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Understanding, Ownership or Resistance: Explaining persistent gender inequality in public services

Abstract

Gender inequality persists in the public services in many OECD countries, despite decades of policy and strategic initiatives designed to promote greater equality. Resistance to gender equality, characterised by opposition to change or support for the status quo, has emerged as one potential explanation for the disconnection between policies and outcomes. This article explores whether concepts of resistance assist to explain slow progress towards gender equality in our study of four Australian public sector jurisdictions, where we asked middle managers about their understanding of, and action towards gender equality. We found that managers were committed to gender equality and held a general understanding of their jurisdiction’s gender equality policies, but lacked a deeper understanding of how organisations and human resource practice are gendered, which impeded translating commitment into action. This resulted in various levels of resistance and an unwillingness or inability to operationalise policies and strategies. This indicates that public services have progressed from identifying the problem to not knowing how to operationalise solutions. Our research contributes to the resistance literature, showing the existence of the various forms of gender equality resistance, which can impede action. A further contribution is that our research did not find differences between the approaches of male and female managers in gender-balanced organisations, with both equally aware of the policies but demonstrating similar levels and types of resistance.

Key words:

Resistance, gender neutrality, gender fatigue, gender blindness, public services, gender equality, problem ownership
Introduction

Since the 1970s and 1980s, a myriad of policies have been employed to address gender inequality in the public sector, with limited success (Connell, 2006). These range from equal employment opportunity policies in the 1980s to the more recent diversity management programs relying on business case arguments (Ainsworth, Knox, & O’Flynn, 2010; Colley, McCourt, & Waterhouse, 2012; Corby, 2011; Smithson & Stokoe, 2005). Some progress has been made, however, gender inequality remains stubbornly entrenched in public sectors in most OECD countries (OECD, 2019). While women are better represented in the public sector than the private sector, women remain concentrated in a limited number of occupational streams and under-represented in leadership positions, and the public sector gender wage gap stands at a global average of 14 per cent (World Bank, 2019). Similar trends are evident in Australian public service jurisdictions, which are the site of this research. The slow progress has led to a resurgent focus on gender equality, driven by G20 commitments and the UN sustainability development goals.

Researchers have highlighted the notion of resistance as a possible explanation for the disconnection between policies and successful implementation of gender equality initiatives (Harker Martin & MacDonnell, 2012; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). Resistance, defined as ‘a phenomenon that emerges during processes of change’ (Lombardo and Mergaert (2013, p. 299) is characterised by defence of the status quo, or outright opposition to change. Resistance can be overt and active, such as deliberate obstruction or actively seeking to undo change. Resistance can also be covert and passive, such as taking limited or no action to promote change (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). Resistance to gender equality initiatives in organisations has been well documented as taking several forms: gender blindness, which occurs where there is little or no recognition of gender inequality; gender suppression, where inequality may be recognised by individuals or organisations but is ignored; gender neutrality, where the experiences of women and men are conflated; and an overarching gender fatigue, where gender equality is seen to have been ‘fixed’ and initiatives are no longer necessary (Acker, 1990; Ainsworth et al., 2010; Gill, 2016; Gill, Kelan, & Scharff, 2017; Kelan, 2009).

Although these concepts have proven useful in outlining the various dimensions of individual and organisational resistance to gender equality initiatives, their collective role in progressing or hindering gender equality remains unclear. By examining how middle managers engage with or resist gender equality initiatives, we apply these under-explored concepts and develop and clarify the boundaries between the types of resistance. We also draw on the concept of ownership, where managers do not fully own the problem of gender inequality and therefore make limited progress towards equality (Lansu, Bleijenbergh, & Benschop, 2020). Problem ownership becomes a mediating factor and a missing link between policy understanding and active implementation, and lack of problem ownership becomes a form of passive resistance as managers ‘kick the can down the road’.

We begin by discussing the key concepts of gender resistance and their blurred boundaries. We then investigate our data to identify whether these forms of resistance occurred, and if so, the extent of such occurrence and whether this may explain the continuing gender inequality within Australian public services. Our research was conducted across eight government agencies located in four Australian state jurisdictions and included documentary review of policies as well as focus groups with 273 middle managers examining how they understood and progressed their organisation’s gender equality policies.
(Williamson, Colley, Foley, & Cooper, 2018). We found various levels and types of resistance, but interestingly, a low level of gender blindness. We found that the forms of resistance were also accompanied by a lack of problem ownership, rendering good intent ineffective.

Our research contributes to the resistance literature, through clarification of the concepts and the boundaries between them, as well as the ways the various forms of equality resistance can work collectively to impede action. We extend and nuance the literature by highlighting problem ownership (or lack of) as a passive form of resistance, and a key to making progress in the future by ensuring managers actively engage with these concepts, own the problem, and implement policy initiatives. A further contribution is that our research did not find gender differences in the approaches of managers in agencies which had parity in the numbers of men and women (gender-balanced), with the data showing that men and women were equally aware of the policies, and demonstrated similar levels and types of resistance. This is significant, as our findings add nuance to the literature on men’s resistance to gender equality.

Middle managers’ role in progressing gender equality

Middle managers play a key role in human resource management (HRM) (MacNeil, 2003; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Managers hold a major role in implementing HRM policies, as they are closer to employees than HRM staff (Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). Furthermore, middle managers act as a vital ‘organisational lubricant’ (Cooper & Baird, 2015, p. 570), translating organisational policy into practice (den Dulk & de Ruijter, 2008; Maxwell, 2005). Many studies have examined the role of middle managers in the implementation of specific components of gender equality policy – such as facilitating flexible work (see for example Bond & Wise, 2003; Cooper & Baird, 2015; Stout, Awad, & Guzmán, 2013; Williams, 2019) but fewer studies have examined middle managers’ role in supporting or hindering the progress of gender equality policies more generally (Kelan & Wratil, 2018).

As Wahl (2014, p. 143) notes, possessing rudimentary awareness that inequality exists does not necessarily and automatically translate into the ability or will to initiate or promote organisational change. Progress can be impeded by conflicts between the goal of gender equality and overarching hegemonic discourses, which include gender neutrality, meritocracy and gendered norms (Lansu et al., 2020). Further hindrances for managers include a lack of resources, lack of agency and low priority accorded to progressing gender equality (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark, 2016; Lansu et al., 2020).

Research has identified that the slow progress towards workplace gender equality can stem from middle managers not taking ownership of the problem, with ‘ownership’ defined as engagement, role modelling and facilitating change (Lansu et al., 2020). Problem ownership is essential to gender equality change projects, and extends beyond awareness of, and understanding the problem (Kelan & Wratil, 2018; Lansu et al., 2020). It relies on middle managers taking responsibility, and taking action. The unwillingness to take responsibility, coupled with a reluctance to engage in change initiatives is also a form of resistance, based on managers seeing themselves as ‘change recipients’ rather than as ‘change agents’ (Lansu et al., 2020). Managers can express commitment to gender equality, but resist taking action (Wahl & Holgersson, 2003), thereby not bridging the gap between change recipient and change agent.

A significant research gap exists as few studies have examined middle managers’
attitudes towards HR policies and practices aimed at progressing gender equality. One study examined managerial support for various HR practices that can progress gender equality and found few differences between male and female managers (Kitterød & Teigen, 2018). Other researchers have found that both male and female public sector managers possessed a high level of awareness and understanding of gender equality policies, although awareness about specific issues and how to implement measures varied (Donnelly, Parker, Douglas, Ravenswood, & Weatherall, 2018; Williamson, Colley, & Foley, 2020). Researchers have instead focused on resistance, as we next discuss.

**Gender equality understanding, ownership and resistance**

The concepts of gender equality resistance we focus on are: gender blindness, gender suppression, gender neutrality, and an overarching gender fatigue (Acker, 1990; Ainsworth et al., 2010; Gill, 2016; Gill et al., 2017; Kelan, 2009). These gender resistance concepts are not clearly defined, but have overlapping boundaries, and are sometimes used interchangeably. Researchers have noted that both action and non-action can be forms of resistance; that is, deciding not to act can be as significant as taking action (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). Other scholars characterise resistance as a continuum which ranges from denial, where inequality is not recognised, to repression, where gender equality initiatives are dismantled (Flood, Dragiewicz, & Pease, 2018). Clarifying these concepts can assist in theorising resistance, as well as assisting practitioners to identify the forms of resistance and appropriate initiatives to implement.

**Gender blindness** occurs when organizations operate from unstated male norms, with no recognition of the difference in men’s and women’s work experience and therefore no need to take action (Wilson, 1996). Ignorance equals blindness. Recognition of gender inequality is limited, women are ignored and the operation of gender in organisations is taken as a given (Linstead, 2000; Wilson, 1996). Gender blindness is manifest through a failure to acknowledge that women are important (Riseborough, 1998, p. 616) and no engagement on gender equality issues (Rubery & Hebson, 2018, p. 416). Gender blindness can be understood as a manifestation of the gendering of organisational processes – ‘doing gender’ – and the concealment of privilege (Lewis & Simpson, 2010). Gender blindness occurs when men are ‘blind to issues of their own behaviours and practices as well as how the advantages and privileges of masculinity are obscured within the norm’ (Lewis & Simpson, 2010, p. 1). Flood and Pease (2005) identify a system of privilege that embeds male dominance within workplaces, as part of a large body of work examining men’s resistance to gender equality (see also Flood et al., 2018; Wahl, 2014). Gendered organisations are reinforced through ‘individual men’s sexist and gendered practices, masculine workplace cultures, men’s monopolies over decision-making and leadership, and powerful constructions of masculinity and male identity’ (Flood and Pease, 2005). This argument closely replicates feminist explanations of gendered organisations and doing gender.

**Gender suppression** builds on the concept of gender blindness. Linstead (2000, p. 302) argued that gender blindness cannot be justified in an era where an increased awareness of gender equality exists. He considered that gender blindness has been replaced by a more deliberate framing, where there is awareness of gender differences but motivation to suppress awareness, rendering action unnecessary. Gender suppression differs from gender blindness, as it is a more active failure to acknowledge women or gender as important (Ainsworth et al., 2010; Riseborough, 1998; Shaw, 2006). Occupational segregation can be rationalised as being natural and inevitable, with organisations believing women willingly self-select into
gendered occupations and roles (Ainsworth et al., 2010). This framing enables participants to make sense of their gendered organisations – in other words, it supports the way gender is done (Ainsworth et al., 2010). Gender suppression also describes circumstances where gender is recognised, but responses are partial, equating numerical gender parity with gender equality (Shaw, 2006). The lack of explicit recognition of gender differences or inequalities means that organisations perceive that limited or no action is required. Gill et al. (2017) identified several of these elements – acceptance of the gendered status quo, arguing that women are content with their choices, and not wanting women to be seen as advantaged over men – as common repertoires of broader organisational gender fatigue. We define gender suppression as an active resistance to addressing gender inequality where gender is recognised, but motivation and actions suppressed.

Gender neutrality is discussed in numerous ways in the literature. Some have defined gender neutrality as equating men and women with no reference to gender (Acker, 1990; Ainsworth et al., 2010; Eisenhart & Finkel, 1998). Others have suggested that gender neutrality recognises gender, but women and men are conflated (Linstead, 2000). Acker (1990) linked gender neutrality to theories of ‘doing gender’ – how gender is created and recreated in organizations, and how supposedly gender-neutral organizational structures obscure the operation of gender. Organisations are gendered, not gender neutral, through the ‘doing’ of gender in organisations, where the myth of ideal worker is paramount (Korvajarvi, 2011; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This ideal worker also conflates ‘women’ with ‘people’. A perceived equal treatment of both male and female employees removes reference to sex or gender, making policies and policy implementation gender-neutral (Ainsworth et al., 2010). Framing gender issues as gender neutral is less threatening to the status quo, and does not recognise women’s disadvantage (Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Smithson & Stokoe, 2005).

Gender neutrality can also incorporate ‘the simultaneous existence of the practices of gender inequality and the impression of equality’ (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998, p. 800). This might include where gender inequality or discrimination occurs in some instances, but is seen as an aberration in an otherwise gender-neutral environment. Gill et al. (2017) identified this as an element of gender fatigue, where gender inequalities are framed as historical remnants or current aberrations. On a similar note, these researchers identified a spatial view where gender inequalities are recognised but seen to be outside the organisation’s control or sphere of responsibility (for example, ascribing gender inequality to labour market factors). We define gender neutrality as attempts to address gender inequality but in ways that seek to equate men and women, and not be seen to advantage women.

Australian public sector gender equality

Our study is situated in Australian public services. Much progress has been made in the public sector towards gender inequality, although recent progress has been patchy (Williamson, Carson, & Foley, 2019; Williamson & Colley, 2018; Williamson et al., 2020). Early approaches in the 1970s/80s were typically equal opportunity policies for women, with comprehensive implementation and monitoring by influential central personnel agencies (Colley et al., 2012; Strachan, Burgess, & Sullivan, 2004). Subsequent public sector reforms shifted this initial focus in several ways. Policy shifted from a collective focus on women to more individualised approaches to diversity. The rationale shifted from benefits to society to a narrower benefit to the organisation. Simultaneously, responsibility for policy and implementation shifted from central agencies to individual agencies and then to managers (Ainsworth et al., 2010; Smithson & Stokoe, 2005; Williamson et al., 2020). The resulting
institutional complexity provided greater latitude around implementing and monitoring gender equality initiatives (Connell, 2006; Williamson et al., 2020).

Like many other countries, Australia has experienced a resurgent interest in workplace gender equality, with state and federal governments expressing deep commitment to progressing gender equality in their workforces and developing renewed strategies (see, for example, Australian Public Service Commission, 2016). Despite this expressed commitment, progress toward gender equality has slowed. The public sector gender pay gap remains entrenched at 11 to 15 percent across jurisdictions (Government of South Australia, 2017; VPSC, 2018), occupational gender segregation is prevalent, women are over-represented in part-time work and lower classification levels and under-represented in leadership roles (APSC, 2016, 2017; NSW PSC, 2018; OCPSE, 2018; VPSC, 2018).

Public sector gender equality policies exist at two levels. An overarching policy developed and overseen by a central agency forms the policy foundation; agencies then develop complementary policies. All four jurisdictions had a gender equality policy, with one being a webpage rather than a policy as such. All of the jurisdictions’ policies defined gender equality. Three of the four framed gender equality as parity of women in senior leadership, based on business case arguments of better performance and productivity. The fourth jurisdiction espoused a broader definition of gender equality rather than just focusing on women in leadership, and centred on ensuring that both women and men have the same access to opportunities and decision making, and were able to balance work, family and community life. Our previous published analysis of these policies highlights a breadth of initiatives, focusing on women in leadership, increasing the take-up of flexible working arrangements (including by men) and modifying recruitment and selection procedures to eliminate biases and barriers, including through unconscious bias training (Williamson et al., 2020).

Method

Purpose: Data is drawn from a two-year study examining the role of middle managers in progressing gender equality within public services. The over-arching aim of the study was to understand the structural and systemic impediments faced by women working in the public service, and to provide insights to assist our research partners to develop reforms and policy levers to counter these barriers. The purpose of this paper, however, is to explore notions of resistance as a possible explanation for the disconnection between policy and implementation, as discussed earlier.

Research Design: Our findings are based on focus groups with public service managers in eight government agencies located in four of Australia’s six state jurisdictions (i.e. two agencies per jurisdiction). The four jurisdictions were partners in a funded research project and gained agreement of the eight participating agencies. The study was conducted in two phases.

Phase one involved analysing the context and selecting the sample. We began by analysing organisational policies and strategic documents pertaining to gender equality in each jurisdiction to better understand the context in which middle managers were operating. We also held exploratory meetings with key informants (such as Public Service Commissioners and senior HRM professionals) to ascertain each jurisdiction’s priorities and strategic goals with respect to gender equality. Using information gleaned in this phase, we worked with the central HR agency of each jurisdiction to identify the two agencies to be
studied from each jurisdiction.

The eight agencies were carefully selected in order to develop a generally representative sample, including a mix of central, policy and line agencies, male-dominated, female-dominated and gender-balanced agencies, and both higher and lower performing agencies with respect to gender equality. We have categorised the agencies into three types: central (i.e. agencies which play a co-ordinating role across all government departments); service delivery, which tended to be female-dominated, apart from one hyper-masculine agency; and technical, which tended to be male-dominated. To ensure comparability across jurisdictions, employee classification definitions were used to select only participants who qualified as middle managers, generally defined as somebody who made decisions around resourcing, staffing, work allocations and leave arrangements. Each agency then circulated a call for volunteers based on wording provided by the research team.

Phase 2 involved data collection. Between November 2017 and March 2018, the research team conducted 40 focus groups with 273 managers (131 women; 143 men). Roughly equal numbers participated from each agency. As the purpose of the study was to understand middle managers’ role in implementing gender equality initiatives, we collected data on gender, but did not collect data on participants’ age, race, sexual orientation or disability. We acknowledge that this is a potential limitation of our study, and future researchers may wish to more closely examine the influence of such factors on middle managers’ perspectives on gender equality. Focus groups were broad-ranging, natural conversations around four themes aimed at generating insights into managers’ understanding of their agencies’ gender equality policies, how they progressed gender equality in their teams, examples of best practice, any barriers they faced and additional support required. Two researchers were present at each focus group. One researcher led each focus group while the other took notes; each pair compared findings throughout the process. Focus groups were digitally recorded transcribed and coded using NVivo12.

Coding and analysis: An initial broad coding frame was developed from the literature and themes explored in the focus groups, and the first and second author’s discussions after each. The second author used open coding to analyse the data, which involved line-by-line data analysis, comparing the data for similarities and differences and then categorising the data into themes, as recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2008). The second author then conducted the thematic analysis; however, this was an iterative process, with the first and second authors continually refining the codes and themes to ensure clarity and reduce the multiple meanings of the various categories. The researchers also identified emergent themes through axial coding, as the data was reassembled, analysed, and meaning interpreted from the reconfigured data (Dimmock & Lam, 2012).

Broad coding was conducted to find elements of policy awareness and understanding, gender blindness, gender neutrality, gender suppression and gender fatigue. For example, data was considered to fit within the gender-neutral category if it had elements of gender-neutral organisational processes, conceptions of the ideal worker, ‘women’ being equated with ‘people’ and conceptions of ‘choice’. As discussed, there is overlap between the categories and where data fitted in to more than one category, the coded material was annotated accordingly. The second author then reread the coded material and identified similarities, which enabled the data to be assigned to one particular code. The second author also subsequently coded for gender awareness and understanding, as managers’ knowledge of organisational policy is a precedent for problem ownership, which was emerging as a key element in the findings. The second author also recoded to identify comments from male and

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female managers.

The coding frame highlighted the overlapping elements of the main categories of resistance to gender equality. Where previous researchers categorised similar elements differently (for example, Wilson (1996) defined gender blindness as women and men being conflated; Ainsworth et al (2010) considered this to be gender neutrality), the final definition used in the coding frame was determined by the most common elements defined by more than one researcher. For example, ‘women’ being conflated with ‘people’ was a theme raised by two groups of authors (Ainsworth et al., 2010; Eisenhart & Finkel, 1998), and this was therefore the definition used. We have used our data to apply these under-explored concepts and clarify the boundaries between the types of resistance, in order to identify the types and extent of resistance, complemented by an examination of managers’ awareness as a precondition for problem ownership.

**Research findings**

In this section we examine the four categories of resistance – gender blindness, gender suppression, gender neutrality, and gender fatigue. We start, however, with an examination of managers’ level of knowledge about their organisation’s gender equality policies, and their understanding of gender equality.

**Gender equality ownership**

Participants were generally aware of their jurisdiction’s and agency’s gender equality policies, although they may not have known the specific details. Even in agencies that were majority male, policy awareness was high. Participants were committed and aware of various aspects relating to gender equality such as the operation of unconscious biases, the lack of women in leadership positions, and occupational segregation. Both male and female managers often adopted a strategic view, linking gender equality policies with overarching corporate policies and organisational culture. This comment demonstrates this linkage:

> I think what I struggle with is the qualitative versus the quantitative. We can talk numbers, but at the end of day exactly what [other participant] is talking about, is a female feels more confident about putting her hand up for a promotion because the agency’s got this plan in place (male, Org8).

Our participants’ understanding of gender equality largely reflected policy framings. Participants displayed an awareness of the need for women in leadership positions, which was expressed in every focus group, the need for women in traditionally masculine areas, including science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM) areas (Org1, Org4, Org5, Org8), and unconscious bias (Org2, Org4, Org7). Robust discussion around the need for gender targets also occurred in all focus groups. Participants largely considered gender equality to be equal opportunity for women and men, with some also specifically including gender diverse employees. Their gender equality awareness, however, was degendered – the emphasis on equal opportunities for ‘everyone’ came through quite strongly, bringing in an element of gender neutrality where ‘women’ are equated with ‘people’.

Managers had some awareness that inequality could permeate HR processes, particularly recruitment and selection – again demonstrating policy awareness. One participant from a male-dominated organisation lamented the lack of women who had applied for a technical role. She then reviewed and rewrote the job description to make it gender
neutral, conducted the recruitment campaign again, specifically targeting women, received an increased number of applications from women, and recruited a woman to the role (Org8). This example – which demonstrates both understanding and problem ownership – was uncommon. Even though policy awareness was high and managers held a reasonable understanding of gender equality, a high level of the acceptance of gendered roles was evident in the focus groups. Hidden gendered attitudes surfaced from both male and female managers, as shown in the following comment:

If you’re a female with a part-time job and a family to care for and tea to make and all the rest of it, well perhaps you might say well maybe I do have time to write a one page letter and put in a CV (female, Org8).

Another common thread throughout the focus groups was an increasing awareness of the need for men to work flexibly. This understanding was widely held by both male and female managers. Flexibility was required not only for men to meet caring responsibilities, but also for gender equality, as this quote shows:

And I think its equity both ways so in order for my wife to work full time and develop her career, I need the flexibility to be able to drop the kids off two days a week or whatever…(male, Org6).

This may signal some growing understanding of the legislated right for parents, carers and other selected groups of employees to request flexible working arrangements in Australia (FWC, 2019). There has also been an increasing focus on the role of Australian men in parenting and caring responsibilities, which may also be influencing these managers (see for example Cooklin et al., 2015; Craig, 2006; Whitehouse, Diamond, & Baird, 2007). Many of our participants considered flexible working to be a gender-neutral practice, equally available and used by both men and women. As one participant stated, flexible working ‘is not actually a gender issue…both males and females make equal use of the arrangements that are available’ (Org4). This statement indicates a normative conception of flexible working, rather than the actuality where the uptake is highly gendered.

Both male and female managers were largely aware of their organisation’s gender equality policy (apart from the hyper-masculine agency) and were committed to its implementation. They were engaged but still demonstrated elements of traditional gender relations, reflecting gendered organisations. Our previous analysis also demonstrated that these managers needed guidance on implementation (Williamson et al., 2020), which would move them closer to problem ownership and being change agents. Having examined managers’ awareness and understanding, we now commence examining resistance.

**Gender blindness**

We found very few instances of gender blindness in our focus groups, and those were mostly in the hyper-masculine agency and the male-dominated technical agency. This was typified by one participant who noted that a level of ignorance about gender equality existed in his organisation (Org3). In discussing the new head of the organisation (a woman whose appointment was not particularly welcomed by the participants) another stated:

…it would have been easy to curl up in a ball in the corner, because of the reaction she got, but I think she’s just worked through that. It takes a strong character to do that sort of stuff. To turn up day after day after day and front group after group after group. So I think it’s that character that a person’s got. That’s what people are seeing here, as opposed to the female, male side of things.
This quote highlights the presence of male privilege: leaders in hyper-masculine agencies are automatically considered to be leaders, and do not need to repeatedly prove themselves, aligning with existing research (Schein, 2007; Tominc, Sebjan, & Širec, 2017; Wood, 2008). This lack of understanding of the structural components of gender inequality is evidence of gender blindness, where women are effectively ignored and issues around gender equality are not understood. As stated, however, gender blindness was not endemic in six of the eight case study organisations.

**Gender suppression**

We found five elements of gender suppression. These were: recruiting the best person for the job; a partial response to progressing gender equality; deeming gender irrelevant and unimportant; acceptance of the status quo, and beliefs that women were advantaged over men.

First, the main elements of gender suppression were evident in discussions around recruitment and selection, where participants claimed that they did not consider gender and just wanted to recruit ‘the best person for the job’. While this could appear to be an element of gender neutrality, as Shaw (2006) notes, this belief demonstrates a partial response, with some acknowledgement that gender inequality exists, but the underpinning gendered assumptions are firmly suppressed. The desire to hire the ‘best person’ was expressed in all 40 focus groups, by both men and women, as this representative quote shows: ‘…you’re just taking the best person. It doesn’t matter what their race, their gender, their colour, whatever, it’s the best person …’ (female, Org7). Such comments often emerged in conversations about gender targets, which were largely seen as unnecessary by both male and female participants, although women tended to be more aware of the need for targets than their male counterparts. We consider an unwillingness to embrace targets as another element of gender suppression – inequality has been acknowledged, but suppressed.

The second main element of gender suppression was evident in the form of partial action, which included the belief that parity in numbers equalled gender equality (Shaw, 2006). Both male and female managers widely believed that gender equality will be achieved when equal numbers of men and women are in leadership positions. Factors that hamper women’s progression into leadership were often recognised, but participants believed that gender equality was solely, or largely, dependent on women becoming leaders. Enabling women to join the male leadership cadre was considered to be equality. Additionally, if an organisation is female-dominated, it must therefore be gender equitable, as this quote demonstrates:

I don’t notice gender as an issue in our area. We’re mostly women…and when men come to work for us, it’s a positive. I’ve never noticed any equity issues really… (female, Org5).

Many participants compartmentalised gender inequality to a job classification or occupational group. If some areas of the organisation were seen to be gender equitable, then this transferred to the rest of the organisation and any anomalies were seen as aberrations, as this quote highlights:

I think overall it’s probably fairly equitable. In [area] where the equity balance is not there, but in other areas of the Department you walk into and it’s very female dominated, so I think overall, gender isn’t really seen as an issue (male, Org1).
Relatedly, another common example of gender suppression occurred when (both male and female) participants did not understand why the various forms of gender inequality and lack of parity persisted. For example, participants queried why occupations were female-dominated but did not understand the causes of occupational segregation (Org1). Another example highlights this confusion, with one participant stating that ‘…it’s interesting that to get a representative mix of the community through our normal recruitment processes, like we have to actually target people. So I don’t really quite understand why that would be…’ (female, Org1). This framing recognises that inequality exists, but comprehensive actions to progress gender equality have not been implemented and have been suppressed. Participants were simultaneously able to recognise gender inequality, whilst either claiming equality had been achieved, or were puzzled about the continuing inequality.

The third main element of gender suppression occurred when gender was considered irrelevant and not taken seriously (Ainsworth et al., 2010; Linstead, 2000). Our participants largely possessed enough knowledge to not openly make comments that diminished the importance of gender equality, albeit several admitted that they were surprised the topic needed researching. The forms of gender suppression we found aligned with gender fatigue, where participants were either tired of talking about gender equality or considered it to be a non-issue, as the following comments highlight:

- It’s not something I’ve come across here…gender is not an issue in this department (female, Org5).
- We talk about gender equity and it’s all around us. And so for me it was almost like a strange concept to come talk about something that’s happening and we’re surrounded by it (male, Org7).

Many participants stated that gender equality had been achieved in their workplaces. Participants were not resistant to the idea or practices to progress gender equality, however, were tired of hearing about such issues. Their fatigue stemmed not only from hearing the same organizational messages, but also because they did not know how to individually make progress. Many participants did not know how to talk about gender equality issues to their staff and did not know how to conduct HR processes to eliminate gender biases. This fatigue is driven by a lack of understanding and ownership.

Additionally, the minimisation of gender equality adopted a particular form that equated gender equality with diversity management. We encountered a widespread belief that organisational focus and efforts should be on progressing equality for diversity target groups, rather than on gender (Org1, Org2, Org3, Org6, Org7). As has been well documented, gender equality has been somewhat surpassed by a diversity and inclusion regime (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005). We heard comments such as:

- I’m not sure it’s the most pressing diversity issue here…it’s the lack of diversity in terms of Aboriginality, disability, everyone else, that’s actually where I think we should…we’re nowhere near a diverse workforce in terms of the rest of those cohorts (female, Org 7).

This framing aligns closely with gender fatigue – a sense that gender has been ‘fixed’, and it is time to move onto other groups. This belief was most prevalent in one central agency (Org7) which strongly adhered to the ideal worker norm, and in the hyper-masculine organisation (Org3). In the hyper-masculine organisation, the participants’ understanding of the need for gender equality was rudimentary. Many of the participants did recognise a need for the organisation to become gender equitable, however, also equated it with diversity as
The fourth element of gender suppression occurred with an acceptance of the status quo, with gender roles being seen as inevitable. Acceptance of the status quo was evident when vertical and horizontal segregation were not seen to constitute gender inequality but seen as natural. Many participants assumed that traditional gender roles were inevitable, as was occupational segregation, particularly in STEMM fields. Organisations aspired to reduce vertical segregation and achieve numerical parity. This was coupled, however, with managers’ acceptance of horizontal occupational segregation as being part of the status quo. Gender is simultaneously acknowledged, whilst being suppressed.

Participants from all eight organisations ascribed certain traits to women, such as being caring, which naturally resulted in occupational segregation, and being less confident, which restricted career development. Both male and female participants in the technical agencies were more accepting of the status quo than participants in the other agencies, with comments such as ‘…most of [the technical areas] are male-dominated…and that’s just the way it is’ (female, Org8). Perhaps surprisingly, the vast majority of participants in the hyper-masculine organisation did not hold more traditional views of workplace gender roles than other participants. They may have been resistant to gender equality initiatives, but their views were not particularly stereotypical. Their focus was firmly on achieving the operational requirements of the job, ascribing to a version of gender neutrality, rather than suppression. This quote exemplifies this attitude: ‘…there are men that are unable to perform those [stereotypically masculine] roles and it doesn’t matter. They fit where they fit…’ (male, Org3). The focus on fit aligns with the ‘best person for the job’ framing, placing this firmly within gender suppression.

Finally, the hyper-masculine agency and the male-dominated technical agency were the only agencies where participants believed that gender equality disadvantaged men and advantaged women. These beliefs were not widespread, but examples from male participants demonstrate this attitude, steeped in male privilege:

There’s a perception, whether it’s real or not, the perception defines reality of ‘oh, well, I’ll piss off and go work somewhere else because I’m not on the agenda to work here’ (male, Org8).

…there’s different cohorts of people that believe that there’s some people being offered unfair advantage if you like, it’s gone almost positive discrimination in that some female members of staff are offered more opportunities than male counterparts, to try and meet government statistics or objectives... (male, Org3)

As our findings show, gender suppression was common amongst our case study agencies. The suppression was nuanced, reflective of a limited understanding of gender equality. The partiality of actions to progress gender equality, in particular, highlights the tensions inherent in an appearance of progress whilst containing it to certain occupations and groups of employees.

**Gender neutrality**
We found much evidence of gender neutrality. Participants generally recognized a need for gender equality to be progressed in their agency, yet ‘women’ were routinely equated with gender neutral ‘people’. For example, in the words of one participant: ‘If they’re doing less for females, then you’ve got a real problem with your manager, no doubt about that. But they should be doing [gender equality] for everyone’ (male, Org8). Another example also illustrates this point: ‘It feels like a lot of it’s about fairness and flexibility for all staff members, not just women…’ (female, Org2).

Secondly, as defined by Gill et al (2017) and Ainsworth et al (2010), gender neutrality also occurs when gender equality is seen to be an individual’s responsibility, framed in terms of ‘choice’. Working part-time or flexibly were seen to be women’s choice (Org1, Org2, Org3, Org4, Org8). As research has shown (Smithson and Stokoe, 2005), gendered workplaces based on a male breadwinner norm frame these ‘choices’ as inevitable and natural. The assumptions around ‘choice’ obscure the operation of traditional gender roles. One quote exemplifies this:

So in terms of career progression, that flexibility is very important and their work/life balance is something they prioritise over applying for manager’s jobs. So it’s not always the case but they’ve just made that very conscious decision and it’s entirely legitimate…I don’t know what effect that sort of choice is going to have in the long run, but I will defend that choice (female, Org8).

This quote is particularly interesting as this manager had positioned herself as something of a champion for gender equality and, while her commitment to flexible working was commendable, this quote also shows an acceptance of traditional gender roles. Such ‘choices’ are seen as natural, as another manager stated, when discussing how women ‘choose’ to not be promoted: ‘…there are characteristics in the population that lead to those disproportionate numbers as the higher you go up’ (female, Org1).

Participants in the male-dominated technical agencies were more likely to claim gender neutrality than either the central or service delivery agencies. They believed their organisations were gender neutral, with jobs and HR processes that were not gendered. Some participants were unaware of gendered working practices, such as working part-time, with one male manager stating that he ‘didn’t see any gender specific issues’ in relation to his part-time employees (Org6). Similarly, some participants failed to see how recruitment and selection practices could be subject to gender bias (Org8), although a widespread recognition of the operation of unconscious biases was common amongst participants from other agencies.

Participants from the hyper-masculinised agency not only believed in gender neutrality, but also saw the ‘job’ as a discrete entity which did not discriminate. As one said, ‘the job doesn’t change. So the job is non-discriminatory’. Participants from this agency equated sex discrimination with underperformance – if a woman was discriminated against, it was not because of her gender, but because she underperformed: ‘they’re not attacking the gender, they’re attacking the attitude. They’re attacking the performance’ (male, Org3). The job as an entity takes precedence over gender.

The other main element of gender neutrality is discrimination occurring, but being seen as an aberration (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998). The most prevalent example of this occurred when participants overlooked the gender imbalance in STEMM areas, where they concluded that apart from these areas, their departments were gender equitable (Org1, Org3, Org8). Whilst similar to the partiality inherent in gender suppression, a gender-neutral
framing places more emphasis on outside factors being responsible for a lack of progress. Therefore, owning and rectifying this imbalance was seen as being outside the organisation’s responsibility and shaped by broader social norms about occupations (Org2, Org3, Org7, Org8). A lack of female candidates in STEMM areas was attributed to a lack of women in the relevant university courses, with little the organisation could do. An indicative comment follows:

And the difficulty isn’t a willingness to employ women in those roles, the difficulty is in having the applicants. I mean, I can literally have a job advertised, get 50 responses and none of them will be women (male, Org7).

More male than female managers saw gender inequality as caused by external factors, as this male manager explained: ‘You just can’t get them in, so what have you got to do? Well it’s an industry issue primarily…’ (male, Org8). Men in the central agencies were more likely to believe that gender inequality was due to other factors outside the organisation, in particular, due to pipeline issues where women were not coming through into male-dominated occupations. Relatedly, an additional recurring theme was time will bring about equality – when society becomes more gender equitable, so will workplaces (Org2, Org3, Org4, Org5, Org7). Similarly, generational change was also seen to be a driver for gender equality (Org1, Org2, Org7). Gender inequality had happened in the past, and current practices would set things right. Research has shown, however, that attitudes to gender equality amongst Australian millennials is still bounded by traditional gender roles, if not outright misogyny (Evans, Haussegger, Halupka, & Rowe, 2018).

Discussion and conclusion

In this article we apply the under-explored concepts of gender resistance to explore managers’ understanding of, and resistance to gender equality, and the forms of this resistance. We examined the concepts of gender equality understanding and ownership, gender blindness, suppression, neutrality and fatigue, and how they explain the lack of progress towards gender equality.

We have made two contributions to the field. First, we have applied the various concepts of resistance to managers’ understanding of gender equality. The role of managers in progressing gender equality is surprisingly under-researched (Kelan & Wratil, 2018), and our findings shed some light on this area. By illuminating these forms of resistance, actions can be developed by organisations to counter each type. Applying the concept of problem ownership also revealed that while individual commitment and good intent was evident, action was stymied by narrow understandings of the causes of gender inequality. Public service managers have progressed from identifying the problem, but were not fully cognisant of how to operationalise solutions. Our second contribution to the field centres on whether resistance is gendered. We have found that while resistance to gender equality existed in our case study organisations, few differences in the attitudes of men and women were found in gender-balanced agencies. This is significant as we show that attitudes reflecting male privilege are not homogenous. We now further consider these contributions.

Our research has more clearly defined and bounded the concepts of gender equality understanding, gender blindness, gender suppression and gender neutrality. In so doing, our examination provides a more nuanced understanding of how gender resistance operates in organisations and is therefore useful to practitioners and academics. We found that all forms of resistance occurred, albeit with less gender blindness because of the nature of the public
sector. The public sector has often been considered to be a model employer, and an employer of choice for women (Corby, 2011; Rubery, 2013). Our findings show that managers possessed an awareness of their organisation’s policies, and a reasonable understanding of gender equality, suggesting that decades of policies and actions are starting to bear fruit. As Wahl (2014, p. 132) states, gender equality ideology has ‘influenced everyday walk and talk, including in management contexts’. However awareness and commitment does not automatically translate into action (Wahl, Hunter, & Höök, 2007), and the failure to take action is a form of resistance.

The majority of our participants demonstrated awareness, understanding, commitment and engagement – all antecedents to problem ownership and becoming change agents (Lansu et al., 2020). However, they could not yet be viewed as change agents as they were not fully implementing policy initiatives, hampered by residual forms of gender equality resistance, coupled with a lack of deep understanding of how to operationalise initiatives. Researchers have long identified a policy/implementation gap in progressing gender equality (see for example Williamson et al., 2020). This research identifies the concept of problem ownership as a key bridge between policy and implementation. The lack of knowledge of how to operationalise issues stems from managers not having deep knowledge of how to progress gender equality (Dieffenbach, 2009; Podger, 2017; Williamson et al., 2020). It may be unrealistic to expect managers to become gender equality subject matter experts, however, our findings suggest that access to such support needs strengthening. Involvement from HR sections, networks of champions, knowledge-sharing fora can all contribute to increasing managerial knowledge, capacity and capability.

Our other main finding is that resistance in gender-balanced agencies was not gendered. Both male and female managers demonstrated the various types of resistance. Male privilege was evident in the hyper-masculine agency, but this organisation is not representative of the broader public sector. It serves to remind us, however, that resistance to gender equality can be pervasive in male-dominated agencies, and continued effort is needed to counter this remaining bastion. Public sector male managers are conversant with gender equality language and concepts, and displayed low levels of resistance, similar to their female colleagues. While the manifestation of male privilege in organisations has been amply documented (see for example Flood et al., 2018), this was not evident in most of our case study agencies. Resistance still exists, but it is covert, not overt, and held by both men and women. This suggests that the gender of the manager is less important to progressing gender equality than are strategies to counter resistance of all managers and to increase problem ownership.

Resistance was evident in the forms of gender neutrality and gender suppression. Gender neutrality includes a recognition of gender inequality even as organisations presented as being gender neutral. It is underpinned by an unstated male norm, and continues to configure workplaces, with many participants lacking the necessary knowledge and resources to reconstruct their workplaces. Here, again, we see the need for managers to become change agents to counter this form of resistance. While other researchers have highlighted the operation of gender neutrality (Acker, 1990; Ainsworth et al., 2010) in reinforcing gender inequality, we consider gender suppression plays a larger – and potentially more insidious – role. While gender neutrality has a veneer of equality, gender suppression firmly signals an ongoing resistance to addressing gender equality – a position with which many organisations would not wish to identify, but which nevertheless exists.

We suggest that this problem stems back to the organisational version of gender equality portrayed in our case study workplaces. If policies and strategies focus on numerical parity
and work and family issues, entrenching stereotypes around women’s roles, then it is not surprising that managers also understand gender equality in this way and think it has been ‘done’. This limited understanding means that gender equality is still very much considered to be centred on women (and a binary version of ‘woman’), with men only featuring in discussions around work and family. As Ainsworth et al. (2010) have found, managers construct their own version of ‘women’, which is closely aligned to the female deficit model. Women are lacking, and it is the responsibility of the individual to overcome inequality and any barriers. Managers were able to acknowledge that inequality existed, but then reflected that it was not their responsibility and/or it was outside the organisation’s responsibility; or that women were satisfied with the status quo. Lewis, Benschop, and Simpson (2017) argue that this position arises due to moderate feminism. This moderate feminism is a response where the perceived excesses of feminism are replaced with notions of choice and rejection of structural explanations (Colley & White, 2019), and gender equality is resolved one woman at a time rather through organisational and managerial ownership of the problem.

The development and implementation of gender equality policies is undoubtedly positive. Our analysis shows, however, that the persistence of gender inequality is not only due to structural barriers preventing progress based on gendered organisations but also to individual resistance. While the resistance literature is extensive, we have shown that some forms of resistance are held equally by male and female managers, as both men and women displayed similar levels of gender blindness, neutrality and fatigue. More men, however, demonstrated gender suppression, particularly seeing gender equality as being outside their – and their organisation’s – responsibility. We did not find overt resistance and demonstrations of male privilege were largely limited to the hyper-masculine agency. Juxtaposed against these differing levels of gendered forms of resistance are the managers’ overall awareness of, understanding and commitment to gender equality. We have also found that while managers were committed to progressing gender equality, they lacked a deep knowledge, which has implications for implementation. Problem ownership can be seen to be a mediating factor for implementation, as this lack of deep knowledge and translation to HR processes means that managers were unable to become change agents. Recognising the different forms of resistance and which is likely to prevail in certain organisations or workplaces will enable middle managers to make the leap from being a change recipient to a change agent to progress gender equality.
References


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