Elements in Public and Nonprofit Administration

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GENDER IMBALANCE IN PUBLIC SECTOR LEADERSHIP

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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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