



Reimagine Healthcare

Women in the public sector: “I thought I was there to make up the numbers”



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- Health and social care workforce dominated by women, but few in senior positions
- KPMG held special event to discuss experiences of senior women in public sector
- High profile speakers offered tips for women working in the field
- All urged women to be true to their own values, to have self-belief, and to lean on partners and colleagues

Joanna Killian was eight and a half months pregnant when she found herself on the 28th storey of a half built tower block. She was managing the construction project and had convinced herself refusing to get in the lift would be seen as proof she was unfit to do her job.

"On that particular day I was feeling awful, but a very senior minister was coming to visit the project," Ms Killian told a KPMG event exploring the experiences of women in the public sector. "So I got into this cradle lift on the outside of the building and stepped onto the top of the roof, which only had a tiny barrier around the edge.

"I staggered around, trying to be perfect, came back down, got out of the lift and thought, 'what on earth am I doing?'. I felt if I didn't get into the lift as a pregnant woman, I would be threatened and unable to come back to my job."

The facts about gender equality – or the lack thereof – are well known. In the public sector, the situation is particularly damning. While the majority of the health and social care workforce is female, very few reach the upper echelons of the organisations for which they work.

Ms Killian was joined at the event marking International Women's Day by two other women in senior public sector positions – Andrea Sutcliffe, Chief Inspector of Adult Social Care at the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and Polly Mackenzie, Director of the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute. Together, they offered a series of tips for women in their field.

1) Don't do anything you fundamentally don't believe in

"I used to do loads of things I thought people would want me to do that were just not me," said Ms Killian, recalling the lift incident. "Be authentic. Don't do completely daft things because you feel you have to prove a point."

Ms Sutcliffe echoed the sentiment. She rejects the role of regulator "as someone who walks around with a clipboard and tick boxes, trying to catch people out." Instead, she asks her inspectors to use 'the mum test': would they be happy for someone they love to receive the care being inspected?

"That's really resonated, and it's made people aware of the reasons why I do the job."

2) Believe in yourself

Ms Sutcliffe revealed she was very close to never taking up her role at the CQC in 2013, not because her interviewers ruled her out, but because she nearly ruled herself out.

"I'm not absolutely sure what it was that the headhunter said to me, but two days before the interview I nearly withdrew. I thought that I was making up the numbers, and they were just interviewing me because they wanted somebody a little bit different to talk to."



Having the confidence to go for a job is a real issue, she said. "Women will look at a person specification and there'll be 10 things on it that we have to do deliver on, and we can do eight and we can't do two, and so we don't apply. And there will be men who will look at a person specification and say: I can do two, and I'll blag the other eight. So there is something about believing in yourself."

3) Share the load with your partner

It was Ms Sutcliffe's husband who convinced her to persist with her application for the CQC job. The importance of having a supportive partner was a recurrent theme during the KPMG event, especially for those with children. Polly Mackenzie was keen to stress the support needs to run both ways.

"I think it's actually really challenging for men to take time away from work – to take this exchangeable parental leave that was introduced, to work four days a week, to work from home, to go home early," argued Ms Mackenzie.

"We have to all support each other to allow the caring part of life – which is something that is fundamental to everything that we live for – to be shared rather than be divided down this gender barrier."

4) Listen to your friends and seize opportunities

It's not just partners who can offer support. So too can friends and colleagues.

"As somebody who grew up as a working class girl going to a comprehensive in the north east of England, quite frankly the idea that I'd be sitting here today would be beyond my wildest comprehension and dreams," Ms Sutcliffe told the audience. "But along the way there have been a variety of opportunities that have arisen, and I've been helped to take those opportunities." And she was keen to note: "nearly all of the people I have worked for and most of the people who have encouraged me to take on other and new roles have been men."

Change is possible

Ms Mackenzie revealed her own "radicalisation as a feminist in the workplace" came when she returned from maternity leave to find six people had replaced her and she no longer had enough to do – a depressing reflection on the challenges that still face women in senior public sector positions.

But she is optimistic about the future. "Gender equality is something we can fix," she said. "There doesn't need to be eternal special stuff for women and special stuff for men – we can get over this."

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