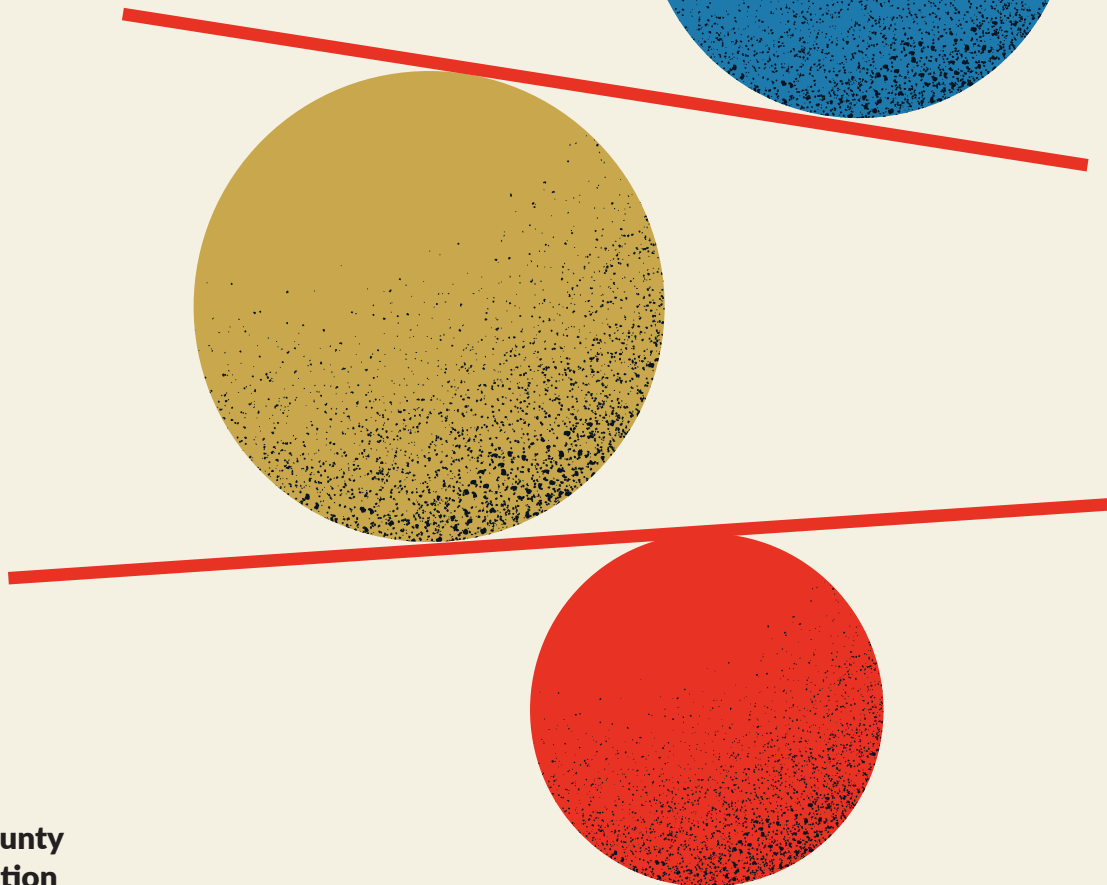


SPECIAL SECTION

From Bias to Balance: Advancing Women in Local Government through SheLeadsGov

A pulse check 50 years after the formation of the Task Force on Women in the Profession.

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ICMA

International City/County
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ICMA established the Task Force on Women in the Profession in 1974 to confront the fact that only one percent of the chief administrative officer (CAO) positions in local governments in the United States and Canada at the time were filled by women. Over the past 50 years, ICMA has provided resources and programming to help make progress toward gender balance in the profession. Today, 23% of CAO ICMA members are women, and this number continues to grow.

Despite great progress, there is still work to be done, and ICMA is looking toward the next 50 years of advancing women in the profession.

Survey Results

As part of its SheLeadsGov initiative, ICMA launched the 2024 Career Advancement Survey, which builds upon research from 2013 and 2019 (ICMA Task Force on Women Surveys) and offers valuable insights from 300 respondents on issues related to career advancement and the status of women in local government today.

Women in local government continue to be ambitious in their career goals, although many share that there are obstacles impacting their career advancement. Survey participants report experiences of gender bias in the workforce, particularly related to obtaining promotions and being excluded from organization events. Probably the most shocking of these statistics is the

87% of survey participants agree that women face more barriers to career advancement in local government than men.

roughly 27% of respondents that reported experiencing instances of sexual harassment from a superior. Figure 1 gives a more in-depth look at this and ICMA's other gender bias findings.

Experiences of bias are not uncommon circumstances for a woman in local government to have to navigate, and they showcase many of the disproportionate challenges that women face. From the survey, 87% of participants agree that women face more barriers to career advancement in local government than men. These vary based on circumstance, but many survey participants shared similar experiences, including, but not limited to, those listed in Figure 2.

While all the barriers listed were reflected in the open-ended survey responses, "family considerations" is a clear standout challenge for women in the profession. On managing work-life balance, Kate Monaghan, director of corporate services, Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council, NSW, Australia, shared, "It's not surprising that the biggest challenge for me has been my 'work-life balance.' I have worked late nights, weekends, and through family

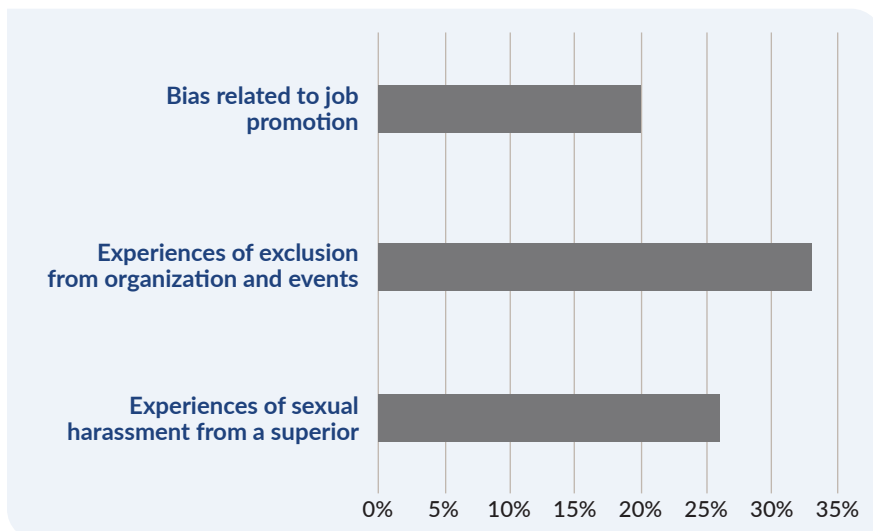
Figure 2. Bias-related Barriers to Career Advancement

- Having experienced a male-focused network of recruiters in their job search
- Unethical organizational leadership
- Organizational cultural barriers
- Family considerations
- Lack of mentorship
- Lack of self-confidence
- Lack of pay equity
- Political circumstances
- Having been perceived as lacking professional experience

holidays. It's great to have a supportive and understanding family, but it's taken me too long to learn that there is no 'balance,' and there is no separate life for work and home. We all get to live one life with the same 24 hours a day, and we get to choose how to manage our time." Seeing work as a part of life rather than an entirely separate entity has helped Monaghan and many other women in the profession manage the personal and professional aspects of their lives in a much more realistic way.

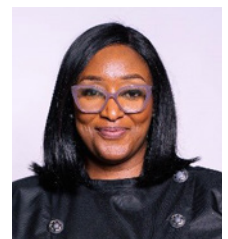
The lack of female representation in local government leadership also impacts women in the profession as they try to advance in their careers. All survey participants indicated that fewer than half of the senior managers at their organizations were women.

Figure 1. Types of Gender Bias Experienced by Survey Participants



Stories from Women around the World

Lungile Dlamini, CEO, Manzini City Council, Eswatini, who serves as ICMA International Region vice president, shared some significant challenges faced



Lungile Dlamini

by women in local government, namely, "navigating the complexities of a male-dominated leadership environment. The expectations placed on women in

leadership roles can be incredibly high, and often, there are added pressures to prove our competence, especially when it comes to balancing the needs of the community with the internal dynamics of government institutions.”

She continued, “In my position as the CEO of Manzini City Council, I’ve faced situations where my authority was sometimes questioned or undermined, not necessarily based on my abilities or decisions but simply because of my gender. This challenge is not unique to Manzini, but it’s one that many women in government face globally.”

Jessica Hoffman, assistant city administrator, Wentzville, Missouri, USA, shared that in her two decades in local government, navigating



Jessica Hoffman

perceptions, biases, and stereotypes has been one of her greatest challenges as a woman in this profession. “Early in my career, I faced skepticism from colleagues who doubted my leadership abilities due to my gender and age, often leaving me feeling like I needed to work harder than my colleagues to prove my worth.”

She went on to describe specific instances of bias that have taken place in her role as an assistant city manager. “People often mistook me for an administrative assistant, assuming I handled scheduling for the



A panel presentation at the SheLeadsGov luncheon at the 2024 ICMA Annual Conference.

All survey participants indicated that women represent fewer than half of the senior managers at their organizations.

city administrator—an experience my male counterparts rarely faced. Similarly, when I founded Missouri Women Leading Government (MOWLG), a male colleague asked during a regional city manager meeting, “Where’s the men leading government meeting?” For Hoffman, these experiences underscore both the biases and the barriers women face, especially in leadership roles.

While biases and challenges surrounding women in leadership roles are not uncommon in the profession, being a community leader during a



Marta Rudnytska

time of war is a whole other challenge that is unimaginable for many but very real for some. With many men being on the frontlines in Ukraine, Marta Rudnytska, director, Lviv City Council Secretariat Department, Lviv, Ukraine, shared what it’s like for women to step up in all areas of her community in an attempt to adapt to this new reality. “Women undergo significantly more responsibility during times of war. All Ukrainians who have been living in full-scale war for almost three years are experiencing psychological trauma, and a woman must be strong all the time. She must inspire herself, her family, and her employees.”

Regarding her own struggles in being looked to as a leader in her community during this trying time, Rudnytska confided, “I never thought that I would ever be responsible for 53 employees during full-scale invasion of my country, 43 of whom are women. Two employees (one of them a woman) joined the Armed Forces, one is the widow of a fallen soldier, and five women employees have fathers or children serving in the Armed Forces.” In addition to the work they do for the community, these women provide support for their husbands and children who are fighting on the frontlines, as well as their family members at home, and they volunteer when their husbands or children need resources on the frontlines. These employees are going through multiple traumatic events. Given this, they look to Rudnytska to provide support that is different than one would expect from a typical employee/supervisor relationship. Women like Rudnytska have proven their capacity to step up and lead under heartbreaking and difficult circumstances, countering biases and perceptions regarding a woman’s ability to lead.

Contributions from Women in Local Gov

Despite various obstacles, women in local government demonstrate their perseverance and far-reaching impact through the meaningful contributions that they make to their communities and the profession as a whole.

Dlamini proved herself more than competent through her successful implementation of multiple transformative



ICMA International VP Lungile Dlamini (right) at the 2024 Manzini Regional Day.

programs that fostered enhanced service delivery, greater organizational efficiency, transparency, accountability, and stakeholder participation throughout her community. While Dlamini created a lasting impact through these programs, she still wanted to ensure that other prospective women leaders in her community do not face similar instances of bias and pushback. To challenge traditional gender roles within municipal governance, she conceptualized and implemented a gender mainstreaming program, an initiative that enables the recruitment and placement of individuals in roles that were previously gender-specific, promoting equality and diversity within the organization. “I focused on consistently delivering results; building strong, respectful relationships with colleagues; and demonstrating my knowledge and passion for public service. I also made it a priority to mentor other women in the organization, empowering them to take on leadership roles, which has had a ripple effect in fostering a more inclusive and supportive workplace.”

Guiding and supporting a team of employees during a time of war would be a challenge for any local leader, regardless of gender. In response to this unique challenge, Rudnytska launched special trainings for her employees called “Communication with Military Personnel



SheLeadsGov Committee meeting at the 2024 ICMA Annual Conference.

“I’ve faced situations where my authority was sometimes questioned or undermined, not necessarily based on my abilities or decisions but simply because of my gender.” – *Lungile Dlamini, CEO, Manzini City Council, Eswatini*

and Their Families: Veterans’ Adaptation to Public Service and Civil Life.” These trainings include discussions with veterans on their potential needs, which have revealed that many of them aren’t exactly sure of what they need or how to communicate their needs.

In an effort to support these women local government leaders who are constantly supporting others, ICMA is stepping in to provide gender equity–

focused programming and ongoing resources in an effort to help break down these barriers and contribute to the success of women in local government around the world.

SheLeadsGov: ICMA’s Flagship Gender Equity Program

To mitigate the obstacles and bias that women experience in the workplace, ICMA has developed a flagship program accompanied by an array of resources to support women gaining a stronger foothold in the profession. SheLeadsGov (icma.org/sheleadsgov) is a global initiative that promotes gender balance by providing career resources and a networking platform for women in local government management. With dedicated staff support, ICMA has gained global recognition as the premier association to strengthen, enhance, and diversify the career pipeline for everyone in the profession,



while enhancing gender equity-focused strategic partnerships.

In 2024, the ICMA Executive Board established the SheLeadsGov Committee to serve as the conduit to ICMA staff and the board on issues related to women in the profession. Appointed by the ICMA president-elect, the member volunteers represent a blend of local government types, regional diversity, and a wide range of career experience—from new assistant managers to senior advisors and past ICMA presidents.

The committee will make recommendations that focus on the association's work to mitigate the effects of gender bias in the profession and ensure that ICMA membership is inclusive and mirrors the diversity of the communities served. In addition, the SheLeadsGov Committee is charged with appointing a woman to each ICMA Executive Board Regional Nominating Committee to provide an additional perspective throughout the board nomination process, further solidifying ICMA's commitment to gender equity.

Jessica Hoffman, assistant city administrator, Wentzville, Missouri, USA, said, "ICMA's commitment to diversity and inclusion continues to normalize women's leadership in local government, inspiring the next generation to step confidently into impactful roles. While the journey has been challenging, resilience, community support, and professional resources have enabled me to thrive and uplift others."

With bridging disparities in the local government management workforce in mind, the SheLeadsGov Committee supports a strategic approach and DEI lens for gender-related research, data collection, and analysis to help promote programs that support, encourage, and prepare future and current women leaders of all backgrounds.

ICMA and SheLeadsGov Resources

SheLeadsGov Virtual Forum

Offering a unique opportunity to connect with women in all career stages, the SheLeadsGov Virtual Forum is a free half-day event held each March to honor and inspire women in conjunction with International Women's Day and Women's



History Month. The digital event provides attendees with engaging education sessions and thought-provoking discussions. The 2025 virtual forum, being held March 5, is driven by the theme "innovate, inspire, impact," serving as a call to action for attendees to be courageous and confident as leaders in any role and at any level, to take risks and embrace change, to be bold in their ideas and actions, and to inspire others to do the same. The event is also an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of women who have made a significant impact in their organizations and communities.

SheLeadsGov Webinars

ICMA's SheLeadsGov webinars are dynamic professional development opportunities designed to empower and connect women in local government leadership. These events feature inspiring conversations with seasoned women leaders who share their personal journeys, strategies for resilience, and insights on navigating the complexities of local government—and more. Participants gain valuable knowledge and tools to lead with confidence and integrity, making these valuable webinars an essential resource for current and aspiring women leaders.

When Sonya Pritchard, chief administrative



Sonya Pritchard

officer, Dufferin County, Ontario, Canada, found herself in a rapidly deteriorating staff-council relationship that was causing organization-wide negative impacts, she turned to an ICMA webinar to help refresh her mindset and shake her self-doubt. "I participated in an ICMA webinar, 'Resilient Leadership: Powering Through in Local Government,' featuring two long-serving women CAOs who shared strategies for navigating difficult situations and managing challenging councils. One key piece of advice that resonated with me was to remember that everything is a moment in time; council dynamics change and situations evolve. They also emphasized the importance of staying true to one's values and maintaining integrity throughout the process." Pritchard shared that this new perspective and opportunity for reflection allowed her to "let go of smaller concerns, focus on the things I can control, and dedicate myself to supporting our talented, dedicated municipal employees."

Women in Leadership Column

The monthly Women in Leadership column in ICMA's *PM Magazine* features inspiring female leaders in local government who share their unique experiences and insights. This column is a treasure trove of wisdom, offering practical advice, personal stories, and strategies for overcoming challenges in the public sector. Whether you're an aspiring leader or a seasoned professional, these articles provide valuable perspectives that can help you navigate your career with confidence and resilience.

ICMA CoachConnect

ICMA's CoachConnect program offers a unique opportunity for women in local government to receive personalized, one-on-one coaching from experienced professionals. This free program is designed to help participants navigate their careers, gain new perspectives, and develop essential skills for leadership. By connecting with a coach, women can receive tailored advice, career guidance, and support to overcome challenges and achieve their professional goals.

Participating in CoachConnect is especially beneficial for women as it provides a supportive environment to discuss career aspirations, navigate salary imbalances, seek contract negotiation advice, and build confidence. The flexible structure allows for both casual check-ins and more formal, ongoing mentoring relationships, making it adaptable to individual needs.

Dlamini celebrates the crucial role that the ICMA network and professional development opportunities like this have played in helping to mitigate some of the professional challenges she has experienced. "Through the training and professional development opportunities that ICMA provides, I've been able to enhance my leadership skills, which

"I made it a priority to mentor other women in the organization, empowering them to take on leadership roles, which has had a ripple effect in fostering a more inclusive and supportive workplace."

— *Lungile Dlamini, CEO,
Manzini City Council, Eswatini*

in turn has helped me better navigate complex political and administrative landscapes. ICMA has also been a platform for networking, where I've been able to connect with other women in similar positions, share experiences, and gain insights on how to overcome the unique challenges we face in local government."

In-person Conferences and Events

ICMA's in-person events offer countless professional development opportunities to receive training on many of the issues identified in the survey results, such as overcoming workplace bias, while providing valuable networking opportunities.

The ICMA Annual Conference provides a wealth of opportunities specifically

tailored to women in local government. Speed coaching allows conference attendees to engage in multiple coaching sessions with experienced local government professionals to gain career and resume tips, build relationships and valuable connections, and discuss career aspirations and challenges. The SheLeadsGov Luncheon provides space to network with other women and share career experiences and advice. Additionally, education sessions focused on women in the profession are held throughout the conference for attendees to learn, network, and converse in smaller settings.

Emphasizing the importance of building and strengthening your professional network, Kate Monaghan, director of



Kate Monaghan

corporate services, Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council, NSW, Australia, shared that "local government industry networks are a critical strength, and ICMA has been able to extend the connection globally. The experiences, positions, and stories of others have helped me to learn and grow and remember the broader world as a context for my own local experience."



Marta Rudnytska and Lviv City councilmembers pass out aid from Polish volunteers.

SheLeadsGov Committee Members

“ICMA’s commitment to diversity and inclusion continues to normalize women’s leadership in local government, inspiring the next generation to step confidently into impactful roles.”

—Jessica Hoffman, Assistant City Administrator, Wentzville, Missouri, USA

Other Networking Opportunities

Women Leading Government (WLG) chapters support a regional and local network for women in local government and public service careers. WLG chapters provide a platform for women in government to connect, network, and share best practices for leadership development. They offer professional development and training opportunities, mentorship programs, academies, and access to resources to help women advance their careers and become effective leaders in government. WLG chapters are typically organized by state or region, and function as their own membership-based initiative.

To navigate challenges related to instances of gender bias in her role as assistant city administrator, Hoffman focused on building authentic relationships with colleagues and fostering a supportive community with the help of ICMA. “ICMA played a critical role in supporting Missouri Women Leading Government’s launch, offering guidance and encouragement that helped amplify women’s voices. SheLeadsGov has also provided invaluable resources to grow and connect with others in the profession.” Hoffman also encourages those interested to explore the more than 20 nationwide WLG chapters and “tap into this network to share knowledge, build connections, and advance women in leadership.”

ICMA and SheLeadsGov will continue to craft and curate helpful resources and events to empower women in the local government space. With the help of other gender equity-focused organizations, ICMA will continue to carry the torch for women in local government. Reina Schwartz, finance director of Albany, California, USA, and SLG Committee co-chair, reinforces this. “As ICMA looks forward with the strength of the SheLeadsGov initiative, we can picture our work on gender equity and inclusiveness as part of a three-legged stool of women’s

organizations, along with WLG and the League of Women in Government. The goal ultimately is to figure out how to support one another, and it’s not competitive.

Each of the groups has its own lens. The SheLeadsGov Committee is ICMA taking the work ‘in house’ to apply the ICMA lens to it. It’s not the only lens there is, but that’s the benefit and the value that we can bring to the work.”

Continuing the Climb

The results of the 2024 Career Advancement Survey clearly demonstrate that women are still experiencing the same kinds of gender bias and challenges that led to the launch of the Task Force on Women in the Profession in 1974. While there has been an increase in the number of women serving in leadership roles, the testimonials from these women reinforce the survey findings and show us just how much work there is yet to do to make this profession a better place for women leadership.

Despite these barriers, women have made meaningful strides in their communities and ICMA is making some serious efforts to support them and their overall success. With the support of the ICMA network coupled with ICMA’s array of resources, women are empowered and encouraged to reach new heights and make their mark on this profession.

With determination to make an even greater impact that transcends both the borders of her community and her country of Eswatini, Dlamini is one of many women making a difference through her role on the ICMA Executive Board where she says she is “committed to advocating for more inclusive policies that support women in local government.” Through ICMA’s SheLeadsGov initiative, ICMA pledges to continue guiding, supporting, and empowering women to shatter the glass ceiling and achieve greatness in this profession. **RM**

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