

Executive Summary
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A study of gender in senior civil service positions in Ireland



Introduction

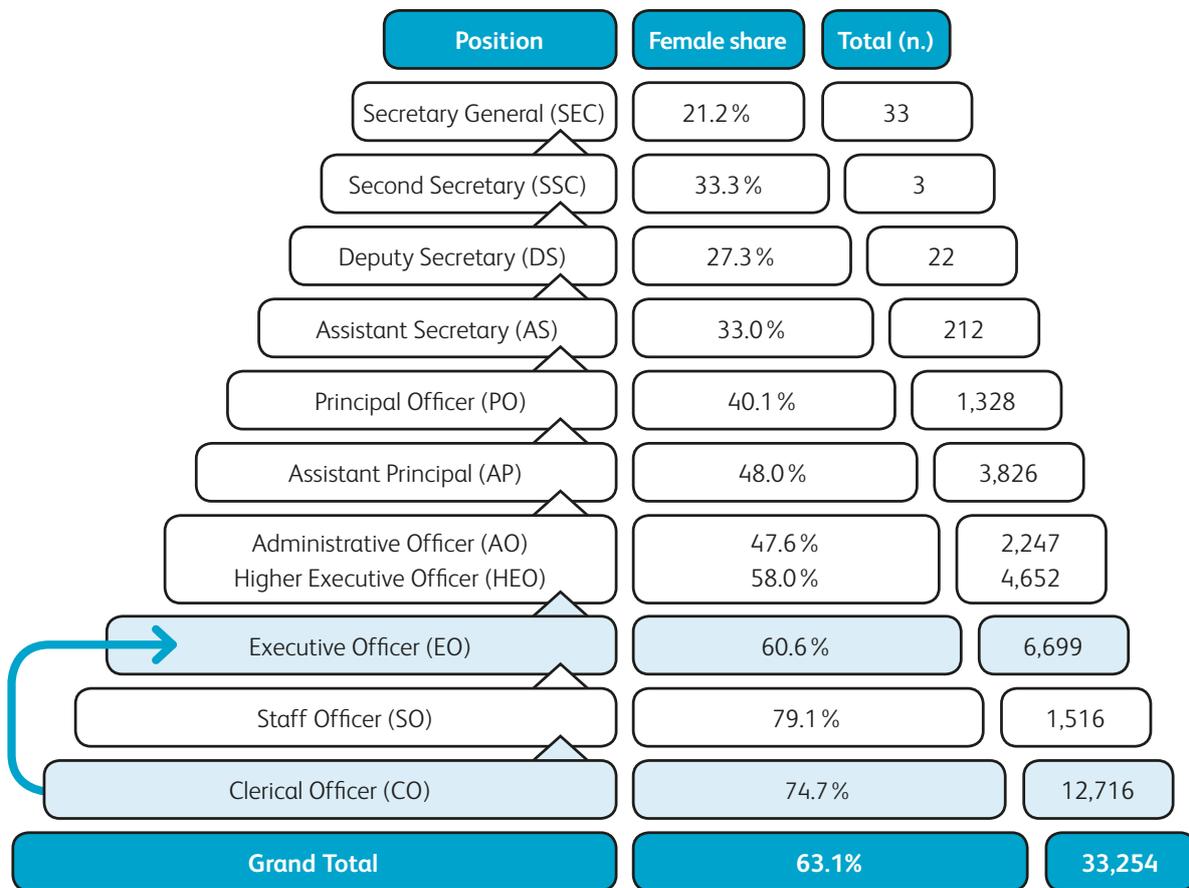
Women make up the majority of those employed in the civil service but are under-represented at the most senior grades, where key policy and operational decisions are taken. Action 8 of the Civil Service Renewal Plan commits to improving gender balance at each level, including senior grades. The present study was commissioned by a high-level steering group set up to oversee implementation of this action. The objective of the research is to investigate the factors associated with gender imbalance at the higher levels of the Civil Service. It draws on administrative data from the Civil Service Human Resource Management System, along with reanalysis of the Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey (CSEES) conducted in 2015, based on over 11,000 responses. In addition, in-depth work history interviews were undertaken with 50 senior civil servants, 36 women and 14 men, across four government departments. The four departments were selected to capture a range of dimensions, including the proportion of women at senior grades, the proportion of staff working outside head office and perceived promotion opportunities. In-depth interviews were also conducted with 11 staff involved in recruitment and promotion within the public service. This rich combination of data yields new insights into the processes shaping gender differences in representation at the most senior grades of the civil service and thus provides a strong evidence base to inform future policy and practice.

Current Patterns

Women currently make up 63 per cent of civil servants but only 33 per cent of Assistant Secretaries and 21 per cent of Secretary Generals (see Figure 1), although women’s situation has significantly improved over the last 30 years. Moreover, there is marked variation in the representation of women at senior grades across government departments. Men are twice as likely to occupy the position of Principal Officer and above as women of the same age, length of service and educational level. Women have made up an increasing proportion of external appointees to the Principal Officer grade over time but remain under-represented in their appointment via promotion. At Executive Officer level and above, men’s advancement to senior grades is found to be 1.5 to three years faster than that of women in the same starting grades who achieve senior positions. Data for the period 2010 to 2015 show that women were much less likely to apply for Assistant Secretary or Secretary General positions than men but that those who did apply were somewhat more likely to be successful.



Figure 1. Hierarchical organisation of grade levels, female share and number of civil servants by grade (2016)



Source: Civil Service Human Resource Management System.

Note: Data refer to total headcount numbers at October 2016. A further 25 cases of unknown gender, four cases of unknown grade and 1,236 ‘other’ grades have been excluded here. Specialist staff are included at their equivalent grade based on salary scale.

Perceptions of Promotion

Despite the pattern of gender differences in grades, the CSEES data show remarkably few differences between women and men in their perceptions of current promotion opportunities. It is worth noting, however, that only a minority of women and men felt they had good opportunities for promotion. For example, less than 40% of civil servants interviewed believe that there are opportunities to develop their career within the department, and fewer than one civil servant in four feel they have the opportunities they need for promotion. The senior civil servants interviewed for the qualitative part of the study had experienced a variety of different approaches to promotion over their career, including internal, interdepartmental and external/open competitions. The approach taken was broadly seen as fair by women and men but interviewees highlighted concerns about the extent to which standardised tests and competency-based interviews could reflect practice rather than work performance. It was also felt that the tests did not actually capture the kinds of skills and competencies, particularly soft skills, needed in the job, as expressed by one interviewee:

... I think that those exams don't seem to capture those softer skills that are essential at a management level in particular that you really have really good people skills, that you can encourage, that you can bring people with you, that you can motivate, that you can build that team spirit. Those tests don't capture that.

The decision to apply for promotion most commonly reflected feeling 'ready', that is, having been in the grade for a period of time and having acquired a range of skills and competencies. Very few adopted a strategic approach by setting out to acquire specific experience to enhance their promotion chances. Intrinsic interest played a significant role in the decision to apply for promotion to the grades of Assistant Secretary or Secretary General. Being familiar with the policy area or function appeared to play a stronger role in the likelihood of applying for promotion for women than men. Applying for promotion was often a highly public event, especially for internal competitions, with a good deal of discussion among peers and between managers and staff about the topic. Some saw this as a potentially negative phenomenon, as one female senior manager observed:

I find a big difference in the public sector in that everything is so public. Everybody seems to know who's going for what job ... and then everybody knows who didn't get the job, which obviously has a knock-on effect on staff morale.

Overall, candidates report receiving a good deal of support from their peers and managers in compiling their application forms and preparing for interview, which provided them with detailed knowledge about how best to approach the process. One female civil servant noted:

My manager at that time ... was a great support because she would have been involved in interviews herself and training for interviews and she had sat on a lot of boards outside of here in other departments for interviews as well so she was able to give us a great kind of insight into what we needed to do and understanding the whole idea of competency-based and what they're looking for and how to get across the best, I suppose, story to them and sell it to them.

Self-confidence, strong communication skills and preparation (in terms of doing mock interviews, for example) were seen as important factors in promotion success. Even more crucially, having accumulated certain kinds of experience, especially high profile policy projects, contact with the Minister and external stakeholders, and the opportunity to 'act up' in a more senior grade, were seen as key factors in enhancing promotion chances. Managers were seen as key in facilitating access to the kinds of work that would enable staff to build up a strong portfolio of competencies and provide opportunities to engage in higher profile and policy roles.

Many candidates, especially for the Assistant Secretary grade, had made a number of unsuccessful applications. This discouraged some candidates from applying again. Interviewees also noted that feedback was not part of the process and where such feedback was received, it was seen as quite cursory and not offering a clear indication of where candidates needed to improve.

Barriers to Promotion

The study highlighted a number of potential barriers to promotion that are particularly likely to have an impact on women. Firstly, the interviews indicated a lack of structured handover and induction with a 'sink or swim' approach common for those newly promoted to senior roles. Many interviewees spoke of the difficulties they encountered in struggling to get to grips with a very new policy area and a new set of internal and external contacts. Managers reported that they themselves were expected to be proactive in sourcing information and 'reading themselves into' the role. One male senior manager observed:

I found it ... I have to say daunting in the first probably couple of months. ... It's instantaneous. So, you kind of, you know, you get the role and tomorrow morning you start. And you're told, "Well, there's a meeting and the Taoiseach's going to it". ... so you're kind of – you really are – on a wing and a prayer for a while.

In a context where women typically have lower self-confidence levels than men and reported higher workload intensity, a higher position may appear daunting, something that might discourage women from applying for promotion.

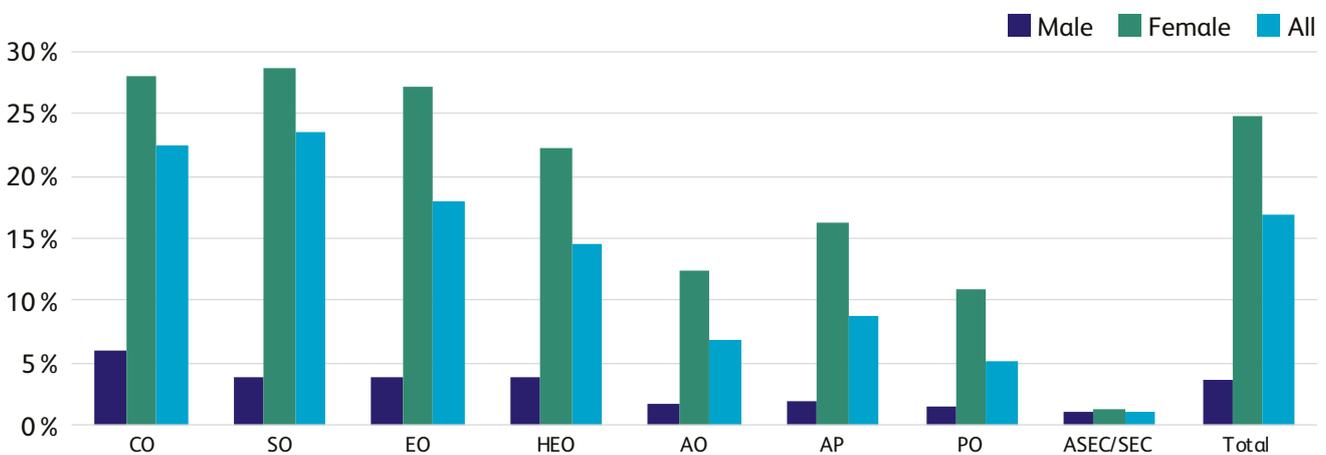
Secondly, lack of self-confidence was itself a potential barrier, with women often feeling that they had to excel in relation to all of the specified criteria. Men and women alike spoke of women needing to be sure that they meet all criteria in order to submit an application, as expressed by one female senior manager:

It is a bit of a cliché ... but men tend to apply for promotion because it's going, women tend to be much more careful in terms of – do they tick every single box? Whereas you know lads who probably have less going for them in a lot of ways but have a more self-assured perception of themselves.

Thirdly, and perhaps the most crucial issue, lack of flexible working arrangements at senior grades was viewed as a significant barrier. Administrative data show that women are much more likely to avail of such arrangements than men but that very few staff at senior grades work less than full-time hours (see Figure 2). The data also revealed that openness to part-time working varies significantly across departments, ranging from 20% in the Department of Health to 11% in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Interviews with human resources personnel confirmed that Departments differed in the extent to which certain roles were seen as incompatible with flexible working. This suggests that organisational culture plays a role.

A common theme in the qualitative interviews was that the loss of flexibility and consequently of the ability to combine paid work and child- or elder-care deterred women from applying for promotion or had led them to postpone such applications. The postponement of promotion, in a context where repeated applications are often needed to progress, meant that some women felt they ran out of time to develop their careers.

Figure 2 Proportion of staff at each grade working part-time, 2016



Source: Civil Service Human Resource Management System.

Note: 'Part-time' includes all those recorded as those working less than full-time hours (<1FTE).

Barriers to Promotion

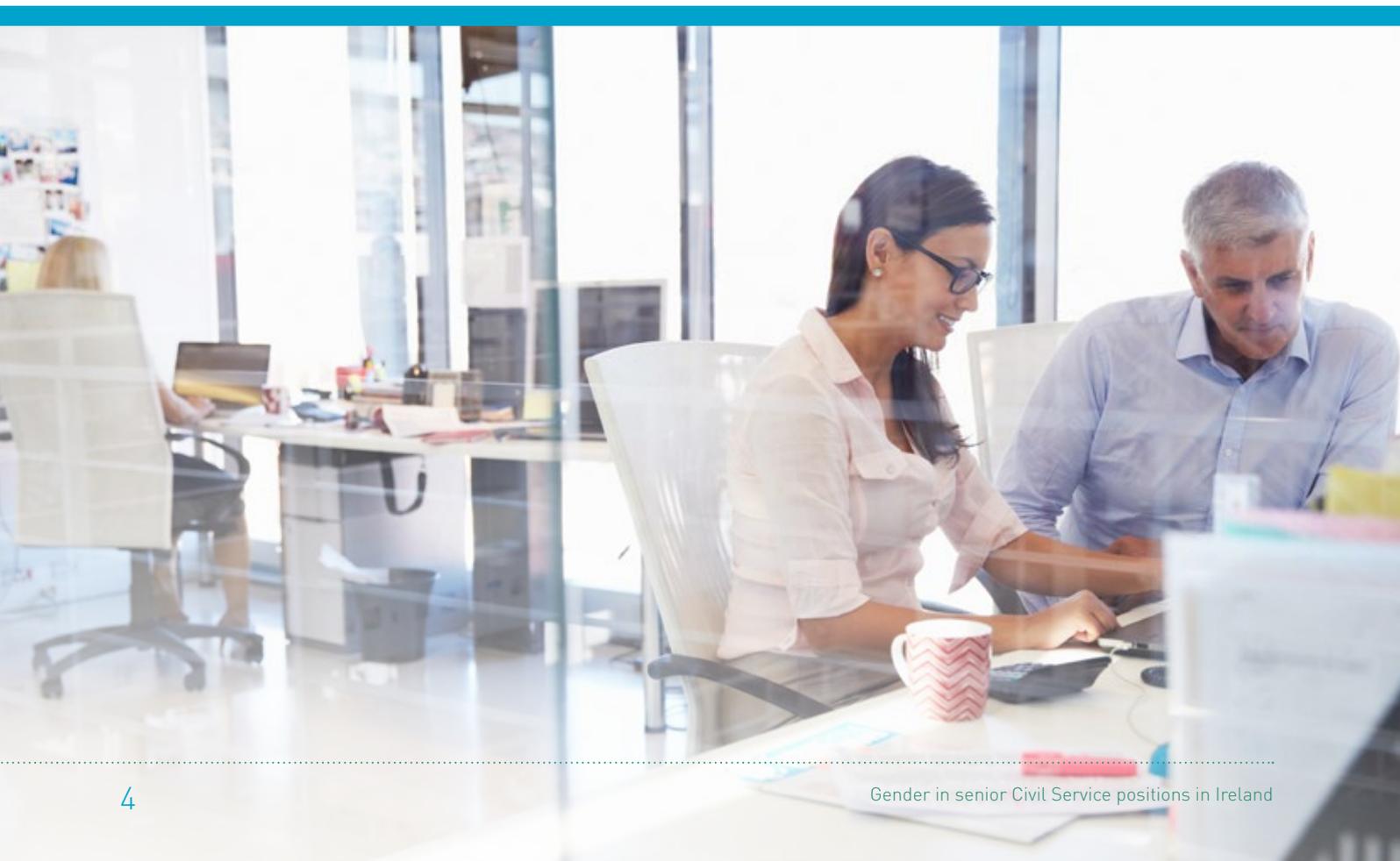
The pattern of lack of flexible working arrangements at senior levels is reinforced by the long-hours culture described by many interviewees and by the high levels of work intensity reported in the CSEES by those at senior grades. Among interviewees, many spoke of the demands of senior management requiring long working hours (often 12 to 14 hour days), with some regularly working weekends as well. Further, staff that availed of flexible work arrangements and reduced working days often found that this change did not correspond with any reduction in workload. The CSEES data show work pressure rises steadily with grade and reaches very high levels at senior grades. A large majority (70%) of those at Principal Officer level and above felt that they had too much work for one person, 64% reported that they never had enough time to get everything done and 50% reported that there is not enough time to do everything well. Across each grade women were more likely to report greater pressure than men and the gap was widest in the most senior positions.

Fourthly, promotion chances are seen as being enhanced by having certain kinds of experience in the current role, but these opportunities are not equally distributed by department, location or gender. Women at Principal Officer level are more likely than men at the same grade to be involved in service delivery or direct service to the public, roles that may lack the visibility to enhance promotion chances. Women at very senior levels (Director,

Assistant Secretary or above) are markedly more likely than their male colleagues to work in service delivery or corporate support, so even very successful women may be more confined to certain occupational niches. Overall, women are less likely to be involved in policy and programme implementation. Since 'policy' is the area most associated with senior positions in the civil service, men's greater access to such work is likely to be an advantage in promotion competitions. Male and female interviewees spoke of the importance of 'prestigious' and 'high profile' roles, with one female senior manager stating:

You are more likely to get promoted if you've been in the really interesting area, doing really important work, than if you've been in an ordinary area doing ordinary work ... and the guys are more likely to get the sexy jobs ... because I think there is a level of unconscious bias.

Finally, the requirement to engage in foreign travel, spells abroad or movement within Ireland may impinge more on women with family responsibilities, thus restricting their ability to apply for certain positions.



Implications for Future Policy and Practice



The study findings point to a number of factors that could facilitate the promotion opportunities of all staff but are likely to have particular benefits for women, given the barriers identified in the study. The confidence of staff, especially women, is likely to be enhanced by a structured period of induction and/or handover as staff move from one role to another, reinforced by mentoring and coaching. Such an approach is also likely to greatly enhance the effectiveness of the department or unit by ensuring the transfer of skills, expertise and contacts. Staff currently have little say in the roles to which they are allocated, highlighting the need for a more systematic approach to career development, involving a personal development plan designed to help staff develop skills and competencies across a range of functions.

Promotion procedures for senior grades – Higher Executive Officer to Assistant Secretary – are generally seen as fair. However, there is an argument for consideration to be given to taking account of a candidate's work performance in the promotion procedure, for example, by taking up references (as is done for Top Level Appointments Committee candidates). Rigorous training of interview boards for both external and internal promotion rounds

is also crucial, while greater feedback for unsuccessful candidates could help build the resilience needed for repeated applications.

The lack of flexible working arrangements and heavy workload requiring long hours among those at senior grades raises a more general issue of the appropriate nature of work organisation at senior levels. To enhance the quality of work generally, and to achieve real gender equity, a greater openness to flexible working arrangements across grades and functions is required.

There is a need for ongoing monitoring of the profile of women and men applying for, and being successful in, promotion competitions. Information is needed not just on promotion rates by gender but on the profile of the potential pool, actual applicants and successful candidates in terms of age and family responsibilities. There is considerable potential to use the Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey to collect additional information, especially on family responsibilities and length of time in current position, thereby identifying groups of staff who face barriers in applying for promotion, as well as those who succeed in doing so.



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