Original Article   Open Access

State of Women in Australian Local Government: Impediments and Recommendations

Fardaus Ara
Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Rajshahi, Rajshahi, Bangladesh

Abstract

This study attempts to explore the current status of women as elected representatives in Australian local government. In addition, it will try to identify the impediments to their participation as candidates and elected members. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted to understand these barriers in the context of wider socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts. This article shows that a number of political, institutional, historical, socio-economic and cultural factors act as barriers to their entry into politics.

Keywords: Women; Australia; Local government; Barriers.

1. Introduction

Women have contributed a lot to the development of societies. However, their participation in politics remains marginal globally at all levels of politics. Local government is a vital part of the national government, closest to the common mass. Many use it as a stepping stone to higher levels of politics. It is found that both men and women who are successful at the local government become a major part of the pool who serve in future as state and federal leaders (Dow, 2014; Tobin, 2016). However, like national governments, the local governments worldwide are suffering from a low representation of women (United Cities and Local Governments UCLG, 2015; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs UNDESA, 2010).

It is assumed that entry at local politics is easier for women than in the national government because the competition is less rigorous. As local government is nearer to ordinary women, they find it easier to look after their family and children in order to take part in local politics. Women can also enjoy local politics to a larger extent due to their acquaintance with their local community. Besides, women often actively take part in organizations within their locality that encourage them to get engaged in the formal political decision-making process at the local level (Evertzen, 2001).

However, local governments are far from achieving gender parity in decision-making positions worldwide (United Cities and Local Governments UCLG, 2015; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs UNDESA, 2010). Globally, only 20% of the world's councilors are women and less than 5% are female mayors. Only 10 of the world's 195 capital cities are headed by women. In the 493 cities with more than one million residents, there are only 29 female mayors (United Cities and Local Governments UCLG, 2015).

The average percentage of female mayors is below 10% except for the most advanced areas outside Europe, where women account 14% of the mayoral positions. On average 10% mayors are women in the countries of Eastern and Western Europe. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 9% of mayors are women. The figures range from 5%-9% in South-Eastern Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. Regionally the percentage of women councilors elected to local government range from a low of 8% in Northern Africa to a high of 30% in sub-Saharan Africa. The sub-regions in Latin America and the more industrial regions witnessed 24%-29% female councilors, while South-Eastern, Southern, and Western Asia all have less than 20% women councilors in local government (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs UNDESA, 2010). However, only 15% of mayors and less than 33% of councilors are women in Australia (Tait, 2018).

In this background, the study tries to explore the status of women as elected representatives in the local government in Australia. Additionally, it will identify the barriers to the participation of women in electoral politics at this level of government.

2. Method of Data Collection

This study uses both primary and secondary data. Primary data for the research has been collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 elected female local government representatives in Western Australia while secondary data has been collected from published and/or unpublished materials, books, journals, reports, newspapers, basic legal documents, and government policy papers relevant to the study and also from the Internet. In this research, secondary data is used to support and complement primary findings.

3. Significance of the Study

So what accounts for the underrepresentation of women in local government in Australia? Part of the answer might relate to the functions performed by the local government, which may not interest many women. The

functions of local government in Australia for most of the 20th century remained confined largely to roads, rates, and rubbish. The local government had no interaction with education, health, and welfare of the community (Sawer, 2001) that caught the interest of women in local government in other nations.

Irwin (2001), contends that women's representation in Australian urban local government is hindered due to a number of factors including attitudinal (from the community and male colleagues), lack of time, family responsibilities, and the male-dominated political network.

Pini (2006), examines the issue of gender in rural local government using a small rural council as a case study which practices a new form of governance. She finds that the new governing system is male-dominated; men hold almost all positions on the 19-member board of this institution while women are excluded there because of a strong male-dominated network. She argues that there is little "new" in the new rural local governance regarding gender politics. Maybe the institutional arrangements that are emerging are new, but the patriarchal structure that exercises power over women within the new arrangement remains unchanged.

Conroy (2011), examines the impact of local government amalgamations upon serving women representatives and those contesting in the 2008 election in the Australian state of Queensland. She finds that women have to face increased workloads, higher costs of election (up to 10 times at least), and bigger new electorates because of the amalgamation. This discourages them from participating in the election. They also feel extra pressures due to the lack of family-friendly work practices and workplace bullying. With new types of barriers for women in the new local government, some of the previous barriers may have been further ingrained as a result of amalgamation.

Over 100 years have passed since the granting of franchise right to Australian women, yet women are still poorly represented in the local level politics in Australia. One noteworthy gap in the literature is that there has been little done to explore the status of women at local level politics in terms of the barriers they face. There is also a lack of scholarships on female politician's viewpoints to improve the participation of women in electoral politics. In other words, there is considerable focus on the gap, but not so much on proposals to close the gap.

4. Political System in Australia

Australia, officially known as the Commonwealth of Australia, is a federation of six states: New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (Qld), South Australia (SA), Tasmania (Tas), Victoria (Vic) and Western Australia (WA), along with two territories − Northern Territory (NT) and Australian Capital Territory (ACT). These former British colonies united to form the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. Apart from the national parliament, each state or territory has its own parliament and government. All states except the Australian Capital Territory have local government as the third tier of government (McAllister, 2006). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australia has a total of 546 local governing bodies. Usually, the term for local government is four years; but in Western Australia and Tasmania, half the local government councils are elected every two years. Mayors or presidents of the councils may be elected directly by adult franchise or by the elected council members. The term for a popularly elected mayor or president is generally equivalent to the full term of the council while election by the councilors of a mayor or president normally takes place every year (Commonwealth Local Government Forum CLGF, 2017).

5. Women in Australian Local Government: Current Status

Women in Australia joined local government late in comparison with countries like the United Kingdom, where women were more active at the local level than in national politics. Although the first female official was elected to an Australian local government in 1919, by 1960 representation of women had reached only 1%, despite the efforts of the Australian Local Government Women's Association [ALGAW], established in 1951, to increase female participation (Sawer, 2001). Women were granted the right to vote in local government elections (subject to property ownership) state by state and came into effect in all states by the early 1920s (Table 1).

Table-1. Year of Right to Vote, and Stand in Local Government and Election to Office by First Women

Region	Right to vote*	Right to stand	First elected
South Australia	1861	1914	1919
Western Australia	1876	1919	1920
Queensland	1879	1920	1925
Tasmania-Rural	1893	1911	1957
Tas-Hobart City Council	1893	1902	1952
Tas-Launceston City Council	1894	1945	1950
NSW-Sydney City Council	1900	1918	1963
Victoria	1903	1914	1920
NSW Municipalities and Shire	1906	1918	1928
Qld-City of Brisbane	1924	1924	1949

Note: Reprinted from Smith (1975) *the dates refer to similar rights for men and women except universal rights. In majority cases, property qualifications restricted the local government franchise and eligibility for election.

Having the right to sit on local government councils, women did not hurry to participate in council elections (Irwin, 2001). By 1960 there were only 100 female councilors, that rose to 250 in 1970 across Australia (Whip and Fletcher, 1999). The situation started to change in the 1970s when new organizations such as the Women's Electoral Lobby and Women Active Politically started campaigning to involve local government on issues like childcare and

the environment. Consequently, the percentage of women as elected local government representatives began to rise, to simply over 6% in 1980, 13% in 1986, and over 25% in 2000 as Table 2 indicates (Sawer, 2001).

Table-2. Percentage of Female Councilors in Each Australian State

States	Year of Election			
	1980 (%)	1994 (%)	2000(%)	2003-4 (%)
Queensland	3.7	21.2	28.3	30.3
Victoria	6.9	20.0	26.4	27.8
Western Australia	4.3	19.6	21.9	27.2
New South Wales	7.8	20.2	25.6	26.7
South Australia	6.8	21.6	27.4	26.4
Tasmania	5.8	16.6	21.4	23.2
Australia	6.2	20.5	25.3	28.9

Note: Reprinted from Ryan *et al.* (2005)

However, their level of participation was not consistent all through Australia, varying across states, and lagging behind in rural areas. Because of the initiatives by the federal and state governments, women gradually have started to join the local government in increasing numbers both as elected councilors and mayors. The percentage of women elected to local government has changed little over the last 20 years as Table 3 indicates. However, the status of women as mayors is much lower than councilors, indicating that women are less prominent in local government leadership positions.

Table-3. Women in Australian Local Government

States	Candidates			Elected Councilors			Mayors		
	M	F	% F	M	F	% F	M	F	% F
NSW (2008)	2,961	1,480	33.3	1,068	387	26.6	114	34	23.0
Vic (2008)	1,363	612	31.0	443	188	29.8	61	18	22.8
Qld (2008)	940	423	31.0	313	167	34.8	50	11	18.0
NT (2008)	140	66	32.0	96	51	53.1	12	04	25.0
Tas (2009)	215	76	26.1	243	38	13.5	20	07	25.0
WA (2009)	738	312	29.7	497	196	28.3	97	31	24.2
SA (2010)	912	362	28.4	468	179	27.7	53	14	20.9

Note: Reprinted from McCann and Wilson (2014); M refers to male while F refers to female

During 1980s women started to occupy the position of Lord Mayor in the capital cities, for example, Sallyanne Atkinson at Brisbane (1985-91), Doone Kennedy at Hobart (1986-96), Lecki Ord at Melbourne (1987-88) and Winsome McCaughey at Melbourne (1988-89) (Sawer, 2001). It is noteworthy that in Queensland, Western Australia, and South Australia, people elect the mayor by direct voting, while the situation differs across Victoria, Tasmania, the Nothern Territory, and some local government bodies in New South Wales, where council members elect the mayor from among the members of the council; the mayor serves one term and then resigns. Basically, the roles of these mayors are mostly ceremonial, and they are not in charge of community leadership much beyond that of an ordinary council member. Conversely, the directly elected mayors lead the council and perform managerial functions (Ryan *et al.*, 2005).

6. Barriers to the Participation of Women in Local Government

The interviews with the participants explored several impediments to the political participation of women that are broadly categorized as socio-economic, political/ institutional and socio-cultural/ideological barriers.

6.1. Socio-Economic Barriers

Socio-economic conditions influence the participation of women in political institutions and elected bodies significantly (Shvedova, 2005). These barriers concern family responsibilities, lack of finance, and bullying and harassment.

6.1.1. Family Responsibility

The scarcity of time for public life due to the crisis of balancing family and professional responsibilities is the most common barrier to the political participation of women globally. All the local government participants identified women's domestic obligations as the main cause of their low participation in politics. The usual barrier to any woman to any public position is a conflict of time for the family, especially for the responsibility of child-rearing. Thus, women, most particularly, young women do not join politics due to lack of support from family and lack of adequate childcare facilities.

6.1.2. Lack of Finance

Finances are integrally related to participation in politics. The costs of canvassing supporters, travelling, campaigning and other expenditure require money. Irwin (2001) claims that local government councilor allowances in Australia vary from as little as AU$50 to $100 in Western Australia to annual payments from AU$5,000 to

AU\$21,000, with mayors normally receiving greater pay. Usually, the elected local governments' representatives find it tough to survive financially on these petty allowances if that is their lone earning source. According to a local government councilor:

To get into politics, you need financial backing and financial security. If you are not financially secure and get financial support from other people, then your goal as a politician may be jeopardized. It could be open to bribes, and some people have greed for money in politics.

6.1.3. Harassment and Bullying

The 2009 survey conducted on women in Australian local government found that 45% of the elected women representatives faced harassment, bullying and sexist remarks in the council meetings (Australian Local Government Women's Association ALGWA, 2009). Similarly, the local government participants affirmed that sexist behavior is in practice in the councils that impedes many women to participate in politics. Although bullying between men, and also between women, is not uncommon in politics, the manner in which intimidation and bullying between the sexes are seen to be mostly one-sided raises the prospect of gender inequality being a salient feature of such interactions. It could also reflect the fact that more males occupy positions of seniority in politics and hence are in a position to bully female juniors, but this would still be considered an outcome of gender inequality.

6.2. Political and Institutional Barriers

Politics has long been dominated and controlled by men in Australia; men formulated the rules of the political game, and men defined the standards for evaluation. The legacy of this male-dominated model has resulted in lower interest and involvement of women in politics. It is essential to ensure that commitment to equality is reflected in laws and policies of the government to achieve gender parity in politics (Shvedova, 2005). The masculine nature of politics and lack of quota are identified as the major impediments to women in local government politics.

6.2.1. The Nature of Politics

Sapiro (1983), claims that politics is a man's business and the government is a men's club. Politics is a rough-and-tumble world, involving competition, aggressiveness, power, independence, rational decision-making among hard choices, and corruption that does not suit many women. Likewise, one councilor states:

Women consider politics a men's game. Politics is very aggressive and many women are afraid of it. Because it is so tough, competitive and contentious, it does not suit a lot of women.

It is evident that certain aggressive personality characteristics are required to survive and succeed in the political arenas that are antithetical to traditional feminine values of passivity and gentleness.

6.2.2. Lack of Quota

Quotas are a form of affirmative action strategy intended to address the insignificant participation of women and other minority groups in all areas of society including job, education and politics. Half of the Australian local government participants opposed a quota system as according to them it is contrary to merit-based appointments. However, other participants felt that a quota system might be introduced at the local level for a certain period of time to increase the participation of women, as local politics is dominated by men. Nevertheless, in the long term, women need to be skilled and competent enough to secure their place in politics.

6.3. Socio-Cultural and Ideological Barriers

Social expectations regarding behaviors and appropriate roles of women and men and the gender relations are shaped by culture. In most societies, culture defines "women's work" and "men's work" both in the household and in the wider community although the patterns and the explanations differ among societies and change over time. Participants identified the socio-cultural system as a major factor influencing the political participation of women in Australia. The traditional division of labor, peoples' attitudes towards women in society, and the socialization of women, in particular, are identified as the most serious barriers to the political participation of women.

6.3.1. Traditional Gender Roles

Traditional norms and practices globally specify women's key roles as mothers and homemakers and place them in the private arena of home and men in the public sphere. Because women are inextricably associated with the private domain, women need to bargain for their entry into the public sphere depending on the accessible resources in a given culture and society (Shvedova, 2005). All the local government participants share the same views on the impact of traditional gender roles. According to one participant:

I think there are still prejudices around, although it is changing slowly and the younger generations are much more equal in approach to women. Women still play the traditional role of homemaker, look after the family, and I think it does influence their participation in politics. Men are not prepared to do the housework, are not prepared to take care of the children, and are not ready to sacrifice his career to favor his wife. It is the wife who makes all the sacrifices to favor her husband. It is a cultural thing, and it will take generations to change as the cultural thing exists here for many generations.

The traditional gender roles in the family, community and society encourage women to prioritize the private domain of home to take care of household needs, look after their husbands and children, thus leaving them with little time to get involved in politics.

6.3.2. Socialization

Boys and girls are socialized in different ways from the time they are born. In many cultures, girls are encouraged to be passive and act accordingly, particularly when in public. These strong gender socialization practices result in the patriarchal status quo being maintained so that men continue to occupy the powerful public positions in society and women the subordinate (Bussey, 1986).

The local government participants identified socialization as a deterrent for the political participation of women in Australia. A local government councilor claims:

I think women themselves put the barriers around them "I cannot do it, I am too busy at home, my husband would not like it, my children will suffer". Women inherently think this way. In fact, they are grown up to believe this way. Some very rare women say "no, it is important to me, I am going to fit it in with the family and my family will come along with that".

The socialization process has influenced the construction of gender in a number of ways and influence women's political participation in society. It becomes difficult for the majority of women to overcome stereotyped gender roles and get involved in politics.

6.3.3. Lack of Confidence

Lack of confidence is one of the fundamental causes for the inadequate representation of women in formal political organizations. Women indeed have all potentialities to lead but fear at times keeps them away from participating in electoral politics (Shvedova, 2005). It is seen that if women are grown up feeling unsuitable in public life or even shame in some instances may have a negative impact on their self-confidence. Moreover, if men are prone to be condescending and too critical of women who take part in politics, then this will have an impact on their confidence.

Local government participants mentioned the lack of self-confidence as an impediment to their participation in electoral politics. According to a participant:

Some women have a lack of confidence to join politics. Especially, younger women fear to join politics because men can be very demeaning to women, put down women easily. They also feel uncomfortable to deal with men.

Another participant states:

The current politics is very aggressive. One needs self-confidence; be bold and arrogant to continue there. Many women do not have the self-confidence that puts them off from politics.

7. Conclusion and Recommendation

Women are underrepresented in local government politics. Factors like family responsibilities, traditional gender roles, lack of resources, attitudes of broader society towards women, the aggressive nature of politics, and the chauvinistic attitudes of male colleagues present challenges to women when considering politics as a career. It is not that they are incapable, it is due to the systems that discourage them from participating. Male politicians still dominate the key positions like the mayor. Patriarchy is deep-rooted in the society that shapes and guides peoples' mindset towards women. It is a good sign that women are coming forward by breaking conventional social norms and practices and participating in politics.

Suggestions were sought from the female participants to improve the status of political participation of women. The participants recommended a number of strategies to improve their level of participation in politics. The importance is given to family support, affirmative action by the government and wider cultural change to promote more women in politics. The recommendations mentioned by the participants are listed as follows:

- Schools and universities can play an important role to encourage women to be potential political leaders by including political courses at schools and encouraging children to participate in debates.
- Governments may increase honorarium at the local government to attract more women.
- Women should be encouraged to think about politics by sending an invitation to attend council meetings; local councils may play a role to develop their self-confidence so that women can feel themselves eligible to run for politics.
- More support from male politicians and equal treatment to women is necessary.
- Greater support from family, as well as easily accessible and affordable child-care, is essential so that young mothers can join politics.
- It is necessary to change the aggressive nature of politics. Politicians as a whole need to stop attacking one another to attract women into politics.
- A change in the attitudes of society is a must; for example, men need to be more accepting of women working full time, and accepting that housework and child-care should be equally distributed.
- The government should ensure more women in decision-making and other senior positions in business, trade unions and all other sectors where women might make a transition into politics.

References

Australian Local Government Women's Association ALGWA (2009). 50:50 Vision: A national programme for gender equity in local government. Available: http://algwa.com.au/manager/resources/5050vision-2.pdf

Bussey, K. (1986). *The first socialisation. In N. Grieve and A. Burns (Eds.), Australian women: New feminist perspectives.* Oxford University Press: Melbourne. 90-104.

Commonwealth Local Government Forum CLGF (2017). Country profile: Australia. Available: http://www.clgf.org.uk/default/assets/File/Country_profiles/Australia.pdf

Conroy, D. (2011). *Gendering local government amalgamations: An Australian case study focuses on the impact of local government amalgamations upon women incumbents and those standing for election in the Australian State of Queensland. In B. Pini and P. Mcdonald (Eds.), Women and representation in local government: International case studies.* UK: Routledge. 162-78.

Dow, A. (2014). *Gender equality stalls in local government.* The Sydney Morning Herald. http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/gender-equality-stalls-in-local-government-20140503-zr3jq.html

Evertzen, A. (2001). Gender and local governance. Available: www.cities-localgovernments.org/uclg/upload/docs/genderandlocalgovernance.doc

Irwin, M. R., 2001. "State of women in urban local government: Australia." In *Paper presented at the Asia-Pacific Summit of women mayors and councillors. Phitsanulok, Thailand.*

McAllister, I. (2006). *Women's electoral representation in Australia. In M. Sawer, M. Tremblay, and L. J. Trimble (Eds.), Representing women in parliament: A comparative study.* Routledge: London. 27-46.

McCann, J. and Wilson, J. (2014). Representation of women in Australian parliaments 2014. Department of parliamentary affairs, Australia. Available: http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/representationofwomeniinaustralianparliaments2014_jul_2014.pdf

Pini, B. (2006). A critique of "new" rural local governance: The case of gender in a rural Australian setting. *Journal of Rural Studies,* 22(4): 396-408.

Ryan, C., Pini, B. and Brown, K. (2005). Beyond stereotypes: An exploratory profile of Australian women mayors. *Local Government Studies,* 31(4): 433-48.

Sapiro, V. (1983). *The political integration of women: Roles, socialisation and politics.* Univerisity of Illinois P: Urbana.

Sawer, M. (2001). *A Matter of simple justice? Women and parliamentary representation. In M. Sawer and G. Zappalà (Eds.), Speaking for the people: Representation in Australian politics.* Melbourne University Press: Carlton South, Vic. 162-90.

Shvedova, N. (2005). Obstacles to women's participation in parliament. In J. Ballington and A. M. Karam (Eds.), Women in parliament: Beyond numbers. 33-50. Available: http://www.idea.int/publications/wip2/upload/WiP_inlay.pdf

Smith, A. V. (1975). *Women in Australian parliaments and local governments: Past and present.* Australian Local Government Women's Association: New South Wales, A.C.T.

Tait, M. (2018). Why Australia's local councils need to solve their gender problem. *The Guardian*: Available: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/21/why-australias-local-councils-need-to-solve-their-gender-problem

Tobin, K. (2016). *Gender: Impacts on participation in elected local government.* University at Albany, State University of New York: Michigan. https://search.proquest.com/openview/59212df462ed7795fb345266838ee6dc/1.pdf?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

United Cities and Local Governments UCLG (2015). The equality agenda of united cities and local governments. Available: http://issuu.com/uclgcglu/docs/uclg-women-en?e=5168798/2752455

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs UNDESA (2010). The world's women 2010: Trends and statistics. Available: http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/Worldswomen/WW_full%20report_color.pdf

Whip, R. and Fletcher, D. (1999). Changing characteristics of women on local government councils in Australia: 1982-1993. *Australian Journal of Social Issues,* 34(1): 59-77.