

The voices of women: leadership and gender in the further education sector

An LSIS-funded practitioners' research project was undertaken by LSN and WLN between October 2009 and March 2010, supported by Protocol National and the NBP. The aim was to find out:

- Why are women so under-represented at principal level?
- How are we to ensure that the further education sector is selecting the best people to be senior leaders from the widest pool of talent?
- What are the barriers and enablers to women as a whole and to BME women in particular?
- What should the sector be doing to ensure greater diversity in senior and top posts?

Eight regional network meetings took place across the country, at which 171 women and men participated in discussions. Following each meeting, participants were invited to take part in an online survey and to pass the survey on to other women in their organisation. 470 women completed the survey: participants were mainly middle and senior managers and BME women comprised 7.9% of the online survey respondents.

This summary was produced by the WLN – for full report go to www.wlnfe.org.uk.

In brief

This chart summarises responses in terms of the key themes for strategies to ensure greater leadership progression opportunities for women in general:

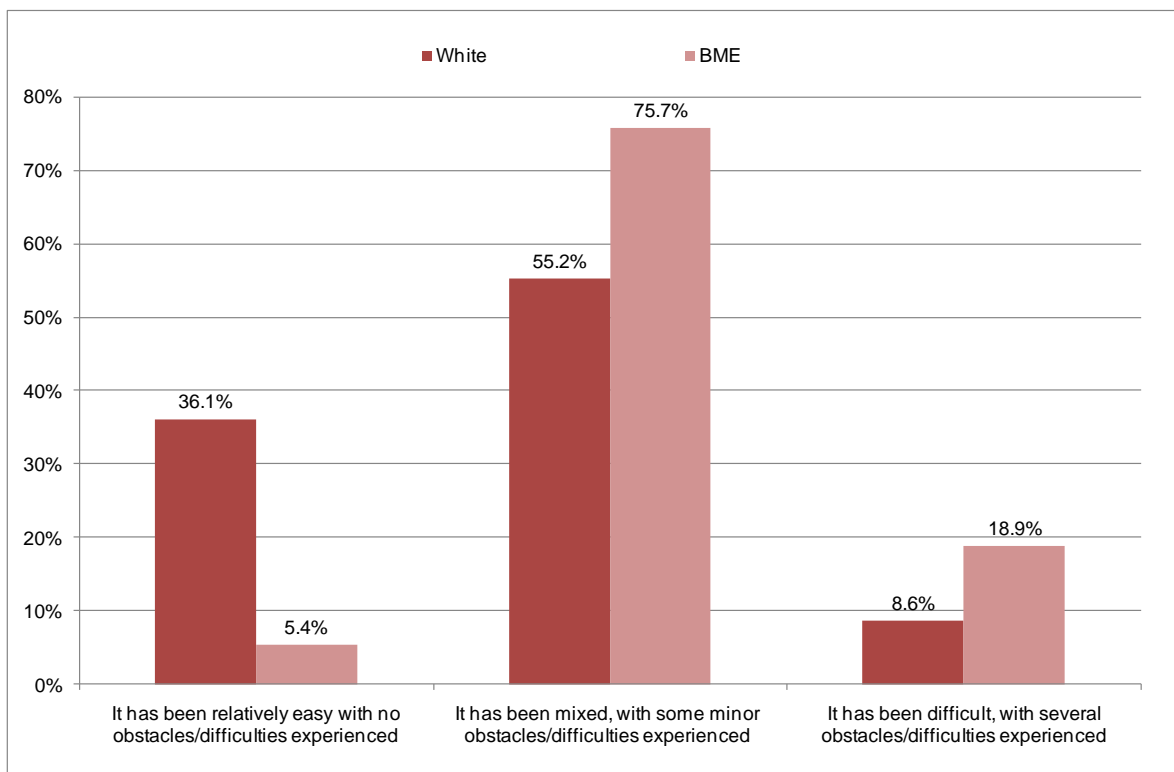
Theme	Examples of comments	No. of comments	%
Mentoring, support and training	<i>'Better advice, guidance, support and training to empower women not only to perform well in their current and future roles as managers'</i> <i>'Conferences on self esteem, confidence building, how to survive difficult situations'</i>	33	24%
Flexibility	<i>'Greater flexibility with regard to working hours and career breaks'</i> <i>'Promote flexible working practices and provide development training that is accessible in terms of funding, location and times'</i>	26	19%
Information and opportunities	<i>'Encouragement; opportunity to gain experience to build up a portfolio'</i> <i>'information and opportunities clearly communicated with support provided by other women managers'</i>	17	12%
Role models	<i>'Clear role models with an effective mentor who is able to question self esteem and fear issues.'</i> <i>'more women in powerful roles on governing bodies'</i>	14	10%
Equality practice	<i>'National monitoring of impact of equalities policies'</i>	10	7%

Career progression experiences

Respondents identified the main barriers to career progression as: family commitments, lack of confidence, negative attitudes in some organisations, lack of development opportunities and support for career progression. 88.7% thought that there were some or many barriers and 44.4% reported having personally encountered barriers. 74.5% of BME respondents had encountered barriers compared to 41.9% of white respondents.

Over half reported mixed career path journeys, with some minor obstacles or difficulties. 9.4% reported that they had had difficult experiences, with several obstacles or difficulties.

BME respondents more likely to report a difficult career path (18.9%) than white respondents (8.6%):



Q2.6. What has your own career development path been like so far?

Gender differences in motivation and levels of confidence

The report also drew on the findings of another research project, the recent LSN Survey “The next generation of leaders” based on 112 online respondents, 51 second tier managers and 61 principals. Findings indicated that:

- women were less interested in becoming principals than men (some cited age as a reason, possibly due to career breaks)
- men were more likely to have planned on becoming a principal at an early stage
- women were more likely to have been motivated by encouragement from others
- women were more likely to be concerned about not being up to the job or failure
- women’s levels of confidence in the extent to which their skills, knowledge and experience matched the requirements of principalship were markedly lower than those of men working at the same level

The impact of organisational culture on career progression

There was a striking contrast between the comments from respondents who felt supported by their organisation's culture, versus those who did not. 115 women provided examples of negative impact of organisational culture on their career progression. Some examples of positive and negative impact:

■ Positive impact of my organisation's culture
In our culture, there is no pressure to be at work outside normal office hours, except by arrangement (e.g. governors' meetings, etc.) Family commitments are recognised and valued. The key thing is getting the job done, not being seen to be at work until 7 pm.
Senior leaders encourage career progression, not just for women but men as well – equal opportunities are strongly embedded in my organisation's work culture.
Use of a support and supervision framework with the opportunity for staff to discuss issues openly, and coaching available to all staff.
■ Negative impact of my organisation's culture
Culture of working long hours - judged on presenteeism rather than outputs.
There are still some male members of staff who have old fashioned views of women and either resent females in management positions or who make sexist comments in front of female staff. These people are in the minority.
Flexible working is not supported and you have to really fight for it. When absent for my first child, my role wasn't covered suitably to save money, and my staff really suffered.

Recommendations in the report

From our respondents' choices and comments emerged a clear picture of the factors, activities and changes that would enable the sector to encourage more women, including BME women, to aspire to leadership and successfully apply for top jobs. Our respondents were clear that principals, senior management teams, governing bodies, government and public agencies all have an important role in bringing about increased diversity.

1. A family-friendly culture in each organisation, with policies that support women and men with caring responsibilities

- Acknowledge and value the family commitments of both men and women
- Develop a work-life balance policy and ensure that the college working hours, including meeting times are family-friendly
- Support job share, fractional part time options and arrangements for home working at all levels
- Actively support those taking a career break, keeping them informed and inviting them to meetings as appropriate
- Actively support those returning from a career break, offering updating opportunities such as work shadow, work experience and respecting age discrimination legislation.

2. A culture in all colleges that positively encourages career planning and progression for all

- Effective supervision, support and performance management

- Appraisal that encourages professional development and career planning
 - Accessible professional and leadership development opportunities
 - Clear organisational structures for promotion and progression.
- 3. A culture in all organisations and across the sector that is free of discriminatory attitudes, takes into account the obstacles faced by certain groups of people and embraces sound equalities practice**
- Effective equalities training for governors, principals and senior management teams including a sound understanding of the obstacles that women and BME professionals face
 - Sound equal opportunities practice including fair and open recruitment processes
 - Clear career progression routes in colleges and across sector
 - An increase in the number of women governors
 - National monitoring of the impact of equalities practice
- 4. Strategies to increase the number of BME professionals in senior management, in addition to the above**
- An increase in the number of BME college governors
 - Higher national profile of BME senior leaders in the sector
 - Effective equalities practices, with a common understanding of diversity, across the sector
 - Mentoring and leadership skills development specifically for BME professionals
 - Networking and support specifically for BME professionals
 - Celebration and positive endorsement of BME senior leaders
- 5. Confidence-building activities to encourage women to regard themselves as potential senior leaders**
- Opportunities for mentoring, work-shadowing and secondments
 - Networking opportunities to learn from peers and from female senior leaders
 - Celebration and positive endorsement of women leaders

What next?

Protocol National has supported this project throughout and will help us to produce a Good Practice Guide for the sector in the next few months. This will be widely circulated in the sector.

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