



www.few.org



700 North Fairfax Street, Suite 510
Alexandria, VA 22314
202/898-0994
fax 202/898-1535

EEOC Diversity Task Force Barriers to Women Working in the Federal Government

Executive Summary: Federally Employed Women (FEW) has been working on gender discrimination issues since its inception in 1968. Diversity remains very important for FEW and its members. As an organization we offer diversity training annually at our national, regional and chapter training programs. With respect to women advancing in the federal government, FEW cites three primary areas of concern: Training, mentoring and the demise of the Federal Women's Programs in federal agencies.

Background: While equal representation of women at the lower grade levels in the federal workforce are basically equitable, at the higher levels women are woefully falling short of their male counterparts. Between 1992 and 2003, women did make much progress in moving into the Senior Executive Service (SES), going from 12.3% to 26.2% of total SES employees. Furthermore, the representation of women at the higher General Schedule (GS) grades and at senior pay levels also increased. According to the US Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the number of women in grades 13 through 15 rose to 125,889 in 2006 from 124,827 in 2005.

However, this trend greatly slowed down after 2006. For example, in 2006, women only made up 28.7% of the career SES and 34.8% of all employees in grades 13 through 15. Yet during the same year women made up 47.1% of the federal workforce. In 2007, women's representation in the SES increased by less than half a percentage point to 29.14%, yet women comprised 44% of the total federal workforce. In the 2009 statistics, out of a total of 6,928 career SES employees, women comprised 2,075 or 29.95% while representing 44% of the federal workforce. In the senior pay levels, women comprised 39.76% at the GS13 level (71,804 out of 180,611); 38.68% at the GS14 level (35,575 out of 91,964); and 33.42% at the GS15 level (20,794 out of 62,227).

FEW firmly believes that the representation of women in the SES and at the senior grade levels (which serve as "feeder" pools for the SES) should be at the same percentage level as women representation in the federal workforce overall (44%). Furthermore, we assert that increasing the ranks of women in the SES less than one percentage points every two years is absolutely unacceptable.

Training: By far, FEW members cite the lack of training and cross-training as a major impediment to women moving into the top levels of the federal government. There are several areas in which training can be improved for women aspiring to move into the SES. Second, women tend to be employed at the lower ranks in the federal government at much greater numbers than men. This does not mean that they do not aspire to be in leadership or management positions. Yet, they are not permitted to obtain upper grade training because they are not in upper management jobs.

FEW believes so strongly in this training approach that during the National Training Programs held over the years, any attendee – whatever their GS level or job description – can take any training workshop that they want – including those geared towards management and leadership. Further, by attending our National Training Program, attendees are exposed to high ranking officers and government employees in both educational and social settings. This allows attendees to receive mentoring tips and suggestions that would not be afforded on the job.

Possible Solutions: First and foremost, training dollars have shrunk to truly unbelievably low levels over the last couple of years. When funding is tight, training is one of the first things cut, and yet it critically impacts the quality of our federal workforce. We also argue that to help women move into these higher level jobs, they need the training first and therefore should be permitted to take manager and upper level training.

Mentoring: Having a mentor is an extremely important aspect to any federal worker's progression into the Senior Executive Service. However, there are no formal mentoring programs for women in the federal government. Women need to have leaders to whom they can ask questions, obtain advice about their careers, receive suggestions on career moves, training needs, and special project assignments, and obtain general information about the process of moving up the career ladder.

Obviously because there are far fewer female SES and high ranking employees in the federal government, our mentor pool is much smaller than that of men. With the male mentor pool being so large, it is often easier for men to become schooled and guided into the ranks of the upper career set. Thus men are often referred or recommended for higher positions while women are not - simply because they do not have the luxury of getting under the wing of a female mentor as readily as men. FEW has tried to fill the void by offering exposure and time with its organization leaders who are often sought out as mentors and role models. However, more needs to be done.

Possible Solutions: FEW suggests that perhaps incentives should be made available to senior managers to establish, endorse, and participate in a mentoring program. Further, the establishment and participation in a mentoring program should be part of the manager/supervisor and the employee's performance requirements. Finally, managers and supervisors need to be held accountable for diversity in their agencies.

Federal Women's Program (FWP): FEW is very concerned that since FWP's inception 37 years ago, the effectiveness of FWPs has gradually eroded to the point of almost non-existence where many agencies do not even comply with reporting requirements with respect to these programs. Furthermore, the regulatory language concerning these requirements is vague and allows agencies to degrade the importance of the programs. For example, according to 29 CFR 1614.102(b)(4), the regulatory basis is as follows:

Designate a Director of Equal Employment Opportunity and such Special Emphasis Program Managers (i.e., People with Disabilities Program, Federal Women's Program and Hispanic Employment Program), clerical and administrative support *as may be necessary* (our emphasis) to carry out the functions described in this part.

Finally, the actual OPM implementation language cannot even be found, and therefore cannot be used as a guide for new FWPMs to understand their responsibilities and requirements. While our understanding is that these instructions included requiring each agency to develop a Plan of Action, to designate an FWP Coordinator, and to submit a periodic progress report to OPM, our efforts to obtain the actual implementation language or these plans have been futile. Additionally, attempts to locate personnel at OPM with historical knowledge about the FWP have also failed.

The eroding effectiveness of the FWP has been questioned as far back as August 1980 when the Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report ("How to Make Special Emphasis Programs an Effective Part of Agencies' EEO Activities," FPCD-80-55 August 27, 1980) concluding that "Special Emphasis Programs" (under which category FWP falls) are loosely operated and do not set out specific goals, resource requirements, timetables, program costs and activities." Furthermore, "top management's participation in and commitment to these programs vary greatly. Coordinators and agency management must have a clear understanding of what is expected." We could not agree more with these conclusions.

Possible Solution: FEW has already been working with the White House Council on Women and Girls as well as OPM Director John Berry on a Presidential Memorandum revising and detailing the responsibilities of FWPs and their managers in ensuring these programs remain effective, beneficial and fully funded.

Conclusion: Women in the federal workforce still are experiencing discrimination, as well as a lack of adequate mentoring and training opportunities to successfully move up through the ranks of the federal government. Women still account for only 29.95% of the Senior Executive Service (SES), a number that has only increased by less than a percentage point in each of the last three years. Yet they represent 44% of the federal workforce overall.

FEW stands ready to work with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) on this Task Force to eliminate barriers to women advancing their careers in the federal government.