

Women in the Government Economic Service

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The Government Economic Service (GES) is a major employer of economists, with current staffing running at 600 economists. The data on the gender breakdown of GES members is relatively rich; this note assesses the evidence on the position of women in the GES.

There have been significant increases in the proportion of women at all grades – in 2000 women were 10% of the GES senior civil service (the top 10% of economists), up from 5% in 1986. In contrast, in 1998 women were just 4% of economics professors. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, amongst private sector economists, women represent rather less than 10% of senior management.

Below the senior civil service, in 2000 women were 21% of Economic Advisers (grades 6 and 7, and about half the GES economists), up from 13% in 1986. The changes were less marked at the entry level – in 2000 30% of Assistant Economists were women, up from 24% in 1986.

This does not seem to be a cohort effect – since 1989, when our entry records start, women and men have, on average, been equally likely to succeed in the entrance examinations. Women constituted 25% of successful applicants to the GES between 1989 and 1994, rising only slightly to 31% of successful applicants between 1995 to 2000. The female representation on economics undergraduate courses has also been about 30% over this period.

Crude estimates of promotion probabilities (number promoted divided by the stock in the feeder grades) show men and women as having had equal probabilities of success. This may reflect the transparent procedures in GES promotion boards – criteria for promotion are established in advance, candidates are graded against the criteria, and an independent audit team does spot checks to ensure procedures are followed.

The main reason why women are not a higher proportion of the GES senior civil service is because of the large numbers who leave mid-career, at Economic Adviser level. Economists become Economic Advisers in their late 20s or very early 30s. In the 1990s, on average each year 12% of female Economic Advisers left the GES, compared to 7% of male Economic Advisers.

It is not clear why they leave – further investigation is needed. As the GES has a relatively high proportion of women in senior positions, there may be even more leaving the profession at this stage from academia and the private sector.

The GES is a “family friendly” employer. Female staff get generous maternity leave, with many departments offering over three months maternity leave on full pay, with the option of up to five years unpaid “career break”. One in six female Economic Advisers works part time, and the proportion is rather higher for GES women in the senior civil service.

More initiatives are in hand to support flexible working in the GES. A job-share pool is being set up, and the system of internal job advertisements has been changed so that there is a prior presumption that all posts are suitable for job sharers unless indicated otherwise. In

parallel with this, the GES will be actively marketed to experienced economists seeking jobs which can easily be combined with family responsibilities.

In conclusion, there have been significant increases in the share of women at senior grades in the Government Economic Service – the available evidence suggests that the proportion of women in senior management economist posts is now rather higher than in academia and the private sector.

Competitions do seem to have been fair, both at entry level and for promotion within the GES, but women have been rather more likely than men to resign at Economic Adviser level, despite generous maternity leave terms and the option of part time work. The limited data available suggests that academia and the private sector may also face substantial female departures at this level.