

The Next Generation of Local Government Leaders: Leaning In or Out of Local Government?

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Sheryl Sandberg's number one bestseller *Lean In* examines why women hold fewer than half of leadership positions despite graduating at higher rates from institutes of higher education. The book also sparked a nonprofit organization, leanin.org, to encourage and support women "leaning in" to their career goals. Sandberg also published *Lean In: For Graduates*, which includes new material intended for young people beginning their careers. With the one-year anniversary of our own MPA graduation fast approaching, thoughts are swirling about next steps, interviews, job hunting, and career tracks in public service leadership. Sandberg's book focuses primarily on the private sector. Do "Lean In" issues affect women working in the public sector in the same way?

We talked to our former classmates and other young professionals interested in public service management to gauge how issues of female mentorship, likeability, and family planning and partners affect them. Our MPA program focuses specifically on developing local government managers and more than 75% of our graduating class were women. However, only a handful are pursuing careers in local government. Despite many discussions around the concepts of leaning in, concerns over weighing the dual roles of managing a local government and managing a household are salient for the next generation of leaders.

Based on our conversations with our classmates and young professionals, one reason women are leaning out of local government management seems to be the perceived instability of leadership positions. There is a strong desire for women to fill leadership roles, but deputy or assistant roles were perceived as providing more stability. Another potential cause of the gap between the number of women graduating and women wanting to go into local government management are glass walls - relegating women to traditionally female roles within organizations. For example, two of the students we interviewed had received advice that they were particularly well-suited for careers in human resources when they were explicitly seeking advice about becoming local government managers. It is essential for women to gain a breadth of experiences that prepares them for being seen as management potential.

One final note is that not all women see leaning in as their biggest challenge in the workplace. When considered from the point of view of single parents and primary wage-earners, leaning in becomes a privilege since it requires placing long-term career plans ahead of family concerns. Women of color are another group of women who face challenges in the workplace that are not addressed in Lean In. For example, one interviewee noted, “It’s getting to the point where women can just be women in the workplace, but I’m not sure it’s ever going to get the point where I can just be Black at work.”

Local government leadership is disproportionately male. Despite many discussions about giving greater emphasis to career planning, the young women we talked with are struggling to lean in at the time in their careers at which leaning in arguably matters most. With these issues in mind, what can current local government managers do to help our generation “lean in” more?