Women and Representation in Local Government
International case studies

Edited by
Barbara Pini and Paula McDonald
Women and Representation in Local Government

*Women and Representation in Local Government* opens up an opportunity to critique and move beyond suppositions and labels in relation to women in local government.

Presenting a wealth of new empirical material, this book brings together international experts to examine and compare the presence of women at this level and features case studies on the US, UK, France, Germany, Spain, Finland, Sweden, Canada, Belgium, China, Australia and New Zealand. Divided into four main sections, each explores a key theme related to the subject of women and representation in local government, and engages with contemporary gender theory and the broader literature on women and politics. The contributors explore local government as a gendered environment; critiquing strategies to address the limited number of elected female members in local government and examine the impact of significant recent changes on local government through a gender lens.

Addressing key questions of how gender equality can be achieved in this sector, it will be of strong interest to students and academics working in the fields of gender studies, local government and international politics.

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Contributors

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1 Gender and municipal politics
Problems, perspectives and possibilities

*Barbara Pini and Paula McDonald*

Scholars of local government have repeatedly lamented the lack of literature on the subject (e.g. Mowbray 1997; Pini *et al.* 2007). As Dollery and colleagues (2003: 1) have commented, local government has often been the ‘poor cousin of its more exalted relatives in terms of the attention it attracts from the research community’. The exalted relatives which Dollery *et al.* (2003) refer to are national political environments, where women’s participation has elicited significant attention. However, the dearth of research on the specific subject of women’s representation in local government is rarely acknowledged (Neyland and Tucker 1996; Whip and Fletcher 1999). This edited volume attempts to redress the situation. Each chapter applies an explicit gender analysis to their specific topic of focus, making ‘gender visible in social phenomenon; [and] asking if, how, and why social processes, standards, and opportunities differ systematically for women and men’ (Howard *et al.* 2003: 1). These analyses within the local government context are critical in understanding the extent and nature of balanced representation at all levels of government. Furthermore, some women start their elective careers serving on school boards, city or town councils, or as mayors, before progressing to state and national legislative offices. Hence, the experiences of women in local government illustrate broader notions of democracy and may, for some individual women, shape their opportunities further along the political pipeline.

The limited literature that does focus on women in local government has frequently relied upon, and subsequently reasserted, assumptions that are rhetorical, stereotypical and less than empirically grounded. For example, early studies asserted that women councillors were middle-aged and poorly educated homemakers (e.g. Bristow 1980; Glezer 1980; Hollis 1987). This contention was subsequently challenged (e.g. Sinclair *et al.* 1987), and writers were advised that they needed to go ‘beyond stereotypes’ (Ryan *et al.* 2005: 433). However, other suppositions about women’s participation in municipal government continued to be made, such as the claim that local government is family-friendly. The argument was that local area politics facilitates women’s participation because there is proximity between home and workplace, a limited requirement to travel, thereby lessening absences from family, and less onerous responsibilities which could lead to long work hours (e.g. Briggs 2000; Lovenduski 1986; Neyland and
Tucker 1996). This assumption has also been disputed. In a study with women mayors, it was revealed that political office at the local level is demanding and intensive, and that it is individualized rather than institutional strategies that are used by political officers to attempt to achieve a work–life balance (Pini and McDonald 2004).

The book opens up an opportunity to critique and move beyond suppositions and labels in relation to women in local government. It is divided into four main sections, each exploring a key theme related to the subject of women and representation in local government. While these divisions are somewhat arbitrary in that many of the authors cross multiple terrains in their case studies, they nevertheless provide a structure for presenting the complexities of women’s representation in local government. Below we introduce each of the four sections of the book and the chapters within them, signalling their contribution to the broadening and strengthening of knowledge about women and politics at the municipal level.

**Part I: Women’s representation in local government: facilitators and constraints**

The historically low level of political representation enjoyed by women in local government has meant that a key task for scholars has been to question why this is the case. Briggs (2000), for example, used in-depth qualitative interviews with 26 female councillors from Hull in England and Montreal in Canada to reveal that across disparate local government authorities, women representatives are subjected to a very similar culture in which sexism and discrimination are rife. Also cited as significant barriers to participation for women is the lack of female role models and networks to which women typically have access. Tremaine (2000) points out that this situation is aggravated by the existence of ‘old boys’ networks’ which have tenaciously survived within the local government sector. Drawing on interviews with nine of the 19 female New Zealand mayors, Tremaine (2000) corroborates earlier work by Encel and Campbell (1991) and Martlew et al. (1985) which reported the many exclusionary practices enacted by male councillors to marginalize and discredit women representatives. These practices include conducting council business in informal contexts such as pubs and male clubs where women are typically not present, ignoring and discrediting women’s input and allocating women to committees which are allegedly focused on stereotypically ‘feminine’ concerns.

This opening part of the book continues the tradition of investigating the factors that negatively and positively shape gender equality in the local political realm. In Chapter 2, Paige Ransford and Meryl Thomson investigate the contacts and networks required for women to run a successful campaign. Illustrative of the cultural and structural factors which impede women’s participation that have been evident in previous work, they find that women often felt isolated from typical funding resources such as the business sector and instead relied on connections made through community. The need for strengthening external linkages
between women councillors and other civil society organizations, institutions and support structures was also identified in Yazdani’s (2004) study of women’s representation in local government in Pakistan. These cooperative arrangements, Yazdani (2004) argues, provide women councillors with access to facilities such as technological services and professional expertise, as well as circumventing isolation and encouraging training and support networks. What is also illustrated in Rainsford and Thomson’s chapter is not only that similar barriers exist as those in very different cultural contexts, but that they are patently evident even in the ostensibly politically progressive region of New England in the United States where their study was conducted. Indeed, reinforcing concerns of a worsening situation in other regions such as Scotland (Bochel and Bochel 2004), the rate of municipal-level representation of women in New England is lower today than it was ten years ago (Ransford et al. 2007).

Continuing the thematic focus on the way women’s representation is facilitated and constrained in this part of the book, Raphael Magin (Chapter 3) examines the reasons for the substantial variation in women’s representation among counties in Germany, with a particular focus on the disparate political heritages of east and west Germany. The chapter discusses the merits and pitfalls of several important structural factors which impact upon women’s access and participation, including list design, mixed electoral systems and proportional representation. This focus on the way electoral systems influence women’s involvement in politics has elicited significant interest in the extant literature, which points out various complexities in the way different strategies affect women’s recruitment to party lists, chances of election and allocation of responsibilities (e.g. Bird 2003). Magin’s chapter, in contrast to other studies which often neglect list design, demonstrates that the effects of the electoral system type on women can be reversed. In municipal politics in Germany, the combination of proportional representation with open lists led to smaller proportions of women in politics than the use of a mixed system with closed lists.

**Part II: Strategies to increase women’s representation in local government**

In Part II, attention is given to strategies to increase women’s involvement in local government. The fraught nature of strategies to address gender inequality in local politics has been highlighted in a case study of the Australian Local Government Women’s Association (ALGWA) first established as an advocacy and networking group for women in the sector (Pini et al. 2004). Interviews with local government women reveal that the ALGWA has a critical role to play in a transformative process towards gender equality. Its very existence is a reminder of the gendered context of local government and it acts as an important source of resistance against the status quo in providing women with a safe environment in which to share their gendered experiences of organizational life. At the same time, the ALGWA risks being dismissed as separatist and exclusive, while potentially allowing for the erasure of discussions of gender equity from
mainstream local government forums. It is for these reasons that women only organizing as an equity strategy ‘frequently provokes controversy’ (Colgan and Ledwith 1996: 38).

In a similar respect to the establishment of networks, other approaches to improving the position of women in local government such as those discussed in Part II have proved to be equally contentious and to have contradictory implications for local political women. This is enumerated in Chapter 4 by Tania Verge, who examines the outcomes of what may be the most widely applied, yet controversial, strategies to foster change in gender representation in local government; that is, the mandating of gender quotas (Krook 2006). While earlier rationales for gender quotas focused on the consequences of equal political representation (e.g. women’s participation contributes to changing the form and content of politics), more recent arguments for gender quotas focus on notions of social justice. Attempts to remedy injustice, Fraser (2003) argues, requires an emphasis on both equality, which is based on the redistribution of material goods and positions, and difference, which requires recognition of diversity.

The use of gender equality quotas in Spain was instigated, Verge explains, by the Equality Law of 2007 and requires that there is a minimum proportion of each sex on candidacy lists. While the legislation applies to each level of government, Verge elucidates its potential and limitations at the local level. It is at this scale that there is a key addendum to the law – that is, it only applies to municipalities with more than 5,000 residents, which constitute just 16 per cent of the total. Thus, the pronounced increase in women’s descriptive representation at the local level following the legislative change was only seen in those municipalities where the quota was applicable. A further limitation of the law, Verge suggests, is that it does not apply to the election of mayors, or to the selection of the mayoral cabinet known as the Municipal Commission, yet these are the most high-profile and senior leadership roles within the sector. The circumscription of the gender equality law has thus acted to limit the democratic inclusion of women.

In Chapters 5 and 6 the focus remains on gender reform strategies for local politics but moves from examining gender equality quotas to other methodologies including a suite of training, education and promotional campaigns in Canada and the establishment of women’s committees in Great Britain. The Canadian situation, detailed by Louise Carbert in Chapter 5, provides an illustrative comparative case study which highlights the ways in which women activists have used multiple scales of political power to leverage action and change. As Carbert explains, Canada has a history of state-based feminism which has involved not only a close relationship between the women’s movement and the state but the engagement of the state by the women’s movement for furthering equality goals (Chappell 2003). It is this state feminism which provides the impetus for the types of strategies implemented by the state of Nova Scotia in seeking to foster greater involvement by women, and specifically rural women, in municipal leadership.

At the centre of the final chapter in Part II, Wendy Stokes takes the reader from the earliest days of women’s representation in British local government at
the beginning of the twentieth century to contemporary times. Again, the empha-
sis in this chapter is on strategies for change with Stokes recording the establish-
ment of the Women’s Local Government Society in 1921 and highlighting its
activism to increase women’s numerical and substantive representation in local
politics. Like those that have proceeded it, such as the Australian and Chinese
women’s local government associations (Pini et al. 2004; Wang 2004), this early
forum provided an important space for discussing and highlighting women’s
concerns and interests, and their dearth in positions of local politics. As Stokes
remarks, despite its efforts the Women’s Local Government Society achieved
little success in addressing gender equality in local representation, but, in many
respects, it became a forerunner to a better resourced and more widespread strat-
egy in Britain in the 1980s; that is, the establishment of women’s committees
within local municipalities. Stokes gives an overview of the membership, func-
tion and structure of these committees as well as outlining their role and focus.
She then uses interviews with those involved in this high-profile equality initi-
ative in order to provide reflective commentary on some of the achievements and
frustrations of the women’s committees.

The fact that women’s committees were phased out and all but disbanded by
the end of the 1990s renders proclamations such as ‘women’s equality work in
local government is here to stay’ (Riley 1990: 67) sadly naïve. The phasing out
of women’s committees is symptomatic of the substantial and pervasive shift to
neoliberalism throughout the 1990s and the associated demise of gender equality
initiatives across all Western industrial nations (Hankivsky 2009). In the final
part of the chapter, Stokes examines the position of women in local government
in a new ideological environment by focusing on the Greater London Assembly.
While it was in this jurisdiction that the first full standing committee was estab-
lished for women in 1981 (Edwards 1988), Stokes demonstrates that it is no
longer such a women-friendly political space, with mayor Boris Johnson dispos-
ing of the high-profile role of women’s adviser as well as abandoning other pro-
grames to facilitate women’s inclusion in local democracy. In summary,
Stokes’ chapter provides a salutary reminder that commitment to address
women’s political disadvantage relative to men is contingent and shifting.

Part III: Making a difference? The descriptive and
substantive representation of women in local government

In a study of Belgian local politics in Chapter 7, Petra Meier and Dries Verlet
take up Phillips’ (1995) theory of the politics of presence, which provides
reasons for expecting a link between descriptive representation (the number of
women elected) and substantive representation (the effects of women’s pres-
ence). Some scholars have argued that ‘descriptive representation by gender
improves substantive representation for women in every polity for which we
have a measure’ (Mansbridge 2005: 622). However, while the ‘complicated rela-
tionship between sex, gender and the substantive representation of women’
(Childs 2006: 7) has been of considerable interest to feminist political scientists,
the focus of analysis has typically been on the national rather than local level. Kanter’s (1977) early, seminal study on women’s political representation was one of the first to reveal what happens when the proportional representation of women is low. She argued that ‘token’ women, whose visibility and ascribed characteristics serve to identify them as different, face certain politically relevant pressures such as difficulties in generating alliances and loyalty tests, and that they engage in interactive and adaptive behaviours such as minimizing change (Kanter 1977). Consistent with previous research in national politics in Belgium, as well as elsewhere (e.g. Kittilson 2006; Wangnerud 2009), Meier and Verlet find evidence that higher levels of female politicians contribute to strengthening women’s interests. Specifically, Meier and Verlet reveal that the level of women’s representation substantially shapes intra-party democratic processes, as well as party recruitment and selection policies. Importantly, Meier and Verlet’s chapter accounts for different levels of women’s representation and how these shape discrete processes which create or thwart opportunities for women in local politics.

Katherine Opello (Chapter 8) adopts a similar approach in terms of examining the extent to which a growing number of female office holders has an impact upon women’s substantive representation in policy terms in France. However, Opello’s chapter offers a longitudinal perspective and a specific comparison of two regional case studies which contrast markedly in terms of both geographic region and political ideology, in a country which was the first in Europe to require gender parity in politics. In addressing issues of substantive representation, Childs (2006: 7) has asserted that ‘simply counting the numbers of women present in politics is an inadequate basis for theorizing the difference they might make’, pointing out that while appealing, the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation fails to consider why women might seek to act for women, and to explain women representatives’ behaviour. Similarly, Chaney (2006) suggests that:

[W]hen a ‘critical mass’ of women is achieved, the substantive representation of women is affirmed only as ‘probabilistic rather than deterministic’ for it is shaped by the institutional context, the gender dynamics of debate, and importantly, the actions of individual ‘equality champions’.

Indeed, Opello’s chapter reveals evidence of critical actors and critical contexts, rather than critical mass, which act as drivers of substantive representation and the creation of an environment that is conducive to the introduction and passage of pro-women policies.

In the concluding chapter of Part III on the descriptive and substantive representation of women in local politics Anne Maria Holli focuses on Finland. To begin this chapter Holli provides a useful overview of the history and nature of gender quota legislation distinguishing between different phases and developments. Following this she turns to Finland and the 1995 introduction of gender quota law which required a minimum numerical requirement for male/female
participation of 40 per cent in local authorities. In terms of changes to the descriptive representation of women in the sector Holli demonstrates that there is cause for optimism with the quotas leading to a dramatic increase in the number of local women politicians. However, women remain disproportionately under-represented in terms of chairs of local government, a role that is not subject to legislative intervention.

Furthermore, qualitative data obtained by the author reveal that covert and overt resistance to women’s involvement has been pervasive and vicious. The picture is further complicated, Holli explains, as women’s presence has simultaneously led to some positive changes, with some political parties improving their selection and recruitment processes and some municipalities extending the gender quotas to municipal organizations outside the regulatory frame. The final section of Chapter 9 addresses the vexed question of the extent to which the increased number of women in Finnish local government has led to an enhancement of the substantive representation of women. Again, Holli’s data suggest a complex and contested picture. For example, there is no evidence of a shift to giving greater priority to what may be viewed as normatively feminine concerns such as health and education, and in fact there is actually a reported retreat from gender equality initiatives at the municipal level. At the same time, interviewees claim that women’s presence had led to improved decision-making practices with greater transparency and communication along with more attention to policy and administration. What emerges from the analysis is that no simple causal relationship may be drawn between descriptive and substantive representation, and consequently researchers need to rely upon nuanced and contextualized approaches in seeking to investigate this matter further.

Implicit in Holli’s discussion of gender equality quotas are significant changes that have transformed the local government system in Scandinavia in recent years (Bergstrom et al. 2008: 203). In the final part of the book this theme is made explicit as authors address not only the local government reconfiguration process in Western industrialized nations, but how such a process has affected women’s representation.

**Part IV: Gender and a changing local government sector**

Even a cursory look at literature on local government internationally in the past two decades reveals the centrality of change across the sector. However, this literature has rarely been written from a gender perspective. There is, however, a small body of international literature that has begun to document and critique gender inequality in local governments in industrialized Western nations in terms of work and employment in the sector. This scholarship is useful in highlighting the critical importance of a gender analysis of change (e.g. Brewis 2002; Conley 2003; Halford et al. 1997; Maile 1999) and has argued that women are not only a disadvantaged group as employees in the sector, but that this disadvantage has increased in recent years. For example, Maile (1999) has reported that well-established equity programmes in local government may be a casualty