

# From the Street Level: Perspectives from Women in Public Administration

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Public administration scholars have extensively examined frontline actors within state and local bureaucracies to understand how their daily interactions and perceptions affect policy implementation. This research, however, does not place focused attention on gender dynamics at the street level. The purpose of this article is to understand the gender dynamics that affect women working on the frontlines of bureaucracy in Arizona. Using a qualitative research design, the interview data reveal women who work for an Arizona state or local agency are affected by positionality, perceptions, and training. The findings from this analysis offer important insights, demonstrating how public sector organizations can begin to hear the experiences of a variety of individuals within our workplaces instead of a few.

Public administrators often describe working for state and local government as a life in a fishbowl, where the work can be heartbreaking, but “one of the few areas of government where a single individual can make a huge impact on the quality of life for entire communities” (Conduff 2017, npn). To best understand the work of state and local public administrators, scholars have investigated their work through the lens of street-level bureaucracy, often referred to as the front lines (Lipsky 1980; Rinfret 2011). To name a few, frontline actors include firefighters, police officers, environmental inspectors, county managers, budget officers, teachers, or election administrators. These individuals possess a great deal of discretion and maintain an ethical obligation to define the failures or successes of policy execution in the United States (Maynard-Mooney and Musheno 2003; Pedersen and Nielsen 2019).

The work frontline actors undertake is essential for public service, yet the organizations they occupy are gendered (Stivers 2002), socially constructed, designed, and run by cis-gendered, White men (Bishu and Heckler 2021). Pedersen and Nielsen (2019) stress that bureaucratic organizations are gendered institutions because they lack representativeness due to gender stereotypes and gender-biased decision-making. Limited studies posit that gendered institutions affect individu-

als and their work at the street-level (Bishu and Heckler 2021; Choi and Guy 2021; Rinfret 2024; Stivers 2002).

The purpose of this article is to understand the gender dynamics that affect women working on the frontlines of the bureaucracy. First, the review of the literature examines emotional labor and street-level bureaucracy to serve as the theoretical baseline to evaluate the experiences of women who occupy bureaucratic positions within state and local bureaucracies. Then, a qualitative research design is applied to evaluate interview data of 32 individuals who identify as women who work for an Arizona state or local government agency. Finally, the analysis and findings suggest the interview data help us to understand how gender norms at the street level can engage our organizations in conversations that move us beyond nervous apprehension regarding women in leadership positions (Gooden 2014; Guy 2010; Lopez-Littleton et al. 2018; Sweeting 2022).

## Review of the Literature

This section of the article presents an overview of literature, explaining why studying women on the front lines of the bureaucracy is necessary. Exploring the scholarship surrounding street-level bureaucracy and emo-

tional labor offers insight into the gender dynamics that affect women within state and local agencies.

### Street-Level Bureaucracy

The base of our organizational hierarchies is occupied by frontline public administrators, also known as street-level bureaucrats or frontline workers, who occupy a critical position in American society (Lipsky 1980). Frontline bureaucratic positions cover positions as wide-ranging as police officers, county managers, teachers, social workers, firefighters (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003), environmental rule-writers (Rinfret 2011), and inspectors (Pautz and Rinfret 2013). Given their delegated discretion by elected officials to make decisions, they influence policy implementation (Pautz and Rinfret 2013).

Numerous scholars (Durose and Lowndes 2023; Hawkins 1984; Kagan 2002; May and Winter 2000) demonstrate that street-level bureaucrats are impacted by a variety of factors ranging from policies imposed by their supervisors, to organizational discretion, to their own expertise, to the internal and external pressures of their work. Specifically, political and administrative superiors attempt to ensure that the actions of unelected, frontline workers coincide with the intentions and language of the policy. As a result, the organizations that employ frontline workers and the day-to-day interactions of the workers affect how policy is implemented (Pautz and Rinfret 2013).

### *Emotional Labor*

Research suggests emotional labor is an important dimension affecting the work of public service organizations (Guy and Newman 2004). The frontline literature assumes street-level bureaucrats are bureaucratic automatons, forgetting their role is “human-to-human exchange that happens when state meets citizen” (Choi and Guy 2021, 185). Absent from this perspective is the fact that, when frontline workers deliver services directly to citizens, they engage in emotional labor to do their jobs. According to Choi and Guy (2021), “Whether a tax official or police officer, social worker or schoolteacher, they are the emotional proletariat—those who earn their living not by manual labor but by emotional labor” (186).

Emotional labor, as defined by Hochschild (1983), is the management and regulation of emotions as part of one’s professional role. All jobs have both physical (e.g., sitting in a chair and typing) and mental (e.g., cognition or information processing) forms of labor. However, according to Guy and Newman (2004) and Grandey and Gabriel (2015), in any job, workers must, to some extent, modify inner emotions to fulfill job requirements, conform to work requirements, suppress emotions, and provide emotional support for others.

For example, while conducting a site visit of a mining facility, an environmental inspector finds non-compliance with the law, explaining the infraction with a calming demeanor. While explaining the infraction to the mining facility operator, the inspector is accused of misinterpreting the law. In another example, a city manager maintains a straight face while meeting with constituents devastated by forest fire. In both examples, the frontline workers’ efforts to perform at work is emotion regulation. Guy et al. (2008) note that this creates a continuum of emotion work where emotive performances and emotion regulation range from superficial expression to intense expression or suppression, with empathy in the middle. Therefore, employees can performatively provide customer service with a smile.

Other dimensions of emotional labor, such as gender and race, warrant discussion (Eagly and Johnson 1990; Potter and Volden 2021). Women perform emotional labor as part of their employment to match the expectations of cultural gender norms embedded within their organizations (Guy 2017). Bishu and Heckler (2021), for example, argue that public organizations are masculine,<sup>1</sup> suggesting that when women move up within these organizations their performance matches the expected masculine display rules. Women face additional strain as they are required to perform feminine work at home, but also keep up with men at work who do not have this second shift (Bishu and Heckler 2021). Career momentum also favors men as they perform masculine work (Bishu and Heckler 2021; Guy 2017) because of their perceived levels of agency (e.g., ambition, drive) (Eagly et al. 2020), which signal little shift from associating masculine traits with leaders.

Emotional labor is also racialized. Individuals from marginalized racial groups continue to navigate hostile

1. Masculine organizations create an atmosphere where women adopt male traits in how they dress, perform, or present; feminine organizations adopt policies that are caring, nurturing, and supportive of a variety of individuals.

work environments due to white supremacy and racial frames. As a result, individuals at work self-monitor, adjust expressions, question oneself, and avoid situations (Grier-Reed et al. 2020). Put simply, emotional labor is racialized because differences are evident for individuals from marginalized racial groups. In turn, these individuals are more likely to experience burnout due to role incongruence because they experience higher emotional labor burdens “so others perceive them as in alignment with the organization” (Humphrey 2021, 14).

Taken together, street-level bureaucracy and emotional labor scholarship can identify the positive and negative outcomes of how people feel about their work. However, representative bureaucracy theory suggests the demographics of the population should be reflected in government agencies that serve that population (Ricucci and Van Ryzin 2017). Women make up over half of the U.S. workforce in professional and management occupations (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2022) but are underrepresented in bureaucratic agencies (Hannah-Spurlock and Silverboard 2021). Managers in these ranks of an organization are commonly filled by White men, who embody their values, missions, and a structure that reflects this demographic (Eagly and Johnson 1990; Guy and Newman 2004; Lowi 1985; Mastracci and Bowman 2015; Newman 1994; Trumpy and Elliot 2019). Bureaucratic organizations, therefore, reinforce gender norms, inhibiting change from lower-level positions occupied by women (Acker 1992; Freeman 1984).

Although we are beginning to provide comprehension into women’s experiences in state and local government (Bishu et al. 2023; Brenner 2009), our infrequency to investigate their experiences on the front lines warrants additional evaluation (Rinfret 2021). Importantly, “Women have been government employees now for nearly a century and a half, and from the first days of their entry into public employment, they had work experiences, career opportunities, and problems unique to them” (Stivers 2001, 15). The intersection of the street-level and emotional labor scholarship offers a ripe opportunity to inform this project’s attempt to understand the gender dynamics that affect women working on the front lines of the bureaucracy.

## Methodology

To advance our understanding of the gender dynamics that affect women on the front lines of the bureaucracy in Arizona, a qualitative research approach is applied to evaluate the experiences and stories of participants often absent from quantitative research. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted in the spring-summer of 2023 with three participants who are frontline workers who occupy mid-level positions within state or local government in Arizona. Semi-structured interviews provide background information regarding a woman’s work experience and identify similarities or differences among participants. Conducting interviews is an important qualitative methodology because participants frame and define their experiences within the workplace (Lewicki et al. 2003).

### *Unit of Analysis and Interview Approach*

Arizona was selected as the unit of analysis for ease of access for the researchers (Deming 1950). Additionally, Arizona contains one of the largest populations in the United States, ranked 14 in 2023, with slightly more women (50%) than men residing in the state (49%) (U.S. Census Quick Facts 2023). Similarly, 50% of the U.S. population identifies as female, and approximately 430,000 individuals work for state or local government (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023).

We adopted snowball sampling method to obtain participants for this study. Specifically, we received a list of potential frontline women to interview from an assistant city manager (e.g., individuals identifying as women, unelected, frontline actors, mid-level positions within their organizations). Each interview session lasted approximately 30–60 minutes, asking the same eight questions<sup>2</sup> designed to ascertain the gender dynamics within their organization. These questions focused on educational background, day-to-day experiences over time, gender dynamics within their workplace, and areas of challenge and opportunity.

### *Explanation of Qualitative Data*

The researcher conducted all the interviews without any identifiers and worked with a Master of Public Administration (MPA) graduate research assistant to examine the data. All interviews were transcribed into

2. List of interview questions: 1. Please begin by explaining your current position and role. 2. How would you describe working within a public sector organization? 3. In your opinion, do you perceive that women are treated differently within your organization? 4. Do you think gender matters in your current role? Why/why not? 5. If you could describe one current obstacle and one current opportunity, what are they and why? 6. If you could use one word to describe what you envision for the future, what is this word and why? 7. In your opinion, do you believe your work affects policy implementation? 8. Is there any other information you would like to provide that I did not ask today?

plain text files by the researcher and graduate student. A content analysis was conducted using the qualitative data analysis software QualCoder, a free and open-source tool. Codes were developed to organize and categorize interview statements across questions (see Tables 1 and 2).

These codes were developed using the frameworks of emotional labor and street-level bureaucracy (Bishu and Heckler 2021; Grandey and Gabriel 2015; Guy 2017; Guy et al. 2008; Hochschild 1983; Rinfret 2021; Rinfret et al. 2022; Smith 1987). Table 1 lists the codes and the corresponding description (emotion displays, unfair treatment, organizational makeup, changes to work, social progress, future orientation, polarization, and emotional labor unknown). Issues of reliability and validity surround content analysis. To ensure consistency in coding, the two researchers used QualCoder to ensure consistency and validity in coding. The QualCoder system allowed the two researchers in this project to directly code raw data through its interface. A pretest detected mismatches or matches between coders. In addition, as the project progressed, the QualCoder system tracked codes by user, tracking validity over time.

Table 2 provides examples of how the research team coded statements from the interviews. For example, one interviewee stated, “Women were typically in arts, library, neighborhood services (housing authority), but over the years I began to see a switch and [say] city managers can have a diverse set of department heads.” This statement illuminates the social progress code—indicating the role of women in local government has changed over time to indicate areas of advancement. Another example is the code “future orientation” for statements such as, “We have to be hopeful what we are doing matters and that we are leaving a legacy and that we are planting seeds and continue to grow and blossom.”

Table 3 provides a demographic overview of the interviewees. Detailed information is not included in this table to avoid identifying individual participants (e.g., there are only 15 counties in Arizona). Therefore, much of the demographics are presented in ranges or

groupings. The type of government illustrates the myriad of sectors of employment and locations in Arizona. Interview participants were in mid-level, frontline positions such as deputy city manager, city/county clerk, county attorney, engineer, public works engineer, health officer, school district manager, policy analyst, data specialist, human resource manager, or planner. The specific cities, towns, or counties are not shared in this article to protect the anonymity of participants. However, the participants represent large (more than 500,000), medium (499,999–100,000), and small-sized communities (less than 100,000). Geographically, more than 55% resided in metropolitan areas and the remaining resided in rural parts of the state. The self-identified race/ethnicity of the participants is 70% White/Caucasian, with 9% stating they are Black, 20% Hispanic, and 1% Asian, similar to that of Arizona (U.S. Census Quick Facts 2023). Not captured in Table 3 is that 1% of the participants stated that they are members of the LBGTQ community, which speaks to the intersectionality of the participants (Crenshaw 1989).

Table 4 lists the total code frequencies. Emotion display coded statements were the most frequent, followed closely by treatment in the workplace, and organizational makeup. For example, public service jobs can require emotive displays. Employers expect employees’ emotional displays to be consistent, regardless of whether the displayed emotions match the employees’ own. Organizational makeup suggests discussions about the structure of an organization or its demographics. For example, many elected positions can be occupied by men, but nonelected, bureaucratic positions, such as assistant city manager or managerial positions, have increasingly seen women joining the ranks. Changes to work, social progress, and future orientation were also frequently mentioned across the data. Social progress or future orientation offered insight into how organizations have evolved. Respondents also discussed the role of polarization and how this has become more apparent in recent years due to national conversations. Interactions between the public and career civil servants have been affected as a result.

**Table 1. Codebook**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>
Emotion displays	Comments referencing displays of emotion or modifying feelings, including dress
Treatment in the workplace	Differential treatment based on gender; reflections on gender-based or racialized comments received (referencing insults, jokes, inappropriateness, or stereotypical roles)
Organizational makeup	Number of women in higher-level positions and rationales
Changes to work	Data relating to promotions, leaving job, or impact of pandemic
Social progress	Evolution of job (past to present)
Future orientation	Expressed hope or optimism
Polarization	Concerns regarding the impact of political polarization and their jobs
Emotional Labor unknown	Participant has not heard of emotional labor before

**Table 2. Codes and Examples**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Emotion displays	<p>“Wasn’t always sure that I could be feminine with my emotions and not allowed to be empathetic.”</p> <p>“Now I needed to move to handshakes and not my natural style, and from there on out that is what I did, and I couldn’t initiate a hug and had to change my style as a leader and being seen differently.”</p>
Treatment in the workplace	<p>“Sometimes in groups I feel like I’m invisible unless my male colleague is an ally.”</p> <p>“Prior to the pandemic or in general, have been asked during an interview if I was going to get pregnant.”</p>
Organizational makeup	<p>“My area of work is definitely male-dominated—most of the colleagues at this level are white men.”</p> <p>“[Women] have lagged in the highest level because it takes time to build a pipeline and hard to call out sexism.”</p>
Changes to work	<p>“However, it was never about making it easier for women and not considering childcare—some orgs across the country have adopted family-friendly policies but [my city] hasn’t done this.”</p> <p>“What I am finding is people have a lot on their plate—backlog from the pandemic and so many emotional things coming out more and more in work.”</p>
Social progress	<p>“I feel like it’s becoming more balanced and see many more women in Arizona.”</p> <p>“Women were typically in arts, library, neighborhood services (housing authority), but over the years I began to see a switch and say that city managers have a diverse set of department heads.”</p>
Future orientation	<p>“Optimistic: I see this through my lens of teaching and commitment to solving problems and see this over and over again—sometimes I see the rat race, but really see people caring.”</p> <p>“We have to be hopeful—what we are doing matters and that we are leaving a legacy and that we are planting seeds and continue to grow and blossom.”</p>
Polarization	<p>“What I am seeing is that colleagues are so fatigued and yearning for retirement due to partisanship.”</p> <p>“Obstacle: Call my field development services—it really does come down to politics and what we can do environmentally has become very divisive and in a large part has always been that way and so much obvious—the ability to reach across the aisle.”</p>
Emotional Labor unknown	“I have not heard the term ‘emotional labor.’”

**Table 3. Demographic Overview of Interviewees**

<b>N = 32</b>	<b>Interviewees (%)</b>
<b>Age Range</b>	
60s	9%
50s–60s	5%
40s–60s	23%
50s	18%
40s	5%
30s–40s	5%
Age not specified	35%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
White/Caucasian	70%
Black/African American	9%
Hispanic/Latino	11%
Asian/Pacific Islander	10%

**Table 4. Codes Referenced in Interviews**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Number in interviews</b>
1. Emotion displays	63
2. Treatment in the workplace	60
3. Organizational makeup	58
4. Changes to work	30
5. Social progress	22
6. Future orientation	10
7. Polarization	5
8. Emotional labor unknown	4

### Thematic Findings

To capture the gender dynamics at play within the interviewees' organizations, we categorized the most frequently coded data into three thematic areas to offer a way to make meaning of the stories from the women interviewed. These areas include putting on a face (codes = treatment in the workplace; emotion displays); gender perceptions (codes = organizational makeup; changes to work); and vision (codes = social progress; future orientation).

*Put Your Face On:* The perceived treatment of women or expectations of women within an organization perpetuates a gendered role. Put simply, the findings in this section articulate that women responded that they must act a particular way in a situation. As explained here, this is a learned behavior based upon treatment within the workplace.

It was not uncommon for interviewees to share examples of unfair treatment in their workplace that affected the way they acted. Some of this treatment focused on enforcing display rules that emphasized masculine traits (Guy 2017) where job roles require work on a continuum from masculine to feminine. Many interviewees describe their work in the form of outward-facing emotional performances. For example, several interviewees noted they switch from wearing a suit, changing from hugging to shaking hands, or demonstrating different facial expressions (e.g., blank or smiling). As one interviewee noted, "When I have to lead a meeting, I wear my black—black is my power suit. With management team meetings, I would wear navy suits—my male colleagues' uniform color is blue and I would even the playing field by looking like them." According to another interviewee, "I know what voice I need to use for certain meetings—calm or stern." A final example suggests, "I am a hugger and during an award ceremony as a department head, I hugged recipients, and male counterparts hooted when I did this." Nonetheless, interviewees stressed they know what gender role (masculine or feminine) to embody to prevent being seen as too weak.

The analysis of the data discerned that women from marginalized communities seem to embark on more deep acting in terms of their attire for work or conversations with higher-level leadership (see Table 3). The researchers are cautious about the findings from members of the LBGTQ community because this information was self-reported and a small percentage of the interview sample. However, the researchers believe it is worth capturing because it was stressed, according to one interviewee, that they had to "change jobs because the emotional labor was too much."

Interviewees who identified as 50 years of age or older explained how they have overcome unfair treatment through emotion regulation, which involved adopting masculine emotion displays of strength and seriousness. For example, one interviewee stated, "Emotional labor is something that women have to learn how to do so we come across as serious and strong," and "You have to be aware of your emotions and how you [are] going to act or sit at a table; how to speak; you have to put on a bit of an act." By way of comparison, interviewees younger than 50 years of age noted "The pressures women face to act like their older, more masculine female colleagues," and "challenge the status quo to change the gender dynamics at work."

Matching masculine norms often requires additional labor from women as they need to be constantly aware of their masculine performance (Guy 2017). These efforts require internal emotion regulation, and many participants gave examples such as: suppressing their true emotions so they are taken seriously, changing their observable personality, or constantly balancing between being assertive or empathic. These are all examples of job duties that were not listed as requirements for their positions.

*Gender Perceptions:* Another element of understanding the gender dynamics within an organization is to investigate whether identifying as a woman matters in day-to-day work on the front lines of the bureaucracy. Street-level bureaucracy research suggests that their discretion yields power to make decisions (Lipsky 1980). Yet, what effect does gender play at this level of an organization? Within this thematic area, we explore how positionality and changes in the workplace affect the role of women interviewed in this project.

Several interviewees noted that being a woman can create an environment where you must work harder than your male counterparts. For example, when applying for a leadership position, one person noted, “I was the only female candidate for my position and I practiced for days, running through questions and [I] know my male counterparts did not prepare.” Once securing a higher-level position, a lot of the minute details still fell on women to take on. Several interviewees lamented that regardless of their position, they always take meeting notes or organized birthday parties. As stated previously, public organizations lean masculine, requiring women moving up within these organizations to perform gender work to match the expected masculine display rules (Bishu and Heckler 2021; Guy 2017). Likewise, career momentum more easily elevates men as they perform masculine work (Bishu and Heckler 2021; Guy 2017).

As a result, “The diversification of the workforce is starting to ease traditionally held normalizations,” stated one interviewee. Moreover, another participant suggested, “There’s a desire to hire more women and people from marginalized communities. You see more Hispanics, Blacks in leadership roles and it is making a difference when I come to work because people are starting to look like me.” Overall, this thematic area suggests gender norms are shifting, but an effort by organizations to continuously attempt to improve is still necessary. Improvement is occurring with intentional partnerships with human resources on recruitment,

onboarding, and retention. Many interviewees stressed that job postings are reopened if a diverse applicant pool is not achieved. Therefore, diversification creates a sense of belonging within our organizations, affecting our perceptions because we begin to see actual change (Newman et al. 2023).

*Vision:* Thus far, the findings show that emotional labor and gender norms are apparent within the participants’ organizational dynamics. The final thematic area for consideration is vision, offering forward-facing opportunities for organizations to consider. It might appear cliché, but hope for the future was reiterated by every single interviewee. Specifically, respondents stated women have made significant strides since the 1970s because the diversity of women in roles across Arizona is noticeable. For example, respondents noted this is because elected bodies at the town/city level are all female, making a difference for nonelected policy implementers like themselves to work together. Succinctly put in the words of an interviewee, “As public servants, we have to make our communities better and as a female leader we have to continue to guide and go for positions so we can inspire women.” However, one woman suggested, “Just because you elect more women doesn’t mean it trickles down to the front lines of agencies.”

At the heart of forward momentum and a vision for the future is training and mentorship. According to one interviewee, “If we don’t have training about something, then how can we improve?” More than 10 women interviewed credited the Arizona Women in Government annual conference as an opportunity for growth and development. At this yearly conference, more than 500 women convene to acquire new knowledge and skills to take back to their organizations as areas of improvement. One person noted, “The annual conference provided me an opportunity to share with our leadership team obstacles women are facing, which we were unaware of. Having a conversation was the first step.”

Interviewees stressed the importance of support from their peers, supervisors, and colleagues. Specifically, each interviewee stressed the importance of mentorship upon hire. “Mentors,” according to an interviewee, “can be any person in the organization but the key to success is offering a confidential space for employees to be candid.” As stated by another interviewee who worked in public works, “My entire profession has been male-dominated, but I received insurmountable mentorship because people believed in my potential. This allowed me to get

through good and bad days and why I am in a leadership role today. Now, I pay it forward.” Notably, mentorship programs can help women in their early careers who face pressure from gender stereotypes and masculine organizational culture (Yu and Lee 2021). Importantly, one of the largest support mechanisms is statewide organizations that invest in the development of women through mentorship and training.

Although the vision for the future thematic area illustrates positive findings, the geographic location affected perspectives. More than half of the interviewees were from metropolitan areas. A few women working in more rural parts of the state suggested there are deliberate attempts to ensure training is included in their budget, but it is often the first thing cut when budget constraints occur.

Taken together, the qualitative thematic themes—putting a face on, gender perceptions, and vision—define the intricacies of women in Arizona interviewed here on the front lines of the bureaucracy. The key ingredient to understanding qualitative data is pairing street-level bureaucracy and emotional labor. Street-level bureaucracy defines our unit of analysis—women within state and local organizations—and emotional labor illustrates their approaches to navigating the gender dynamics of a workplace.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The stories presented by women on the front lines of Arizona’s local and state government offer a glimpse into the gender dynamics at play within their respective organizations. Simply put, these women suggest the underlying forces within their organizations range from positionality, perceptions, and training. For example, to confront unfair treatment within the workplace they perceive that adopting masculine traits has assisted in reaching their position within their current organization. However, through support from their peers, training, and development, women are finding positive pathways for success. Here, a summary of implications, limitations, and directions for future scholarship offers our field future direction.

First, this research recognizes that gender dynamics within some Arizona public organizations are mixed and have evolved. For many within this study, stereotypical gender roles are evident, such as note-taking at a meeting or proving one’s self-worth during a job interview. However, being a woman, according to some

participants, is now a workplace advantage. Due to organizational commitments to diverse hiring practices, women report in this study a stronger sense of belonging because they can see individuals like themselves in positions across the organization.

Second, mentorship and training make an impact on women within these organizations. Mentorship is provided within organizations and amplified through professional organizations such as the Arizona Women Leading Government. Training, according to some of the interviews, has helped women realize that competing with one another is a detriment. Instead, when moving into leadership positions, women must bring women and marginalized communities along as they move up the organizational ladder. If not, organizations will continue to be occupied by a dominant class.

Third, emotional labor is an important framework to evaluate the proletariat of public service (Choi and Guy 2021). The thematic areas illuminated the effects of the emotional labor involved with the women in this article and their daily work. However, when directly asking the participants about the emotional labor that they endure in their jobs, it was noted that it is not a topic of conversation within their organizations. Awasthi and Mastracci (2021) warn that public service jobs focusing on cognitive development while ignoring developing emotional labor skills is an ethical failing. Public servants should possess both approaches for current or future public service careers (Guy 2020; Mastracci et al. 2010) and this starts with training and organizations working with human resource management.

Despite the important findings, limitations in any research are prevalent. For example, the sample size was relatively small (32 interviews), with 70% of the sample identifying as White. Although age, geographic location, and race offered some differentiation within the sample, additional research could be of value. Moreover, we learned more about gender dynamics at the street level. However, gender is not bimodal, it is multifaceted, intersectional, and socially constructed. Focusing on individuals who identify as women only begins our understanding of the dynamics at the street level. Arguably, gender mainstreaming prioritizes superficial fixes to gender equality and ignores the larger cultural or systemic root causes (Arora-Jonsson and Ågren 2019). Additionally, by mainstreaming the issue of gender, it becomes de-politicized (Andersson 2018). Therefore, using this project and its data is a starting point for us

to recognize that gender is a broader concept. Studying women is one access point of information.

The implications and limitations of this research provide opportunity for future research. For example, the application of emotional labor at the street level could be used to compare the findings from this project with other states with similar demographics. Additionally, findings from this project could be used to work with practitioners within state and local government to determine what hiring, onboarding, and onsite job practices assist in the success or failure of women within mid-level positions at the street level. Finally, the qualitative findings could serve as a baseline to create a large-scale survey by working with organizations like the Arizona Women Leading Government to launch a larger study.

In our final paragraph, we recognize that a nervousness in government is still apparent (Gooden 2014); however, as the demographics of our state and local organizations evolve, we can use the stories from the women in Arizona to invoke change. After all, we cannot forget that “As a field, public administration recognizes the potential of local government to serve as a vehicle to address societal disparities and injustices. An important condition for facilitating societal change is a healthy workplace within local governments (Newman et al. 2023, npn). If not, we will continue to only hear the voices of a few (Rinfret 2024), perpetuating gender dynamics that engender a nervous government.

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