WOMEN IN THE CIVIL SERVICE: HAS SOUTH AFRICA GOT THE BALANCE RIGHT?[1]

By Kealeboga J. Maphunye[2]

Introduction

This paper examines gender related issues within the public service, specifically the civil service, focusing on what is often referred to as the Senior Management Service (SMS). A the heart of the debate is an assessment of (a) how women experience marginalisation and uncertainty, given the government's affirmative action policy; (b) the difficulties of investigating especially gender related issues inside government departments (i.e. very often there is a thin line between rhetoric and reality regarding 'women's empowerment'); (c) what we already know about gender imbalances within the civil service; and (d) the attempts to redress these. Finally, the paper examines the views of selected women inside government departments on these issues. It concludes that while women's position inside South Africa's civil service has improved gradually since 1994, much still needs to be done to ensure that women are represented proportionately especially in the highest positions of government departments. Information for this paper was gathered from reports on gender issues and women's positions in South Africa's civil service, as well as from women themselves (from Assistant Director level) in selected departments,[3] including the relevant literature review (national and international) on this topic.

South Africa's new Constitution (Act 108, 1996) "has won global praise" (DFID, 1998:5) for its comprehensive human rights provisions and is internationally renowned as a model document, given the elaborate socio-economic, political

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[3] Interviews with 180 civil servants (1999-2001) in Education and Health Departments in KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, North West and Gauteng provinces. and in the national Departments of Health and Public Service and Administration.

and other rights it guarantees to different groups and individuals. Before 1994, the civil service (and other sections of the wider public service) was seen as a "no-go area" for certain groups including blacks, women and people with disabilities. Hence, no sooner had the new government assumed office than it began introducing an elaborate, comprehensive programme (known variously as 'representivity', diversity, affirmative action, etc.) to deal with the legacy of inequalities inside the state machinery.

As a policy of addressing the imbalances of the past in public and private sector employment, affirmative action is one of the current government's controversial programmes and has either been criticised or supported from various quarters of the society. To a large extent, both this support and criticism of the policy of affirmative action were premature—because it had barely been introduced as part of the government's wider transformation[4] process and could not be evaluated or assessed fairly given its limited duration. However, as South Africa celebrates its tenth anniversary of freedom (1994-2004), it becomes necessary for it to be examined using a number of yardsticks for determining 'progress' and development, including the extent to which women have been 'empowered'[5] in certain organisations, especially the civil service[6]. The issues of gender disparities, marginalisation and imbalances continually arose in my recent study, which examined (among other things) the assessments of civil service changes in South Africa since 1994, the perceived significance of these changes, and the perceived value or desirability of changes. Given the time constraints,[7] not much was said by the respondents on the gender-related questions as these were asked at the end of the interviews, but those who responded to the relevant questions gave an indication of women's experiences in their departments. The study also involved the assessment by national and provincial civil servants—and

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[4] A fashionable term in South Africa; in this paper, it means introducing administrative and other reforms and change in public and other organisations.
[5] Another term often used loosely in South African discourse. Here it means creating a situation (e.g. opportunities, practical skills) to enable women to perform as equal citizens with full rights.
[6] This term refers to those officials in traditional government departments, especially those in the highest positions of these organisations.
[7] Thirty-minute interviews comprising 20 structured and unstructured questions.

by MECs[8]—of post-1994 changes in South Africa. The issues raised by this study are beyond the scope of this paper, but indicate that the transformation (or fundamental change) of South African society cannot be complete unless the question of women's marginal position in the civil service and other areas of life is resolved to the satisfaction of the women themselves.

1. Why the Senior Management Service?

First, this paper focuses on the Senior Management Service (SMS) because this is where managerial decision-making takes place. Second, trends throughout the world (Mani, 1999; 1994; Turner and O'Connor, 1994) suggest that gender-biased policies are often taken (or implemented) by civil servants that have very few or no women in top positions. Third, very few women were represented at this level in the departments covered by my recent study,[9] although government now shows significant willingness to improve the position of women in public institutions. Certainly, it would appear that affirmative action in the South African context has had an added effect in the advancement (however minimal) of women into the highest civil service positions, but many women that this writer spoke to at these levels were often reluctant to see themselves as affirmative action appointees. This could be partly due to the stigma attached to affirmative action appointments as 'incompetent' appointees, and partly because very few women who were (identified to this writer as) AA candidates were willing to talk about their experiences. In other countries, the SMS or officials in equivalent positions are often involved in driving the implementation of government policies, hence the absence of women (or disproportionate representation) at this level as compared to their male counterparts would mean an inability or unwillingness to articulate and incorporate their concerns on any policies or laws they may perceive as disadvantaging them.[10]

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[8] Ten Members of the Provincial Executives in 5 provinces were interviewed.

[9] Education and Health. Study on the roles, structures and perspectives on change in post-1994 departments (PhD thesis, 2002 Essex UK).

[10] Botswana in the early 1990s is a case in point. Women struggled to register their concerns to the predominantly male policy makers when they disagreed with gender-biased laws and policies.

2. Women's Marginalisation in the Civil Service: Real or Imagined?

South Africa's liberation struggle included the gender component that led to the realisation that freedom after apartheid would be meaningless unless women's marginalisation in the major decision-making fora was redressed. It has long been argued by various scholars that the relegation of women to lesser roles in both public and private organisations is not accidental but well orchestrated owing to powerful societal forces, such as custom, tradition and patriarchy (See Meena, 1991; Wallace, 1991; and Zwart, 1992). For instance, many women have argued that there is a "glass ceiling" (Naff, 1994) beyond which they could never hope to advance in many organisations, no matter how hard they tried to advance their careers. Referring to the British case, Andrew Hede explained the glass ceiling as "...a popular metaphor implying a single unseen barrier preventing women breaking through to the top in management" (Hede, 1995:593). One of the causes of women's minimal career advancement in the top echelons of the South African civil service could be the presence of such a glass ceiling.

In the late 20th century there were attempts to dismiss the fact that women were very often relegated to junior positions in many institutions, e.g. on the basis that women merely 'perceive' marginalisation. However, several studies have suggested the presence of the "glass ceiling" (see Morrison *et al.* 1987; Randell, 1994; Schneider, 1993; and Schwartz, 1993), and these ideas have led to a formalized argument—the female marginalisation thesis—as an attempt to explain the situation many women face in private and public organisations (Turner and O'Connor, 1994:80). While this thesis has been severely criticised, it has been seen as a useful descriptive framework for examining women's positions in formal employment in developing countries (Scott, 1986; Brydon and Chant, 1989).

In many African countries (including South Africa) the question of women's marginalisation, especially in top civil service and other public positions, is often

carefully concealed under a web of gender stereotypes and justifications of maintaining respect for culture and tradition (see Maphunye, 1996). The appeal to culture (specifically tradition which includes customs and values) is commonly used as a scapegoat by many conservative traditionalists in South Africa's former black homelands to 'explain' why it would be unacceptable for gender biased cultural norms and values to change. But this essentially opposes the government's transformation policies and ultimately works to keep women out of the decision-making positions thereby violating constitutional provisions in the Bill of Rights.[11]

3. Gender Equality Inside Government Departments: A Taboo Subject?

Inside government departments there does not seem to be a direct attempt to avoid addressing the gender imbalances that often exist.[12] But a common complaint by some senior officials is that they do not have capacity and have to rely on minimal staff to do the job, hence they cannot take immediate steps to redress these imbalances. Others complain that they need clearer and specific guidelines from their head offices on how to incorporate gender concerns in their departmental staff plans. For instance, they state that nowadays gender issues are also accommodated at staff and other meetings in the departments, but the major problem here is the monitoring, evaluation and immediate implementation of relevant steps whenever problems are identified.

The issue of gender relations, especially women's marginal positions in some government departments, was also acknowledged by some of the male

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[11] Since coming to power, the ANC government has taken practical and significant measures towards redressing racial and gender inequalities in South Africa. But in many areas of the former homelands in provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, North West and the Eastern Cape, it ran into difficulties dealing with traditional leaders who sometimes oppose any move—including the recognition of women's rights—that they think erodes or undermines their power.
[12] In 2003, to the Intergovernmental Fiscal Review report (2003:181), stated that there were a total of 1,6 million (1.03 million, PSC 2004:9) employees in the public sector, i.e. national, provincial and local government, including those in "public entities" such as Eskom, Transnet and Road Accident Fund.

interviewees.[13] While civil servants generally agreed that their departments had affirmative action policies in place, there was a mixed response to the questions: "Does your department have an affirmative action policy?" and "If so, are you satisfied with the implementation of such policy in relation to (a) *Race,* (b) *Gender,* and (c) *Disability?*" Many were not satisfied with the pace of affirming women in particular, as part of the policy, but more women than men felt that their departments either "under-emphasised" gender issues, resorted to tokenism, or placed too many women in subordinate positions in their departments. One (woman) civil servant in KwaZulu-Natal province felt that men "loyalists" (a possible reference to political party loyalists) were usually appointed to higher positions in her department, hence its lesser commitment to redressing gender imbalances.

4. Gender Imbalances in Government Departments: What we Already Know

In 1998 a draft government policy document revealed that:

> With respect to women in the public service, the proportion of women in senior management positions (Director and above) has increased from 5% in 1994 to close to 9.2% today[14] (Green Paper on Women's Empowerment, 1998:19).

The document also acknowledged important variations across departments and provinces; it noted, "Whilst a number of departments and provinces have made considerable progress in gender representivity[15]...others have made little or no progress." In his reply (31 March 2003) to a parliamentary question[16], President Thabo Mbeki re-affirmed the government's position on affirmative action and outlined a gender breakdown of public servants in government departments and other public institutions. In his words, "Huge gains have been made in trying to

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[13] One interviewee stated, "We haven't done anything to deal with gender imbalances in this department. [My] department is too slow when it comes to implementation of gender based affirmative action" (Interview, 07/04/2000).

[14] This figure fell far short of the 30% target of new recruits to the management echelon by the year 2000 that was laid down in the White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service.

[15] This is a South African term for representativeness. "Representativity" is sometimes used to explain racial, gender and other forms of representation, especially within public institutions.

[16] In Response to B.L. Geldenhuys, New National Party.

make the public service representative of the South African population. Currently...with regard to gender, 52.5% is female and 45% male.[17] However, at senior management level the breakdown for senior management is 22.1% female and 77.9% male" (President Mbeki, Oral Reply, National Assembly, June 2003). The picture is not significantly different in State Owned Enterprises where only 23.5% of women are employed compared to 76.5. The gender imbalance is even more glaring at senior management levels, with a gender breakdown of 75% male and only 22.1% female."[18] Such figures paint a gloomy picture of women in South Africa's civil service, but the "claim that women are less efficient than men" that has been made elsewhere (Hede, 1995:591) has not been heard in South Africa (at least openly) since the post-1994 changes in government departments occurred.

An overview of the views of women interviewed in my study did not indicate that there were widening gaps between men and women in government departments; on the contrary, many women said they believed women had made gains: some said these were 'significant', others stated that the transformation of South Africa's civil service had introduced 'minimal', though important changes on which future civil servants would build. Government (e.g. through the Public Service Commission and the Department of Public Service and Administration) has also recently undertaken study tours to countries such as Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, France and the United Kingdom, as part of feasibility studies to introduce NPM (New Public Management). New Public management refers to a cluster of ideas and practices (including reinvention and neomanagerialism) that seek, at their core, to use private sector and business approaches in the public sector (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000: 549). While it is not clear how far NPM (e.g. the introduction of Contracts and Performance Agreements) in the service will help to deal with the specific issues of gender disparities, it is however discernible that these disparities should be addressed if

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[17] 2.5% not explained.
[18] Similarly, 2.9% unexplained.

the efficiency and effectiveness of the civil service are to be addressed.[19] In spite of the minimal gains of women in the highest civil service positions,

> "The increased presence of [South African] women in the legislatures, the executive and other structures of government has made it possible for women politicians and civil servants to promote women's interests through new legislation as well as through an increasingly strong lobby to transform male institutional norms, values and cultures" (Green Paper on Women's Empowerment, 1998:19-20).

5. Measures to Address Women's Marginalisation and Gender Imbalances in Public Organisations

In many developing countries, women are poorly represented in the public sector despite the large number of female-headed families in these countries (Turshen and Holcomb, 1993). One problem faced by women in these countries, including South Africa, is that they struggle to gain entry into the terrain that is traditionally seen as the preserve of male privilege and power, such as the civil service and other public organisations. "Their ability to gain access to this area, and to move upwards in occupational terms within otherwise patriarchal societies, offers an interesting opportunity to explore the impact of the state in [dealing with]...segregation within the public service itself" (Turner and O'Connor, 1994: 79).

As in several countries, concern in South Africa should be on how best to ensure that government is able to attract and retain staff with skills,[20] and this means offering several incentives to women executives and others at higher levels (Adamolekun, 1993). These include, amongst others, reasonably competitive salaries for senior managerial and professional officials (Adamolekun, 1993: 45), and targeting these incentives especially at women. In addition, measures aimed at building capacity, such as distinct training and development policies for

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[19] In Britain, as Andrew Hede argues, 'merit reforms' similar to those being introduced in South Africa, "left in place a complex system of class and gender based [male] preference (and discrimination) which has only recently begun to be dismantled" (Hede, 1995: 587).

[20] According to the Intergovernmental Review report (2003:184), the 2003 Budget "...makes the first attempt to deal with some of the financial challenges facing Government in relation to attracting and retaining scarce skills..." i.e. professionals in the public service. It still remains to be seen whether this will also deal with the gender disparities in these positions.

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selected sectors of women would also have to be adopted. One example could be training that is specifically designed for upgrading women's skills in the lower and middle management positions where women are often concentrated.

With the introduction of New Public Management measures inside public institutions, the government has already begun implementing some of these measures. In particular, SAMDI[21] has been conducting training courses aimed at enhancing efficiency in government departments, but the challenge it faced was that its own capacity in terms of its staff was limited. Furthermore, its centralised position also meant that, although it was better located within the Department of Public Service and Administration, it could not easily reach public officials in remote parts of the country where it was needed most.

Employment policies and laws are critical to ending women's marginalisation and dependency and subordination (Turshen and Holcomb, 1993:xv), and this step has already been taken in the South African context. However, such policies and laws need to be accompanied by concrete programmes to eliminate women's disadvantages in the civil service and in other areas of life, e.g. strengthening the national and provincial women's 'machineries' (e.g. Office on the Status of Women). Further, the impact of these policies on women's careers in the civil service (especially the top echelons) will also need to be measured systematically (Mani, 2001:313).

6. Women Civil Servants' own Perceptions on Gender Imbalances and Inequalities

Women civil servants' perceptions of gender imbalances were documented as part of this writer's collection of data on changes and transformation within the South African civil service. Among the comments made by female respondents were the following, which indicate a mixed response, e.g some felt that gender imbalances were treated as a secondary issue to race; that not enough was being done about gender disparities; and that more women should be appointed

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[21] South African Management Development Institute.

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to in senior management positions. Some respondents were uncertain whether affirmative action (AA) policy targets race, gender and disability equally; but others said that current changes in the civil service responded to the plight of vulnerable groups, e.g. women, and that the AA policy treats race, gender and disability equally. One respondent stated that in some departments (e.g. Health) there were more women because of the high number of nurses in the department. Another argued that AA should target black females but that this was rarely the case. Several female respondents noted that women are still concentrated at lower management positions (e.g. Assistant and Deputy Director). Overall, many respondents suggested that the affirmative action policy in South Africa focuses strongly on racial rather than gender balancing (see Box 1 below for selected comments on these issues).

Box 1:	Officials speak about Race and Gender Affirmative Action:
1.1	"The department does implement AA and I agree with it in principle. There are no more exclusive male Afrikaner appointments and we are getting the best people from all races. However, I am not entirely satisfied with its implementation — some appointments are made just on the basis of people's skin colour." (Female, white; provincial department; less senior grades)
1.2	"More flexible recruitment policies based on AA and targeting the designated people were introduced; but *AA is difficult for whites to swallow*." (Male, black; provincial department; less senior grades)
1.3	"The AA policy is successfully implemented in my department, especially on gender, perhaps because the Head of Department (DDG) is a woman." (Male, black; provincial department; less senior grades)
1.4	"We have an AA policy and I'm generally satisfied with its implementation. AA focuses on race and gender. We haven't empowered people with disabilities yet." (Male, black; provincial department; most senior grades)
1.5	"AA is being implemented in my department and I view it as both capacity building and empowerment. Recruitment panels often give extra points [to target groups]. We now have a fair mix, almost black, of senior civil service and most female black Directors." (Female, black; provincial department; less senior grades)
1.6	"The [Department] has an AA policy and has now reached the required racial and gender proportion. Merit is now the main criterion used...." (Male, black; national department; senior grades)
1.7	"AA is being wrongly implemented. The wrong people get appointed. I'm waiting for the day when somebody will learn that a country's survival depends not only on the skin colour of a person but on his skill and mental ability. In interviews, whites perform well. Blacks often perform worse, but get appointed. We do courses and training for AA appointees but their work ethics are generally very poor." (Male, white; provincial department; senior grades)

1.8	"It's good that the department has an AA policy but I'm not satisfied with its implementation process. We're experiencing resistance to implementation. However, transformation is not an event but a process, and we need to deal with the mind set against AA." (Male, black; provincial department; senior grades)
1.9	"AA is being implemented, but I'm concerned at the way it's being applied — reverse discrimination — in the department." (Male, white; provincial department; senior grades)
1.10	"In this department race is synonymous with black males because only they are being affirmed presently in the department. It is only at Deputy Director level that females are present: otherwise there is no AA for females." (Female, black; provincial department; less senior grades)
1.11	"The current changes in the civil service are very slow, especially in relation to black empowerment and AA." (Male, black; provincial department; less senior grades)
1.12	"The opening-up of avenues for previously disadvantaged people in the civil service is a welcome change; but there has been too quick fitting [appointment] of these people into senior positions. There is need for support for such appointees." (Female, black; provincial department; less senior grades)

(Source: Maphunye 2002a)

By contrast, Male respondents also gave a mixed response to the question of women's position in the highest civil service positions, as part of the government's affirmative action policy. Some men agreed with their female colleagues that much still needed to be done to empower them; but some were either indifferent or felt that they had 'adequate' numbers of women in their departments already. Despite the mixed responses of the women civil servants above, it appeared that more women than men felt that 'something' drastic had to be done to deal with the continuing problem of women's exclusion (however subtle) from the highest civil service positions.

Conclusion

In practice, the implementation challenges for South Africa's civil service, especially in relation to gender-related affirmative action, suggest that much needs to be done in relation to this form of social transformation. Although South Africa has one of the world's most enviable records of women's representation in

political and civil service positions, the struggle for the further improvement of women's situations (especially in the highest civil service positions) still continues. Many women at these levels believe that they have made significant (or at least some) gains towards the eradication of traditional gender-based disadvantages that are a relic of the apartheid system; but many are equally uncertain as to whether to celebrate this achievement whilst women's representation at higher levels still creates dilemmas for policy-makers. In fact, at 29.3% women in national departments in 2004 are clearly outnumbered by their male counterparts and very few of these (91, 402) make it to the top (PSC, 2004:9), which is a worrying factor as South Africa prepares to celebrate its first decade of freedom. Even President Thabo Mbeki acknowledged this recently in his 2003 State of the Nation Address, and his comments warrant quoting in full:

> We must also refer to the important matter of gender equality. Some progress is being made in government to address this issue. And in the private sector and civil society, the campaign on the rights of women has started at least to form part of the national discourse. But society still lags far behind in terms of actual implementation, particularly in mainstreaming gender issues on development and poverty-eradication. Within government, we will continue to insist on the implementation of the National Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality. Concretely, we will soon introduce a system through which gender representation targets and content of programmes become part of the core performance criteria of every government institution and manager (Mbeki, State of the Nation Address, 2003).

The major dilemma facing most senior officials in South Africa is often not whether to deal with gender disparities, but how because affirmative action itself is not a straightforward policy or strategy. It is often understood differently by officials in the same department, thus watering down and undermining the very efforts aimed at empowering women in such a department (Maphunye, 2002b). One interviewee mentioned the "disjuncture between national and provincial

departments," which usually results in the creation of a 'gap' between (national) policy-making and (provincial) implementation. In addition, the AA policy is not applied uniformly within the civil service because of various (and often conflicting) interpretations (Maphunye, 2002a). Usually, though not always, AA focuses on race and gender (especially the latter rather than the former) but excludes disability, an important criterion for 'affirming' previously marginalised individuals in the civil service. With the onset of AA in South Africa, policy-makers have been careful to downplay the racial bias of the affirmative action policy, but the small number of women in senior civil service positions as compared to the men suggests that gender issues are second in policy enforcers' list of priorities.[22] Some officials (mostly women) complained about what they saw as a lukewarm, if patriarchal, approach to gender-related disparities in their departments (Maphunye, 2002a).

In conclusion, despite the foregoing comments, observers have stated that the position of South African women in politics and the civil service has been improving steadily. This is particularly in view of the fact that barely a decade has passed since the current changes in the public sector as a whole were undertaken.[23] Certainly, as the Minister of Public Service and Administration stated recently, the face of the public service as a whole has changed much since 1994; and this is more visible given the representation of traditionally under-represented groups (Budget Speech, 2003). In this regard, perhaps South Africa has 'got the balance right', despite the unimpressive record in relation to the disabled in many departments' staff profiles. While the country might have surpassed the records of some of its neighbours on the representation of women in public institutions (see Geisler, 1994; also, Maphunye, 1996:10), much still

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[22] Gender appears as a poor second to race, but disability (the other criterion within the affirmative action policy) turns up last in the equation.

[23] In 1996 Morna reported: "about one quarter of South African Parliamentarians are women — the seventh highest percentage in the world." She noted similar advancements in the civil service, arguing that the numbers of "...women in senior management positions have increased from 3% to 10% since 1994" (Morna, 1996).

needs to be done on gender:[24] especially to increase the number of women officials at or above the Deputy DG levels as well as to ensure that women are trained in skills that are often required for officials to function effectively at these levels. Ultimately, women's struggle within South Africa's civil service is about government getting the balance right not only in terms of racial equality but gender profiles in government departments.

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[24] In her Budget Speech to Parliament (11/06/03), the Minister of Public Service and Administration stated, "we need to enable those women who have joined the public service to move from their traditional roles in the caring professions to become leaders and managers."

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- ☐ Database on a File Server
- ☐ Website
- ☐ Report on an HSRC trip
- ☐ Education Assessment Instruments
- ☐ Psychological Assessment Instruments
- ☐ Pamphlet (published)
- ☐ Pamphlet (unpublished)

Confidential: /No (delete inappropriate option)

Website URL: (where appropriate)

Abstract (add a descriptive paragraph of Output):