

Case Study: Local Government

Map out how different groups of women and men interact with local government.

Understand how the local government budget works.

Identify the overall economic context.

Know your equality and anti-discrimination laws.



Embed gender equality policies and legislation in local government financial management.

Promote diverse candidates in local government elections.

Build relationships with local groups and women's networks.

Foster women's participation in budgets and economic policy.

Changing Local Government Policies and Budgets

CASE STUDY 11: LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Monica Costa and Rhonda Sharp¹

The role of local government

Local governments play an important role in our daily lives, dealing with public health, local roads and footpaths, parks, sports, libraries, environmental issues, waste disposal, building regulations, planning, and community services. Local government can advance gender equality and women's wellbeing through:

- *provision of local social and physical infrastructure that reduces the amount of unpaid work done by women.*
- *planning provisions and emergency support to mitigate against the impacts of climate change on vulnerable people.*
- *good quality employment and contracts with suppliers.*
- *women's representation in decision-making.*

Local governments in Australia have yet to draw strong links between progressing gender equality and budget decision-making. However, the Victorian state gender equality legislation is opening new spaces for gender-responsive budgeting for local government. This case study highlights the potential of gender analysis for local government budgets. This involves:

- *mapping how women and men interact with local government (employment, contracting, services and infrastructure and women's representation)*
- *understanding how the local government budget works*
- *identifying the overall economic context*
- *knowing the relevant equality and anti-discrimination laws.*

An understanding of these elements will help identify options for change.

Mapping how women and men engage with local government

Engaging with local government requires an understanding of how different groups of women and men interact with the government. This involves examining the use of local services and infrastructure and issues of representation in professional and elected positions.

Services and infrastructure

The rhetoric of the greater efficiency of the private sector in delivering services has seen local governments adopt strategies such as competitive tendering and contracting, resource sharing, and using the market to influence the pricing of services and goods.

This context has typically overridden social and political issues. Self-cleaning public toilets are an example of an innovation in local service provision that was designed to save on cleaning costs. The social concerns of users were generally not appropriately considered. Research suggests that older Australians find self-cleaning toilets unfamiliar and difficult to use. People with a disability and their carers, typically women, are likely to avoid them for fear of being locked in, the doors opening or cleaning starting before exit.²

Poorly planned and maintained local physical infrastructure affect perceptions of personal safety and influence the way public spaces are used. This can prevent different groups of women and gender diverse people from participating fully in the local community.

Latrobe City Council joined YourGround, an interactive crowdsourcing map, developed by CrowdSpot in collaboration with Monash University, which showed the Council where women and gender diverse people felt safe to enjoy leisure, sport and play. Further a gender analysis toolkit was developed for the design and implementation of more inclusive events and projects (Table 11.1).

Table 11.1 Key questions for local government planners to consider in infrastructure planning³

When planning the project	Yes/No /NA?	Provide evidence. What action is required? Specify changes
Does this project aim to address an existing gender-based issue? If not, is there opportunity to? (e.g. lack of female change facilities)		
Have you collected and analysed data about current and projected usage by both women and men?		
Have you identified how you will engage with stakeholders who don't have formal positions within stakeholder groups? (e.g. club members rather than just committee members)		
Have you taken into account the barriers to participation of women and men in the consultation process? (e.g. time of day, care responsibilities)		
Are there equal opportunities for both women and men to contribute to making decisions during this project? (e.g. stakeholder meeting and consultations)		
Have you considered linking with other internal or external stakeholders to assist in delivering a more gender aware outcome? (e.g. Regional sporting assembly)		
Have you considered the different needs of adults, parents and children?		
Have you considered how different design elements would affect perceptions of safety for both women and men?		
Does the project design brief mention gender equality?		

Representation in professional and elected positions

Australia's 537 local councils are an important source of employment in local communities, representing nearly 10% of the total public sector jobs.⁴ In many rural and remote areas local government is the best avenue for a professional career for women.

Council initiatives. A number of councils have taken practical steps to advance gender equality in the workforce, despite limitations of sex disaggregated employment data at the council level.

This was the case of the City of Melbourne which in 2017 provided for increased flexible family leave for men and women with 20 weeks paid leave for primary carers; 20 weeks paid leave for secondary carers who support their partner's return to work; and full superannuation during paid and unpaid leave for the first 12 months.⁵

Other strategies have included strengthening gender analysis of the employment in local government. The Nillumbik Shire Council and Banyule City Council, for example, developed the Gender Equity Employment Analysis Tool to improve gender equality and eradicate discrimination.⁶

Women in senior roles. Around one in five local governments in Australia have no female representation in their executive leadership, and some local governments have taken steps to increase the number of women engaged in senior roles, improving their recruitment techniques, working conditions and applying quotas and targets.

In 2021, the national professional association for local government officers, the Local Government Professionals Australia (LGPA) set a 2025 target for gender balance in local government leadership roles of 40% women, 40% men, and 20% of any gender (40:40:20). There is, however, a long way to go to achieve greater diversity, with only one in three local governments in Australia that have four or more executive staff meeting this goal.⁷

Women representatives. The pace of change in women's representation in elected positions has been relatively stronger. In South Australia for example, a record percentage of women stood for and was elected to local government in the 2018 elections with 35% of elected candidates being women, a six percentage point increase in the proportion of women elected in 2014 (29%). In the same period, the number of female mayors trebled, with women representing 39% of elected mayors in 2018, up from 13% in 2014.

These results build on a campaign – Make a Difference – designed by South Australia's Local Government Association (LGA SA) with the aim of increasing the number and diversity people enrolling and nominating for the voluntary council elections.

In the lead up to the 2018 elections this modest-budget campaign highlighted people of different ages, gender and backgrounds using a portfolio of materials developed and made available by LGA SA to councils. The LGA SA also developed animated videos on how to enrol and nominate that were promoted online and in social media, installed billboards and promoted local government in regional and metropolitan radio and regional press. The campaign has had a significant impact, with a rise of 19% in the number of women nominating, and elected.⁸ This campaign was continued in the 2022 local government elections.

Some state governments have adopted strong a commitment of gender balance in elected positions in their local councils with the Victorian government committing to a 50% target by 2025.



Yorke Peninsula Council SA (2022)⁹

Understanding how local government budgets work

To apply a gender lens to local government policies and funding it is important to understand how a local government budget works, including what and how services are funded. The three main sources of revenue for local governments are taxation, user charges, and grants and subsidies from federal, state and territory governments.

Revenue

Taxation and user charges. Local governments across Australia raise the vast majority of their own revenue through rates (taxation on property), service charges (such as garbage collection), user charges (such as dog registrations, public swimming pools, school holiday activities) and fines and penalties. Councils have different abilities to generate revenue depending on their location, population size, rate base and the capacity to impose charges, which is established through state and territory legislation.

Information is limited about what share of local government taxes and charges is paid by women or what share of women's income is directed to paying such taxes. These equity questions matter, however. For example, as carers, women tend to use more local government services and have lower incomes than men. Therefore, women can pay proportionally more than men when revenue is raised through user charges.

Grants and subsidies. Grants and subsidies from federal, state and territory governments make up on average 14% of local government revenue.¹⁰ For some small and remote councils these grants represent more than half of their revenue. The largest of these transfers is the Financial Assistance Grants which provide federal funding to local governments to achieve equitable levels of services. This funding is allocated to the states and territories on a per capita basis and distributed to councils as per principles set under the 1995 *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act*.

Typically, councils with poor capacity to generate revenue, outside large urban centres and with smaller populations, will get a larger share of grants. Over time, Federal Financial Assistance Grants have failed to keep up with community demands placed on local councils. The value of the grants, as a proportion of total federal government revenue, sunk from 1.2% to 0.6% by 2020-21.¹¹ While some states offer borrowing facilities to local governments, in Australia local government has very limited options to augment revenue.

Expenditure

Local governments make an important contribution with operational expenditure of over \$40 billion per annum. Local government expenditure is spent on housing and community facilities (24%), transport and communication (22%) and general public services (18%).¹² State laws and regulatory frameworks guide the financial operation and reporting of councils.

Reading financial reports. Table 11.2 sets out common questions that can be asked of local government financial reports, identified by the Australian Certified Practising Accountants in the left hand column.¹³ We demonstrate how a gender lens can extend this analysis in the right hand column.

Table 11.2 How to read council financial reports with a gender lens

Common questions asked of council financial reports	Common questions asked using a gender lens
How well has the council performed in meeting its objectives?	Is there a commitment to gender equality? Which objectives are likely to be relevant to gender equality? Is there legislation or policy statements referring to gender equality?
What is the financial strength of the council?	Does the financial strength represent changes in revenues and/or expenditures that disproportionately disadvantage some groups of women compared to men? What are the likely gender effects of its key revenue sources? What is the composition of its spending and its implications for gender equality? Are gender impacts considered in grants applications (including disaggregated data on employment impacts)?
Has the council fulfilled its commitments in terms of the council strategic plan or similar?	Have resources committed impacted on gender equality? In what ways?
Does the council have a viable and sustainable future?	Has risk been assessed and financial plans developed in areas relevant to gender equality such as climate change, care services, unpaid care, affordable housing, food security and jobs? Does the council have a path for a more equal future? Are costs being transferred to the households?
How effective is the council's management?	How representative are the decision-makers (elected members, executive and other administrative staff)? How transparent are council budget decisions? Are there mechanisms for inclusive participation in budget decisions?
How did the council perform against its budget?	Is a gender lens applied to policies and budgets? Has it included an analysis of impacts of mainstream non-gender specific and gender specific allocations and programs? What are the positive and negative gender impacts? Has the analysis contributed to changes in programs and budgets?

The application of gender-responsive budgeting principles would require local councils to also investigate whether they are achieving an efficient use of resources or transferring costs. For example, are they transferring costs from the paid economy to the unpaid economy by requiring women to do more unpaid work to compensate for the loss of services, with negative effects on women’s physical and mental health and ability to undertake paid work?

Participatory budgeting provides opportunities to increase women’s engagement with local government decisions. Some local governments in Australia have used budgetary rules to involve the community in the process of deciding how its monies are spent – participatory budgeting. On occasions, citizens and community organisations have been given a role in the scrutiny and monitoring of spending of public resources.

In the City of Darebin, Victoria, for example, community groups proposed over 35 projects, subsequently prioritised for funding by a citizen jury. The Council of the City of Canada Bay in Sydney, New South Wales, opened the council budget to review by its citizens with the council committing to accept their recommendations.¹⁴ Gender-responsive budgeting facilitates participatory budgeting with its emphasis on transparency, accountability and the inclusion of women’s voices in budgetary processes.

Economic context

It is important to identify changes to the economic context because this shapes the space for government policies and budgets to address gender inequality. Local government roles and responsibilities have expanded over time, but revenue has not grown commensurably. The limited capacity to raise taxation and the adoption of rate capping rules by many councils have contributed to local government becoming more dependent on state and federal grants. These problems are compounded by cost shifting between levels of government and the politisation of funding for local projects.

Cost shifting

There has been an increase in cost shifting, with functions being devolved to local government from federal and state governments without a corresponding increase in resources. The impact of this practice on NSW council budgets is monitored with a biannual survey by Local Government NSW. Its 2023 report found that a total of \$1.36billion, the equivalent of \$460 per ratepayer annually, had been shifted to councils. **Over the last decade cost shifting has imposed an estimated burden of more than \$10 billion on councils.**¹⁵

In Victoria, the City of Greater Bendigo estimated that the cost of the maternal and child health programs shared with the state government had a \$700,000 funding gap in 2017 largely as a result of the state government failing to keep pace with the costs of providing the service.¹⁶ Increasing local government responsibilities without adequate funding is likely to result in gaps in service delivery that can increase women’s unpaid time burdens when households seek to fill these gaps.

Additional funding has also become increasingly politicised and vulnerable to being used to both garner and reward voter support, particularly during federal and state elections.

Climate change

Many of the most extreme environmental and economic impacts of climate change are experienced at a local level. Local governments have little option but to address the risk and impacts of climate change.

Alternative transport. Analysing the gender impacts of the results of climate change can assist in improving the targeting and effectiveness of climate change policies. Many local councils are taking steps to support urban cycling as an alternative transport. Studies have shown that rates of regular cycling are 10% higher for men than women.

Gender analysis would provide insight into the cycling behaviour of different groups of women and men, and indicate how to increase their numbers. A NSW report into barriers to women riding bikes found that women remain concerned about safety and look for riding infrastructure separate from roads. In addition, women typically have different riding behaviour to men's, with additional stops related to their care responsibilities.¹⁷

Individuals on low incomes. Women are more likely than men to be worried about the risk of climate change and to support some action to address it.¹⁸ Climate change is likely to exacerbate current inequalities because of its greater adverse effect on vulnerable groups, among which women are over-represented.

Those living in poverty tend to reside in areas that are more likely to be negatively affected by climate change, and have fewer resources, social networks, and capacity to address issues raised by a changing climate, or find housing alternatives.

Low income renters, in particular, have limited capacity to make the necessary upgrades to improve energy consumption and property owners have limited incentive to upgrade their properties.

Extreme climate events erode family and community well-being, particularly among poorer groups, with a study describing how prolonged heat waves in Mildura (Victoria) led to negative effects on those reliant on social housing. Children and teenagers were recorded leaving their hot homes and roaming the streets at night; spikes in domestic violence were reported; and nutrition was poorer because cooking was too difficult.¹⁹

Access to adequate shelter is a basic human right. Local governments, working in conjunction with state and federal governments, have a role in addressing these impacts, and policy and budgetary gaps, which can be facilitated by gender-responsive budgeting.

Legal context

Gender equality and anti-discrimination laws that impact local governments provide opportunities for gender-responsive budgeting.

Victorian Gender Equality Act (2020)

The Victorian *Gender Equality Act* is the first Australian law requiring all public sector agencies, including its 79 local councils, to ensure that their policies, programs and service delivery consider and promote gender equality, and take the necessary and proportionate steps to achieve it.

To achieve this, Councils are required to develop and implement action plans to address gender equality and its intersections, conduct gender impact assessments on their policies and services, undertake a workplace gender audit, and report to the Gender Equality Commission every two years. This work should be part of Council's delivering on their strategic plans.

A dashboard with this gender analysis for local councils is provided on the Portal of the Commission for Gender Equality Public Sector Insights, and it includes:

- *Four yearly Gender Equality Action Plan using the gender analysis of the workplace audit to provide an assessment of the Council's performance against seven workplace indicators and identify strategies and measures for promoting intersectional gender equality in the workplace. Some attention is given to resource adequacy, for example, the City of Ballarat's Action Plan (2021-25) includes the need to provide costings of progressing gender equality, diversity and inclusion in the workplace in annual budget preparations. These Plans are available on the portal of the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector and are reviewed every two years.*
- *Gender impact assessments of the effects of new and up for review policies, programs or services of significance and direct impact to the community. It covers issues and challenges, policy context, policy options, and policy and program recommendations to promote gender equality. This analysis can be used by local councils when seeking state government funding.*

The *Gender Equality Act* provides a favourable legal context for gender-responsive budgeting and the amendment of the Financial Management Act (2024) which aligns the gender impact assessments with budget processes (see Case Study 9).

Notes, Case study 11

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