

# WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT EQUITY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

# A study of senior managers

Gender equity is a key objective of government policy, as seen in national government's target of 50:50 gender representation in senior management by March 2009. However, recent research shows that this target is far from being met.

This article focuses specifically on the representation of women in senior management positions in municipalities.

## A long walk to equity

Despite impressive strides in empowering women, many of the historical obstacles that have stood in the way of the advancement of women are still prevalent in South African society. For example, women continue to be on the periphery of planning and decision-making processes at work and in their communities. Restricted access to education, which has been a major contributor to women's underdevelopment and marginalisation, is still rife.

Since the 1994 democratic elections, the South African government has striven to reverse this system of oppression towards women. The government introduced a comprehensive system of regulation designed to govern employment practices and policies, and to provide guidance to employers and employees alike. Key legislation includes the Labour Relations Act of 1995, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997, and the affirmative action policy and Employment Equity Act of 1998. The overarching objective of this legislation is to promote the equality of citizens, including women, particularly in the workplace. However, the implementation and effectiveness of these policies have been questioned. In fact, research shows that the target of 50:50 gender representation in senior management echelons by March 2009 has not only been missed by national government, but is unlikely to be met in the near future.

## Equity at the local level

This article aims to evaluate whether local government has succeeded in meeting its objective of gender parity at senior management levels. The subjects of the research were district and metropolitan municipalities. In reviewing the implementation of gender equality initiatives in South Africa, empirical evidence such as a data set on local government employment statistics was utilised. The data for local government was then compared with that for national and provincial government to contextualise the results.

The data for the 46 district municipalities included all local municipalities, which opened a window to all of South Africa's 277 local and district municipalities. Adding the six metropolitan municipalities provided a bird's-eye view of the representation of women in senior management positions in South African local government. The six metros were analysed separately to ensure that they did not distort the results, given their size relative to district municipalities.

## Findings

The main finding of the research is that the target of gender parity at senior management level set for March 2009 was missed by a large margin. However, the problem is not confined to local government but is prevalent across the sectors. Comparative studies for the private sector reveal an even more worrying trend. A census published in 2008, conducted by the Businesswomen's

Association, revealed that between 2004 and 2008, the percentage of women executive managers increased from 14.7% to 25.3%, female directors from 7.1% to 14.3%, chief executive officers from 1.9% to 3.9% and female chairs of boards from 3% to 3.9%.

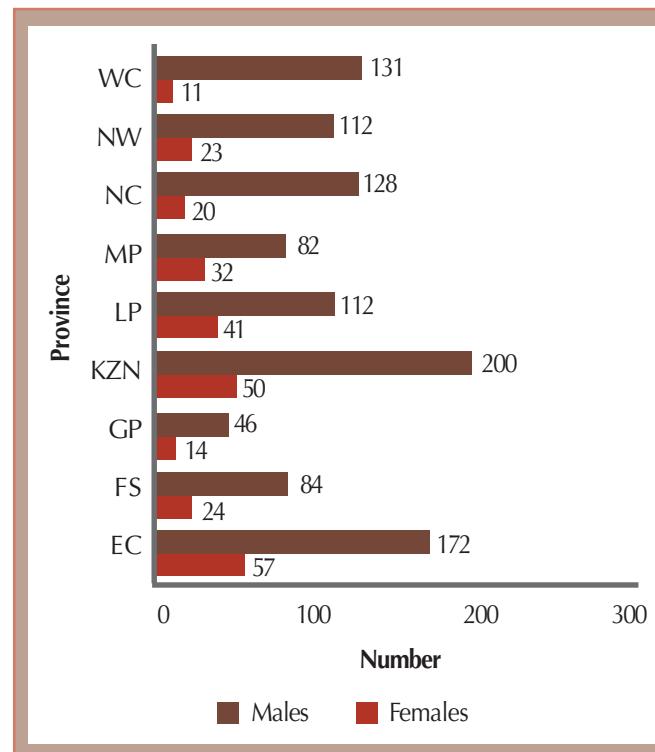
Figure 1 depicts the senior management gender equity profile of South African district municipalities. Viewed comprehensively, the district municipalities in Mpumalanga lead, with 28% of women senior managers, followed by Limpopo (27%) and the Eastern Cape (25%). The worst-performing districts in this regard are in the Western Cape, where only 8% of senior managers are female, followed by the Northern Cape (14%) and North West (17%).

The data for metropolitan municipalities is also revealing. Figure 2 shows a better picture for metros than for all the districts combined in each province except for KwaZulu-Natal. For the purposes of this study, the metros were requested to provide employment data for all people who held positions designated as senior management, regardless of the comparability of pay scales.

Although local government has put in place structures and processes to mainstream gender, it has not yet managed to achieve gender parity in its senior management echelon. Such structures and processes include committees that deal with gender issues, gender coordinators, gender forums, gender policy frameworks in different municipalities, facilitating gender training workshops for both councillors and officials, gender desks, and the placement of gender focal points in different government departments.

Gender equality targets set for March 2009 were missed by a large margin. The national government has so far achieved 36% representation of women in senior management. The bulk of this percentage was achieved within the first year of the introduction of parity in government, which means that progress in achieving the target is slow. The provincial governments combined have achieved 33%, with the Free State provincial government being the poorest in terms of gender equity: men fill 73% of its senior management

**Figure 1:** Gender equity profile of senior managers at district municipalities



positions. The district municipalities (including all 231 local municipalities) have achieved 20%. Analysed separately, metropolitan municipalities have achieved 32% representation of women in senior management.

These figures reveal that the problem is not unique to local government. In fact, the problem is countrywide and cross-sectoral. Universities and political parties were found to be no different. Of the 23 South African universities, only two had female vice chancellors in 2008/09. Of the 15 parties represented in Parliament from 2004 to 2009, only two were led by females. The argument can be made, however, that if we are going to see greater representation of women in both politics and management, local government is the most accessible sphere to serve this purpose. It is therefore vital that greater

**Figure 2:** Female vs. male senior managers per metropolitan municipality

Province	Metropolitan Municipality	No. of female	No. of male	Total	% female managers
<b>Eastern Cape</b>	Nelson Mandela	51	122	173	29%
<b>Gauteng</b>	Ekurhuleni	21	56	77	27%
	City of Tshwane	50	124	174	29%
	City of Johannesburg	108	179	287	38%
<b>Kwa-Zulu Natal</b>	Ethewini	26	108	134	19%
<b>Western Cape</b>	City of Cape Town	121	224	345	35%
<b>Total senior managers in all metros (6)</b>		365	780	1145	32%

attention be paid to women's participation at the local level. This will not only facilitate change in municipal structures and decision-making processes, but also allows for visible power shifts in the communities in which women are rooted.

An interesting finding of the research is that the traditional urban-rural divide does not automatically apply to gender representation in municipalities. For example, the highest proportion of women in senior management (40%) was seen in Alfred Nzo, an area that has no urban centre. On the other hand, the Western Cape district municipalities, which operate within or have a major centre, are the poorest in employing females in senior management.

This raises the question: *What are the key obstacles to achieving gender empowerment at the local level?*

- **Traditional barriers**

The legislation exists, but it cannot change attitudes. These range from conservative attitudes towards employing women to blatant discrimination in very patriarchal and traditional communities. Perhaps in addition to national legislation, local government should have its own framework driving women's empowerment at the local level, focusing on localised target-setting and evaluation.

- **Education and training**

Education and training initiatives have not produced enough women with the requisite skills and experience to close the gap between policy and implementation. While education is important, hands-on skills development and experience are paramount in management positions. Women therefore generally access education at a general level rather than in a targeted way. As a result, there are not enough programmes explicitly aiming to provide opportunities that enhance the capabilities of women. Tailor-made programmes emphasising management skills and hands-on experience could go a long way towards 'growing' women managers.

- **The gap between policy and implementation**

The idea of training, mentoring and support is entrenched in legislation and policy, and men are considered partners in this process. However, implementation of these policies is lacking. Regular monitoring and evaluation of implementation may serve to reduce the gap between policy and practice.

- **Equality of opportunities versus equality of outcomes**

In much the same way as the transformation of local government focused on systems and structures as opposed to outcomes, the 50:50 target for the representation of women in management was primarily focused on equality of outcomes: that is, the number of

women in management positions as opposed to qualitative opportunities to make a long-term impact on governance.

## Conclusion

It is true that in many ways the local government workplace is changing and is becoming more inviting to and supportive of women. However, the substantive advancement of women in municipal structures will require a much greater sustained effort on the part of government. While the South African government has set tight time frames to achieve this goal, it has not made the necessary investments in all elements that would facilitate the effective implementation of developed policies. The target of 50:50 gender representation in government by March 2009 was a good one, but the time frames set were unrealistic. Not enough has been done to analyse the extent of the challenge, not only at the macro level but in the context of each and every municipality. The failure to invest in the critical building blocks that would ensure the realisation of this overall goal is perhaps one of the biggest failures in this regard.

A detailed analysis of the various explanations for this public policy failure concludes that it is due to a lack of investment in activities that enhance the capacities of women. This specifically relates to education. The study concluded that the government has prioritised the outcomes of gender equality rather than focusing on providing opportunities at the earlier stages of the labour market value chain. Put differently, the targets were correct, but the time frames were unrealistic in relation to the limited investment made. The government therefore needs to put its energy and money into ensuring equality of outcomes, not just equality of opportunity.



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This is a summary of a mini-thesis for the MPhil in Public Policy at the University of Cape Town in 2009. The full paper can be obtained from the UCT library. The study was supervised by Professor Anthony Butler, who is currently with the University of the Witwatersrand.