

Women are held back in local government by a culture that pigeonholes us into ‘women’s issues’

By Democratic Audit

*Local government remains a male-dominated world, with men making up a majority of both total and senior roles. If we are to achieve an equal balance, local government needs to make jobs and elected roles in the sector easier to access for those with other commitments, and stop pigeonholing women, says **Laura Wilkes** of the LGIU in the latest post of our [Gender and Democracy](#) series.*

For too long, there simply haven't been enough women in an elected capacity in local government. Women's employment in local government is also significantly lower than male counterparts, both in terms of positions of seniority and pay. Yet successive attempts to increase women's elected presence and to equalise pay seem to have fallen flat. This presents a real issue for equality, but also, the lack of women's voices in local government is a significant risk to a healthy democracy.



(Credit: Euthman, CC by 2.0)

The recent [Sex and Power 2013](#) report highlighted that just 32 per cent of councillors in the UK are women – compared to 51 per cent of the population. When it comes to leadership in local government, the figures are even more alarming. Just 12.3 per cent of council leaders in England are women as are just 13.3 per cent of elected mayors.

These figures are mirrored when it comes to women in employed positions. In 2012 just 22.9 per cent of local authority chief executives were women. A survey for the Local Government Chronicle revealed that for the overall local government workforce in 2012-13, at levels below senior management, there is a 1.7 per cent gender pay gap. This is largely because women are more likely to work in part-time, lower paid jobs.

It is clear from these figures that there is simply not an equal representation of women in local government. Yet the benefits of having women's voices are clear. Equal representation enhances democratic legitimacy. Women bring experiences and issues to the decision making-sphere that may otherwise get left behind. What is more, the electorate tend to be more confident in democratic processes if they see themselves reflected in decision-making arenas. There is also the inescapable moral argument; in 2013, over 80 years since all women in the UK were granted equal rights as men to vote, and nearly 40 years since the Sex Discrimination Act, it is simply not right that women are still not equally represented in politics and public life.

How do we explain this absence of women in local government? Are women simply less interested in being councillors and taking on positions of responsibility? This is unlikely. Instead, there are still a series of barriers that hold women back.

The most obvious is that it is still the norm for women to undertake the bulk of childcare and other caring responsibilities. This is not conducive to the role of a councillor, where meetings take place during evenings and at weekends and the demands of the role are significant. For women who already have jobs, in addition to caring responsibilities; attending the vast array of meetings, engaging with the community, in addition to political campaigning and canvassing is highly time consuming and unrealistic amongst other activities. This also means that women are more likely to work part-time; resulting in lower earnings than men and decreased likelihood that they are able to take on senior organisational roles. Are there any local government chief executives that job share, or work part time? My guess is that if any do exist, they are in the minority.

There are also cultural factors at play. A significant part of the problem is that women are continuously pigeonholed into roles that are seen as 'women's issues', such as adult social care, education and culture and leisure. More often than not, male cabinet members tend to be given portfolios for finance, regeneration and economic development; the portfolios that often act as gateways to leadership positions. This is similarly reflected in the workforce; for instance, women make up 77 per cent of [social workers in Britain](#) – not typically a role with a career path that leads to chief executive of a local authority.

How do we change this? Successive attempts to encourage women to stand as councillors, such as the '[Be a Councillor](#)' campaign, have been effective to a point, but they act as sticking plasters on a much wider problem. We urgently need to look at how being a councillor can be made much more flexible and fit more easily alongside family life and employment. This might involve thinking radically about the role of a councillor; such as job-shares, or focussing their remit much more tightly to remove endless committee responsibilities,. Crèche facilities should be a standard offer for all councillors. Thinking creatively about how individuals can contribute to meetings and decision-making forums – such as via Facetime, Skype and virtual councillor surgeries – are all ways that we could use technology to make the role more accessible to women.

Consideration should also be given to councillor allowances. Adequate remuneration for councillors could remove barriers by financially supporting women to take on the role. Pensions also need to be addressed urgently. The Government's recent decision to exclude councillors from joining or accruing further benefits under the Local Government Pension Scheme is a significant barrier to women, who may not have other paid employment, or pension schemes from which to draw in the future.

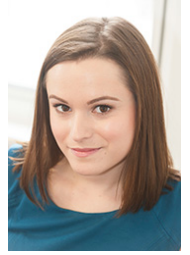
There is obviously a much broader point here too about childcare – this should no longer be seen exclusively a women's role. Greater flexibilities around paternity leave, enabling men to take on more childcare roles, and looking seriously at [suggestions around universal childcare](#) services could enable families to better balance childcare responsibilities, which may help more women into full-time employment roles and also make being a councillor more realistic.

Political parties need to do more to encourage women to stand. Looking outside 'traditional' methods of selection and actively targeting women who are prominent in community groups, school governors and local charities could act to remove the perceived barriers of 'self-nomination'. Another radical move could be to relax membership rules to enable women who may not normally associate themselves with party politics, to stand. Moving away from the 'boys club' nature of decision making in the pub will also help with this point.

Finally, if we are serious about getting more women into local government and moving those who are already there into leadership roles, we need drastic cultural change. Women should have the opportunity to contribute across the whole of local government, not pigeonholed into 'women's issues'. In particular, we have to recognise the value that women have offer in areas more aligned with leadership roles. Until as a sector we start to see women differently, and equally, we won't move forward.

Note: The views contained within this article represent the views of the author at not Democratic Audit or the London School of Economics. Please read our comments policy before posting.

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This post is part of Democratic Audit's **Gender and Democracy** series, which examines the different ways in which men and women experience democracy in the UK and explores how to achieve greater equality. To read more posts in this series [click here](#).

