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NEAR THE TOP: UNDERSTANDING GENDER IMBALANCE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT

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Women have both the ability to influence and to be really successful with organizations of the future. Because organizations of the future are going to be fluid, they're going to be person-driven. They're going to be flexibility-driven and community-centered. All of which tend to be women's strengths.

—White Female City Manager

This report is risky work. People may want to hear and not hear what the final conclusions are. Now you guys judge for yourself if we're at the right place or at the right time given contemporary society. If not, then what are we going to do about it? But somebody needs to point it out. Somebody needs to say hey, here we are in the year 2018.

—Male Assistant City Manager of Color

Introduction

In 1908, with the advent of the local government management profession, there were no female managers. Today, women run some of the largest cities and counties in the United States. Despite these apparent gains, women occupy a mere 17 percent of the top management positions in local governments, a number that has only slightly increased since the 1980s.¹ The percentages for women of color are even smaller: 1.39 percent estimated by the 2012 ICMA State of the Profession Survey. These proportions raise the question of why there are so few women—both white women and women of color—serving as local government managers when they constitute half of the population.

This report seeks to shed light on this question by discussing the results of qualitative research into the career experiences of women, as well as men of color, serving as local government managers and assistant managers. The research involved conducting 37 interviews—36 from the United States and one from Canada. The research team interviewed 30 women and seven men of color, both in-person and over the phone. Forty-six percent of the sample represented people of color. The inclusion of men in the sample was to generate representative views on racial dynamics in local government management.²

The report begins with historical background on awareness of gender issues in local government management. The second section delves into the patterns of interview results, in which participating managers talk about the rewards of local government management; attributes of desirable local government management jobs; and the gender and racial dynamics that accompany those jobs. The final section of the report discusses the implications of these patterns of results on the local government management profession.

Gender Awareness in Local Government Management

Awareness of gender imbalance in local government dates back to the 1970s, in the midst of the second wave of the feminist movement that saw increased political activism for women's rights around education, family, sexuality, and work.³ During this time period, a 1973 edition of the *Public Management Magazine* was devoted to the status of women in municipal government. This special issue called attention to the fact that women comprised only one percent of ICMA membership, and raised some of the same questions

being asked today: Why aren't there more women in local government management? Why aren't female graduates of MPA programs gravitating toward careers in local government? One article in this edition⁴ found that, of the 2,534 professionally run municipalities, only 15 were managed by women. (Counties were not analyzed.) None of the municipalities with female managers had populations above 13,000; more than 50 percent of female-led municipalities had populations under 2,000. On a similar scale, there were 24 elected women mayors in the United States at that time.

Subsequent research sought to understand the effect of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act (EEO) on diversity in state and local government employment. In 1976, political scientist Lee Sigelman used survey data from the U.S. Civil Service Commission (1970–1972) to determine how well women were represented in the state and local government workforce and what factors might be related to the attractiveness of the public sector.⁵ He found that, while women were well represented in the public-sector workforce in every state, they held a disproportionate percentage of lower-level posts.

Sigelman later teamed up with fellow political scientist Joseph Cayer on a follow-up article on EEO's impact on the presence of women in state and local government.⁶ Using newer data, the researchers found that women and minorities made gains as a percentage of the overall state and local government workforce between 1973 and 1975. The percentage of women working in state and local government increased from 34 percent in 1973 to 38 percent in 1975. Despite these gains, women continued to lag behind men in salaries and were woefully underrepresented in management-level positions.

In 1987, another political scientist, James Slack, investigated how EEO and affirmative action had affected attitudes of city managers toward the recruitment of women.⁷ The number of female city managers had increased from 15 in 1972 to over 100 in 1986, but women were still vastly underrepresented. Slack surveyed a sample of city managers and found that they were supportive of affirmative action in theory but less so in practice, such as specifically recruiting a gender-diverse candidate pool. Managers who were younger and had more progressive ideological perspectives were more likely to support implementation of affirmative action.

Twenty-one years after Congress passed the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, Mary Guy wrote an article, "Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Backward," which chronicled the efforts of women to integrate into the profession of

public management.⁸ Guy argued that the strengths women bring to the workplace are too valuable to ignore or allow to go to waste, but that government administration continues to be dominated by males in leadership positions. Her analysis of gender and public sector workforce patterns finds that the advancement of women shows spurts of progress followed by “periods of redefinition.”⁹ She concluded that women still faced barriers, including the limited availability of female mentors, sex role stereotypes, and structural barriers.

Fulfilling Guy’s prediction from 25 years ago, the field of local government management shows little change nationally in the percentage of chief administrative officer positions held by women since 1980. The latest data from ICMA on the gender of member chief administrative officers (CAO) have shown a modest increase in the percentage of women. At the time of publication (January 2020), 677 CAO members were female and 2,956 were male. The percentage of female CAOs now sits at 18.3 percent, up from 15.6 percent in 2017.¹⁰

Table 1 highlights some of the notable milestones over the last four decades in support of underrepresented populations in the field of local government management and leadership.

Interview Results

Given the slow growth of diversity in city and county managers, it is worth examining how women and people of color view their status as part of the profession. To begin answering that question, the research team interviewed 37 local government managers and assistant managers to detect patterns and shared experiences for women and people of color. To get at this information, the interview questions focused on the career paths of participating managers; the rewards of local government management; attributes of desirable local government management jobs; and the gender and racial dynamics that accompany those jobs.

Table 1: Major Milestones for Women and People of Color in Local Government Management

1972	Equal Employment and Opportunity Act passed.
1973	ICMA dedicates issue of Public Management to status of women in municipal government; reports that only 15 out of 2,500+ professionally managed municipalities are managed by women.
1975	Share of women working in state and local government increases to 38 percent, up four percentage points in two years.
1976	ICMA Task Force on Women in the Profession releases a report after two years of study. At this time, women make up one percent of ICMA member CAOs. The task force report identifies pre- and post-entry barriers faced by women in local government management.
1983	Sylvester Murray becomes first African American president of ICMA; National Forum for Black Public Administrators founded.
1976–87	Series of studies analyzing effects of EEO on women in the profession. Women gain more representation, but still tend to occupy lower positions. A sample of managers report more support for affirmative action in theory than in practice.
1993	“Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Backward”; a study finds women are making spurts of advancement in the profession followed by “periods of redefinition.”
2002	Peggy Merriss elected first female president of ICMA.
2004	International Hispanic Network (now Local Government Hispanic Network) formally launches as independent nonprofit.
2006	Women Leading Government founded.
2010	Engaging Local Government Leaders founded.
2012	Appointment of 75 women and men to the ICMA Task Force on Women in the Profession.
2014	ICMA Task Force on Women in the Profession issues second report, acknowledging lower pre-entry social barriers but persistent examples of gender bias in senior-level recruitment and promotion.
2015	League of Women in Government founded.

This section discusses the results of interviews with managers and assistant managers, focusing on the patterns of comments made in those interviews.¹¹ A pattern emerges when multiple comments point to the same theme. The number of comments making up a theme vary widely, anywhere from five to 30. Given that this is qualitative research, the frequency of comments matter far less than the ideas and issues raised.

The report is divided into sections by interview topic. *The Rewards of Local Government Management* chronicles the intrinsic rewards of serving cities and counties, which could attract more women and people of color into the local government management profession. *To Pursue (or Not Pursue) the Job* dives into the factors that influence the decision to apply or not apply for a local government management position. *Cornerstones of Career Advancement* discusses key influences on respondents' career paths: mobility, mentors, and sponsors and networks. *Gender and Racial Dynamics in Local Government Management* delves into patterns of experiences based on being a woman, a person of color, or both in local government. *Moving Forward* discusses the implications of the research and next steps for moving forward.

The Rewards of Local Government Management

Every profession seeks to provide meaning and fulfillment in order to attract the best and the brightest. Fortunately, local government management is an intrinsically rewarding profession, a feeling confirmed by this study's interview participants. They frequently used words like *passion*, *a calling*, and *joy* to describe their work.

For many interview participants, service to community surfaced as a strong motivation for working in local government management. To illustrate, the words *serve*, *service*, *servicing* or *served* showed up in 32 of the 37 interviews. As one city administrator explained, "I have the ability to go home every night feeling like the work I did that day is going to make life better for the people who live in my community."

Making a difference in individual lives also surfaced as a strong reward for local government managers. It was not uncommon for managers to give specific examples of residents whom they helped in their jobs. One city manager provides the perfect example: "It could be as simple as sending snow plows to an elderly person who's trying to get out of their driveway for a doctor's appointment." Another city manager spoke of having the opportunity to interact directly with citizens: "For me, it's rewarding to have that "one-on-one" conversation with residents of the community."

The immediacy of local government work—being able to quickly see the fruits of one's labor—is yet another reward of local government work. One manager suggested that one of his "favorite things has always been watching the purchase of a new police vehicle and seeing it deployed on the street. Or seeing a trench being dug and a pipe being laid and know-

ing that the next day water is going through it." The tangible nature of basic local government service delivery is an often-cited source of pride for local government managers.

The professional rewards of community service suggest that cities and counties have enormous potential to attract a new generation of managers. This may be particularly true for women and people of color, who tend to have higher public service motivation¹² and be drawn in greater proportions to public and nonprofit organizations.¹³

CAREER PATH CHARACTERISTICS

Local government management career paths are characterized by several features: professional training and credentials, social and human capital, and an orientation toward public service. Using data collected from resumes from a subset of interview participants, we see that the majority of local government managers hold professional graduate degrees in public administration (72 percent with an MPA). In addition, 63 percent also completed additional professional training (i.e., typically graduate-level courses, as well as training programs run by universities and professional associations). Examples of these programs include the Public Executive Leadership Academy, Senior Executive Leadership Institute, Leadership ICMA, Mid-Career Manager's Institute, public procurement certification, and others.

This data also suggests that movement between different types of positions and different local governments is typical for those who reach top management positions in their career. In other words, gaining both human capital (experience and training)¹⁴ and social capital (connections and relationships)¹⁵ are key to developing careers in local government. In our data, participants held an average of seven different types of positions in local government and worked in four to five different local governments. Prior to serving as the chief appointed official or assistant level roles, study participants worked in budgeting and finance, community and economic development, water and sewer, public works, and other traditional local government service departments or agencies. Only eight participants were promoted to their management position from within their organization.

It is also clear that those who attain management positions in local government are oriented toward public service. In our data, participants spent significant time in their careers in public service positions (average 25 years, with a minimum of 15 years).

Table 2: Career Path Characteristics of Interview Participants*

	# of Managers	% of Total		
Have MPA	18	72		
Have graduate degree	19	76		
Have additional professional trainings	17	63		
Promoted from within	8	33		

	# of Managers	Avg	Min	Max
Years in current position	23	7.5	1	37
Years in organization before promotion from within	8	3.5	1	9
Number of different positions held	23	6.9	4	16
Number of local government employers	23	4.4	2	9
Years in workforce	25	27	18	37
Years in public service positions	24	25	15	35

*Summary statistics presented here are based on data collected from resumes provided by 27 interview participants. Not all resumes included all data items.

To Pursue (or Not Pursue) the Job

One anecdotal explanation for gender and racial imbalance in local government management is that a disproportionate number of women and people of color do not pursue local government management positions. If this explanation is valid, it is critically important to identify the factors that encourage or discourage women or people of color from joining the talent pool. Some career path factors raised in the interviews transcend gender and race, including political stability, where there is low board turnover and relative harmony among elected officials, and financial stability, in which local government budgets are well-managed and fiscally sound. We set aside these considerations to focus instead on two factors with particular relevance for women: diversity and inclusion of the local government and work-life balance.

Diversity and Inclusion of the Local Government

Signs of diversity and inclusion—in both the community and local government organizations—emerged as factors that influenced some women and men of color in deciding to apply for management jobs. Interview participants identified three characteristics of local governments that provided clues as to how inclusive a job environment would be: the diversity of the community, the diversity of both organizational and elected leadership, and the inclusive (or exclusive) behavior of the council or commission.

For some managers of color, communities with little diversity were a nonstarter. One deputy city manager illustrates this perspective: “If there’s 3 percent African American, I’m not going there.” For this manager, the risk of being socially isolated based on race was not one that she was willing to take for herself or her family.

Another factor considered by some interview participants was the diversity of both elected and appointed leaders. One deputy county administrator explains that she looks for local governments “where there have been women in leadership positions so that I know there’s a path that’s already been cut.” This city’s commitment to gender balance in leadership conveyed its commitment to both a diverse and inclusive work environment.

The extent to which a governing body acts in an inclusive manner signals the prospective experiences of women and people of color in a local government. One town administrator recounted being interviewed “in a basement somewhere,” where everyone around the table were men. “I felt like, they’re going to dominate me or try to be more difficult. And I just didn’t think it was going to work with that particular governing body.” This observation points to the role of subtle cues—whether in body language, location, or group composition—in forging perceptions of perceived inclusion of a local government setting.

Collectively, these sentiments suggest that local governments will be more likely to both attract and retain top talent when they can demonstrate a gender- and racially mixed

leadership, actively seek diversity in leadership positions, and have councils that pay attention to the subtle cues they send.

Work/Life Balance

For female managers in particular, work/life balance emerged as a significant factor that guided professional pursuits. (None of the men interviewed brought up work/life balance as a job factor, although one had delayed pursuing a job outside his community until his son was out of high school; another mentioned that his wife had been “a single mom” for a brief stint in the early stages of his career). One female city manager summarized just how consuming the work can be:

Today, I'm exhausted. I'm in the thick of my life and nothing seems more appealing than just being able to wake up in the morning, drink my coffee, and have nothing to do. I laugh because a retirement representative came and did some counseling with us. And he looked at my husband and said, 'Just get used to the fact that city managers never retire. She'll be working until the day she dies.'

Compounding the intensity of the local government management workload is the fact that women tend to have greater caregiving responsibilities. One manager noted that the evening responsibilities make it hard for a woman with children and caregiving needs. “Evening meetings . . . community engagement . . . that's fine and good, but when you're a mom with a kid at home doing homework, it can be tough.”

The demands of local government management can also influence career choices, as one manager explained: “I did make hard decisions because I did turn down jobs that, if I had been married, if there were a spouse to help, if I hadn't had a child, I probably would have taken, but being mom was my number—one responsibility.”

This last quote brings in sharp contrast two worldviews. One worldview echoed by some women in top management positions is that work and family can indeed be balanced in local government management and aspiring women management candidates just need to push ahead on both fronts. The other worldview makes the claim that aspiring women management candidates should not be put in the position where they have to choose between family and career progression.

Some key factors enable managers who are women to juggle their job responsibilities and caregiving. Technology has made it easier for many professionals in different fields to “work” outside of office settings, local government management included. As one manager noted: “I log in pretty much every night from home . . . I'm working the same amount of hours but . . . I don't have to be sitting in my office.” While the benefits of technology for work/life balance have been debated,¹⁶ in these cases, technology has allowed man-

agers with caregiving responsibilities, both male and female alike, to juggle family and career.

Another factor in work/life balance is finding a local government with the right work environment, one that offers flexibility and support for working families. One city manager credited her former manager who, when she was an assistant manager, “helped me be a mom and an employee at the same time.” Even early career flexibility and support can make a huge difference, noted one female city manager:

I had a supervisor at the time, whether he did it intentionally or not, [who] allowed me to have freedom and flexibility in the career, so there wasn't necessarily a project that he was not willing to allow me to work on. He also allowed me to have flexibility with my home life, so I never felt like that I was being neglectful of things at home that I was not able to, that was going to prohibit me from pursuing things at work. So, I never really felt like I had to choose. I felt like I could have a decent amount of balance with both.

Many issues of work/life balance disproportionately affect women and, as such, are crucial to address for a profession seeking to diversify its leadership ranks. Research suggests that women and men benefit equally from work-life balance, as do the organizations for which they work, and that policies enabling telecommuting and flex time can be instrumental in enabling work/life balance.¹⁷

Cornerstones of Career Advancement: Mobility, Mentors, and Networks

Participating managers also noted a number of factors that shaped their career paths. Geographic mobility, mentors and sponsors, and their professional networks were important factors in shaping their career trajectories. For the managers we spoke with, geographic mobility was necessary to reach management positions, mentors and sponsors were key in attaining positions as well as professional development, and the networks developed over time both sustained and advanced careers.

Mobility

Geographic mobility is a key consideration that shapes the career paths of local government managers. As one deputy county manager explained, “If you want to be a manager, you must be willing to relocate geographically.” In addition to being open to frequent moves, there are also research studies that provide statistical evidence that job turnover in the city management profession is common.¹⁸ This turnover can provide opportunities for younger women and people of color if they are willing to relocate. As one female city manager pointed out, “You might want to, as a young profes-

sional, have some thoughts about [whether] you are willing to move to a small community and work in small communities, because that's one way to move up."

If relocating is a key characteristic of career paths in local government management, family support for relocation is a necessary condition. One female city manager considers her marriage a partnership: "My husband and I have been married for 33 years and he's been a partner. He has been willing to move when I've gotten opportunities, so we've moved all over the place....He has had some professional sacrifices that he's had to make to allow me to grow my career." However, for dual-career families especially, the likelihood of relocation could be a deterrent for those considering a career in local government management, particularly when there is inadequate employment potential for the working spouse.¹⁹

Geographic mobility in local government management careers is typical and even necessary according to our participants. Many communities require government staff to reside in the communities in which they are employed. However, there seems to be a trend at the state level to ban this practice. Wisconsin, Michigan, Washington (in statutory cities only), and Ohio have outlawed local government residency requirements. If mobility is typical for local government management careers, this suggests that those unwilling or unable to move will be less likely to seek and attain management positions. This may be limiting the potential candidates for some open positions given that managers with school-age children or spouses who are employed outside the home may have difficulty relocating.

Mentors

Most participants had several key individuals who provided mentorship throughout their careers. These relationships provided advice, tacit information about how local government works, connections to get a foot in the door, and advocacy. Interview respondents viewed mentoring as an essential aspect to career development, along with training and experience. Most participants did not focus on one mentor, but rather a collection of mentors, and even articulated the ways in which different mentors served different purposes—in other words, a relationship "constellation."²⁰ As one male assistant town manager put it:

Mentorship relationships are important...I have a collection of people from graduate professors to my former boss to colleagues, ...former classmates, everyone can show up in a mentor category if they have something...that adds value for me, and hopefully I can add value for them and it's a mutual relationship.

Interview participants spoke highly of their mentors. They named them by name and spoke about the place their paths first crossed and specifically what the mentoring relationship offered. However, some women in our sample also

noted, with disappointment, that most or all of their mentors have been men. Generally, one explanation for the persistent lack of demographic diversity in leadership positions is that when there are few women in leadership positions, women cannot access the social networks necessary for advancement.²¹ Additionally, when there are few, if any, examples of what it looks like to be a woman in a management position, other women have a hard time picturing themselves in such positions—a local government manager is not necessarily a "possible self."²²

The inability for women and people of color to find mentors in their profession who look like them may be one reason so many have a constellation of mentors. The interview respondents indicated that they look to their churches, other professional contacts, and former professors to provide that perspective. For some in our sample, mentorship is also provided by people outside of their professional networks—in particular, family members can serve as mentors. One of our participants describes how her mother was a model for what it meant to be a working professional and how both working outside the home and parenting can make a person "complete."

Mentors take a chance on you. They act as sponsors, which can lead to opportunities, and let you try on different identities as you develop your own professional identity.²³ In particular, participants indicated that mentors led by example and pushed them out of their comfort zone. Throughout the U.S. labor market, there is evidence that men are promoted at higher rates than women.²⁴ There are alternative explanations for this outcome, and one explanation is that men are more likely to have mentors that "sponsor" them, advocating for their advancement. By contrast, women receive traditional mentoring—in the form of professional guidance and advice—but not as much active advocacy on their behalf by the mentor.²⁵

Another important aspect of mentoring is the legacy it provides for future generations of local government managers. Interview participants noted that those who have been mentored pay it forward. In this way, mentoring can generate self-reinforcing systems that continue to grow. In addition, mentoring may also be a way for women and minorities to navigate gender and racial biases within their organizations, incidents of sexual harassment, or other situations that are unique to a female or minority group member.

Networks

For almost all of our participants, the connections they have with other professionals made a difference in their career trajectory. Compared to many other professions, the field of city/county management is fairly small.²⁶ Networks develop largely through career paths, where mobility is key to advancement. As one participant noted, it was his connection to a prior supervisor that landed him a new position. In fact, his connection to his former manager was so meaningful,

Gender and race affect every area of life, but particularly workplace experiences.

that his new county did not even check his other references.

For many participants, a primary place to develop a network was professional conferences. As the participants noted, conference attendance was crucial because connections can provide access to jobs. In fact, conference content may be less important than the opportunity to network. As one manager described, conferences can even provide a network of peers who will look out for you, particularly if you are in search of a new position.

Attending conferences is also a way to intersect personal and professional identities. Highlighting the National Forum for Black Public Administrators (NFBPA) conference, a city manager was able to “see” what it means to be an African American working in local government. She observed, “That was the first time that I saw myself in the field of local government management, to find myself as a grad student at a conference surrounded by black men and women that were doing amazing things as local government professionals... and for the first time I saw myself in the field.” In a given community, there may be few, if any, women or minorities in the top management positions. These conferences give participants the opportunity to engage with others in similar roles.

Other participants noted the increased diversity in professional associations like the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). Sylvester Murray, former manager of Cincinnati, became the first African American president of ICMA in 1983. Peggy Merris served as ICMA's first female president with her election in 2002. Since that time four additional women have been elected to this same position. In 2017, Marc Ott was appointed as ICMA's executive director, the first African-American in the association's history. Diversity in ICMA leadership matters to some female managers and managers of color: it makes them feel included, supported, and hopeful for the future.

Mobility, mentors, and networks are cornerstones of local government management advancement. Participants universally praised the value of mentors and networks in the development of career paths in local government. Establishing a collection of mentoring relationships, maintaining past career connections, and generating new connections at conferences are all important for gaining access to local government management positions. Yet the ability to move to a different city or state was also seen as instrumental for career progression.

Gender and Racial Dynamics in Local Government Management

Gender and race affect every area of life, but particularly workplace experiences. The race and gender of public servants affect pay, rates of workplace harassment, and standards of leadership behavior that disfavor women and people of color.²⁷

Local government management is no exception to these trends. While a handful of interview participants felt that

their gender or race had not affected their local government management experiences,²⁸ gender and race permeate the experience of being a local government manager for the remaining participants. As one female city manager of color explained, “Implicit and explicit bias are real, and they play into our daily interactions. So, whether I'm in a rural area or a large urban city, those things are still very apparent.”

At the extreme end of the spectrum, there are tales of blatant sexism that managers experienced early in their careers: posters of naked women plastered on the walls of a fire department; being asked by a senior manager about the status of her virginity; a budget director who announced that women were not good at math and who made comments about menstrual cycles; being denied assistant positions because “people weren't ready for a female in that role.”

The recent experiences relayed by managers fall in between “no sexism” vs. “blatant sexism” narratives. This is not to say that the gendered experiences of management professionals are insignificant or that managers felt that their gender or race had held them back; they did not.²⁹ Rather, the patterns of comments indicate a profession still struggling in some places with recognizing women and people of color as legitimately holding positions of authority.



The Only One in the Room

Being a woman, person of color, or both in local government means sometimes being “the only one” in the room. Recognizing that her “only” status might create tough challenges, a town manager of color worried about her choice of a local government management career, saying “You’re in this job. I don’t hear anybody doing what you’re trying to do. You’re very much in this white man’s world. Are you going to be okay?”

Some interview participants found that being “the only” made integrating with local management groups challenging. Being the only female or person of color in the room triggers a distinct set of social dynamics, including a heightened visibility that creates performance pressures. Harvard Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter refers to these phenomena as “tokenism, experienced by people who are socially or culturally different from the norm.”³⁰ One female city manager of color referred to being under “a different kind of microscope” than the typical white male manager. Another female city manager elaborates:

When I walk into the room...I’m the youngest, I’m usually the only woman, or definitely the only black woman, and so these things influence people’s initial assessment of my ability or my competency, what I’m bringing to the table. So I am engaged in relationship building because that’s one of the best ways to conquer some of those issues. Because we all have implicit and explicit bias.

The heightened visibility for women and people of color in local government management creates pressure to demonstrate competency. One city manager of color explained that she sometimes felt compelled to prove, not only that she was competent, but that she was exceptional at her work. “Any work or project that I worked on I double-checked, I triple-checked . . . I knew that at any given point and any given time, more than likely, I would be compared to a white male counterpart.” This manager’s strategy—to be more prepared and to work harder in order to compare favorably—is a common one for women in male-dominated professions.³¹

Stereotypes

Managers also spoke about the effects of gender roles and stereotypes on their professional experiences. Gender role theory holds that society expects women to be caring, compassionate, and nurturing and men to be assertive, commanding, and in control.³² As portrayed by interview participants, when women and people of color show up in authoritative local government management roles, it can trigger confusion, surprise, and even pushback.

It was not unusual to hear from women or men of color that they had been mistaken for subordinates or service professionals at some point in their careers. To illustrate from

our interviews, a contractor asked a female manager to make copies for her; a female deputy county manager of color sent to review the budget with a civil grand jury was asked, upon arriving at the meeting, whether she was there to take notes; a male financial officer (now manager) attending a black-tie fundraiser was mistaken for a waiter.

Once the status of a female manager or manager of color is discovered, surprise is a common outcome. One deputy county manager describes a job application process in which, “I did this interview and I walked in and they were like, ‘Well who are you?’ . . . But in the end, I got the opportunity.” As a female deputy county manager of color explained, “the level of professionalism, the level of skill, the level of ability that I bring to every situation, I think it surprises people.”

Gender roles factor into the professional experiences of women in local government management. In a blatant form of gender discrimination, there was the council member who disqualified an assistant manager for an open manager position “because she’s a mom with kids.” Another manager recounted her experience:

As much as people say they don’t discriminate against women, sadly there is discrimination out there. At one point, I interviewed for a community when I was pregnant and had a male elected official ask me, ‘How are you going to balance this new child with the responsibilities of this community?’ And I thought to myself, ‘Are you going to ask a new father that question?’

In line with gender roles, some female managers experienced “think manager-think male” bias, which associates men with leadership traits. One female city manager of color explained what this looks like:

Other times they don’t believe you are the city manager. I’ve been through disaster recovery issues, where my assistant city manager is a white male, about 6’3”, and all the outside authorities would go to him thinking he was the city manager, and he would point to me. . . people don’t always identify you as being the person in charge or being the leader in the room.

When a female manager replaces a male manager, the biases that favor men as leaders create challenges that have to be overcome. A white female manager provided a different example. Her tenure followed a white male manager who developed what became a familiar style of leadership. She noted, “My first year here people would say (I’m) just not the leader he was. Even though people didn’t intend it, I think that was latent sexism. Like there is an accepted way of doing things and it’s the way the white guy did them.”

Social Exclusion

In the 2014 ICMA Task Force on Women in the Profession, 31 percent of female managers surveyed reported being excluded from important networking opportunities based on gender. As our female interview participants in particular point out, social exclusion can be broader than just networking. It can involve not being invited to social events, ignored in conversations, and excluded in the language used in professional settings.

Some managers talked about being left out of critical networking opportunities over the course of their careers, such as outings with commissioners that included other male senior organizational leaders but excluded them. For example, a white female city manager was first promoted from assistant manager after her white male predecessor departed, and subsequently noticed that invitations from the local university stopped coming:

All of a sudden the chancellor was inviting my planning director and my development director to dinner parties or Christmas parties. So, I had to tell a high-ranking female I knew at the university, 'Look, it's not that I'm dying to go to these things. But, from a protocol standpoint...my staff shouldn't get invited to things at the president's house that I don't get invited to.

That female managers and managers of color sometimes feel excluded in local government settings is consistent with social science research showing that professional social networks tend to be harder to access for women and people of color and thus limiting in terms of career opportunities.³³

Events and invitations are not the only methods of exclusion: the language used in informal settings can also create a sense of social isolation, particularly for women attending meetings where most participants are men. A female deputy county manager described being in monthly manager meetings: "It's like being in a locker room, but I try really hard not to let them see that some of the conversation I find insulting."

In another example of recognizing only men, a female town administrator told the story of being "...at a meeting where I convened a bunch of men to talk about a big problem we're having related to the organization and running waste water. I got up and the other senior man got up and said, 'Thank you, gentlemen.'" Research on gender-exclusive language indicates that it is ostracizing for women. In one experiment, research subjects who were exposed to gender-exclusive language in a job interview were less likely to want the job.³⁴ For the local government management profession, gender-exclusive language is yet another discouraging cue that women do not fit the mold of the traditional local government manager.



Racial Dynamics

While gender was the primary focus of this research, race served as a layer of experience for some local government managers. This should be no surprise given that racial dynamics in the United States serve as a backdrop for the experiences of people of color. One need look no further than public opinion polls, which show a divide in how people of color in the United States perceive racism compared with their white counterparts.³⁵ Managers of color reported the following situations:

- Blatant racial commentaries in online news items featuring them.
- Witnessing racial (and sometimes racist) dynamics on elected boards.
- During a visit to another community to apply for a management job, turning in a wallet to police in a white neighborhood, only to be asked by an officer how much money he had taken out of the wallet.
- A manager of color who answered the phone, provided his Latino name, and was told by the caller that he wants someone who speaks English.
- A community partner asked a manager if he ever considered changing his non-American name.
- A manager being shown a picture of all white men in his office and being told, "These were the good old days."

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These experiences were not everyday occurrences for these managers. Nonetheless, they represent the “death by a thousand cuts” of racialized experiences—whether subtle or blatant—that convey an “other” status to those who don’t fit the mold of the white male manager.

A handful of managers did not see their gender or race affecting their experiences. The remaining managers did experience racial or gender bias (or both). Some participating managers talked about being the only women or people of color in the room and the group dynamics it created. Other managers experienced being mistaken for subordinates or service professionals; women in particular had been asked to undertake subservient tasks—making coffee or taking notes—even as managers. Racial dynamics also surfaced, as some managers experienced subtle and blatant signals calling attention to their “not white” status. While interview participants acknowledged a profession changing for the better, some experienced racial and gender biases that portray a profession in the earlier stages of becoming more diverse and inclusive.

Moving Forward

The perspectives shared in this report suggest that local government management is still in the process of integrating women and people of color into its leadership ranks. This is problematic because it suggests that the local government management profession is drawing from a talent pool that is artificially narrow, due to a possible combination of women and people of color (1) not applying for these positions; (2) applying but not being chosen; or (3) leaving the local government management profession.

Yet the local government management profession is poised to become more inclusive. The work of local government is engaging and meaningful, which promises to attract a broader talent pool interested in serving communities in high-impact ways. Local government organizations and associations can play a critical role in addressing gender and racial dynamics in local government management by,

The professionals interviewed as part of this study have much advice to provide women and people of color entering the profession or who are still early in their careers.

Build Relationships. The most common advice across interviews is to build relationships. Some managers emphasized the importance of being involved in professional organizations as one form of relationship building, which can expose you to job opportunities and also help you build a reputation outside your organization. But internal networks are important as well, particularly as they relate to understanding how resources are allocated and how to navigate organizational processes. Build relationships both internally and externally as a career advancement strategy.

Focus on the Mission. It is no secret that local government management is a tough occupation. Managers are fired at the drop of a hat, critiqued by the media, and bashed by citizens, all challenges that are magnified for women and people of color. Interview participants had some advice for dealing with these challenges. The first is to develop a thick skin, which will enable you to bounce back from professional challenges. Managers commonly described translating challenging circumstances into personal challenges. Focusing on the mission is another piece of advice, which allows you to make challenges less about you and more about public service.

Be selective. Managers advise early career professionals to pick their community carefully, seeking out jurisdictions that align with their political and social values. One assistant county manager who was considering a position, visited the community with a friend, incognito, to get a sense of the community. Another deputy county manager suggested doing homework on organizational fit as well: “You really need to research an organization and find out if it shares your values. If you are progressive, you believe in social media, you believe in civic engagement, and you believe in strategic planning, then you need to find an organization that does those things. Otherwise, you’re just going to be frustrated. You’re going to be angry. You’re not going to be happy there.”

Join. Organizations like those referenced in this report have important roles to play in addressing gender and racial dynamics in local government management. From professional development offerings to conference sessions to commissioned research, diversity and inclusion is and should remain a key thread of activity for professional associations. National organizations supporting women and people of color in local government include:

- ICMA,
- League of Women in Government,
- Engaging Local Government Leaders,
- National Forum for Black Public Administrators, and
- International Hispanic Network/Local Government Hispanic Network.

for example, offering diversity-related topics for plenary panels and keynote speakers at conferences with local government (not only in panels with those who are already aware of diversity and inclusion issues in local government. Particularly given the patterns reported in the previous section, *Racial Dynamics in Local Government*, these sessions would be an opportunity to begin the conversation around race in local government.

There is also a need for quantitative research to test the prevalence of the patterns revealed by this qualitative study, whether sponsored by local government associations or organizations. The patterns of comments that surfaced from these 37 interviews are valid for identifying potential trends around diversity and inclusion, but not enough to generalize to the local government profession as a whole. In-depth quantitative data collection and analysis are needed to test the prevalence of the issues identified in this report.

Along the lines of information needs, the local government profession needs demographic data collection on its members, including gender, race and ethnicity, but also other dimensions of diversity such as veteran's status, family status, sexuality, disability, and so forth. Currently, Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL) is performing this function through its Diversity Dashboard, but with limited resources; local government associations and organizations could collaborate to play a major role in supporting this effort. These efforts could include periodic diversity and inclusion climate surveys among local government managers across the U.S., to understand how gender and racial experiences are changing (or not) over time.

To mitigate social exclusion in networking events, state associations should consider expanding social events beyond the golf course, where business takes place among mostly white men. Groups including the League of Women in Government, the National Forum for Black Public Administrators, ELGL and others could assist in this endeavor. These groups were cited by research participants as giving women and people a place to see themselves as local government managers.

With regards to work/life balance, local government organizations and associations can start a national conversation, not only for women, but also for men in the profession. These conversations should transcend work/life balance to question the structure and pace of local government work itself. Yale Professor Ellen Kossek's research on work/life balance, particularly her co-authored book, *The CEO of Me*, would be one such resource.

All of the research participants in this report named chief administrative officers (CAOs, primarily white men) who had "tapped them on the shoulder", identified their talent, and encouraged them to enter local government careers. Along these lines, CAOs can play a transformative role in diversifying local government management. First



and foremost, by being aware of the gender and racial dynamics uncovered in this report, CAOs can be poised to respond when they see these dynamics play out. When there are only a handful of women or men of color in the room, CAOs can be aware of the social isolation that can accompany being "the only." CAOs can be aware of the language used in meetings to ensure that it includes rather than excludes all parties present. Whether at a conference or in meetings, sitting CAOs can intentionally include women and people of color in side conversations.

Moving forward also requires local communities and local government organizations to recognize the work that is necessary to make management positions attractive to women and men of color. When local communities and elected and appointed leaders promote diversity and inclusion, it sends an important signal to management candidates. Along these lines, talented managers look for civility in the council chamber, as well as organizational and community diversity. These traits will alter the quality of the talent attracted to management positions. At a broader level, the local government profession offers rewarding high-impact work that can attract women and people of color, who tend to gravitate towards nonprofit

careers.³⁶ This aspect of local government management can be more strongly marketed towards prospective local government professionals early in their careers.

Finally, some of the steps identified here are similar to the recommendations made by the 2014 ICMA Task Force on Women in the Profession, including demographic data collection, high-profile diversity speakers, and continued partnership with state associations and affinity groups. Local government associations, organizations, and affinity groups should jointly monitor the extent to which task force recommendations are being achieved as a means of maintaining momentum on these critical issues.

It will take a sustained, concerted effort by ICMA, local governments, elected officials and organizations like the League of Women in Government to increase the numbers of women and people of color in local government management positions. But such an effort promises to energize the local government profession with diverse perspectives, a more representative bureaucracy, and a profession that will more adeptly tackle the challenges of an increasingly diverse and complex society.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

For Local Government Organizations and Associations:

- Feature diversity-related topics for plenary panels and keynote speakers.
- Expand demographic data collected on members.
- Survey members about the dynamics identified in this report to quantify these trends.
- Offer a wide range of social events that extend beyond the golf course.
- Start a national conversation on work/-life balance for both women and men in local government management.
- Educate elected officials on how to make management positions attractive to women and people of color.

For Local Government Managers:

- Be mindful and make your staff aware of the gender and racial dynamics uncovered in this report.
- Use inclusive language in meetings.
- Ensure that women and people of color are included in your networking events.



Endnotes And Resources

- ¹ International City/County Management Association, *Final Report on the Status of Women in the Profession* (Washington, D.C.: International City/County Management Association, 2014).
- ² We suspected, based on prior research experiences, that without gender as the focal point, men of color would focus more on the racial dimensions of local government management. More detailed information on research design can be found in the Appendices.
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- ⁵ Lee Sigelman, "The Curious Case of Women in State and Local Government," *Social Science Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (March 1976): 591-604.
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- ¹⁶ E. Jeffrey Hill, Brent C. Miller, Sara P. Weiner, and Joe Colihan, "Influences of the Virtual Office on Aspects of Work and Work/Life Balance," *Personnel Psychology* 51, no. 3 (September 1998): 667-83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.1998.tb00256.x>.
- ¹⁷ Mary K. Feeney and Justin M. Stritch, "Family-Friendly Policies, Gender, and Work-Life Balance in the Public Sector," *Review of Public Personnel Administration* September 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734371X17733789>
- ¹⁸ See David N. Ammons and Matthew J. Bosse, "Tenure of City Managers: Examining the Dual Meaning of 'Average Turnover,'" *State and Local Government Review* 37, no. 1 (2005): 61-71; Barbara C. McCabe, Richard D. Feiock, James C. Clingermayer, and Christopher Stream, "Turnover among City Managers: The Role of Political and Economic Change," *Public Administration Review* 68, no. 2 (February 2008): 380-386; Tari Renner and Victor S. DeSantis, "City Manager Turnover: The Impact of Formal Authority and Electoral Change," *State and Local Government Review* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 104-111.
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- ²⁵ Herminia Ibarra, Nancy M. Carter, and Christine Silva, "Why Men Still Get More Promotions than Women," *Harvard Business Review*, September 2010, 80-85.
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- ²⁷ Leisha DeHart-Davis, Deneen M. Hatmaker, Zachary W. Oberfeld, and Amy E. Smith, "Public Sector Diversity Research: Taking Stock" in *Handbook of American Public Administration*, ed. Edmund C. Stazyk and H. George Frederickson (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2018).
- ²⁸ To illustrate, one city manager felt that his experiences has been based not on his race but on his ascent to management at a young age. Another city manager suspected that her lack of gendered experiences was due to having a prior female manager who "paved the way" for her. A third manager had only one negative experience she attributed to sexism, explaining that, "I've really had very few experiences that I felt in any way were a challenge or held me back in any respect." A county manager illustrates one such comment: "I haven't really run up against any of the stereotypes and discrimination that a lot of women do, or maybe, I just don't take it as discrimination. You know, I look at it as I've got a job to do whether I'm female or whether I'm male, and I just do my job."
- ²⁹ This finding diverges slightly from the 2014 *ICMA Task Force Report on the State of Women in the Profession*, which found that 14 percent of respondents to a question about barriers to career advancement cited discrimination as the biggest obstacle (p. 28).
- ³⁰ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "Some Effects of Proportions on Group Life: Skewed Sex Ratios and Responses to Token Women," *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 5 (March 1977): 965-90, <https://doi.org/10.1086/226425>.
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- ³³ Herminia Ibarra, "Race, Opportunity, and Diversity of Social Circles in Managerial Networks," *Academy of Management Journal* 38, no. 3 (June 1995): 673-703; David Collinson and Jeff Hearn, eds., *Men as Managers, Managers as Men: Critical Perspectives on Men, Masculinities and Managements* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publishing, 1996); Kanter, "Some Effects of Proportions on Group Life"; Gail M. McGuire, "Gender, Race, and the Shadow Structure: A Study of Informal Networks and Inequality in a Work Organization," *Gender & Society* 16, no. 3 (2002): 303-322, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243202016003003>; Gwendolyn M. Combs, "The Duality of Race and Gender for Managerial African American Women: Implications of Informal Social Networks on Career Advancement," *Human Resource Development Review* 2, no. 4 (2003): 385-405.
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