

ABOVE THE PARAPET

A Programme at the Institute of Public Affairs

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Above the Parapet

A Programme at the Institute of Public Affairs

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Foreword

We know numbers but not journeys

Evidence consistently shows that women are underrepresented in public life. Anecdotal accounts of the lives of women who have successfully pursued careers in public life attest to the obstacles faced, the struggle to be heard and the price paid by women for raising their heads 'above the parapet'. What remains little explored is women's own accounts of their journeys. The *Above the Parapet* research project has examined the experiences of senior women in public life by asking them to describe their journeys into those positions, the barriers they met and how the lessons learned from these experiences could benefit women who follow. We focused on those sectors – politics, diplomacy, academia, and civil society – in which people can achieve visibility, authority and influence in public life.

Above the Parapet acknowledges the literature that argues that diversity in public life results in public good and brings enhanced public outcomes. Additionally, the project recognises that access and participation have intrinsic value as well as a foundation in rights.

Above the Parapet also acknowledges that public life has a primarily male profile and history, and that this has been a systemic and institutional bias, not the expression of accident and coincidence. Women's entry into public life constitute acts of dissent and disruption. Such disruption is worthy of study and analysis, with a focus on women in the vanguard.

The project's research questions are:

1. During the journeys to seniority achieved by women in public life, what were the dynamics which enabled, the challenges that hindered, and the approaches used to overcome challenges?
2. What lessons do these women have to share with the women who hope to follow them, and men and institutions seeking a more balanced public life?

The *Above the Parapet* research was conducted through interviews with senior women across the four selected sectors. Five Visiting Fellows spent time at the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) to reflect, debate, and capture their journeys and experiences. We were delighted to have HE Joyce Banda, former President of Malawi, HE Roza Otunbayeva, former President of Kyrgyzstan, Professor Sylvia Tamale, Ugandan academic lawyer, HE Julia Gillard, former Australian Prime Minister, and Professor Ruth Simmons, former President of Brown University, as Visiting Fellows joining our project.

Above the Parapet found resonance with so many women that the project completed twice the number of interviews originally expected. We have conducted 80 interviews (in addition to the contributions of the Visiting Fellows) with subjects from over 40 different countries including former presidents, ministers, university vice-chancellors, ambassadors and leading civil society voices.

Above the Parapet has international scope, recognising that many parallel challenges are faced by women across the world, but that there are also culturally specific circumstances to be examined. Distribution across sectors and regions is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of interviewees by sector and region

Sector	Number	Region	Number
Academia	16	Africa	8
Civil society	18	Americas	19 Inc 9 USA
Diplomacy	20	Asia	11
Politics	26	Europe	38 Inc 22 UK
		Pacific	4
Total	80		80

We have gathered rich and personal reflections that illustrate the journeys of women into senior public life. We hope that the lessons learned from these journeys will help to build understanding and strategies among women who seek to influence public life and men who seek to help in redressing the historical imbalance.

Thank You

We warmly thank the *Above the Parapet* advisory group, who have supported the research with ideas, feedback, good humour and much encouragement. The time and thought they invested in this project are hugely appreciated.

We also would like to acknowledge the generous financial support of the LSE Annual Fund and the Alison Wetherfield Foundation (AWF) for this project. In particular, Christine Douglass of the AWF has been a great enthusiast and advocate for this work.

Professor Conor Gearty, Director of the LSE's Institute of Public Affairs, was the first to encourage and support the development of this idea from its inception and has been a stalwart supporter throughout the work.

Most importantly, recognition and gratitude are due to the eighty women and five Visiting Fellows who took the time to speak to us about their lives. They trusted us with intimacies and ideas; they shared their thoughts for the women who follow.

This report draws on their accounts.

Introduction

The dominance of men in public life transcends time and place.¹ Women make up less than 10 per cent of world leaders. Globally, less than one in five members of parliament is a woman. No country pays women the same as men;² very few have equal representation in managerial positions³ and men's share of household duties, though increasing in some places, remains low and inconsistent compared to that of women.⁴ These statistics illustrate the stubborn resilience of gender inequality across various aspects of private and public life.

This research project has been rich and rewarding. It has explored personal, hidden, and often unnamed aspects of women's lives. A deliberate decision has been taken to make the tone and voice of this initial report human and personal, which is in keeping with the spirit of that research.

The many people with whom we have been in contact and the many expressions of interest in the work of Above the Parapet have created an audience of practitioners, as well as academics, who await the findings. This report seeks to provide an overview of the accounts that have been shared and identify some of the practical implications that flow from them.

¹ OECD (2014) *Women, Government and Policy Making in OECD Countries: Fostering Diversity for Inclusive Growth* (Paris: OECD Publishing); UN Commission on the Status of Women (2014), *Review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action: report of the Secretary-General*, E/CN.6/2015/3; UN Division for the Advancement of Women (1992) *Women in Public Life. Women 2000* no. 2. The importance of the subject was also recognised in a resolution adopted by consensus by the UN Commission on the Status of Women at its thirty-sixth session in March 1992.

² UNDP (2015) *Human Development Report 2015* (New York: UNDP), 220.

³ For some illustrations see catalyst.org/knowledge/women-management-global-comparison, ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/--publ/documents/publication/wcms_334882.pdf and pewsocialtrends.org/2015/01/14/the-data-on-women-leaders/

⁴ Treas, J. and Drobnic, S. (2010) (Eds.) *Dividing the Domestic: Men, Women and Household Work in Cross-National Perspective* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

This report alone cannot do full justice to the breadth of information shared with the research team during the *Above the Parapet* research. Instead it presents key themes and lessons.

The report opens with an outline of the study and its aims. The following section explains the research methods. The dominant themes emerging from our analysis are presented in the next section, drawing from the full group of women who spoke to us. These focus on the directness, or otherwise, of routes to seniority and the presence, or absence, of planning in those journeys: the perennial challenge of juggling domestic and professional lives, the particular challenges of intersectionality, and finally luck, accidents, and risk-taking.

The following four sections address each of the sectors – academia, civil society, diplomacy, and politics. Reflections and findings that pertain to those sectors specifically are mapped out in turn, with particular attention paid to how progress was made and where support was found.

The five Visiting Fellows shared many hours of reflection through which they explored their experiences. Extracts from their stories are included in the penultimate section, using their own words. The final chapter summarises some of the key lessons and suggestions that flow from the experiences of Above the Parapet interviewees. This last section specifically addresses the second research question: what there is to be learned from these stories, both by women who wish to follow the interviewees into positions of influence in public life, and by others who wish to contribute to the disruption of the ‘business as usual’ dynamic of those arenas.

During the course of the research, we spoke with more than 80 women across the four sectors. Some data were captured in our Above the Parapet Facewall.⁵

⁵ The *Above the Parapet* Facewall can be found at blogs.lse.ac.uk/ipa/above-the-parapet-profiles/

Above the Parapet Facewall

“We know numbers, but not journeys.” LSE’s Above the Parapet project is exploring the journeys taken by high profile women who shape public life. We have spoken to more than 80 women in the fields of politics, diplomacy, academia and civil society to gather their stories of reaching the highest levels of public life. Patterns, trends, their experiences and lessons from these 80 interviews will be shared for the women that follow and the men who wish to see more balanced public life. The Above the Parapet Facewall presents insights from our interviews, and for more information on the project please visit [About Above the Parapet](#).

Academia Civil Society Diplomacy Politics All

The Facewall presents interview extracts from several women who allowed us to publish them. The extracts address challenges, dynamics that enabled progress, significant aspects of their journey and lessons to share. Some Facewall interviews were recorded on video – including those with all five *Above the Parapet* Fellows – and others are excerpts from interview transcripts.

The *Above the Parapet* initiative held a number of events with different audiences to share emerging findings and seek feedback on what people hoped to learn from the study:

- Each *Above the Parapet* Fellow gave a public lecture on their particular journey to seniority.⁶

⁶ All lectures with Above the Parapet fellows can be downloaded and streamed online at lse.ac.uk/IPA/Research/AboveTheParapet/Events.aspx

- The *Above the Parapet* team gave a public lecture at the LSE Research Festival 2015 to share initial findings following the conclusion of all interviews.⁷
- Two seminars were held to share tailored findings with specific audiences who had expressed an interest in learning more from *Above the Parapet*. One audience consisted of professionals working in the gender and development sector seeking to learn from the findings of the research. The other was a group of young women aspiring to senior public life.

Further to this report, initial findings – also drawn following the conclusion of the interviews – were published in *LSE Connect*, the LSE's alumni magazine.⁸

The Study

Systemic under-representation of women informs the contexts in which women operate prior to accessing positions of power. There is no reason to assume that the channels through which women access leadership are exempt from biases and prejudices; this study illustrates how some of those biases limit possibilities but fail to extinguish determination. Pre-leadership spaces require further illumination to explain poor numbers and to change the shape of possibility.

Starting from a recognition of male predominance as the norm, our study is interested in how this is disrupted and how abnormality is achieved. We have not sought to explore how often this happens. Instead, *Above the Parapet* is investigating what can be learned from those who have disrupted the inherited order.

The *Above the Parapet* study does not examine leadership *per se* – what constitutes leadership, how it manifests itself, the psychology of a leader and so on. Our focus is on access to leadership – how is it possible for women to become

⁷ The LSE Research Festival lecture can be downloaded and streamed online at lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/player.aspx?id=3086

⁸ The article can be found at lse.ac.uk/alumni/LSEConnect/articlesWinter2015/voicesAboveTheParapet.aspx

public women of influence? Despite having such a rich pool of accounts, this study cannot be conclusive; further work is needed. More detail for each sector would be helpful; addressing our geographical gaps also needs further attention. As it does elsewhere, the issue of intersectionality needs much stronger recognition and understanding; how this plays out in women's lives is poorly researched and recorded. In recognising that we have a poor understanding of how women can access positions of influence, the *Above the Parapet* work has sought to open the door on this relatively little-explored area.

This research has considered individual accounts, self-perception and characteristics of women in seniority. In addition, attention has been given to context – the social, political and economic context that inevitably shapes the possibilities and responses open to women as a class. This study is not exhaustive; we seek to shed more light than currently exists on the still relatively unusual trajectories of women into senior public life.

We do not propose that success for women is equivalent to reaching the most senior echelons of professional life. Success, when used in this research, relates to the achievement of reaching those positions of influence and seniority explored here, not that seniority is synonymous with success.

This study is of women as a group, women who may have commonality in their experiences or differences in their approaches. It is about women being worthy of study and understanding in their own right, as holders and generators of knowledge with insights, lessons and implications that can shape how senior public life is accessed and conducted. It is not a comparison of women's experiences with those of men. What is said about women here is not about how they differ from or compare with men. Where references are made to men, it is a presentation of what women have mentioned, and how they have seen comparisons play out in their experiences.

This work is not about starting from men's experiences as the core framing narrative and explaining women as distinct from, or subsumed by, that. It is instead about starting with women's accounts as knowledge-building material intrinsically worthy of study and analysis. The research is premised on the potential within women's experiences to shed light on how to create a more feminised and balanced senior public life.

'First' Women

Many of the women interviewed were 'firsts' – the first female Presidents of Malawi and Kyrgyzstan joined us as Fellows, as did the first woman Prime Minister of Australia. Indeed, all of our Fellows were first women: Professor Tamale was the first woman to be dean of a law faculty in Uganda, or indeed in Africa; Professor Ruth Simmons was the first African American person to be president of an Ivy League university. Many other women among the 80 interviewees were also firsts. Table 2 lists their specific firsts, although in some cases not their names as their participation in this research remains confidential. It is undoubtedly difficult for pioneers to forge a path for themselves. They carry the weight of their sex in their behaviours, their actions, their words and their impacts, with race, sexuality and disability status also affecting perception and opportunity. The voices of critics tend to be loud, but others watch with hope and optimism that the 'firsts' might push open doors through which others might subsequently pass.

Being the first is also about achievement and can have particular meaning. One diplomat spelled this out very specifically, capturing her pride and privilege at representing her newly independent state at a critical stage:

Interviewee D20AS: "We're a rare breed of ambassadors that saw the flag hoisted for the first time ... So to me, the thing that characterises my journey is just the privilege. Privilege to be an ambassador, but I think I'm extra privileged to have done it in such a very, very important, transformative time for my country and my people. Yes, I'm so lucky and so fortunate that I got to ... serve in such a high position in the multilateral system. That to me is probably the most important thing. Yes. I always say to people, 'Every day I'm making history'".

Above the Parapet's first women are represented in all four sectors (see Table 2), chiefly in politics. Over half of the Above the Parapet first women were from Europe.

Table 2: 'First' women

Joyce Banda	First woman President of Malawi, first woman President in Southern Africa	Africa
Roza Otunbayeva	First woman President of Kyrgyzstan and first woman President in Central Asia	Asia
Sylvia Tamale	First woman Dean of Law Faculty in Uganda and Africa	Africa
Julia Gillard	First woman to lead Australian Labour Party; First woman PM of Australia	Pacific
Ruth Simmons	First African American woman to head an Ivy League University	Americas



First black woman to serve as Cabinet Minister in her country	Europe
First black woman in Parliament in her country	Americas
First Jewish woman to serve as Cabinet Minister in her country	Americas
First openly lesbian political party Leader in her country	Europe
First female President in her country (x 3)	Europe
First openly lesbian mayor of a major city in her country	Americas
First Muslim woman in Parliament in her country	Americas
First woman to found a political party in her country	Europe
First woman professor in a University in her country	Pacific
First woman Director of a University Department in her country	Europe
First woman Vice Chancellor of University in her country	Europe
First female Ambassador to Israel for her country	Europe
First woman to be Cabinet Secretary in her country	Pacific
First job-sharing couple in Diplomatic Service in her country	Europe
First female Ambassador to the UN, first female Ambassador to the US	Europe

Chart 1: 'First' women by region

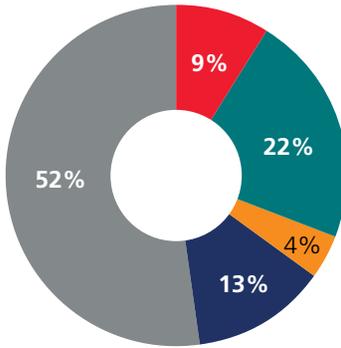
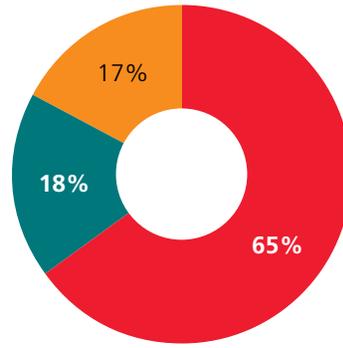


Chart 2: 'First' women by sector



Methodology

This study is premised on the legitimacy of women's voiced experiences being the basis for knowledge production. It proceeds on the basis that women's lives are best comprehended from the vantage point of experience, alongside which observation and an external gaze have a complementary place. Starting from this position, the objectives of the study – to examine women's access to leadership in public life and draw out lessons – are pursued through interviews, documenting and analysing women's personal accounts.

Data collection method

A review of the available statistics and quantitative data regarding women in public life provides clear evidence of the under-representation of women in the senior ranks of diplomacy, academia, politics, and civil society.⁹

⁹ See statistics presented in introduction.

Despite this, women's own testimonies of their access to power have rarely been captured. This research has sought to address that gap, in some part, and to begin to populate that space by gathering the words of the women involved.

Through qualitative research, we sought a direct concern with experience as it is 'lived', 'felt' or 'undergone',¹⁰ so as to build a grounded understanding. Our study sought personal life stories as a way of capturing career experiences.

The aim of the research was to explore the routes taken to seniority. To this end, the primary research question was:

- During the journeys to seniority achieved by women in public life, what were the dynamics which enabled, challenges that hindered, and approaches used to overcome challenges?

Concerned with the paucity of women in senior public life, we posed a secondary question to see what we could learn from their experiences:

- What lessons do *Above the Parapet* interviewees have to share with the women who hope to follow and men and institutions seeking a more balanced public life?

Interviews were semi-structured and an interview protocol was used to guide the research team in collecting data. Semi-structured interviews facilitated the gathering of rich and detailed responses in relation to the women's experiences and allowed the researchers to clarify responses during data collection.¹¹

The protocol was designed to cover the research questions, particularly: description of route to position of seniority, including education; challenges faced; aspects that enabled their progress; methods of overcoming challenges; and advice to share with those that follow. Questions were phrased in an open-ended manner to allow interviewees space for reflection and to report openly their own

¹⁰ Sherman, R. and Webb, R. (1988) *Qualitative Research in Education: Focus and Methods* (Bristol, PA: Falmer Press).

¹¹ Barbour, R.S. and Schostak, J. (2005) "Interviewing and focus groups" in *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, ed. B. Somekh and C. Lewin (London: Sage Publications Ltd), 41-48.

experiences. While prompts were used to guide the interviewees to reflect on topics covering the main areas of research, the design allowed interviewees to lead the discussion and focus on the aspects of their journey that they deemed most significant to them. Similarly, when conducting the interviews, the research team used neutral language and asked questions in an open and empathetic way.

When invited for interview, participants received a summary of the research, which explained the overall purpose and intended goals of the study as well as the type of questions asked. The summary was then discussed prior to the interview itself and subjects were given the opportunity to ask questions about the interview. This ensured that interviewees had clarity regarding the purpose of the research and knew that the interview would cover personal details relating to their own career path.

The introductory discussion also served to establish a rapport between the researcher and the interviewee. Interviewees were universally in favour of the project's aim to build a library of women's accounts and were keen to contribute to such a repository.

Interviews were conducted in person, by phone, or via Skype. Hearing from women leaders beyond Europe and the USA required a flexible and enabling approach to setting up interviews – phone calls were essential in this effort.

Interviews lasted an average of 55 minutes. A handful of interviews were much shorter, given the limited availability of women in senior roles, and a number of interviews were over 90 minutes. The research elicited 99 hours of interview recordings. Some interviews were not recorded so the 99 hours do not capture the full extent of material gathered. Further publications are planned so as to provide analysis and address some of the learning that could not be captured here.

Interviews were conducted by a team of three researchers who all followed the same interview protocol. All the interviews except one were recorded (with the permission of the respondents) and transcribed. Every woman interviewed was given the option to stop the recording if she wished or to ask for a break in the recording so that she could speak off the record¹².

Confidentiality and anonymity

We obtained the permission of interviewees to include verbatim excerpts to illustrate findings within this report. In all cases, names have been identified only with permission of the interviewee. If permission has not expressly been given, anonymity has been maintained. Every effort has been made to remove details in excerpts used here that could identify specific individuals. For example, identifying words have been substituted with generic versions (eg, 'my country', 'my political party') where referenced in this report or other research outputs.

The coding used against extracts and quotes in this report systematise references to the speaker's sector and region. The first letter denotes the sector: A for academia, C for civil society, D for diplomacy, and P for politics. The number identifies an individual, for example, 1-21 for diplomacy and 1-18 for civil society. The last part of the code refers to the speaker's region of origin:

Asia (AS), Africa (AF), the USA (US), the Americas excluding the USA (AM), the United Kingdom (UK), Europe excluding the United Kingdom (EU), and the Pacific (P).

Guarantees of confidentiality were essential for this study as this reassured interviewees that the interview was a space where they could be comfortable to reference frank, intimate and illustrative details of their particular journeys.

Each of the five Above the Parapet Fellows agreed that their accounts would be used and that they would be named.

¹² Several interviewees did indeed ask for the recording to be paused; one asked not to be recorded at all, preferring that written notes be taken.

Interviewees

In total, 80 women from over 40 different countries holding senior positions in the four fields of study were interviewed. In addition, the five Fellows spoke to us at some length.

Participants were selected after a consideration of sampling strategies. Purposive sampling – often used in qualitative research and informed by the research questions – was chosen for its advantage of ‘selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study’.¹³ Participants were recruited through snowball sampling using our professional and personal networks, and selected to reflect some of the diversity of women in senior public life.

Women currently in, or having recently left, senior positions in the four fields under study were approached to participate in this research. Appropriate interviewees were sought according to positions held, as follows:

Table 3: Interviewees

Academia	Interviewees held the rank of professor or were more senior, and often in conjunction with a senior management position within university administration (eg, vice-chancellor, rector)
Civil Society	Interviewees were (or had previously been) heads of national or regional non-governmental organisations
Diplomacy	Interviewees had reached Ambassadorial rank
Politics	Interviewees were former heads of state or government, politicians (eg, ministers, parliamentarians) or senior figures within political party structures.

With the research team being based in London, interviewees in the UK were the most accessible. However, as the researchers were aware that studies into women’s leadership primarily focused on women in Europe and the USA, we sought interviewees from all continents to

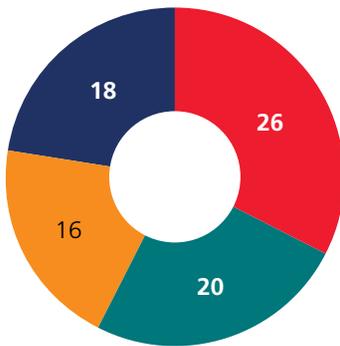
¹³ Patton, M.Q. (1999) Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *HSR: Health Services Research*, 34 (5) Part II: 1189-1208.

obtain data on women's journeys in public life across the world. A spread of interviews was also sought among the geographical regions – see Table 4.

Table 4: Geographical backgrounds of interviewees (excluding fellows)

Region	Number of interviewees
Africa	8
Asia	11
Pacific	4
Europe (excluding UK)	16
UK	22
Americas (excluding US)	10
US	9
Total	80

Chart 3: Sectoral distribution of interviewees (excluding fellows)



Above the Parapet sought diversity in background and identity to broaden our understanding, in particular, of complexity and diversity. Through this deliberate strategy we reached a variety of women leaders, including black and minority ethnic women, lesbians, and women with disabilities. Thus, we sought to explore how intersectionality – the ways in which social categorisations such as class, age, and race interconnect – is experienced among women who have accessed power.

We originally aimed to achieve a completed sample of between 40-50 women. However the number of women who shared their stories has greatly exceeded our initial aspirations. We contacted more potential interviewees than we hoped to have in our final sample, expecting that many would be uninterested or unavailable. An *Above the Parapet* website was opened, newsletters produced, and social media used to invite people interested in the work to nominate women to whom we might speak. We also attended the UN Commission on the Status of Women in March 2015, a global gathering of women that brings together politicians, diplomats and civil society activists. (Academics also attend, but in smaller numbers). While there, we conducted 23 interviews, over a quarter of our sample.

Five women who had reached the height of their professions joined us as Fellows and were each interviewed over multiple days. Their accounts provide considerable depth in understanding how each woman arrived at her position.

All interviewees provided valuable insights into how women have sought and shaped spaces in which to be heard and exercise influence.

Approach to analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and entered into QSR Nvivo10 software for coding. Computer software was chosen to aid the analysis of the volume of material following almost one hundred hours of interviews in total, through tabulating words and phrases. We coded the interviews according to the issues raised, making links between the various coded text segments and continually comparing coded segments with one another.

The first twenty interviews, five from each of the four sectors under study, were coded by the two researchers who had carried out the majority of the interviews and were most familiar with the data. Segments (or 'meaning units'¹⁴) were coded as perspectives; beliefs and experiences were articulated by the interviewee. These meaning units were assigned a theme which summarised the essence of what was being expressed. Interviewees were able to organise their thoughts into stories of 1) progress or support, 2) challenges, 3) methods used to overcome challenges, and 4) lessons to share with those who follow.

To start, we carefully read and re-read the transcripts of these first twenty interviews, searching for instances where responses corresponded with the above categories. We then highlighted relevant portions of text in line with the categories in Nvivo10 and examined each category for its main themes. In order to review and refine the coding themes, all collated data extracts were re-read to ensure that the groupings had been organised to form coherent evidence of consistent patterns in the entire set of interviews.

The two researchers kept a research diary and would discuss coding progress and review each other's coding two or three times a week to validate early decisions on how responses would be coded. Once sub-themes within each main category had been established, these were outlined in a coding book. The coding book set out the name of each theme (eg, challenge) and sub-theme (eg, bullying, balancing caring responsibilities), and provided a definition for each alongside an example.

Following initial coding and analysis of the first twenty interviews (25 per cent of the whole sample), we brought together academics and practitioners working on gender as well as young women interested in pursuing careers in one of the four fields of study.

¹⁴ Kvale, S. and Brinkmann, S. (2009) *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.) (London: Sage Publications Ltd).

The purpose was to seek feedback and reflections on the themes emerging from the initial analysis, as well as to enhance the utility and findings for young women. Participants assisted in validating the direction of analysis and suggested priority focus areas for the research's primary audience.

The remaining 60 interviews were divided between a coding team of four: the original two researchers who had undertaken the majority of interviews, and two coding assistants who underwent training and practised coding exercises where their coding was reviewed by the main analyst. All coders maintained a research diary throughout, and the main analyst continued regular discussions with the coding team and reviewed their coding to ensure consistency.

Individual data extracts for each theme were then collated to determine significant features of the extracts, to consider how these contributed to the overall research question and sub-questions, and assess the implications of this data analysis. We used an inductive approach in our examination of the data, aiming to build rather than test theory. This approach helped us to identify meaningful patterns in the data and to ensure that themes were strongly linked to the data. Searching across each interview transcript helped identify repeated patterns of meaning and common conceptualisations. Furthermore, this coding technique allowed a structural analysis of participants' responses and the identification of patterns and differences in the personal beliefs and lived experiences to be identified.



Key themes

Ninety-nine hours of interviews plus discussion with five Visiting Fellows, each over several days, have provided an immense pool of material that will take considerable time to mine for its many lessons and contributions to knowledge. For this initial overview, four key overarching themes are outlined: planning, juggling, intersectionality, and opportunity.

Planning: winding roads and direct flights

The most common pattern emerging from women's accounts is that of the unplanned journey. While a minority of women planned and followed a route through to a known end point, planned journeys do not emerge as dominant in women's accounts. Rather it is the diversity of routes and the many stops along the way that emerge in a striking way.

Not only did women move in and out of different areas of work, but they spent time in more than one of the sectors we explored in this research, demonstrating that experience in one is valuable in others (Chart 4 shows numbers and direction of travel between sectors). Some areas seem to be more porous than others, with academia appearing the least open to entrants from elsewhere.

While just over a third of *Above the Parapet* interviewees (35 per cent; n=28) have worked in their chosen sector throughout their careers, most have moved across sectors, in particular the four sectors explored in this study. In academia, however, the majority of women (69 per cent; n=11) have spent their entire careers in this sector.

Chart 4: Movement across sectors

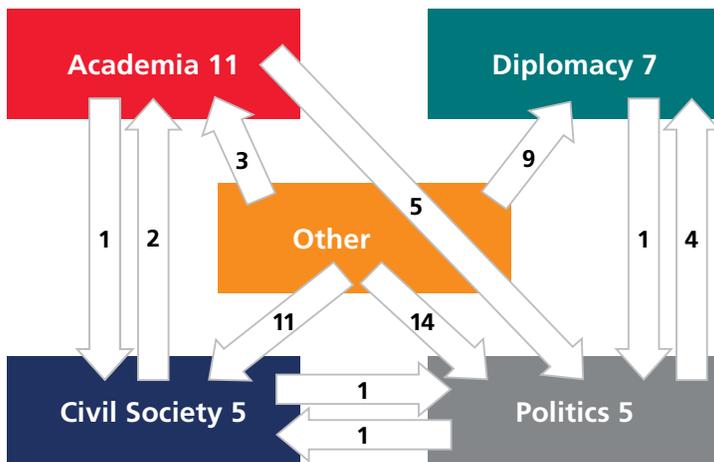
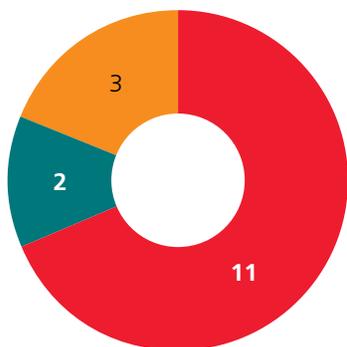
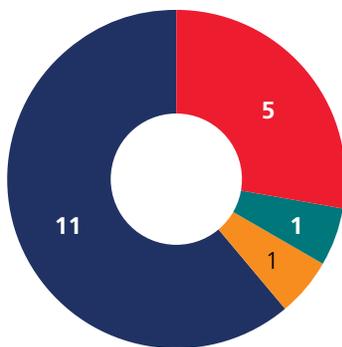


Chart 5: Routes into academia



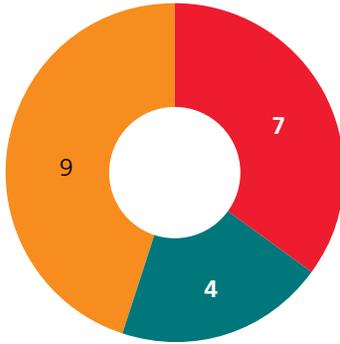
- Only academia
- From civil society to academia
- From other to academia
- From politics to academia

Chart 6: Routes into civil society



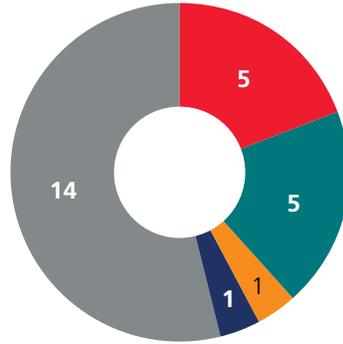
- Only civil society
- From academia to civil society
- From politics to civil society
- From other to civil society

Chart 7: Routes into diplomacy



- Only diplomacy
- From Politics to diplomacy
- From other to diplomacy

Chart 8: Routes into politics



- Only politics
- From academia to politics
- From diplomacy to politics
- From civil society to politics
- From other to politics



Women who plan

Some women planned parts, if not the whole, of their careers. The plans revolved around a particular type of work, or promoting an agenda, or working in a particular way, more than aiming for a specific job. This quote from a woman who headed an NGO illustrates this approach, as she speaks of a 'value plan'.

Interviewee C1EU: "In the year 2000, colleagues, friends from [my university] and I met in New York because it was the new decade, and we said, 'Okay, where do we want to be... 10 years from now?' So everyone wrote that on a postcard and we all kept the postcard. My goal then was to run my own organisation, to be travelling around the world, and to be fighting for social change, and that's exactly what I did... [N]ot a career plan, but a value plan... [P]eople that I meet now, my former school friends, do say that it was... something I've always said, that I will not be living in my village or in [my country], I will be travelling, I will be doing all the things I ended up doing... I didn't quite feel... that life in my... village was where I wanted to be, no no no no; and I knew that from a very early age."

Others did plan a career:

Interviewee A1US: "In terms of my roles in higher education, it was exactly a dream come true. I made a conscious decision after I finished my undergraduate work. I initially worked as a child welfare worker for the [local government services] but during that period of time was thinking seriously about how to move toward a career in higher education."

Interviewee D12UK: "I have always wanted to work in the UN, so I bid for New York and then I bid for Geneva, because it fulfilled the particular goal to work in the UN. I only ever wanted to be an ambassador at a senior level... I was really interested [in doing] something out of the ordinary... Also to craft, be involved in the crafting of ideas and decisions on the world stage and foreign policy. [W]hat I liked about [the foreign ministry] was that... you represented your government, and the only people you

competed with were not other [ministries in this country], but foreign offices around the world. I just really liked the idea of that.”

Therefore planning works for some women. It can enable them to realise a commitment to a particular area of work (such as teaching) or to an organisation (such as the United Nations). It can be a commitment to an agenda – a ‘value plan’ as described above.

However, the unpredicted journey was spoken of by many more women. They spoke of taking opportunities, taking risks and being open. The uncertainty of unknown trajectories was very well captured by a diplomat and an academic:

Interviewee D6AS: “It’s like... jumping on a trapeze, when you let go of one end of the trapeze and you end up not quite sure whether you’ll catch on to the other one, and so that’s kind of freefall... potential freefall... can be quite intimidating and scary and everything else.”

Interviewee A7UK: “I never had a plan and I never had a career path, so some of the places I found myself in surprised me.”

The first of these comments speaks eloquently to the inherent dangers of risk-taking. Employment is, for most people, so closely intertwined with being able to live, eat and pay the rent or mortgage that there is an understandable aversion to taking risks at work. Having the resources and support or being willing to go without, enables a greater resilience to such uncertainty. Aside from material considerations, the degree of comfort a woman has around risk-taking and uncertainty also matters.

The majority of women either made no mention of having clear aspirations or plans or said explicitly that they did not have them. The career planners formed the smallest group in each sector.

**Table 5: Planners and non-planners
(percentages are per sector)**

	Had career plan % (n)	No career plan % (n)	'accidental' journey % (n)
Academia	31(5)	31 (5)	38 (6)
Civil Society	11 (2)	39 (7)	50 (9)
Diplomacy	30 (6)	55 (11)	15 (3)
Politics	19 (5)	35 (9)	46 (12)

Planning worked out well for more women in the diplomatic and academic fields than for others, but it was only evident in the accounts of a minority in each sector. The possibility that seniority and influence are within the grasp of women who do not determine their career plan in advance will be a source of optimism for women who are uncertain of their career trajectory.

On motherhood, juggling and partners

Perceived conflict between women's reproductive and professional roles is a persistent feature of discussion about women and work, whether that work is as a street cleaner, nurse, engineer, politician or singer.

It is not unexpected that this balancing act emerges in the study; indeed it is a relevant factor, as the bulk of childcare responsibilities fall to women. We have sought to explore how parenting, or its absence, features in the lives of the women we have interviewed.

The majority of women we interviewed are mothers (71 per cent; n=57). When asked about where they found support, over half (53 per cent) of the interviewees in relationships cited their partners as one of the most significant sources, including in the domestic and childcare sphere.¹⁵

¹⁵ 64 per cent of interviewees identified as being married or in a relationship

Shared parenting:

Interviewee P8UK: “[In our household] the gender roles were never determined – whoever came home first cooked. The children, the moment they were tall enough to reach the sink, were doing the washing up – both boy and girl [laughter], and basically they always regarded domesticity as a shared responsibility... we help[ed] each [other] do whatever was necessary, and it didn’t matter, so both my kids could cook – in fact, all four of us cooked quite well, and it just seemed completely normal that you cooked, you cleaned. I did most of the shopping, but they did the unpacking and... it was just a question of being a community... [My husband] always felt that it was not right that women should give up anything in order to be married or to have children, and so in our household the gender roles were never really particularly determined, so we all grew up with it... One of the things that I was extremely lucky with is that we live within five minutes of the university, so we could come home for lunch, we could get to university on time. I had no commuting time.”

Beyond spousal support:

Interviewee P3EU: “[My mother] comes [to] our home [in the] morning at seven o’clock. She’s 74 now. She comes [to] our home at seven o’clock in the morning, I leave at 7:30, and I come home whenever I come home, between seven o’clock and maybe nine, sometimes. And she’s just there and she wait[s] until me or my husband [comes] home. Who has that luxury? I don’t know anybody [who does]. And if I [didn’t] have my mother, it would be literally impossible for me to organise.”

Interviewee P15EU: “I was very lucky in that I had home support... I was able to encourage the person who looked after me and my four brothers when we were growing up... our nanny, to become nanny to my three children, so there was a kind of continuity until she became ill with cancer, and then I finally nursed her in her final months, which seems a justice in itself, when she was very weak. But I do admire young parents who have to juggle without that, and I recognise that I was very lucky to have the support that I had, which greatly helped.”

Interviewee P27AF: “So I had my son and, you know, we have families. In Africa you have aunties, so I had a couple of people at home supporting me.”

Interviewee P23EU: “[W]e had to get babysitters or... get nannies, and it was very difficult indeed, very stressful. I did... In fact, I lost my second child. It was born prematurely and died because I think I was overworked. We didn’t know. We didn’t know about maternity [leave] and things like that so, you know. I try to put my children first, but I felt very guilty when my second child died.”

Interviewee D2AM: “They also agreed that I couldn’t come on my own and one of my sisters gave up her job and came with me... She came to be my housekeeper and she looks after my house and my eating and everything, so I don’t have to think about that. I’m not sure how... I would’ve done this work, but it would’ve been a little more difficult because, as it is now, I don’t have to think about those things. Which is what a man has ... I don’t have a wife, but I have a sister.”

Interviewee D12UK: “We had a brilliant nanny. We still have, he still has the same nanny, and that took all our money and all our energy, but it was a great investment.”

Interviewee D15AF: “I’ve been through it before, I think I can do it again. I have a lot more resources now in terms of help, people who help me with the children and whatnot. What I ended up doing was to bring a cousin of mine to come and live with us and be able to be with my daughter when I was away.”

Employers offered support for some mothers. In one case a diplomat was able to stay in the capital for several years while her son was small and was then posted somewhere to which her former husband would not object:

Interviewee D6AS: “[O]ne of the reasons why I think they sent me to the UK is because they knew my personal circumstances, so they would not be able to send me to a less congenial environment... because my ex-husband would not allow me to take [my] son with me if it was to a place that might not provide a good education system... So I laid down in some ways my requirements quite clearly that... I wouldn’t go away unless I [could] bring my son along.”

In some cases, women explicitly saw parenting or other forms of caring as driving or deepening the contribution they made to public life:

Interviewee P2AM: “Well, my wife and I have been together 24 years... and we chose to adopt older kids out of state custody. They had been in foster care... Our youngest is 19 and our older daughter is now 24. They were 7 and 12 when we adopted them. But we had already been caretakers before that. [My wife] and I had been together for a year when my 90-year-old grandparents... moved in with us... [T]hey could no longer live on their own and so we moved them into our house with us and cared for my grandfather in the last months of his life and my grandmother for a couple... more years before she finally had to have more care and moved into a home... [B]ecoming a caretaker for my grandparents was a learning experience, it was one of the best experiences of my life that was also one of the hardest experiences. But it changed my view of who I was in the world, it made me a lot more comfortable in my own skin and it gave me a perspective on the fragility of life. [Soon after, we] took in a gay teenager who had been living on the streets and 20 years on... we refer to him as our son. He has no other family and becoming instant parents of a teenager was another learning experience and it reignited my passion to make my city better and to make opportunities better for youth, and by that time I was no longer an activist in the LGBT community, but it made me more passionate about making things happen. Having to be the grownup, having to be the parent [laughter] all the time was important. But I saw the struggles that he went through, so when we finally adopted our girls later we had lots of parenting [experience] by then.”

On intersectionality

Most previous explorations of leadership or leaders have tended to be sector-specific (business or politics, for example) or primarily Western. Examinations of racial or ethnic dimensions exist but these are few in number and not so much concerned with public life.¹⁶ The *Above the Parapet* research has, by design, taken a different and broader approach. Key among the motivations was to capture the experiences of women who tend to be poorly seen and heard in discussions about them. In debates about women, there has been a tendency to collapse all experience into a homogenised category without adequate regard for the diversity of experiences, and thus reach conclusions for women as a whole. The majority – and therefore dominant – story might be white women, middle class women, able-bodied women or heterosexual women. Such representation is not necessarily by design. It may happen unthinkingly; it may be that researchers talk to those with whom they have most affinity or those to whom they have easiest access.

This approach renders invisible and silent women outside that particular category. What results is that the experiences of one group of women are read to be typical for all women, without taking the time or trouble to capture the voices of, to learn from, women who do not fit into the dominant mould.

Above the Parapet was designed to avoid recreating that pattern. It has been an international exercise, seeking to hear from women from across the globe, black and white, disabled and able-bodied, straight and lesbian. We have actively sought to explore, to the extent that circumstances allowed, what the overlapping and intersecting forms of social belonging or marginalisation mean to the women concerned.

¹⁶ For example: Carter, J.F. (2007) *Double Outsiders: How Women of Color Can Succeed in Corporate America* (Indianapolis: JIST Works); McBride, P.M. (2007) *Work It, Girl! The Black Woman's Guide to Professional Success* (Mira Loma, A: Parker Publishing); Brown, E.M., Haygood, M., and McLean, R.J. (2010) *The Little Black Book of Success: Laws of Leadership for Black Women* (New York: One World Books).

As explained in the methodology chapter, this research does not yet offer conclusions or implications, but it does open the door more fully than other work on certain areas, from which a good deal is yet to be learned. The *Above the Parapet* interviewees include women who can speak about the intersections of sex with class, race, disability, geography, and sexuality. Our analysis has sought to reflect these complexities and to contribute towards a fuller appreciation of intersectionality in terms of how it is lived.

Table 5: Intersectionality among interviewees

Intersection named	
Sexual orientation	4
Disability	4
Ethnicity/race	13
Age	20
Class	4

Several women spoke of how intended supports such as mentoring had failed them due to a failure to recognise specific experiences. One black woman explained how inappropriate she found the fit when she was assigned a white male mentor. She spoke of him not understanding her experiences and how much the situation improved when she found a black woman mentor. One woman with disabilities also struggled to find a mentor who shared the intimate knowledge she had of dealing with her particular intersectional challenges.

The difficulties of establishing credibility as a younger woman were mentioned. It was assumed that young women would service older women or, this came up often, that women were too young to hold senior diplomatic roles. The assumption that diplomacy is a field for older men was a challenge many diplomats referenced.

Race

Interviewee C5UK: “[For] somebody like me, a black woman... [it was] very difficult to move up in the civil service... I was in my 20s, I’ll never forget, there were no black people in the civil service, so I knew, obviously, that it didn’t make any sense to stay there.

“The other problem that I’ve faced externally... I’m of Nigerian origin and I’ve had people say to me, ‘You’re Nigerian!’ Do you understand what they mean? It means I’m a thief. Do you understand the generalisation there? So you had to try to make people understand that, yes of course I’m a Nigerian, but firstly not all Nigerians are thieves and secondly, I am not a thief.

“Related to that, of course, is being a black woman. I’ve talked about being a woman working in the black community, but also being a black woman... don’t forget, here in this country I’ve been to meetings where people thought I was there to make the tea, because [I’m] not just a woman, but a black woman, and so these are the stereotypes I’ve had to deal with.”

“They matched me with a mentor and it was a male gentleman, white guy, very knowledgeable, but it was just very difficult. Not the relationship, but my experiences were new to him... first as a woman and secondly as a black woman, so as much as he tried his best, he just ... we couldn’t connect at that level, and so I told him I needed to find another mentor who [could] ... so when I say, ‘This is happening,’ she knows exactly what I’m talking about.”

Interviewee P24EU: “As the first black woman in cabinet I had a specific portfolio. My focus had to be on the portfolio I [held]... I did my work in the portfolio... That was part of my responsibility. At the same time, as a black woman I had to bring to the job who I am.”

Interviewee A18AM: “As far as my colleagues were concerned... I have no story to tell in terms of racism and whatever.”

Interviewee P9AM: “[There was some] stereotyping... [S]omeone is expecting the minister... to show up. They’re waiting at the door for this, I would imagine... white man or... white woman... [I]t was actually when I was the parliamentary secretary to the prime minister – ‘The prime minister is not coming, but his parliamentary secretary will be here,’ and they were waiting for the parliamentary secretary to appear, not a black woman.”

Age

Interviewee D11EU: “If I’m absolutely honest with you, the first year was incredibly hard, lots of challenges, some self-made, some contextual. So in terms of going to [country], it is a fairly conservative society. It’s certainly one that respects age, it’s known to be a little bit macho, so I was just like, you know, ‘Age and men, and I am young and female... It’s not going to be necessarily straightforward.’

“People would say, ‘She can’t possibly be a proper ambassador because she’s so young.’ So I had that, I had, honestly, a little bit of bullying within the diplomatic corps, so other ambassadors in other countries who were just like, you know, taking the mickey and making jokes at my expense.

“So as I say, the first year, without a doubt in my mind... was a little bit, ‘Why should I listen to this girl?’ Whereas normally [as an ambassador], you have a certain amount of credibility that comes with you before you’ve had to prove yourself, just because of the title, whereas... I didn’t have that. I had to prove myself, and then once I had proved myself it was fine, but I guess I didn’t have that automatic right, and I don’t think that was because I was a woman, I think just because I was so young but, you know, probably fair enough.”

Interviewee C11AM: “We started working with the feminist movement... I was one of the very few women working on young women’s issues and at the beginning the dynamic was very funny because it was like, ‘You’re the young one so you can take the notes’ and I was like, ‘Well I can take the notes for this meeting but for the next one I want to chair’ and I think there [were] a lot of power dynamics of being young and then trying to find a place

within [the] women's movement and I think there are still a lot of power dynamics, like with the roles that young women... play within the movement.

"[S]o it was not only a matter of being male or female, it was more [a] matter of being a youth... I think that our conversation with the women's movement... was fine, but I think that we were kind of... a novelty. As I said, most of the women were old[er] women, and as I said, it was good that we were invited, but at some point we were kind of like the pet, like, 'Aww, clever young people' and we're like, 'We want to be sat at the same table. We want to have a voice,' and I think that was where the tension started."

Interviewee D19EU: "The one thing they ask me about is age. It's very funny. That is something that keeps recurring, so it's not the fact that I'm a woman, but it's more about age ... they think that I'm too young for the post. So it's more that because they see many other ambassadors, it might be... the last post before they retire. It could be that instead of saying 'Oh, you're a woman in this position' they say 'You're very young, so how come at that age that you're here?'"

Interview D18EU: "There's no secret that [my appointment] was criticised in the foreign ministry, that I was too young, and... it was a lot of talk about it at the time. I was [seen as] a little too young. Of course there are always... people with more experience and more men... but... because of my special[ised] background working with the issues [that my particular embassy deals with]... both the foreign minister and others said, 'She is the obvious choice and she is it absolutely,'" but I [faced] a lot of criticism."

Sexuality

One example of how sexuality influences choices is that of a politician who felt constrained in her political life by having been open about her sexuality:

Interviewee P13EU: “I met a woman at [university] and we fell into a relationship... [M]y relationship was quite open. In those days it was simply not possible to be openly gay as a [political] candidate. It was just an impossibility. It was certainly possible to conceal the fact that you were gay... and that’s happened frequently. I didn’t feel that was for me. In any case I’d been too open about it at university.

“Although I was open about my relationship at university I still felt inhibited from discussing it anywhere else. [I was advised to keep my sexuality] quiet. It was that I just felt a bit uncomfortable about doing that, really... I didn’t like the idea... I didn’t want to give people power over me. I felt that I would always be looking over my shoulder, because periodically the papers would be full of the latest person to be outed.



“In a sense my sexuality did define my career really, because there’s no doubt I would have progressed earlier had I not been gay. It’s ridiculous that my sexuality should determine so much. Thank God it doesn’t determine [as] much now as it did when I was young.”

Disability

The desire of interviewees to have role models and mentors whose shared characteristics go beyond gender alone was mentioned. An interviewee with disabilities highlighted an aspiration for role models with whom she could further identify:

Interviewee P20UK: “The role models bit is hard, because when I was growing up you didn’t see disabled people in [my profession] on TV. My role models have been other people [in my former profession], other people in politics – there’s been a whole range, [but] there has not been one person [with a disability].”

Further, issues of mental health and the stigma that is attached to poor mental health were raised, including in relation to family members:

Interviewee P5AM: “They looked at my mother’s history of being mentally ill and even during the campaign, that was raised... [T]hey said, ‘I wouldn’t support somebody who was mentally ill,’ so they didn’t talk of my mother, they talked about me like someone who was that also. That was one of the challenges.”

Interviewee P22EU: “[My boss] wanted me to be on the top of the candidates list and replace him [in parliament] because he felt, after eight years, it was too much [for him] to stay as a parliamentarian. Then I said no, and I said no because I had just started in therapy two years before, I needed that therapy very much. I felt that I was not up to the job of being scrutinised and if it was known I was going into therapy it would be a scandal. Because then they would say, ‘She’s sick’ and so on and so forth. So at that time I said no and then I withdrew.”

Class

Most leadership positions in any sector are occupied by people of middle- or upper-class status. To aspire to such positions from poverty or working class backgrounds remains a challenge:

Interviewee P5AM: Yes... I found a lot of resistance... When you come from rural and poverty-stricken families then there are certain people within the country... who believe that you shouldn't be at that level because you come from [a] poor family. Even... today you have people who will look at you in a particular way and turn away because, 'Who are you to be in that role, where you come from?' We come from family that is really, really poor, so people will look at that and [not] see. I came from a very rural area, so to them somebody from that area cannot be endorsed as a politician."

Interviewee A11UK: [Interviewer: "Can you just explain a little bit more why you thought you didn't deserve a professorship?"] "Yes, I think it's a combination of gender and class that the idea of being a professor was so outside my lived experience."

Interviewee C18UK: "I was considered a gifted child, and funnily enough there were three other girls in my year who were very able and gifted as well. The school nurse was also the school secretary, and I remember sitting outside the office waiting and she was taking a letter from the headmaster. All these four gifted girls, we'd finished the syllabus a year early because we were so bright or whatever, and they were discussing whether we should go up a year early, and he said there was no point because we all lived in council houses; we'd all be pregnant at 15 anyway. Our parents wouldn't support us and we'd have to be in a year where we didn't know anyone. So there was no point, and you won't believe this because I can hardly believe it myself, but what they decided to do was put us in the Portakabin... with no teacher for a year, and told us to build a scale model of the school."

The journeys of women's access to leadership are undoubtedly shaped by intersectionality. Issues of race, class, sexuality, disability and age impact upon assumptions made about them, on possibilities that are open or closed to them, and how women are able to envision their futures. Structures of inequality are not confined to gender; they are manifold. They are not discrete; they interact to shape specific experiences that need more understanding. *Above the Parapet's* research has sought to contribute to opening this area of work and to make space possible for women to speak about these experiences. Intersectionality has emerged as critical context and experience for women from all the regions where we conducted interviews. Women's accounts show that the challenges of enabling women of a variety of backgrounds and identities to access leadership remains a work in progress, requiring further exploration and efforts to address.

Opportunity, luck and risk-taking

The phrase 'the right place at the right time' emerged early in the research as an explanation offered by women for aspects of their progress. Forty-seven of the women we interviewed, 57 per cent of our sample, cited luck or being in the 'right place at the right time' as a contributory factor in their success.

Those who were able and willing to take or make opportunities emerged as successful in their journeys to the top of their fields. 'Accidental' journeys are those where women have told us that they received phone calls or encouragement from friends or colleagues to seek a position which might not have been in their minds at the time. They spoke of their willingness to take opportunities when they arose, of being willing to give up what they had been doing and step into something new and unfamiliar.

Interviewee C6AF: "An opportunity comes, you use it. If you think it is beneficial, go ahead and use it."

Often an unexpected call planted seeds previously not considered. Women thus found themselves travelling on an unexpected journey:

Interviewee P7EU: “I came into politics for the parliamentary elections in 2003. I was trying to start a company and I think in some ways that my idea of a company got noticed by one of the [political] parties and I got asked whether I wanted to run for the primaries for the elections, and that’s it.”

Interviewee P26AS: “[An advisor to the president] called me to see the president. Out of the blue. Somebody saw me in August, I had to give my CV, but I didn’t know specifically for what, so I just gave it to them.”

Interviewee D61AF: “I got a call: ‘Hello, you know I’m forming my cabinet? I wanted you to be part of my team.’ I say, ‘Who is it?’ He says, ‘It’s [the prime minister].’ So I say, ‘Okay, I’ll think about it.’ He says, ‘There’s no time to think, I need an answer now. I have to announce it tonight.’ I say, ‘Just a minute.’ Then I said, ‘Okay, alright, yeah, I’ll give it a go.’”

Interviewee D4EU: “[I] don’t think that I was career-driven... I took basically what was coming, so I didn’t set [out] to become ambassador to the UN... from day one when I started in the ministry. [I] still tell both young female [and] male diplomats not to be so focused on having a pre-planned career... It might be also based on my own generation’s experience that things work easier if you wait... Now, you really have to have the right CV or you have to... [show] that you were always interested in this from day one... To me... it [happened] a little bit by chance and then after 20 years I thought, ‘Oh yes, actually I know the UN, so I am quite relaxed about the career.’ I don’t tend to say, ‘[T]hey didn’t give it to me because I’m a woman’ or something.”

Interviewee A6AM: “[M]y journey was not a traditional path and it was not an intended path... which is quite different from how most in academia make their journey... So my journey is serendipitous... there was no career path or no ladder that was a clear straight line. It was a series of opportunities presented to me that I wanted to pursue.”

Interviewee C15AF: “[T]he funny thing is that every time I’ve left something, I’ve never left that thing to walk into something else. I’ve always left with no idea of what is going to happen.”

However, as interviewee D4EU says, it may be that a more consistent approach involving planning, strategy and singularity of purpose will open doors for women. What is in the CV matters more now, she suggests, than it did previously. The analysis does not currently permit such conclusions, but notes the prevalence of risk-taking and opportunities in women’s journeys to positions of influence. Our analysis suggests a number of interpretations of luck, which are set out below:

Conducive social or political contexts

Interviewee C11AM: “The women’s movement identified the need to have younger voices. I feel very privileged because I think that I was at the right time in the right place because suddenly... when [my organisation] arrived they realise[d], ‘You’re right, we don’t have a lot of young people,’ so I think that they were more willing to open [up to us, and let us in].”

Interviewee D8EU: “It’s circumstances that made it possible for me to do what I did, and I wouldn’t recommend it; in fact it wouldn’t be possible now for others to do it. There was something about the circumstances then: a classmate from my school became [a senior director within the foreign office], another worked with [my country’s head of state]; ours I think was a special class. When we grew up, the time we grew was the right time and the right place, and that is partly responsible for what happened. The important element is that we took the chances that were there. We got up and made those real.”

Interviewee A7UK: “We were so privileged, my generation, because I just knew I’d get another job. I just knew I would. We were very, very lucky. 1980: It was a golden time to be young, without a doubt. I mean, obviously, things were about to change. You know, I wasn’t quite born in the absolute perfect path, because I was still only in my mid 20’s when [our country got a new] prime minister and things began to change quite dramatically in this country. But nevertheless, the optimism you would get another job – and I did, I did immediately! – was there.”

Interviewee A11UK: “I think I was incredibly lucky. People would say, ‘How could you say having a child when you were 19 and had no money was lucky?’ But it was in the early 1970s and there was such a questioning of everything then that nobody batted an eyelid [when my daughter] came with me to conferences. I would just take her with me. I only had her, and it was just possible to integrate her into... how I lived at that time. You just developed collective ways of dealing with things.”



Accident, chance or circumstance

Interviewee A1US: “I do believe in serendipity, being in the right place at the right time. Of course, it always depends upon how one behaves and reacts to being in the right place at the right time. For whatever reasons, things went very well, both on the campus and with my career and I was able to make the acquaintance of a number of people who served both as mentors and examples to me of both good and bad decision-making.”

Interviewee A4P: “[I would summarise] my long career path as... a mixture of just being [there] at the right time, but maybe [also] being recognised for working hard and then just [applying] for the position when it was advertised...”

Interviewee A16US: “Some of those [opportunities] came [because] I’ve just been the right person at the right time; I’ve just been there. So, for example we have [an association for my field of study] here, and it’s a mechanism for people to organise around intellectual... and research interests. So, years ago... in the 80s, I was the person who collected the petitions that happened to get that started. Now we have... five or six hundred members of this section. I was the person who collected [the petitions], but I just happened to be the person in the place at the time. I collected the petitions and I made it happen, but it’s because I was the person who was there at the time that it needed to happen.”

Interviewee D3AS: “The former foreign minister and the former [ambassador]... in New York encouraged [my appointment]. They wanted to have women, they said that because this was the right time, we needed to have more women serving abroad.”

Luck as being around supportive people

Interviewee D10AF: “If you are married to a man who is more powerful than you economically, of course you have to bow your head down so that you can get the things done that you want, and that is a very, very sad situation because... the mind is a terrible thing to waste... Most women can do so much but, because they live in an atmosphere where

most of the time they're supposed to suppress and not voice what they really, really feel, because they're not economically empowered to argue... they stick with it. I was lucky that was not the case... to have a very supportive husband... He pushed me forward to be active politically."

Interviewee D20AS: "This is not a 9-to-5 job. Luckily for me, I have a very supportive husband who actually took on a lot of the responsibility and supported me. The way business is done around here, there's a lot of events [that continue beyond 6pm]."

Interviewee D12EU: "I've been lucky enough to be surrounded by these incredibly good people and then in addition I was doubly lucky because they took the trouble to help me. I've been lucky enough to work with people like [a colleague who ran a prestigious government department] and [another colleague] who's now [an advisor to our head of government]. I've been lucky to work with people who are really good in their field, so you learn a lot from them because of that, but... you also then [take] the trouble to bring people on."

Personal circumstances

Interviewee D7EU: "I think I'm very lucky that from nature I don't need a lot of sleep. It's helped a lot. I had nights with four hours. Now, I need much more because I'm much older, but at that time [when I began taking on the very senior roles] I was never tired and I could do a lot of things. I got lucky."

Interviewee D10AF: "I was lucky... When I got appointed [as ambassador], all my children had fled the house. It was an empty house. So it sort of freed me."

Employer practices

Interviewee D7EU: “[I had job-shared a diplomatic role at a lower level with my husband who was also employed by the foreign ministry. Some years later the ministry said:] ‘OK, you are now waiting for an ambassadorial post abroad,’ and I asked the minister if [my husband and I] can job share [again]. She said, ‘Well, it’s not possible,’ and I said, ‘For an international role, it’s not possible to be accredited, two ambassadors in the same country, but if you sent us [to] a country where we cover different states, then we can split the job,’ and she said, ‘So where is this possible?’ I [pointed out some locations where our embassy is a regional office covering different states. Then my minister said:] ‘OK, let’s try this pilot project of a job-sharing ambassador.’ I think we were the first... ambassadorial couple who made a real job-share... because we had the same office, we went every day to the office together [and focused on our separate states]. On paper we were 50 per cent as opposed to 100 per cent. We gave much more time to work for less salary, but we realised that we are in a pilot project, that we want to be also a model for other couples which could be following after us... We are quite lucky, but it was not always easy and we needed to be very flexible.”

Interviewee D12EU: “[The foreign ministry began] looking for ways it could demonstrate that [diplomats] were getting better at strategy. One of the things they chose was to send people on [an executive master’s course at a prestigious university] and I was one of the lucky ones. I think there were three of us who went on the ... course... I’ve been able to use [the knowledge gained on the course] to great effect in negotiations.”

Interviewee D21P: “In the early 90s I was lucky that I was slotted in rather than work[ing] my way up public service, which would have taken a long time. So having come [back to my country] from [living] abroad in the early 90s, I guess I entered at a level where I was visible and that took me to be appointed as secretary to cabinet.”

Interviewee C10UK: “I’ve been very lucky in [that] some of the people I’ve had as line managers, who have given me space to develop new things, new programmes, new ideas, wanted to make sure it works, but have [trusted me].”

The Power of Disruption

Aside from the need to be materially secure, there are issues of personality that affect the ability to take risks. Confidence and a willingness to step beyond safety and certainty enable risk-taking behaviour. Several women spoke of personal qualities that might interrelate with this behaviour. They include: a questioning approach to the home, school or the world; being out of the ordinary, not least at school; and being willing to speak out on issues of personal importance even if it comes at a cost. We identify these as disruptive qualities.

More than one interviewee called herself a troublemaker or identified in other ways as failing to conform, challenging authority or branching out at some point prior to achieving seniority. For some women grappling with intersectionality, many of whom are branching out in ways unknown to their families, this comes at the price of being seen as 'odd', at home as well as in the wider world.

Interviewee A10AM: “[It] was deeply rooted in my household [as a child] to ask questions, to contest, to articulate demands where we see them as appropriate, and I went to law school with a commitment to... being a civil rights attorney precisely during the time that the civil rights infrastructure was being dismantled, so much of the work that many of us in that generation might have been doing has turned into work that looks at deeper infrastructures and deeper ideologies that have legitimised... deeply segregated and unequal societies. So a lot of the work is... on how we think about things, how we talk about things, what we take as a given and what we see as perfectly normal... [S]o that’s who I am, and largely, I guess, that’s a bigger life trajectory that brings me to this point.”

One of our visiting Fellows, Professor Ruth Simmons, reflected on her own behaviour as a child: irritating and troublesome to others, including her own family. This extract illustrates the very nuanced balancing act in which she tried to reconcile finding joy and power through learning with her family's perception of her articulateness and academic success.

"The slur used against me was always I was too proper. Why did I have to speak the way that I spoke? Why couldn't I just speak dialect like everybody else? Was I trying to be superior to them? What were my motives? [I] continued to build my storehouse of language in spite of the criticism and people saying that I was odd... [I]t was most irritating at home, of course, this proclivity that I had for speaking language that I took out of my precious books. They really thought that I was trying to use it as a weapon against them. In a way I was, because as the youngest I was the most vulnerable in my family...

"The single most important thing to me is still my family, so I'm not estranged. [I]n time I learned more about how to hide who I am and what I'm doing in order to make sure that these people continue to be part of my life. So I make adjustments along the way...

"[A]s I go through school I'm racking up a series of honours... and feeling ambivalent about them because I don't think I want to tell my parents that I'm doing well. Partly because I think it's not all that relevant to them, partly because I think I'm already differentiating myself enough and being enough of a nuisance to my family – why emphasise it by saying 'You know these people think I'm great?' Why would I do that? I knew not to do that when it came to my family."

Other women also spoke of being misfits at school or otherwise confounding expectations of them:

Interviewee A14EU: “They didn’t put me in the A-stream, so I made myself thoroughly unpleasant by doing all the work they gave me as quickly as I possibly could to make my point.”

Interviewee A16US: “I never worried much. I just followed my passion. I followed what I wanted to do. Perhaps if I had come from a more academically oriented family I would have thought differently and been more cautious. Maybe I was a risk-taker because I didn’t know any better. So I simply said, ‘I’m going to do what I want to do,’ and found people who would support me.”

The use of the term ‘luck’ is therefore a mask or signifier of a variety of possibilities. For some it is about having privilege; for example, being brought up with professional networks that support a woman’s journey. For others it can be about being identified and then nurtured by someone in a position of power or influence. For some, it genuinely is what they see as chance, something for which no other explanation can suffice.

This chapter has sought to explore some of the most significant themes emerging from women's accounts. Most did not plan a career aiming at leadership, but found themselves there, often through the support of others. Motherhood and juggling of personal and public commitments remains an ongoing challenge for many women; husbands, wives, mothers and others enable that juggling to work. Structures of inequality are varied, and where more than one impacts on the life of a woman, she has to deal with the complexity it brings. Being a black woman, being young in a world of older (wo)men, or a lesbian where traditional values hold currency, or having disabilities, all impact on the way the world treats and views a woman. Her intersectional positioning shapes the opportunities she has and how she is perceived. More work needs to be done to uncover and investigate what this means and to discover how to enable women to move beyond the confines that intersectionality can bring. Luck is a frequent explanation of access to opportunity, networks and supports – though genuine chance may matter in some journeys.



Women in senior leadership: academia

Introduction

Universities are home to those considered the best minds: leading thinkers and creators of knowledge. Reports show that numbers of female students at the tertiary level have been rising¹⁷ over several decades,¹⁸ and in some places there are twice as many female undergraduates as male.¹⁹ Yet the same institutions that recognise talent, ability and intellect in female learners appear to be reluctant or unable to find a place for women with these qualities among their academic leaders.

Successful, supportive or enabling factors mentioned by senior women academics included the establishment of women's networks, supporting the appointment and promotion of women. The latter in some cases involved including drawing attention to the ways in which talent and innovation were brought to bear by women not fitting academic stereotypes. Several women spoke of academia having the flexibility as a sector to accommodate maternity leave and motherhood obligations. Key academic champions for flexible working helped a number of women through the changes in their contractual status; such champions included male peers and seniors. Serendipity, luck, or opportunity featured as did familial support.

The numbers tell a similar story across countries and regions: women are well represented in non-academic positions and poorly represented in leadership roles. The USA had 38 per cent female chief academic officers and 36 per cent female academic deans in 2007 (Curtis 2011).

¹⁷ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2015) *Gross enrolment ratio, tertiary, gender parity index (GPI)* (Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics) data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ENR.TERT.FM.ZS

¹⁸ Chamie, J. (2014) *Women More Educated Than Men But Still Paid Less* (Boston: Yale Global Online)

¹⁹ UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (2012) *Students obtaining undergraduate degrees, 2011-12* (UK Higher Education Statistics Agency: Cheltenham)

In Australia, 18 per cent of higher education institutions are led by women. In South Africa, three of 23 vice-chancellors (13 per cent) and five of 23 registrars (21 per cent) are women; 18.5 per cent of all professors are women (HER-SA 2007). A review²⁰ of women in academia in Arab-MENA countries reports that the percentage of professorial positions held by women in seven universities is between 0 per cent and 5.4 per cent, with three of the seven being below 1 per cent.

In the UK, where professors number 18,500 in total, 22 per cent are women²¹ and just 17 (0.09 per cent) are black women²². Among the Russell Group of UK universities²³, which includes the LSE, the home of this study, women make up 19 per cent of professors²⁴ and just 4 per cent of vice-chancellors.²⁵

Above the Parapet academics

Of 80 total interviews for *Above the Parapet*, 16 women were asked for interviews due to their seniority in academic life: one from Africa, one from Asia, one from the Pacific, one from Europe (excluding the UK) and seven from the UK; and six from the USA.

As in other sectors, several women (six in this case) spoke of their accidental or unplanned path into leadership; five women said they had actively sought an academic career:

²⁰ Karam, C. and Afiouni, F. (2014) *Localizing women's experiences in academia: multilevel factors at play in the Arab Middle East and North Africa*, in *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* (2014: 25), 500–538

²¹ UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (2013) *Professors in the UK, 2011–12* (Cheltenham: UK Higher Education Statistics Agency)

²² For illustrations see: timeshighereducation.com/news/black-scholars-still-experience-racism-on-campus/2012154.article and ucu.org.uk/article/6449/ Report-highlights-lack-of-women-and-BME-university-professors

²³ The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK universities.

²⁴ Russell Group (2013) *The House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee Inquiry into Women in STEM careers: Evidence from Russell Group Universities* (London: Russell Group)

²⁵ UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (2012–2013) hesa.ac.uk/

Interviewee A5AS: “I just fell in love with the teaching and learning and creating that wonderful relationship with students... I realised that perhaps I want to be an academic in higher education and I want to probably go into teaching. Then I realised that I would... very much enjoy a leadership position, because you can make a positive difference. [I]n a leadership position you are able to have a broader perspective on higher education and you can actively do things – policies and procedures and curriculum and institutional and operational initiatives – that can actually enhance students’ learning.”

The unplanned journey can be surprising and is often about taking opportunities when they arise:

Interviewee A11UK: “I would say my journey is an entirely accidental and unintended one. I’m the first woman in my family to go to university and I never had huge ambitions about academia. I didn’t even really understand what it was, to be honest.”

Education

Unsurprisingly for this sector, education emerged as a point of reference in women’s accounts and in our analysis. Only four women spoke of the importance of their own experience as having a positive impact on their journey, while others spoke of their education simply as a fact of their experience, and one woman related how mixed her experience was:

Interviewee P8UK: “In Cambridge, I actually did a PhD on land reforms, because we were just having land reforms in [my country] and I had this agreement with my father that so long as I studied, I didn’t have to get married. So I wasn’t a particularly good student – I was a troublesome student... – but I kept on doing degrees in order not to go home and get married.”

Messages of failing or succeeding in education – or (not) being part of the dominant educational narrative – were powerful in shaping others’ perceptions of the interviewees, their own self-perception and the terms of their engagement with the world.

On the interrelationship between education and gender:

Interviewee A7UK: “There was something called the 11-plus,²⁶ which you have probably heard of. It was the very end of it, but nevertheless I had to take it, and I failed it. My brothers had all passed it; I had three elder brothers and lots of... older male cousins, so I was the first girl. I had one younger female cousin who came after me, but at that point I was the first one. I had one other cousin who failed the 11-plus, but I was the first girl to fail the 11-plus... Very much a failure and very much associated with being a girl as a failure.”

Interviewee A11UK: “We had good teaching, I think, in the main, but actually the ambition was to create good Catholic girls who would become good Catholic wives and of course, given that I grew up in [a major city], there’s a very big Catholic community there, so there are dentists, there are doctors. They need intelligent women for them, so yes, they wanted us to be intelligent.”

On religion, education and containment:

Interviewee A10US: “[T]hey sent me to a local school... a white fundamentalist Christian school, oh my God that was probably life-changing more than anything... we were constantly contesting what they were doing in the classroom, what they were doing in extracurricular activities, how they were trying to contain me in those spaces, so yeah, I guess, having institutional struggle backed up by family and historical patterns of contestation is, I’m sure, all of what has shaped me in the work that I do.”

²⁶ An exam at age 11 to determine which type of secondary school the student would enter.

On poverty as a constraint to education:

Interviewee A11UK: My grandparents couldn't afford to have both of them (my father and my uncle) going on to [study]... So my father had to go out to work and he worked on the railways... [M]y mother died when I was 12 and my father had been nursing her for 18 months... [H]e did his exams and then went to train to be a teacher in order to be able to be around for my sister and I. He'd only just qualified to be a teacher by the time I finished my A-levels. So I think there's a family background of, almost, education being a luxury and very important, not dismissed, but a luxury because many of my father's generation... just had to go out and earn money because the families were poor and struggling. So I think I didn't grow up with a sense of... entitlement to pretty much anything."

On the male academy:

Academics spoke of a variety of difficulties in university life. One woman reflected on changes she had seen, noting that she was not permitted to supervise male students in her early academic career (Interviewee A2US). The slowness of winning promotions was considered by some to be connected both with a reluctance among women to seek (early) promotion and with male preference:

Interviewee A15UK: "I think it's also perhaps a gender trajectory. I think part of it is the speed that you go through the stages. I wasn't a speedy person. Each stage took a while. I think it's quite interesting to look at female trajectories because of that... [S]ome people were becoming professors much quicker than I did. In my department I can see they [were] mainly male."

Interviewee A16US: "Only one other woman had ever been promoted in my department from within, only one, to full professor... Very few women professors... just the two of them in my department... one who had been hired from outside, and the one who had been promoted within. And she actually went back into administration, the one who'd been promoted within. She did work on gender too, as it turns out; she took up doing work on gender. But yeah, there weren't a lot of people along the way, and certainly I was the first person who was doing it based on women and politics work."

“The leadership positions are still primarily male, and the women who are there are not necessarily feminist scholars – and a lot of them are not. I’m sure it’s changing [in] some places, but I just haven’t seen a lot of institutional change. I really see the feminists creating spaces for themselves, but not the support coming from the top... at [my university], which is world-renowned for feminist work, we just did a big strategic plan; they don’t even mention feminist stuff. I mean, it’s not even in there. They don’t take pride in the fact that they can say, ‘We’re world-renowned in this area of work.’”

One academic reflected on institutionalised male networking and what we might call male sympathy:

Interviewee A16US: “With men they’ll say, ‘Oh, that’s just so-and-so; that’s the way he is.’ If I [behaved like that], it wouldn’t be ‘the way I am’, it would be a problem. Even with humour; like, I had a female colleague when I first came to [my university], she was very quick-witted. Now, they would’ve loved that in a guy; they didn’t like it in her. You know, she was too quick to come back at them. I mean, it’s a whole range of behaviour... you just can’t go too far on them; you just have to operate in a more limited space.

“Sometimes [male and female academics would] actually disagree with each other; we have disagreements. You know, it’s like, ‘What do you mean we’re operating the department? [running the show?]' I mean, they really had no consciousness of their own behaviour... I learned very early that academia doesn’t tolerate that with women, there’s a much narrower range of acceptable behaviour; maybe that’s broadening out a little bit, but it’s still a lot narrower... I’ve seen women, and I know of women, who’ve behaved in aberrant ways, and they don’t last.”

Academics spoke of both a struggle to access ‘non-traditional’ female disciplines and a struggle with finding recognition and legitimacy in those spaces. They also struggled with advisors:

Interviewee A5AS: “The males have more dominance in the classroom. You can tell their voices were being heard. It was so easy for a male PhD candidate to get a teacher. It’s really important to get a teacher advisor... because that will guarantee your research assistance money... all the male colleagues, it was so easy for them to get a teacher... in fact the male faculty members asked them... especially [in] economics, you could tell the opportunities, if there was a grand opportunity or someone had to go to a conference or somebody got a leadership admission, it was always the male colleagues that were handpicked.

“I was presenting papers at conferences where I was the only woman. [B]usiness and economics is very male-dominated. There were some women in the audience, which was always nice to see, but when you’re the only person... I also enjoy conferences like the International Feminist Economics Conference. I really enjoy going there... talking [to] women [on] gender issues and race and poverty and gender.”

Interviewee A16US: “I took a course on [the United States] Congress²⁷ my first semester, and it was 17 male students and a male professor, and that was the class. And I remember going to this professor and saying, ‘I want to do a paper on women,’ and he said, ‘You can’t study women.’”

“ I think the key thing is – which I often tell women – don’t try to behave like a man, if it’s not natural to you. Use your own style. So, you know, don’t try and be something you’re not. ”

(A12UK)

²⁷ The United States Congress is the bicameral legislature of the federal government of the United States consisting of two houses: the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Interviewee A15UK: “[My field] is quite a male subject. We had 70 per cent females as undergraduates, as master’s students and actually now, going through to research students. When you get to staff profile, we had something like 14 per cent. We’re not a balanced department. We’re very male in terms of how it’s run and we’re very female in the people who teach it. [In the field] I would often notice when I was directing [field] sites that if people came on site they would go up to a male supervisor rather than me.”

Interviewee A9UK: “There’s a sense that I have in meetings [which is reflected in] one of those greeting card[s]. It’s all men sitting round a table apart from one woman. And the little quote underneath says, ‘That’s a very interesting point, Miss So-and-so, now let’s wait for a man to make it.’ I feel like having that on my door sometimes, actually. And it’s partly within [my university] and [yet I also see it] elsewhere... you say something, it’s not picked up, and [then] it is picked up and attributed to somebody else... usually to a man who’s said something. So... there is a sense of, here we go, that’s happening all over again. Or waiting to speak and with your hand up, and... you’re just not seen.”

Interviewee A8UK: “One of the reasons why I want to leave [this university] is basically, as a woman, [you have] a very tenuous state; people aren’t interested in what you do or [don’t] know anything about what you do; you don’t have the status. If you were a man, people would wonder why you were at a [academic event with senior academic staff present] and they would probably engage with you and ask, but as an older woman it isn’t symmetrical. As an older, ageing woman all these things start to fade [in ways] that are very gendered.”

On diversity of talent not being recognised:

Interviewee A15UK: “Structures that recognise being ‘good’ are rather male structured. I often say there are many ways of being good, so if you’re at an interview... they’ll say, ‘Oh, this person really knows what they want. They gave a stunning, very confident performance.’ You could say, ‘Yes, but x is quieter and more thoughtful and they’re doing some really interesting research.’ It’s the recognition, in many ways, of being good, [that] I think needs more emphasis. I don’t think, initially, my way of being good was one that shone.”

Interviewee A16UK: “I had never in my entire career been asked to be part of an external review team... which is a team that goes in and evaluates a department and makes a report to the university [until last year]; I’d never been asked to do that, and probably because I do Women in Politics, you know, I’m very specialised, not what most departments want to be – ‘And besides, she’s a feminist’: not what most departments want to be evaluated by.”

There was a consistent theme among academics of the university as being relentlessly male – in culture, in practices, in biases and in the informal networks that operate. Experiences and testimonies align with the data we have on women’s struggles to progress in academia.

Impacts

We asked women why it mattered that they had reached their senior position and what impacts they had enabled.

Eleven of the 16 academics stressed the importance of promoting other women and having an impact on their journeys. Strategies included citing female academics, representing women visually through portraits in the workplace and introducing gender-sensitive employment strategies. They were aware of their impact as role models and actively sought to encourage women in the academy. Women were cognisant of the challenges faced by mothers and encouraged flexible work practices; they hired women regardless of their personal arrangements and circumstances. Women also actively participated in building networks and support groups for women. Academics referred to having a sense of responsibility to other women, in particular referring to being one of the first women in such a senior position:

Interviewee A4P: “One of the things I did at [my university] was to introduce a gender policy in the early 80s, and in that gender policy it says very clearly that all committees at university must have at least 50 percent representation, 50-50 for... women and men. That has been a difficult kind of policy to maintain and to achieve, but we haven’t been too bad in the sense that we tried to do that. Now, the council, they are appointed by

governments, so the government accepts members to the council... I [changed] the policy; I did put in a very strong request for young mothers to keep their children. [A]t the time... we were going through breastfeeding with the children, they didn't allow mothers to go home to feed their child. We also introduced paternity leave so it was equal conditions for both men and women..."

Interviewee A5AS: "You could find wonderful female candidates, so... during my tenure... the new three hires were all female... And we had more male students doing Management and Economics, and we tried to help, to promote and encourage women students... I remember when I became the chair and we were in the hiring committee, I would make sure that those committee members never questioned a woman's capabilities just because she was a mother. I would say, 'No, we cannot ask... if somebody has children, if that person can do the job.' It doesn't matter, we cannot, that's really on the borderline of discrimination if you raise those questions, even in an internal meeting."

Interviewee A7UK: "[I]ve just written another book, and I am just realising how many... how often guys... quoting guys all the time. So I try to find the slightly less well-known, but often utterly remarkable, female academics and writers and quote them. I know they are not as well-known and I felt people are going to think when I quote her, 'Well, she isn't the same authority as him,' but I am going to do it. That's how you become an authority. Of course, and there are exceptions, always exceptions to those. Martha Nussbaum, they quote her, but they are... tiny in number, in comparison..."

Interviewee A15UK: "We've done things like representation of women visually. We had loads of portraits of males around the institute so we've started getting portraits of females who have [made] great contributions to this institution. I've been collecting those and they're going up on the walls... gradually, so that that's a different sense of where power lies, to have those images, or where interest or respect lies, whatever you want to call it."

Interviewee A3US: [on establishing a network] “We started out thinking we might get about 50 or 60... So we put out the call and we finally ended up with 300 people – women, all women that had come. They were at very different stages. We had people who were just sort of emerging leaders, if you would. We had people who were sitting in positions across the state but had never actually met with people on other campuses like themselves. So they were all isolated. So we started by inviting [a university] president to come and talk about the networks and how they were working and what they were doing.”

Academics reflected on learning to accept and to use the power they have, acknowledging that their positions meant something significant:

Interviewee A11UK: “So you won’t see... I don’t even know whether it... does it say professor on my email? Anyway, the CBE isn’t on it, I use it when I think it will benefit other women or women in general. So when I used to do reports for women who were seeking asylum on their stories about having been abused, I would put the CBE there because I thought that would... it might have a little tiny influence... I don’t pretend that I don’t have power. I think I tried to do that when I was younger, and that’s what created the tension, that I pretended I didn’t have it or I chose not to think about the fact that I had it, and then would get in to all sorts of philosophical angsts when I allowed myself to recognise that I did have it. They were kinds of power that are... I think if I work hard at a speech I can actually really... I feel these moments where there’s a silence in the room and everybody is with you and actually I find it terrifying, because I know that that kind of rhetorical power can actually take people in all sorts of horrible directions and what they’re doing is looking for you to tell them.”

Interviewee A1US: "I've got to tell you that at this particular construction company, I was in the ladies' room one day and I'm at the sink washing my hands. This woman comes up to me, introduces herself and she says, 'I can't tell you how proud we all are that you're on our board.' I don't really even know what role she plays in the company, but I've heard the same thing from people within the university. When I went back to [my university] in the interim president position, I actually had a number of staff who would come up to me and say that they had been students when I was first [there], and would tell me what a role model [I was to them]. So it wasn't something that I necessarily focused on, but I began to have a very healthy respect that being a role model was very important for people. I think, always an awareness when you're in either a minority or in the margin that people are watching and, again, how you comport yourself is very important."

The persistence of maleness

Our preliminary analysis suggests that in academia the challenge and resistance to women's leadership is especially pronounced. Women were aware of disparate rates of promotion and reflected this in their reluctance to seek it. The data support observations of structures in universities being male-dominated, and women offer explanations that include a failure to recognise the talents and contributions of female academics. Notwithstanding the scale and nature of the challenge they face, or perhaps because of it, academics were tentative in naming the influence they accessed through seniority, and were determined to put it to good use for other women academics.

Women in senior leadership: civil society

Introduction

Above the Parapet's investigation of access to leadership in civil society arises from the potential and actual impact that the sector has on public life through its advocacy of laws, policies and practices. How women have reached leadership positions in a sector that influences public life is key to this study.

Data on the gender ratios of senior positions in civil society are rare. A study of 558 chief executives of trade associations, labour unions, interest groups, think tanks and other non-profits with a significant presence in Washington found that just 18 per cent of those posts were occupied by women.²⁸

Of 80 *Above the Parapet* interviews in total, 18 women were selected because of their civil society standing: three from Africa, five from Asia, one from the Pacific, one from Europe excluding the UK and five from the UK; one from the Americas excluding the USA and two from the USA.

Movement across sectors

Aside from these 18, a further four women spent some of their journey to leadership in civil society, but are included in this research for their work in other fields. Two academics spent significant time in civil society and one former politician, included for that role, went on to be a leading figure in the non-profit world. One interviewee went from civil society into politics and then changed sectors again. Five women moved into leadership positions from within civil society, while others had worked outside the sector before they headed a non-profit organisation.

²⁸ National Journal (2012) Executive Compensations Compared, cited at blogs.cfr.org/zenko/2012/06/25/of-course-we-cant-have-it-all/

Some interviewees highlighted the benefits of informal mentoring and support, noting that a search for a formal mentoring programme can detract from mentoring benefits which can be found in other relationships:

Interviewee C15AF: “We are formalising the concept of mentoring... But I do think that there needs to be space also for informal [mentorship]. My journey has been a lot of informal mentorship... that was never acknowledged... but you were given access.

“I think it was about an intergenerational dialogue... an intergenerational relationship... [S]ome of the mentoring that I am describing here was as simple as... a family member, who’s probably an activist, who has to go to a meeting during the weekend and says ‘Would you like to come?’ and you’re like, ‘Yes, sure’. Or you offer yourself and say ‘I would like to come’ and they say ‘Okay, great’, and then you say ‘Well, can I serve tea’, and they say ‘Sure’. So, you got into the room... [T]he fact that you were serving tea was completely irrelevant – you got into the room and so your mentor provided you access, and your good behaviour determined whether or not you stayed in the room or got chucked out. I was a fly on the wall for some incredible things that have happened in our country and that was... a combination of being willing to serve tea and being willing to behave. And so... I learned from seeing others do.”

Explore and then plan

We heard that women had developed their passion and motivation through trying different areas of work and learning about new areas or topics. One woman from Europe talked about taking one interesting opportunity and then another until she found what it was she really wanted to do. It was then that she was able to work out what would help her to pursue her interests and take deliberate steps in her chosen field. Another activist from Asia discovered trafficking through her journalism and then chose to work full-time against sexual exploitation:

Interviewee C14AS: “I started as a journalist... I had a very free hand... I covered ethnic conflict, I covered the... elections – so it was a really fantastic time... I also thought that... I had to cover politics, and politics from the point of view of men. So that is what I was trying to do: get into the political beat, meet the political leaders, who were all men, report on what they were saying, and... not looking very closely at what else was going on.

“I was researching another story... when I came across these... villages which didn’t have any girls from 15 to 45... How come so many girls were missing? ... [W]hat was happening was that there was a... supply chain from these remote villages... to the brothels... [T]here was the procurer, the transporters, the recruiter, the corrupt bodyguards, the pimp, the brothel people, owner, landlord... and organised criminal network... which were supplying hundreds and thousands of girls to brothels all over the country and these girls were between the ages of nine and 13 years... [T]hat was really, really shocking to me.

“I was determined to tell the story as authentically as possible, so I spent a lot of time inside the brothels... talking to the women... It was not enough to tell their stories – I had to do something about it. So I quit journalism and... what I did was with the 22 women who had told [me] their story... we decided to start an NGO.”

One woman whose life and work takes place in the Caribbean, Europe and the USA happened upon the work that captured her when her sister helped her find a voluntary position working with a women's shelter:

Interviewee C9UK: "So I ended up there, and I walked in, and I was just, 'This is it'... I walked into this place and it [was] like coming home, but in a different way. I hadn't ever had that experience; I knew, I got it... [A]ll of my young feminist thinking crystallised... and the training that my mother gave me about being in service, and suddenly it was 'This is it, I can do this!' This was just being there and volunteering and doing admin. A couple of weeks after I'd been there, one of the senior staff members [said] 'Do you want to do refuge work?' Yes! That was it, that's where it started, and that was my thing."

As with the other sectors in the study, powerful stories and motivations recur in the leadership journeys of women in civil society. These interview extracts illustrate that, although women did not always know where they wanted to go with their careers, they still gained access to great influence in civil society, nationally and internationally.

Leadership style

One area explored with our interviewees was what it meant to them to have reached seniority, to be leaders. Commitment or obligation to do business differently and to support other women into jobs or training featured in their reflections.

Interviewee C10UK: "I suppose the other thing I am really keen to do is to bring in other women. [F]or example, I have a deputy who's also a woman, so I will try to enable her to come into the conversation, if she's not coming into the conversation. I think that's another... really interesting question. I suppose I like to think that I have recruited and supported and promoted talented women in my career, and that's really important."

Interviewee C2AF: “Being in service to community [and] recognising one has a responsibility to give back... should influence or flow from a certain value system, a conceptual framework. I believe that is what should shape one’s leadership style, or how one relates to those with whom one is working, as well as those whom one is serving. One does hear about servant leaders and I think that comes reasonably close to the way in which I have chosen to work. Focus on team, when working with colleagues in the office; mandate, participation, engagement, relatively flat structure, those are very important to me. I think it’s really important, and... when I’ve... dealt with work situations, I’ve tried to, in my office, get to understand the whole person. So, where possible, staff actually bring their parents in for me to meet them, with great pride because I’m interested in them as people with families. My instinctive approach, my culture and even the organisational culture is to recognise that we’re dealing with human beings who belong to families and to groups, and so if you’ve had a bad event at home you’re going to bring that into the office. We can talk about it if you want to talk about it. If somebody’s had a death in the family, we talk about that, somebody’s child is ill, no problem, go off and sort it out. ‘I’ve got a 93-year-old dad, I’ve got to rush off ...’ ‘No problem, rush off.’”

Interviewee C6AF: “I didn’t have [mentoring] but I can say that now we do mentor a lot of people and in my work I tend to work with much younger people and give them all the support that they need so that they can improve on the way. Give them the opportunities, travel, study and all of that, so that is something that I also do on a regular basis.”

Interviewee C10UK: “I was very strong on introducing flexibility, because we were employing more people with experience of mental health issues, and who sometimes needed flexibility or needed different things, different management approaches.... And I was really keen that [we should] not just advocate for things or campaign for things, but actually show and demonstrate. ...You know, practice what [you] preach...”

Interviewee C3AS: “[T]hey always say that if you want to be a successful public figure, you cannot be successful in your family. So I want to prove that I can be a good mother. It was a challenge to prove it was possible. It put a... heavy burden on my shoulders and my family’s shoulders as well. It was a challenge for me. I want to prove that women can do it.”

Family as influence

Family relationships and the messages conveyed there have, in part, shaped women’s leadership journeys: childhood experiences, parental encouragement and discouragement and other family influences.

Interviewee C18UK: “My parents always instilled a sense [that] I could do anything I wanted to do, I could be anyone I wanted to be. My dad’s an amazing character. He’d had an incredibly hard life, and he would say to me all through my life, ‘You get up and fight, girl. Don’t you take any shit from that doctor’, or ‘Don’t you take any nonsense from that boss.’”

Interviewee C1EU: “I had a fairly traditional childhood in the sense of lower middle-class... with middle-class values: ... extreme commitment to education of the kids, a lot of investment outside education. So I had music school, I could do more or less any sport I wanted, I went to theatre, all of those things. I think my parents’ life was very much focused on their children’s education.”

Interviewee C2AF: “My mother was originally a teacher and upon marriage, stopped teaching and had the children and then got involved in business [and] the church... and was involved in a women’s organisation. [T]he first village where she lived with my father, she set up the first nursery school in the village. My father[’s] background is in education as well; he was a teacher... He ended up being directly involved in politics... So I really grew up in a fairly vibrant household, not only focused on making money and living from day to day, in a sense, but really also commit[ted] to giving back to society and to community.

“[With] both my parents having been to school in, and having met and married in, apartheid South Africa, were very mindful of discrimination and the need to fight it in different ways, and primarily through education. [W]e had a very strong emphasis placed on giving back to community and that really has continued as a thread throughout my life in terms of the work choices which I’ve made. I’ve been influenced by, primarily, my parents.”

Interviewee C3AS: “[S]uddenly in one moment in the hospital when my brother was born, [everything changed and] I was asking myself, ‘[Have they stopped] loving me? Am I [no longer] important? What happened?’ I felt really very bad towards my brother, and especially [towards] them, but more especially to the neighbours and relatives who, in one minute, changed. [At] that time my hair was [long] and I was helping my mother at home, cleaning the house and things. I decided that I needed to cut my hair and to put on trousers and go and play in the street with the boys, because boys are better.

“My father was a very well-educated, advanced person, an open-minded person. [He] started to explain to me how much he appreciated having three daughters, and if it was his own choice, he may not have any more children. That’s enough for him and he’s not discriminating against women, against girls, but this is the society, he was explaining to me. This opened my eyes to the situation of my girlfriends around me and their relation[ships] with their families. I discovered how much they were controlled; they [were] not allowed to play, they [were] not allowed to stay out of the home after [sunset], all of these things. Boys were going to the cinema. We were not allowed as girls, at least alone, because my father used to take me to the cinema, but I discovered that my friends [couldn’t] go and their parents [were] not going to the cinema. So I start to see that there is discrimination and I start to play the role of being the lawyer of my friends with their families: ‘She should have the right to do this, she should have the right to stay and read a book instead of cleaning and doing these things.’”

Interviewee C7AS: “My parents were teachers. [They ran a school for our community to which children came from all over the country.] I learned that... you do not have to agree with a system if the system doesn’t want to admit your ideas. You have to find ways. So my parents taught me that. ...The children were living in our house, because they were coming from rural communities and the school was in the centre of the city. They never had a place to go, to live in, so my father was bringing them to our house, they would live with us in order to keep the school going. This was really a lot of learning for us.

“From the other side, [my] grandfather and my father’s brother had been exiled to Siberia for their political views. One of the brothers also disappeared completely. My father all his life was looking [for] him. We couldn’t [find him]. So there was an environment of always trying to find the ways, the proper ways to make an environment positive for people... So it was a very interesting environment I was growing in.

“I was closer to [my] father in the sense that [my] mother got ill very soon and when I was 17 she passed away. So [the] entire family were taking care of her. It was very interesting because it was a family of teachers, they’d never received high salaries, but what we had [was] books. So in order to pay for the doctors, whom father was bringing sometimes from Moscow, we had to sell our books. We had nothing else to sell. So mother passed away. My father was [my] best friend... and the person who I could really share all my thoughts [with] and learn from... He wanted me to go into politics very much. In the Soviet system at the time it was... very hard to get into politics. You have to agree in order to keep your position; to keep your independence, to have your views, was very hard.”

Interviewee C8UK: “I think I had a pretty privileged upbringing. I had two very loving parents who were very supportive of whatever I wanted to do. There weren’t any boys in the family; three girls and I was the eldest. ... [T]owards the end of being at school, ...when you start cottoning on to how other people live and you start doing voluntary work, ... you start realising that you were lucky.

“And on my father’s side, [he was from a] Quaker family, so there’s a very strong tradition of social justice and trying to be aware of other people and their circumstances and not just feeling good about having a lot of things, but feeling that there’s an obligation if you have things to share with them, so I think that probably is a kind of line... that runs through the life I’ve had.”

“You have to love yourself enough, you have to love the planet enough; for me, you have to love your people enough, and I think if you’re willing to bring a sense of that... it becomes not a fight because you’re engaged in battle for the sake of being in the battle... but... something that is really motivated by all that you are. I think if you do that, even if you are heartbroken in moments, you could always return to a place of, ‘I got this.’ I return to, ‘I got this because I love this.’”

(C9UK)

Connections between generations and beyond a nuclear family unit provide the core of several women's accounts and drive. One woman spoke of the centrality of family in a larger collective, a larger struggle:

Interviewee C4P: "I'm but a reflection of my family. When you see me I don't walk alone. You might not see anybody beside me but truly I do not walk alone.

"[E]verything is our children, our grandchildren ... they are our life. We have a saying from whose waters do you flow. That means from who do you come from ... your grandparents, your mother, your grandmother, your great grandmother and so on."

Interviewee C10UK: "I grew up in [a university city]. My parents were both ... academics, so I suppose I had the good fortune of a good education, and an upbringing that encouraged me to succeed academically. My parents both were in the languages, literature kind of area. I had one sister and she ultimately went into nursing, and then [the] voluntary sector as well, so not all that dissimilar. I think that once I started really taking charge of my career, I felt that pure academia was... I mean, I was involved in research for a while, as I mentioned, but I felt it was a bit... I was a bit frustrated by pure academia. I wanted to do something more applied. And, to some degree, that was a reaction against [elite education]... I didn't go to [a prestigious university], by the way, but I grew up in those surroundings..."

"As a young person I rebelled against what I viewed as elitism and... academic snobbery and lack of connection with the real world. You know, imagine, I was 14, [and] thinking that way. ... That may have influenced me to take jobs doing things like being a nursing assistant and working in bars. I... wanted exposure to different things, which led me into things that interested me. But I think I had a great advantage, educationally, but... it was quite traditional. ... We weren't exposed to images of what women might do in their lives."

Interviewee C12AS: “Both my parents were the first people in their families to go to university, and I think for them, academic work was... the epitome of everything you might want. ... [S]o I think they wanted me to succeed academically; that was probably what they most wanted. ... [M]y father died when I was in my early 20s, but my mother was... very supportive once I started doing these different things, and interested in it and so on.

“[M]y dad is one of the indigenous people’s leaders who stay in [the capital city]... as an informal indigenous leader in his current village. From that time, I see my father trying to help other [people] from his village. [M]y mother came from [another part of the country]... from the Muslim community, and ...became also like a coordinator of the Muslim [community in the capital city]...

“[M]y father and my mother are very tolerant [people]. ... [W]e celebrated... Christmas together with our Christian friends, ... which for other conventional Muslim[s] is prohibited, but for my mum and my dad it’s not. So that’s why I’m very proud of my mum and my dad because they are [raising] us as tolerant and very [comfortable with] pluralism.

“My mum... is very, very... tough and... always helps divorced families. So from that I learned how to become an advisor for... family issues. ... [S]o for me, ... my leadership came from the combination of blood from my parents as... leader[s], because they are also leaders from their community, but also through my own experience as a leader of my practices, as a human rights lawyer.”

Interviewee C13US: “[I] grew up with parents who treated me as [if] I could do anything or be anyone, and being a girl was never an issue in any way in terms of [their] support. ... [O]ne day when I was 14 my mother took me out for lunch [and] we got seated next to the kitchen. She told me that it was... because we were two women, and then she started this whole process of telling me how... unfair the world [is]. As a person who spent the first 14 years of her life without any clue that that might be going on, ... it made me pretty angry and then... [I came to think] about the meaning of justice and got involved in political campaigns when I was probably 13 or 14...

“[I learned] constantly about the cost of being a woman, [but was] still kind of focused on the broader issues of poverty and [inequality] affecting particularly African Americans in the United States...”

“[M]y mother was an academic and... an intellectual feminist. ... [She] always had her own pursuits when she was in graduate school, because she got married quite young and had children young. But she was in graduate school and then she changed and my parents ... well, my mother I think felt fairly aggrieved. [She saw] her whole life as a lack of choice. ... I never felt treated like [I] was anything other than [who I am], ...but my mother was of a [different] generation. ... [She] was born in 1940 [and] she was of a generation where, she told me, if you wanted to do something other than get married and have babies, you could either be a teacher or a nurse and those were your only two options.”

Interviewee C15AF: “[My journey has] probably got to do a lot with my family background, because my family background on both sides has been activists in very different ways. My great-grandmother was the last wife of the chief and she... came into the chief’s household as the youngest wife but also... it was [the time of] colonisation and the coming in of missionaries. ... [S]he accessed education. ... And what she did was incredible, because she then took all of her access to privilege to the other senior wives. [T]hat sounds like a small, little thing, but can you imagine being a junior wife in a household that is patriarchal and has got rules and procedures and a hierarchy. And being able to then begin to advocate and to teach and to empower women who are [very] senior to you.

“My grandmother... was a nurse and my grandfather was a teacher, which at that time was probably the highest level of education they could access. I reckon if my grandmother had had her way she’d probably have been a doctor, but she didn’t have that privilege. But they worked in the community, they worked in trying to change.... [M]y grandfather’s family [was] from a different ethnic group and settled in a community where they were completely surrounded by a different ethnic group. But they spread their language... and they spread their

customs into that community, and [into] my grandmother as well. So they [were]... engaged in their community and they... have a legacy of change and a legacy of doing something memorable that changes lives. ... [I]t's also in their children, it's in my parents, my mother particularly.

"My mother has been an activist in her own right and [she and her] sister... were the only two girls in her family. ... She is a well-known women's rights activist in [my country], she's a well-known feminist... [and involved in setting up a democratic political party]. But also... working, always working from a feminist perspective. Like I said, I think that probably comes from my great-grandmother: ... whatever you do, how does that translate to a change for the women in the household? Not just a change for everybody, because that's great to make a change for everybody, but what can you do to [make] that little extra... change for women? So it could have been just blankets for the chief's wives, but she... got them blankets anyway.

"We've been raised to be incredibly fiercely independent... we are raised to push back ... but to push in a way that makes sense. And... I think someone who I don't acknowledge a lot is my father. My dad was a self-educated man but he was also someone who tried to take his interests and leverage them and make something out of them... [H]e was probably one of the first black executives [after we became an independent country]. So... there has always been this... 'do something' imperative in the family, and so that's what you try to do! You have to do something!"

Interviewee C16AS: "My father was a medical doctor and a professor. He was a professor of pharmacology at the [capital city's] university. My mother was a trained nurse. ... [A]t the time they got married, the regulation was that nurses, if they got married, they had to [leave] the service. This was... in the 1950s. So she moved out of nursing care and took on the role of homemaker – [I] have an elder sister and a little brother. [M]y parents were not exceedingly well off, but we were comfortable.

"[M]y work was very much influenced by feminist framework... [S]tep by step you learn what feminism is. You have a gut feeling, you know it. ... [W]hen I was a child I remember protesting... [W]e had domestic help, but if the domestic help was not there or if she had gone on leave then the children had to do the housework, like sweeping the rooms and so on. And I would argue with my mother, I must have been twelve or thirteen. I said, 'Why should I have to clean my brother's room? Why can't he pick up his clothes?' And my mother would just say, 'Look, for heaven's sake just do it.' And I would say, 'No, why should I do it? Because he's got two hands and two legs just like me, so why can't he clean his room?' And I must say that I think my mother was very supportive. She was probably thinking 'Don't push this girl too much.'..."

"[I] think my father... retreated when I started to show potential... [N]ot that he ever opposed me, but I would challenge my mother. The conversation was always with my mother. For example, I wanted to learn to drive... [I was 18 and] every time I asked... my father would find some reason. 'The car is new.' 'You'll crash it.' 'I don't have time.' Then when my younger brother turned 18, [my father said] 'Do you want to learn to drive?' So I went to my mother [and said], 'Why, when I asked, [couldn't I] learn to drive... but he is walking behind my brother saying, 'Do you want to learn to drive...?' ... [F]rom that position I think my father became very... despondent, and he realised I wasn't going to give up. When I went to England I got my licence, and I [was] the one who ended up driving my father to work. And my cousins would all laugh at me, saying, 'You are the PhD driver.'"

Early years and the family environment emerge repeatedly as impacting on the lives and hopes of women leaders, whether as a motivation, as a challenge or as a positive or negative message. The theme is clear in the data: supportive early childhood contexts make a positive difference. Both mothers and fathers have been influential. The role of fathers is recognised in the foregoing quotes. Mothers were role models: they planted seeds of possibility and hope. Some modelled roles were limited in their

options and visions, in ways which some daughters refused to repeat. In some cases, families passed on values and activism that energised and drove their daughters. The key drivers were in the realm of ideas and imagination, not wealth and privilege, though the latter made some journeys more comfortable than others.

Civil society leaders' journeys

Hearing from women across different regions of the world has highlighted the variety of routes to leadership; the absence of linear journeys is striking. Deep wells of drive and passion are the engines of these journeys, ignited by early enlightening influences, mostly positive, about women's place in the world. Senior women in civil society who spoke to the *Above the Parapet* research team made it clear that their leadership serves a purpose greater than their own ambition – they carry a sense of responsibility for their sex, their race or other groups often denied access to the levers of power. Several women make reference to the ways in which the world had failed or constrained their mothers, that they became aware as girls of wasted talent or disappointment among their mothers. Coupled with their own discovery, sometimes through their own fathers, of how those patterns could potentially restrict the options open to them, this appears to be a potent driver of their mission to achieve change: to be active and to shake up a world that could do much better. Many civil society leaders make it their mission to 'do' leadership differently, for themselves and especially for the women who will follow in their wake.

Women in senior leadership: diplomacy

Introduction

Ambassadors represent and act on behalf of their state, with authority and credibility vested in them to speak for the highest national authority. They are a phone call away from the head of government or head of state. Women who access this traditionally male space claim authority *ex officio* and ought not to be less than a male in the same position.

The representation of women ambassadors in large diplomatic capitals is an important indicator for evaluating gender equality in the diplomatic field. Women make up 13 per cent of heads of mission in London,²⁹ 15 per cent of permanent representatives at the UN in New York³⁰ and 15 per cent of heads of mission in Washington.³¹

The Nordic countries lead the way in Europe with a 2010 study showing Norway as having the highest proportion of women ambassadors with around 30 per cent, and Finland and Sweden not far behind with 27 per cent female heads of mission³². In the UK, 21 per cent of ambassadors and 19 per cent of high commissioners are female, while women occupy 22 per cent of senior positions at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The US sets an example with 27 per cent of ambassadors being women. In Africa, Rwanda and South Africa stand apart from the rest of the continent, each with just below 25 per cent. The Asia-Pacific region lags behind, with exception of the Philippines, where 40 per cent of ambassadorial posts are filled by women, and Australia, where women head 29 per cent of missions.³³

²⁹ Embassy (2012) *Women Envoys on the Rise*, embassymagazine.com/barometer/bar_issues/emb38_bar.html

³⁰ Embassy (2012) *Women Envoys on the Rise*, embassymagazine.com/barometer/bar_issues/emb38_bar.html

³¹ Diplomacy Matters (accessed 24 June 2014) Announcing our Digital Diplomacy Initiative, diplomacymatters.org/resources/ambassadors/index.php

³² Embassy (2012) *Women Envoys on the Rise*, embassymagazine.com/barometer/bar_issues/emb38_bar.html

³³ Diplomacy Matters (accessed 24 June 2014).

Of the 80 interviews conducted for *Above the Parapet*, 21 women were interviewed as ambassadors or high commissioners: four from Africa, three from Asia, one from the Pacific, nine from Europe (including three from the UK) and four from the Americas (no ambassadors were available for interview from the United States).

Women's social status and position serve as motivating factors for diplomats as they do in other sectors. This theme arose repeatedly in our conversations:

Interviewee D10AF: "I think, basically, I am a born feminist. Everything in my life has always been, you know, geared towards the improvement of the woman's life, everywhere, and I have always taken a very keen interest in what the women were doing throughout the world, and also tapping into the experiences of my own women in [my country]... I liked economics because I think it resonated with my feelings in terms of how women were being incorporated into the mainstream economic activity... [M]y journey, I think, really began there, when it became sharper that the women are not given their due place [in] society, whether it be at economic level or political."

Routes

More women moved into leadership positions within diplomacy from backgrounds in other sectors than progressed from within the diplomatic world. Other backgrounds included teaching, law and economics. Only three said their journey was by chance or accident, although eleven said they did not plan to become ambassadors.

Interviewee D10EU: "But I have thought more about what will lead to what, and particularly, [at] the point I'm at now, I am thinking quite strategically because I've got maybe four or five big jobs ahead. I do need to quite carefully [choose]... which ones I want, because the next move I make will be pretty critical in terms of where I go."

Interview D15AF: “That I am an ambassador at my relatively young age is quite unusual. Normally a nation’s or a country’s government will promote their diplomats from one stage to another; they don’t normally jump from being a first secretary to ambassador like I have done. It depends on the quality of work, the things that you do, how forceful you are with your ideas and what you stand for. And I should say, I was very forceful with the direction that I thought that our embassy should take and how we should follow the instructions from our government. Politically, in a multilateral environment, it’s very important that you have a strong stance and you stand for something that benefits your people [and] benefits your country and your government.”

Interviewee D3AS: “In 2006 I decided really to take the assignment. Because at that point there were no women in the foreign ministry doing diplomatic assignments. We had women working in the foreign ministry, but doing administrative or technical jobs, not the diplomatic assignments. So I applied and I was approved to be posted. Thankfully, the former foreign minister [who had been a senior diplomat prior to being minister] encouraged me to take this assignment – he wanted women [diplomats]. [The minister] said that because this was the right time, we needed to have more women serving abroad. I know in [my country] women were late to becoming diplomats, but it’s not the fault of the government.”

Again, the absence of planning was no impediment:

Interviewee D21P: “I didn’t have such an ambition at all. In fact, I’d already finished with public life. I was in private life for two years when I got a telephone call from the head of our foreign affairs department, who made me the offer, would I like to come to London? And I accepted. I think it was already in discussion; I was aware of some words being dropped here and there by politicians. So it may have been already in the discussion that perhaps they were thinking of sending me here. It’s not a thing that I... had ambitions for.”

Interviewee D4EU: “I don’t think that I was career-driven, in a way. I took basically what was coming, so I didn’t set myself to become ambassador to the UN... [I]t might be also based on my own generation’s experience, that things work easier if you wait and [build] your career by steps ... I did [things connected with] the UN. It kind of started a little bit by chance, and then after 20 years I thought, ‘Oh yes, actually I know the UN’ ... so I am quite relaxed about the career.”

On education

Education emerges as an important element in these diplomats’ journeys, as it does in other sectors. However, the few interviewees whom we know did not undertake tertiary education were in this sector. One third of the diplomats studied abroad at some point.

Familial and societal expectations shaped the educational experiences of several diplomats:

Interviewee D5EU: “My mother had always been desperate for one of us to be a doctor, because my father was a doctor, so I was the one forced into doing the bloody science A-levels, which I really hated. I’m actually OK at maths, but I wasn’t particularly good at sciences, so I struggled through. I should have changed, you know how you do, but you just... when you’re that age you just sort of battle on.”

Interviewee D6AS: “I think our challenge is part of the society that we come from... So there is always expectation in the Asian society... in which lots of emphasis is of course placed on education. [G]iven my own kind of strength in the [humanities], the options were either becoming a lawyer or doing something in actual social sciences, but there would be a certain level of society expectation that if you could get into law school you would at least try to get into law school first and foremost... [T]here was a lot of family, parental and society expectations that I would at least try for law school which I did, and I got in... even though I knew that was not what I really wanted to do. But I completed the degree.”

Interviewee D8EU: “When I grew up, women had no rights or access to education. Only boys were allowed to study in [our academic secondary schools] in those days... Only they then could go on to university. I went to what was essentially a business college run by Catholic nuns... where we were taught secretarial skills, housekeeping, and I graduated at the age of 17.”

The discrepancy between the experiences of older and younger women is clear in the last two quotes, although the cultural backdrop is also a factor. It may be that education, especially tertiary education, has become a more pertinent factor over the decades.

Networking

Diplomats are expected to have a ‘plus one’ in their professional lives, for dinners and other social events in particular. The profession makes explicit expectations of domestic lives and arrangements, as does engagement in politics to some extent. Some diplomats we interviewed were single, some were single mothers and many spoke of the importance of establishing strong and supportive female networks. The benefits of these include having a space to make personal and familial connections:

Interviewee D20AS: “We’re mothers. We all have young children, and one of the networks that we’ve just created is the ambassador kids club. ... We’re having an event this weekend where we come with our children, they meet each other, they play. But it’s also for us to get to know each other and support one another, and just talk normal stuff about parenting, family. So that’s the one network that is very useful for me because when I arrived, my daughter was 12 months old.

"[T]his network is great because we do share that, and we all have really intense work lives, and we're trying to find the work/home balance. Now I'm less uncomfortable to say, 'Well, I can't go that meeting because my daughter is sick', or, 'I'm not coming in today because I've got to go to her school things'. I wasn't doing that before because I just didn't have [a support network]... now I have that with the women ambassadors and some of the younger men who bring their children as well."

Interviewee D17EU: "I have [the] support of my lady diplomats, some of them very much. In the time when I was a deputy permanent representative, we had a group; we helped each other so much. Even when we had some personal problems, even now... I can call. ... That is a huge support. That is great when you make that network. It's easier to work here, it's much easier if you are doing that. You don't need to go to... certain meeting[s], if you don't have enough time, if you [can] rely on someone."



Support from partners and families

By forging these relationships, women are increasing the possibilities open to others and enabling them to break the mould of diplomatic life, including making room for women and family obligations. The importance of good domestic support emerged as a common theme, with appreciation for partners and spouses who provided it:

Interviewee D5EU: “[My husband is] massively respectful of my career and kind of knows what he’s taken on, he knows that that’s what I do and wouldn’t want me to be anything else.”

Interviewee D11EU: “I’ve just got married and it is amazing, the difference that having that home support makes. So I think even the toughest people are probably so much stronger when they’ve got someone behind them, you know? It’s not easy on your own, it really isn’t.”

While this type of support from partners and family was often referenced in broad terms, in approximately a third of such references it was cited as highly significant to the interviewee’s journey to seniority, for instance:

Interviewee D12EU: “In dealing with challenges? I go running to my husband, like lots of people who are married, and so I think having him on my side has probably been the most important thing. Before I was married, when I wasn’t very good at [the language of my first diplomatic posting], you just have to suck it up and cope, basically. I think I’m quite good at that, but I also think it’s easier having someone to talk to about it. Someone who, come what may, is on your side. That really helps.”

Impact

When a sector or profession is steeped in male history, female entrants are challenged to do things differently, show results and lead the way for other women. Three-quarters of the diplomats spoke about their leadership style and many stressed the importance of promoting other women and having an impact on their journeys, including through mentoring, advice, encouragement and training.

Interviewee D1AM: “Obviously I wanted always to promote women and young people. That’s another thing that women can do.”

Interviewee D5EU: “I do a lot of mentoring... encouragement [to] join the [foreign service]... Saying to them, ‘You can do it’, so for example [when colleagues in other ministries say], ‘I don’t think I could be an ambassador’, I’m like, you absolutely can, believe me. So a few who have been hovering about applications, I put a lot of pressure on them. You’re not in it, you can’t win it. You’ve got to at least get the bloody application in. So just giving them the confidence to try because... and again I was sceptical, but I really do see it, women are much harder on themselves. They feel they’ve got to tick every box before they even apply; men don’t feel that. They put the application in and then learn on the job, and don’t learn as quickly usually.”

Interviewee D7EU: “We implemented a mentoring system in the ministry, and I was asked to be mentor for four or five women in the last year, and that was new... we could share the experience and... encourage younger women. I have now... a diplomatic [colleague], a woman, and we have a lot of discussions when she comes with me to the ministry, because there’s traffic jams... [so we] talk in the car, and we can be very personal and open, ...we can talk about having children, about moving every four years, and I would like to encourage younger women.”

“ [T]hat’s also the reason I said I would like to give the answers to you... because I want to encourage young women. ”

(D7EU)

Interviewee D13AM: “When I was vice-minister I remember hiring... you know, I was young. I didn’t know many people who could do this, so I asked for advice and suggestions and the person they suggested to hire was this woman who was eight months pregnant at the time. And... I called her, I interviewed her and I said okay, you’re hired. ... So you go give birth and you come back, fine. We’re still the best of friends since then, of course. But again, I try to challenge by my own work, by... my sphere of influence, I try to make those changes, and that, I think, has repercussions because then that person will buy in and then other people will notice.”

Interviewee D6AS: “I actually just had this conversation a couple of days ago with a... colleague... She’s a mother of two now and struggling to... balance her own commitment to the job as well as her own commitment to her children... [T]he conversation I had with her... was all about ‘I come from [the same background] as you...’ [I]t is a challenge and perhaps quite often role models, women role models present an image where everything is... very smooth sailing, and of course they can have it all and that probably might be more intimidating to others, because I was actually telling her all about the struggles I have gone through... we talked through all these challenges [and she] realised that people are facing the same kind of challenges.”

There is a sense of responsibility that adheres to women who are among the first to breach barriers: to perform well and make it possible for others to follow.

Interviewee D12EU: “[I] put a lot of time into being a good manager myself. To bringing on young talent, to [putting] a lot of effort into motivating people and creating opportunity for others.”

Interviewee D19EU: “I think that we have to, in our jobs, try to promote learning the whole time, especially when it comes to ourselves. ... I think having a good team around you and learning process and being able to say... if you made a mistake, that you’re open about it and that you can say ‘I’m sorry’.”

Interviewee D1AM: “It’s our responsibility that you have to further generations because we inherited already the path that many women have been doing before us. ... Of course. Yes. Of course, yes. We were very conscious of that... And of course, passing the experience to other young women to let them know that it is tough, it won’t be free, you have to pay the price, but it’s worth it, so worth it to pay the price. It is worth it... I think as women and as mothers we also have a responsibility, especially with our daughters.”

Interviewee D7EU: “I couldn’t say no to many things. So I accepted, maybe, too [many] functions and I didn’t want to refuse. ... [I was at times overloaded] and I admitted that I would be the first woman who has this quite important job... and I didn’t want to say no, because normally, we feminists complain that there are not enough women on all the levels, and if they ask, then we shouldn’t refuse because then the men would say, ‘Ah, we said it. We told... everybody that women, if they [had] the chance, they would say no.’”

The diplomats’ stories

Absence of planning for leadership was not a barrier to becoming ambassadors and high commissioners. A high level of education was associated with this profession, except for two women who did not study at tertiary level. By supporting each other in their family obligations and by having spouses who take on the traditionally female roles of homemaking, women diplomats have re-crafted their work spaces to allow themselves and other women diplomats to reshape domestic responsibilities. Diplomats, along with other vanguard women, are driven by the responsibility to do well for their sex as a whole and to make paths like theirs easier for other women to follow.

Women in senior leadership: politics

“I took the view from the beginning of when I was elected as the first woman President ... that I would do it proudly and confidently as a woman, and that it would be a plus that I was a woman and that I would always indicate that, and make it so.”

Interviewee P15EU

Introduction

It is arguably the case that executive power is where the most influence is most often wielded, so the exploration of the experiences of women in ministerial or more senior positions is crucial to this research.

The numbers appear resilient but not unyielding. Of 189 countries with parliaments, women make up 22.3 per cent of MPs,³⁴ with the highest at 63.8 per cent in Rwanda³⁵ and the lowest at 0 per cent in five national parliaments. Just five governments exceed 50 per cent representation for women. Only 21 exceed one-third female representation.³⁶ In governments around the world, the percentage of women in ministerial posts is 17 per cent.³⁷ Of the 193 UN member states, 19 (10 per cent) have an elected female head of state or government.³⁸ In the UK, in the 2015 general election, 191 women were elected as members of parliament, which at 29 per cent was a record high. Seven out of 22 cabinet posts (32 per cent) in the UK are held by women.

³⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union (2014) Women in National Parliaments. Last modified 1 April 2014, ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/world010414.htm

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Inter-Parliamentary Union (2015) Women in Politics: 2015. Last modified 1 January 2015, ipu.org/pdf/publications/wmnmap15_en.pdf

³⁷ UN Women press release (2014) Progress for women in politics, but glass ceiling remains firm, unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/3/progress-for-women-in-politics-but-glass-ceiling-remains-firm

³⁸ UN Women press release (2015) Sluggish progress on women in politics will hamper development, unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2015/3/press-release-sluggish-progress-on-women-in-politics-will-hamper-development

Women in Cabinet, 1 January 2015³⁹

% of cabinet positions held by women	Number of countries
>50%	5
40-50%	11
30-40%	14
25-30%	19
20-25%	36
15-20%	19
10-15%	42
<10%	46

The desirability of having more women in senior political life remains widely recognised. Political parties have tried to increase the presence of women in politics with varying degrees of success. Special measures, such as targets and quotas, have been partially successful but have also been challenged. Over 30 per cent of interviewees for this project had been senior politicians.

Motivation and purpose

A number of former heads of state or government grounded their accounts of leadership in a personal relationship to nation, state and people:

Roza Otunbaeva, former President of Kyrgyzstan: "I am a daughter of my nation, I'm known in my country as a stateswoman who has devoted her life to serve her nation, and I am one of seven daughters of my father. Very ordinary in the way that I have graduated from university and worked in public affairs in Kyrgyzstan for a long time. I reached high positions during the Soviet days, working for the Foreign Minister [and at] UNESCO, came back and had quite an intensive political career, and became president. I was the only woman president in the former Soviet Union."

³⁹ Table uses data from ipu.org/pdf/publications/wmmmap15_en.pdf

Joyce Banda, former President of Malawi: “[I am] a leader, a servant leader, self-made, a woman who believes that this world should be a better place for all; [I have] tried to lead my life reaching out to make this world a better place for all, both rich and poor. I decided at the age of 30 that I was going to spend my life assisting women and youth in social and political empowerment.”

Julia Gillard, former Prime Minister of Australia: “Politics gave me the ability to see a problem, make a decision to change it, implement the policies that do change it and then to look back and see that the change you were seeking has actually happened. There is a grand delight in that: being able to have the power and the levers in your hand to address long term issues of disadvantage and inequity. For me the most satisfying bit was around creating a better education system because it was trying to improve the quality and equity of education that first motivated me to get involved in anything that looked like politics.”

Movement across sectors

Did senior politicians reach their positions as a result of careful planning? While just under a fifth of our politicians said they had planned their careers, a third said there was no plan. Yet almost one half (46 per cent, n=12) spoke of their journey as accidental or in other ways the result of chance. Some combined a motivation to make a difference with chance in terms of how they were able to do that.

On shaping a political path

Those who had a plan were very clear on how this came about and why. They came from a drive to be seen and to be heard:

Interviewee P27AF: “From a very early age. I knew that I had to sit in front, I have to sit in the front row and ... I have to make sure I say [something if it needs saying]. So I’ve always developed those techniques that say, ‘Listen if I go to a meeting, I go to a conference ... If there’s one person you have to hear, it’s me. If there’s one person you have to remember, it’s me.’ I will make sure my point of view is heard. So I try not to be invisible. ... [after a visit to the USA] I went home to thank the American ambassador. I said to him, ‘Now I’m going to tell you I’m going to work for democracy for the rest of my life.’”

In this case a former minister, a political activist whose activism brought put her under media scrutiny and nearly cost her her life, describes her “accidental” journey into that position:



Interviewee P27AF: (continued) "I didn't plan to be a minister. I planned to be a doctor or planned to be a professional, to make money...but somehow the paths changed ... [took] a different direction because of circumstances. [The President called me and] he said, 'When are you coming home?', because he knew I was going to go home. I said, 'Actually I'm on my way ...', he said, 'When you come can you come and see me?' and I said, 'For what?' He said, 'I've decided to make you minister of foreign [affairs]'. I said, 'What?!'"

For most women there was no plan; they found themselves in politics:

Interviewee P5AM: "No, there was no plan. It was divine intervention."

Interviewee P9AM: "Well the thing is that I didn't, at the time, choose, neither was it a path that I had laid that I would be going into politics."

Interviewee P11EU: "It wasn't like I want to become a minister. I think, and I thought that was something so far away. Then one thing led to another."

Interviewee P16UK: "I wasn't actually thinking of becoming a [parliamentarian] but our local [parliamentarian] stood down and the party decided because of local circumstances mostly to make it an all-woman shortlist and it was very marginal. But I got elected and I've been in parliament since."

Politics is not a sector in which early entry and linear career progression appear to be necessary; we found it the most open of the four professional sectors under study, with the majority (54 per cent; $n=14$) of women entering from outside these areas.

On education

Education was raised by many women, including 20 out of 26 of those in politics. Different reasons were offered: four of these 20 spoke of the positive impact it had on their journey, including deferring marriage; two had more mixed experiences, while 14 simply described their experience when asked to tell the story of their journey. One reason for valuing tertiary education centred on it being the context for entry into political activity.



Education is crucial, but it is insufficient on its own:

Joyce Banda: “There is stiff competition [to be a politician in Africa]...you need an economic base first. Don’t come and say: ‘I have gone to school, I have a degree, I am ready.’ It doesn’t matter what number of degrees you have – what matters most is what you do with that education once you leave that classroom.”

Education as political training was vital for Julia Gillard, who was a student organiser while at university, and for others too: “[As a student leader I found] where that line is between being able to lead a group of people to new ideas as opposed to jumping over here and they’re never going to follow you and you’re just going to undermine any connection between you and them. That is the judgment that politicians need so it was a real world example...Yes. And I’d certainly advocate it. Needn’t necessarily be the student union but get involved. So that thing about campus life, that can bring people these experiences – it doesn’t have to be student politics, it could be the person who decides that they’ll convene and manage the water ski club and you’ve still got to work out how to manage money and how to make things happen that people are prepared to support, how to run a meeting and all of that...I’m absolutely sure for me that whilst the pieces of paper – my degree – have been useful and the knowledge in them useful during my life...the experience [made a big difference].”

“So, life begins at the edge of your comfort zone.”

(P19UK)

University similarly opened up political life to others:

Interviewee P13EU: “When I got to university I was elected to chair the [student] society [of my political party]. I won the election to the student union executive.”

The ability to operate on the international stage features in many accounts, for its benefits in terms of learning, networking and the ability to make change on a broad landscape. Education outside the country of a woman’s birth emerged as a factor: seven out of 26 politicians studied abroad:

- One woman from the Pacific and one from Europe were schooled abroad
- One woman from the Americas and one from Europe studied at university abroad
- Two Asian women studied at universities abroad
- One European woman studied abroad for both schooling and university education.

Challenges

The key challenges about which women spoke included male-dominated environments, sexism and bullying.

The dominance of men

Over half of our senior politicians interviewed mentioned being in a male-dominated environment, although not all spoke of it in the same way. Nine referred to it as a challenge, three simply as a feature of the environment, and two as an advantage. Three strands of challenge are: the need to find other forms of support including beyond a party home, not wanting to be associated with the poor practice or reputations of male politicians, and the difficulties that environment poses for progressing issues of particular importance to women, including in a ‘radical’ political climate. The following quotes illustrate these themes.

Interviewee P16UK: “That’s what has sustained me through here because in many other ways – you know, especially when I arrived we were 19 per cent women [elected to parliament]. It was a very male environment but I had a very strong group of women friends and we made friends when we arrived in the first couple of weeks and we have stayed friends and bar one we’ve all kept our seats and they have ... we’ve sustained each other through all the changes.”

Interviewee P4P: “Whereas in the earlier election, in the earlier times I was, I put my name in but I wasn’t fully committed to the thought. I suppose it was that little bit of lack of confidence in earlier times. I was thinking “no” because the parliament [in my country] has always been 100 per cent men. It was always the men who were botching things up. And especially ...that period when we lost a lot of our investments and all that. It was all through mismanagement. I didn’t want to be part of something that had done a lot of terrible things to [my country].”

Interviewee P22EU: “The group was extremely male-dominated, but it was supposed to be radical so of course they were for equality. And I knew very well that I couldn’t push women’s issues. I mean I could be there but I could not push women’s issues... I felt very clearly that you know you had to be careful on that score.”

Politicians found themselves the targets of sexist comments and treatment. From comments on their appearance to having their competence belittled, sexism infused their political experiences. Julia Gillard expected the sexism to arise early in her premiership and die down later when in fact it remained a constant; a ‘go-to’ tool for use in political criticism: “It was hard to disaggregate sexism from controversy for policy positions.”

The agility of women in navigating the domination of men, including some who officially promote equality, and the valuing of women’s friendships, emerge as crucial to sustaining energy and direction.

The juggling act

The perennial issue of work-life balance was discussed, with 46 per cent of senior politicians noting this as a challenge.

Motherhood and professional life were cited both as being in tension but also as enabling an appreciation of issues relevant to their role in public life. Having had to deal with the demands of family and working life enabled a better appreciation of the lives of constituents and voters.

Interviewee P2AM: “There is no such thing as balance, if people think that it means that you give equal and/or appropriate amounts of time to the different aspects of your life. There’s balance if you think of it as a see-saw, balancing being ... where one is up and the other is down, you just have to make sure that the same end is not down all the time. [...] On that see-saw we adopted a girl between the general election and the run off, when I was running for city controller. So not a really smart thing to do because ... I was in the middle of an intense political campaign, I was clearly the front runner but no political campaign is easy and adopting kids is a very stressful thing to do. So that see-saw was bouncing up and down from day to day. And it was a matter of- this requires all of my ... 110 per cent of my attention right now and the next day this requires 110 per cent of my attention in the other direction. It was not a smart thing to do but we survived it.”

Interviewee P5AM: “So for a woman involved in politics [it] is a challenge because they still have to do every other thing that every other woman is expected to do and therefore I continue, I continue doing. Indeed, being a woman in politics – it’s a challenge, a huge challenge, you have balance with the children thing that you’re always out and then you have a family, yet you have the constituency and as a Minister you have think of the entire country so you have to think about [...] a ministerial portfolio, whereas the constituency want you equally as the country and then you have family who’s also fighting for that attention...it’s a huge challenge but I believe is a challenge that worked, already working hard for people especially the issues of women and girls, you know, what is that challenge?... fighting and walking along with those people.”

Interviewee P6AM: “And I had several working opportunities through the years but I had four children and I had never thought about entering public life and people ... said to me, ‘What prepared you?’ and I said, ‘Being a mother was probably the most significant’. Because what you really need is common sense and an understanding of what the people you’re serving what they not only want, but what they really need and how can you explain it to them. Well I don’t think I did [balance things] very well. I have four children and a long suffering wonderful husband; we’ve been married 50 years. And they were excellent and always supportive but one of the reasons that I retired in 2004 was that I wanted to spend more time with my husband, with my children and particularly my grandchildren. And I had been in an elected office at that point for 25 years.”

Interviewee P16UK: “I think to be honest, you know, the sacrifice – if there was a sacrifice although I don’t think I realised it at the time – was that I had one child but I didn’t have any more children and that wasn’t really a conscious decision to only have one child, I just think that I was very busy doing lots of other things.”

For some women, the balance was not tenable and their relationships did not survive:

Interviewee P19UK: “So I decided eventually, when I became a single mother and it became even more difficult with my marriage breakdown and so then I decided to go into public relations and started my business doing that... And they wanted me to become a local councillor and I kept saying no; purely because of the childcare issue. I knew it would be meetings every night until God knows when. I wasn’t earning very much money. There was no way I felt I could do that sort of job as a single mum... So you know I’ve been struggling in a sense um, trying to balance home and both family and work. Just, I don’t know really, I don’t know how to answer that question I don’t know what it’s like to be a man.”

The ending of a relationship can be liberating:

Interviewee P9AM: “My marriage had by then gone ...so I was divorced by then so I didn’t have a husband. I didn’t have a husband to worry about whether if I stayed late or I didn’t come home or if I went straight from the aircraft to a function and I didn’t get home until whatever, I didn’t have that kind of concern.”

Supportive partners and other family members made all the difference for some politicians:

Interviewee P1AM: “First of all... I have a great husband... Somebody had to take care of my son, he’s now 14 years old but for a woman if we have to work and we arrive home and children, even though you have help with you, children need more but need a lot of the mother.”

Interviewee P2AM: “[my partner] is self-employed which is very helpful... she’s owned her own business for 25 years..... But in a way because she was self-employed she had a lot more flexibility.”

Interviewee P7EU: “I’ve always and I think I’m just really, really lucky because I have a wonderful husband who has taken over a lot of responsibilities for the upbringing of our children and for the home and that has always been really, really supportive of me.”

For some women, expectations of gender norms in family life confounded the drive for equality while for others, questions about having – or not having – children remained with them for years. For many women, entry into public life was a comparatively manageable process once their children were older.

Interviewee P22EU: “What happened was that I married one of my fellow students, who was in the student group and that only lasted a year...We were supposed to be equal though we were not equal and in the newspaper they said, ‘Oh, God now you’re a couple you have to [leave] because we can’t have married women here.’ They were always asking me, ‘are you making breakfast for your husband... are you cleaning up?’ ...he was [a senior official in our political party]. So he was completely absorbed in the party. I must say I just panicked because all of a sudden I felt that I was caught in the traditional women’s role and that would be all wrong. So I just left him. That was very tough. ...He had given priority to politics so that was it. Fortunately we didn’t have children.”

Interviewee P1AM: “I have only one son... To manage different priorities. You had to have time for that. So I had to put in balance and I want to do both things well so in that case I have, until now, I have concerned myself I did right or wrong and now I have no choice. In this life I will have one. It’s not easy.”

Interviewee P17UK: “I think it’s very, very difficult for women with children if they are primary carers, I don’t have children, so that’s not been an issue for me.”

Interviewee P9AM: “When I first went into politics ...I didn’t have [my daughters] in the house... so I didn’t have that concern, daily concern if you know what I mean because you had to leave...I was fortunate in that, as I said, my girls were away at university, they were adults by then. I didn’t have to worry. All I had to do was have money ready for them.”

Have things changed?

Many politicians were motivated by seeing change in the lives of women and shaping a more equal world. Ten politicians spoke of seeing progress and one particularly of seeing changes for black women. Politicians reflected on changes in women's lives from the household to the nature of women's leadership.

They spoke of change at the personal, family level:

Interviewee P3EU: "I think my father had a big problem with these women who stood up and said 'Half of the wage the man brings home goes to the household, and I have a right for my own incomes.' So he was kind of against the strong women because man says what is right at home, etc. And then he saw his own daughters growing up, developing [their] own opinions. I think he started to be proud that we both went to university and we both made our own career, but just seeing his own children, daughters suffering... that we were not able to take the right steps at the right [time], he changed his mind. But [we are] his own blood and daughters, that was what made him change."

Interviewee P20UK: "When my grandmother got married, she wasn't allowed to work. When my mum got married, she chose to give up work, she could have carried on working. Now, I just think we're in a completely different world and I want my daughter not to have any barriers at all."

Changes at national level have had impact:

Interviewee P9AM: "I put a motion in the House asking that black history month [be instituted nationally] and I worked really hard and got that motion passed ...and now all across this country you hear about black history, black history...in [that] month ... whether it's corporate, whether it's religious settings, schools, academia, university settings... That was my motion so that has benefited everybody from coast to coast to coast, not only black folks but all [nationals], to recognise their history."

Interviewee P6AM: “As more women got elected and we had a critical mass in the province ...in [one year] we elected a lot of women and that changed the culture of the whole provincial parliament. By the time I got to [the national parliament ten years later] the Prime Minister nominated and appointed five women.”

What is the material difference that can flow from having women in senior positions? Reflecting on what she has seen, one former president had hoped for more than she has witnessed, but positive examples exist:

Interviewee P15EU: “Now, the challenge not only is that we see more women take high positions, but also, is it going to really make a difference? I think that’s worrying, as well, that we haven’t seen a significant difference in leadership. So some of us, I think, are very interested in how women lead differently. Not all women – some women very much lead in what would be a more traditionally male way; I think Margaret Thatcher would be a good example of that. But, Michelle Bachelet, for example, who’s been re-elected as President of Chile is, I think, significantly trying to do it in a different way.”

Politicians' journeys

A profound and sustained drive to make change, often born of personal experience of inequality, features in the accounts of women politicians. High levels of formal education are apparent, and international experience may contribute to ambition and networking. The world of politics remains resolute in its maleness, bringing a set of challenges that women deal with by having female networks, by extracting themselves from spaces where words and deeds are in tension, and by ensuring that their home lives are supportive. For some, public life and heavy commitments have exacted a high price in their personal lives. No matter how well women do, when they reach the highest level of politics they remain targets of sexist disparagement and abuse. Resilience and carving out new ways of doing business are among their responses. However, despite its latent and open hostility to women, the world of politics remains relatively more open to women entrants, whatever their professional backgrounds, than other sectors.

Fellows

Above the Parapet provided a space for women who hold (or have held) positions at the highest levels of public life within our four fields of research to join us at the Institute of Public Affairs (see chapter on Methodology). They were invited to reflect, debate and capture their journeys. We were delighted to have HE Joyce Banda, former President of Malawi, HE Roza Otunbayeva, former President of Kyrgyzstan, Professor Sylvia Tamale, Ugandan academic lawyer, HE Julia Gillard, former Australian Prime Minister, and Professor Ruth Simmons, former President of Brown University, as Senior Visiting Fellows join our project in this regard.

During their time at the LSE, all five Visiting Senior Fellows underwent in-depth interviews regarding their journey into public life, documented their own reflections, and gave lectures and seminars on their experiences within public life. All five spoke of their experiences, their impacts, what they want to tell the women who follow and the men who want to make change and how institutional arrangements impeded or enabled their contributions to public life. This section highlights their reflections – shared in their direct voices – and mirrors themes from the report.

Joyce Banda served as vice-president of Malawi from 2009 to 2012 and president from 2012 to 2014. She was the first woman to serve in either position in Malawi and the first female head of state in southern Africa. She was a successful businesswoman and a community organiser before entering politics in 2004. She founded a new political party in 2011 and the same year was named Africa's third most powerful woman by *Forbes* magazine.

Joyce Banda: "to be a powerful woman"

"At 30 years of age, I drew my mission statement in life, which says 'I will spend my life [helping] women and youth gain social and political empowerment through business and education.'

"[These are] some of the challenges that women face on their journey to public life... [P]overty, underdevelopment, under-representation [are all] issues for women. An additional problem for women, as if all that is not enough, is patriarchy... [P]atriarchal society has hindered many women [from entering] public life in many parts of the world... socialisation processes at household level and community orientation have [inhibited acceptance of women] in leadership positions. This has also impacted on women as they feel they don't have to fight for leadership positions. These behavioural patterns have mostly been influenced by negative attitudes, traditions and customs. I believe that real change must start with changing attitudes, traditions and behaviours in our families, communities and institutions.

"I have always said to women that perhaps we need to take responsibility for some of the things that are happening when our men grow up and are not



gender-sensitive. It's what we do as mothers at the household level. Those of you that are from Africa know that we are the first to say "Don't cry like a girl", telling our son "Why are you crying like a girl?" and then telling the boy child to not get into the kitchen, the boy child shouldn't cook. So the boy child is forever sitting with his dad at the other side of the house. But the only little radio in the house is there, so this boy is listening to the radio and your daughter is with you in the kitchen. So, some of the disadvantages women or the girl child faces, it is us mothers who are at the centre.

"Women leaders feel the urgency of doing something about a situation. They see and feel the plight of families, of children, of communities and indeed of countries. They recognise... poverty, education, health, water and sanitation... energy and climate change variability... I have seen it, I have felt it and I have lived it. For me, therefore, it is a moral obligation to spend my life doing something about this situation.

"[T]he Hunger Project gave me an award in 1997... for leadership for sustainable end[ing] of hunger. The award was shared between me and President Chissano of Mozambique... When I turned up in New York to receive that prize, I went with 17 rural women... I went back home with my \$50,000 and I started what is called the Joyce Banda Foundation... [W]e focus on economic empowerment, education, health, leadership and rights [and have] reached 1.3 million Malawians. We provide school buses to 3,500, we have sent 500 students to university, and we look after 30,000 orphans... I just want you to see what happens when you invest in an African woman.

"In many cases we may see what men do not see with regard to women and children... During my human rights activism, I campaigned against violence against women... [and when I became] minister of gender, my first responsibility was to enact the domestic violence bill. I am happy to report that by the time I moved from that ministry, the bill had been passed. I had also introduced a school bus programme for girls to go to school. I had also launched what I called the Zero Tolerance Campaign Against Child Abuse.

“During my time as gender minister, foreign minister, vice-president, and then as state president of Malawi, and chair of SADC [the Southern African Development Community]... I received a lot of support from men, more than women. And I do not remember that I was undermined by them, if anything, particularly in the mainstream, in the government, civil servant, I don't remember anybody looking down at me. If anything, negative attitudes, insults and namecalling came from outside the mainstream government system. Against all odds, against the insinuations and perceptions that Malawi was not ready for a woman president... I made several critical policy decisions that demonstrated that women leaders are risk-takers.

“Being the first woman president in the country, it was also incumbent upon me to [ensure] that issues of women are at the centre of government policies. Most of my policy positions were informed by my experience as I was a... woman who [had gone from living on] less than \$1 [per day to the] State House. I was clearly aware that many women and girls looked up to me as a role model and mentor. I have pushed these things from my personal experience, from an emotional point of view and from a practical perspective. I have moved from where I was not sure where my next meal would come from. [I] am privileged to have lived most of the challenges [I have talked about].

“There is only one woman [role model for me] and this is my grandmother. She was an entrepreneur... [I]n my tradition, the grandmother brings up the first grandchild. [I]n our case, my father was working in the police; [he] insisted that he wanted to bring up his daughter. But my grandmother [also] insisted, so they ended up sharing. So every weekend I spent with my grandmother. She was very strong, refused abuse, was self-sufficient, worked hard, employed men... everybody was coming in and out, eating at the house. So I learned to give at a very early stage, but also I don't remember any time when she wasn't selling something. The only thing she wasn't selling was her grandchildren. She had enough money all the time... I knew from a very early stage that I needed to be strong, to stand and to be independent and to stand on my own and to refuse to accept abuse – that was [from] my grandmother.

"[I]n 1975 my husband went to [work] in Kenya and I went along. I [wasn't allowed to] work any more... But that was a very good opportunity for me, because it was just when [the United Nations] had declared the Decade for Women. [There were] so many things happening in Kenya that [were not] happening in Malawi. I just happened to be at the right place at the right time... I [was] living in an abusive home... I ha[d] all this time to attend these women's conferences. But for the first time, I am only 26, I am hearing words like abuse, women in development, violence against women – words... up until that time I didn't know how much I have been abused. I am waking up... I am hearing words that are beginning to make sense to me. So by the time I left Kenya to go to Malawi, I was very clear that I was in the wrong place. I needed to do something, walk out. But I had spent my year and a half in Kenya wisely, I empowered myself. I attended these courses, everything. [And I decided to leave]... in 1981 [women] didn't leave... [A woman] took me in for two years.

"[T]he day that I stood in parliament... to present the [domestic violence] bill, there was no time for discussion; it was towards the end of the day. So, I was going to present it and the discussion on the panel was going to be the next day. And I remember... one member of parliament from the opposition said, 'This is stupid', and the speaker said, 'You must wait'. But [he continued,] 'This is foreign, this is American, that's the problem with Joyce Banda, she is taking foreign stuff...' [There was lots of] cheering on the floor. I walked out of parliament very frustrated. But it was good, because it helped us get better prepared for the next step.

"We met that evening, we wrote 40 speeches and distributed them, we agreed we are just going to read them... [S]o after everybody presented [their] speeches... we had to vote and the noes were louder than the yesses... [A]ll the women stood up and [said], 'No, we want to vote again, but we want to vote one voice [at a time]... so that everybody knows who votes yes or no.' And [that was] the last thing they wanted.

"[W]hat I did three months before the... presentation in parliament was to expose a lot of abuse, a lot of abuse. A woman who refused to go back to her husband, he hid in the woods and chopped both her arms and she was nine months

pregnant. A woman whose eye was pulled out because she refused to cook for her husband... I made sure that [it got covered on] TV and radio. And a week before going into parliament it was International Women's Day. I asked my President to direct all his male ministers to join me in a big protest talk against domestic violence. And now the whole country..., cabinet ministers, men and women, [was] marching together, thousands and thousands of people [including the grassroots]. But being led [in the International Women's Day march] by male ministers was something we had never seen before in this country. So by the time we went to parliament, the country was ready. Everybody was waiting to hear any member of parliament that would say yes to eyes being pulled out and arms being chopped off.

"On this journey I have believed that leadership is about falling in love with the people you serve, and the people falling in love with you.

"For many women their grain of leadership has withered away too early, too soon as a result of [many] challenges. It is a tragedy that they have not realised their full leadership potential... I have come to believe that participation of women in leadership has to be an agenda for both men and women.

"When I came into office, I decided that it was time for women to take up leadership roles. I appointed a female chief justice..., female chief secretary, head of the civil service..., two deputy governors in reserve banking, deputy general of police, eight district commissioners. I made [hundreds of] appointments, but when you look at the people that were appointed, you see women and men that were qualified for the jobs, and if you look at our performance... you can see that it was an able team that was able to implement the programmes.

"I was being interviewed one time... and they said, 'You worked so hard, you want to get to the top to be as strong as a man.' I said 'No, I worked so hard to get to the top and be a powerful woman.'"

Julia Gillard was sworn in as the 27th Prime Minister of Australia in June 2010 and served in that office until June 2013. She was the first woman to hold this position. Previously, following the Australian Labor Party's victory at the 2007 federal election, she served as Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and Minister for Social Inclusion.

Julia Gillard: 'normalising images of women's leadership'

"By the time I'd emerged from university I was very keen to enter parliament, so it'd taken me a long time to work out that's what I wanted to do with my life, but I'd decided that's what I wanted to do.

"When I came out of student politics I basically knew that's what I wanted to do, but I needed to finish my degrees. I was very active by then in the ALP [Australian Labor Party], so I was president of a local branch, the Carlton branch of the ALP... I started putting myself forward for pre-selection.

"[We lost women politicians in that election because] ... many were in the more marginal seats... We... looked at that and said, 'We've got to fix this for the long term... future, and the only way of fixing it's two things. One, to have an affirmative action rule which sets a target, not just for how many women overall, because then all



the women will get shoved into marginal seats, but for women in safe and marginal seats. And [two,] we need an organisation that supports female candidates and helps women come forward.' So I was involved with... the group of women that campaign[ed] to change the ALP rules, which we did, and then to create an organisation called Emily's List, which was a fundraising outfit. Fundraising, support, inspiration, try to get women to think about politics. Emily's List is still there.

"Yes, so it took some time to end up in the issues that I had identified early in politics that really mattered to me. Then... when I was a backbencher... I'd selected education and employment as the committee I wanted to go on... I produced, even as a backbencher, a short education policy that went into the mix for consideration as an election policy. It ultimately didn't make it in a funding-constrained environment, but [it] was one of the last ones taken off the table. As a backbencher I was looking to try and put my shoulder to the wheel on education, but then for the next few parliamentary terms I ended up doing other things. It was when I became deputy prime minister that I took the shadow employment and workplace relations portfolio. And that was because... it was one of the things I would have identified on my way into politics as [what] I wanted to do... [I]t was core to my sense of purpose...

"As deputy leader the convention is you get to pick your portfolio, whereas the leader allocates all the other portfolios. When we came into government in 2007 I asked Kevin [Rudd, then prime minister] to add education [to my portfolio], because one, [it was] what I'd always wanted, the dream come true. Two, I thought it would give the federal government the opportunity to put together [a] whole-opportunity agenda. Everything from early-childhood schooling, vocational education, universities, what that then means when you get to go into the workforce and adult education in the workforce. Put the whole opportunity [agenda] together in one government department and be able to have this set of policies that join it all up. A very common complaint in education and all of that is that it is siloed, [which] doesn't fit... people's lifestyles.

“I wasn’t doing all this single-handedly. I had a team of junior ministers working with me and in that short timeframe we did get agreed profound new settings in early childhood. We got agreed major reform directions in education. They were being implemented. We got agreed major reforms directions for universities and they were being implemented.

“The fact that Kevin and I were a male-female team, and on the other side of politics there was a male team, that was obviously very commented-on in the election. And [it] created some women’s energy around a potential first, the first woman to be deputy prime minister.

“[S]o I guess what I’m trying to say through that is I think the status of being the first female deputy prime minister actually trumped the others and the deputy prime minister was empowering in terms of the portfolio selection. And the first woman bit tended to attract some interest and attention to the work you were doing. That was a good dynamic at that stage.

“My memory of this period in terms of my own portfolio is not day-to-day pitched battles... It was more really the endurance to carry that workload and to carry it day to day. The support there, the personal support from Tim [Mathieson, my partner] to make it possible and to roll with it. I’m going to be in Canberra doing this and he’s in Brisbane doing something else. The support from my personal staff, who worked incredibly hard and backed me in all of this hard labour, and the sense of support from the family. That they were barracking⁴⁰ for you, Mum and Dad, not necessarily understanding every detail of what you were doing, but barracking for you. I had good support from long-term friends who had been in these political and personal networks over my lifetime. People ... who had been in this personal and political network going all the way back to student politics and when I was looking for pre-selection. All of that helped make it bearable.

⁴⁰ Used here to mean ‘supporting’

“Tim was important, yes. So Tim has been there for the journey into becoming deputy opposition leader for the 2007 campaign and as there was the intensity of this workload in government; he was always just incredibly flexible about it and supportive about it. Whilst he would worry about making sure you kept your health and didn’t go absolutely mad on the work, eating vegetables and all of that sort of stuff, he was very supportive of what I was doing. So not trying to dissuade you from doing so much.

“My parents [were] getting older and [I was] not always [able] to... be there for them. I’d visit as regularly as [I] could.

“[My parents were] still in Adelaide and I had my niece and nephew, have been close to across their lives, and by the time I was at this stage of politics they were big people, not little people, so adults, but wanted to maintain a connection and relationship with them. But [despite the] overwhelming focus on my work, compared with cabinet ministers I’ve worked with who have been juggling having babies and very small children, I had it incredibly easy given my lifetime choices.

“Some things have happened over time in Australian politics that the women have campaigned for... [Some] have happened that have made it a little bit easier. [It was] recognised that a woman with small children might need to bring with her a carer. Way back when, the rules didn’t accommodate that, because it was all figured on, men went to Canberra and woman stayed home and looked after kids... The parliament house ultimately had a childcare centre created in it where members of parliament, and indeed staff, could get care for children.

“I think people have been prepared to think about the things that can make a practical impact and if you went back 15, 20 years, people weren’t even thinking about the very practical things that could make a difference. I think people are absolutely prepared to explore that now.

"I think it's a dynamic associated with... parliament becoming more female [and] younger. I think people go into politics younger than they used to, which means their likelihood of being in politics and having young families is higher. I think, because Labour's got more women in it, more energies probably come from our side around some of those questions, but when they've been raised, overwhelmingly they've had bipartisan support. There have been people on the other side who have said, 'Yes, that's practical. It makes a difference. Let's do it.' Yeah.

"Yeah, I wouldn't claim I was the leader of any of these changes. I was a big supporter of them, but they... certainly predate my time as prime minister... [A] childcare centre ended up going in where the modern members' bar had been for a period of time.

"I think there's a continuum of issues, so should people with children (they're more likely to be women than men) have this or that entitlement as a parliamentarian? That response is being overwhelmingly mainstreamed. Then up at this other end, you had the political contest when I was prime minister, where I came into the prime ministership in a controversial way. It appealed to people who wanted to press on how I got there as a character question, to build Lady Macbeth-style imagery around that. As I was [a] prime minister leading a minority government it appealed to political opponents to build some gender language around that: "She's getting told what to do by others who support her government", which had its ultimate, most blunt expression in a sign at a rally that said, 'Julia Gillard, Bob Brown's bitch'. Which was a reference to the leader of the Greens, so I'm being told what to do by the leader of the Greens.

"[On] political arguments... [D]epending on where the political contest is, you'll pick a set of words that go [to] the heart of your opponent and the case you're trying to put against them. In picking the set of words which went [into] the political contest against me, often from [politicians]...and then in the media, that set of words would be a gendered set of words. Now that doesn't mean if I'd been a man they wouldn't have still been pressing on the same issues.

“The gendered remark obviously gets people to hear it around ‘first woman to do the job’ rather than the straight political attack... [I]t helps your political prosecution of an argument to create gendered imagery.

“Of course there was some reaction to just me being the first woman to be prime minister. There was some reaction at that point, but really the gendered stuff infected the political debate at the point that the political debate was hotter. It became the convenient criticism.

“[H]andy to use when you want to make an attack, a political attack in a time when you identified your political attacks as likely to have effect, because things were controversial.

“I always wanted to be [judged] for what got achieved as well as being the first woman prime minister... [O]n being the first woman, the gender bit, I think that there still is a resonance... now that there’s been one woman to do the job, that that opens people’s perceptions about who can be prime minister. It just helps normalise thinking that you’re a young girl, you can aspire to be prime minister, if you’re a young political activist. You can aspire to be prime minister.

“[A]nd that’s a good thing, because you ultimately want it to just be normal... [I]t’s finding its way to a new and better normal.

“I hope we are bequeathing a world where it’s easier, and I think we got given – a collective ‘we’ – got given a world where it’s easier. My journey in politics stands on the shoulders of the [women who went before]... and their journey in politics stood on the shoulders of the women who first got into the parliament and made it to the ministry.

“I think we inherited a better world. I hope we’re bequeathing a better world for women’s opportunity and true participation in politics. I would say to a woman, old or young, who wants to involve herself in that world, to be conscious of that journey of change and hopefully be part of it and make it part of their mission to make it better again for the next generation, [t]o go into it very clear on purpose and why you’re doing it. Not only because I think that’s what politics is about – purpose – but because it’s so sustaining when you are in politics to know why you’re there, what your purpose is.

“I’d also say – you used the terminology, emotional scarring... I think you can make some choices about how much you let the gender grit which comes into all of this, how much you let it impact you. I think you can sustain a sense of self that isn’t hostage to emotionally reacting to these kind of gender criticisms. I think you can build a sense of self, build a few layers of protection and intellectually understand that [at] the end of the day [it] isn’t about you. It’s about something bigger than that and you therefore don’t have to feel personally down about it.

“[U]nless you start with a reasonable class of women on the backbench, hopefully 50/50, but a large number of women on the backbench, you’re never going to get good representation in cabinet, because people will not have the attributes to deal with it... The setting of targets that make your political party more representative I think is key. I would certainly advocate that. I would advocate the practical measures that will change, context to context, nation by nation, but the practical measures that help people with family responsibilities, participants in the political process could advocate those.

“I would advocate doing what is possible by shining a light on gender and sexism to get the gender jibing, the gendered comments and abuse out of political debates. Even beyond that... I think there’s cultural work for us to do on images of leadership and normalising images of female leadership.”

Roza Otunbayeva is a Kyrgyz politician who went on to head the government during its transition from an authoritarian regime to a parliamentary democracy. In June 2010, she was elected President of Kyrgyzstan and served in that post until successfully facilitating the first peaceful transfer of state power in Central Asia in December 2011. She had previously been a minister and a diplomat for the Soviet Union.

Roza Otunbayeva: “my education gave me wings”

“[M]y grandmother... married [at the age of] 13... She gave birth to... 13 children. Then when her husband died she went as wife to the brother; that was the ordinary life of women in my part of the world. I’m the granddaughter and it’s different, completely different. My mother gave birth to eight children; I’m the second one. My mother is a very hardworking lady and I [owe] many things to her: tough, hardworking, very purposeful. My father was a... judge for a quarter of a century.

“[W]e are seven girls and [one] boy in my family... My father was... an ordinary judge. [M]y mother was strong... she was a teacher. In my country women are really strong in the sense that they give birth to many children [and at] the same time they work.

“[My parents wanted] us to be educated, they want[ed] us to learn about the world... five of us... graduated from... universities.



"You see, I was privileged. If I [had been] a daughter of... peasants, I [would have] stay[ed] in the same place and... probably [not] moved from one place to another. [I] was born in Bishkek and [moved] to Naryn... and then my father was transferred to work in Osh where we lived [for] five years. Thanks to him I was exposed to other cultures. [We were] a quite humble family, I would say, nothing special, nothing.

"[E]ducation... is paramount for women. Otherwise you would be behind the men. You should all the time learn and learn, know much better, [be] ten times better than everyone. My education gave me wings [with] which I'm flying the whole of my life. So you should be intellectual... [o]therwise they will never recognise you [as] an equal...

"I was strong in all... natural sciences and humanities also. I didn't know what to do, I wanted to become [a] diplomat [but] our neighbour, he was a diplomat in the Soviet foreign ministry and [he said] that it is impossible because women are not allowed to work in the foreign ministry.

"After my university, after I got my PhD, I went back home and I became a teacher in our national university... I was trying to present my lectures like today [on] PowerPoint... I was trying to give them the pictures of philosophers, Aristotle or Francis Bacon or whoever, to give the paintings of those times.

"I was [about] 26 or 27 when I moved to work for [the] party... I was the secretary of the party committee in the district of Bishkek. That was very active public work... Then after two years I became the chief of public works. You have a municipality here and someone is in charge of all this social work. Then I became deputy prime minister. I was going up and up. That was a choice which I never regret also.

"I didn't start to travel until I was about 35. Until that time, for us in the Soviet Union you couldn't travel [abroad]... of course between Moscow and Bishkek, St Petersburg, that's it. ... Later, when I was 39, I was invited to come to Moscow to work for Mr [Eduard] Shevardnadze, [the Soviet foreign minister]... it was the time of perestroika.

"I was [the] representative of [the] Soviet Union [to] UNESCO, vice-president of [the] executive board of UNESCO... [It was] a cultural phase [when we] transform[ed] the] Soviet Union, so it was an exciting time... That was our mission – to show that the country is not dull, it's not terrible, it's not just egalitarian but within the country [is] a huge potential which we want to open up to the world and we can change our country. That was really the best of our intentions... I started to learn about the world.

"I said something that [people] noticed... and I was sent immediately in 1987 to be [a] member of the Soviet delegation to the United Nations General Assembly. In 1989 they invited me to come to work in Moscow in the foreign ministry. So I started to work, I learnt a great deal about diplomacy representing the Soviet Union. It is really something important... everyone comes to you to have your advice, your point of view.

"I do remember... [the] first time [I came] to London, in '89 I guess. It was such a very intensive [job] to build up the Helsinki agreement, to build new European architecture, a couple of meetings, one was on human rights. In London [there] was a big meeting about the mass media and communication. I would say that they... noticed I was young... [I] was certainly remarkable – the only woman on the board, remarkable because in [the Soviet Union]... they had [never before had a] woman member of the board of the foreign ministry.

"I think it was wise from Shevardnadze's point of view [to put me on the board]. I was one of the people who helped the new leadership to improve the... foreign policy of the Soviet Union. That was very important to prove that [the] Soviet Union [was] changing... opening, something new [was happening].

“Smart men, Shevardnadze for example, would recognise that if I appoint another man, nothing would happen. If I appoint this smart woman, something will happen. [S]o... slowly we played our role and after us the mass of [women] came... of course I would endorse and support other women.

“You know why women [have] been chosen over the last ten, twenty years more and more? Because the world... is sick of corruption... So who comes to clean up? Only women... [Some male leaders] want to be remembered as... progressive... And how [can you] do this? Only by appoint[ing] women. I think women are much better [at governing]... I am feminist of course [in] this regard.

“So perestroika [meant that] externally... we looked [like] a country which had woken up.

“[T]he historical, traditional, cultural background of Kyrgyzstan [is] different from others in central and middle Asia. We’d been nomads, travelling and... mov[ing] from place to [place]... you need a lot of effort, skill and strength. Women had been sharing all this hardship with men. They looked after children, they built the houses – yurts – they looked after the animals... Women were not, like in settled nations... sitting somewhere behind the wall... being completely covered... Kyrgyz women had been free and self-sufficient, independent.

“Soviet power has done [a lot] for me. I was lucky: I was chosen [from] amongst many... [For] three years I served my country as deputy prime minister, as minister of foreign affairs. Then I was invited to go to Moscow.

"[We had tumultuous change in Kyrgyzstan for] almost a quarter of a century. We lived [with]... wild privatisation, in the wild market economy and with poverty. We've been so unhappy. [Following many years of corruption, power in Kyrgyzstan] was broken completely... So what happened? [Following the second revolution in 2010] we thought we should change the constitution. It should be not in the hands of one person, [the] president. We should do it differently. When [our new interim government] came to power we said, 'In three months we will present the constitution', and we [did]. A lot of people, more than 200 sitting together and working all the time [for] three months.

"During the April 2010 revolution there [were] tensions, controversies... 87 people... were shot from the White House [the office of Kyrgyzstan's president]. People came to say, 'Just leave the office' to the president and yet... [the armed forces] started to kill [protestors], shot them...

"[O]n 7 April 2010, the decision was [made and they said to me] please do lead us. I immediately went to the White House where [I spoke to the] prime minister. I said '[Y]ou should go, leave office now. Look, 100 people died, you should leave office'. They asked [for] one hour... We came in an hour; he gave me [his resignation] paper.

"Later on [in June 2010, after the revolution when I was interim president], when there were violent clashes in Osh, some 420 people died. I was going between Osh and Bishkek... I was all the time going to the people because there was no choice, someone should go and listen to them.

"I was the oldest one amongst [the political classes in Kyrgyzstan]. Most of them... are younger than me. They know and they respect me. They know that I am the most experienced person from the Soviet [era]. They are kids of this new time, from the independence time. They grew up, they established themselves. I was in the Soviet days. I [had already been] at very high levels. Not just academic [but also] foreign minister of the Soviet Union.

“My country chose, 24 years ago, this democratic path and democracy is about equality, equal voices for people, and women [faced up to] these problems of transition, especially economic problems. Men, they lost themselves in the transition. It was a really serious change of life, while women... understood that, if not them, then who takes care of children and the society? That’s why they started to be retail traders, bringing stuff from all over the world to Kyrgyzstan... this is how they survived. We lost a lot of doctors, a lot of intellectuals who left their profession and went to be retailers... Almost all women are literate. This is the situation [we inherited] from the Soviet days. So women became survivors of this new country. They survived... and overcame this transition... [Women] paved the route [to the future]. “It was [not always] successful... [I]n 2005, when we got a parliament, not a single woman was [elected], and then we became very angry and we demanded... quotas... [A] quota was decided [at]... 30 per cent for women in our parliament, 30 per cent in the electoral commission.

“ [W]hat allowed me to come into high office, and what allowed other women to be more visible today was... our historical, cultural, traditional background, our democratic choice of development and... a very strong contribution of women to democracy in my country.

Professor Ruth Simmons was the 18th president of Brown University (2001-2012). She was Brown's first female president and the first black president of an Ivy League University.

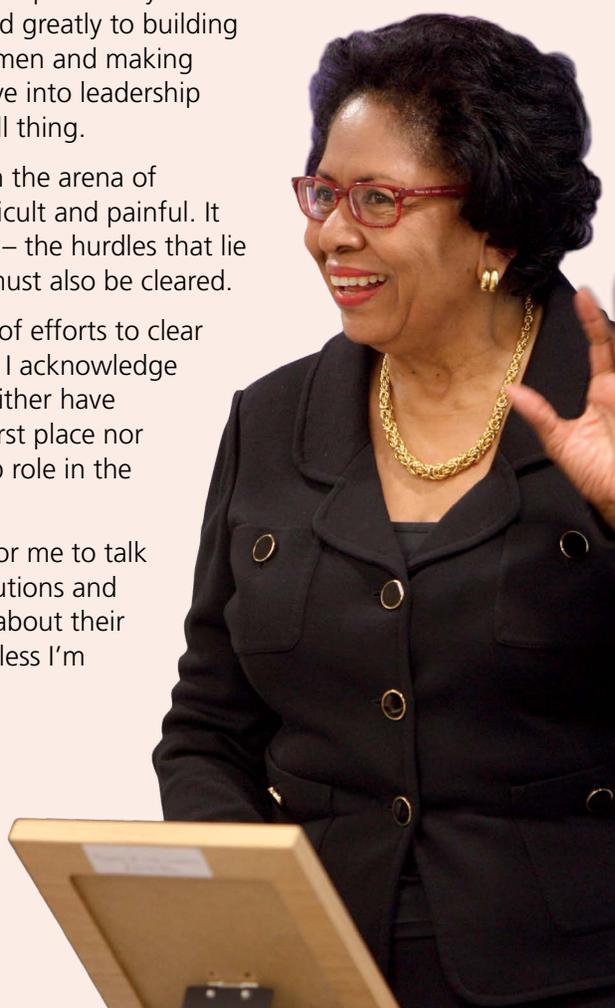
Ruth Simmons: “the only way for me to remain in the academy was not to change my fundamental principles”

“[I]’ve been associated with [programmes] both at Smith and Brown [universities]... that promote women’s leadership... over [a] 40-year career I have observed the many ways in which such programmes enlighten the public and create opportunities that otherwise would not be open to women... [I]’ve been truly impressed by how these programmes have contributed greatly to building up resources available to women and making it possible for women to move into leadership positions, and that is no small thing.

“Meaningful social change in the arena of equality can be slow and difficult and painful. It is not enough to open doors – the hurdles that lie beyond the front threshold must also be cleared.

“I have been the beneficiary of efforts to clear the pathway to equality, and I acknowledge that without them I could neither have gotten an education in the first place nor made my way to a leadership role in the academy.

“I recognise it is impossible for me to talk about the necessity for institutions and countries to speak the truth about their history and circumstances unless I’m prepared to do it myself.



"I think [there] is something emblematic in what I and many women and minorities confront as they rise to and carry out their leadership roles. We must not only compete with other high achievers without similar histories of discrimination, but we're expected somehow to rise above that history to perform as if that history did not exist. That's quite something. Early in my life I was very interested in theatre, and I admit [that] in our professional lives we are often called on to do some amount of performance acting... but [it's] a tall order to pretend all the things endured on the way to leadership, including discrimination, somehow didn't exist...

"My own efforts at the personal level sought to overcome the long-term effects of racial discrimination in the US, while at the same time nurturing a belief that my experience and understanding of racism is a potent tool for fighting for human rights. I tried to use that understanding to confront racism rather than to forget it, and in the meantime also to confront other ills: sexism, homophobia and other ills that divide and ravage our communities.

"My journey to leadership began in a small town in east Texas where my parents were sharecroppers. Like most rural blacks in the 50s and 60s they [had] few choices in shaping their lives and the prospects for their children... I was the last of their 12 children... born into a brutally exploitative sharecropping system that required child labour to boost income for both plantation owners and families.

“As a general rule, because of the demands of sowing and picking cotton, children attended school less than 50 per cent of the school year, but it was my good fortune that my family moved to Houston when I was only seven, and without the requirement to work in the cotton fields I was able to attend school for the full day and the full year. I relished going to school. In... books I found a way to imagine a world different from the oppressive world I had been born into, one that taught me I was ugly, inferior and absolutely without prospects for the future.

“Many in the world experience having every opportunity for improvement blocked because of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, class and other factors... in the United States under the Jim Crow system blacks were prohibited from seeking certain types of employment, from voicing opposition to discriminatory practices, from using many public facilities, and of course from associating with whites at all. The economic exploitation and racial segregation that was typical of this period placed severe limitations on the degree to which blacks could receive an equal education. In spite of the landmark court case dethroning the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine [in] education, in my community we remained very much separate and unequal. But because of that very segregation, a cadre of dedicated teachers able to find employment only in black schools provided outstanding teaching and mentoring in the schools I attended when my family relocated to the city. The irony of this is astounding. Their opportunities were blocked... and so they were consigned to teaching us... but what a blessing that was for us... because they were educated... they were the only educated people we encountered in this community...

“I was especially privileged to have a handful of teachers who encouraged me to go to college. I had no good understanding of what college would do for me. Nor did my parents; they had an eighth-grade education, but in terms of what we know today it was more like a second-grade education: they could read, they could write, they could add and do basic math, but that was pretty much all their education allowed them to do. And certainly from their perspective, given the world in which they had grown up, the idea of college was foreign indeed. So I couldn’t have had a good understanding of what college would do for me, but my excitement about learning drove me to want to advance to the highest levels of education, where I could continue to grow in understanding about the wider world. Understanding the wider world was of keen interest to me and served as a kind of antidote for the hostility and disparagement blacks faced on a daily basis.

“The experience of growing up in the 50s and 60s... during rigid segregation is very hard to describe. It was routine for us to walk down street and be assailed for no good reason at all for simply walking down the street, routine for us to have to step off the sidewalk to permit whites to pass, routine [that] if we had a glance that looked emboldened or spoke in a way that seemed to suggest arrogance we could be summarily punished by anyone – not the formal system, but by any white who felt affronted.

“[A]s a consequence, as you might imagine, my parents taught us how to behave around whites... to do nothing... to be very constrained in our movements and our actions... to not reveal on our visage any sign of anger or discontent... to say ‘Yes, ma’am’ and ‘Yes, sir’ [and] otherwise to project an image of an entirely compliant person... that’s the way they brought us up and they were wise because all of us lived to adulthood... all of us were safe in our family environment and safe when we went to town. It was only later after we moved to the city that we became more emboldened... to stand up for our rights... because there was more of an infrastructure in the city to support our safety, but our parents were very clear we were at risk in the world. That’s what it was like to grow up at that time.

“The accusation of innate inferiority governed our lives and hung over every aspect of what we did. [T]here is a word that people in the African American community use... saddy. Well, saddy is a term used for the kind of person that I was, very proper – the slur used against me was always [that] I was too proper. Why did I have to speak the way that I spoke? Why couldn’t I just speak dialect like everybody else? Was I trying to be superior to them, what were my motives and so forth... I continued to build my storehouse of language in spite of the criticism and people saying that I was odd... and it was most irritating at home, of course, this proclivity that I had for speaking language that I took out of my precious books. They really thought that I was trying to use it as a weapon against them.

“So school became a proving ground where I could constantly test my capacities to learn, to express myself well, to grow stronger as a human being. Ultimately, through the encouragement of teachers I was able to earn a scholarship for college, to broaden my perspective, to study abroad, and finally to gain a PhD and enter academic life. But by the time I graduated from high school in 1963 my teachers thought it was high-risk for me to go to an integrated university, and they thought, mostly because I was a bit rambunctious, and quite outspoken as a high school student, [that] this did not bode well for me in a white environment, and so they pushed me to attend a black college, which is what I did. I went off to New Orleans and attended an all-black college in Louisiana.

“I did the strangest thing [at university]. Kennedy was assassinated, so [it seemed like] the end of the world. It was '63, the end of the world. And then, of course, all the demonstrations that were taking place in that era, civil rights movements that were taking place... I was required as a first-year student to attend chapel – that was standard in those kinds of institutions – and I refused to go. And they didn't know what to do with me because I was so obstreperous, so I started, I guess, in this mode of protest once I got to college. I guess I was coming into my own intellectually and thinking; I had my own ideas. There were things that I want to see happen, there are things clearly that I'm critiquing now independently and... I decide, how absurd is it to have required chapel, because that must presume that everybody is a Christian. But what about people who aren't Christians? How can you force them to go to chapel? It's just unjust, and... they might not protest, so I'll protest for them.

"I think it was [in] my first year in college [that] I wrote an essay on homosexuality and how unjust it was, the way people treated homosexuals... I would have attributed it in part to the fantastic – again – the fantastic teachers that I had, because there's something quite interesting that happened during the civil rights era: people of goodwill who wanted to do something, especially academics, sometimes left the north and went south to teach in black colleges. So I had the most wonderful English teacher and the most wonderful Spanish and French teacher, and a terrific theatre teacher from Yale. So all these people influenced me greatly, because they'd come from a tradition in the north of... empowering students to find their own ideas and... to engage in critical analysis and so forth. And so that had a big impact on me; it's almost as if I had been waiting all my life for this environment. And I'm miserable on a personal front because I'm very lonely, I miss my family terribly... again, I retreat to my academic studies.

"By the time I began my career I thought I was already at the height of my achievement because after all, to advance from a segregated inner-city high school to a PhD at Harvard was an achievement far beyond anything I or my teachers or my family could have imagined. So I started my career in a rather lacklustre manner... [although] I wouldn't have called it that at the time... [I was] content to follow my husband as he moved from a career in law practice to a career in business... along the way I was content to find employment where I could while attending to the duties of parenting two young children... but my career took a different turn by necessity... my husband and I separated after 14 years of marriage and I took a job at Princeton University.

“Within Princeton I rose quickly to a high-level administrative position in spite of my penchant for somewhat quixotic behaviour that caused me to question everything, especially the university’s policies and practices with regard to women and minorities... It was my good fortune that some of my work in questioning and addressing those practices led to significant changes in the hiring of women and minorities, changes that drew favourable attention to Princeton... I was involved in the recruitment of faculty, and in that era Princeton didn’t have black faculty, for the most part, and many of those that they did have were not competitive with the rest of the faculty. I had the pleasure of recruiting a lot of faculty, and that was hard work... the notion of convincing departments, department by department, that they should hire extremely qualified African Americans, and science departments that they should hire extremely qualified women, was very challenging. Nevertheless, we managed to have some success with this... the credit that I received personally for some of these advances led me to increasingly high levels of responsibility, and in 1995 I was approached about becoming president of the largest women’s college in the United States.

“The fact that my activist approach had not deterred the search committee from seeing me as a positive force frankly surprised me. In fact, when I was first approached about the idea of becoming a president I said no, not only because I thought there was some kind of mistake, that they didn’t really know who I was, but also because I could not bring myself to believe I could be the person I am and be a college president... it just didn’t seem possible that that could work, so when they first approached me I said no. I would not stand for the presidency of Smith. They kept at it a bit and came back to me and persuaded me that I should take on this role, but even after they did, I urged [the] board to consider carefully whether they were comfortable with my approach to leadership.

“I had been able to remain committed to the academy, because it had tolerated and in some cases embraced my commitment to making these institutions more inclusive. This work was central to my identity as an academic. Many in my cohort had left the academic profession altogether, not only because they deemed it hostile to their presence but also because they lost hope that change would occur during their lifetime... [I] remained in the academy because my path was illuminated by an unshakeable belief that not only was change possible but that I could be a useful instrument of that change. My work, while never solely dedicated to diversity efforts, was often motivated by the desire to see diversity thrive in my lifetime.

“It was very important to me when I was President at Smith to identify programmes that brought women into areas where their success was somehow blocked. I worked very hard to establish an engineering programme, and I did that because I had been so frustrated by the small number of women in certain fields of science and engineering... At that time, students had to study physics, chemistry [and] calculus plus engineering in the first semester... a lot washed out before they got into the meat of the field, so I wanted to set up a programme to demonstrate [that] there was another way to teach engineering. So I set up the engineering programme at Smith. Smith was a wonderful opportunity for me to try some of the things I thought important to change in the academy.

“When I was approached about going to Brown I was very much reluctant to leave Smith; it was such a wonderful environment. The students were bright, we had laid out a series of things we wanted to achieve... But being presented with the opportunity to break the colour line in the Ivy League was ultimately something I couldn't say no to. I couldn't say no because it was not clear that if I turned down the opportunity to move into a leadership role in [the] Ivy League... that there was another African American any time soon that would have that opportunity... and so I was persuaded by those who thought symbolically it was such an important thing to do. I was persuaded to go to Brown.

“Having been elected the first African American president of an Ivy League university... I was certainly aware that many would be concerned about my ascension to that post. I was also aware I would not have the freedom of some of my fellow presidents in the Ivy League to govern solely in the interests of their university’s mission. Their performance would be judged on the basis of their effectiveness and planning, constructing budgets, raising funds, creating new programmes and representing the university. I, on the other hand, along with the two other [female] Ivy League presidents, would be greeted inevitably by watchful stakeholders alert to missteps that would be presumed to typify the behaviour of someone of my background. I don’t know if you have had this experience, but typically when they get angry about something a minority group member does, they say ‘You see, that’s just what you people do’.

“I was so different from what Brown presidents were supposed to be. I’d grown up poor. Brown is a very privileged environment, a very wealthy institution. I’d been educated in segregated schools. I’d not attended an Ivy League university as an undergraduate. I was a southerner. One of the first things that I heard when I was named president of Brown was the great concern about my election. Do you know why? Because they said I was a southern Baptist... Finally I represented the legacy of the slaves who had built the historic building at the centre of the campus. The first president of Brown, whose portrait was hanging in my office, over the fireplace, was a slave holder... of course I’m a descendant of slaves... no one ever suggested, by the way, when I began my term, what should be done about the portrait that I had to face every day that I came to work.

“Some probably worried... that I might do some damage to the university... that had survived many challenges to become ranked as one of the best research universities in the country, but in an odd way I understood their concern. Yet I had to balance the anxiety of doubters against that of others in the country who would be more attentive to something different... and that is, was I going to be an uncle Tom, or... Thomasina? [T]hey would be concerned: would I honour my history and continue to speak out for those marginalised by and excluded from elite universities?”

“So this is the situation that marked my entrance into public life at Brown University. Some might describe it as walking a tightrope... [I recognised] that the only way for me to remain in the academy was not to change my fundamental principles. The civil rights movement and the experience of growing up in the Jim Crow south made it impossible to obliterate the importance to me of equal rights. I knew I could not be part of a system that prevented fair and equal access and treatment. I was less concerned about attitudes or actions that excluded or offended me personally.

“I focused instead on matters of long-term cultural, historical or societal importance. The focus away from my own situation allowed me process, I think in a healthy way, much of the personal discrimination I received early in my career: poor treatment by faculty when I was a graduate student at Harvard, unequal pay when I became an academic... I was actually told in one of my early jobs [that] I simply couldn't get paid [an] equal amount, an amount equal to the men on the faculty, because they had children to support.

“Whatever exposure I had to America's obsession with race was managed through a conscious process of asserting and reasserting fundamental principles of human decency and equality, not so much in relationship to me and my group, but fundamental human decency and equality.”

Sylvia Tamale, Professor of Law was the first woman to serve as dean of the Faculty of Law at Makerere University (2004-2008). Professor Tamale serves on several international boards and has been a visiting professor in several academic institutions globally. She has won several awards for defending the human rights of marginalized groups such as homosexuals and refugees.

Sylvia Tamale: “somebody has to speak out”: from the first woman dean to the worst woman in Uganda

“[W]hen I went to college it was in the early 80s. There was only one university in Uganda... and at that university the choice of courses that you could enrol on were very limited. [O]riginally I really wanted to become a journalist. I don’t know where I got the inspiration to become a journalist, but... there was no such course at the time. And I think journalists were training in, not in universities but in, you know, small institutes, and of course it was prestigious to go to university. So I went to university and I did law. So the choices were really limited... I hadn’t done economics so I couldn’t go for [a Bachelor of Commerce degree, so] law was the next best, and I thought, you know, if I can’t do journalism... I was beginning to become very sensitive to inequalities in society, the social inequalities. [T]hat’s how I ended up in law.

“How did I end up being an academic? [These] were very difficult times in Uganda... [T]here was a lot of brain drain, including at the university. So, you know, many of us good students were persuaded by our professors to come back and teach.



“So I was persuaded by a couple of my professors to come back, and in law, the normal course is after doing your undergraduate degree you go down to do your bar course... I was persuaded by these two professors not to go to the law development centre. [A]fter graduation [I] just went back and I was in class, teaching... students that were one year below me, yes. So that’s how I ended up in academia, and I loved it.

“I have always worked very hard... right from primary [school]. I have always been very focused, I don’t know if it’s because I was firstborn; whatever it was, I’ve always known I have to work hard, I have to prepare for my future... I have always taken my studies very seriously – nobody has ever had to sit me down and say, ‘You know what...’ so I always performed very well, because I worked for it and so, yes, that’s how I ended up in academia...

“I knew that whatever I chose to do, I would be very good at it. I was very confident in that sense. In our circle of friends there was... one [woman] who... never had to [work hard], but she... passed; I was not that type... I had the brains, but there is no way I would have got the grades I got without having worked [and] been very focused... [Y]ou know, when we [were] revising and reviewing our notes [she was] lying on her bed reading. She would go in and do the paper and beat all of us. I wasn’t like that.

“I was hired as a teaching assistant and I’ve never looked back. [I] mean, I’m in my element when I’m in front of a class... When I am in front of a classroom... I am transforming students’ consciousness and so I have always enjoyed it.

“As I said before, I think the seed was sown by my teacher. So I think entered activism through Marxism, you know, the political economy of the law and... becoming very aware of the inequalities in society and how the law contributes to that, and although... these professors were never in any formal shape feminist, sometimes from their analysis they alluded to the inequalities not just in class but also gender.

“[I] remember one class... something about women being perceived as not equal... and I was shocked. I was so shocked.

“Yes, I was so shocked, because I had never thought of myself as inferior, I had never thought of women generally as inferior. So what he said... really, really shocked me, it was like ‘boom’!, so... where is that coming from, because I had never, ever... I wasn’t aware of it. So that, I think... drove me when I went to do my LLM [Master of Laws]; I enrolled for a course, Women and the Law. It was taught by Susan Estrich, the woman who wrote [*Real Rape*].

“I took that course, and at that time, when I was at Harvard, my husband had also done his LLM at Harvard ... so while I was doing my master’s he was doing his PhD, and once I got to Harvard he just introduced me to all these African American feminist writers, and I just read and read.

“The more that I became aware of this inequality, ... with the course, Women and Law, realising... the background of the political economy, analysis of critics, ... understanding the law and how it works, I was looking at the law more critically now, especially as it affected women and how it perpetuated the inequalities, gender inequalities. I mean, some laws as you know were just blatantly discriminatory, just blatantly, including the constitution, you know. We had a non-discrimination clause in the constitution, and then there was this exemption clause that said you cannot discriminate on these grounds – sex wasn’t one of them – and then there was a proviso which said you cannot discriminate except in these circumstances, and those circumstances were personal laws.

“Marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption; all those personal things where women suffer the most discrimination. So all that raised my awareness and spurred me into more and more activity.

“[I] knew that if I was going to grow academically I needed that grounding, so I did it, you know, in reverse. So I decided “No, what more law am I going to learn? I’ve done two degrees in law”, so I was very sure even when I was applying... actually I wanted to do feminist studies. At that time in America only one university offered a PhD in feminist studies; it was Emory University, [and] I wasn’t sure I wanted to go to the south of America. So the next best was... the [Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies department] at the University of Minnesota, but it wasn’t... giving PhDs... [B]ut I could do my major in sociology and my minor in feminist studies. That was perfect.

“I did sociology because I had never done it before, I was doing it... from scratch; sociology, two years, I was just doing... [quantitative and qualitative methods], oh my goodness and I didn’t have any respect for the [quantitative method]... I remember there was a Chinese professor teaching us quantitative method and then there was another American... professor teaching us, and they would write on the board all [these] formulae, and if anyone entered the room they would think this was a mathematics class, and they would be so proud... teaching us how to be... objective and neutral and I just didn’t believe in that, because it just did not make sense. [Y]ou cannot claim to be objective, and of course I was also reading the critics. So it was the same, it was a repeat of my undergraduate [experience], you know, you listen to one side, you listen to the other side and you decide who is more persuasive...

"I tried to pick something that would converge my three interests, which were law, sociology and feminist studies, so I looked at women in politics, women [parliamentarians], women who make law. I'm looking at gender issues and affirmative action. So that's how I came up with this topic.

"I had a plan for my life. I always knew what I wanted, so I was going to do my PhD, I knew I wanted two children, I knew that you begin facing risks at 35, so I had to have my children. I said I would have my first one at 33 and the second one at 35.

"[I]n '93 [my husband] would join me for the second year when I was a student. [H]e... got a visiting professorship... I would become pregnant... that year, go back home pregnant... to do my field research... [g]ive birth at home.

"I did okay, and everything, I was lucky that everything went according to plan, because sometimes you may want to become pregnant... and so I [had] the baby as I was doing my research, left him with my mother.

"When he was seven months [old I] came back to Minnesota to write up and spent exactly seven months, graduated and that's how I planned it.

"[I] was looking at... affirmative action as a policy, as an experiment, because in Uganda when Museveni's administration took over power they introduced affirmative action, so there was a quota for women in parliament... other marginalised groups, but mainly women; one woman per district. So women would compete against each other in each district.

"So by the time I did my studying... the affirmative action policy had been in place for almost ten years, so... how is it working? Is quantitative equal to qualitative, do they see themselves as women representatives, are they gender-sensitive, [does] gender factor into this formula of affirmative action? What are the issues? [This relates to] some of the questions that you are asking me; how did you get into, how did you come to run for this office?

"I toyed with the idea of running for parliament, but then I thought about it very seriously; why do I want to go to parliament? Obviously it's for transformative change: I want to be there at the table where laws are made, where decisions are taken. But then I thought to myself, hey, how many feminists, how many of us will be there, are we going to have a critical mass and actually make a change? The answer of course was no; don't I stand a better chance, a better chance to change the thinking of future leaders within the four walls of the lecture hall in the school? The answer was yes. So... once it became very clear to me, I decided to stay, I decided not to run and... it's not a secret – I tell my students the first day in class: you know, for me, this is a platform.

"I tell [the students], I am here to teach you how to think critically about the law... [S]o they already know most of the law that they're ever going to know, most of the doctrines, most of the principles. What we do is revisit those principles, those doctrines and the different laws that they've learnt and look at them through gender glasses, and for many of them it's like learning a new law.

"I think all people who live in ex-colonies know very well what kind of education was introduced to our countries, very, very deliberate[ly] by these... colonialists. [T]hey had an agenda; they were not going to introduce an education that encourages critical thinking... so that you can challenge them. So it was cram, cram, cram, cram regurgitate, move on. [H]oning our critical skills was not part of our education, and unfortunately... the post-colonial governments just continued with this – very, very sad, you know. So we see it in class all the time when [we] are teaching, if you just ask the question in a different way or ask for an opinion that requires someone to think about, you know... [A]nd... I tell them how the mind works like a parachute – only works when it is open. I ask them to open their minds, and so... it's really a political exercise for me... and I don't hide it. ... I tell them [that] learning is a very, very challenging and very uncomfortable process because I'm asking you to step out of your comfort zone. I'm asking you to begin questioning.

“March 2013 is when I became a professor. Deanship was... October 2004 to October 2008. [I was the first female dean of a department] of law, not only in Uganda but in Africa. As I say... there’s a lot of hullabaloo about ‘first’ but I’m telling you, in law as long as you had the qualifications there was no competition. [P]eople would be very glad for it to be you, because first of all it’s donkey’s work and they don’t have time for it. ... [I]t was my turn in terms of seniority – [m]any of the people older than me had done deanship; it really was my turn.

“[But there was criticism] beyond the faculty, beginning when I was elected dean, because we have web mail lists for all faculty in the university, so... there were comments like ‘What is wrong with the law school... faculty? How can you elect such a person to lead you, a person who supports gay rights, a person who supports prostitution? What’s wrong with you?’ and things like that, and there was a lot of that... and I saved all those emails... [W]hen I ended my four-year term there was a male deputy dean from [another faculty] who wrote on that list saying ‘Oh, it’s too bad Sylvia’s not renewing her term. She’s been a fantastic...’

“[I]t’s shocking of course to see the level of vitriol and hatred, but it doesn’t go deeper than my skin... because of my conviction. I really think it’s that, because I know. It’s like a white person telling me ‘You are inferior, you are inferior, you are inferior’. It will not get to my core... yes, it hurts... especially if they have... powerful machinery behind... them which will influence and affect some of the way I live. It hurts, but otherwise... I have my convictions and... I am going to speak out and try to construct a counter-narrative. That is my duty.

“The only person I talk to is my husband... really laughing over it. ‘[D]id you see this? Did you read this? Oh, come and look at this’, and we laugh over it. But I’ve never been depressed. I’ve never shed tears and... many times... when it really gets vicious... I’ve had a few people call, like on the anti-homosexuality thing... even from as far as Nairobi: ‘Do you need help? Should we evacuate you? Are you safe?’

"I was named the 'worst woman in Uganda by a national newspaper' in 2003. That year... there had been a lot of press. That was when one of the waves of homophobia. I had been very vocal about prostitution, abortion, everything. So I wasn't surprised.

"No, it didn't upset me at all. I expected it. It just shows you the ridiculousness when you juxtapose it with Kony⁴¹.

Yeah, given what was going on... [Radio] stations everywhere: 'Tamale, Tamale, Tamale, this woman, this woman...' Parents telling their... children not to take my courses.

"They were in class telling me, 'I'm here but I'm defying my father.' 'I'm here. If he knew I was here... I'm defying my husband, I'm defying my...' They still tell them, 'Don't attend that class. That Tamale, don't...' They come anyway.

"No, it didn't feel lonely. I just said, 'Somebody has to speak out'. I didn't realise that... ten, fifteen years down the road, that there'll be many [people speaking out]... I really appreciate that [the] anti-homosexuality act... [brought] many more people... out to speak. At that time it was... I would speak out and a few people would write in the papers in support. A handful, less than five."

⁴¹ Joseph Kony was named the worst man in Uganda in 2003. He was the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, a militia in Uganda, long engaged in a civil war and allegedly responsible for deaths, sexual violence and mutilations. For more, see: britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Kony

Lessons, reflections and conclusions

Reflections and lessons

"[I]t's less about the destination and really all about the journey. The journey is made possible by people and made more interesting because of people. It ultimately weaves together a network of relationships that you have that span... geographic borders, industrial sectors, even educational levels ..." Interviewee A1US

This report is a preliminary account that has prioritised women's voices in reviewing the journeys of female leaders in four areas of public life.

A number of persistent motifs have emerged in this analysis and are summarised in the Key Themes chapter. These themes confirm the resistance to women's entry to leadership and that, despite this resistance, it can be achieved by determined and highly committed women even if the specifics of these forms of disruption were not planned in advance.

Lessons

Women who talked to us about their journeys into leadership were asked to share possible lessons arising from their experiences for women who wish to follow them into similar positions. There was a considerable degree of overlap in their comments, as might be expected given the similar nature of many of the journeys.

The key thoughts offered to women who seek leadership in academia, civil society, diplomacy and politics are listed below, with illustrative quotes.

Seize opportunities, don't hesitate

Women spoke of taking, making and being open to opportunity, as well as taking risks:

Interviewee P12EU: “[Do] not say, ‘I would like to say yes but I’m not experienced enough, I’m not smart enough, I haven’t met enough people, I’m not ready because of my family.’ Say yes because the men say yes, and then afterwards when they have said yes they say ‘But I still have to manage with family, with knowledge, with competence,’ but they say yes.”

Interviewee D15AF: “So, whenever you see that opportunity, that window, I would encourage everyone to take it; to take it because you never know. And I feel as you grow older you get less chances in life, life deals you worse cards from the deck, so when you’re younger and you see an opportunity, take it. But if you take it with a lot of doubt, a lot of concerns, that might trigger you to making mistakes or regretting something in the future; if you embrace it, embrace that opportunity and you give it all and you give your best, definitely it’s gonna pay off.”

Develop confidence, believe in yourself

Interviewee C15AF: “Having self-confidence... I don’t think that you can do away with fear, but [be] able to manage your fear.”

Interviewee D11EU: “I think that it’s not something that is given to you; you have to decide. I don’t believe in confident and not confident. I believe in people who make decisions to be confident. So you make a decision, you say, ‘I am going to face this situation in a confident way,’ and that’s how you gain confidence.”

Interviewee D11EU: “I think so much of it comes down to confidence. We are constantly knocking ourselves, self-deprecating, knocking ourselves down, and as an ambassador, you learn that you can’t do that because you’re representing people. So if you’re knocking yourself down, you’re knocking [your country], and I found that it was a hell of a journey for me, but by the time I left I was so much more confident, because I had to be.”

Find and use support networks

Interviewee C9UK: “How I’ve been able to do [this journey] is by being pushed, and being loved, and being nurtured, and also being fought against at points, so I’ve been able to deal with, to bounce back from people being quite brutal to me... I don’t think I’d have been able to do that if I hadn’t been given the confidence that I have by the people who nurtured me in the early stages.”

Interviewee P6AM: “Make a list of all your friends and family and everyone that you think would be helpful and supportive... even if they are not friends: acquaintances, people that you have met who if you phone them and say, ‘I’m thinking about doing this,’ they won’t hang up the phone and they would say something like, ‘Good for you,’ and when they say, ‘Good for you,’ you are able to say ‘So I am going to need some help – do you think you could give me a little time, advice and so forth,’ and you would be surprised at [the response].”

Be passionate about your work, your purpose

Holding positions of seniority has to be for a purpose, say our respondents. Women who aspire to such positions should have clarity of the purpose for which they seek office, the changes they want to see and the work they want to do. Seniority for its own sake is not going to carry women through. Passion and drive will continue to provide motivation and satisfaction.

Interviewee A7UK: “I think finding something you are passionate about helps you write about it and in the end, in academia still, what you write and publish is how you get on. More than how you teach, which may or may not be fair. Certainly, probably, not fair on the students. So choosing your niche, where you have something to say, and finding the opportunities to say it, I think, is how you get that recognition and how you’re heard.”

Interviewee P2AM: “A lot of the messages that I give to almost every group of young people to whom I speak is [that] you need to get out there every day if you are passionate about what you do. And it took me a while to figure out what I was passionate about and to allow myself to do it, but I think it is important; life is too short to not have something that excites you, that gets you out of bed every day. I am blessed to have been excited to work every day for nearly 18 years.”

Prepare well – know your subject, your environment

Women urge others to consider how to deal with detractors before being caught by their harshness. Rather than being caught unaware, prepare and have a variety of responses to hand.

Interviewee A4P: “[O]ne of the lessons one can share with others is that one must recognise the environment that you are working in and must recognise how you need to navigate and need to manoeuvre and need to understand the political environment in which you operate.”

Interviewee P27AF: “It’s very important for you to understand... your country. It’s very important to know the issues. The party structures are very difficult and challenging, you really can’t be an outsider and go in. So there is a lot of work you need to do and I think one of the things that helped me, I was saying to one of my staff... ‘You know, as a woman I have one lesson: you never get a second chance to make a first impression.’”

Be determined

Stay resilient and be determined to keep going, no matter what.

Interviewee P14AS: “Yes, just always, if you fall, just pick yourself up and just see that as a challenge, not as failure. That’s how I advise my female colleagues as well, if there’s a lot of questions, if you’re feeling uncomfortable, just don’t take it. Just speak up or approach someone else if you are feeling uncomfortable.”

Interviewee D10AF: “Oh, work hard, be true to yourself, dedicate yourself to your cause, stick to it and don’t be inward-looking. As long as you keep focused and... work for a larger accomplishment which will benefit a larger community... you will feel invigorated and empowered by all that energy.”

Educate yourself

Interviewee P25AM: “Lesson one, and I tell both men and women [this], is educate yourself. Education is key to developing analytical skills. You need to analyse, you need to be thoughtful. You need to have all your facts together. So number one: educate yourself.”

Interviewee D2AM: “Let me tell you, the first lesson I would have to say to any woman is, prepare yourself. It means get the best education that you can get.”

Have a supportive partnership

Many women spoke about the critical value of a supportive partnership at home.

Interviewee C11AM: “[Find] the right person to accompany you through your journey... for me it has been very important.”

Interviewee D7EU: “I would say... for every job, choose the right partner. It is very important and maybe this is difficult, because normally the women are young, and maybe they don’t think about what’s in five, ten years, but I would say to them, be careful. Discuss what you really expect from life.”

Find and learn from role models and mentors – ask for help

Interviewee P20UK: “[T]ake opportunities to learn from other people and to ask questions. Actually what I found in so much of the stuff that I’ve done is, [when] I’ve seen someone who’s an expert in the field, [I] don’t demand loads of time, but just actually ask really focused questions. And actually it’s not bad to ask people for help.”

For some women, role models do not exist, and they are missed:

Interviewee P9AM: “Individuals said, ‘You should go into politics.’ That was a difficult decision for me to make simply because of our history. Black people have been in [my country] since the late 1500s. There were only two black men over those many years who were ever in the parliament. There were no women ever elected to the parliament of [my country] or ran for the parliament... When I took the challenge to run for office, I had no model to look at or no mentor in terms of someone who had been there. It was uphill. It was really uphill.”

Concluding thoughts

Cross-sector opportunity

Just over a third of Above the Parapet interviewees (35 per cent; n=28) have worked in their chosen sector throughout their careers. Most women have moved across sectors, in particular the four sectors explored in this study. In academia, however, the majority of women (69 per cent; n=11) have spent their entire careers in that sector. This suggests that any woman who seeks to lead in the academic sector should enter that sector early and stay there. While many sectors appear to be open to experience gained elsewhere and recognise the relevance of work beyond that sector, in academia this is less obvious. The route to seniority is more linear here than in the other sectors explored. The need to invest heavily in passing the entry gates – higher education, PhDs and publishing – might be a bar to entry at a later date. In other sectors, access to leadership follows a less rigid path.

Planning a journey is not a dominant story

The majority of women across the 80 interviewees and within three of the four sectors do not have career histories that followed a strategy to a known end point; the unplanned journey emerges as one of the most consistent themes across women’s accounts. The diversity of routes is striking. As we shared emerging findings during the research, this was received as a positive and optimistic finding. It gives young women a sense that they have not missed the boat and that options remain open to them. The

ability to progress without a game plan, without a strategy, is immensely enabling and should be confidence-building for young women who simply do not know where they want to go. Several women said they were driven by values and principles; that they were open to opportunities where they could take these forward. Not having an answer to the question “What do you want to be when you grow up/pass your exams/graduate/qualify?” does not appear to be a bar to progression. It means that avenues are open and this is a profoundly optimistic finding. The often unstructured journeys taken by these women show that the future is full of possibilities.

We are also alerted to the potential that taking risks and opportunities can lead women to occupy positions of influence. Furthermore, the research suggests that doing so could be key to such journeys. However, as one woman says, it might be that more contemporary times require a more consistent approach, where a CV that shows singularity of purpose is what will open doors for women. We have interviewed vanguard women in this research; we can learn from their experiences and consider what really makes a difference at this time. When women stop being the exception or the minority, it may be that different approaches will apply. While it remains an oddity for women to be in the most senior echelons of their professions, they get there by all sorts of routes and means. Descriptors such as odd, troublemaker, and disruptive may be apposite for women who are the initial displacers of the patriarchal order. When women’s presence in leadership positions becomes more quotidian, it may be that more predictable routes provide successful journeys to seniority. Our future analysis will explore this further.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality shapes experiences and possibilities; it also shapes the imagination. Just as the absence of women from leadership roles can constrain the envisioning of what is possible and realisable, so too does the absence of black women, young women, lesbians, women not born into privilege and women with disabilities serve as a brake on the imagination of what is possible. Growing recognition

that public policy and practice do not serve well those who remain excluded from decision-making and influence needs to transform from a theoretical understanding, even if limited, to a change in practice.

The data is scarce but powerful: poor women, black women, young women, lesbians and those with disabilities do not have a meaningful presence in public life and the obstacles in their way remain poorly recognised, let alone understood. Structural inequalities are powerful; women living intersectional lives risk being rendered invisible and silent. A considerable shift is required for access to leadership to change from being the expression of privilege to being the expression of the best talent. Women spoke of their struggles to find ways through existing structures and limited opportunities but also of how, when they were able to move through those spaces, it brought consequences in terms of their existing family and other home communities. We heard from women how mentoring, schooling, media and other spheres of influence often failed to plant or nurture the seeds of optimism that help to give access to the levers of power.

Being able to imagine oneself in a place of influence helps with the effort required to occupy that space. Failing to see how intersectionality works (which has been a feature of much of the literature so far) contributes to the status quo. This research has sought to make a small contribution to widening the pool of testimonies and accounts, to ask different questions that take seriously women who have historically been missing from discussions of leadership and influence across different geographical locations. It would be unwise to reach conclusions from this particular study, though we hope to have started to open up the discourse on women's leadership to a more inclusive vision, practice and set of strategies.

Luck

It is striking that the majority of women interviewed for this research, 57 per cent of those with whom we spoke, referred to luck or being in “the right place at the right time” as part of the explanation for their being in positions of leadership. Luck is distinct from merit, just reward or a logical consequence of prior actions, qualifications or experience. It is possible, of course, that luck has indeed played a part in some journeys. The ease and frequency of the use of this term may suggest, however, that women do not easily see that merit, qualifications or experience are what have enabled their journeys. Their access to seniority is therefore predisposed to explanations of exceptionalism, patronage or even irrationality.

There is work to do to unpick what luck means to different people and why it features commonly in the accounts of senior women. Were luck really to be the explanation of their journey, then the implications would not be helpful for others, for luck, in the sense of chance, is random and unpredictable. To rely on luck is an uncertain and unreliable route to positions of influence.

Unpicking what it is that luck is used to describe suggests that it is used synonymously with having supportive individuals at home and at work, having work practices that accommodate different circumstances and being materially well established so that shocks can be absorbed. ‘Shocks’, in this case, refers to uncertainty at work, in the sense of the resulting financial insecurity of giving up work. Demonstrating commitment, for example, by working very long hours is not an option for some parents or those grappling with disability, constrained mobility or similar parameters. If there is a reliance on others to spot talent and provide opportunity then these constraints may render it more difficult to be spotted.

Finally

As highlighted in very recent surveys of the literature on the topic, “[w]omen’s leadership is mostly seen in terms of access to formal leadership positions, but too little is known about how women become leaders. Trajectories of women’s political or economic influence and leadership are mostly still poorly documented or explained.”

This research has opened up a rich vein of study into women’s access to leadership in key areas of public life. Women who have transgressed the established order by encroaching into men’s dominance in leadership have a lot to tell us about how they did so.

In every sector represented in the study, leaders were driven by a motivation to make a difference for other women; no doubt this was a factor behind their participation in this research. Thanks and appreciation are due to them, and the research team will continue to disseminate their words and the analyses that flow from their accounts.

⁴² Domingo, P. et al. (2015) *Women’s voice and leadership in decision-making: Assessing the evidence* (London: Overseas Development Institute)

Annex 1

Guidance note on interviewing and prompting data collection while conducting Above the Parapet interviews with women in senior positions in public life

Main research question

What are the social, organisational, familial or political circumstances experienced by women who have made it to senior positions in public life?

Sub question

What lessons do these women have to share with women who hope to follow and men and institutions that want to see a more balanced public life?

Guidance on conducting semi-structure interviews

- Establish rapport with interviewee to create an atmosphere of trust.
- Ask questions in an open, empathetic and unthreatening way.
- Motivate the interviewee to tell their story by prompting, including with short verbal reactions (“Can you tell me more?” “How was that?”).
 - Another strategy for motivating an interview is with reflective probes by repeating or paraphrasing an interviewee’s remark to seek clarification of an issue (“So what you are saying is... is that correct?”).
- Have respect for the beliefs and lifestyle of the interviewee
 - it is not your task to indicate your opinion before or during the interview (you wish to know the perceptions and experiences of interviewee themselves).

- While the sequence of questions below follows a logical order, questions may not necessarily be asked in this order in the interview. Follow the order in which topics arise as the interview develops.
 - The guide is to be used as a checklist to see that the main topics have been covered to answer the main research question.
 - The interviews are semi-structured, the below is a guide to prompt data collection.
- Closing the interview: it may be useful to repeat some aspects covered in introduction (eg, the output of research) to create some distance/end intimacy where you feel comfortable leaving the interviewee.

Topics to prompt data collection

Introduction – Introduce self, purpose of research, how research will be used, that comments will be unattributed for the report and unattributed quotes may be used to illustrate the report, note that along the way that comments may be off the record (and not included in data) if so chosen, data will not be shared beyond the project, seek permission for audio recording (to help transcription), ask if any questions and whether happy to go ahead with the interview.

Opening of interview – I'm going to start with an open question, and I'll follow up with questions on points of interest as they arise. How did you get to where you are/ what is the route you have taken/could you give me an overview of the route you have taken to becoming [senior position they are currently in]?

School – I'd like to know about your time in school/ in education – how did this have an impact on your path? (Probes: Were you supported in school? Were you encouraged at school?)

Family – Is there anything about your family upbringing that you believe had an impact in you choosing your career path? Did your parents work in a similar field? How did they feel about your chosen career path?

Challenges – May I ask, what have been challenging times in your journey to where you are now? What would you consider were barriers you met along the way to becoming [the senior position the interviewee is in]?

- **Strength/resilience** – Where did the strength/resilience come from to handle these challenges?
- **Overcoming** – How did you overcome these? Where did strength come from to overcome challenges?

Dynamics that enabled progress – What dynamics enabled your progress? To what do you credit your success? Where has support or encouragement offered to you had an impact on your journey? If simply “luck/opportunities” – why do you think such opportunities were given to you?

Mentors/Network – have mentors, role models or networks played any role in your journey?

Personal life – How has been your experience of balancing a personal/family life alongside your work? Could you comment on this balance as you reached the senior levels of your line of work? How has this had an impact on your journey to senior public life? How have you managed balancing bringing up family with your work?

Analysis – The proportions of women in senior public life are few – 21 per cent professors, 17 per cent head of universities/18 per cent of heads of NGOs in DC/23 per cent MPs in UK, 22 per cent MPs in world, 17 per cent of ministers in world, 32 per cent local councillors in UK. Looking at your journey, why do you think there are so few women in [field of work interviewee belongs to]?

- As a factually male-dominated field – how has it felt to operate in this?
- **Impact** – As a woman in a male dominated field, have you felt any feeling of responsibility or duty as a woman in this role?/as the first woman to hold this position?

Closing questions

(Penultimate Question) Catch all – Is there anything important about your journey that we've missed/we've not discussed yet?

(If needed: Prompt that it could be organisational/social/familial/political circumstances)

Lessons – Are there any lessons you have learnt along the way of your journey to senior public life that you would like to share with young women aiming to go into [same field as interviewee]? What to do? What not to do?

Purna Sen, former Deputy Director at LSE's Institute of Public Affairs, was the lead researcher for *Above the Parapet*. Jade Cochran was project adviser and main analyst for *Above the Parapet*.

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