

Executive summary

Women's participation, inclusion, representation or lack thereof in areas of decisionmaking and leadership have dominated international forums since the 1970s.

This study set out to understand how women in the water sector achieved positions of seniority and leadership and what lessons can be drawn from their experiences to inspire other women aspiring for leadership in the sector. From the experiences and lessons shared, the study distilled a set of criteria for women to achieve career-success in the water sector. The study's departure point was to focus on those women who have made it to levels of leadership and senior management in the water sector; to find out how they made it and the ways in which they cope with the responsibilities of their high ranking positions.

The study represents a focused analysis of women working in the water sector, specifically women occupying senior positions (Director Level and above) within public sector water institutions. A study population of 40 people, women and men, was identified. It was decided to include men in the study population and sample, in order to gain a perspective of their role in supporting women in the sector. Due to challenges of access, 34 of 40 people identified were interviewed, that is, 26 senior women and 8 senior men.

The research, the interviews specifically, were carried out according to five broad categories that included background, challenges encountered, support mechanisms, policy environment and women's leadership in the sector.

The background looked at where the women came from and the factors that contributed to their success in the sector, that is, what were the motivating factors and the drivers in their success.

The challenges encountered explored the obstacles that the women encountered growing up, the way(s) in which they dealt with them, and whether they encouraged and enabled their growth or hindered it.

In terms of support mechanisms the women were asked to describe the kinds of support that was in place to accommodate them in their career and how they have experienced different forms of support, that is, personal as well as professional support. The interviews with men began from this category onwards. The men were asked about their role in supporting women and the contributions they made to enable women's growth and advancement in the sector.

The policy environment addressed the extent to which legislation and policy has enabled women to develop and attain senior positions. This was viewed as a critical category in that there appears to be a gap between the advanced legislative and policy environment in South Africa and the implementation of the legislation and policy. The women were asked to share on the extent to which the legislative and policy paradigm enabled their development, and their insights in the gap between the existence of the legislation and policy and the implementation thereof. The men were asked about their involvement in the implementation of the gender policy as well as to share their views on whether or not the policies are working to ensure that more women are getting into the top leadership and management positions in the sector. The category also sought to understand whether having women in senior management is necessarily transformative and enabling for other women.

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The fifth category, women's leadership in the sector, looked at the current level of women's leadership in the sector. In other words, do women hold meaningful positions of leadership and do they have decision-making power in their positions. Further, the category unpacked the impact of women's leadership in sector transformation and in advancing a transformative agenda that creates space for other women to climb the ladder and achieve positions of seniority in the sector. The questions in this category

were similar for both the women and men. An additional question for the men was that they were asked about their views on women in leadership with regard to addressing gender biases against other women being able to access decision-making positions. The analytical framework that was applied to the findings derived from the interviews was Sarah Longwe's Women's Equality and Empowerment Framework (1995; 1998; 2001). Through the application of the framework and the assessment of women's equality and empowerment according to the five levels of equality, the findings revealed that women in the water sector have achieved equality and empowerment at the highest level. Women participate in all areas of the sector and have control of resources including in the decision-making of how resources will be distributed. There is a level of consciousness among the women in terms of gender equity, gender inclusiveness and gender sensitivity. South Africa and the water sector have a legislative and policy framework that supports equality of opportunity as well as advances women, in particular, through the Affirmative Action Act. The water sector developed a National Implementation Strategy and Action Plan 2006-2010 for mainstreaming gender into the water services sector, evidencing the sector's commitment to mainstreaming gender.

While the formal prioritisation of mainstreaming gender is being met through the Implementation Strategy and the legal environment, the implementation thereof emerged as a challenge. Gender mainstreaming expertise within the sector seems to be poorly developed in that the department has a gender focal point; however, in the interviews and the discussions the office is not as 'visible' as it should be. Noting that the office has experienced capacity constraints, which further suggests the lower significance credited to mainstreaming gender.

Another challenge is linked to what is termed 'State Feminism' wherein women's needs and interests are actively engaged and represented. The women who joined the sector in the earlier years of transition (1994 to 2001) are the women occupying senior and leadership positions, and in the findings the responses from these women as to whether or not they have a responsibility to other women in the sector were mixed. Some women felt that they do whereas others felt that they do not and further noted that they do not subscribe to gender. In the formative transition years there were few women in the sector and the need to work together and mobilise to support each other in a predominantly technocratic male environment was much stronger. These views raise critical questions about the role and responsibility women have to other women; the extent to which it is possible to rely on women who hold positions of leadership to drive an agenda that supports and advances women; the extent to which women can fundamentally affect transformation, and what is the role of men in this regard given that the sector has seen men who have been supportive and committed to gendered transformation; and who ensures that the sector is upholding its commitments to driving gender equity? These are questions that the sector will have to interact with in the near future.

Towards the criteria for career-success for women in the water sector, it emerged from the findings that the following are needed.

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Functional capabilities. At the most basic level women need access to functional capabilities. This includes the ability for women to participate by having practical choices; real opportunities; and substantial freedoms and resources such as well-being, health, control over one's environment, support in terms of welfare and social services, time and space. These are the core essentials or the fundamental that form the base from which people; women in this case, can develop and flourish. These are the constitutive parts of development.

There are various factors that need to be in place in order for these capabilities to be

realised, such as government policies, social security, access to education, financial resources, welfare, etc. With these and other factors intact, human well-being is enabled and basic needs are met.

Education. Education is essential and a necessity for career advancement and success. The women and men interviewed emphasised the importance of education as a means towards achieving success in the water sector. Interviewees exemplified high levels of education, with each having one or more tertiary qualifications. The importance of education lies in the independence it allows, the confidence it instils and it is a resource that one owns and cannot be taken away. The women spoke strongly against tokenistic appointments, and asserted that they were appointed based on merit. They also felt that the only way to improve themselves and their opportunities was through education.

Coupled with education is hard work and dedication. Both of these are essential to career success in the sector, and it is only with hard work and dedicated effort that growth, improvement and success are attained. The women acknowledged that the legal and policy environment promotes women and makes provision for the preferential treatment of women; however, it is hard work that enables women to rise in the sector.

Support. Personal and professional support, like education, was cited as critical to career success. Personal support at home, from family, spouses and/or partners provides women with the space and possibility to advance themselves towards realising their goals and ambitions.

Professionally, mentors and/or coaches as well as institutional support assist women to progress. Finding and accessing support that works, that is the availability and accessibility of formal and/or informal support in the professional and personal sphere is important. It assists in personal and work-related challenges and helps to find and maintain a balance between work and personal life.

Further, an institutional environment that is supportive and innovative in responding to the needs of women and the multiple roles that women have is needed. This includes, for example, mentorship, training, capacity building, the availability of day care facilities, and flexible work hours.

Passion and ambition. The women related their passion for the work that they do, that is, their involvement in contributing to the lives of South Africans through the provision of basic services, such as water and sanitation. This has sustained their interest and engagement in the sector.

The sector provides a challenging work environment that is diverse and constantly changing. There is need for innovation, creativity, problem solving, and many other skills that keep people engaged. In other words, the sector provides an environment that is stimulating. It is drive, passion and ambition that are required to achieve and succeed. Some women described how the challenges within the sector feeds their ambition and they continuously strive to improve the sector as well as themselves.

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Social capital. Social capital in the form of interpersonal networks, contact, knowledge and other related human resources are assets that can be used to address needs and interests. These collective assets provide women who are either entering the sector or who are already in the sector with a means to receive and give support; to gain access to knowledge and information; and to establish and be a part of a community where ideas, challenges, and other facets of work can be shared and discussed. The networks that are formed can be amongst women only or they can include both women and men. Either way, it is important that they are diverse, representative and inclusive, taking into consideration what the reason or objective for forming the network is. In some instances, the network can be very informal wherein it is people coming together

as friends or colleagues to meet and touch base on matters. However formed, networks and social capital, more broadly, allows and facilitates horizontal collaboration that has fewer barriers or obstacles. It has greater potential to generate individual rewards, such as career opportunities and support networks by encouraging and increasing the capacity of people to work together.

Characteristics for leadership. The final criterion lies in the qualities that characterise a good leader. While these are qualities that were identified in the women holding leadership positions, they are relevant given that the qualities of leadership in the women interviewed were groomed and inculcated over time in their careers. These include a good work and moral ethic; interacting with people in a respectful manner; supporting and providing opportunities to people; working well with people since collaboration and co-operation are essential in the sector; learning from people and sharing information and knowledge with others; fairness and equality; and working with people in a horizontal way that is collegiate and transformative rather than power-oriented and hierarchical.

The following attributes seem both intuitive and essential (necessary and sufficient) for good leadership:

1. Ability to articulate a tangible vision
2. Communicating meaning and purpose effectively
3. Empowerment of others by imparting skills and knowledge
4. Helping others to deal with change, fear, anxiety and stress
5. Influencing others without using authority
6. Managing ambiguity, uncertainty and crisis situations
7. Being flexible and adaptive but not unsure and indecisive
8. Having integrity and creating trust
9. Building teams and managing team and group dynamics
10. Facilitator, coach and enabler

(Charney, 2006)

Overall, the water sector has done well to advance gender equity and to narrow the gender gaps. This is evidenced by the legislation and policy environment that addresses women and from the number of women with decision-making power who influence and impact the strategies and structures that make up the sector. There are men in the sector who support and are involved in mainstreaming gender; they are committed to transformation and want to see women progress in the sector. They have and continue to be partners in the process and have been particularly supportive to the women they work with in the sector. There is the understanding that in order for gender mainstreaming to be fully implemented gender must be understood,

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internalized and diffused throughout the sector. What is critical is that spaces within the sector are moulded and framed by the inputs of women and men who are committed to seeing meaningful change and improvement happen.

The emerging challenges for women in the sector in the future are fourfold. The first is among the women who currently occupy senior and leadership positions and whether these women will continue the drive that was so profound in and around 1994 to promote women's needs and interests in the water sector. The second lies with new, younger women who are entering the sector and the level of consciousness about issues of gender equity, women's interests, empowerment, participation and mainstreaming gender. Third is with women in junior positions and the support and encouragement they receive in gaining access to senior, leadership positions. The fourth is in the institutional transformation of the organisations that were involved in the study, that is, DWA, WBs, municipalities, the WRC, etc. – the key stakeholders in

the sector – and the extent to which gender is mainstreamed.