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# The Missing Cohort: Women in Local Government\*

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\* Double-blind reviewed article.

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**Abstract** Australia historically lags other democracies in its gender representation in legislative bodies. While Victorian councils achieved a record 43.8 per cent of women elected to councils in 2020, outperforming most federal and state parliamentary tiers, they were still shy of the Victorian Government's local government target of gender parity by 2025. This article uses mixed methods to investigate women's experiences in running for Victorian local government and gender differences in electoral success and experience as a counsellor. The findings reveal a positive story about women's electability, despite fewer women running for office, their success rate is higher than men's. However, the data also shows a missing cohort of younger women. Paid full-time work, childrearing and household responsibilities are key barriers to elected office for younger women. This study contributes to the theme of 'Parliament as a Gendered Workplace' and makes recommendations to narrow the gender gap in politics.

## INTRODUCTION

Women's representation in legislatures is an important dimension of justice and equality. It is the human right to participate in public life on an equal basis to men, free of direct or indirect discrimination. Yet, women rarely hold equal representation in elected governments. In Australia, only a third (31.1 per cent) of House of

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Representative seats are occupied by women. Australia is currently ranked 50th in the world for women's parliamentary representation in the lower house, a significant fall from 15th in 1999.<sup>1</sup> The Australian Senate has 51.3 per cent women's representation.<sup>2</sup> Further, even where women's parliamentary presence has significantly increased, they may still find they are unable to perform their representative roles on an equal basis due to a gendered workplace culture.<sup>3</sup>

One bright spot for women's representation globally is local government, which has achieved higher rates of women's representation than national parliaments, generally.<sup>4</sup> The picture of women's representation at the local level in Australia is more mixed. Women constitute 37.9 per cent of federal parliamentarians compared to 35 per cent of women elected in local government nation-wide.<sup>5</sup>

The latest election figures show Victorian local government outperforming the national averages of women's representation. Women councillors represent 43.8 per cent of Victorian councillors, compared to nationwide averages of women's parliamentary representation (38.6 per cent) and of women in local government (35 per cent).<sup>6</sup> While this is a positive step toward gender parity, generally speaking local government holds less power, garners less media attention and is often overlooked as a site for women's political participation. This omission is deeply problematic as local government plays a critical role in local communities and can be a pipeline into state and federal

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<sup>1</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, 'Women in Politics: 2019'. Accessed at: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2019-03/women-in-politics-2019>.

<sup>2</sup> Proportional representation electoral systems tend to have higher numbers of women elected compared to other systems.

<sup>3</sup> Marian Sawyer, 'Dealing with Toxic Parliaments: Lessons from Elsewhere'. *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 36(1) 2021, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Ionica Berevoescu and Julie Ballington, 'A Global Comparative Study on Women's Representation in Local Government'. International Political Science Association, 2020. Accessed at: <https://www.ipsa.org/wc/paper/global-comparative-study-womens-representation-local-government>.

<sup>5</sup> State Government of Victoria, 'Gender Equality in Local Government', 2021. Accessed at <https://www.localgovernment.vic.gov.au/our-programs/gender-equity>; 5050 Vision, 'The Case for Women in Local Government', 2019. Accessed at <https://www.5050vision.com.au/case-for-women-in-local-government.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Anna Hough, 'Composition of Australian Parliaments by Party and Gender: A Quick Guide'. 2021. Accessed at [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/rp/rp2021/Quick\\_Guides/CompositionPartyGender](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp2021/Quick_Guides/CompositionPartyGender).

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parliaments.<sup>7</sup> Understanding women's experiences at the local level is crucial to mitigating the barriers to equal gender representation at all levels of government. This article aims to contribute more broadly to scholarship that examines Parliament as a gendered workplace by highlighting a potentially detrimental flow-on effect if gender parity is not achieved at the local level. We use Victoria as a case study to understand barriers to women's equality in local politics.

This study combines innovative survey data of Victorian local government candidates in 76 council elections in October 2020 with councillor survey data in December 2020 drawn from those who were subsequently elected and VEC data. Notably, we find a missing cohort of young women in their prime reproductive years. To better understand factors that may limit younger women's political representation, we apply role strain theory to investigate whether the demands of and strain associated with balancing competing roles limits younger women's ability to run for local government.<sup>8</sup>

To shed light on the experiences of women in this 'missing' group, we interviewed 10 women who were interested in local politics, but hesitated in nominating to run in 2020. This allowed us to examine what factors may have limited their capacity to seek election to represent their community. Importantly, we also find from Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) election result data that when women do run, they are more likely to succeed than men. Thus, we recommend a range of policy initiatives aimed at alleviating the role strain associated with balancing other work and caregiving demands to promote women's representation in local government and to lay a pathway into the state and federal tiers of Parliament.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

Notwithstanding compelling normative reasons to close the gender gap, there are also strong economic and governance arguments for gender parity. A McKinsey Global Institute report estimated that \$12 trillion could be added to global GDP by 2025 by

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<sup>7</sup> Ana Weeks and Lisa Baldez, 'Quotas and Qualifications: The Impact of Gender Quota Laws on the Qualifications of Legislators in the Italian Parliament'. *European Political Science Review* 7(1) 2015, pp.119-144.

<sup>8</sup> William Goode, 'A Theory of Role Strain'. *American Sociological Review* 25(4) 1960, pp. 483-496.

closing the gender gap in public, private and social sectors.<sup>9</sup> It is also estimated that gender equality would boost Australia's GDP by 11 per cent and the economy would gain \$8 billion if women transitioned from tertiary education into the workforce at the same rate as men.<sup>10</sup> Other studies find that increasing the numbers of women can alter the culture of parliamentary workplaces. For example, one study found women take their elected responsibilities very seriously and have lower levels of parliamentary absenteeism than men.<sup>11</sup> Further, parliaments with higher ratios of women to men recorded lower levels of corruption than those with fewer women.<sup>12</sup>

Researchers also find that there is strong public support for women politicians across the main parties in Australia, yet, low rates of women's participation remain in place.<sup>13</sup> This underrepresentation of women is true for both of Australia's major party groupings: the centre-left Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the centre-right Liberal and National parties (the Coalition). While the ALP does have party quotas and has achieved 48 per cent women's representation in the federal lower house, the Coalition offers a stark example of women's underrepresentation. It has fewer women in the federal Parliament (20 per cent) than it did more than 20 years ago (25 per cent) during the Howard Government's second term (2001-2004).<sup>14</sup> Presently, neither Coalition partners support gender quotas. The Liberal Party has a voluntary target to achieve gender parity by 2025.<sup>15</sup> However, the Coalition does not have adequate numbers of

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathon Woetzel, Ann Madgavkar, et al., 'How Advancing Women's Equality Can Add \$12 Trillion to Global Growth'. McKinsey Global Institute, 2015. Accessed at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth#>.

<sup>10</sup> State Government of Victoria, 'The Benefits of Gender Equality'. Accessed at <https://www.vic.gov.au/benefits-gender-equality>

<sup>11</sup> Weeks and Baldez, 'Quotas and qualifications'.

<sup>12</sup> Soren Holmberg and Bo Rothstein, *Good Government: The Relevance of Political Science*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021, p. 240.

<sup>13</sup> Andrea Carson, Leah Ruppanner, and Jenny Lewis, 'Race to the Top: Using Experiments to Understand Gender Bias towards Female Politicians'. *Australian Journal of Political Science* 54(4) 2018, pp. 439-455; Ferran Martinez i Coma and Duncan McDonnell, 'Australian Parties, Not Voters, Drive Under-Representation of Women'. *Parliamentary Affairs* 2021, pp. 3, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Matt Martino, 'Does Labor Have Twice the Number of Women the Liberals Have in Parliament and on the Frontbench?'. ABC News, 20 February 2019. Accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-07/fact-check-does-labor-have-twice-number-of-frontbench-women-/10696844>.

<sup>15</sup> Elly Duncan and Julia Baird, 'Leaked Liberal Report Shows Concerns about Women and Culture in the Party Were Raised as Early as 2015'. ABC News, 8 April 2021. Accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-08/leaked-liberal-party-report-shows-ongoing-concerns/13292160>.

women politicians coming through the pipeline to likely meet its approaching target. As local governments can be important feeders into state and national representation,<sup>16</sup> and women's underrepresentation at the local level has been found to contribute to women's continued lack of parity in state and national parliaments,<sup>17</sup> it is important to consider how women experience their roles as politicians in local governments in Australia.

While women are underrepresented in general in representative institutions, it also needs to be acknowledged that women's representation varies by age and other characteristics. Understanding representation across the life-course of women is important both for descriptive and substantive representative and has gendered implications for the pipeline into other levels of political representation.

Women have been found to draw upon their lived experiences to inform their policy platforms.<sup>18</sup> This means that women's representation across the life-course is critical to inform the policy needs of young, middle and older-aged women. Yet international and local studies show women's representation in local government tilts towards middle ages (40-59): representation is lower for younger women and those aged over 65.<sup>19</sup> Increasing the number of younger women in elected office is critical for descriptive representation and for drawing upon lived experiences to create effective legislation for women (substantive representation).

There may be other benefits for increasing women's representation at the local level. Local government is cited by Australian politicians as a useful training ground for representation in state and federal tiers of government.<sup>20</sup> If men have larger representation at younger ages and thus are building political experience, it follows that it will remain difficult to achieve gender parity via a pipeline from local government

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<sup>16</sup> Melody Crowder-Meyer and Benjamin Lauderdale, 'A Partisan Gap in the Supply of Female Potential Candidates in the United States'. *Research and Politics* 1(1) 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Mirya Holman, 'Women in Local Government: What We Know and Where We Go from Here'. *State and Local Government Review* 49(4) 2017, pp. 285-296.

<sup>18</sup> Iris Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Berevoescu and Ballington, *A Global Comparative Study*, p.10.

<sup>20</sup> Lyndon Megarrity, 'Local Government and the Commonwealth: An Evolving Relationship'. Parliament of Australia, 2011. Accessed at:

[https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/rp/rp1011/11RP10](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1011/11RP10).

into state and federal parliaments as well. Thus, equalizing gender participation in local government across all ages is critical for equal representation at that governing level, but it may also improve gender representation in other legislative tiers and help redress some of the issues related to Parliament as a gendered workplace.

The Victorian Government has recognised the importance of gender parity in local government. It promotes an inclusive gender culture through its 'Safe and Strong' gender equality strategy that sets a target of 50 per cent women's representation by 2025.<sup>21</sup> This commitment has been supported with mandatory candidate training and funding through the major local government representative bodies, the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) and the Municipal Association Victoria (MAV), to attract more women to local government. If there are not adequate numbers of women standing for council elections, these goals will be difficult to achieve. There is little recent evidence for understanding gender barriers faced by Australian local government candidates, and even less focused on Victoria.<sup>22</sup> This research aims to address this gap and to make recommendations on narrowing the gender gap in local politics.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ENTRY TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

To understand gender barriers to women's representation in local government, we apply a role strain perspective. The theory posits that individuals hold a range of roles that have associated norms, expectations and demands. Individuals can add new roles into their role set that vary across these dimensions. Intense roles are those that place onerous demands and foster role overload (for example, demands of a role exceed capacity). Conflicting roles are those whereby demands are difficult to combine with

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<sup>21</sup> Victorian State Government, 'Safe and Strong: A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy'. Accessed at <https://www.vic.gov.au/safe-and-strong-victorian-gender-equality>.

<sup>22</sup> Exceptions include Ruth Henig and Baroness Henig, *Women and Political Power: Europe Since 1945*. London: Routledge, 2001; Judy McGregor and Karen Webster, 'Women's Local Government Representation in Auckland: Does Size Matter?'. *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance* 20 2017, pp. 1-20; Barbara Pini and Paula McDonald (eds.), *Women and Representation in Local Government: International Case Studies*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011; Anne Stevens, *Women, Power and Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; Amanda Sinclair, Margaret Bowman, and Lynne Strahan, *Getting the Numbers: Women in Local Government*. Melbourne: Hargreen, 1987.

other roles. Women often hold intense and conflicting roles that trigger the stress process, leading to inter-role conflict, burnout and exhaustion.<sup>23</sup> The birth of a child provides a powerful example of how a new role triggers the stress process model. The role of mother brings social norms and expectations of time intensive, child-centred, one-on-one demands that often contribute to role overload, stress and strain.<sup>24</sup> A breadth of existing research shows mothers are most likely to report inter-role conflict and exit employment in response to the intense demands of combining childrearing with paid employment.<sup>25</sup>

We apply role strain theory to understand the experiences of women in local government. Being a local councillor adds a new role into one's role set that imposes demands, norms and expectations which may foster role overload and inter-role conflict for women combining local government with motherhood and employment. Past studies on Australian local government found women representatives face a disproportionate burden of family responsibilities compared to their male counterparts.<sup>26</sup> Conroy found that the non-standard hours required of a local councillor made it especially difficult for women to accommodate political representation in the absence of family support.<sup>27</sup>

Because the local government representative role is public facing, community oriented and subject to public scrutiny and accountability, we hypothesize it is an intense role that triggers stress, strain and overload. Further, we expect combining the role of councillor with that of mother or caregiver without adequate supports will engender inter-role strain. We expect these consequences to be particularly damaging to young women who are often also enacting the role of 'good' worker and mother, meaning

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<sup>23</sup> Laura Poms, Lila Fleming, and Kathryn Jacobsen, 'Work-Family Conflict, Stress, and Physical and Mental Health: A Model for Understanding Barriers to and Opportunities for Women's Well-Being at Home and in the Workplace'. *World Medical and Health Policy* 8(4) 2016, pp. 444-457

<sup>24</sup> Maureen Perry-Jenkins, Abbie Goldberg, Courtney Pierce, and Aline Sayer, 'Shift Work, Role Overload, and the Transition to Parenthood'. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69(1) 2007, pp. 123-138; Janeen Baxter, Sandra Buchler, Francisco Perales, and Mark Western, 'A Life-Changing Event: First Births and Men's and Women's Attitudes to Mothering and Gender Divisions of Labor'. *Social Forces* 93(3) 2015, pp. 989-1014.

<sup>25</sup> Shira Offer, 'The Cost of Thinking about Work and Family: Mental Labor, Work-Family Spillover, and Gender Inequality among Parents in Dual-Earner Families'. *Sociological Forum*, 29(4) 2014, pp. 916-936.

<sup>26</sup> Pini and McDonald (eds), *Women and Representation in Local Government*.

<sup>27</sup> Denise Conroy, 'Gendering Local Government Amalgamations', in Barbara Pini and Paula McDonald (eds), *Women and Representation in Local Government*, pp. 161-178.

they are simultaneously building careers and families under intense demands. As a consequence of these competing roles, we expect young women to be less likely to put their hand up to run for elected office and to report greater role overload, inter-role conflict, stress and strain when elected.

Existing research lends preliminary evidence to these role strain arguments in elected politics. Research from the UK and Canada suggests that one factor pulling women into local government compared to other tiers is the practicality of the location of local governance which means less travelling time to better integrate work and family life.<sup>28</sup> However, this assumption is contested.<sup>29</sup> Local government can be equally demanding and intensive as other levels of representation. Indeed, an earlier analysis found more women were elected in Australian parliaments than local councils in 2005.<sup>30</sup> Other studies focusing on women in local government find that having supportive partners who share ideological beliefs and, more importantly, general domestic duties, was essential to women's success.<sup>31</sup> Together, these studies indicate that women politicians can balance competing work and family demands when adequately supported, which may structure their trajectories into higher level positions, or without adequate support, role strain may tip them out of politics altogether. Overall, women councillors typically serve less time in their elected role than men, which may be partially explained by their greater role overload associated with balancing work, family and position as councillor.<sup>32</sup> Ryan and colleagues' study of Australian women mayors found men were able to 'compartmentalise' their paid employment and domestic responsibilities, whereas women had little separation between the two roles, or overlap, sometimes bringing children to their council meetings when childcare was not available.<sup>33</sup> This provides insight into the ways in which women are balancing roles

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<sup>28</sup> Jacqui Briggs, 'What's in It for Women? The Motivations, Expectations and Experiences of Female Local Councillors in Montreal, Canada and Hull, England'. *Local Government Studies* 26(4) 2000, pp. 71-84.

<sup>29</sup> Barbara Pini and Paula McDonald, 'A Good Job for a Women: The Myth of Local Government as Family-Friendly'. *Local Governance* 30(3) 2004, pp. 144-151.

<sup>30</sup> Marian Sawer, 'Presence and the Price: Women and the 2007 Australian Federal Election'. *Australian Feminist Studies* 23(6) 2008, pp. 263-269.

<sup>31</sup> Briggs, 'What's in it for Women?'.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Allen, 'Gendered Candidate Emergence in Britain: Why are More Women Councillors Not Becoming MPs?' *Politics* 33(3) 2013, pp. 147-159.

<sup>33</sup> Christine Ryan, Barbara Pini, and Kerry Brown, 'Beyond Stereotypes: An Exploratory Profile of Australian Women Mayors'. *Local Government Studies* 31(4) 2005, pp. 433-448.



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that are often overlapping, integrated, and demanding. We draw upon previous research in this theoretical frame to test these assumptions through analyses of quantitative and qualitative datasets, including those who nominated for local government, those who were successful in the Victorian 2020 elections, and those who considered recontesting in 2020, but ultimately decided against it. Our analysis is guided by three main research questions:

Who runs for local government?

Who gets elected to council?

What obstacles limit equal gender representation?

## **METHOD**

To answer these questions, we use a mixed methods design. We combine quantitative survey data of men and women candidates and elected councillors, with qualitative interviews with women who had previously run for office or were politically interested but decided at the last moment not to run. These unique data sources enabled us to triangulate findings to understand gender differences in the experiences of campaigning and being elected to local government. The interviews provide rich data to study a cohort found to be conspicuously absent in the survey data, which is women under 45. Ten women from this age cohort were interviewed for an hour each to understand their decisions to either not nominate or not recontest the 2020 local government elections.

### *Surveys*

We use a multi-step approach to collecting and analysing data. In September 2020, we conducted a survey of local government candidates. Working with the VLGA, we sent a survey of 50 questions to the 2,186 men and women candidates on the VEC roll. The survey contained questions about candidates' motivations for running for council, domestic arrangements, past political experience and affiliations, skills, perceived barriers to overcome to be elected, the goals candidates hoped to achieve if elected to

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council, and demographic questions.<sup>34</sup> Our survey response rate was 34 per cent, with 743 candidates completing the first survey. Comparisons with the VEC database show our sample was broadly representative on key demographics of the candidate population (see Table 1 in Appendix A). We had a slight overrepresentation of women in our candidate survey, with 43.9 per cent of women respondents compared to the population of 38.9 per cent of women who nominated for council (as per VEC data). We also had a higher proportion of regional respondents (44.3 per cent) compared to the VEC data (34.2 per cent).

Second, following the local government elections in December 2020, we undertook a second survey of the same length (50 questions) to capture responses of men and women who were newly-elected councillors at the beginning of their four-year terms. We asked the same demographic questions and questions about their motivation for running for council and activities of daily life, including paid work, childcare, and domestic responsibilities. Our survey response rate was 36 per cent, with 222 councillors completing the second survey out of a population of 623 elected councillors. Comparisons with the VEC database show our sample was broadly representative of the Victorian local councillor population, but with an overrepresentation of women (50.9 per cent in the sample compared to the 43.8 per cent elected). We again had a slightly higher proportion of regional respondents in the sample (59.5 per cent) compared to the councillor population (55.7 per cent), (see Table 1 in Appendix A for more sample details).

### *Interviews*

Third, after analysing the quantitative data that revealed a missing cohort of women under 45 years of age, we sought more granular insights into this finding using qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews to complement our quantitative data set. To do this, we advertised through the VLGA and Facebook group, 'More Women for Local Government' to interview adult women 45 and under with an interest or past experience in local government representation (see Appendix B, Table 2 for anonymised interviewee details). The Facebook group contains 1,200 members who identify as politically interested in local government. We used purposive sampling to

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<sup>34</sup> Demographic questions included age, gender, marital status, number of children under 18 at home, care-giving responsibilities, political leaning, party affiliation, locality, country of birth and cultural and linguistic diversity.

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achieve a sample with a mix of rural and metro-based women both with and without children. The mean age was 34.4. We undertook ten interviews between February and March 2021. This number of interviews was deemed sufficient according to grounded theory as key themes were repeated indicating data saturation.<sup>35</sup> Due to COVID-restrictions, the semi-structured interviews were undertaken online using Zoom and each interview took approximately one hour. We employed inductive analysis to identify key themes from the interview transcripts using the qualitative analysis software tool, NVivo.

## DATA AND ANALYSIS

### *Who runs for council and who gets elected?*

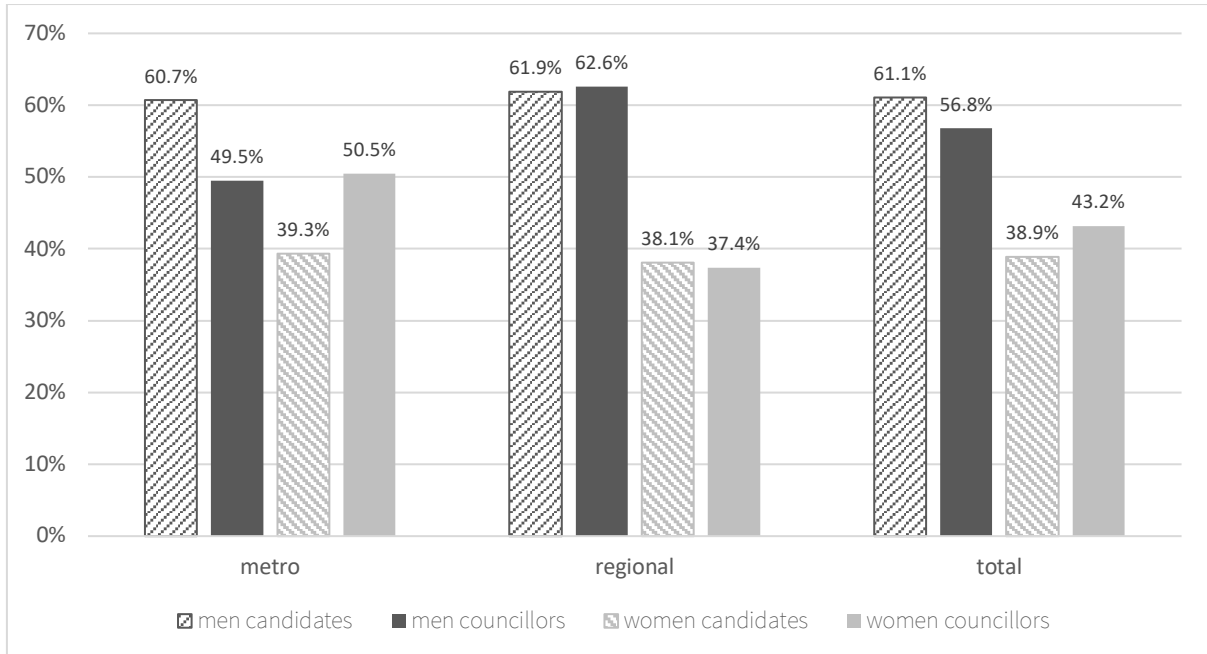
The VEC data reveals that more men (61.1 per cent) than women (38.9 per cent) nominated for election to councils. In raw numbers, this was 1,336 men compared to 850 women. However, as Figure 1 shows women candidates had a greater success rate, with almost one in three women nominated being elected (31.5 per cent) compared to only one in four men (26.3 per cent;  $z = 2.62, p = .005$ ). As a result, women comprised 44.5 per cent<sup>36</sup> of all elected councillors, men 56.8 per cent. A further comparison of success rates by locality revealed that women candidates had a greater success rate than men in metropolitan councils (24.6 per cent for women compared to 15.6 per cent for men,  $z = 8.85, p < .001$ ), but not in regional councils (45.3 per cent for women, 46.7 per cent for men,  $z = -0.46, p > .05$ ).

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<sup>35</sup> Corbin Strauss. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications., 2014

<sup>36</sup> The official proportion of female councillors is 43.8 per cent, which is at odds with the 44.5 per cent who succeeded at election. This is because several women have since resigned.

**Figure 1. Electability: Proportion of male and female candidates nominating for election in metro and regional councils and their success rate**



Source: Authors using VEC data; N=2,186 candidates and elected councillors; N=623

This finding tells a positive story of women's electability and addresses our second research question. It shows that despite fewer women nominating for councils than men, as a proportion of those who achieve success, electorally women fare better. This positive finding of female electability is consistent with other comparable local government studies, including in New Zealand<sup>37</sup> and in the federal Parliament of Australia. For example, Martinez i Coma and McDonnell's study of women's underrepresentation at the national level also finds overall that women candidates obtain more votes than men.<sup>38</sup> In Victoria, this finding is stronger in urban municipalities, which provides the first recommendation of this study: State

<sup>37</sup> McGregor and Webster, 'Women's Local Government Representation in Auckland', p.9.

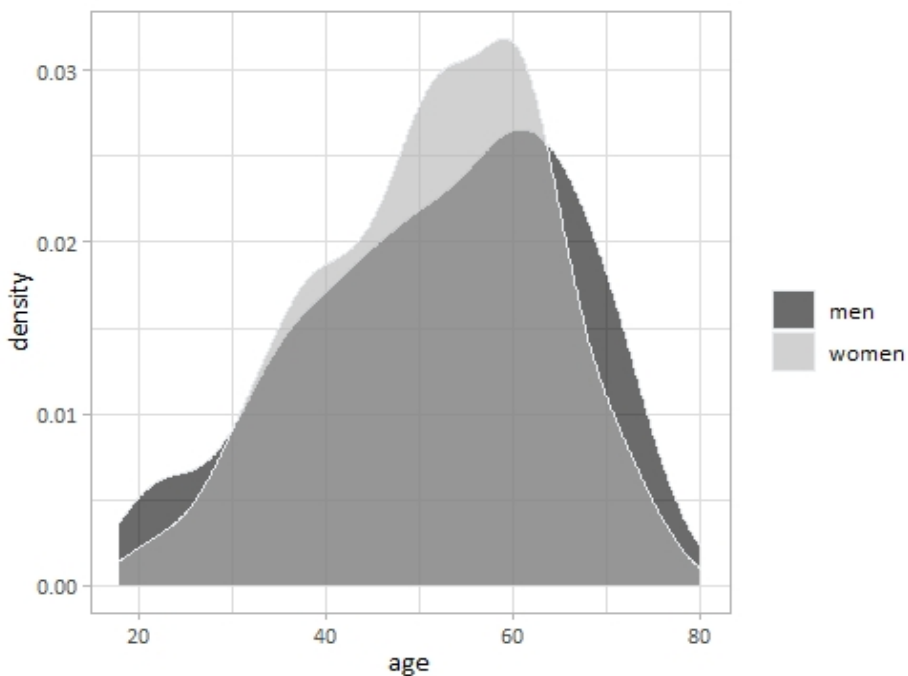
<sup>38</sup> Martinez i Coma and McDonnell, 'Australian Parties, Not Voters, Drive Under-Representation of Women', pp. 3, 16.

Government and local government sectors should commit greater resources to attracting women to run for councils in regional Victoria.

### *Age and Experience*

Although the VEC does not collect data on the age of those who run for councils, our survey data indicates that running for council is an older person's exercise (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Age and gender distribution of Victorians nominating to run for 2020 local government elections in Victoria.**



Source: Authors, September candidate survey. n=743

The mean age from the candidate's sample was 51.6 ( $SD = 13.4$ ; range 18-80). There is also an electoral dividend for those with past council experience, which skews towards men (29 percent of men and 21 percent of women aged 45 plus). Also, we can see in Figure 2 that proportionally more younger men than women (particularly in the 18-30

age group) were nominated for the 2020 elections<sup>39</sup>. In addition, more men had run for office at least three times, indicating a greater proportion of men than women with extensive campaign experience (16.9 per cent v 10.4 per cent). Overall, more men than women had previous council experience of at least one term (22.6 per cent compared to 16.6 per cent). Thus, to achieve gender parity, a second recommendation is to focus resources on training and encouraging younger women to run for council.

### *What obstacles limit equal gender representation?*

Having addressed our first and second research questions and finding that older people are more likely to run for council and that women, especially in metro areas, are more likely to succeed than men, we turn to research question three to better understand the obstacles to running for local government. The analysis of the candidate and councillor survey data reveals important gender differences in work and life roles, which we now explore.

The data shows that women candidates and elected women in the age bracket 18-45 are equally likely as men to have young children. As a result, both younger men and women have more childcare responsibilities than those aged over 45. Notably, however, it is younger women who do more of this unpaid work (see Figure 3).

Our interview data affirms this quantitative finding with details about how some women consider these competing demands of political activity and family responsibilities:

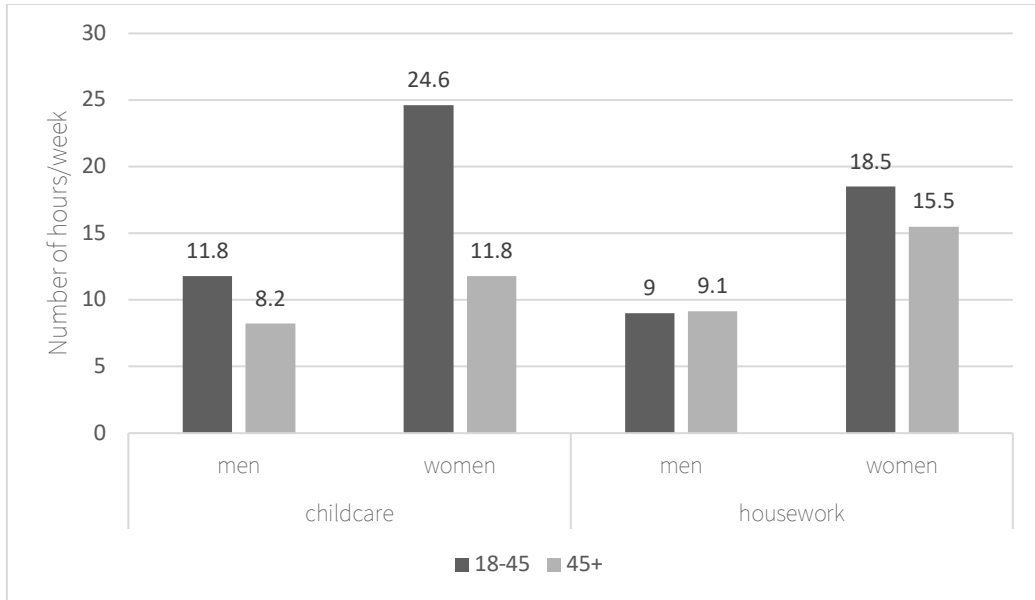
Juggling being a councillor, having a small child and having work on top of that was really challenging. And I think more challenging than I kind of first imagined.

(Interview 1, 8 March 2021)

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39 A comparison of densities using Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated that the age distribution of men candidates was significantly different from the age distribution of women candidates ( $p = .034$ ). An additional comparison using logistic regression indicated that both the youngest (aged 18-30) and the oldest candidates (aged 60+) were more likely to be men ( $b = -0.65$ ,  $SE = 0.32$ ,  $t = -2.02$ ,  $p = .043$  and  $b = -0.50$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ,  $t = -2.66$ ,  $p = .008$ ).

**Figure 3. Childcare (a) and housework responsibilities (b) of local government councillors with children under 18**



Source: Authors, N=222; n= 66 councillors with children under 18

Another former councillor, 33, said the competing demands of child-rearing and council responsibilities were irreconcilable for her and so she decided not to recontest in 2020:

I understand that council will pay for babysitters, but I don't want my children in care all the time. And so it was sort of sold to us when we were doing our training and as part of the women in local government that it was family friendly and all this, but it's not. So I feel a little bit tricked.

(Interview 4, 2 March 2021)

These findings also accord with Figure 2, which shows younger women are less likely to consider running for council than older women and younger men. As detailed in the interviews, this can be due to competing time demands with family responsibilities. More younger women than men with children under 18 spend time on childcare responsibilities, averaging 24.6 hours compared to 11.8 hours for men candidates. The councillor survey data also reveals that more women than men, irrespective of age, report having carer responsibilities (in addition to child-rearing) such as caring for elderly parents (see Table 1).

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The in-depth interviews provide testimony that women interested in political careers felt this inter-role strain and decided not to recontest the election. A 33 year-old women with children, who considered running in 2020 but eventually decided against it, said:

It is time away from my own children. So not just time in terms of literally being able to fit it into my sort of current employment arrangements, but also that that's a sacrifice for my young kids.

(Interview 7, 5 March 2021)

This gender difference is strongest among younger candidates. In addition, the data shows collectively that women counsellors with children under 18 are spending much more time on housework than their male counterparts (see Figure 3). This difference is compounded when we look at younger women councillors. Women who fall into this group spend on average 18.5 hours per week on household chores, compared to 9 hours for men. One 40-year woman with three children aged under 10 considered running for the 2020 council elections but then decided not to. Her decision spoke to the effects of role strain:

Sometimes it just feels like there's not enough hours in the day already. With work, volunteer work, community work, and parenting, and then friendships, partners, things like that, as well.

(Interview 9, 24 February 2021)

Another interviewee said she would wait until her children were older before nominating for council:

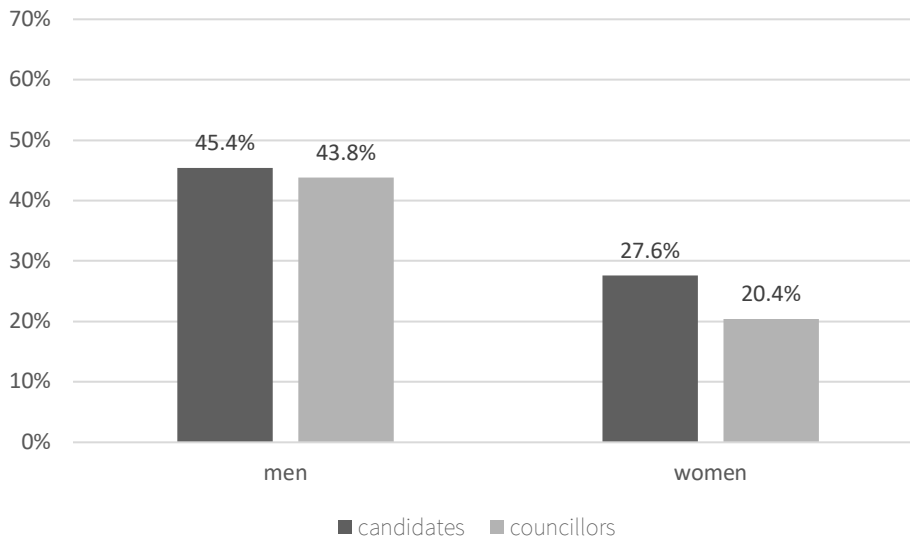
In the end, I just thought, this is my last baby, and I didn't want to regret not spending time with her. So I decided not to run, that was the key reason.

(Interview 10, 3 March 2021)

Both the candidate and councillor data show that it was about half as likely that women who nominated or were elected to council were also in full-time employment, compared to men (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4. Proportion of candidates and councillors employed full time**



Source: Authors, n=729 candidates survey; n= 222 councillors survey.

It appears that in order to accommodate political activity with other competing roles, the option of full-time work for women is often sacrificed to accommodate parenting, housework and council activity. For some women, however, this trade-off may not be an option. We see evidence of financial and/or career insecurity in decisions not to run for council in 2020:

I just didn't consider it feasible that I would be able to maintain my current employment responsibilities plus do the work of council ... I felt it would have a necessary and direct impact on my ability to earn money on behalf of my family.

(Interview 7, 5 March 2021)

This concern about financial pressure and juggling part-time employment with council work was repeated in other decisions not to run for council. For example:

My intent would have been to maintain a part time work arrangement, and then the council position as well. I appreciate that the council position is a good 30 hours of work a week, it's just outside of the usual business sort of hours.

(Interview 10, 3 March 2021)

In each instance we see evidence of role strain, the ‘felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations’,<sup>40</sup> both for women with and without children. For example, a 28-year-old in a relationship and building her career, considered running for council in 2020, but did not do so after considering the impact that taking on council responsibilities might have on her career path:

I think the expectation would have been that I would have dropped down to part time in my current position, and picked up the council position as a part time position. Essentially I would have two part time jobs.

(Interview 8, 12 March 2021)

For some interviewees, the sacrifice of giving up full-time work to be able to accommodate political activity, plus family responsibilities was considered too high a price to pay after investing time to build a career. For example:

It would be really difficult having done those hard yards to then have to leave the workforce again, and then try and re-enter in however many years’ time. I’m lucky that I have been a long-term employee. ... [I]t would have been difficult because I would not have wanted to give up, essentially, my career that I’ve worked in for 20 years, for something else.

(Interview 9, 24 February 2021)

Addressing our third research question, the survey data and interview responses show evidence of role strain as a key obstacle for younger women entering and staying in local politics. Added to this difficulty of reconciling numerous roles with council work was interviewees’ concerns over financial security. Our data shows women more than men are likely to be in part-time jobs, earning less, than men counterparts. Further, Victorian councillor remuneration is low compared to other forms of employment (between \$8,833 and \$31,444 per year).<sup>41</sup> Councillor allowances vary depending on the number of constituents in an electorate, with regional councillors in the lowest paid ‘category 1’ remuneration band. A 2008 review of council allowances found ‘allowance levels presented a barrier to candidacy for women, young people and mid-career

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<sup>40</sup> Goode, ‘A Theory of Role Strain’, p. 483.

<sup>41</sup> Victorian State Government, ‘Proposed Determination of Allowances for Mayors, Deputy Mayors and Councillors - Consultation Paper’, 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.vic.gov.au/proposed-determination-allowances-mayors-deputy-mayors-and-councillors-consultation-paper-july-2021/existing-council-allowances-system>

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professionals'.<sup>42</sup> Low pay and intense family demands mean women have less discretionary funding to outsource some of these competing pressures. Critically, we find through the in-depth interviews that the existing caregiving resources provided by local councils are, for some, not adequate to meet their caregiving needs, which means these resources may be less effective than intended. Clearly, the reasons for the missing cohort are multifactorial with weak economic compensation likely intensifying the need for full-time work and limiting means to outsource domestic labour—two factors that compound experiences of role strain. We draw upon these insights to make clear policy recommendations below.

## CONCLUSION

The Victorian Government has set a target of equal gender representation in local government by 2025. Critical to achieving this goal is understanding barriers to women's entry into, and their experiences within, local government. Here, we have applied a role strain perspective, postulating that combining the role of councillor with other intense roles like mother or worker would be difficult for women to reconcile. We find strong support for this theoretical perspective, with women councillors in our surveys reporting more than twice the housework and caregiving demands as men. Many managed these intense role demands *on top of* employment. In this regard, we find women were managing distinct work and family demands alongside council work more so than their men counterparts.

It is perhaps, no surprise that we identify a 'missing cohort' of young women putting their hand up to run for local government. Through our interviews, we show these women anticipate inter-role strain and thus are unwilling to sacrifice their careers and family wellbeing to run for local council despite their political interest. In this regard, role strain impacts women's local government representation in two ways: (1) women who are local councillors hold more intense work and family demands and, (2) women anticipate inter-role strain and thus abstain from putting their hands up or decide not to recontest the next election. As a consequence, women are more likely to run for local government at later ages when child-rearing responsibilities have eased, but with

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<sup>42</sup> Victorian State Government, 'Proposed Determination of Allowances'.

less council experience than men. These findings have serious implications for both burn-out within local government and a leaky pipeline of women for higher office. Failure to address role strain is a missed opportunity to redress questions of Parliament as a gendered workplace. Achieving gender parity may be a step toward changing entrenched gendered cultures in this novel workplace.

Despite these barriers, the data indicate that women are more electable in local government suggesting that increasing the pool of women candidates will likely increase women's representation. These patterns are most evident in urban areas, with stronger attitudinal support for gender quotas amongst Labor and the Greens (see also Martinez i Coma and McDonnell's 2021 analysis at the federal level)<sup>43</sup>, thus indicating that greater investment to support women candidates in rural areas is necessary. This provides one clear recommendation for future policy action.

Critically, however, our research also indicates a need to better support for the unique needs of women councillors, especially young women balancing high housework and caregiving demands on top of paid employment. One clear action would be to provide childcare supports for local councillors. This is recently available in Victoria but the subsidies and conditions under which they can be claimed, and what is considered a reasonable expense, vary from council to council.<sup>44</sup> Some councils' policies limit claims to formal meetings and exclude less publicly visible council work such as responding to constituents' emails. A systemic policy would create greater certainty and fairness for all councillors, including men. As our interview data indicate, some councillors were also reluctant to put children in care which suggests this resource may not be as effective as anticipated. A complementary policy would be to provide flexibility in who can be paid to care for children and to consider including friends and family as carers, which could ease role conflict outside of formal childcare operating hours.

Further, councillors would benefit from additional resources including better remuneration (which the Victorian Government is currently considering).<sup>45</sup> A flexible, capped spending account to outsource housework, is another option to increase

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<sup>43</sup> Martinez i Coma and McDonnell, 'Australian Parties, Not Voters, Drive Under-Representation of Women', p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> Victorian State Government, 'Councillor Expenses and Allowances: Equitable Treatment and Enhanced Integrity', 2020. Accessed at: <https://www.lgi.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-09/LGI-Councillor-support-report.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> Victorian State Government, 'Proposed Determination of Allowances for Mayors, Deputy Mayors and Councillors - Consultation Paper', 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.vic.gov.au/proposed-determination-allowances-mayors-deputy-mayors-and-councillors-consultation-paper-july-2021/>

women's participation across all age levels. These concessions would require a larger public discussion about why women find reconciling work, family and councillor life difficult and the value of women in these spaces at younger ages. Given that the experiences of women councillors are likely to mirror those of their constituents, a public campaign around these issues is likely to resonate with women constituents and to help normalize the need for childcare subsidies for all councillors with young children so that they are not regarded as a 'woman's expense'. This is an area that would benefit from further research. Ultimately, without solving issues around combining work, family and local council representation, women will continue to trail men in their political equality in these spaces. This remains a public issue worthy of deep investment to ensure women's successes within local government. Such successes can serve to strengthen women's pipelines to achieve gender parity and its flow-on effects in the Federal Parliament as a gendered workplace, in order to create a more representative democracy for all.