

Women in Local Government in Queensland

Women are under-represented in local government. This paper aims to inform the work of the recently announced 'Women in Local Government Strategy Group' to increase women's representation in local government in Queensland.

Introduction

Local government is where many of the decisions relating to our communities are made. These decisions impact on women and men in their communities, and their families. It is important, therefore, that women, as well as men, are equally represented at all levels of local government, so that decision-making is relevant and responsive to the local community.

In Queensland however, as in many other states and territories in Australia and overseas, the opportunity to use local government to change the status and situation of women is significantly under-utilised. The representation of women as elected members and managers in local government is far below the proportion of women in the population.

The factors affecting the level of women's participation in local government are both complex and diverse – ranging from attitudes, personal characteristics, finances, and competing responsibilities.¹ Cultural change within society, as well as within the sphere of local government, will need to occur before significant gains are made in this area.

The issue of women's participation in local government has been explored at the national level through the *National Framework for Women in Local Government*. Published in November 2001, the National Framework was an initiative of the Australian Local Government Women's Association (ALGWA), with funding and support from the National Office of Local Government and the Commonwealth Government's Office of the Status of Women.

Building on the National Framework, this paper:

- explores current levels of women's participation in local government in Queensland;
- examines factors which may inhibit women's entry into, or continued involvement in, local government; and
- refers to strategies outlined in the National Framework for increasing levels of women's participation in local government and outlines strategies currently in place in Queensland.

This paper aims to inform the work of the recently announced 'Women in Local Government Strategy Group' to increase women's representation in local government in Queensland. The establishment of this committee will assist the Queensland Government to address women's under-representation in leadership and decision-making roles – one of the goals identified in the *Women in the Smart State Directions Statement 2003-2008*.

Current participation of women in local government in Queensland

Elected members

In Queensland, as at March 2004, women are 30% of all elected councillors and 17% of mayors.² As at May 2004, 38% of councillors in Aboriginal Councils were women.³

In the March 2004 local government elections, 653 women stood for election as councillors or mayors. This was down 0.4% from the 2000 figure of 656 female nominations. However, female candidates represented 27% of total nominations, up from 26% in 2000 and 23% in 1997.⁴

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As a result of the March 2004 elections, there are 21 female mayors, 2 more than the high of 19 in 2000. Thirteen were returned and one was elected unopposed.⁵

Male (83%) and female (17%) mayors were elected in identical proportion to the percentage of male and female candidates.

598 (29%) councillor candidates were women, while 301 (30%) elected councillors were women. Female candidates had a slightly higher success rate than their male counterparts.⁶

These results indicate that if more women were encouraged to be councillor or mayoral candidates in local council elections, the percentage of women in these positions would be likely to increase.

In Queensland, the following local councils have the highest representation of women as elected members:

Council	Total no. of councillors	No. of female councillors	% of female councillors	Female Mayor
Maryborough City Council	8	5	62.5%	✓
Peak Downs Shire Council	8	5	62.5%	x
Burnett Shire Council	8	5	62.5%	x
Brisbane City Council	26	15	57.7%	x
Redcliffe City Council	7	4	57.1%	x
Thuringowa City Council	10	6	60%	x
Duaringa Shire Council	10	6	60%	x
Bundaberg City Council	8	4	50%	✓
Cambooya Shire Council	8	4	50%	✓
Herberton Shire Council	8	4	50%	✓
Toowoomba City Council	8	4	50%	✓

Of the 34 local governments in discrete indigenous communities, four have female mayors or chairpersons.

The average term served by a councillor or mayor in Queensland is 9-10 years.⁷

Appointed Managers

In Queensland there are currently only 8 female Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) out of 125 local councils, equating to 6.4%.⁸ Local councils with female CEOs are Barcoo, Blackall, Booringa, Boulia, Brisbane, Gladstone, Redland and Thuringowa.

In the local governments in discrete indigenous communities there are 11 female Chief Executive Officers or Council Clerks. These local governments are: Doomadgee, Hope Vale, Mapoon and Napranum Shire Councils; and Badu, Bamaga, Erub, Dauan, Hammond, Kubin and Mabuigai Island Councils.⁹

The turnover rate for local government CEOs equates to an average term of 6-7 years.¹⁰

Interstate and international comparisons

Elected members

Queensland's level of elected female representation in local government compares relatively favourably with the

overall national average and other states and territories in Australia.

The *National Framework for Women in Local Government* states that nationally in 2001, women made up less than 30% of all elected members and 15% of mayors.¹¹ With 33.2%¹² of councillors being female, the Northern Territory is slightly ahead of Queensland's 30%. In South Australia¹³, Tasmania¹⁴, New South Wales¹⁵ and Western Australia¹⁶ the proportion of elected female councillors range between 23.2% and 26.6%. In Victoria, 29% of councillors are women.¹⁷

Notably, in Victoria 30.4% of mayors are female, compared with Queensland's 17%. This could be largely due to Victoria's comprehensive and well-funded program to encourage women into local government, which, through the Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition, has been operating since 1996.¹⁸

The Purdon Report (1997) showed that while the age profile of female councillors in Australia was younger than that of their male counterparts, they were not statistically representative of the adult Australian female population. There were very few women under 30 in local government.¹⁹ There is no available data on the average age of female councillors in Queensland.

Internationally, Queensland is roughly on par with New Zealand's 2001 election results in terms of female councillors (31%) and mayors (16.4%). In 2003, 27% of councillors in the United Kingdom were female, while Sweden had a far higher proportion at 42%.²⁰

Appointed Managers

In Australia, women's representation is much lower as CEOs than as elected members. In 2001, 5.1% of local governments had a woman as CEO, however there were significant variations between states, with Victoria having the highest proportion at 17%.²¹ In Western Australia, only 4 of the 140 CEOs were female, as of January 2004.²²

The *National Framework for Women in Local Government* states that nationally, women make up less than 10% of senior executives. This includes CEOs/general managers and second and third level managers.²³

International data regarding the levels of female CEOs and senior managers in local government is not readily available.

Benefits of women's participation in local government

As shown above, Queensland represents the 'middle ground' in terms of elected female representation in local government. While the proportion of female local government CEOs is much lower, this too, is roughly in line with interstate comparisons.

There are a number of reasons, however, why efforts should be made to increase the representation of women both as elected members and appointed managers in local government in Queensland.

The first and perhaps most obvious argument is that 50.1% of Queensland's total population are female. Women's representation accordingly will ensure that local government decision-making is more representative of local community needs and aspirations.

More balanced gender representation, as well as other reflections of community diversity, are also likely to benefit local government by strengthening policy debate within councils and the wider community.

Women in local government who were surveyed in thirteen countries in Asia and the Pacific in 2001 said that their style of leadership was more inclusive, collaborative and communicative than men, and that they tended to focus on issues, rather than personalities.²⁴ They saw this as a positive benefit for local government.

It has also been suggested that women often demonstrate an approach that is different and complementary to that of men. They also bring qualities to consultation, policy development and decision-making processes that can be of particular value.²⁵

Women who manage their own households often have high levels of organisational, financial and time management skills which can be of particular benefit to both elected and appointed positions within local government.

Many women also have a close involvement with their community (often as a result of household and child-rearing responsibilities as well as volunteer activities) and thus often have a greater awareness of the social issues impacting on their communities and greater concern for their communities' wellbeing and welfare. This may particularly be the case in relation to issues such as child care, public transport, road safety, schools, hospitals, shopping centres and other community facilities. As local governments focus increasingly on improving and maintaining the liveability of our communities, women have even more to contribute to local government than they did in the days of 'roads, rates and rubbish'.

There are benefits, also, for women who participate in local government. Elected positions within local government are generally more accessible than those at the state or federal level. Local government is also a good training ground for women who aspire to a life in federal or state politics²⁶. Management positions within local government often provide family-friendly conditions as well as lifestyle, and can serve as a 'stepping stone' for other high-level management positions in the corporate, community or public sector.

Factors that affect women's participation in local government

A range of factors affect women's participation in local government. These factors can generally be assigned to four broad categories:²⁷

- attitudinal;
- financial;
- competing responsibilities; and
- personal characteristics.

Some factors are a greater barrier to entry, while others may become more evident to women once they are in the local government environment and strongly influence their decision to retire.

The impact of each of these factors will also vary at key transition points in women's lives, such as beginning or returning to paid employment, having and raising children, and retiring from paid employment.

It should also be noted that many of these factors apply to men as well as to women and are not gender issues, as such.²⁸ However, the impact of these factors on the participation of women in local government is generally far greater than for men, as evidenced by men's higher level of participation.

Attitudinal

Attitudinal factors include the attitudes of others, especially males, to women in local government, as well as women's own attitudes, including a lack of confidence.²⁹

Local government has traditionally been male-dominated. While this has changed significantly and women have made considerable inroads into local government in terms of representation, many still have to contend with traditional male views regarding the role of women and their place in society. Women in more conservative communities in regional or rural areas may experience particular difficulty in joining and participating in the 'boy's club' of local government.³⁰

Sometimes these attitudes lead to harassment and discrimination. If this type of unprofessional and unethical behaviour goes unopposed by a mayor or a CEO it can seriously impact on a woman's desire to remain in local government.³¹ Indeed, the management styles of the mayor and the CEO are often a key contributing factor to the type of experience women have on council.³² Anecdotal evidence suggests that negative experience and lack of support in the first term of office may be the major contributing factor in the loss of female councillors to local government.³³ The male-dominated environment within council may also be a deterrent for women aspiring to CEO or senior manager positions. This may particularly be the case in non-traditional areas of female employment, such as finance, planning and engineering.

If women are not taken seriously by male colleagues, their confidence in and perception of their skills and abilities may be eroded. It is also claimed that the level of public scrutiny, especially from media, is higher for women in local government, and they are expected to perform at least as well as men, if not to an even higher standard.³⁴

Financial

Financial factors include the level of remuneration, as well as allowances received as reimbursement for additional costs associated with being involved in local government. Financial factors are generally more applicable to elected members than appointed managers. Their impact will also depend on whether the woman is single, a sole parent, primary carer, secondary income earner or retiree.

The degree to which the issue of remuneration is a significant factor varies throughout Queensland, as individual councils negotiate their own salaries or allowances, which are subject to community scrutiny and comment before finally being determined.³⁵

There appears to be a significant divide between conditions of remuneration for metropolitan and rural/remote councils. Metropolitan councillors are more likely to undertake council work full-time and metropolitan councils are more likely to provide their councillors with a salary package, which may be aligned to a proportion (eg. 80%) of the salary of a State Parliament backbencher.

On the other hand, rural and remote councils usually pay councillors an allowance for attendance at meetings and conferences and sometimes, a mileage and telephone allowance also. Councillors in rural and remote communities are more likely to undertake council work part-time, yet the level of commitment required means that there is also a significant level of volunteerism by councillors. While women's high levels of volunteerism generally indicates that their involvement in community activities is not motivated by financial factors, the level of commitment required by a local councillor can often make it difficult to run a business successfully or to maintain other employment, either full time or part time. The financial impact of this would be particularly significant where the female councillors is a sole parent, primary carer or primary income earner.

Reimbursement is generally not provided to councillors for expenses incurred as a result of carer and child care responsibilities, business or farm costs, where such costs arise directly in connection with attendance at meetings, functions or other official duties.³⁶ If a woman is the secondary income earner and primary carer in a family, the cost of child care may negate any financial benefit from being involved in local government at all.

Regardless of the metropolitan/rural divide, community expectations regarding the salary or allowance that councillors should receive, and a reluctance to pay high rates in order to 'line the pockets of council', mean that some councillors and mayors are underpaid in comparison to other professions, given the high level contribution and commitment they make to their communities.

As stated in the report *Moving On – Women and Retirement from Victorian Local Government*:

"The debate is regarded as larger than simply being about how much a councillor is paid. Rather, it raises questions about the role of a councillor per se, both in relation to their state and federal counterparts and also in relation to strengthening the professionalism of the service. Underlying such questions is the long history of volunteerism that has characterised council work and the continuing controversy any change to this volunteerism seems to stir up in rural and metropolitan communities alike."³⁷

Competing responsibilities – family and carer

Competing responsibilities include family, carer, and business or employment commitments that need to be balanced by women involved in local council.

Competing business and employment commitments are not in themselves gender specific, but often have a more significant impact on women who also have competing family and carer responsibilities. This balancing act applies more to women than to men, as women are more likely than men to be the primary carers of children, and also carers of other people with support needs, such as elderly people or people with a disability.³⁸

In the past, female councillors have traditionally been women who entered local government when their primary caring responsibilities to their children had ended. Over the past two decades however, this profile has changed significantly to include single women and women with dependent children.³⁹

While this balancing act is certainly not exclusive to women in local government, it is perhaps more pronounced than in some other careers and other forms of volunteerism, which generally take place during the day.⁴⁰

By contrast, council obligations, such as meetings and functions, frequently take place in the evenings and weekends which are usually considered to be personal or family time. It is even more pronounced for women who are elected members, rather than appointed managers, as councillors are expected to serve the communities that elected them and support public events. Failure of a councillor to do so could have the result of not being re-elected.

In addition, there is often the expectation that councillors and their partners will attend functions that are not appropriate for children, yet child care is neither provided nor paid for.⁴¹

As noted by Julie Boyd, Mayor of Mackay, "...meetings, receptions and other council events are not scheduled for people with children. They are often programmed at times that make it difficult to keep family life running smoothly."⁴²

Access to affordable and accessible child care is even more difficult when it is required outside of week day working hours and particularly when it is required at short notice. Women living in rural and remote areas may experience further hardship in this area when they are required to travel long distances to attend meetings and functions and access appropriate child care services. Coupled with the lack of an allowance for child care, many women with young children may consider that the financial costs associated with a career in local government may outweigh the many other benefits. This is likely to be an issue of particular concern for single mothers.

Being a councillor often means 'being on call' 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Without support provided by council for women, the difficulty of balancing council, home and work life, and the impact of council life on other family members, can lead to the decision to retire from council.⁴³

Personal characteristics

Personal characteristics that may affect women’s involvement in local government include, but are not limited to:⁴⁴

- age;
- lacking experience in local government and politics;
- having career and/or lifestyle aspirations that are not met within local government;
- being from an Indigenous or culturally and linguistically diverse background; and
- having a disability.

A woman’s youthfulness and/or lack of experience in local government and politics, may result in her being taken less seriously by other (male) council members and the community, regardless of her previous involvement in the community or in management positions elsewhere. Whether this behaviour is real or perceived, it may dissuade women from becoming involved in local government.

For older women in particular, fear of going out in the evenings alone to attend council meetings, may contribute to a reluctance to get involved in local government.⁴⁵ In rural and remote areas, the distance to travel between a councillor’s place of residence (ie. a property) and the council chambers may be considerable.

Age is also closely related to key transition points in women’s lives, such as beginning or returning to work, having and raising children, and retiring from work. Each of these transition points, and the responsibilities associated with them, will also have an impact.

For women aspiring to senior management or CEO positions, local government may not provide a supportive environment that encourages women to take up these opportunities. The provision within the *Local Government Act 1993* that gives council the authority to appoint senior managers may make it difficult for a female manager to be appointed by a male-dominated council. It is worth noting that this provision is not the common approach across Australia.⁴⁶ There may also be insufficient mentoring support for women within small rural or remote communities. Furthermore, the lifestyle aspirations of these women may not be compatible with living in a rural or remote community.

As is the case nationally, the number of women in Queensland local government with disabilities or from Indigenous or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is currently unknown, although likely to be extremely low.⁴⁷ As is the case with other employment opportunities, women with these personal characteristics typically face even greater barriers to participation in local government.

Strategies to encourage women’s participation in local government

The *National Framework for Women in Local Government* provides a comprehensive list of potential strategies at the local and state level to increase the number, and participation, of women in local government.

The strategies include:

- education about local government;

- pre-election support;
- family-friendly meeting times;
- training;
- mentoring and support;
- review of entitlements;
- equal opportunity considerations; and
- development of women’s networks.

The *National Framework for Women in Local Government* can be downloaded from www.alga.com.au/policy/social/women.php.

Existing strategies in Queensland

A number of strategies outlined in the *National Framework for Women in Local Government* are already being implemented in Queensland.

The Queensland branch of the Australian Local Government Women’s Association (ALGWA Qld)⁴⁸ currently has approximately 120 members, including four males. The majority of its members are councillors. ALGWA Qld has established an annual bursary to assist local government employees (male and female), at all levels, to further their education in the field of local government.⁴⁹ On average, there are 100 applicants each year.

ALGWA Qld has also established a mentoring program to connect women in similar councils with one another for advice and support in their role as councillors, senior managers or CEOs. It also produces information leaflets, runs seminars before elections to encourage women to stand for election, and conducts a targeted advertising program in areas where there are no or few women in local government. ALGWA Qld produces *ALGWA News* quarterly to share information from members around the state and also conducts an annual state conference in a different location each year.⁵⁰

In 1995, the Women into Local Government Working Party was established by the then Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning and developed a brochure titled *Helpful tips for intending candidates*, which was specifically aimed at women. The working party is no longer in existence. In 2001, the department produced and distributed, with the assistance of ALGWA, the booklet *Local leaders Local women*, which tells the stories of more than 20 women in local government across Queensland.

The Department of Local Government, Planning, Sport and Recreation runs general seminars prior to elections and produces an information pack for intending councillors, male and female.

The department is also currently developing legislation to deliver an enforceable Code of Conduct to regulate the behaviour of local government councillors. The introduction of such a code may improve the local government environment for women.

In February 2004, the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) and Local Government Managers Australia (Queensland) Inc. (LGMA Qld) produced a report on the *Review of CEO Recruitment and Retention Issues for Rural and Remote Councils*. The report makes numerous recommendations to increase recruitment and

improve retention of CEOs in rural and remote councils, including⁵¹:

- promoting the benefits of lifestyle in rural locations;
- providing for the attendance of a partner to visit and assess town when interviews are arranged, and facilitate schools visits etc. to encourage the decision to relocate;
- introducing more flexibility in contract remuneration packages to better meet individual circumstances of candidate CEO and their family; and
- endorsing the introduction of a Code of Conduct for Councillors.

Many of these recommendations would also serve to encourage more women into CEO and senior management positions in local government.

In addition, some legislation indirectly seeks to create a more positive environment for women in local government. The *Anti-Discrimination Act 1991* protects council employees, potential employees and clients against unfair treatment or harassment in the areas of services and facilities provided by council, employment practices and in the way in which councillors treat each other. Anti-discrimination legislation also prohibits sexual harassment and it is the responsibility of council and the CEO to ensure that no employee, client or member of the public is harassed.⁵² Another provision prohibits a councillor from discriminating against another councillor in the performance of official duties. Councillors, rather than the council, are personally liable for any behaviour that breaches this provision.

While councillors are made aware of anti-discrimination legislation through resources such as LGAQ's *Councillor Handbook and Good Governance Guide*, legislation alone cannot be relied upon for changing an individual's behaviour and must be accompanied by other reforms at the local government level to encourage and support the participation of women.

Future directions

Despite there being some strategies in place in Queensland to increase the participation of women in local government, to date there has not been any formal coordination of effort by state government, local government and state local government associations.

The *National Framework for Women in Local Government* invites each state association and state government to form a coalition of appropriate strategic partners to prepare an action and implementation plan for each state and to provide support and coordinated resources to councils.⁵³

This invitation was responded to in August 2004, when the Minister for Environment, Local Government, Planning and Women announced the establishment of a 'Women in Local Government Strategy Group' to drive a plan to increase women's representation at both the elected and officer level. Members of the committee include a female CEO, and representatives of LGAQ, ALGWA Qld, ALGWA and the Department of Local Government, Planning, Sport and Recreation. The committee will be tasked with identifying the impediments to women's participation in local government, and develop strategies to overcome

them. This paper is intended to be used by the committee as a starting point for discussion and action.

With local government elections held as recently as March 2004, there is a good opportunity to build on the enthusiasm of newly elected representatives and positively influence the experience of women recently elected as councillors or mayors. At the same time, the next local government elections are more than three years away, which provides time for implementing strategies to increase the number of elected female representatives.

As for women as CEOs and senior managers, the report released in February 2004 by LGAQ and LGMA titled *Review of CEO Recruitment and Retention Issues for Rural and Remote Councils* may invigorate strategies to encourage women's participation in the administrative sphere of local government.

Indeed, Queensland is currently in a very good position to commence a coordinated effort to increase the participation of women in local government. It is hoped that there will be some visible results following the 2008 local government elections.

Endnotes

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¹⁷ Victorian Local Governance Association, 15 September 2004, unpublished data

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³⁶ Frere, *op. cit.*, p5.

³⁷ Frere, *op. cit.*, p37.

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⁴³ Frere, *op. cit.*, p3.

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