Women in Leadership: Who Can Have it All?

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Abstract

After the two evolutionary achievements in equal opportunity and work/life balance agendas when feminists have been debating whether women can have it all; Sandberg, the COO of Face book provides a ground breaking argument in her famous book Lean In that having it all is nothing but a myth. She instead questions whether women can do it all. She also believes nobody actually can. In this paper, I investigated this ongoing debate whether women can have it all or more precisely women can do it all. I utilized unrefined primary data gleaned from interviews with eight female senior executives in the South Australian Public Service. Experiences of these female senior executives suggest that although doing it all has different meanings in different women’s lives; all women indeed have to make strategic adjustments when to combine career and family. In this process three essential aiders are: agency, priority and lifestyle preference and necessary formal and informal work supports. While the employee relations policies today assist women in building confidence that if they want they can do it all, these policies likely to be less effective in bringing career/family balance for many women in the senior leadership levels. Therefore, having it all often solely depends on individual agency of these women.

Conference Stream: Open stream

Key Words: Gender equality, leadership, public service
1. Introduction to the Research Problem

1.1 Women in leadership

Achieving equal opportunity at work has always been a primary concern for feminists. As part of this concern many feminist scholars and activists have drawn attention to the barriers that have prevented women from gaining equal representation in the ranks of senior executives- the phenomenon commonly referred to as ‘the glass-ceiling’. Feminist scholars have long believed that if women had access to the same educational opportunities and professional networks as their male counterparts, they would shatter the glass ceiling and would make their way to the top management positions. However, even after having required equal opportunity policies and legislations for more than two decades it seems that women still now are unable to achieve equality with men in leadership positions; no matter it is in public or private organisations.

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

The broad purpose of this paper is to analyse what factors continue to hold more women back from achieving leadership positions in employment? And what factors actually support them to achieve career/family balance and acquire into the top leadership levels. Before going deep into the research problem the current context of women in leadership in Australia has been briefly discussed in the following section.
1.2 Women in leadership: A Closer look at Australian Context

In 2012, Australian women comprised 47% of Executive Level employees of the Australian Public Service and only 39% of the Senior Executive Service (SES) although they outnumber men in all junior classifications (ABS, 2012). In the 2009-10 financial year, women held only 1887 (33.4%) of a total 5655 positions on 529 Australian Government boards and bodies which indicated that there were more than 10 men to every one woman in this level (Australian Public Service Commission, 2008). The following graph demonstrates the gender composition of SES employees of the APS in 2008.

Figure 1: Men and Women Participation In the SES, (Whelan, 2011)

Statistics from the private sector are worse than these. In the 200 listed Australian Stock Exchange companies, women held only 8.3% of board directorships, 10.7% of executive managerial positions, and only 2% of positions as chair (EOWA, 2008). That is, in the CEO level there were more than 49 men to every one woman. Evidence also suggests that in the same year the number of companies without women executive managers rose sharply to 45.5% from 39.5% in 2006 (Andrews & Bourke, 2011). This is clearly shown in the following table.
Table 1: Trend data on the profile of women according to the 2004, 2006 and 2007 EOWA Census (EOWA 2008 as cited in Bourke & Andrews, 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>Change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASX200 Chairs</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>No change between 2006 to 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASX CEOs</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>Reduction between 2004 and 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASX200 Board Directors</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>No significant change between 2004 and 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASX200 Executive managers (total)</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>Reduction between 2004 and 2008</td>
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The Australian Census of Women in Leadership EOWA (2008) has revealed that the growth of women within leadership in this sector is, surprisingly, ‘stagnant’ or ‘slipping’. Although female board directorship numbers rose substantially during 2012, very little has changed in terms of the number of women within executive ranks within the last decade. It is argued that due to a fluctuating growth of female representations in the Key Executive Personnel positions, this cannot be interpreted as a stable progression towards leadership equality in Australia (EOWA, 2010).
2. Women in Leadership: Literature Review

2.1 Feminist Arguments on the Reasons of Leadership Inequality in Modern Workplaces

Feminists have long believed that if women had access to the same educational opportunities and professional networks as their male counterparts, they would shatter the glass ceiling and would make progress towards gender balance in the leadership. But decades later, with professional programs like law and medicine often graduating more women than men, and with many of the traditional barriers now gone it is surprising that women still now occupy a small fraction of board membership and top managerial positions.

In attempts to answer the question of why women continue to face a glass ceiling and remain under-represented at senior levels of organisations, researchers and commentators have offered a variety of conflicting explanations.

Mainstream feminist arguments recognise the adverse impacts of social and organisational obstacles which create labour market and workplace inequalities, and hence the need for government intervention to promote more egalitarian and non-discriminative workplaces for women. In relation to the glass ceiling, they suggest that if there were less or no social and structural barriers, women would automatically progress to the highest levels of the organisational hierarchy. Feminist researchers have also argued that even in the Public Service where many gender advances have been introduced, a genuine non-discriminatory gender culture is yet to be achieved (Connell, 2005, 2006; CPSU, 2008; Dolan, 2000, 2004; Nutley & Mudd, 2005; O'Faircheallaigh, Wanna, & Weller, 1999; Olsson & Pringle, 2004; Whelan, 2011).

Oakley, J. (2000) has identified that there are two different categories of explanations and theories available in the feminist literatures concerning the factors that preserve the glass-ceiling. According to her, in the first category, barriers are created by workplace practices which are more objective and easier to deal with through policies and programmes. Such as recruitment process that favours masculinity, selection, recruitment and promotion process that prefers males over females, and so on. In the second category barriers are often behavioural and cultural. The explanations for these barriers ‘revolve around the issues like stereotyping, tokenism, power, preferred leadership styles, and the psychodynamics of male/female relations’ (Oakley, 2000b, p. 322).
After the equal opportunity revolution it is currently argued that even though the organisational practice is not visibly gender biased the culture and attitudes within the workplace, particularly in the higher executive/corporate levels, still secure biases and discriminations against female employees. It is, therefore, a main reason for lack of women in the senior management positions.

Even after securing the top positions by overcoming the stereotypical structural and social barriers, female senior executives report experience of discrimination where their capabilities and contributions have often been underestimated due to male domination in the workplaces (Chesterman, Ross-Smith, & Peters, 2004; Oakley, 2000a; Vardon, 2010). Because of such biases and discriminative attitudes many senior female executives burn out of their roles. Evidences also suggest such cultural and behavioural forces, moreover, push the female middle managers away from the senior managerial roles.

Many senior female managers complain that in the boardrooms they are often taken just as ‘tokens’ (Vardon, 2010). Evidences show in organizations where more than 30% of the senior management is run by female managers, hardly their contributions are seen as attributes of successful management. Instead, their leadership skills are seen as feminine traits. For example, there is a perception that the female management style is more of interpersonal, known as transformational management style, which is more communicative and people oriented. In several occasions, it is found that such perception of differential management styles of male and female usually is disadvantageous for females and such stereotypes portray women as less capable leaders particularly when the company is looking for someone capable to achieve deadlines, targets and profits (Chesterman, et al., 2004; Oakley, 2000b; Ross-Smith & Chesterman, 2009).

Gender-based stereotypes and the closed circle of the ‘old boy network’ are strong organisational forces that are slow to change (Oakley, 2000b). Scholars argue that the ‘old boy network’ is still very strong due to male majority in the senior posts and men still think, ‘we feel more comfortable with people like us around’ (CPSU, 2008; Summers, 2003; Vardon, 2010). A common complaint of senior executive women, therefore, is that they often face fear of isolation. In the board rooms they often are not taken very seriously; they feel as if they do not exist. This current phenomenon is like ‘pushing peanuts uphill’, where without creating opportunities or suitable work atmospheres women are continuously blamed for not pushing harder to progress careers up to the leadership levels. It is similar to ‘workplace
domestic violence’ where women face mock challenges to compete for leadership but when they reach there their voices are usually unheard and undermined (Vardon, 2010).

The existing literatures on women at work also acknowledge the strong interdependency between women’s career progression and work-family collision as the underlying disadvantage for women to acquire into senior leadership positions in many Australian organizations (Andrews & Bourke, 2011; Austen, Birch, & Competitiveness, 2002; Connell, 2006; EOWA, 2010; Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009; Johnstone & Lee, 2009; Pocock, 2003, 2005a, 2005b). Evidences show that the activity of caring for children is still very much gendered and so is the work/family balance (Pocock, 2005a), which often impact women’s likability for securing senior executive roles. This is also regarded as one of the reasons that sustains glass ceiling in organisations to restrict women from high powered, high salaried leadership roles.

Furthermore, a number of feminist scholars have suggested that there is a need to rethink the job design of executive level of roles; as sometime these roles are too women-unfriendly that it contribute in sustaining the glass-ceiling effects in many organisations (Bourke & Andrews, 2011; Hakim, 2006). Mid-career female employees who are mothers often complaint that highly demanding top executive jobs do not appeal them because of its work loads, work hours, job intensity and therefore, less favourable work/life outcomes (Hakim, 2006; Simpson, 1998). As ideal working norms are heavily applied in the top executive roles, it is argued that the job design and work/life situations of these positions are never family-friendly. The question arises here, is there something about the nature of jobs themselves, particularly about the executive roles that they actually keep women away from it? Does the structure of such roles reflect ‘hidden biases’ about masculine abilities and reject femininity in leadership and management roles? (Bourke & Andrews, 2011)

However, while the mainstream feminists are busy arguing about the impacts of glass-ceiling and organisational culture and practices; the post-modern feminists upheld some new insights to define persistent leadership inequality in Australian workplaces. Contrast to the ‘mainstream’ feminist view, a group of postmodern feminists have argued that the reason why women remain under-represented at senior levels is more directly related to the individual choices that they are now free to make rather than any remaining structural barriers to their advancement. Therefore, if some or most of the new generation women do not exhibit leadership attributes, or willingness to push harder for securing top managerial careers; then,
this is their individual choice, it is ‘girl’s power’ today (Boyes, 2012; Dezso & Ross, 2008; Hakim, 2000, 2002; Mansaray, 2009). This new development in feminism basically argues that a changed gender context now exists in society where women are more qualified, independent and empowered than ever before, and, where such progress has caused associated changes in female values, aspirations and behaviours towards career goals and life’s aspirations.

To describe this recent development in feminism, scholars use the examples like Anne-Marie Slaughter, the director of policy planning for Hillary Clinton, who has stepped down from her ‘high powered White house position’(Hayward, 2012); or Nicola Roxon, the former Australian attorney-general who has resigned from her role and become stay at home mother (Thompson, 2013). It was their personal preferences to leave their hard earned leadership positions.

While the third wave of feminists describe such career behaviour as choice feminism the mainstream feminists argue that such incidences actually indicate that combining family and leadership career is still difficult for the 21st century women. This is why women burn out easily. A ground breaking research on the senior executives in USA has discovered that modern women today not only struggle to have a balance between their family lives and career progression but also often do more serious personal sacrifices when they wish to break through glass-ceiling to secure leadership positions.

The research discovers that in the USA-

• 49% of ultra-achieving career women (earning more than 100,000 $) ages 41-55 are childless.
• 33% of high achieving career women (earning $55,000-$66,000) ages 41-55 are childless; 57% are unmarried.

However, the more successful a man is, the more likely he has a spouse and children:

Only 19% of ultra-achieving men are childless and 17% unmarried. (Hewlett, 2002)

Studies suggest that this has become a very surprising but well-kept secret of most of the developed countries. To support her findings another study done by Guillaume and Pochic (2009) identifies that French women need to do ‘hard-core sacrifices’, such as- not taking children or being divorced or staying single to access into top management positions.
(Guillaume & Pochic, 2009). The British sociologist Hakim (2006) also suggests that similar evidences are common in England too (Hakim, 2006).

Such research findings, therefore, permeate the debate that when the post-modern feminists are so sanguine about opportunities and choices of the modern women; why they still are not able to have it all; that is, a successful career and family life. Why they often need to do severe personal sacrifices if they wish to progress their careers into the leadership levels?

While most of the traditional barriers for female career advancement are arguably waned away in the 21st century, and, researchers and policy-makers still are working on how to achieve leadership equality in Australia; this paper aims to look at the whole research problem from a different perspective- from the perspectives of those women who already have gained success in their careers and in their personal lives. It is to understand the factors that generally have supported them to achieve their success. It also investigates about those factors which are unfavourable for career advancements of female employees, particularly for those who aspire for a senior leadership career.

This paper, therefore, seeks to answer the following central research question by conducting an empirical study:

- Can women have it all?

The paper also makes enquiry about:

- To what extent (and in what ways) does structure of opportunity of an organisation assist its female executives to have it all by making them break through the glass ceiling and by combining family and career?
3. Method: Discovering Leadership Experience

This paper has utilised unrefined data from a broader research project which has been undertaken by the researcher at the University of Adelaide as a part of her Master’s thesis in 2014. By using a significant portion of data and information gleaned from eight interviews with female Senior Executives in the South Australian Public Service, who are aged from 30 to 55, the researcher has analysed the key research questions of this paper.

A significant portion of the interview questionnaire has involved questions which are closely related to the components of the research questions of this paper.

At first when the researcher has invited the female senior executives to participate in this research, she did not expect an overwhelming number of positive responses. However, after starting to interview these high-profiled executive women, she noticed that they had so much to tell about their success stories; their failures; their career experiences and personal strategies to overcome career/family collisions as well as their suggestions for the young generation of women in successfully establishing ‘having it all’. Such positive attitudes from these female leaders, thus, represented their integrity, eagerness and support for leadership equality in the Public Service. Such attitudes also helped the researcher to successfully draw conclusions on the research problem identified.

The primary focus of the interviews with these senior female executives in the South Australian Public Service was to analyse the factors that allowed them to secure their leadership roles in the public service. The interviews also discussed organisational structural elements, policies and practices and their work/life balance experiences. The study also sought to reveal the approaches that these senior executives had utilised to overcome any impediments to ‘have it all’ in their lives.
4. Findings: Views from the Top

While I was interviewing these successful women, I found that ‘having it all’ had different meanings to them; it was not necessarily always acquiring the top leadership roles or having children. But, combining achievements in careers and having a preferred lifestyle were important to each one of them. Lisa commented, ‘…I always feel I am a career woman. I am the first wave of generation who feel that they can have it all.’ (Lisa, 48, SAES-3)

After the evolutionary achievements in equal opportunity and work/life balance agendas when feminists have been debating whether women can have it all by minimising gender gap in the leadership; Sandberg, the COO of Facebook provides a groundbreaking argument in her famous book ‘Lean In’ that having it all is nothing but a myth. She instead questions whether ‘women can do it all’ (Sandberg & Scovell, 2013). In her views to have it all women need to do it all and for doing it all they need to ensure some formal and informal supports for them. The most important support they can get is from their organisations and from their families.

During my interviews with the senior women executives, when I asked them about the support from their organisation I get overwhelming responses. I noticed that invariably each one of them observed equal opportunities for career progression from their organisations. They generally see no discriminative attitude or inequalities in the selection and recruitment processes. None of them identified that their unsuccessful applications for new positions or promotions were related to any kind of gender discrimination; instead, they suggested that often their applications get rejected because of their own lacking, such as lack of relevant experience, lack of suitable expertise or qualifications, or there were better candidates than them for the same jobs.

Clare identified that her latest application for a new executive post was unsuccessful because she herself was not ready to take that role, ‘…I think I wasn’t ready and so I did not give a sense of being capable of taking the job.’ She also commented, ‘… I do think it is really hard to go from ASO-8 to Senior Executive levels and the competition is very high. There are a lot of people in the mid-executive levels but the senior executive jobs does not get advertised very often. So I do not think there is any particular barrier for women. I think the same would be true for men and women in the same level and the challenges are the same in taking the next step.’ (Clare, 32, SAES-1)
When asked did that mean no systematic or non-systematic barriers were restricting women’s upward career progression, a number of interviewees replied that there were systematic as well as cultural barriers that might obstruct women’s career trajectory but those were not always related to gender or gender differences. Instead, these restraining factors are more related to public sector work ethics and the culture of employee relations.

Christina explained the situation, ‘We in the public service are not recruiting for potentials. We do not like to come out of the comfort zone, recruitments happen by knowing someone. We do not take risks. It is very stereotypical… However, patriotism or nepotism in the public service is clearly defined. So, theoretically it does not happen. But again performance measurement is not very tactful here. Recruitment decisions are taken depending on perceptions… As women are not good at networking, they usually are not known faces in the workplaces. The impression is not created at all. The perception thing therefore is not in favour of women. Thus, they get discriminated.’ (Christina, 48, SAES-1)

To answer that whether women’s inability to stand out has any link with their lesser number in securing executive level of jobs, Clare explained, ‘Men are more successful at gaining those positions because they are better at demanding. I know a few occasions where men have said, well, if you wanna keep me you gonna have to promote me to the executive level, that attitude, and the way they sell themselves- not common in women…I am not good at selling myself the kind of really impulsive and brave way...So, I think that would be a factor as well.’ (Clare, 32, SAES-1)

From the initial discussion with the senior executives it seems that they are confident enough on the structure of opportunity within their organisations. As it is seemingly equitable, non-discriminative and merit based; it is generally supportive to those women in the pipeline for leadership roles who are qualified and also aspire to be there.

They again suggested that if women get discriminated it mostly happened because of their own lacking or incapability to comply with the workplace culture in the public service; not because of the structure of opportunity. They identifies three particular characteristics which are frequently found in female mid-career executives to limit their ability to gain promotions; these are- lack of confidence, lack of stand-out or demanding ability, lack of networking ability. These factors ultimately make the female employees disadvantageous in the recruitment and selection processes within the government.
However, after an in-depth discussion with these high powered female leaders it was revealed that while structural discriminations are not in fashion now a days, these women also sometime get discriminated because of male dominated organisational culture in the leadership levels. They suggest these are mostly cultural things and endemic in male dominated workplaces. Therefore, they did not see them as organisational structural barriers anymore rather these were barriers that stem from broader stereotypical gender norms and cultures that manifested themselves in the attitudes and behaviours of individual male executives.

Even though the participants did not see or experienced gender based discriminations in their organisations in relation to recruitment, selection and promotion prospects, they experienced gender based harassments and discriminations in the boardrooms and in many other occasions while working in the decision-making processes. They presumed that these attitudes were generally linked to stereotypical gender conceptions and cultures in organisations. Such cultural practices were persistent because female senior executives were so few in number that they were unable to act as change agents within the Senior Executive Services. However, many of them argued that such behavioural issues were also related to power struggle and the workplace culture of the Government organisations.

When I analysed their comments I find that most of the Senior Executives from the female dominated departments were mostly satisfied in their roles in terms of value, respect and impact on decision making process. However, the participants who were in the male dominated organisations were the ones who were unhappy and felt discriminated.

Linda shared her experience where she commented that being discriminated was a daily phenomenon for her. Most of the meetings that she attended were mostly male dominated. The chairs of those meetings were almost always males. ‘Males usually think that they can take over; you have no control on it’, as she said. She also added if women were good decision makers they were seen as aggressive. If women had good reputations they would face unfair judgements. This is how she is discriminated every week.

Amanda said she experienced discrimination in the boardrooms. Inside the boardrooms dominations are usually done by older male executives. As female executives are generally 10-15 years younger than the male managers they have been discriminated because of having lesser experiences. They face de-valuations. She explained that it happened because the old boy network was still very strong.
Similar story was shared by Sara. She said that she experienced such situation where she was the only female member in the board room. And the males took over the whole decision making process. She felt intimidated and left off. However, she said it happened in the departments which were male dominated. In departments which were female oriented were not like that rather the female dominated organisations are ‘…more friendly looking.’ (Sara, 38, Deputy Chief Executive)

It is; again, true that in male dominated workplaces a woman almost always has to prove her capabilities and competences more extensively than a man to be eligible for an executive or senior executive role. Such ill competition has become a part of the organisational culture and a noticeable de-motivator for young women, as the participants resentfully commented. Although the structure for remuneration is defined in the public service, career prospects do not have clear measurements or appraisal technique. A woman has to give a lot more than any man to be in the executive roles:

‘…in my experience I see females are more competent than most of the males in these positions...although females have to struggle more than males to get into these high-powered roles.’ (Christina, 48, SAES-1)

‘…you can be really fabulous but still you can be undermined. You have to know that cultural barriers are still there and you have to be prepared...we actually need organisations to recognise these barriers. Individually you can stand out but socially it should be recognised. I think men are the answer. It won’t change if they are not aware of it.’ (Emma, 53, SAES-3)

While workplace culture particularly in male dominated occupations and levels were evident to be gender biased, female senior executives believed that if females would be more confidence and resilient they could overcome these cultural barriers. For this, it is also essential to increase the number of women in these workplaces.

To encourage more women to grab leadership roles these senior leaders suggested that these workplaces should be more family-friendly. In most of the feminist literatures on women at work, it has been stated in various occasions that women’s family and care responsibilities and work/family collisions have made it difficult for them to advance their careers up to the leadership levels. Andrew and Bourke in their book chapter on in-depth discussion on women in leadership, have suggested that the job design of the senior executive-managerial jobs should be restructured to make it more family-friendly vis a vis female friendly as in their
study they have found that adverse work/life balance situation in the executive and managerial level of jobs often keep the junior women, particularly those who are mothers, in the pipeline away from applying for those roles (Bourke & Andrews, 2011).

However, the senior executives in this study have shared some different views on their work/life situations and strategies for achieving better work/life balance. Half of the participants suggested that even though they worked too many hours and there were no fixed hours in their jobs they did not necessarily have to juggle between their work and life. They were, as they suggested, most of the time satisfied in their jobs. However, the main reason for not having much work/life collisions was that they either did not have children or their children were grownups.

However, the rest half participants complained that they have to juggle a lot. It was noticeable that those who had young children said they felt juggling. Therefore, it was clear that the perception of work/life balance of these senior executive women often was related to their personal life conditions, that is, whether having young children or not; rather than to work intensity, work hour or job requirements.

Christina commented that she did a lot of overtimes which were always unpaid. But she never felt she was juggling between work and life as she did not have children. A similar thing is echoed in Lisa’s statement, as she said, ‘…I do overtime. I am here most nights after 6pm. It is not paid. I travel a bit but not extensively. But my children are older. I don’t feel much juggle between work and life.’ (Lisa, 48, SAES-1)

Sara’s experience was little different. She said her life was terribly work centred. She even worked in weekends. She commented, ‘I have no time for me to be sick. I don’t have time for holidays. My work life balance is not the answer for many people, particularly for mothers with young children. They will be horrified.’ (Sara, 38, Deputy Chief Executive)

When asked whether such work intensities impacted their job satisfaction or career goal, almost each one of them replied, their job satisfaction was not really related to their work/life conditions. Rather, their job satisfaction was mostly related to work achievements and being valued at work. They also stated that they knew they had to be available 24/7 for the type of jobs they were choosing to do and it was also written in their job contracts that they had to be available whenever needed. Sara said, ‘… the women who do not mind the hours and the pressures should come forward for leadership level of jobs. The work environment is good. You will have autonomy and control over own time. I used to work in less hour jobs but the
team was not very helpful and the work environment was unfavourable. I was more stressed. But in this role I am satisfied.' (Sara, 38, Chief Executive)

For most of these female senior executives in this study who had young children, managing home was more difficult than managing their work.

Amanda commented, ‘Work is not struggling. Managing home is struggling. After children, arranging home is struggling around full time work.’ (Amanda, 42, SAES-3)

Sara added, ‘I juggle a lot. It is a day by day proposition. When there is a young child it becomes less in control. To me work at home is harder than work at work. Sometimes even before coming to work you have to do work for the whole day at home…When there are work deadlines and if things at home are not going smooth, there comes the guilt factor.’ (Sara, 38, Deputy Chief Executive)

The majority of the senior executives who had dependents blamed the work/life balance policies for being ineffective and faulty in their work levels. It was surprising for this study to know that work/life balance policies were not very much effective to bring about a balance between work and life for these working mothers in these highly powerful leadership positions. All of these women acknowledged that introduction of work life balance policies and practices have made the lives of the junior, non-executive female employees easy but it was not same for the senior executive women.

The first thing that they identified was that in executive level of jobs no employee was entitled to flexi-time options or flexible work arrangements. They could only take purchased leave, compressed leave or working from home options. The senior executives who had young children suggested they suffered the most when an emergency situation came up. If they needed to take an unexpected leave or time off for any emergency reason they could take it informally but they had to make it up later by working overtime.

Again, the participants also suggested that compressed leave was not suitable for the kind of jobs they did because there were no standard work hours for them. They suggested that working from home was an option which could be employed in the rare occasions of off-peak times. But, working from home is not suitable most of the time because the senior executives often need to give instant decisions or tackle emergency situations which obviously were not possible from home. Emma stated that she sometimes works from home, ‘…at times I work from home but it is not for achieving better work/life balance. It is because I have too many to do. My purpose, therefore, is not having work/life balance, it is again the work.’ (Emma,
53, SAES-3) Regarding purchased leave Linda stated, ‘I just do completely full job but I have to pay for it when I am purchasing the two hours leave.’ (Linda, 40, SAES-2)

Therefore, senior executive roles are still now difficult for female employees particularly who have children or expect to have children. Again, it also gives an impression that at the leadership levels it is not expected that employees would have had dependents. In regard to combining parenthood and executive level of jobs Christina commented, ‘…if you are an executive you have be available to meet the expectation for long hours. If you leave early, for example at 5:30 pm, it is seen as you are not serious enough or giving it right as a senior executive. It poses a threat that your contract may not be renewed anymore…If the work culture in these levels would be more family-friendly then many working mothers would be interested to secure these roles.’ (Christina, 48, SAES-1)

From the experiences of these senior executives it was clear that work/life balance policies and available family-friendly provisions did a little to assist them in achieving work/life balance. They stated that it was their own wills, family supports, lifestyle strategies that had helped them in combining career success and family responsibilities. These executives also suggested that a number of support systems in their lives had helped them to achieve the ability to manage between work and home and they said these are essential and invaluable for women to be able to sustain in leadership level of jobs.

Partner support

All of these senior executives suggested that for being successful in careers family support was very important, particularly from their partners.

Bianca suggested that she could not do it without the support of her partner. Clare explained that particularly in the time of juggle she needed her partner to be there. The similar was shared by most of the other participants where they remarked that being in such top role was possible because they got continuous supports, encouragements and inspirations from their partners.

‘…my partner is reasonably considerate and supportive. He is self-employed, so better than others may be. He sometimes is entirely responsible for children. We both respect each other’s work. We operate like single parents sometimes.’ (Amanda, 42, SAES-3)

Child care support

The senior executives who have young children said that they took paid formal child care supports. However, all of them had informal supports as well, such as - supports from
grandparents or family friends. The noticeable thing is that every one of them felt they were extremely lucky as their partners were very supportive regarding child rearing.

Linda said, ‘We have supports from grandparents for our children, but my husband manages the kids when I am away.’ (Linda, 40, SAES-2)

An interesting example had been set by Sara and her husband regarding arrangement of child care of their children. When Sara took her first child she took six months maternity leave and then came back as full timer. She did not have to be part-timer as her husband decided to stay home full time for taking care of their first child. During the time of the second child Sara decided to work part time and her husband worked full time. It definitely helped her growing her career as a senior executive and later being a Chief executive, as she stated, ‘…I was not having any emotional problem returning full time after the birth of my daughter because I was not choosing between my daughter and the work. Instead, I was choosing between me being part-time or my husband being the carer. And my husband was at home for the care of the child and it definitely helped me growing my career.’ (Sara, 38, Deputy Chief Executive)

**Domestic work support**

Most of the participants shared that they were satisfied on the arrangements of domestic work sharing with their partners and they did not see many differences. A number of them even commented that their partners did more than they did. In terms of breadwinning, it seemed that all of these executive women saw themselves as one of the primary bread winners for their families. They seemed do not perceive inequalities in their families based on gender difference.

Linda said, ‘It is not an issue for us. In fact he does far more than me. I do shopping and bills, like outgoing works. He does most of the in-house works.’ (Linda, 40, SAES-2)

Most of these participants also shared that they usually took the help of external supports such as- assistance from a paid cleaner or a cook or a gardener; ‘…yes we share, it is 50:50. We have a cleaner though, I am satisfied.’ (Emma, 53, SAES-1)

Bianca said, ‘My partner works part time, so he does more than me, however, we also have a cleaner and a gardener for external household supports.’ (Bianca, 36, SAES-1)

After describing about organisational supports and family supports the senior executives suggested that there was one particular thing that had helped them in achieving senior
leadership role and it was their own agency. Such agency included career goals, aspirations, expectations, priorities and lifestyle preferences of these female executives.

Although the majority of these high-flying women denied that they ever had a specific goal or ambition for leadership roles or had clear career plans, they said they all were always very careerist or career-minded. They identified such attitude as ‘commitment to work’ (Bianca, 36, SAES-1). They acknowledged that they always had inner drives for career achievements.

Linda who is working in the executive role in the Government for seven years and in the senior executive role for almost two years, commented, ‘I had no ambition to work in powerful executive jobs with the public service. I think I am a natural leader. So, I have naturally driven into leadership role.’ When I asked her about her career journey up to the senior executive level she said, ‘…it just fell into place and it all just kind of happened. I have been appointed for a job in the public service which I even did not apply for. I applied for an alternative job. They said, look we do not want you to do the job. We want you to do another executive job and I did not have a clue how I was going to do it but I said alright.’ She also added that, ‘… in terms of power and ambitions I think that a lot of the senior executives I know have kind of fallen into these roles based on their capabilities and competences rather than ambitions.’ (Linda, 40, SAES-2)

A similar thing echoed in Lisa’s comment,

‘I never had a specific career goal. All of my career ambitions were temporary or fleeting. It is something like…umm…what might be the next thing to do?’ (Lisa, 48, SAES-3)

Amanda said, ‘I was not single minded-ly ambitious, but my personal approach was being good and enjoying what you do.’ (Amanda, 42, SAES-3)

The majority of these female senior executives also suggested that it was not a clear and fixed career trajectory that had helped them in securing successful careers. Instead, it was their ability to go for every opportunity that came into their career paths and being open and flexible to grab these opportunities had helped them to be successful.

These women always gave priority to their career than anything else in their lives. Most of these senior executive women almost always worked full time. A few of them worked part-time when their children were young and one of them worked flexible hours to complete her post-graduate degree. It is very important to note here that none of these women had career breaks. Thus, all of them demonstrated full time work commitments to climb into the executive or senior executive roles.
While the majority of these highly qualified senior executives almost always worked full time, they took their first child in their mid-thirties when they already were in the Senior Executive Services. It is visible from their comments that while career and family decisions were interrelated; they gave priority to their career first and then had children when they were in considerably senior positions with respectable incomes.

For example, Amanda who was married for nine years had her first child when she was 37 years old and was working in Level-1 of the Senior Executive Services. At the time of this interview she was in Level-3 of the senior executive services with a three years old daughter and a six months old toddler. She said she was working at the current level for last two years; however, she had her second child while in this role and as she took 18 months of maternity leave, she was actually working in her present role altogether for six months. It was her strategy for managing between career and family to have children in her late thirties when she already was in the senior executive roles. Therefore, a successful career was always her priority before family or parenthood. Even after being a parent of two children she said career was her priority, and she felt managing home is more of a struggle than work, especially after children.

Among the participants of these interviews those who took children before being in the executive or senior executive roles were older than rest of the participants and were noticeably a minority in numbers. Therefore, this trend suggested that the younger participants had given priority to their careers before children. They made sure of their position in the executive stream first and then took the decision to have a child.

However, Clare, the youngest senior executive participant who did not have children yet said, ‘… I was not ready myself for taking children… But, I had always forced myself to think that the ideal situation would be to not have children until I become an executive.’

(Clare, 32, SAES-1)

But again she also observed that it was not easy for women to give priority to career in the ages when they were expected by the society to extend their families, as she said, ‘…having children is not my first priority in life… I think other women make it hard for women to be focused solely on careers; women who do not identify themselves really focused on child-bearing are seen as mean and selfish by the women who have children … you know…like a bitch or something.’ (Clare, 32, SAES-1)
When your priority is not the career and career aspiration is not securing the leadership roles it is actually difficult for female mid-career executives to progress careers into the senior levels. According to the senior executives, to be successful both in careers and in family lives females need to be motivated by career drives and have to be ready to adopt with a lifestyle change.

Furthermore, they also identified that many mid-career female executives usually gave priority to their family needs and work life balance after having children. It was one of the reasons for them to be discouraged to pursue a leadership role as in these roles there were limited availability of work/life balance and job security. As all the senior executive roles were contractual, when the contract finishes there is no guarantee of contract renewal or getting a new contract. Sara explained it in this way, ‘…once you are Executive you are much more vulnerable when your contract finishes or if the work you are doing is no more important sector for the government. You are again vulnerable when the government changes or ministry changes…but in non-executive jobs there is a provision for deployment and they get paid even after the job loss…It is true for every male and female executive. But it impacts more female executives because women are more cautious about job security, flexibility and tenure. ’ (Sara, 38, Deputy Chief Executive)

She also explained that higher salary was a great motivator for employees, especially for those who had dependents. But in the senior executive services remuneration and benefits are not great motivators for working mothers. When someone is working in the mid-executive levels they can expect to earn around $110,000 p.a. With that salary they get additional benefits like flexi-time, less stressful work hours and superannuation. But if they proceed to executive level they get around $140,000 p.a. But they ultimately lose all the other benefits. Therefore, the employees who have young children and prioritise work/life balance and job security will less likely to be encouraged to secure senior executive roles.
5. Discussion: Yes! Women Can Have it All, but…

As to answer the key research questions of this paper, from the experiences and opinions of the interviewees of this study, it can be concluded that yes, today, women can have it all. But, only if they can meet a few conditions which are vital for career and lifestyle success for them.

The first and foremost condition for today’s women is to accept that cultural and behavioural discriminations are still present in workplaces and therefore to overcome them. Although the structure of opportunity and organisational workplace culture within the South Australian Public Service was generally non-discriminative and equitable to most of the interviewees in this study; they have also identifies a few socio-cultural factors that still today impact female career progression and work behaviours, and may also influence their family and lifestyle decisions. Although these negative factors are very important when to analyse career development of women; these are, as these senior women have suggested, mostly behavioural and cultural issues, not directly linked to organisational structure and therefore, mostly are ignored by policy-makers and social scientists.

The majority of the senior executives have emphasised the cultural factors more as barriers than the structural and systematic factors within their workplaces. They also suggest that the structure of opportunity is generally non-discriminative and merit based in the public service. However, even though opportunities do exist the competition is very high. Thus, another condition for female mid-career executives is to be confident and more dynamic to grab these opportunities. They point out a number of factors that the mid-career women should adopt to be more successful in gaining career opportunities at the leadership levels, these include-

i. Proven skills and qualifications
ii. Confidence to stand out in the crowd
iii. Professional socialising and networking capabilities
iv. Flexibility in career and work placement choices
v. Willingness to apply work/life balance strategies by giving priority to work needs
vi. Capability to be resilient and strong even when workplace culture will prove not equitable and in favour of female executives
vii. Aspiration to contribute in public policy-making and in implementing social justice
viii. Preparation to adopt a particular lifestyle which is required to pursue a leadership career.

Although most of the senior executives have suggested similar experiences regarding structure of opportunity within public organisations; significant differences are also visible in their opinions which stem from two underlying situations-

1. Presence of young children

2. Working in male or female dominated workplaces

Therefore, the impact of the structure of opportunity on career success may vary depending on these two factors mentioned above. When interviewees have young children their experiences are different than those of the interviewees who do not have children or have grown up children. Women having grown up children have observed that having young children and being in the senior executive roles is remarkably difficult and they have suggested this is what the non-executive women in the pipeline who have young children or who desire to have children soon should note when applying for senior executive roles.

The women who do not have children have perceived that it would be impossible for them to secure leadership roles and to sustain there if they had children. The youngest senior executive in this study who do not plan to have children within next five years have believed that taking children would make it harder for her to have career/life balance and perform her highly responsible job effectively.

However, it is worth noting that the two participants, who have young children at the time of interviews, suggested just the opposite assumptions. They have suggested that it is not impossible to combine a leadership career and children. In their opinion, having young children can be a barrier for progressing career from non-executive roles to executive and senior executive roles; but, after becoming a senior executive it is not as much difficult as it is perceived by the junior women in the pipeline. However, they also have suggested that it can prove difficult if someone does not have adaptive capabilities and the right support from their families as well as do not possess the access to suitable formal and informal childcare supports.

Although it becomes difficult when the work is very busy or deadlines arise and at the same time the children are sick at home or some other emergencies come up, these situations can be overcome by introducing effective family-friendly policy supports in the senior executive
roles. At present employer support for effective work/family balance is limitedly available in the Senior Executive Services. Because of the unique work culture and the nature of work in this Service as well as the people work in it who are, if not resistant, but reluctant to work on introducing necessary family-friendly arrangements; these roles look very much family-unfriendly and therefore, discouraging for junior women who want to have children. They have again suggested that to change such work culture it is needed to model that leadership career and family balance is possible and that women are successfully doing it these days even without the help of necessary policies and practices.

It is also worth noting that these two extremely optimistic senior executives who are also mothers of young children work in female dominated departments in South Australia. This is another interesting finding of this study that most of the women in female dominated organisations more likely to be optimistic about their career prospects and are mostly satisfied on the work culture in their organisations.

Most of the interviewees in this part of the study have suggested that gender based discrimination and inequalities, however not common scenario in the modern workplaces today, but these are more likely to be identifiable in male dominated organisations than female dominated ones. It suggests that the stereotypical male dominative culture is still sustaining when there are more men and fewer women, and when men are more powerful as a group over the females. The senior women who already have proved their potentials and have succeeded in achieving leadership roles, working in the male dominated workplaces, say it is highly intimidating for. They have also suggested that such cultural thing can be overcome if women are more aware of such things and adopt some attributes, like-confidence, stand out ability as well as resilience and mutual respect. Again, increasing the number of female executives in these organisations is also an effective mean to minimise such behavioural and cultural discrimination.

Therefore, the findings overall suggest while organisational structure apparently does not impose traditional gender based inequalities and discriminations directly into the workplaces anymore; if women have the necessary qualifications, skills and confidence and more importantly if they are willing they can be successful in achieving leadership roles in the South Australian Public Service. Thus, it is an important matter today that whether women want to be there or not.
Therefore, a very important condition for junior women to pursue a leadership career is to do a cost/benefit analysis before going to apply for promotion to the next level. They need to understand that whether or not they want to progress their careers. For a better decision making regarding career choice, the senior executives suggest a number of factors that the junior women need to consider before progressing into the leadership levels, they explain:

Leadership jobs are always contract based jobs. Contract based senior executive roles create job insecurity for many employees particularly for those who have dependents. Working mothers, therefore, are seemingly more vulnerable in terms of job security when contract finishes and if not been renewed in the senior executive services. Again, such roles pose limited scope for work/life balance comparing to the non-leadership roles. Female employees with dependents struggle and juggle the most because of lack of flexible work arrangements in the leadership levels in the public service. Salary structure in senior executive levels comparing to mid-executive levels is also not attractive particularly for working mothers as it excludes the possibility better work/life balance, job security, superannuation; and, includes-more stress, no fix working hour, frequent travel and extensive workloads.

While the interviewees have identified that these systematic factors may work as barriers for junior women to choose leadership career, they also suggest that these barriers can be overcome if someone has agency and aspiration for contributing in policy-making by securing leadership roles. Choosing leadership career, therefore, is not just a career choice for women but it is an informed decision-making process for them to be able to adopt a lifestyle change. It is like an identity shift where personal agency plays a major role to make them successful in acquiring such lifestyles.

Another important condition that the mid-level executives should meet to be success in achieving such lifestyle change and thus, having it all is the ability to be adaptive between career and family. It requires an adjustment of some of the private aspirations and goals of female employees. The majority of the interviewees in this study have done it by delaying motherhood, and by choosing to have children after becoming a senior executive. They give priority to their career over family for a certain period of time. It is an adaptive strategy which supposedly has made these women successful in achieving a successful career and family.

Therefore, this study finding suggests that leadership career is a unique lifestyle. Today if women want they can achieve this lifestyle. For this, they need to comply with some
behavioural changes in themselves and utilise some adaptive strategies to combine family and career. The structure of opportunity does not impose gender inequality in workplaces anymore. Even if it does, women can overcome this by being confident and resilient. Thus, leadership equality is more of a choice thing than opportunity thing today. However, this choice making process mostly depends on three important factors as identified by the senior executives in this study, namely- personal agency, lifestyle priority and preference and necessary formal and informal work supports. They also suggest that such choice making process can be make easier if the policy makers would consider implementing a more family-friendly work arrangements in the senior leadership levels in the public service.

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