Women-only networks as a strategy for change? A case study from local government

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Introduction

This paper uses a case study of the Australian Local Government Women’s Association (ALGWA) to address the question of the efficacy of women-only networks as a strategy to support women leaders and managers and increase women’s representation in senior positions. Its particular focus is on formal networks, which are established as an adjunct to, as a counter to, or as an extension of, traditional male-dominated networks or organizations. Such a focus is of significance in that forming women-only networks has been a strategy adopted to advance the position of women in decision-making positions across a range of occupational sites including trade unions (Colgan and Ledwith, 2000; Kirton, 1999), farming organizations (Shortall, 2001), sporting groups ( McKay, 1997), construction firms ( Greed, 2000) and publishing companies ( Colgan and Tomlinson, 1996).

The paper is divided into six sections.

To begin, the literature on formal women-only networks is reviewed. In the second section of the paper, some background information on the position of women in local government is provided. The third section of the paper provides an overview of the ALGWA. Following an outline of the methodology in the fourth section of the paper, data from the study are presented. The conclusion of the paper draws on these data to assess the value of women-only networks as an equity strategy.

Women-only networks – the literature

In her paper on women and networking, Ehrich (1994) revisits three interconnected themes in the literature by drawing on examples from the field of educational administration. These are: first, that networking is integral to career success; second, that the networks to which males belong tend to be more powerful and third, that women typically have difficulty in accessing these male-dominated networks. In the decade, since this paper was published, these themes have continued to resonate in the literature. Indeed, Woodall et al. (1995, p. 32) have argued that informal networks are of increased significance in the uncertain employment environment that is today characteristic of industrialised nations. This is not good news for women, given that recent studies examining reasons why women are so poorly represented in positions of management

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have not deviated from earlier claims that a key factor is women’s exclusion from more powerful male-dominated networks (Linehan and Walsh, 1999; Davidson and Burke, 2000; Fawcett and Pringle, 2000).

It is because of the interconnection between the three themes cited above, that women in management and business have, over the past decades, sought to establish their own networks. Still and Guerin (1986, p. 103) identified an “increasing impetus” of formal women-only networks for women in business and management. As Berkelaar (1991), argued in her study based on the data from the Netherlands, the key motives for establishing women-only networks are to provide support and to circumvent women’s exclusion from old boy networks. Benefits of women-only networking are said to include increased self-confidence, the provision of learning opportunities, gaining of new skills and growth of social contacts (Travers et al., 1997).

In introducing their edited collection of papers on the subject of the role of women in changing organizational gender politics, Colgan and Ledwith (1994, p. 38) note that women-only organising is an equity strategy which “frequently provokes controversy” amongst women. Some argue that this type of organising is separatist and exclusive while others consider it to be essential for circumventing men’s organizational power. These divergent opinions about the value of women-only networking resonate in the academic literature on the subject. Generally, while there is recognition that there may be positive outcomes of this strategy, women only networks are not represented as a simple panacea for increasing women’s involvement in management. There are ranges of reasons for this. One relates to the fact that it is from male-dominated networks that managers are likely to be selected. Thus, as Ehrich (1994, p. 9) argued, while women-only networks are useful for providing women with “valuable psycho-social support”, women seeking to progress their careers also need to “extend their networking practices” and participate in mainstream networks. This is an issue developed further by Burke et al. (1995) in their study of gender differences in the internal and external networks of men and women in three large business organizations. The networks of men and women in the organizations under investigation conformed to those reported in other studies that they were typically sex-segregated (Ibarra, 1993; Rothstein and Davey, 1995). However, it is men who hold the majority of senior positions in the organizations. The fact that women reported a higher level of reliance on outside networks for developmental functions than men, is raised as a concern by the authors, who explain that research suggests outside sources may not be as effective in facilitating career development.

Clearly, the question of the value of women-only networks is contested. This paper seeks to offer some resolution to this debate by conceptualising the establishment of such networks in terms of Cockburn’s (1991) distinction between short-term and long-term equity agendas. In order to arrive at such a conceptualisation, the paper draws on data from interviews with elected women members in local government in which participants share their perspectives about women-only networking. Before turning to these data, the following section provides some contextual background information on the gendered nature of the local government sector.

Women in local government

A number of international studies demonstrate that the under-representation of women in local government is not peculiar to Australia (Drage, 1999; Edwards, 1995; Tremblay, 1996). Similarly, the literature indicates that the many constraints to women’s participation in local government described in an early Australian study by Sinclair et al. (1987) are equally relevant elsewhere. This is even despite the significant time difference between this work and more recent studies.

Briggs’s (2000) in-depth qualitative interviews with 26 female councillors from Hull in England and Montreal in Canada reveal that across disparate local government authorities, women representatives are subjected to a very similar culture in which sexism and discrimination are rife. Some particular barriers for women representatives are due to the lack of female role models and networks. This situation is aggravated, as Tremaine (2000) says, as “the old boys’ network has an amazing ability to survive” within the local government sector. Drawing on interviews with nine of the 19 female New Zealand mayors she corroborates the earlier work by Encel and Campbell (1991), which reported the many exclusionary practices enacted by male councillors to marginalize and discredit women representatives. These practices include conducting council business in informal contexts such as pubs and male clubs where women are typically not present and ignoring and discrediting women’s input. Despite the significant disadvantages experienced by women in these studies, Yule (2000) reports that there is little discussion about gender issues in local government authorities. The male councillors in her English case studies construct the paucity of women in local government as an outcome of the “natural”
differences between males and females and this rationalisation provides little or no space for women to articulate and address inequalities. Thus in this view, differential outcomes for men and women in public life are constructed as a result of biological determinism. This conceptualisation acknowledges the gendered nature of local government but ignores the conditions under which women are excluded from leadership and renders invisible inequitable processes and principles.

In spite of these considerable constraints female representation in local government in Australia has increased substantially. That is, in 1980 women accounted for just 6 per cent of positions in local authorities, in 1986 this had increased to 13 per cent and in 2000 to 25 per cent (Sawer, 2001). Following the most recent round of elections, nearly 30 per cent of all local government positions and 15 per cent of mayoral positions were held by women (Dunn, 2001, p. 1). One factor that has been identified as contributing to this increase has been the existence of support networks, including most significantly, the ALGWA (Neyland and Tucker, 1996, p. 132; Whip and Fletcher, 1999, p. 61).

The Australian Local Government Women's Association

In Australia, the 692 local government authorities are organized on a state basis. At both the state and national levels they are represented by a group known as the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) which encompasses a federation of associations across the six Australian states and two territories. As Table 1 demonstrates, women's representation in positions of elected office within these associations is limited.

Like the mainstream group ALGA, the ALGWA is made up of both the national and state or territory associations. While the group was first established in 1951, it remained largely inactive until the National Convention for Women in Local Government was held in 1966. Since this time it has been active in pursuing its dual charter of increasing women's representation and in supporting women currently in local government.

To meet these goals at the national level the organization has focused on developing policy and strategic initiatives. For example, the ALGWA has been instrumental in the development of a National Framework for Women in Local Government (ALGWA, 2001) which provides a policy framework to increase women's participation in elected and management positions in local government. State and territory strategies have typically been focused on more grass roots activities such as conducting training and mentoring programs for new female members, running information seminars for aspiring women candidates and undertaking publicity campaigns to highlight women's contributions to local government. A further activity has been the holding of an annual conference in each state.

Methodology

Within the state of Queensland there are 124 local government authorities or councils. Of these, 19 (15 per cent) are represented by a female mayor. Interviews with all 19 of these mayors provide data for this paper. This qualitative approach was used as the study was designed to elicit a detailed, nuanced and descriptive understanding of different attitudes towards women's networks, not a numerical representation of the frequency of different attitudes amongst a population (Mason, 2002, p. 65). Interviews are also “ideally suited to examining topics in which different levels of meaning need to be explored” such as in understanding the perceptions of different mayors to the ALGWA (King, 1994, p. 33).

The selection of the entire cohort of 19 women mayors in the state of Queensland as a sample is consistent with purposeful or theoretical sampling as described in the qualitative methodological literature. Specifically, Minichiello et al. (1995, p. 162) describe the process as it applies to qualitative interviewing as “selecting informants on the basis of relevant issues, categories and themes”. In this study the mayors were selected as

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<th>Name of association</th>
<th>Gender of chairperson</th>
<th>Number of executives</th>
<th>Number of females as executives</th>
<th>Number of males as executives</th>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
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a category for investigation as they both make up a subset of the broader population of women councillors in the state of Queensland, and, previous to having become council leaders, all had been councillors. The mayors interviewed were typical of the broader profile of Australian women councillors (Whip and Fletcher, 1999). One was widowed, two single but the remainder married. The majority were in their mid-fifties while the youngest was 44 and the oldest 65. Similarly, while one mayor was in her 12th year of office, the greatest proportion of women had been in their positions for just five or six years.

Interviews took approximately one hour and were “lightly structured” (Wengraf, 2001, p. 111) in that while a list of questions was prepared and all interviews covered the set questions, there was enough flexibility in the process for participant responses to inform the structure of the interviews. The semi-structured approach provided the opportunity for questions to be contextualised and for participants to expand on issues or raise themes that had not been anticipated. To begin, the mayors were asked about their background before entering public office and their motivation for joining local government. Following this, they were asked about any difficulties they had encountered in undertaking their role and the achievements they had attained during their period in government. In addition to questions about these issues, the mayors were also asked about their involvement in, and perceptions of, ALGWA.

Interviews were transcribed in full for coding through the qualitative data software package Nvivo (Qualitative Solutions and Research, 1999). The first stage of coding was based on a list of themes identified from the literature while the second stage concentrated on identifying emergent themes from the data (Richards and Richards, 1994). Through this thematic coding process three groups of participants were identified: those who were supporters of ALGWA, those who were critics of women-only networking and those who were ambivalent about the value of women’s organizations. The views of each of these three groups are described in separate sections below.

Benefits of women-only networks
Of the 19 mayors interviewed 11 were unreserved in expressing their support for ALGWA. There was not a clear relationship between length of service and support for ALGWA, but several interviewees began by responding to questions about the organization by reflecting on the difficulties they had encountered in first being elected to local government. They described feelings of disillusionment and frustration at the treatment they received from some male colleagues. These feelings, they reflected, were aggravated by the sense of isolation at being the only woman on council at the time (or one of two). What would have been useful to them at the time, they suggested, was contact with more experienced senior women in the local government sector who could provide them with guidance and support. Two mayors, for example, commented:

I’ve retained a membership because I know how hard it was for me at times and how much it meant to me when I was coping a hard time to be able to talk to somebody else who would understand.

The ALGWA have a mentoring program now which I wish had been there when I first came on to council. That would have, I think, probably if nothing else, given me a vent for my temper, but also probably would have helped to guide me a little bit better.

Both these participants went on to explain that they now had a network of both male and female colleagues across the local government sector, which satisfied their needs for support, learning and advice. The building up of this network outside their own councils and communities was particularly important for these participants given their rural location – but had taken one interviewee over a decade to establish. In contrast, they explained the benefit of ALGWA was that it was a “ready-made” network for women beginning careers in local government.

It was not just as a beginning councillor that another participant found ALGWA to be beneficial but also as a newly elected mayor recently. She had attended a network conference a year ago and found the experience so educative and helpful to her role that she had continued to maintain contact with a particular group of women via e-mail. Again, this woman, along with two others, drew particular attention to her geographical isolation as a reason for supporting ALGWA. These participants explained that in a small community, gossip was rife and consequently they were self-conscious about discussing any aspect of their council life with a local person.

A further issue raised by the participants as a benefit of ALGWA is that it provides a sense of collective identity. Meeting and talking with other women about their experiences, they said, assisted them in naming gender harassment and discriminatory practices. This aspect was particularly critical in situations where this behaviour had been normalised. One reflected that she thought it was “just me” until she had been to her first ALGWA conference. Another said:

A lot of us had similar issues and we were able to discuss those issues. I was able to say, “Well, what do you do?” It was being the same gender and going through the same things.
All of the 11 mayors who supported ALGWA were also involved, to different degrees, in the mainstream local government association, which enabled them to draw comparisons between the two groups. They argued that despite the fact that ALGWA was caricatured by some men in local government as a “have-a-chat-club”, “hen’s club” or “recipe swapping group”, similar issues were canvassed by the mainstream and women’s network at the annual conferences. Topics at the most recent forums of both groups, for example, focused on natural resource management policy and community development. The key difference, they suggested, was the environment in which the issues were addressed because in the mainstream group women had much less input as organisers, chairpersons, speakers and participants than they did in ALGWA.

Criticisms of women-only networks
Four of the 19 mayors were critical of women-only networks. In explaining the reasons for their disapproval they engaged three main arguments. The first was that a focus on women was trivial and unnecessary in light of the larger concerns that faced the local government sector. As one stated:

I’m far more worried about local government being constitutionally recognised than I am about women being patronised to make their way through local government.

Related to this argument was the view that women faced no discrimination or inequitable treatment in local government. Participants claimed that there may have been such a problem in the past but this was no longer the case and thus, the formation of a women’s network was completely unwarranted. For these women gender was, they said, simply not an issue. As one stated:

I prefer not to be involved in the male/female question. I never have. I don’t believe in equality or inequality or whatever. When I was elected I was elected by the constituents because they thought that I was the person for the job, irrespective of what my sex was, and I don’t think sex should be an issue when you’re representing the council or the ratepayers.

Connected to this argument was a third claim, that it was discriminatory and divisive to have women-only groups. To support this point of view three different participants argued that “there’s no such thing as a Men in Local Government Association”. In light of this claim they suggested that it was not just separatist and exclusive to establish a women-only network, but antithetical to women’s calls for equity in local government. Their belief was that equality was inconsistent with a women-only network. One interviewee expounded on this theme arguing:

They (women) would complain if there was a local government association solely for men. They would say, “Here, hang on a minute, why are we excluded?” but yet they’re prepared to say, “Well, we are going to exclude ourselves from you,” and I don’t really believe that’s right.

This claim highlights the contradictory position faced by women-only networks. They are established because women have been marginalised in mainstream organizations, but then, ironically, accused of separatism and exclusivity because they have named themselves as women-specific groups. In contrast, the mainstream groups such as ALGA appear gender neutral. In this sense women are constructed as the recipients of “special” treatment and men are argued to be the victims of “reverse” discrimination. The mainstream groups are not named as androcentric groups or men’s associations despite the fact that males dominate decision-making positions.

In expressing their opposition to ALGWA and advancing the arguments raised above the four mayors stated that they had always enjoyed good relationships with the men they worked with in local government. For example, in responding to a question as to whether she was a member of the group one mayor stated, “In my working relationship with all the other males I’ve never had a problem”. Another claimed:

I was the only woman on the Fire Board. I was the only woman on the Water Board. I was the only woman part of the time in the Council and I’ve never felt anything but the utmost respect.

Clearly, these mayors believed that involvement in the ALGWA was indicative of one having a negative relationship with male colleagues or having some individual problem. They sought to claim a gender-neutral standpoint and were thus keen to distance themselves from the ALGWA group.

Ambivalent supporters of ALGWA
The third group of women were those who supported the ALGWA but simultaneously expressed some ambivalence and concerns about it. Of the four women in this group, two explained their position by highlighting the group’s lack of power compared with the mainstream counterpart ALGA. They referred to the fact that the ALGA was the “official” group for local government representatives and consequently had significant financial and human resources at its disposal. It was also the first point of call for any government or industry consultation. As a consequence they wondered if women would be better off working through the mainstream group for equity.

The following is indicative of this point of view:
I feel through that, that we might be able to be stronger working through the ALGA because at the end of the day we have absolutely no autonomy, no voting rights, no nothing on the Local Government Board or anything.

For the two other participants ambivalence focused on the issue of inclusion. One argued that it was important that the group included men so that it was not seen as a separatist. The second participant who was concerned with inclusion emphasised that there was a need for ALGWA to be more inclusive of the diversity of women.

Greater attention, she said, needs to be given to develop strategies for involving indigenous women and women from non-English speaking backgrounds in ALGWA.

Discussion

The disparate views expressed by participants in this study as to the value of the organization ALGWA resonate with the introductory discussion of literature on women's networks. That is, these groups offer possibilities as well as potential problems when they are established to increase women's participation in management. Given this contradictory status, it is useful to engage Cockburn's (1991) notion of the need for both a short-term and long-term agenda to achieve equality as a means of providing an evaluation of the place of women-only networks.

A short-term agenda is one which focuses on implementing strategies which address the symptoms of discrimination. A women's network is one such strategy. It is clear that many men in the local government sector remain hostile to female participation. In situations such as this, groups like ALGWA provide women with a much-needed space for mediating the effects of the environment. However, women-only networks are not an end in itself, and must be used to advance a long-term agenda. This agenda, Cockburn (1991) argues, is the one which seeks to affect broader organizational and social change. For ALGWA this means transforming local government authorities and associations to include a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives.

The ALGWA has a critical role to play in this transformation process. In organizations in which women operate individually to advocate for change, equity agendas are marginalised and easily obstructed (Colgan and Ledwith, 1994). Further, the network's very existence is a reminder of the gendered context of local government and men's continued hold on positions of leadership in the ALGA. Further to this is the fact that the network is an important source of resistance against the status quo in providing women with a safe environment in which to share their gendered experiences of organizational life. As participants in this research suggested, the realization that their individual experiences of discriminatory treatment or sexism were shared by a collection of women councillors was educative and empowering.

Besides validating experiences, the ALGWA provides the opportunity for women to seek alternative interpretations of events and experiences. This aspect is particularly important in situations where harassment, sexism and discrimination have been normalised or minimised. In this sense, the isolation that a number of the interviewees described in undertaking their roles in such a male dominated arena was successfully interrupted by the ALGWA. This is particularly a salient outcome given that over half of the women respondents in this study are located in rural areas where a sense of isolation for female local government representatives is likely to be more pronounced than it is in the city (Sinclair et al., 1987).

In contrast, the change was occurring in organizational sites where women's activism was strong and where women provided collective support for each other internally as well as across organizational borders. Importantly, for groups such as the ALGWA, women-only networks were a key feature of this support.

To achieve the long-term goal of transformation, women's networks cannot operate in isolation. In the first instance, they should attempt to engage with male dominated networks, and particularly sympathetic leadership within these networks. This is critical if gender issues are not sidelined into the women's only spaces.

Secondly, women's networks should seek to build alliances with other women's groups in what Berkelaar (1991, p. 26) labels a “network of networks”. This is, of course, difficult given that women are not a homogenous group. There is a need therefore, for any grouping of women's networks to give particular attention to questions of difference and diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability (Travers et al., 1997).

There are ranges of critical challenges facing women-only networks. Unlike traditional groups, they may be questioned about their legitimacy and status as well as have problems securing resources and finances. Mainstream groups may criticise them for exclusivity while hiding their masculine dominance behind claims to gender neutrality. It is remarkable then, that in spite of these difficulties, groups such as the ALGWA have been established and maintained. What is important is that such groups continue to exist and be supported, because as long as women are a minority in

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positions of leadership, the crucial role they have to play in generating long-term transformation change will not diminish.

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Further reading