

# Cambridge Elements

Elements in Public and Nonprofit Administration

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## GENDER IMBALANCE IN PUBLIC SECTOR LEADERSHIP

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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-70808-1 — Gender Imbalance in Public Sector Leadership  
Leisha DeHart-Davis , Deneen Hatmaker , Kim Nelson , Sanjay K. Pandey , Sheela Pandey , Amy

Smith  
Frontmatter  
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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

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It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108708081](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108708081)

DOI: 10.1017/9781108761352

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Sheela Pandey and Amy E. Smith 2020

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First published 2020

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

ISBN 978-1-108-70808-1 Paperback

ISSN 2515–4303 (online)

ISSN 2515-429X (print)

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## Gender Imbalance in Public Sector Leadership

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DOI: 10.1017/9781108761352  
First published online: June 2020

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**Abstract:** Women remain underrepresented at the highest echelons of the public sector, despite comprising half of the public sector workforce in the United States. To study this imbalance, we focus on the local government setting, which employs more than 60 percent of the public sector workforce in the United States. We use a problem-driven approach to examine gender imbalance in local government management. We employ multiple methods, inductive and deductive research, and different theoretical frames for exploring why there are so few women leaders in local government management. A qualitative analysis of interviews with thirty female local government managers and assistant managers allowed us to discern patterns that shed light on gendered workplace experiences, as well as barriers to pursuing the top job. A sequence analysis of the resumes of forty-one North Carolina county managers enabled us to detect gender differences in career paths that possibly preclude a higher percentage of women in top positions. Finally, we analyze secondary data collected on local government managers of 100 counties and 332 cities in North Carolina using the glass cliff theory as our explanatory framework. Our results suggest the women in local government management face a complex puzzle of gendered career experiences and circumstances that lend insights into gender-imbalanced leadership in this domain. We conclude with recommendations for future research and managerial action.

**Keywords:** gender, gender and leadership, gender-imbalanced leadership

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ISBNs: 9781108708081 (PB), 9781108761352 (OC)  
ISSNs: 2515-4303 (online), 2515-429X (print)

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