

CHAPTER 2

Women in senior roles

The number of women in leadership positions is not only an issue for the developing world; a majority of countries around the world have unacceptably low levels of women in parliament, local government and on corporate boards –
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Political, social and legal changes in Australia over the past 50 years have increased opportunities for women and girls, especially in relation to education and employment. And yet, women continue to be under-represented in senior roles in business, politics, the judiciary and many professions.

Women accounted for 18.2% of ASX 200 company board members at the end of May 2014,⁶ an increase from a low of 8.3% in 2008. But 41 company boards in the ASX 200 still do not include any women. According to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, in 2013–14 women made up only

26.1% of all key management personnel and only 17.3% of all CEOs in Australian workplaces with 100 or more employees, while 33.5% of employers did not have any key management personnel who were women.⁷

Other examples of this leadership gap can be found in a range of professions; for instance, over 60% of law graduates are women,⁸ but only around 22% of lawyers in senior positions (including partner, principal or director) are women.⁹

Women are better represented in the public sector and academia. Nevertheless, in 2013 only 40% of senior executives in the Australian Public Service were women, despite women making up 57% of that workforce.¹⁰ Women constitute over half (56%) of all academic staff at universities, but tend to be concentrated in lower-level positions and under-represented at the professorial level; and only 29% of senior academics in Australia are women.¹¹

Inequalities in the political sphere are also persistent, despite some advances. Non-Indigenous women in South Australia were the first in Australia to win the right to vote and the right to sit in parliament in 1897. In 1902, women's right to vote was extended to federal elections, but it was not until 1965 that all Aboriginal women and men had the right to vote.

The twentieth century saw a long list of firsts for women in Australian politics and leadership. These

included the first woman to enter parliament (Edith Cowan, Western Australia, 1921), lead a political party (Janine Haines, Australian Democrats, 1986), be a state premier (Carmen Lawrence, Western Australia, 1990), and head a government department (Pat O'Shane, NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 1981).

However, women had to wait until the 21st century for a female governor-general — Quentin Bryce, who was appointed in 2009 — and a female prime minister, when Julia Gillard took office in 2010. Despite women making up slightly more than half of Australia's population,¹² they constituted less than one-third of elected parliamentarians at the federal and state/territory levels in July 2014.¹³

Women's representation among federal government ministers fluctuated between 16% and 26% from 2004 to 2014, reflecting changes in government, with a shift from a Liberal to a Labor government seeing a marked increase in female ministers. Women accounted for just 17.6% of cabinet ministers between 2004 and 2008, and by 2013 this had increased to 22.7%.¹⁴

With another change of government in late 2013 there was just one woman in the Cabinet and four in the outer ministry; a second woman, Sussan Ley, was promoted to Cabinet in December 2014.¹⁵

So, what is going on? Why are so few women represented at the highest levels after decades of

increased opportunity? As we explain below, gender inequality at the top has its roots in widespread inequality in education and employment and the persistence of 'traditional' gender roles.