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Victorian Independent Remuneration Tribunal  
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**Melbourne, VIC 3000**

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Dear Mr McCann

### **Submission on Councillor Allowances**

We write to make this submission in response to the Consultation Paper on the Proposed Determination of allowances for Mayors, Deputy Mayors and Councillors, published in July 2021.

In making this submission, the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) highlights the important and complex role that councillors perform and trust that Commissioners will give deep consideration to the impact that these allowances play in attracting and retaining diverse and skilled members from communities as elected representatives (councillors).

We respond in order to the Consultation Questions as set out in the Consultation Paper.

#### **1. Roles of Council members**

##### **– What are the most important duties and responsibilities of Mayors, Deputy Mayors and Councillors?**

The Local Government Act 2020 ('the Act') has removed much of the prescription contained within the Local Government Act 1989.

The change in legislation has elevated the responsibilities for councillors in relation to the good governance obligations of the role. In particular the overarching governance principles and supporting principles contained in s9 of the Act point to the key accountabilities that councillors must meet in performing the role in the community interest.<sup>1</sup>

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#### **<sup>1</sup> 9 Overarching governance principles and supporting principles**

(1) A Council must in the performance of its role give effect to the overarching governance principles.

(2) The following are the overarching governance principles—

- (a) Council decisions are to be made and actions taken in accordance with the relevant law
- (b) priority is to be given to achieving the best outcomes for the municipal community, including future generations;
- (c) the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the municipal district, including mitigation and planning for climate change risks, is to be promoted;
- (d) the municipal community is to be engaged in strategic planning and strategic decision making;
- (e) innovation and continuous improvement is to be pursued;
- (f) collaboration with other Councils and Governments and statutory bodies is to be sought;
- (g) the ongoing financial viability of the Council is to be ensured;
- (h) regional, state and national plans and policies are to be taken into account in strategic planning and decision making;
- (i) the transparency of Council decisions, actions and information is to be ensured.

- **How have the roles and responsibilities of Council members changed since the last review of Councillor allowances in 2008? What future challenges may emerge?**

In addition to the *Local Government Act 2020*, a raft of legislation (for example the *Gender Equality Act 2020* and the *Climate Change Act 2017*) are emblematic of increased complexity in the environment within which the Council operates and point to significant new responsibilities for local government (including for elected representatives).

The complexities of the modern world (incl. social, climate, and technology) have raised the level of conceptual and strategic thinking required in the councillor role.

However, there has not been a diminution in the critical thinking that attaches to the traditional oversight and review functions in role of councillor. Indeed, such absence of prescription requires that councillors (individually and collectively) be more alert to the range of risks confronting the organisation.

There are a range of such tensions between the roles of advocacy and governance oversight and we believe these deserve attention in the fixing of allowances.

- **How are Council member roles affected by a Council’s electoral structure (for example, ward structure or ratio of Council members to population)?**

We submit that councillor roles will almost inevitably be stretched between the functions of strategy and oversight. Whilst the electoral structure will certainly play a role, other factors including culture, articulation of roles and responsibilities, and electoral structure will certainly affect the roles played by councillors.

However, that may play out locally, we consider that the driving factor in fixing allowances ought be the role and accountabilities as set out in the Act. These are the accountabilities against which roles ought to be defined and performance and conduct held to account.

## 2. Purpose of allowances

- **What is, or should be, the purpose of allowances for Council members?**

It is clear that the councillor allowance is (just as it is named) an allowance and not a salary.

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- (3) In giving effect to the overarching governance principles, a Council must take into account the following supporting principles—
- (a) the community engagement principles;
  - (b) the public transparency principles;
  - (c) the strategic planning principles;
  - (d) the financial management principles;
  - (e) the service performance principles.

That said, we submit that the allowance achieves a range of purposes as follows:

- acknowledges the level of responsibility and inconvenience attached to the role;
- recognises the hours of work required:  
70% of councillors dedicate more than 16 hours per week to their role, with nearly one fifth spending more than 32 hours per week on their role.)<sup>2</sup>.  
To illustrate the modest nature of the allowance– a councillor at a Category 2 council being paid the highest rate in that bracket would be paid \$25.24/hour (\$26,245 annually; based on 20 hours/week x 52 weeks = 1040 hours)
- compensates for potential lost income  
(i.e. hours spent on councillor duties that could have been spent in paid employment);  
and
- attracts a higher calibre and more diverse mix of councillor candidates.

As described elsewhere in this submission, allowances do influence the number and quality of candidates for office in an environment where the Minister for Local Government, the Hon. Shaun Leane has announced a review into the culture of local governments.

We also conclude that the topic of councillor allowances does draw predictable media commentary. We submit that it is not a bad thing that the quantum of each allowance is transparent to the community. Looking beyond that noise of critical comment, it is to be hoped that awareness of the allowance and also the demands of the office will support the community to give careful consideration in the exercise of their votes.

The notion of such disclosure is hardly new. The OECD, in relation to Board remuneration found that “The quality and timeliness of disclosures around incentive and remuneration arrangements is also critical to informed shareholder engagement, and providing a level of assurance to minority shareholders that remuneration is structured to align executive and director incentives with the interests of the company as a whole.”<sup>3</sup>

We submit that a similar dynamic, adapted accordingly, ought to apply to local government.

### 3. Allowance category factors

- **What factors should be considered when allocating Councils to allowance categories? Is the existing system, in which Councils are allocated to categories based on population and revenue, appropriate?**

We will not make a detailed submission on this question as we believe the Tribunal will receive more detailed comment from other sources.

However, as previously stated, we consider that the driving factor in fixing allowances ought to be the role and accountabilities as set out in the Act. These are the accountabilities against which roles ought to be defined and performance and conduct held to account.

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<sup>2</sup> *Councillor expenses and allowances: equitable treatment and enhanced integrity*, Local Government Inspectorate 2020

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2011), *Board Practices: Incentives and Governing Risks*, Corporate Governance, OECD Publishing.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264113534-en>

#### 4. Adequacy of allowances

- Are current allowance values adequate, for example to:
  - attract suitable candidates to stand for Council?
  - reflect the costs (e.g. time commitment) and benefits of Council service?
  - support diversity amongst Council members and potential candidates?

Our response to this question takes two parts. The first is premised on the complexity of the role; the second on the impact of the allowance on diversity.

##### **Complexity**

Without going to a level of detail, quantum of the allowance should be based on the intrinsic factors associated with the role. Some considerations for the Tribunal could include:

##### Organisation - Wide Factors

- Size, nature and turnover
- Complexity of operations – Councils routinely deliver around 100 discrete services in a complex environment
- Structure and responsibilities of Council, including committees
- Risks and challenges of the confronting local governments

##### Councillor-Specific Factors

- Time commitment required
- Performance expectations of the role
- Inherent emotional intelligence requirements
- Involvement in strategic, value-added decision making
- Supply and demand – the need to attract and retain qualified people.

##### **Diversity**

We submit that the allowance must be at a level which overcomes, to the extent possible, economic barriers to entry by diverse members of communities.

As recognised in the 2008 Panel Report on this topic, “the value of the allowance payable to Council members can have a significant impact on an individual’s decision to stand for Council, with implications for diversity of representation”.<sup>4</sup>

Anecdotally, we know that at least one councillor who resigned in early 2019, before the end of the 2016-2020 term identified the low level of remuneration as a key reason for her resignation. As a young mother on maternity leave at the beginning of her term, the hours suited her well, but once she was in a position to return to work, she found that she was making a significant financial sacrifice in order to serve her community as a councillor. In other words, it was not possible for her to continue to work full time in paid employment while also undertaking councillor duties at a rate of remuneration that was much lower than her regular salary.

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<sup>4</sup> State Government of Victoria (2008) , *Local Government (Councillor Remuneration Review) Panel Report*, [Local Government \(Councillor Remuneration Review\) Panel Report](#).

In this response we draw heavily from the research by Carson, Ruppner & Mikolajczak ('Carson et al') as set out in Appendix 1 to our submission.<sup>5</sup> This is a collaboration of La Trobe University, the University of Melbourne and the VLGA, funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant.

The 'voluntary' nature of local government elected representative roles is a double-edged sword. It is intended to attract candidates that are 'community-minded'. However, it also precludes a large cross-section of the community whose experiences are just as (if not more, by way of their underrepresentation) valuable as those who can *afford* to be councillors.

Carson et al found from survey data (of registered candidates in the October 2020 local government elections) that running for council is an older person's exercise. The typical candidate from the sample is in the range of 38 to 65 years of age. There is also found to be an electoral dividend for those with past council experience, which skews towards men.

Almost half of the women aged between 50-64 indicated that this was their first time running for council compared to about a third (38 per cent) of men in the same age bracket.

The researchers suggest that this indicates that women are more likely to run for government after their children have grown and their careers are well-established or they have retired. Their analysis of analysis of the candidate and councillor survey data reveals important gender differences in work and life roles, particularly when it comes to childcare and employment type (full time, part time, casual) in addition to councillor duties.

Some quotes from the interviews undertaken by Carson et al illustrate this scenario:

*'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).

*'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)

*'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).

According to the researchers, "both the candidate and councillor data show that it was uncommon for women nominating or being elected to council to be in full-time work, compared to men... 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 political activity. For some women, however, this trade off may not be an option."

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<sup>5</sup> Appendix 1. Carson, Ruppner & Mikolajczak, (2021) *The Missing Cohort: Women in Local Government in Australia*

*“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).*

The VLGA's project *Local Women Leading Change* includes training workshops for prospective women candidates. As part of this training, participants discuss the average time spent on councillor duties and the level of remuneration. Almost all participants report this as being a necessary consideration when weighing up whether to stand, with many participants deciding that their personal circumstances are not compatible due to this factor.

This is echoed in the concerns of other underrepresented cohorts including First Nations people, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, culturally diverse backgrounds and those with disabilities or caring responsibilities. For many of these community members, the deliberation about whether to stand often ends up as an economic one, or a question of where they may be able to make the most impact (considering informal means of community participation or volunteering).

For the reasons described in this section we submit that significant weight ought be placed on the impact of the allowance in achieving diversity.

## 5. Superannuation

- **How, if at all, should superannuation be considered in determining allowance values?**

We submit that existing arrangements for payment of superannuation should not be diluted, for the reasons of supporting diversity as outlined elsewhere in this document.

## 6. Comparators

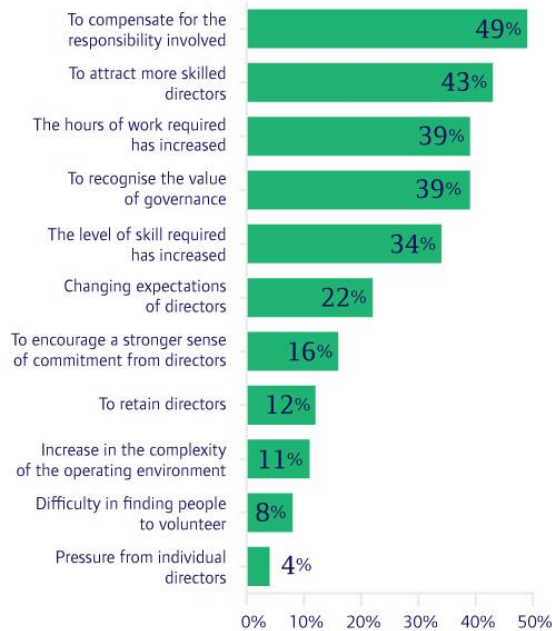
- **The Tribunal is required to consider allowances for persons elected to ‘voluntary part-time community bodies’ when making the Determination. Which bodies should the Tribunal consider, and why?**
- **The Tribunal is also required to consider similar allowances for elected members of local government bodies in other States. Which States are particularly relevant (or not) for this purpose, and why?**

VLGA is not in a position to benchmark remuneration across comparable community bodies and local governments. However, we do point to research undertaken by the Australian Institute of Company Directors regarding the question of payment of directors by ‘not for profit’ entities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Should more NFPs consider paying directors?’, <https://aicd.companydirectors.com.au/resources/not-for-profit-resources/nfp-resources/should-more-nfps--consider-paying-directors> AICD 2017’

**Top three reasons for considering paying directors**



In a Victorian local government context this goes beyond the question of whether councillors ought be paid, but points to compelling grounds for the allowance to be adequate.

**7. Financial impacts**

**– What are the financial impacts of varying allowance values for Council members?**

We submit that as a proportion of overall expenditure, the allowances paid to Mayors and councillors is not material (i.e. less than 1%).

We acknowledge that many councils do operate with constrained budgets in a rate capped environment, however for any cost there is a compensatory community benefit associated with attracting and retaining a diverse, skilled mix of councillors due to minimising economic barriers to participation.



In summary we note the importance of this review in a context where public commentary through media regarding these allowances often does not fully explore the impact of the adequacy of these allowances on the achievement of public value. We trust that we have been able to provide evidence in support of a level of allowances that recognises the important contribution by elected councillors and overcomes economic barriers to participation.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. We would be pleased to clarify any of the content and can be contacted at [kathryn@vlga.org.au](mailto:kathryn@vlga.org.au).

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'K. Arndt', is positioned above the typed name.

Kathryn Arndt  
**Chief Executive Officer**



**APPENDIX 1**

**The Missing Cohort: Women in Local Government**

**ABSTRACT:**

Australia historically lags other democracies on its record of gender representation in parliaments. 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 local government and gender differences in electoral success and experience as a councillor. The findings reveal a positive story about women’s electability, despite fewer women than men running for office, their success rate is higher. 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.

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 as 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 the federal House of 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>7</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>8</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>9</sup> Yet, the picture of female representation at the local level in Australia is mixed. The Australian Senate has 51.3 per cent female representation.<sup>10</sup> When combined with the percentage of women in Australia’s lower house, women constitute 37.9 per cent of federal parliamentarians compared to 35 per cent of women elected in local government nation-wide.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, the latest election figures show Victorian local government is outperforming the national averages of female 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 women in local government (35 per cent).<sup>12</sup>

However, local government holds less power, is more regional and rural, and garners less media attention and thus, 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 parliaments.<sup>13</sup> Understanding women’s experiences at the local level is crucial to mitigating the barriers to equal gender representation at all levels of government. Thus, 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 parity is not achieved at the local level. We use Victoria as a case study to understand barriers to female equality in local politics.

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<sup>7</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, ‘Women in Politics: 2019’. Accessed at <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2019-03/women-in-politics-2019>.

<sup>8</sup> Marian Sawyer, ‘Dealing with Toxic Parliaments: Lessons from Elsewhere.’ *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 36(1) 2021, p. 22.

<sup>9</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>10</sup> Proportional representation electoral systems tend to have higher numbers of women elected compared to other systems.

<sup>11</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>12</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).

<sup>13</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.

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 from those who were subsequently elected. 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 if strain associated with balancing competing roles limits younger women's ability to engage in running for local government.<sup>14</sup>

To shed light on the experiences of women in this 'missing' group, we interviewed 10 women who were interested in local politics but did not put their hand up to run in 2020. This allowed us to examine how the intensity of competing career and caregiving pressures in women's early adult years many have limited their ability 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 alleviating the role strain associated with balancing other work and caregiving demands as a key policy mechanism that would likely promote women's representation in local government and lay a pathway into other parliaments.

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

Women's representation in government is a critical component of broader equality that can benefit the economy and government performance. A McKinsey Global Institute report estimated that \$12 trillion could be added to global GDP by 2025 by closing the gender gap in public, private and social sectors.<sup>15</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>16</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>17</sup> Further, parliaments with higher ratios of women to men recorded lower levels of corruption than those with fewer women.<sup>18</sup>

Low rates of female participation remain in place across Australia despite strong public support for women politicians across the main parties.<sup>19</sup> This underrepresentation of women is true for both of Australia's major parties: the centre-left Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Centre-right Liberal and National parties (Coalition).

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<sup>14</sup> William Goode, 'A Theory of Role Strain.' *American Sociological Review*, 25(4) 1960, pp. 483-496.

<sup>15</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>16</sup> State Government of Victoria, 'The benefits of gender equality'. Accessed at <https://www.vic.gov.au/benefits-gender-equality>

<sup>17</sup> Weeks and Baldez, 'Quotas and qualifications', 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Soren Holmberg and Bo Rothstein, *Good Government: The Relevance of Political Science*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021, p.240.

<sup>19</sup> Andrea Carson, Leah Ruppner, 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.

While the ALP does have party quotas and has achieved 48 per cent female representation in the federal lower house, the Coalition offers a starker example of female underrepresentation. It has fewer women in the federal parliament (20 per cent) than it did more than 20 years ago (25 per cent) under the Howard Government's second term (2001-2004).<sup>20</sup> Presently, neither Coalition partners support gender quotas. The Liberal Party (LP) has a voluntary target to achieve gender parity by 2025.<sup>21</sup> However, the Coalition does not have adequate numbers of women politicians coming through the pipeline to suggest it can meet its approaching target. As local governments can be important feeders into state and national representation,<sup>22</sup> and women underrepresentation at the local level has been found to contribute to women's continued lack of parity in state and national parliaments,<sup>23</sup> it is important to consider how women experience their roles as politicians in local governments in Australia.

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

Like other marginalized groups, women have been found to draw upon their lived experiences to inform their policy platforms.<sup>24</sup> This means 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 later ages (40-59), representation is lower for younger women and those aged over 65.<sup>25</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). Further, local government is cited by Australian politicians as a useful training ground for representation in state and federal tiers of government.<sup>26</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 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 redress some of the issues related to parliament as a gendered workplace.

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<sup>20</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>21</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>.

<sup>22</sup> Melody Crowder-Meyer and Benjamin Lauderdale, 'A partisan gap in the supply of female potential candidates in the United States.' *Research & Politics*, 1(1) 2014, 2053168014537230.

<sup>23</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>24</sup> Iris Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Berevoescu and Ballington, *A Global Comparative Study on Women's Representation in Local Government*, p.10.

<sup>26</sup> Lyndon Megarritty, '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).

The Victorian state government has recognised the importance of gender parity in local government and of promoting 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>27</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.

Yet, if there are not adequate numbers of women standing for council elections, these goals will be near impossible to achieve. With exceptions, there is little recent evidence to understand gendered barriers faced by Australian local government candidates, and even less focused on Victoria.<sup>28</sup> This research aims to address this gap and to make recommendations to narrow the gender divide in local politics.

### ***Understanding the Barriers to Women's Entry to Local Government***

To understand gendered barriers to women's representation in local government, we apply a role strain perspective. Role strain 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 have varying demands. Intense roles are those that place intense demands and foster role overload (e.g., demands of role exceed capacity). Conflicting roles are those whereby demands are difficult to combine with other roles. Women often hold intense and conflicting roles that trigger the stress process, leading to inter-role conflict, burnout and exhaustion.<sup>29</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 with intense demands that often contribute to role overload.<sup>30</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 childrearing.<sup>31</sup>

We use role strain theory to understand the experiences of women in local government.

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<sup>27</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>28</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, Oxon: Routledge, 2011; Anne Stevens, *Women, power and politics*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; Amanda Sinclair, Margaret Bowman, and Lynne Strahan, *Getting the numbers: women in local government*. Melbourne: Hargreen, 1987.

<sup>29</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 & Health Policy*, 8(4) 2016, pp. 444-457

<sup>30</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>31</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.

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 male counterparts.<sup>32</sup> Conroy found that the non-standard hours required of a local councillor made it especially difficult for women to accommodate political representation without family support.<sup>33</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 they are 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 suggest 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 that suggests an easier integration of work and family life.<sup>34</sup> However, this assumption is contested.<sup>35</sup> Local government can be equally demanding and intensive as other levels of representation. Indeed, an earlier analysis found more women were elected in other Australian parliaments than local government in 2005.<sup>36</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>37</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>38</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>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Pini and McDonald, *Women and representation in local government*.

<sup>33</sup> Denise Conroy, 'Gendering local government amalgamations', in Barbara Pini and Paula McDonald (eds), *Women and representation in local government: International case studies*. Abingdon, Axon: Routledge, 2011, pp. 161–178.

<sup>34</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, p. 71-84.

<sup>35</sup> Barbara Pini and Paula McDonald, 'A good job for a woman: The myth of local government as family-friendly'. *Local Governance*, 30(3) 2004, pp. 144–151.

<sup>36</sup> Marian Sawer, 'Presence and the price: women and the 2007 Australian federal election'. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 23(56) 2008, pp. 263-269.

<sup>37</sup> Briggs, 'What's in it for women?', 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Allen, 'Gendered Candidate Emergence in Britain: Why are More Women Councillors Not Becoming MPs?'. *Politics*, 33(3) 2013, pp. 147-159.

<sup>39</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.

We 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:

1. Who runs for local government?
2. Who gets elected to council?
3. 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 under 45 who had previously run for office or were politically interested but decided 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 provided rich data to study a cohort found to be ‘conspicuously absent’ in the survey data, women under 45. We interviewed 10 women from this age cohort.

### ***Surveys***

We used a multi-step approach to collecting and analysing data. First, in September 2020, we conducted a unique survey of local government candidates. Working with the VLGA we sent a survey to the 2,187 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 council, and demographic questions.<sup>40</sup> Our survey response rate was 36 per cent with 729 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). We had a slight overrepresentation of women in our candidate survey with 44.7 per cent of women respondents compared to the population of 40 per cent of women who nominated for council (as per VEC data). We also had a higher proportion of regional respondents (44 per cent) compared to the VEC data (35 per cent).

Second, following the local government elections in December 2020 we undertook a second survey to capture responses of 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 34 per cent with 211 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 (51.7 per cent in the sample compared to the 44 per cent elected). We again had a slightly higher proportion of regional respondents in the sample (60 per cent) compared to the councillor population (56 per cent), (see Table 1 in Appendix).

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<sup>40</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.

### ***Interviews***

Third, after analysing the quantitative data that revealed a missing cohort of women under 45 years of age, 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. The Facebook group contains 1,200 members who identify as politically interested in local government. We used purposive sampling to 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 10 interviews between February and March 2021. Due to COVID-restrictions, the semi-structured interviews were undertaken online using Zoom and each interview took approximately one hour.<sup>41</sup> 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 (60 per cent) than women (40 per cent) nominated for election to the council. In raw numbers, this was 1,225 men compared to 813 women. However, as Figure 1 shows women candidates had a greater success rate in metropolitan councils (51 per cent of all elected councillors out of 40 per cent of nominated candidates) compared to men (59.5 per cent out of 49 per cent of men nominating), and across Victoria (44.5 per cent<sup>42</sup> out of 39.9 per cent women nominating) compared to men across Victoria (55.5 per cent out of 60.1 per cent men nominating).

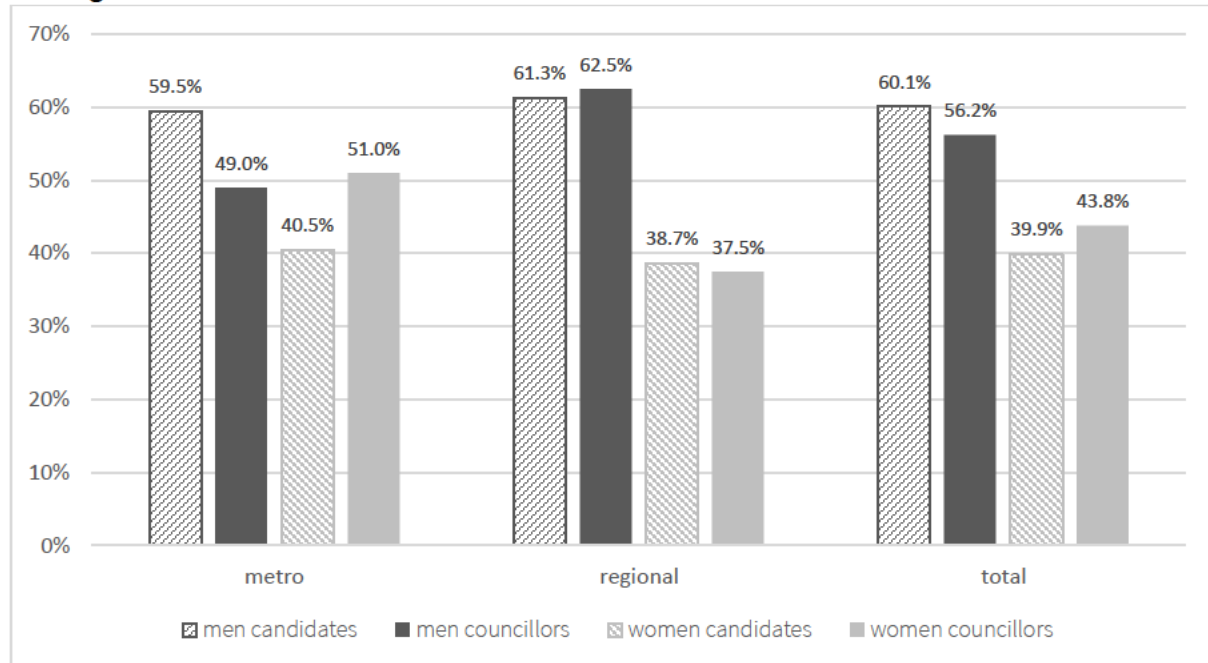
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<sup>41</sup> The interview schedule and metadata of participants is available on request.

<sup>42</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=2187 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 council than men, as a proportion of those who achieve success, women fare better. This positive finding of female electability is consistent with other comparable local government studies, including in New Zealand.<sup>43</sup> In Victoria, this finding is stronger in urban municipalities, which provides the first recommendation of this study: State Government and local government sectors should commit greater resources to attracting women to run for council in regional Victoria.

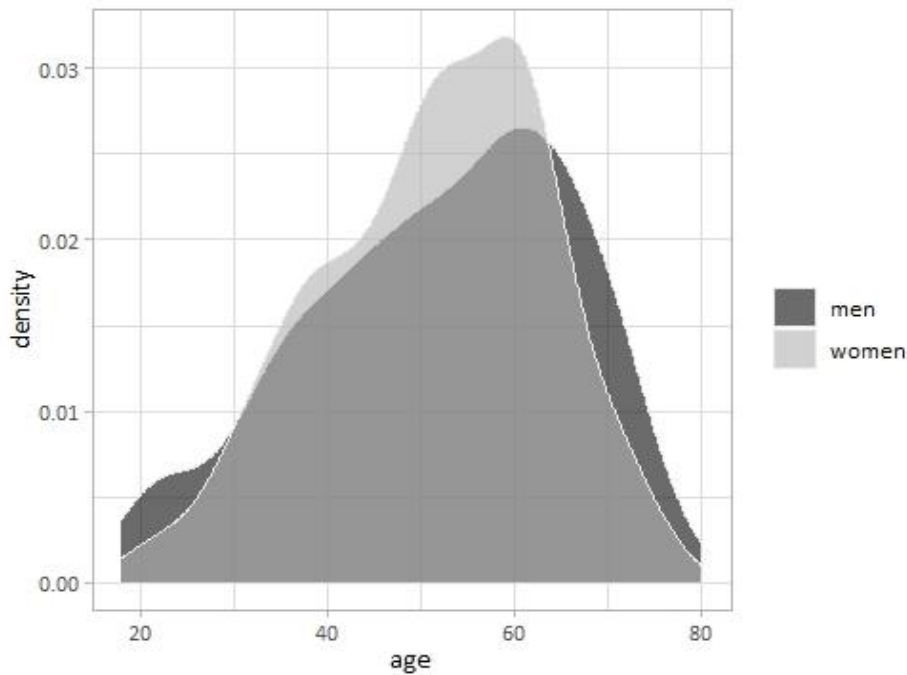
### **Age and Experience**

Although VEC does not collect data on the age of those who run for council, our survey data indicates that running for council is an older person’s exercise (Figure 2). 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. Almost half (49 per cent) of the women aged between 50-64 indicated that this was their first time running for council compared to about a third (38 per cent) of men in the same age bracket. Also, we can see in Figure 2 that proportionally more younger men than women (particularly in the 18-30 age group) nominated for the 2020 elections. In addition, men were much more likely to have run for office at least three times previously compared to women (24 per cent v 14 per cent) and therefore have had more experience campaigning. Overall, more men than women had previous council experience of at least one term (65 per cent compared to 55 per cent).

<sup>43</sup> McGregor and Webster, ‘Women’s local government representation in Auckland’, p.9.

Thus, to achieve gender parity a second study recommendation is to focus resources on training and encouraging younger women to run for council.

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



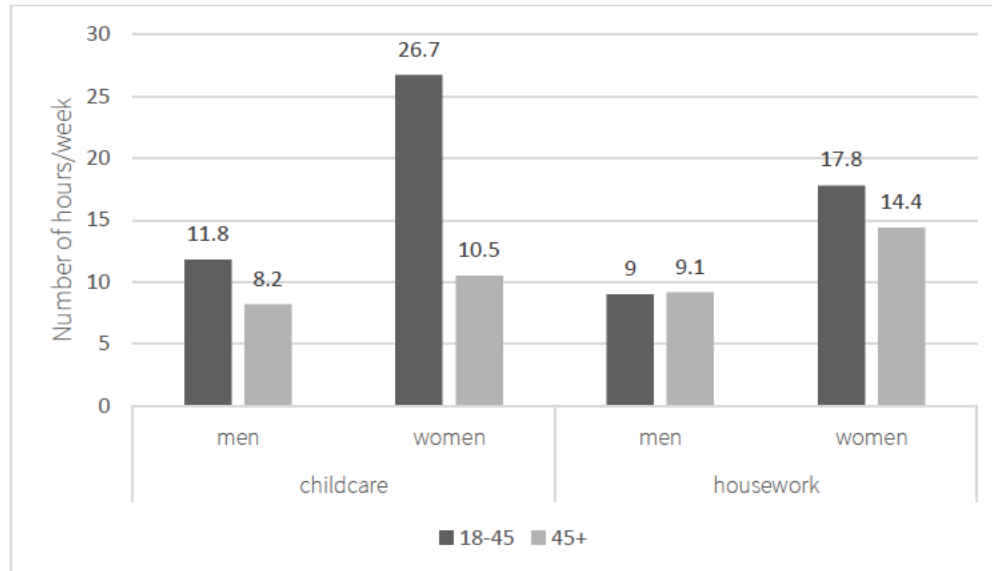
*Source: Authors, September candidate survey. n=729*

**What obstacles limit equal gender representation?**

Having addressed our first and second research questions 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 obstacles to running for local government. The analysis of the candidate and councillor survey data reveals important gender differences in work and life roles that 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 the younger women who do the lion’s share of this unpaid work (see Figure 3).

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



Source: Authors, n= 211

Our interview data affirms this finding and details how some women considered 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).*

Another former councillor, 33, said the competing demands of child-rearing and council responsibilities were difficult 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 that shows younger women are less likely to consider running for council than older women and younger men and, as detailed in the interviews, it can be due to competing time demands with family responsibilities. However, the councillor survey data also reveals that women irrespective of age report having substantially greater carer responsibilities (in addition to child-rearing) than men. Women are much more likely to have other carer responsibilities than men, but the gender difference is strongest among younger candidates. The gender finding specific to childcare responsibilities shows more younger women than men spend time on childcare responsibilities, averaging 26.7 hours compared to 11.8 hours for male candidates (with children under 18). It was apparent through the in-depth interviews that women interested in political careers felt this inter-role strain and decided not to recontest the election.

A 33-year-old woman 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).*

In addition, the data shows collectively that women councillors of all ages 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 with children aged under 18. Women who fall into this group spend on average 17.8 hours per week on household chores, compared to male counterparts who spend on average 9 hours per week.

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:

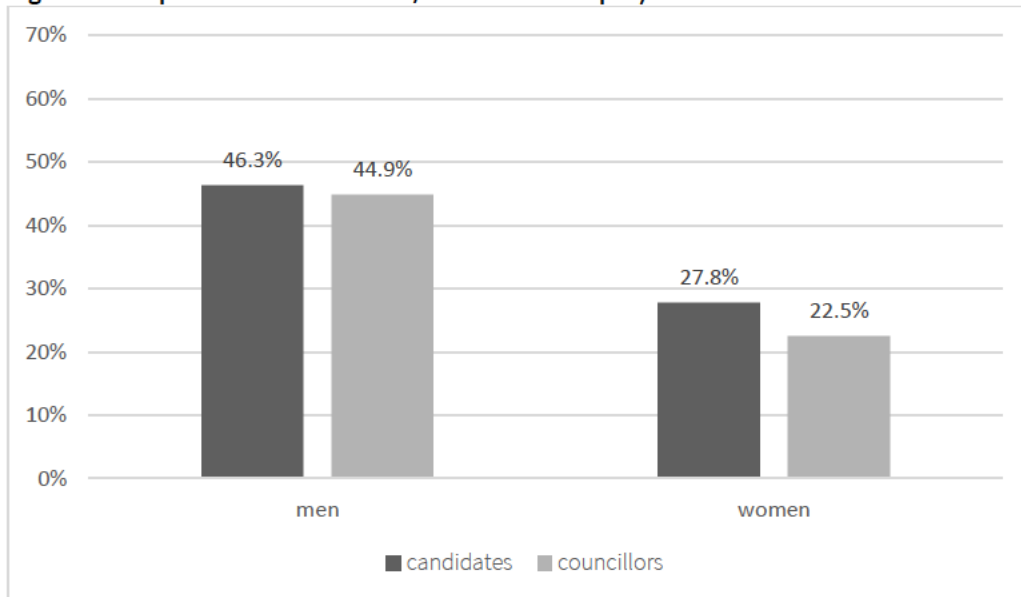
*Sometimes it just feels like there's not enough hours in the day already. With work, volunteer work, community work, and parenting, and then friendships, partners, things like that, as well. (Interview 9, 24 February 2021).*

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 councillors/candidates employed full time**



*Source: Authors, n=729 candidates survey; n= 211 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 paid employment with council work was repeated in other interviews and 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>44</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 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, 28, 12 March 2021).*

<sup>44</sup> Goode, A theory of role strain, p. 483.

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. .. it 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 male counterparts. Further, Victorian councillor remuneration is low compared to other forms of employment (between \$8,833 and \$31,444 per year).<sup>45</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 professionals.'<sup>46</sup> This 2008 finding of councillor pay as a barrier to female participation is consistent with our study's findings that also show financial and career security plays a role in prospective candidates' decision-making to run for council and is a factor in limiting female participation in local government. It might also further explain why female representation is lower in regional councils across Victoria, where councillor allowances are lowest. More broadly, this financial barrier to female participation may help explain why female representation in Australian local government (35%) is below the overall participation of women in Australian parliaments nation-wide (38.6%), as discussed in the introduction. While role strain and gender inequality exists in other tiers of representation, full-time salaries available to elected representatives at state and federal levels may help mitigate the financial element as a barrier to female participation.

## 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 apply a role strain perspective based on the assumption 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 strong support that women were managing distinct work and family demands alongside council work more so than their men counterparts.

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

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

It is perhaps, no surprise that we also 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. 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 elections.

As a consequence, women are more likely to run for local government at later ages, but with less 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 whereby achieving gender parity may be a step toward changing entrenched gendered cultures in these novel workplaces.

Despite these barriers, the data indicate that women are more electable in local government suggesting that increasing the pool may increase women’s representation. These patterns are most clearly evident in urban areas with stronger attitudinal support for gender quotas amongst Labor and Greens, 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 indicates a need to better support 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>47</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. Yet, 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, which could ease role strain especially outside of formal childcare operating hours.

Further, councillors would benefit from additional resources including higher pay (which the Victorian government is currently considering).<sup>48</sup> A flexible, capped spending account to outsource housework, is another option to increase female 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.

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<sup>47</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>48</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/>



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 'female 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 success within local government. Such success can serve to strengthen women's pipeline into other political tiers to achieve gender parity and its flow-on effects on parliament as a gendered workplace culture to create a more representative democracy for all.



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## Appendix

Table 1: Composition of September survey of Victorian local government candidates and December s urvey of Victorian local government councillors

	candidate survey		councillor survey	
	men	women	men	women
metro	229 (56.4%)	177 (43.6%)	34 (40.0%)	51 (60.0%)
regional	174 (53.9%)	149 (46.1%)	68 (54.0%)	58 (46.0%)
total	403 (55.3%)	326 (44.7%)	102 (48.3%)	109 (51.7%)