

# Women in Local Government

*An overview of current literature identifying the role and participation of women in Local Government*

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**October 2007**



# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Statistical Overview.....	3
Initiatives to increase numbers of Women in Local Government.....	5
Barriers for Women entering Local Government.....	6
Women in the Australian Public Service.....	7
The Role of Vocational Education and Training.....	7
Where to from here?.....	8
Appendix A.....	10
Appendix B.....	11
References.....	12

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to outline and summarise key issues influencing the role and participation rate of women in local government. The paper synthesises information, statistics and data gleaned from current literature on the topic across all states and territories.

The paper aims to identify statistics which either support or refute the view that women are not widely represented across all levels in local government. The participation of women as staff members of local government as well as senior managers and elected councillors is differentiated and explored as appropriate.

The paper concludes with a summary of suggested strategies proposed by those organisations who have undertaken their own primary research into gender issues within local government. Additionally, the paper proposes strategies which the Vocational Education and Training Sector might look at in attempting to increase the participation rate of women within Australia's largest employer, local government.

## Statistical Overview

A review of current available data on the participation of women in local government reveals that quite surprisingly no one body holds definitive statistics to indicate the exact numbers of women working in local government.

A range of websites for the various state associations as well as state and federal government departments were searched however to determine as accurately as possible, the current presence of women in local government.

At a glance:

- The percentage of women elected representatives nationally is around 29 percent<sup>1</sup>
- 20 percent of women working in local government are in a professional capacity and this proportion has not changed since 1996<sup>2</sup>
- Local government is both the smallest and the most 'male' of the government sectors in Australia
- Little has changed in the relative employment of women in the local government sector in Australia since 1996
- Nationally in 2001 local government employed 125,000 people of which women comprised some 50,000 or 40 percent
- Australian Bureau of Statistics Labour force figures provide an indicator of the proportion of females employed in local government as 41

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<sup>1</sup> Review of the National Framework for Women in Local Government, ALGWA, May 2007 page 8

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, page 8

percent. This compares with 45 percent of females in total employment for all of Australia.<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A.

This last figure showing the proportion of females working in local government is best supported by the following comment made in the Review of the National Framework for Women in Local Government:

*"... Australian local government is but a microcosm of Australian culture, and is probably no more male dominated than most parts of Australian society. Individual councils as organisations appear to range across spectrum of being 'women' or 'family' friendly as do other organisations within Australia."*<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding this, the literature also suggests that there is still much progress to be made to increase the participation rate of women in local government particularly in council management and senior management positions.

In the past decade the increase in women's employment in the industry has slowed. There was virtually no change in the relative employment of women between 1996 when 39 per cent of council employees were women and 2001. The picture in each of the states and territories matches the national picture with little change in the proportions of women employees since 1996, this is partly a product of the fact that overall employment by local government has been declining over this period with a reduction of 3,311 jobs a 2.6 percent drop. Hidden in these national figures is another fundamental change in local government employment: the growth of part-time employment.<sup>5</sup>

A major proportion of the women who work in local government are working part-time. In 2001, 44 percent of the women employed in local government were part-time.<sup>6</sup>

A study conducted by ALGT in 2002 as part of the phase one review of the Local Government Training Package profiled a representative sample of 21 Councils across Australia. The study showed that men dominated the local government workforce in most segments of the industry, as shown in the following table:

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<sup>3</sup> ABS, 6291.0.55.001 - Labour Force, Australia, Detailed - Electronic Delivery, Sep 2007

<sup>4</sup> Review of the National Framework for Women in Local Government, ALGWA, May 2007, page 11

<sup>5</sup> Paths for women in local government: National figures and local successes, UTS Centre for Local Government, 2004

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, page 4

Category	% Men	% Women
Government & Administration	29.8	70.2
Planning & Management of the Physical Environment	57.1	42.9
Environmental Health	64.8	35.2
Operational Works	80.6	19.4

ALGT: A National Vocational Education and Training Plan for 03-06 (2002)

## Initiatives to increase numbers of Women in Local Government

At the national level the most significant attempt to influence the rates of women working across all levels of local government was launched in 2001 through the National Framework for Women in Local Government. Developed by the Australian Local Government Women's Association (ALGWA), the framework was funded through the National Office of Local Government and the Commonwealth Government's Office of the Status of Women.

Since the introduction of the framework, some advances in strengthening the profile of women in local government were achieved and federal government funding was directed to a range of associated programmes and associations in support of women. Initiatives have included:

At the federal level:

- Funding of the Women's Leadership and Development Programme Grants to review the national Framework for Women in Local Government
- The introduction of a category for women in the DOTARS National Awards for Local Government
- A committee convened by LGMA to develop strategies which support the initiatives outlined in the Framework

At the state level:

- The establishment in Western Australia and Queensland of Ministerial Advisory Committees for women in local government. The WA Department of Local Government and Regional Development, produced a report titled "Strategies for achieving greater participation by women in the western Australian local government sector, 2004 – 2008". This paper is particularly concerned with the low numbers of women in CEO and Management positions in local government but also looks at improving the overall numbers of women in local government. An outline of the main strategies proposed by the paper is provided in Appendix B.
- The establishment in Victoria of a Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition comprised of nine organisations. This includes

awards for implementing the Victorian Local Government Women's Charter. The charter supports the principles of Gender Equity, Diversity and Active Citizenship.

- The NSW state government's "information kit for Councils" which includes practical resources to assist councils in developing local action plans to increase women's participation in local government. The kit includes strategies for increasing the numbers of women in senior management roles as well as in the role of elected representatives.
- In both NSW and Western Australia there are mentoring programmes for women in local government
- Queensland has formed the Women in Local Government Strategy Group to identify impediments and strategies to overcome them.

A review of the national framework was released in May 2007 to update the findings of the framework and promote further initiatives to ensure its efficacy.

## **Barriers for Women entering Local Government**

The literature is not conclusive on what specific barriers exist to women entering local government. It is fairly common however to read that women find the art of balancing career and family to be the main difficulty upon entering the workforce in any industry.

During the May 2007 review of the National Framework for Women in Local Government, over 86 percent of women councillors identified time demands as a concern, making this the number one issue. 'Balancing public life with family life' was the main problem experienced by 69 percent of women councillors<sup>7</sup>

Other issues included financial considerations for councillors and the workplace culture of councils. Cultural change was seen as critical for the retention of both female staff and elected members. 46 percent of women said that job selection and promotion was an issue as were lack of career structures and lack of part-time work in senior positions.<sup>8</sup>

There was also strong support voiced for further assistance for women through training and education. Whilst it is widely acknowledged that more training has been made available in the six years since the Framework was released, improvements are still needed. Training opportunities for both women councillors and staff in rural, remote and regional communities are still particularly limited.

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<sup>7</sup> Review of the National Framework for Women in Local Government, ALGWA, May 2007, page 8

<sup>8</sup> Review of the National Framework for Women in Local Government, ALGWA, May, page 22

Good courses are often expensive and then for country people, additional travel and accommodation costs severely limit opportunities. About 52 percent of officers also identified training and confidence building as issues. 'Managing conflict' was the type of training most often required, followed by 'local government financial management' and 'governance matters'.<sup>9</sup>

## **Women in the Australian Public Service**

Whilst this paper is aimed at the Local Government sector it is interesting to note the relative figures for the Public Service Sector. A report prepared for the Democratic Audit of Australia in 2007, indicates that the proportion of women in the public service reached 50 per cent for the first time in history in the 2000 – 01 financial year.<sup>10</sup> Women now comprise 54.9 per cent of all APS employees.

However as in other employment sectors, women are concentrated at the lower levels of the APS, and in particular are under-represented in the senior management and leadership group.<sup>11</sup>

## **The Role of Vocational Education and Training**

The purpose of vocational education and training (VET) is to provide skills and knowledge for work, enhance employability and assist learning throughout life.<sup>12</sup>

The role and participation of women in the workforce has the attention of all industries, not just local government. It is important therefore that any strategy aimed at increasing the numbers of women working in local government, considers the national policy paper for women in VET which was released by the ANTA Board in 2004 and which is now being implemented by the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST). The paper, titled "Women: shaping our future", outlines key focus areas for improving women's access to VET and therefore the workplace.

Key strategies relevant to promoting and encouraging women's access to VET and Local Government include:

- Delivering accessible and quality VET for women that addresses their requirements as clients with particular needs – e.g. ensuring that gender issues are addressed when developing and reviewing Training Packages

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<sup>9</sup> Review of the National Framework for Women in Local Government, ALGWA, May, page 20

<sup>10</sup> 'Changes in the Australian Public Service 1975 – 2003' Parliamentary Library, Canberra <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/chron/2002-03/03chr01.htm>

<sup>11</sup> How well does Australian Democracy serve Australian women? Democratic Audit of Australia, Report No. 8, 2007 page 70

<sup>12</sup> The national strategy for vocational education and training 2004 – 2010 (2003), page 2

- Providing information and customised advice to support and enable women in their key decision making related to life cycle transitions
- Monitoring of and further research into gender segmentation across industries and occupations
- Promoting the success of VET for women using role models and mentoring
- Improving links between informal and formal pathways for VET
- Resourcing support services for women including childcare, customised counselling and career advice, language, literacy and numeracy tuition
- Targeting women who are not yet in the workplace
- Funding for flexible and remote delivery that isn't only online

These are but a few of the suggested strategies proposed at the national VET level and the list is in no way exhaustive.

## **Where to from here?**

As the prime national focus on increasing the participation rate of women in local government has already identified a range of issues and strategies it is logical that any future directions consider the way forward proposed by the National Framework. In the review of the National Framework, a set of questions is provided to stimulate discussion about how councils might encourage and promote greater gender equity.

The following questions which are listed in the review of the National Framework are aimed at developing strategies which support increased participation of women as staff of local councils:

- Does council actively implement a home-based work policy? What proportion of staff at all levels regularly work from home as an agreed part of their employment conditions?
- Does council offer flexible working hours at the workplace? What proportion of staff at all levels take advantage of that system?
- Are women included in all job selection panels?
- Are there priority childcare places for staff in council child care centres and family day care schemes?
- What support is provided for women returning from maternity leave?

The following questions posed in the review paper are aimed at developing strategies which support increased participation of women as councillors in local councils:

- Does council provide the maximum possible reimbursement of councillor expenses including child care and travel allowances?
- Does council provide cab-charge vouchers or other adequate transport arrangements for councillors travelling at night?
- Does council's website provide information on how to become a councillor, or link to another informative website?
- Has council formulated and adopted position descriptions for councillors?
- Is there a comprehensive induction programme for all new councillors?

- Is there a 'buddy' system for new councillors to learn from more experienced colleagues?
- Is there a training plan for all councillors and is it adequately resourced?
- Is there an effective process for dealing with bullying and harassment complaints by elected members?

The above lists of questions are not exhaustive but do provide a starting point for furthering discussion on the topic of increasing women's access into local government.

Ideally, any concerted effort to increase the numbers of women participating in local government, would begin with a clear understanding of accurate numbers.

Aside from the figures gathered through the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there is no one body responsible for gathering data on the numbers of women entering and leaving local government positions. A positive step therefore would be to establish links between the major representative organisations to commence such a task. To keep an updated account of the numbers of women in local government, entering and leaving local government and their reasons for doing so, would indeed assist in the development and implementation of strategies and processes aimed at increasing the numbers of women participating in local government.

## Appendix A

**Australian Bureau of Statistics  
Employed Persons (ST E15\_Aug06) by Industry Group (ANZSIC06), Sex, State,  
Status in Employment - from August 2006 Copyright © Commonwealth of  
Australia**

**Table 1**

**Industry (ANZSIC06) by Sex**

**for Employed Total ('000), August Quarter 2007**

	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Total</b>
DIVISION_O Public Administration and Safety	339.8	292.0	631.8
SUBDIV_75 Public Administration	209.3	237.1	446.4
GRP_750 Public Administration, nfd	-	0.9	0.9
GRP_751 Central Government Administration	58.2	83.7	141.9
GRP_752 State Government Administration	68.5	89.8	158.3
<b>GRP_753 Local Government Administration</b>	<b>76.1</b>	<b>53.8</b>	<b>129.8</b>
GRP_754 Justice	5.6	8.3	13.9
GRP_755 Government Representation	0.9	0.6	1.5
SUBDIV_76 Defence	14.7	9.7	24.4
GRP_760 Defence	14.7	9.7	24.4
SUBDIV_77 Public Order, Safety and Regulatory Services	115.8	45.2	161.0
GRP_770 Public Order, Safety and Regulatory Services, nfd	-	-	-
GRP_771 Public Order and Safety Services	114.2	44.6	158.8
GRP_772 Regulatory Services	1.6	0.6	2.2
SUBDIV_O0 Public Administration and Safety, nfd	-	-	-
GRP_O00 Public Administration and Safety, nfd	-	-	-

## **Appendix B**

### **West Australian Department of Local Government and Regional Development Advisory Committee on Women in Local Government**

Strategies for achieving greater participation by Women in the Western Australian Local Government Sector:

1. Promoting career paths in Local Government
2. Achieving sector and organisational culture change
3. Providing education, training and development opportunities
4. Promoting socially responsible HRM policies, practices and services
5. Promoting the local government sector

## References

Websites referenced or researched for this paper:

- The Victorian Local Government Association's Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition  
[http://www.vlga.org.au/webpage/issues/list-women\\_gov.chtml](http://www.vlga.org.au/webpage/issues/list-women_gov.chtml)
- Centre for local government at the University of Technology Sydney  
<http://www.clg.uts.edu.au/research/index.html>
- The Australian Local Government Women's Association  
<http://www.algwa.com.au>  
The Australian Local Government Association  
<http://www.alga.asn.au>
- Office for Women, NSW  
<http://www.women.nsw.gov.au/>
- Office for Women, Queensland  
<http://www.women.qld.gov.au/>
- The Australian Bureau of Statistics  
<http://www.abs.gov.au/>
- West Australian Department of Local Government and Regional Development - Advisory Committee on Women in Local Government  
[www.dlgrd.wa.gov.au/Publications/Docs/Women\\_in\\_Local\\_Govt.pdf](http://www.dlgrd.wa.gov.au/Publications/Docs/Women_in_Local_Govt.pdf)
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