians over women, but rather upon traditional attitudes. Marital condition is another employment factor for which the basis seems to be largely traditional’. Alarming, social and cultural gender bias is not discussed in such explicit terms in the AJPA again until the 1990s.

In 1959, Parker (1959) writes on the issue of recruitment arguing ‘in so far as the peculiarities of females render them unsuitable or uneconomical to employ in certain occupations or certain positions, the public service may have perfectly rational groups for limiting their employment in those positions, on the valid principle of suiting persons to jobs’ (p. 13). However, he goes to say ‘I can see no justification for retaining in public service legislation those

**Table 1. Articles on gender that have appeared in the AJPA**

Date	Number	Authors
1930s–1950s	2	Parker (1959), Woodring (1944)
1960s–1980s	7	Beale (1985), Bowman (1972), Bryson (1987), Deacon (1982), Horn (1971), Weller et al. (1980), Wilenski (1988)
1990s–2015	15	Althaus (2015), Colley (2006, 2001), Evans et al. (2014), Gray (2006), Hutchinson et al. (2014), Hutchinson and Eveline (2010), Lee (1994), Lindorff (2009), O’Loughlin and Newton (2014), Osborne et al. (2010), Prenzler and Drew (2013), Sawyer (2002, 2014), van Acker (2003)

provisions which inhibit the controlling authorities from regulating the employment of women solely on the rational ground of fitting people to jobs’ (p. 13) – arguing that the public sector has reached a watershed moment where women’s employment will rise.

### ***1960s–1980s***

In the 1960s, when the women’s rights movement shifts into full swing, male pronouns continue to be used without exception in the AJPA. For example, in 1964 Sir Guy Powles writes about the ‘the citizen’s rights against the modern state and its responsibilities to *him*’ (p. 1). Similarly, in 1962 a themed issue (vol. 21, issue 4) on the public servant contains a series of papers with titles including ‘the public servant – his responsibilities to the community’, ‘the public servant – his relationships with commerce and industry’, and ‘the public servant – his impact on the community’ (p. 324).

In the 1970s, accompanying the rise of second wave feminism, we can see the emergence of gender equity in the public sector workforce in the literature (Bowman 1972). In 1972 Bowman examines the role of women in local government, specifically focusing on local counsellors. Local government, it is argued, is a more suitable place for women in politics. Bowman notes that Australia lags behind England and other countries in the numbers of women drawn to local government office (where

engagement has been the highest for women elsewhere, compared to at the state or national level). Her findings indicate that as local government responsibilities shifted from ‘engineering to welfare services’ the ‘feminization’ of local government would occur (as in England, where local government’s remit for social service provision is much larger). Hence, the level of women engaged in the political sphere was thought to be linked to gendered interests, and appropriate ‘social issues’ for women to address. In this article we also begin to see the first commentary of ‘gendered workplaces’ emerge, with Bowman noting that women most likely to be nominated and elected are those least likely to challenge or threaten male colleagues.

However, the literature examining public sector performance management and career structures continues to be devoid of factors that might influence the participation of women (see e.g. Horn 1971; Howard and Riach 1971). This is despite significant policy changes occurring nationally regarding legal barriers for women in the workplace, equal pay and anti-discrimination legislation (Baxter 2002; Hooks 1984; van Egmond and Baxter 2011). For example, Horn (1971) discusses incentives and productivity in the public sector. He draws on survey results that indicate women in low-wage industries are more motivated by good working conditions (i.e. fairness and employers that make them feel valued) than wages. Horn challenges the (then) longstanding belief that

only senior managers are motivated by non-wage related factors. However, he fails to extend what begins as gendered analysis of the experiences of women workers in other sectors to that of the public sector. For example, how creating more meaningful and valued positions and career pathways would increase or encourage the progression, retention, or recruitment of women in the public sector. Instead, Horn slips into standard presumptions regarding how managers should manage 'his subordinates' in light of value and fairness being more important than wages.

In the 1980s gender inequity in the public service begins to receive more sustained (albeit, still limited) attention (Beale 1985; Bryson 1987; Deacon 1982; Weller et al. 1980; Wilenski 1988). Beale (1985: 376) calls attention to the continuing low numbers of women in the workforce, arguing for a 'stamping out of the discriminatory issues preventing women [taking up] top positions'. Bryson (1987) argues that equal opportunity policies developed within a managerialist framework that promote a highly technocratic and masculine approach. In doing so, women were expected to assimilate rather than reshaping institutional environments to accommodate work, family and caring responsibilities. This is an issue that arguably remains inadequately addressed today (Evans et al. 2014).

### 1990s–2015

In the 1990s the AJPA published only one article explicitly addressing gender equity in the public sector (Lee 1994). Lee takes a critical look at enterprise bargaining system and its impact on working conditions and wages for women. Enterprise bargaining in the 1990s widened gender wage gaps and further deteriorated working conditions for women. Despite this concerning conclusion, no further research in the AJPA delves into these issues for the remainder of the '90s.

Lee's conclusion in the 1990s, that the 'same institutional, social and attitudinal constraints still impact on the ability of women to compete equally in the paid workforce' as 100 years ago, can be seen in the work of the next two

decades. Although 2000–2015 has seen a greater and more explicit focus on issues of gender equity (see e.g. Althaus 2015; Evans et al. 2014; Hutchinson and Eveline 2010; Lindorff 2009; Osborne et al. 2008; Sawyer 2002, 2014) progress remains unsatisfactory. As we explained in the introduction, women now make up a greater proportion of the public sector workforce overall, but only 40% of top positions (Evans et al. 2014). Cultural, social, and institutional barriers identified in recent research are the same as those noted in the 1940s by Woodring, and the 1970s and 1980s, including men's perceptions of, and cultural biases regarding, women's ability to lead (Bowman 1972; Evans et al. 2014). Here lies a challenge for the AJPA – to engage more fully and critically with the barriers to women's participation in the public sector.

### Current Challenges – Time for a Feminist Lens?

The second notable silence in the history of the AJPA is the use of feminist theories and lenses to explore public sector challenges. Only in 2008 do Osborne et al. apply a feminist lens to the question of inclusive consultation and mainstreaming of gender issues. They argue that 'well-resourced women's policy offices within Australian governments are essential to ensuring effective, equitable consultation' particularly regarding the gender impacts of policy decisions (Osborne et al. 2008: 149).

Arguably, many contemporary challenges in public management could benefit from a feminist lens. Post-structural feminist approaches in particular are said to have potential for 'contesting, disrupting, and illuminating programs, policies and [practices]' – resting emphasis on binaries and highlighting positionality (Vann et al. 2014: 13). Osborne et al. demonstrate this potential in their investigation of community consultation where their case study material demonstrated that 'successful consultation, that minimises divisive political contest, can be contingent upon productive on-going relationships between policy workers and community representatives' (Osborne et al. 2008: 159).

Feminist theory presents different ways of ‘knowing and doing’, which could prove to be fruitful ways forward for many contemporary public management challenges. For example poststructuralist feminist theories and ways of working have de-centred notions of authority (i.e. single ways of knowing or doing; Gavey 1989; St Pierre 2000). Hence, they can allow for and enable a great diversity of perspectives, as well as assist in negotiating these. This is critically important when we consider that much of public management now involves working across organisational, institutional, and sectoral boundaries. Here, a plurality of meanings is both unavoidable and one of the chief advantages promoted within discourses of new public governance (Osborne 2010).

Post-structural feminism argues that common language (the lack of which is often argued to be a barrier in cross-boundary working (Bammer et al. 2010; Wiseman 2015)) is in fact not innocent or neutral. Rather, it is riddled with presuppositions which may in actual fact hinder progress (Gavey 1989). Hence, a feminist approach to public administration could lead the field more effectively embrace a multiplicity of voices, subjectivities, and ways of knowing and doing. This would constitute a notable shift away from our current attempts to generate common frameworks of understanding.

It is well argued that the major challenges for public administration and management are in the realm of cross-boundary working (O’Flynn 2013; Osborne 2010). Recently, O’Flynn outlined four questions confronting the field of public administration:

- What do we mean conceptually by working across boundaries?
- Why has working across boundaries emerged as an imperative?
- What does this actually evolve?
- What are the critical enablers and barriers in understanding how to work across boundaries?

At present, collaboration and cross-boundary working is typically treated as a rationalist tool to achieve particular ends in the mainstream public administration literature (Dickinson and Sullivan 2014). As Dickinson and

Sullivan (2014) suggest, the time is ripe for new conceptual and theoretical insights. With their emphasis on diversity, difference, subjectivity, and positionality feminist theories can help us to begin to answer the critical questions posed by O’Flynn (2013).

Feminist theories can enable deeper analysis of *why* different actors need to be brought together to solve problems, the ways in which this can and should challenge authoritative ways of working as well as offering insight into the types of skills and knowledge required to navigate cross-boundary working. As Osborne (2010) has argued, emerging discourses of new public governance posit a plural state and a pluralist state with greater emphasis on inter-organisational working. Arguably, we are yet to develop theories and methods that can adequately capture and account for this plurality – tending towards successive waves of terms (or ‘buzzwords’), which can capture discourses and actors (Keast forthcoming). In recent years, these have included popular terms such as co-design and co-production, which dominate the policy landscape but gloss over, rather than reveal, the intricacies of cross-boundary practices. This includes critical issues such as power differentials and differing knowledge bases. In contrast, feminist theories welcome and encourage a plurality of meaning and language. Knowledge is transient, changing, and constructed intersubjectively. These are ideas public administration would do well to embrace, or risk drowning in fads and fashions promoted by politicians seeking new terminology to ‘dress-up’ the same old problems and ways of working.

### Endnote

1. The papers are available free online at [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1467-8500/homepage/gender\\_and\\_feminist\\_approaches\\_in\\_public\\_administration.htm](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1467-8500/homepage/gender_and_feminist_approaches_in_public_administration.htm).

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