Realising the opportunity:

Addressing New Zealand's leadership pipeline by attracting and retaining talented women

Author: **Ministry of Women's Affairs**
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Executive Summary

Leadership talent is in short supply in New Zealand and globally. Yet at every successive management level significant proportions of talented women drop out or their career stalls. This is the leaking talent pipeline. This report examines how three factors, unconscious bias, career breaks and flexible working, create barriers to women's career progression and contribute to the loss of leadership talent.

Unconscious bias based on stereotypical views about gender and leadership can negatively influence decisions about the recruitment and career progression of women leaders. Women who take career breaks and become primary caregivers face challenges when re-entering the workforce and getting their leadership career back on track. Flexible working can negatively affect both job and career as women trade down their skills to gain flexibility. Flexible work arrangements often preclude women from leadership jobs and progression into senior roles.

Proactive talent management that identifies high potential and high performing women and supports them in their leadership career is critical to ensuring talented women enter and stay in the leadership pipeline. To be fully effective, gender balance in leadership needs to be seen as a business imperative on the strategic agenda. Top level support is critical to driving the changes required to create an organisational culture that values leadership diversity.

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

The decision to explore issues around the leadership pipeline is borne of the Ministry of Women's Affairs' commitment to support greater participation of women in leadership roles across New Zealand. This report complements work the Ministry is already progressing, specifically in the area of more women on private and public sector boards.

In spite of some key advances for women in the workforce over the past few decades and growing evidence demonstrating a strong business case for gender balance, women remain underrepresented in management and leadership roles in New Zealand and overseas.

There is a large volume of research examining the barriers to women's progress into leadership roles and an equally large volume of academic and practitioner literature on strategies to improve gender diversity outcomes in the workplace. This report focuses specifically on the role organisations play in creating barriers to progression. Cutting through the volume of evidence, we want to ask some pragmatic questions including: what is stopping New Zealand organisations from achieving gender balance in leadership roles? And what interventions would accelerate the change process?

To assist with this work, the Ministry established an external Advisory Panel (see Acknowledgements for details). Following discussions with the Panel and other industry representatives, the Ministry decided on the three areas of focus that frame this report:

- unconscious bias and its influence on women's recruitment and career progression
- processes for women leaving and re-entering the workplace following career breaks
- flexible working arrangements that would better meet individual and business needs.

All three are linked, although for simplicity we discuss them separately. All three are also strongly influenced by unconscious habits and perceptions of gender, leadership and work.

This report provides an overview of how these three factors influence women's progress in leadership roles and how organisations can mitigate barriers. We draw together international and national research, and practitioner information in the public domain. The report aims to inform discussions, support initiatives already underway, and encourage new actions so that New Zealand organisations can attract and retain talented women in leadership roles. A wide range of initiatives aimed at gender balance of both boards and management teams currently exists. A more collaborative approach to sharing challenges and insights would maximise the benefits of the various initiatives to ensure New Zealand builds, and benefits from, a strong pipeline of talented women leaders.

2   Why action is needed

From a business perspective, pursuing the diversity dividends of gender-balanced leadership would seem to be a logical choice. Yet organisations have been slow to respond to the challenge of attracting, retaining and supporting talented women in the leadership pipeline.

Leadership talent is in short supply in New Zealand and globally

There is a shortage of talent in leadership and general management skills and expertise in New Zealand and globally[1][2][3]. Yet at every successive management level, significant proportions of talented women drop out, or stall below senior management and top leadership positions. This is the leaking talent pipeline and is seen in most countries[4].

The leaking talent pipeline is seen in most countries

New Zealand has a strong pipeline of talent

The competition to attract and retain talent tends to ignore 51 percent of the population - New Zealand's women. Since 1994 women have been graduating with tertiary qualifications at higher rates than men; they now comprise 65 percent of university graduates[5]. Women are, therefore, among the most qualified candidates for entry-level positions and they also create a sufficiently large pool of candidates for progression through to the highest roles. University qualifications, particularly postgraduate qualifications, are seen as a useful stepping stone for executive roles[6] and, arguably, the majority of the executive talent pool for organisations[7]. Any organisation not aiming for a gender-diverse leadership pipeline is narrowing its available talent.

There are clear business benefits

The business benefits of gender balance in leadership teams are clear. There is evidence of improved organisational performance; improved financial performance; better insights into customer needs and critical markets; improved customer satisfaction; greater innovation, creativity and productivity; improved employee engagement; improved risk and audit oversight; better decision-making; and increased competitive advantage[8][9].

Retaining talented women represents a good return on investment

Women, employers and society make significant investment in developing women's leadership skills and expertise. Given the current shortage of leadership talent, supporting women to fully utilise those skills throughout their careers would represent a good return on that investment.

Rational decisions are influenced by unconscious behaviours and habits

Although pursuing the diversity dividends of gender-balanced leadership would seem to be a logical choice, as the Australian White Paper on gender diversity in management makes clear, rational decision-making is strongly influenced by people's motivations and behaviours[10]. As a result, some decisions are not rational and often that is because habits, often unconscious, make it hard for people to change their behaviour even when they want to.

Much of the research and literature on barriers to women's progress into leadership roles, and on strategies to improve gender balance, emphasise the importance of individual behaviour. The behaviour of senior leaders in particular is important in either creating barriers or making changes. Individual behaviours and attitudes, which are strongly influenced by those often unconscious habits, underpin the group norms and values that form workplace culture. Empirical research shows that people's perception of gender is a powerful determinant of workplace attitudes[11].

Further progress requires a three-pronged approach

Despite gains for women in leadership in the last two decades, progress seems to have slowed, particularly at senior levels. To improve gender balance in leadership roles, organisations, in our view, need to look at the issues and challenges they face in attracting, developing and retaining female talent at all levels in the leadership pipeline. These fall into three broad categories.

Firstly, there are structural issues such as policies and work practices that create barriers for women. Organisations have addressed some of these structural barriers including through equal opportunity practices, parental leave arrangements, family-friendly policies etc. However, as the information in this report suggests, there is still room for improvement.

Secondly, and more importantly, there are cultural issues such as beliefs, attitudes, stereotypes and values that create biased, often unconscious, perceptions about women's ability to advance and/or lead effectively. Significant barriers still exist because of cultural issues that contribute to societal, organisational and individual mindsets. These create invisible barriers to women's progression. Challenging these beliefs will require cultural change over the long term.

Thirdly, at a strategic level, there needs to be understanding of the systemic, organisation-specific and long-term nature of the changes required. Ad hoc approaches will not achieve the cultural shift needed to change individual and organisational mindsets. Real progress will take strong leadership, with visible management commitment to strategies and actions that deliver organisation-wide results.

3   Unconscious bias

Unconscious bias is the product of a person's unconscious knowledge (what we know) and unconscious thinking processes (how we think)[12].   Unconscious processing using our unconscious knowledge happens automatically, and is sometimes described as "fast thinking"[13].   The advantages of fast thinking are speed and efficiency, since we use shortcuts to avoid having to sort through every piece of information.   The disadvantage is that we do not take all the relevant information into account when making a judgement or decision, which means that the decision has a greater risk of being sub-optimal.   Sub-optimal decisions can occur when our unconscious knowledge is either wrong or insufficient or when our unconscious thinking processes, which are shortcuts, mean we exclude relevant information.   We are not aware of unconscious bias influencing our decision-making.

Use of stereotypes can create unconscious bias

One form of unconscious thinking that can result in sub-optimal decisions is our use of stereotypes.   Stereotypes are widely held, but fixed and oversimplified, images or ideas of a particular type of person or thing.   Such stereotypes are implicit; we do not know we have them and so they can lead to unconscious bias in our decision-making.

We unconsciously use our stereotypical beliefs to make decisions, particularly in ambiguous situations[14] or in the absence of personal experience[15].   The danger of using stereotypes and other unconscious thinking is that they are not 'fact checked'[16].   This means we can continue to use it even when it does not match external realities and it may even contradict our conscious thinking.   In other words, we can make biased decisions even when we believe ourselves to be unbiased.

Research and anecdotal information suggest many people have stereotypical views about gender and leadership[17] [18] [19].   Gender stereotypes are generalisations about how women and men differ based on our perceptions of how women and men 'should' or 'ought to' behave in various situations.   Leadership stereotypes are preconceived notions about leaders and how they should behave.

Leadership stereotypes create challenges for women leaders

All the evidence indicates there are no gender differences in outcomes achieved by male or female leaders; both perform equally well[20].   However, there is evidence that people associate leadership with behaviours and traits that they link with men.   People associate effective leadership with 'agentic' behaviours, such as self-confidence, decisiveness, self-reliance, individualism, that convey achievement and control[21] [22] [23] [24].   These are typically considered to be more masculine and associated with men.   This phenomenon has been described as 'think leader, think male'[25].   In contrast, women are associated with more 'communal' behaviours, such as being kind, helpful and interpersonally sensitive[26] [27].   These behaviours are not typically associated with leadership.   So many people implicitly associate men with leadership and unconsciously see men as natural leaders, whereas women have to prove they can lead[28].

Prejudice against women leaders and aspiring leaders can occur because of the incongruity people feel between the behaviours expected of a women and those of a leader. The mismatch between qualities attributed to women and qualities thought necessary for leadership creates a number of challenges for women's career progression. These include: more negative perceptions about the abilities of aspiring female applicants; more negative evaluations of the behaviour of women currently occupying leadership roles; and undervaluing women's leadership style.

People unconsciously see men as natural leaders, whereas women have to prove they can lead

Women leaders are evaluated differently from men

Unconscious bias and the resultant stereotypes about gender and leadership mean that women and men aspiring to, or in, those roles are evaluated differently. Women who aspire to leadership are evaluated more negatively than men, despite being judged equally as competent and behaving in the same way as men. These evaluation penalties include being assessed as: less likeable, less agentic, less competent, less desirable as leaders, less hireable or less likely to succeed in their careers[29]. Given this, unless unconscious bias is addressed, women are less likely to be appointed into leadership roles, even in organisations that assume they make decisions based on the candidate's merits. Evaluation bias against women's task competence and potential also means they may be less likely to be identified as high potentials for leadership talent programmes[30], which could limit their opportunities for a leadership career.

Women leaders face backlash, the double bind, and more scrutiny

Women leaders who take on masculine attributes to fit their leadership role, and so behave like men, risk another form of evaluative bias. Gender backlash occurs when a person behaves in a way that is counter to the stereotypical view we have of them based on their gender[31]. Generally people prefer women to behave like stereotypical women and men to behave like stereotypical men.

The mismatch of women and leadership places women leaders in a 'double bind' and subjects them to a double standard. Women leaders are generally thought too aggressive (too tough) or not aggressive enough (too soft)[32 33 34], hence the double bind. Such negative views undermine a leader's ability to influence.

Women at senior levels also tend to face higher standards and more scrutiny and criticism than men[35]. Women who are successful in male domains may be viewed as less competent than their gender-congruent counterparts after making a single mistake[36].

Women's leadership may be less valued

There is evidence that women are perceived to have a different leadership style from men and that women's leadership is less valued.

In a recent Australian survey of business people, 78 percent of respondents believed some leadership teams do not value the different perspectives women bring to leadership teams[37] [38]. Both women and men tended to agree that women are often more effective at building teams and relationships with colleagues, as well as balancing family commitments. They also agreed that men are more effective at speaking up at meetings and managing their emotions at work. The research showed that women's collaborating style is not perceived to be as effective as men's promoting style and the promoting style is most emphasised and rewarded by organisations. Interestingly, 78 percent of women perceived differences in leadership style as a barrier to women's career progression and only 39 percent of men felt the same. This difference highlights a lack of shared understanding about the challenges facing women aspiring to leadership.

A review of the Australian Treasury, a male-dominated organisation, also found underlying and unrecognised bias impacting on management judgements and leadership styles in the organisation[39]. Members of the executive leadership team demonstrated "some institutional biases toward a homogenous leadership style [and] biases toward conceptual and analytic skills over coordination and people skills"[40].

A 2013 survey of Australian women in junior and middle management found 40 percent had had a conversation about their style and fit within the organisation in the last three years and those conversations often involved some sort of criticism[41]. Unconscious bias and gender stereotyping associated with the 'think manager, think male' phenomenon might be exacerbated by management competency frameworks that are still weighted towards masculine leadership traits and behaviours[42].

A review of the progress of senior women in the Australian public service found a masculine leadership style is favoured[43]. The Australian Department of Defence adopts a traditionally masculine leadership style, often described as more driven and outcome focused, to fit in with its male-dominated culture, and as a result women form a stigmatised group[44]. In contrast, in departments with more women at senior levels (e.g. Education, Health), a wider range of leadership styles is accepted and there is likely to be more focus on communication, relationships and collaboration[45].

Since we know there are no gender differences in outcomes achieved by male or female leaders, these differences in leadership style are just that, differences in style and behaviour. By creating this false dichotomy between women's and men's characteristics as leaders, stereotypes can narrow the range of effective leadership behaviours and styles within the workplace[46] [47]. This affects both women and men who do not exhibit those

> Stereotypes can narrow the range of effective leadership behaviours and styles within the workplace

behaviours, as they are less likely to be recruited, promoted, recognised or rewarded (see affinity bias below). As a result, they are less likely to progress up the leadership pipeline to senior levels.

Affinity or in-group bias can lead to discrimination

Unconscious bias can also include affinity or in-group bias, which is the tendency to evaluate one's own group more favourably than others. This can lead to an instinct to seek out people similar to oneself and a bias in favour of a 'mini-me' culture. This is one reason why male leadership styles tend to be valued more highly, particularly in male-dominated organisations.

Affinity bias can result in people being more likely to appoint or promote someone with a style similar to their own. In organisations that remain male-dominated at middle to senior management, this can damage women's chances of successful appointment or promotion[48]. A study of New Zealand accountancy firms reports that "women and 'out of the box' men could be held back by a paternalistic culture where 'partners favour junior staff who remind them of themselves'"[49]. In an Australian survey of business people, 90 percent of respondents thought men in senior roles were more likely to appoint or promote someone with a style similar to their own[50]. Likewise, a review of the Australian public sector found promotion into senior executive positions favoured those people who fit the dominant masculine leadership culture i.e. men[51].

Fewer women, at different levels in an organisation, particularly in senior leadership roles, means early and mid-career women lack role models that demonstrate career progression possibilities and examples of leadership skills and strategies[52]. Lack of role models can undermine women's willingness to put themselves forward for development and progression opportunities[53][54].

Unconscious bias means career progression isn't a level playing field

Despite the gains made through structural changes to address equal opportunity, unconscious bias means there is not equal opportunity for women to be selected for progression into leadership roles[55][56][57]. Unconscious bias in the way we see and evaluate women and men creates invisible barriers for women to enter and progress in the leadership pipeline. Organisational structures and cultures privilege certain norms and values that provide comparative advantage to men with the right attributes. Structures and cultures can also discriminate against women. For example, assumptions that women are unsuited to certain roles, or are a riskier choice, may lead to managers looking at women's experience rather than their potential, whereas men are more likely to be promoted based on their potential[58].

It is difficult for women to adapt and succeed in organisations where bias occurs unconsciously through these workplace norms and values that are difficult to detect. A recent US/UK report concluded that unconscious bias is the primary barrier to women's progression, since it affects recruitment, development, performance evaluation and promotion decisions[59]. Australian research also indicates unconscious bias is the most

significant barrier to women's progression in male-dominated organisations[60]. Addressing unconscious bias is, therefore, a critical component in ensuring gender balance in leadership roles. The alternative is to continue to expect women to adapt their behaviours to fit better into the prevailing culture. This has been described as giving "women skills to play on an uneven field, but [it] doesn't flatten out the field itself"[61].

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Addressing unconscious bias is critical to ensuring gender balance

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Addressing unconscious bias effectively requires a strategic approach

The effects of unconscious bias are subtle, pervasive and difficult to change, partly because we are unaware of our own bias and because we do not recognise the effects of bias amongst the other factors that influence our decision-making. Regardless of the current level of understanding and action, a strategic approach to addressing unconscious bias is a key component to addressing the leaking pipeline. A strategic and systematic approach is required because addressing unconscious bias can be approached at several levels and real traction will require interventions at all levels[62].

Individual level: Raising awareness of unconscious knowledge and bias at the individual level will assist people to understand how this affects judgements and decision-making. Strategies and tools (such as agendas and checklists) can be used to create more structured and slower thinking, thereby reducing the risk of unconscious bias.

Systems and process level: Policies and procedures can be systematically reviewed and redesigned to minimise bias against women's career progression into leadership roles. Procedures for recruitment, development, formal rewards and recognition, re-entry, flexible working, and promotion are all important.

Organisational level: Workplace culture, i.e. the patterns of decision-making and behaviours, can either support or undermine efforts to address unconscious bias. Culture can be visible and seen in how policies are actually implemented, or invisible based on people's assumptions about policy implementation and how the organisation works.

Mechanisms to address unconscious bias include awareness-raising and training that start with all levels of management, and in-depth training for HR (human resources) roles and people actively involved in recruitment and career development. To be effective, the awareness-raising needs to be put into practice[63], for example with processes and procedures such as mixed gender recruitment panels, and transparent, performance-related selection and promotion criteria. Such procedures serve to slow down fast, unconscious thinking processes that can lead to unconscious bias[64] and serve to ensure decisions are based on merit, not bias. Managers also need training to see how unconscious bias can surface in everyday decision-making and to identify actions to address individual mindsets that are counter to the organisation's goals[65].

Unconscious bias can be changed, but bringing unconscious interpretation into conscious awareness is difficult because our unconscious biases are deeply ingrained. Re-wiring

those ingrained habitual ways of thinking requires dedicated time and attention and hence a strategic and systematic approach to changing mindsets and behaviour[66]. This sort of cultural change needs to be led by the executive team and engage with a broad cross section of the organisation over a long timeframe[67].

Questions to consider

What unconscious biases affect women in leadership in your organisation?

What leadership style/model is recognised and rewarded?

Does the existing leadership style/model meet the organisation's current and future needs?

Which of your key people management processes (recruitment, selection, development, evaluation, promotion) inhibit unbiased and gender-neutral practices and why?

What support do you need to address unconscious bias in your organisation?

4   Career breaks and re-entry to work

A career break is an extended period of time, that is, several months or years out of the workforce. Broadly, there are two groups of women taking career breaks: those who leave the workforce entirely, and those who maintain an ongoing relationship with their employer. Both groups face challenges when returning to work, although those who leave the workforce face the additional challenge of re-entering it.

Gender stereotypes mean women are expected to have career breaks and be the primary caregivers

Society expects women to be the primary caregivers and to 'take care' of others. As a result, women continue usually to be the ones who interrupt their careers by having a career break. Women with family responsibilities are also more likely to work flexibly, often part-time (see below for more information) and so have fewer years of job experience, which generally slows their career progress[68].

In New Zealand, women's labour force participation increases to 76 percent in the 20-29 year age group and then declines markedly to 71 percent in the 30-34 year age group compared with men, whose participation rate peaks in this age group at 93 percent[69]. This is the time when women are most likely to be having children and so having a career break. Surveys of women in their 20s and 30s, and men, indicate they see personal and family responsibilities as the primary barriers to women's career success[70][71][72][73]. Women in senior roles also see family commitments as an important barrier, but not the only one[74].

With increasing longevity, families are also more likely to be under pressure to care for elderly relatives. With no change in society's expectations of women as caregivers, women are most likely to feel pressured to fulfil this role. This will create another challenge for women in, or aspiring to, senior leadership positions, i.e. in mid to late career. One United States survey of highly qualified women found one in three in the 41–55 age group had taken a career break to care for family members who were not children[75].

Family responsibilities are not the only reasons women take career breaks. One survey showed that, although the majority (44 percent) of women leave the workforce to spend more time with family, about one in four women (23 percent) leave to pursue a degree or other training[76].

Encouraging talented women to re-enter the workforce represents a good return on investment

Given the shortage of talent in leadership and general management capability in New Zealand and globally, there would be a good return on investment by supporting those women who have left the workforce and want to return[77]. The cost of replacing a senior manager can be up to three times the annual salary and benefits in terms of training time and knowledge investment[78]. Ernst & Young[79] estimates that by encouraging highly educated women (graduates and postgraduates) into the workforce and appropriate career

paths Australia could increase its return on education investment by AUD$8 billion each year.

There is little authoritative information on how New Zealand organisations manage women's career breaks and return to work, although anecdotal information suggests some organisations do assist women and men returning from parental leave. A recent United Kingdom inquiry on building the executive pipeline of talent found that the transitional period during a career break and return to work is not currently addressed by many organisations[80]. A United States survey showed that, while over 90 percent of women wanted to get back to work after a career break, less than 75 percent succeeded in obtaining jobs and re-entering the workforce[81]. The survey found that most women (93–94 percent) were eager for help re-training, re-tooling and re-skilling. Anecdotal information suggests New Zealand women are keen for similar re-skilling.

Two aspects of re-entry seem key for women wanting to return to the leadership pipeline: firstly, being able to effectively manage work and family responsibilities (see section on flexible working below) and, secondly, having opportunities to fully utilise their talents and manage their career. A central issue for organisations wanting to attract and retain talented women back into the workforce is how current recruitment, development and promotion practices view career breaks and non-traditional career paths. Do these consciously or unconsciously count against women in leadership roles? If so, is this in the best interests of the organisation, or talented women or the New Zealand economy?

> Two aspects of re-entry seem key: managing work-family responsibilities, and opportunities to fully utilise their talents and manage their career

Formalised re-entry schemes are recommended

The United Kingdom *Executive Women in the Workplace Inquiry* recommends organisations formalise their career break and return to work schemes in order to ease the transition period when women return to work[82]. Formalised schemes could include providing funding and technology to allow those on career breaks to maintain contact with their colleagues, organising periodic catch-up meetings with line managers, and establishing a refresher programme for those returning to work. Such programmes show a demonstrable improvement in re-entry and retention in the workforce. Individual return to work procedures, such as pre-return self-appraisals, women's networks, mentoring, and sponsorship programmes focus on building both confidence and skills[83].

The United States company iRelaunch, which specialises in helping employees and employers with workforce re-entry, reports a big increase worldwide in the number of career re-entry programmes since 2004, when career re-entry became an important issue[84]. These programmes are run by universities and other higher education providers as well as employers. For example, IBM India is piloting a programme to identify the most effective channels and methods to bring back qualified women professionals who have taken career

breaks[85]. For those who wish to resume on a part-time basis, it has a separate programme that invites all alumni women IBMers to work as freelancers on highly disciplined, transparent short-cycle projects. IBM's recruitment strategy depends mainly on employee referrals and seeks out high performing alumni who left 3-5 years ago.

Organisational push factors encourage talented women to leave

The 'pull' factors of family responsibilities can be intensified by 'push' factors – features about the job or the workplace that encourage women to leave. These include lack of meaningful work, under-stimulation and lack of opportunity.

Push factors can occur because, in some organisations, women with families, particularly those working part-time, are seen as less committed to their career[86][87]. As a result they may be assigned more routine work and overlooked for more prestigious projects and roles[88][89]. If they have to choose between career and family/personal life, women will trade down their skills in order to gain other benefits such as flexible work arrangements (see below). United States research indicates women in business sectors are pushed off their career track more by dissatisfaction with work than being pulled by external demands[90].

Career breaks and non-traditional career paths can count against women's career progression in leadership roles

Both career breaks and flexible working can negatively impact on a woman's career and advancement[91]. There is evidence that women working part-time in alternative roles may get stuck there for the rest of their career because the organisation does not see an alternative career as a short-term option women use before resuming their full-time careers[92]. Some Australian organisations will not consider candidates, particularly for senior roles, if there has been a career break or some of their experience has been in a part-time capacity[93][94].

> Emphasis on traditional career paths means organisations miss out on talented employees

In the Australian public sector, career breaks are more likely to be considered a barrier to women's progression in more male-dominated organisations[95]. Such emphasis on continuity of employment and traditional career paths means women are not competing effectively in the labour market and organisations miss out on talented employees. An indication of the possible scale of the issue is that 43 percent of highly qualified women in a United States survey had taken a career break and 58 percent described their careers as non-linear, i.e. not progressing through the industry hierarchy[96]. Presumably these women would not be considered for senior roles in some Australian organisations.

Many organisations are designed to fit a traditional linear career trajectory. Careers start when people are in their 20s, and the 30s are about career acceleration, the 40s career consolidation and the 50s transition to retirement[97]. Many organisations with a talent

management policy start selecting candidates for leadership development when employees are in their 30s[98]. Such an approach does not work for women who take career breaks to have children, often in their 20s and increasingly in their 30s. These women, therefore, miss out on the opportunity to upskill. Without active intervention they are unlikely to enter the leadership pipeline.

Questions to consider

How are career breaks and non-traditional career paths viewed in your organisation?

How does your organisation support talented women to return to work and get their leadership career back on track?

In what way does your organisation inhibit talented women from returning to work, and what plans are in place to address this?

How could your organisation benefit from deliberately seeking out talented women who have temporarily exited the workforce and supporting them to return?

5   Flexible work arrangements

The availability of flexible working arrangements is critical for many women, and men, who are caregivers as it enables them to manage work and family responsibilities[99] [100]. A United States survey of highly qualified women returning to work following a career break found 64 percent consider flexible work to be extremely or very important to them[101]. The United Kingdom's *Executive Women in the Workplace Inquiry* reports one company where 85 percent of those being turned down for part-time work subsequently left the organisation, which runs contrary to any organisation's interests[102].

Many flexible work options exist but are not widely used

Flexible work arrangements include a range of work patterns such as[103] [104]:

- **part-time/reduced hours**: anything less than full-time hours

- **job-sharing**: a form of part-time working where two (or more) people share the responsibility for a job between them

- **flexi-time**: employees choose, within certain set limits, when to begin and end work, usually in conjunction with 'core times' of the workday when people are required to be in the workplace

- **term-time working**: employees remain on a permanent contract but can take paid/unpaid leave during school holidays

- **compressed hours**: compressed working weeks (or fortnights) involves reallocation of work into fewer and longer blocks than the regular working week, such as 40 hours over four days, or a nine-day fortnight

- **telecommuting/teleworking**: employees work all or part of their working week at home or some other location remote from the workplace

- **gradual retirement:** reduced workload or number of hours during the period before retirement

- **career breaks**: career breaks, or sabbaticals: extended periods of leave – normally unpaid – of up to five years or more.

In New Zealand and internationally, flexible working policies and some practices are increasingly in use. A 2011 survey[105] found 90 percent of employees could access flexi-time and 75 percent part-time work. This is similar to the United Kingdom, where one survey reports 77 percent of women and 70 percent of men using at least one form of flexible working[106]. However, other forms of flexible working, such as compressed hours or job-sharing, are currently not well used in New Zealand[107].

Under the Employment Relations Act 2000, any employee who has the care of any person and has, at the date of the request, been working for his or her employer for the immediately preceding six months may make a request for flexible work. The *Employment Relations Amendment Bill* that is currently before Parliament will extend this right to all employees and remove the six-month requirement. This would allow all employees to request flexible

working arrangements when negotiating their contract.

Studies indicate a range of benefits of flexible working for both organisations and employees. These include: improved productivity and performance; time and cost savings; increased customer satisfaction and net profit; better recruitment and retention; higher levels of employee engagement and satisfaction; improved focus, concentration, motivation and creativity; better utilisation of skills; better work-life balance; improved wellbeing, happiness and health[108] [109] [110] [111] [112].

Flexible working can negatively affect both job and career

Flexible working may be perceived to have, or may actually have, a negative effect on job and career progression and/or result in a loss of status; it has been described as a career staller or career suicide[113] [114] [115] [116]. A global survey indicated that, although 80 percent of employees would like to have more flexible working options, people would only use them if there were no negative consequences at work[117].

A United Kingdom survey found that 74 percent of part-time employees thought their employer's flexible working policies were good, very good or excellent[118]. It also found the employees:

- *were overqualified or overskilled* for their current role (29 percent)

- had traded down (41 percent), i.e. taken a job below their skill and full-time equivalent pay level

- said their career had plateaued and they had not been promoted (73 percent)

- believed promotion was only possible if they increased their hours (63 percent)

- felt less valued than full-time colleagues (34 percent).

The negative impact on job and career suggests flexible working can be a double-edged sword that forces people to make compromises between flexibility and their career. Anecdotal information indicates New Zealand women may take a lesser-paid job to gain flexibility[119]. This means that neither the women nor the organisations are getting the full benefit of women's existing skills. As mentioned above, lack of meaningful, stimulating work may contribute to push factors that encourage women to leave organisations.

At this time we are not aware of any New Zealand-specific information on how flexible working affects women in leadership roles. There may be a view that flexible working, particularly on reduced hours, would exclude people from leadership roles, particularly senior or managerial roles, because of the workload and, therefore, the hours required to do the job[120]. Three out of four people in a United Kingdom survey did not believe it was possible to work part-time in a senior

> There may be a view that flexible working would exclude people from leadership roles, particularly senior or managerial roles

role[121]. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reports that fewer women working part-time in the public sector in OECD countries are in management roles[122]. And a European study suggests that the number of women managers working flexibly is low[123].

Lack of visibility can negatively affect career progression

There is a risk that the contribution of flexible workers is undervalued and not rewarded. There is evidence that many organisational cultures value and reward face-time/visibility (being in the office) and commitment (indicated by full-time work and often long hours)[124 125 126 127]. In part this appears to be because workplace culture, practices and policies are often based on the myth of the ideal worker, a man with no family responsibilities, able to focus single-mindedly on work[128 129]. Many organisations maintain a culture demanding long hours spent in the office, which is seen to preclude the effective use of flexible or part-time working[130 131]. This overwhelmingly affects women, who may be blocked from promotion and may exit the leadership pipeline. A study of New Zealand accountancy firms found some firms did not believe it was possible to be a partner and work part-time and this is one reason why there are so few women partners[132]. Two large firms saw 18-hour days for partners as "the price to be paid for earning high incomes", although both reported difficulties in attracting people into partnership roles.

Different approaches to networking can also result in less visibility for women and impact on their leadership aspirations[133]. Balancing work and family responsibilities leaves little time for socialising with colleagues and building professional networks. Where informal networking is mostly with men, the networks can be centred on male activities, such as sport. In these circumstances, women, as a minority and possibly with little interest in sport, may find it difficult to engage and benefit from the informal networking. It has been argued that such 'networking' should not be tolerated, since it is an unhelpful practice that perpetuates the old boys' network and undermines diversity and inclusivity[134].

Employees who are less visible in the workforce have less opportunity for allocation of highly visible projects and promotion[135]. Large and visible projects, mission-critical roles, and, where relevant, international assignments are all important in career progression[136]. Leading projects alone does not predict advancement, but working on highly visible projects does. Yet United States research indicates that, even without working flexibly, women were less likely to have the opportunity to work on the highly visible 'hot jobs' needed for advancement[137]. Limited access to these opportunities means women then start to miss out on crucial learning, career advancement or promotion opportunities, further disrupting their career progression. In the senior executive teams of some Australian public sector organisations, having a family creates a tension between being at work and being visible, since people who are not in the office are assumed not to be working[138]. Visibility is important for promotion in those organisations since promotion is strongly influenced by high profile work and reputation.

The 'mummy track' view and an ad hoc approach can lead to negativity and resentment

Despite its apparent availability, it seems flexible working is still largely focused on or perceived as 'the mummy track' – women working part-time while caring for children[139] [140]. There is evidence that resentment can occur if flexible working policies are not available to all, or if work is not designed to prevent others from having to "pick up the slack"[141] [142].

Flexible working arrangements are often implemented in an ad hoc manner, at the request of individual employees[143]. United Kingdom research shows that as many men work flexibly as women do but, whereas women do so contractually, men do it unofficially[144]. Lack of good, consistent, transparent, organisation-wide practices and procedures can create concerns and potentially some negativity if not properly dealt with. Concerns about flexible working include: spill-over into non-work time, impacts on management workload, reduced performance if flexible working is not properly managed, mistrust of people who are working at home, concerns about reduced collaboration and social contact, and the organisational costs and complexities of creating a flexible working environment[145].

Make flexible working arrangements available to all employees and visible

Normalising flexible working and making it available to all employees, regardless of gender, family responsibilities and age, is recommended to overcome the negativity and stigma associated with it[146] [147]. There are calls for organisations to look at flexible working arrangements in the context of wider demographic and societal changes and see flexible working as a business imperative to meet the needs of the whole workforce[148] [149]. Younger workers wanting work-life balance[150] [151], older workers wanting semi-retirement[152], men wanting a greater role in childcare[153], and men and women needing time for elder care[154] all want flexible work arrangements.

Given the changing demographics and the needs of women returning to work, organisations with a proactive approach to flexible working are likely to have a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining talent. Visible, successful examples of flexible working, particularly at senior levels, are seen as critical to flexibility becoming mainstream[155] [156]. We know of a number of senior women working flexibly, although they are still very much the minority.

Showcasing flexibility in senior roles demonstrates it can be done

Ernst & Young's proportional partner role (see section on transparent career plans below) demonstrates it is possible to work part-time in a senior role. Partners working flexibly are also evident in New Zealand professional services firms, including a small number of New Zealand accounting firms, despite widespread belief that it is not possible in the accountancy sector[157].

To demonstrate that it can be done and to encourage more opportunities for senior people to work part-time and flexibly, the United Kingdom's Timewise Foundation showcases successful senior leaders who work part-time. The Power Part Time list includes 50 women and men working at the top of their professions on less than five full days a week[158]. The Foundation's 'Timewise Partners' are businesses exploring ways to be proactive in using flexibility as a strategy to aid career progression. The ultimate goal is "a business culture where working flexibly doesn't hold people back from promotion, where a diverse pipeline of talent is maintained through to senior management, and where businesses can attract outstanding candidates by opening up to flexibility in recruitment"[159].

For effective implementation align policies, workplace practices and culture

Key human resource policies and practices that support career progression (e.g. job descriptions, expectations, promotion, development, rewards and recognition) are usually designed around the ideal worker – the full-time, physically present employees. This alone may implicitly make flexible working incompatible with career progression[160] [161]. Such policies and practices may need to be revised to meet the needs of women re-entering the workforce in jobs that are designed to progress their leadership career while allowing them to work flexibly.

Even when flexible policies are in place, workplace practices such as early morning meetings, after-work networking, or assumptions about clients' expectations for availability create workplace norms and values that can impede actual take-up and implementation[162] [163] [164]. Existing organisational culture and the attitudes of the executive team and the wider management and leadership teams can enhance or undermine efforts to implement flexible working. For example, people can feel that it is not acceptable to leave early and that their manager and/or colleagues resent them when they do so[165]. Managers may also be complicit in this by suggesting people are not putting in their time because they work different hours[166].

An Australian study of unconscious attitudes towards work-life balance initiatives suggests men and women may have unconscious bias that flexible working policies are more appropriately used by women[167]. The study suggests such views could create a workplace culture that makes it unlikely that men will request flexible work, and so reinforcing the pressure for women to take the major role in family responsibilities. The authors recommend awareness-raising to reduce the unconscious bias in order to encourage flexible working by both men and women.

The United Kingdom *Executive Women in the Workplace Inquiry* recommends reviewing organisational culture regarding part-time and flexible working to ensure it is not blocking women's career progress in leadership[168]. The organisational culture is often reflected in the

uptake of policies[169]. So if flexible working is not widely used, the dominant culture may be undermining its uptake. Embedding a flexible working culture within an organisation is likely to be difficult and also may be aided or hindered by the sector in which the organisation operates[170]. To be successful, the organisation's culture needs to support flexibility in practice. Managers play an important role in establishing and maintaining the organisation's culture. Their decisions, behaviours and role modelling and implementation of policies are what matters[171]. Managers need to be aware of the benefits of flexible working and the importance of their own role in supporting the organisation's goals. The executive team's behaviour is particularly important and is discussed more in the following section[172] [173].

Questions to consider

What sort of flexible working is used in your organisation?

Who is working flexibly and in what roles?

Which roles are explicitly excluded from flexible working, and why?

How do existing policies, workplace practices and culture support implementation of flexible work?

What is your own attitude towards flexible working?

How is your management team supporting flexible working?

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6   Proactive talent management is key

Proactive talent management that identifies high potential and high performing women and supports them in their leadership career is critical to ensuring talented women stay in the leadership pipeline.

To maximise the return on investment in their leadership talents, organisations need to assist women to return to work or re-enter the workforce in a role that is commensurate with their skills and experience and value to the organisation. Otherwise their talents will be wasted in sideline roles. It is important to work through job options that maximise the benefits for both the organisation and the employee. It is also important for both the organisation and the employee to start proactively planning and managing the woman's leadership career as soon as possible. A meaningful job that utilises all their skills and helps get their career back on track would reduce the push factors that encourage women to leave organisations. Visible role models of people in senior leadership roles working flexibly demonstrate that it is possible to progress through to senior management as well as manage family responsibilities and maintain work-life balance.

Design career-enhancing jobs that utilise women's skills

An Australian survey of business people indicates challenging work is an important consideration for people when it comes to considering flexible work[174]. What is required is interesting and 'high impact' work that is career enhancing and is chunked in such a way that it can be done by people working part-time or flexibly[175]. This may mean redesigning jobs to fit employees rather than expecting employees to fit into the current organisational structure. This is probably easier in some sectors than others. Ernst & Young has developed a proportional partner role in which the partner takes a proportion of the workload, say 80 percent or four rather than five clients, for 80 percent of the salary[176]. In this case the same job, with the same opportunities, is scaled down. To be successful, redesigned jobs need to be seen as worthwhile, committed career options for both women and men, not viewed as a first step towards leaving the organisation.

Transparent career plans help get careers back on track

Career and development plans are important for progression and likely to be a useful way to encourage talented women to stay in organisations. An Australian survey of business people highlights the importance of transparent career paths for women that clearly outline how they will develop their skills for advancement[177]. According to respondents, transparent plans provide tangible evidence of the organisation's commitment to gender parity.

Transparent career plans provide tangible evidence of the organisation's commitment to gender parity

Typical linear progression and career paths ignore individual life choices and external factors that influence employees' work needs. A study of women in leadership roles in a French utility company found that women who continue the traditional upward career path generally do not work flexibly[178]. There are calls for employers to change the way they view career development (for everyone) and to see it as modular rather than linear[179][180]. Employees need to gain a range of experiences, not just add up years of the same sorts of experience, to speed up their acquisition of wisdom and perspective. In other words, the relevance and range of experiences and learning are more important than the number of years of work.

Deloitte has developed a career customisation framework that provides a structured approach for organisations and employees to fit their lives into their work and their work into their lives, which it calls 'career-life fit'[181]. It includes a lattice approach to career pathways which enables lateral and diagonal directions as well as planned descents, all of which provide more varied options for growth and development. It also allows people to make choices about the pace of their growth and development, workload, and when and where work is done[182]. People can 'dial up' to accelerate growth and development and 'dial down' to reduce workload or modify when and where they work. Importantly, there are also changes to advancement and compensation. Advancement is performance based rather than tenure based, with specific core competency criteria used to guide decisions. Compensation is based on what matters most to clients – quality, efficiency and contribution – rather than billable hours or firm profitability, i.e. success is based on results rather than face-time.

Organisations could be more proactive about talent management and succession planning, and look right across the business when developing their talent pool to ensure that participants in mid-career development programmes are diverse and include talented or high potential women in flexible roles. This would ensure talented women are considered for, and given opportunity to enter, the leadership pipeline. Organisations highlighted as demonstrating best practice provide part-time employees with access to the same training, benefits, development, and advancement/promotion opportunities as full-time employees[183].

Another consideration for organisations and women leaders in talent management and career planning is how well roles position women for the top jobs. Experience in line positions, with direct responsibility for profit and loss or client service, is seen as essential for rising to the most powerful positions in the organisation[184]. However, female executive managers are more likely to be in support roles (marketing, human resources, strategy, finance, communications) rather than line roles (chief financial officer, chief operating officer, functional business head, sales)[185][186]. Anecdotal information suggests support roles are not as highly valued by the executive team and board as line roles. Furthermore, although women can rise to very senior levels working in support roles, they are unlikely to progress to become the chief executive officer (CEO). Women with senior leadership aspirations need to include line management roles in their career plan.

Questions to consider

Do existing flexible jobs fully utilise talented women's skills?

Who (gender and age) is in your leadership talent pipeline and what does this indicate about your organisation's approach to talent?

How could your organisation's career paths and talent management plans better accommodate career breaks and flexible work arrangements?

7 Leadership and a strategic approach are critical

It is apparent that two factors are crucial to increasing the number of women in leadership roles: firstly, leadership from the top with active involvement of the CEO, executive team and board; and secondly, a strategic and systematic approach to introduce organisational changes that change mindsets and behaviour throughout the organisation. Removing barriers to women's career progression in leadership roles in organisations will require a change in underlying beliefs, mindsets and behaviours, which takes strong and committed leadership and sustained action over a long time.

Top level commitment is critical to driving change

Personal conviction and commitment from the CEO and executive team are seen as the most important requirements for increasing representation of women in leadership[187] [188] [189]. Gender balance needs to be on the agenda, with visible management and action from the executive team. New Zealand's 25 Percent Group and the Australian Male Champions of Change (male CEOs) recommend CEOs get personally involved in diversity actions[190] [191].

The CEO and executive team play an important role in recruiting women at senior levels. Appointing women into senior leadership roles provides demonstrable evidence of commitment and is seen as the biggest differentiator in how women see their own career progression[192]. A critical mass of senior women leaders is considered the single most effective action that will have the greatest impact and improve female representation at all levels[193] [194]. It is suggested that when the proportion of women in senior positions is less than the critical mass (often 30 percent), the organisation's culture and practices are unlikely to create a strong pipeline for women[195].

It seems the importance of critical mass in getting real traction depends heavily on the organisation's existing leadership. This reinforces the important role the executive team has in addressing the challenge of women in leadership. Australia's Male Champions of Change aim both to improve the leadership pipeline and to increase the representation of women at senior levels in their own organisations[196]. In contrast, many of the respondents to a recent international survey of directors and senior executives thought that a change in top level leadership would be required before there would be real change in balancing the leadership pipeline in their organisations[197]. The focus on senior leaders highlights the importance of embedding action on gender balance into the organisation's core business. Only then will gender balance in leadership be sustainable and no longer dependent on the personal commitment and drive of individual leaders.

The executive team member's own actions are also important because they operate as role models and play a key role in establishing the norms and values that underpin organisational culture. For example, executive team members and other senior leaders working flexibly who discuss their work patterns would demonstrate it is both possible to do and not career limiting. By proactively championing and role modelling they would also help remove the stigma and cultural resistance to new ways of working and career management. Senior

executives and other leaders can also role model proactive talent management by identifying and sponsoring talented women for development and career opportunities[198].

Gender balance needs to be on the strategic agenda

To be fully effective, gender balance in leadership needs to be seen as a business imperative on the strategic agenda and given the focus and attention required[199]. This starts with identifying the issues, barriers and possible solutions before deciding on actions. The barriers and solutions each organisation faces will depend on its external operating environment as well as the dynamics of the current workforce and the organisational culture.

Experience suggests that after some initial wins progress is likely to plateau[200] [201]. Australia's Male Champions of Change point to the need for transformational change that changes the underlying beliefs, mindsets and behaviours around gender, leadership and work[202]. They recommend an integrated change programme that engages a broad cross section of the organisation to raise awareness and then change individual and organisational mindsets. Cultural change of this sort is the most effective solution to removing unconscious bias[203], which is what underpins many of the beliefs, mindsets and behaviours that create barriers for women's leadership progression. Work from McKinsey indicates that organisational transformations that address underlying beliefs and mindsets are much more likely to succeed than those that address only the symptoms[204]. Strong leadership and high levels of employee engagement and ownership are important factors for success. Cultural change is challenging and is likely to be context specific, so what works in one organisation will not necessarily work in another[205] [206].

> Organisational transformations that address underlying beliefs and mindsets are much more likely to succeed

9   In conclusion

The benefits of attracting and retaining talented women in leadership roles are clear. Clear too are existing barriers to women's career progression associated with unconscious bias, career breaks and flexible working. There are a number of actions organisations can take to reduce these barriers and gain the benefit of attracting and retaining talented women leaders including:

- raising awareness and developing actions to address the unconscious bias that otherwise will continue to create invisible barriers to women's progress in the leadership pipeline
- supporting talented women to return to work or re-enter the workforce in jobs that fully utilise their leadership skills and value to the organisation
- aligning policies, workplace practices, and organisational culture to support effective flexible working arrangements for all employees
- proactively planning and managing women's leadership careers in a way that supports their career and life choices
- taking an executive-led and strategic approach to implementing transformational change that will shift existing mindsets and behaviours to ones that support gender balance in leadership.

With the release of this report, the Ministry marks another milestone in its journey to support women in leadership.   The Ministry works to support New Zealand initiatives that help to realise the opportunities that having more women leaders provides. The report complements support already provided through the 25 Percent Group and the nominations service for appointment of women onto state sector boards and committees.

The report draws heavily on overseas information and that available in the public domain. We want to find out more about how unconscious bias, career breaks and flexible working affect women's career progression in New Zealand organisations. The report poses some questions for organisations to consider. We are interested in your responses to these questions, and your views and experiences in addressing gender balance in leadership. We plan to develop a knowledge centre of existing and emerging information and best practice on attracting and retaining talented women in leadership roles.

Further information and updates will be available on the Ministry's website www.mwa.govt.nz as this work progresses.

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