Women in Local Government

Research Examines Possible Factors Influencing Ascent to Top Job

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Since the 1980s, more women have registered to vote, and have voted, than men. Yet females currently represent less than 20 percent of the members of Congress.

At the municipal level, a little more than 30 percent of elected boards are female and approximately 15 percent of county elected boards are female. In terms of the appointed city and county managers in the United States, less than 15 percent are female.

Do these statistics suggest that elected and appointed officials in government will remain a male-dominated profession, much like human resource managers and health-care administrators are female-dominated professions today?

What are the reasons and considerations that influence such disparate representation? In this article, we provide further statistics on this matter, identify some challenges females in government leadership roles face, and test whether the gender makeup of interview pools and the gender makeup of appointing boards influence the decision to appoint females to local government management positions.

Census Data on Education, Jobs

The lack of women in senior-level positions used to be referred to as a “pipeline problem”; that is, women with the appropriate level of education and experience were not available.

According to recent U.S. Census data, however, 90 percent of both men and women have completed high school or more, and 60 percent of women have completed some college versus 58
percent of men. In addition, 33 percent of women and 32 percent of men have earned at least a bachelor's degree and 12 percent of each hold advanced degrees.¹

Although the facts clearly show women meet or generally exceed the educational levels obtained by men, a 2015 Census Bureau survey of 60,000 households determined that just 39 percent of all levels of managers were woman and 27.9 percent of these women managers held a chief executive officer position.²

When considering these statistics, one must recognize that this same study found that 73.7 percent of medical and health-services managers were women, while only 6.7 percent of construction managers were women. In addition, human resources management positions that were dominated by males in the 1970s, then equally represented by men and women a decade later, have been female dominated since the 1990s.

The type of occupation, therefore, appears to influence the percentage of women in leadership positions in each occupation.

**Focus on Local Government Profession**

When considering the city, town, and county management profession, a 2012 ICMA State of the Profession survey found that women represented 19.8 percent of chief appointed official (CAO) positions. In a 2016 study for the Council of Graduate Schools,³ however, it was determined that 71.1 percent of graduate degrees in public administration were awarded to women during the 2014–15 academic year.

Nearly three-fourths of M.P.A. graduates are now women. Since the M.P.A. is the degree of choice for local government managers, and women are earning a large majority of these degrees, it begs the question: Why aren't more women represented in the local government management profession?

We've all heard of the glass ceiling concept, which was introduced in the 1986 Wall Street Journal article “The Corporate Women.” Basically, it provides that even when armed with superior qualifications and experience, a woman's ascent is often prevented by an invisible barrier that prevents her from reaching the higher echelons of an organization.

Some commonly cited factors that impact this ascent involve family situations. Former ICMA President Patricia Martel, in a 2015 Governing magazine article⁴ opined that some women feel they had to prioritize work over family obligations to evidence their commitment to a professional
career.

Studies have also pointed out the long working hours and the public scrutiny associated with the profession, and the challenges married women have if they have children and need to face issues of relocation, child rearing, and parental care; all which makes the manager job particularly challenging.

Another reason why women have not accented to these positions, and a reason often cited, is simply gender bias.

**Female Bias by Both Genders**

Whether a job is male dominated or female dominated, the issue of gender bias still exists. Some research has shown that a surprising pro-male bias by both male and female raters exists for female-dominated jobs while neither appears to be favored in male-dominated jobs.

There is also the concept, referred to as the Queen Bee Syndrome, which involves women in leadership positions who work with male leaders and prefer to be distinct members of their group and show bias against other women.

Some research suggests that these women don’t support their female subordinates because they feel that the success of other women may challenge their own positions of power in organizations. In the Governing article, Martel also emphasized the importance of having female role models who are willing to mentor women who aspire to be local government managers.

**Significance of Board Gender**

Auster and Prasad\(^5\) analyzed the importance of gender makeup of board members who were responsible for the appointment of the top position in their respective organizations.

They concluded, in these types of appointments, that board decisions are particularly vulnerable to bias because they require committee members to make decisions with incomplete information under conditions of uncertainty. Most notable are four psychological dynamics that these same researchers believe dominate board member decisions when considering appointments:

1. Stereotyping of visible (gender, race, age, etc.) and invisible markers (religion, occupation, unobservable illnesses, etc.).

2. Similarity/attraction and dissimilarity/repulsion. People tend to be attracted to others whom they
perceive as being from similar social categories.

3. In-group favoritism. Committee decisions are shaped by the social dominance of those in power and how they stereotype and categorize potential candidates.

4. Group conformity pressures. Committee members will attempt to shape the decisions of dissidents in an effort to replicate the organizational ideology and preserve their status.

Applying the four dynamics of board decision making, it is reasonable to conclude how gender makeup of boards can influence final decisions made by these boards during their hiring process.

**Women Managers in Florida**

Much of the past research tried to explain why females are not appointed to top positions in an organization. In an effort to test the portion of research that focuses on gender bias, we examined the selection process for the 26 female local government manager appointments in Florida that occurred between the years 2012 and 2016.

More specifically, the examination evaluated the gender makeup of the finalist pool and the gender makeup of the board members making the appointments to determine if any patterns or notable conclusions can be identified.

This approach was based on a previous study published in the *Harvard Business Review* that examined university faculty appointments. There, the researchers concluded that there was a zero percent chance that a female would be selected if only one female was included in the finalist pool of four candidates to be interviewed; a 50 percent chance if two females were included in a finalist pool of four candidates; and a 67 percent chance if three of the four finalists were female.

In the Florida study, again, both the gender makeup of the finalist pool and the gender makeup for each of the appointing board members was quantified. The results of the study produced these results:

- Eight of these 26 appointments (30 percent) involved the promotion of a female to the manager position without conducting a search for candidates or interviewing a pool of candidates. Therefore, no finalist pool was applicable.
- There were only six all-male boards among the 26 jurisdictions. Three of these all-male boards made the decision to promote from within, two selected a manager from a finalist pool of at least two females, and only one selected a female manager from a pool with one female. In that case, there were only two other male finalists.
• Of the remaining 18 appointments in the study, which did involve recruitment and interviews, 11 of these governments (or 61 percent) included at least two females in their finalist pool.

• Of the remaining seven appointments that only had one female in their finalist pool and which involved a recruitment and interview process, four also included at least two or three females on the appointing boards and two had at least one female on the appointing board.

• Three-fourths of the appointing boards in this study included at least one female member and of those, approximately 60 percent included at least two female members.

Need for Additional Research

Although the Florida study was limited to the local governments that appointed female managers, the results appear to support the importance of two or more females in the finalist pool and support the importance of female representation on the appointing boards when a female is appointed to a local government manager position.

Also, if one accepts the psychological dynamics that impact appointing board decisions referenced earlier in this article (stereotyping, similarity/dissimilarity, in-group favoritism, and group conformity), one can conclude that more female board members are needed if a greater number of females are to be appointed to local government manager positions.

In future research, it is recommended that the Florida study could be expanded to examine all the manager appointments (male and female) over a set period of time to ascertain the differences and similarities between the processes and gender representations when a male versus a female has been appointed. And, future research could examine whether the gender makeup of the finalist pools and the appointing board members differ when executive recruiting firms are employed by local governments to assist them with their selection of a manager.

More research could also focus on whether more female M.P.A. graduates are deciding to pursue management careers in the nonprofit sector than their male colleagues. This sector has seen tremendous growth in the United States in recent decades. Research could examine whether more females are continuing to decide to pursue such female-dominated professions as human resources management or public health administration. Perhaps there are greater numbers of females electing to work in management positions at the state or federal level of government.

The answers to these questions, and more, may help to more fully explain the reasons for the low percentage of females serving as local government managers and whether this trend will continue.

References

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