# The leadership style and motivation of women council candidates in regional New South Wales, Australia: a heuristic inquiry

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## Abstract

*The women who aspire to the role of a local government councillor in rural and regional areas of Australia are still breaking new ground. This paper presents research findings, by a woman who stood for election, concerning some of the barriers women face in achieving public leadership in regional and rural local governments ('councils'). It explores the motivation and leadership styles of six women candidates campaigning in two neighbouring all-male councils in regional New South Wales in 2017. The study used heuristic inquiry in which the researcher and participants share a personal lived experience of the issues being studied. Heuristic inquiry allowed for an intimate and creative presentation of the research. Key findings were that gender disparity was not a significant motivator for five of the six women. The main motivator was service to their community with all six women favouring a servant leader style.*

**Keywords:** Women, local government, council, leadership, regional studies, heuristic inquiry

## Introduction and context

Local government is the grassroots level of governance and councils may be seen as the gatekeepers of their region, responsible in large part for setting the tone of their community. The gatekeepers to a community decide who they will include and who they will not. A council where women are not represented perpetuates the social construct of gender bias towards leadership being the male domain, and sends a message to girls and women that they hold a subordinate position (Sinclair 2007; Gender

Equity in Local Government Partnership 2012a; Australian Local Government Women's Association New South Wales Branch [ALGWA NSW] 2017). The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 urges *"councils to uphold human rights, including the rights of women, as an essential component of a democratic, equitable and inclusive society"* (Gender Equity in Local Government Partnership 2012a, pp. 1–2). Actively working towards gender parity in local government will send a clear message that women are equal, and that their voice is valued and respected.

### *Context of women on councils in Australia*

The Australian government acknowledges that there remains a gross under-representation of women at all levels of politics, especially in rural and regional areas, and has previously invested in efforts to address this, with a focus on the local government level (Sawer 2007; McCann and Wilson 2014; ALGWA 2019). Sheridan et al. (2006, p. 279) asserted there was an *"urgent need for gender analysis… in rural and regional Australia",* and over a decade and a half later, ALGWA NSW (2017) indicated that there is still an urgent need for women in local government in rural and remote communities to be supported and understood so that they may overcome the limitations which they face.

Commencing in the 1990s, there have been a number of initiatives in Australia to address the gender disparity in local government (Sawer 2007). Programmes have continued through the past two decades (Purser and Diggerson 2010; Conroy 2011; Pini 2011; Gender Equity in Local Government Partnership 2012b: Queensland Government 2017). The most significant commenced in 2009 when ALGWA in conjunction with the Australian federal government established an initiative named '50:50 Vision – Councils for Gender Equity' (ALGWA 2019). This programme encouraged councils to undertake gender analysis and then actively design processes to correct the imbalance of women representatives both elected to council and employed in senior management positions (50/50 Vision: Councils for Gender Equity 2013). However, funding for the programme ceased in 2012 after only three years (ALGWA 2019).

In 2015 ALGWA NSW went on to partner with the University of Technology Sydney's Centre for Local Government (UTS:CLG) to offer another programme, 'Empowering Women in Local Government', which held workshops and mentoring for women considering running for election, existing women councillors and women employed in the New South Wales (NSW) local government sector (UTS:CLG 2015). Again, however, it appears that this programme was short-lived, with no further programme dates or information on the UTS:CLG webpage since September 2015.

Significantly, initiatives by ALGWA in South Australia and Tasmania contributed decisively to a rise in the nation's overall number of women councillors to 34.9% in 2019 but NSW, the focus of this study, was still below this average at 31% (Skatssoon 2019). The Victorian government, meanwhile, continues

to strive for 50% representation by 2025, and women's representation reached 43.8% of councillors elected in 2020 (Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions Victoria 2022).

As noted above, after the 2017 local government elections women comprised only 31% of councillors in NSW. Moreover, four of the 128 councils were all-male, including one of the two councils in this study. Fortunately, in the 2021 elections this situation improved with a *"dramatic jump in the gender balance"* to 39.5%, up by 8.5% (Darriea Turley, President, Local Government New South Wales [LGNSW] 2022). This followed a strong campaign in the lead-up to the 2021 elections, planned by the NSW Office of Local Government (OLGNSW) (2021) and ALGWA NSW (2021). It included numerous events and forums, brochures, media articles and press releases to encourage and support more women to stand as candidates; and appears to have contributed significantly to the subsequent increase in women's representation. Nevertheless, this is still unrepresentative of the Australian population, of which women make up 50.5% (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021).

### *Study rationale and research question*

While there are signs of improvement, there is still a lack of current scholarly literature on women councillor representation in Australia. This study therefore seeks to add to the knowledge of why women stand, or do not stand, for local government that may inform future programmes and initiatives. If women do not continue to strive for public leadership positions, and support those women who do, then all that ALGWA and similar initiatives have achieved will be eroded.

ALGWA continues to urge councils to become agents for change within their community (ALGWA NSW 2017), but neither of the regional councils in this study had actively participated in the '50:50 Vision for Gender Equity' programmes. It was for this reason that the principal researcher set out to investigate the motivation and leadership styles of women candidates choosing to contest seats in all-male councils, when the councils themselves were not actively encouraging women to do so.

The majority of previous Australian studies focus on the experiences of being an elected woman councillor: few have considered their leadership styles and motivation regardless of the election outcome. Investigating those factors will help to develop ways to encourage and support more women to seek nomination as council candidates in future elections. Therefore, this research specifically explored the question: *What are the leadership styles and motivations of lead women candidates contesting an all-male regional council?*

## Literature review

This review commences with key contemporary literature on leadership and gender, then moves to women's leadership and gender stereotypes in a regional context, and finally Australian and state government initiatives and programmes to address gender disparity on councils. Literature on representation is only lightly covered. After extensive searching the authors note that the literature on

research into women's participation in local government is dated and possibly not reflective of the current situation. More research and debate is needed.

Leadership, like gender, is a social construct, one which is created by our own feelings and thoughts – those of the followers, the audiences, and the leaders themselves (Hoyt and Simon 2017; Sinclair and Evans 2019; Western 2019). Before the 1970s little research was conducted into gendered leadership. The focus and interest of leadership studies was in men leading men and the traditional command-and-control style of management, and this trend continued into the 1980s (Sinclair 2007). From the mid-1980s to the current day there has been an increasing interest in women's leadership and the alternative management styles which women are seen to bring to the workplace (Sheridan et al. 2006; Nixon and Sinclair 2017; Western 2019). While much of the literature on women's leadership acknowledges that women and men share similar leadership traits, women are found to bring a distinctive perspective to organisations and tend to promote leadership roles and provide opportunities for other women, minority, and marginalised groups (National Press Club of Australia 2017; Nixon and Sinclair 2017).

Sinclair and Evans (2019, p. 140) propose that *"there is a recognition that power structures and institutions are gendered in both overt and more deeply embedded ways"* and Sheridan et al. (2006, p. 273) assert the importance of becoming aware and challenging *"the way in which discourses of hegemonic masculinity pervade"* organisations and society. Progressive political thought is that these patriarchal defined gender roles only serve to justify male dominance keep *"both women and men in gender prisons"* and need to be challenged (Gillard 2014, p. 98). Julia Gillard, the first female prime minister of Australia, states that the media is largely responsible for the role they play in maintaining the patriarchal discourse by creating the changing ideals of what a woman is, and should be: by reducing women down to their appearance and valuing beauty over intellect; and by downplaying women's career successes and academic contributions (Gillard 2014; Sinclair 2016).

There is an argument that it can be reductionist to claim women have a specific leadership style as it reinforces gender stereotypes (Western 2019). This simultaneously disadvantages them and can lead to marginalisation (Sinclair and Evans 2019). Reductionist or not, studies into women's leadership styles all tend to use the word 'transformational'. Transformational leaders use strong communication, networking and interpersonal skills which look to build bridges and encourage people to work as a team, utilising collective strengths to overcome weaknesses (Eagly 2011; Bjørnå 2012; Western 2019).

When women's leadership was first studied it was set against and compared with male leadership styles; now, studies are comparing the styles of regional and rural women leaders with those of urban women (Ryan et al. 2005). The challenges to achieve positions of power faced by regional and urban women are quite distinct in many ways due to geographical and social differences, and this is still an understudied area (Ryan et al. 2005; ALGWA NSW 2017). The existing literature on attitudes toward gender roles in regional areas is quite old. It shows that up to 2010 there still existed a conservative

belief that the woman's domain is in the home and the man's is in the public sphere, while urban areas had already mostly transcended this outdated definition of gender roles (Sheridan et al. 2006; Murphy 2010). In rural and regional areas of Australia women's leadership has always been acceptable in low-profile organisations, predominantly in the volunteering sector, but women who wish to move into higher profile positions of leadership and power are often met with opposition as they challenge the status quo (Maguire 2010; Litchfield 2022). Changing these entrenched views towards women in positions of leadership in regional and rural Australia will take time (ALGWA NSW 2017).

Unlike feminist scholars, political historians do not tend to write of the political achievements of rural and regional women's organisations, and this may be explained on the basis that traditional conservative gender roles have rendered country women passive and unpolitical (Murphy 2010). Many country women pride themselves on being quiet and humble leaders who do not aspire to hold public office. However, quiet and humble leaders are certainly not 'passive'; they achieve results through *"patient, careful, incremental efforts and do what is right for their organisation and for the people around them"* (Badaracco 2003, p. 3). The women within Australia's Country Women's Association (CWA), for example, fit the profile of quiet leaders who have achieved a long and proud history of powerful political influence bringing many positive benefits to rural and regional women, children, families and their whole communities (Murphy 2010). The CWA's sole purpose has been to make regional Australia a better place for those who live there. Its members are not doing their work for personal glory or public recognition (Badaracco 2003; Western 2019). Nevertheless, in her history of 100 years of the CWA Harfull (2022) argues that far from just cooking scones and making handicrafts, they are 'radical' *"women who changed country Australia"* (Late Night Live 2022). Traditionally, CWA members were not encouraged to run for politics as they viewed that to be the male domain (Crook 1997), but this is now changing with the CWA encouraging members to become more political on public platforms (Ellicott 2017).

Australian studies on country women outside the CWA also consistently show a trend for rural and regional women to uphold traditional, conservative gender roles, preferring voluntary organisations over public office (Ryan et al. 2005). Women hold many high leadership positions within these community organisations that equip them with the skills and experience required to do well in a political role. Eva Cox, founder of the Women's Electoral Lobby, does not dismiss the value of women leaders in low-profile voluntary organisations but feels that, in their concern not to *"disrupt the traditional gendered patterns of* [socially constructed] *power"* (Sheridan et al. 2006, p. 272), these women tend *"too often* [to] *ignore those areas traditionally deemed to be male preserves"* (Cox 1996, p. 12). Marian Sawer (2007) found that the historical timeline of women and their role in *"the male preserve"* of formal politics in Australia shows there has always been a culture of exclusion and a very strong reluctance towards inclusion. Traditionally *"domestic politics has been a masculinist activity that operated to bolster domestic patriarchy"* (Murphy 2010, p. 32). However, for those country women

interested in entering politics outside women's groups, local government has nevertheless been more accepting than state or federal levels.

The role of a councillor may be seen as keeping women closer to home and focused on domestic issues; this marries well with the traditional country woman's 'allowed' public face, namely representing home and family, social standing and status (Ryan et al. 2005). Although elected male councillors have started to accept that women have a place in local government, they are not willing to allow them to feel they are equals, especially in regional areas labouring under conservative political ideology which supports traditional 'Victorian era' gender roles (Alexander 2001). Men do not want to be seen to be overtaken by women (Briggs 2000; Murphy 2010; Farrell and Titcombe 2016). Hutchinson et al. (2014) found evidence of a firmly entrenched masculine culture in a study of local government in Western Australia. The long-held stereotype of women politicians at local government level has been that of a white, married, middle-aged, middle-class homemaker, non-tertiary-educated, with non-dependent children and who is a member of a voluntary community group (Ryan et al. 2005). Men have been known to use the stereotype of the ill-educated woman councillor to discredit women's roles in local government by claiming that standards of candidates and the competition are lower (Whip and Fletcher 1999).

However, more recent studies show that this stereotype is outdated. The 'second wave' of women councillors are younger and more educated than many male candidates. With the majority being tertiary-educated, a greater number are career-orientated and see councils as entry points into leadership and politics. They are still predominantly white, middle class and married: some have young children and view council work as an extension of the 'committee mum'; while others have no children, and like their older counterparts are active volunteers within their community (Briggs 2000; Ryan et al. 2005; Murphy 2010; Pini 2011; Manion and Sumich 2013b).

The authors suggest that it is important to challenge the long-held stereotypical profile of the woman councillor and replace this with the profile of the 'second wave' of women councillors, in order to attract more women to stand as candidates for council. Research supports the view that when a minority group recognises themselves in the elected representation, this increases trust and participation within that political system (Mansbridge 1999; Ulbig 2007). Further to this, empirical studies have shown a trend for local government office to lead to state and federal politics, and this offers hope that as more women are elected to councils, there will be more women at all levels of government (Whip and Fletcher 1999; Ryan et al. 2005).

## Methods

### Research design

A feminist theoretical framework was adopted to explore the phenomena of leadership styles and motivation. Feminist social researchers tend to practice self-reflexivity in their work and find it more natural than researchers in other disciplines to write of their own personal experiences and feelings, weaving their stories into their research in the interest of both personal and societal transformation (Livholts 2012; Sinclair and Evans 2019). Most feminist researchers use qualitative methods which often include personal autobiographical accounts (see hooks 2013; Spry 2011; Holman Jones et al. 2016; Zembylas et al. 2020 [on Judith Butler]). The methodology chosen for this study was *heuristic inquiry*, which can encompass both autobiographical and biographical research written about an intense personal lived experience of both the researcher and the participants (Douglass and Moustakas 1985; Kenny 2012; Patton 2015).

Heuristic inquiry does not conform to formal or conventional scientific research methods, rather it is spontaneous, creative and often shifting in its methods to best explore the deeper levels of the phenomenon (Moustakas 1990; Djuraskovic and Arthur 2010; Haertl 2014; Patton 2015). Heuristic researchers are encouraged to draw from many varied sources that would often be excluded from other forms of academic work. This style of research is concerned with discovering the essence and deeper meanings of a phenomenon and does not set out to test a hypothesis, nor is it concerned with whether the findings can be replicated or generalised (Moustakas 1990; Kenny 2012; Patton 2015). A heuristic inquiry project often contains artwork, poetry, song and performance, tending to push the boundaries of traditional research. However, there is a prescribed set of six stages a researcher goes through in undertaking a heuristic inquiry and they must be disciplined in their approach to present a successful well-developed study of the phenomenon under investigation. In the present study, the principal researcher was a candidate in the 2017 NSW local government elections and the research followed these six stages: initial engagement; immersion; incubation; illumination; explication; and creative synthesis (Moustakas 1990; Djuraskovic and Arthur 2010; Kenny 2012; Patton 2015; Johnston et al. 2017; Kumar 2017).

### Study participants and councils (2017–2021)

The women invited to participate in this study were campaigning in two neighbouring regional council areas for the September 2017 elections. Those two councils had regressed in their gender representation from one female councillor during the 2008–2012 term to no women during 2012–2017 (New South Wales Electoral Commission [NSWEC] 2017). Due to proposed council amalgamations in the region the 2012–2016 term had been extended by one year. The Australian Electoral Commission's (2017)

public records had 98 candidates registered across the two councils: 43 were women, of whom 40 were in the larger of the two local government areas, most holding the lower positions 3-6 on group tickets.[1]

The six women who participated in this study were selected as they either held position one or two on a group ticket or stood as individual candidates – hence the description 'lead candidates'. The principal researcher had a pre-existing relationship with three of the participants, socially or through political networks, and met with the remaining two participants for the first time during this study. At the 2017 council elections none of the three women who contested the smaller regional council, of whom two were participants in this study, were elected, perpetuating an all-male council. Of the four women in this study who contested the larger council, only one was elected, resulting in a council of ten men and one woman.

### Participant interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted allowing participants to tell their story uninterrupted (Douglass and Moustakas 1985) and spontaneous questions arose, allowing other emergent themes to be explored and provide further information to support and enrich their responses to the predetermined questions (Kumar 2012). The interview prompts covered: personal background; councillor/candidate experience; the opportunities and obstacles in running the candidate's campaign; the leadership styles which inspired them (female and male); whether the issue of gender diversity and ratios and/or membership of ALGWA influenced their decision to stand; whether they have influenced or been influenced by other women, and/or consider themselves as feminists; and whether targets and equal gender representation form part of their future vision. The principal researcher answered the interview questions through self-dialogue, drawing together *"intellect, emotion, and spirit"* (Moustakas 1990, p. 16) in her responses and captured this through journaling and reflective poetry (Djuraskovic and Arthur 2010; Haertl 2014).

As this was a feminist study issues of identity and power imbalance were considered in the design, with face-to-face confidential interviews conducted with all participants and pseudonyms being assigned, including to the principal researcher, to protect their identity. Ethical concerns led to a decision to discontinue involvement of one participant in the study due to an identified power imbalance. This participant had been in a support position (position 2) on the principal researcher's group ticket.

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[1] In NSW voting for local government elections is conducted on a preferential system with either grouped or ungrouped candidates. Groups of two or more candidates can appear on a ballot paper. These groups can be from a registered political party or can run as a collective of independent candidates who have chosen to form a group. Ungrouped candidates are shown in a separate column from groups and are listed in order of the ballot draw. When voting there is a choice of 'above the line' (group names) or 'below the line' (all candidates named individually, including those in a group) on the ballot paper. First preference is marked as a '1', second preference as '2', third preference as '3' and so on, until the minimum required number of candidates have been marked. If the voter chooses to vote for a group, s/he just marks a first choice above the line and preferences are then allocated according to the group's wishes. See: https://www.elections.nsw.gov.au/Elections/How-voting-works

All interviews were conducted in a location and at a time that the participants selected. The interviews were recorded and manually transcribed, and each interview was of a similar duration and transcript length. Once the recordings were transcribed each participant was emailed a copy; all replied and indicated that no amendments were required. Communication when not in person was conducted via email, phone or short message service (SMS). The researcher met with three women for a second interview, but a second interview was not required for the other two participants as enough data had been previously collected.

## Findings[2]

### *Profile of Participants*

All participants including the principal researcher were assigned a number from 1 to 6. Three (participants 4, 5, 6) are middle class, married, aged over 50 years with non-dependent children, and community volunteers. However, only two of these three fit the long-held stereotype perfectly by also being non-tertiary-educated Anglo-Australian (participants 4, 6), while participant 5 identifies as Aboriginal (Indigenous Australian) and is postgraduate-educated.

Participants 1, 2 and 3 fall into the 'second wave' of women councillors, being aged 35–40 and tertiary-educated, as well as being active community volunteers. Two are in committed relationships (married/de facto) with no children and both are interested in moving into higher-level politics (participants 2, 3), while participant 1 is a single parent of a young child under 15 and is more community-focused than career-driven.

The identified under-represented groups among councillors in Australia are women, Indigenous Australians, people aged 18–39, people with a disability, people whose first language is not English, lower-income occupations, single parents with a child under 15 (Manion and Sumich 2013b) and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) (Wade 2016). In addition to all the participants in this study identifying as women, a further five out of these eight groups were represented. One woman is Indigenous Australian and one of unknown ancestry; another is aged between 18 and 39; two identify as LGBTIQ; and one is on a low income and is a single parent with a child under 15.

### *Exemplary profiles*

With such a diversity of women two exemplary profiles have been selected to illustrate a different leadership style and stage of life. These two women were selected as offering exemplary profiles of their stories while *"maintain*[ing] *their individual uniqueness* [still] *reflect*[ed] *the group as a whole"* Kenny 2012, p. 9); in addition, both belong to a minority group, LGBTIQ or Aboriginal (Manion and Sumich 2013b; Wade 2016).

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[2] The findings and extracts from transcripts presented in this and the next section are drawn from Sky (2018).

*Exemplary profile: participant 3*

*Participant 3* is just beginning her forties and is in a loving, committed, and supportive de facto relationship. She is a professional self-employed consultant and has held numerous leadership roles in both paid and voluntary organisations. She has no children and works part-time flexible hours. She has three brothers and comes from a well-educated and respected family. She has completed several post-graduate qualifications to master's level.

*Participant 3* does not see herself as a feminist as she admits to not having enough understanding of feminism to label herself one. She identifies herself as a consultative leader, expressing a dislike for either extreme of the quiet soft style or the authoritarian dictatorship style of leadership; however, in the examples she offered she tended to admire strong leaders over quiet.

Her motivation to run for council is her love for where she lives and the desire to continue the good work that has been done while offering a fresher, more progressive perspective:

> *I don't see* [council] *as a career, I see it as a service. I more see it as a volunteer role, not as a career choice. I didn't know councillors got a payment when I first decided to nominate, I didn't know that* (transcript 25 August 2017).

*Exemplary profile: participant 5*

*Participant 5* is a woman in her 'third age', an animal lover and married as she says to her best friend. She is self-employed and works part-time flexible hours as an Indigenous language and culture teacher and artist, and she also has community roles in a voluntary capacity. She has no dependent children, but her husband has medical conditions requiring increased caring responsibilities. She is tertiary-educated with her highest qualification a university graduate certificate.

*Participant 5* identifies herself entirely as a quiet leader and finds strong women leaders distasteful. She offered names of women leaders whom she liked for their *"softness"* and those she disliked for their *"blokey-ness"* (interview 1: 9 August 2017). She does not wish to be identified as a feminist and does not belong to any women's groups, *"Oh gosh no,* [I'm] *not a rampant* [feminist] *by any means, no, no"*, physically recoiling at the thought. She thinks that women fighting for women's issues and Aboriginal issues are missing the point: she believes they are all just people's issues and should be addressed as such. Her decision to run was not influenced by the lack of women elected in the previous term of council, and her campaign was not pushing any agenda.

> *Don't be loud, do it quietly. It's not just the volume but the aggression, I find those type of women quite formidable, very aggressive and it puts people off, they assume they are totally right and push their agenda very, very strongly, which is fine if you are passionate about it, but I think there's a way to do it that isn't aggressively loud. It might take me a while, but I get there, there is just little mentions that then come through* (transcript 25 August 2017).

### *Composite depiction*

Five main themes were revealed by the data: childhood influences; leadership styles; ambivalence around gender issues; ambivalence around gender targets; and women's attitudes towards their own gender.

*Table 1: Key themes of women seeking election to local government*

| **Theme: leadership styles** | **Composite depiction: 'leaders I admire'** |
| --- | --- |
| • 5 out of 6 participants identified as quiet, strong leaders<br>• 5 out of 6 said they disliked soft, feminine leadership styles<br>• 1 woman out of 6 identified as a quiet, soft leader and disliked strong women leaders | *I like to be boss, I like to take charge, not that I like to take over, well sometimes I do* (participants 2, 6)<br><br>*…but only with people who need to be pulled into line* (participants 1, 4, 6)<br><br>*Maybe this is why the female leaders I look towards I'd put towards the male* [leadership style] (participants 1-4, 6)<br><br>*…only because it's really hard if you go to one end and be all stereotypical female, soft and supportive and everything like that, you may not get the respect because you can be seen as a pushover* (participants 1, 3, 4, 6)<br><br>*…but then you don't want to be the opposite end, bossy and it's your way or the highway…that only causes negative, low morale and then people will disrespect you as well because you're being seen as a bully…so, you do have to find that centre ground really* (participants 1-4, 6)<br><br>*My idea of a leader is different to others, for me inspiring leaders do not need to have a high profile or be followed by masses of people* (participants 1, 4, 5)<br><br>*…a female leader is a strong woman in her own right* (participants 1, 4, 6)<br><br>*…who through her strength, when she connects with another, she changes their life.* (participants 1, 5)<br><br>*I have been blessed so many times in my life by meeting women like this* (participants 1, 5)<br><br>*…who have changed my life or just reinforced to me that I'm on the right path, keep going.* (participants 1, 5) |
| **Theme: ambivalence around gender issues** | **Composite depiction: division around campaigning for gender issues** |
| • 1 woman out of 6 said that the lack of women on council was her motivation to run<br>• 5 out of 6 said gender was not a factor for their decision to stand and that their campaigns did not focus on gender issues<br>Only 1 out of 6 participants had actively encouraged another woman to stand as a candidate | *This electorate is very conservative and male-dominated* (participants 1, 3-6)<br><br>*There is still an air of misogyny, there's still some very backward thinking* (participants 1, 3, 4, 6)<br><br>*Women make up 51% of our population and yet my council has had no female representation for 5 years, and this is why I am contesting the election* (participant 1)<br><br>*I believe in empowering other women* (participants 1, 6)<br><br>*But I am not running because I'm female* (participants 2-6)<br><br>*… and I don't want people to vote for me because I am female, that's neither here nor there* (participants 2, 4-6)<br><br>*I just thought, I'm pretty sensible, I have half a brain, I haven't had experience on council, but I felt there needed to be a different perspective, not necessarily a female perspective* (participants 2,4-6)<br><br>*My campaign, it's general* (participants 2, 3)<br><br>*… it takes in everything, it takes in the whole town* (participant 6)<br><br>*I haven't programmed it to take in men or women* (participants 2-6)<br><br>*What affects me, whether it be roads, or rates, or parks or footpaths, water, everything …. it affects a man too* (participants 2-4) |

Only two of these five themes and composite poems are included in this article – leadership styles and ambivalence around gender issues – as they speak directly to the focus of this paper and, the authors argue, provide the most important findings for future leadership programmes. The voices of each individual woman are identified by the participant number. Lines with more than one number beside them indicate that these participants' quotes have been combined as they were similar in wording and meaning.

### Creative synthesis

The guiding heuristic question for this study was *What are the leadership styles and motivations of lead women candidates contesting an all-male regional council?*

While focusing inward on the question to understand the deeper essence motivating these six regional women to run for council, the motivator that was illuminated was community service. All women expressed that they saw being a councillor as a community service role: two were unaware that they would be remunerated if elected and had thought it was a voluntary unpaid role. While one candidate cited gender disparity as her motivator, she also pointed out that increased awareness of women's under-representation and greater gender equality would be a benefit for the health and wellbeing of the whole community. The five participants who were not campaigning on gender issues or due to the lack of women on council were clear that if elected their role was to serve women, men and children equally across their council area. The creative synthesis poem presented below represents a unified voice and the essence of their candidature.

### Community service: a woman's motivation

*To be a candidate for council is to me all about – community service*

*This is all I want to do, to serve – my community*

*This is not about gender, it is about every person.*

*To serve my community*

*Is to recognise and respect diversity*

*To include everyone.*

*I am not doing this for the money or the fame*

*This is not a career path or ego-driven in any way*

*It is all about giving to, and assisting, others.*

*This is of course all that it should be about*

*Service to the community*

*No matter your gender, sexuality, race or creed,*

*No matter your health or your wealth,*

*These make no difference to me.*

*I just want to represent you, and*

*Keep the other councillors accountable*

*Hold them to their campaign promises*

*Remind them that they are not there to serve their own interest, or*

*Those of their mates and the big business end of town.*

*For to be a councillor, to me, is all about integrity*

*Honesty, transparancey, accountability, inclusivity*

*Fairness, justice, and equality.*

*It is about delivering a community service to*

*Every child, woman and man equally.*

## Discussion

This study explored the leadership styles and motivation of women lead candidates contesting two all-male regional councils in order to understand the barriers women in regional areas face in taking public leadership roles. The findings illuminated some of the social attitudes and perceptions towards gender and why women in regional areas are under-represented on their local councils. Some of the keywords in the transcripts of the six participants included: the 'boys' club'; sexism; discrimination; misogyny; regressive not progressive; patriarchal; and conservative. Nevertheless, despite all participants recognising the entrenched 'boys' club' that existed in their respective councils, the lack of women councillors was not a motivator for five of the six participants. The lead candidates in this study were found to be motivated by service to their community.

While research indicates that the women who have achieved top-level positions tend to emulate male stereotypical leadership (Sinclair 2007; Maguire 2010; Blackwood and Louis 2017), the participants in this study have all discovered what Eagly and Carli (2007, p. 123) explain as a *"middle way, that is neither acceptably masculine, nor unacceptably feminine"*. The specific leadership style that captures their motivation is that of the *servant leader* (Chin and Trimble 2015). The *servant leader* does not wish to rule over others: they enter leadership with the desire to serve the people they represent by *"responding to the needs of followers* [constituents]*"* (Chin and Trimble 2015, p. 127). *Servant leaders* resonate with Western's (2019) quiet, humble leadership style with the added emphasis being on serving the people and focusing on goals that will find solutions and deliver results for the collective good (Chin and Trimble 2015; Longman and Lamm Bray 2017).

This style of leadership falls under the banner of collaborative leadership, which is seen as a stereotypical female style and is gaining greater levels of respect, especially among politicians of both genders (Eagly and Carli 2007; Elix and Lambert 2014; Chin and Trimble 2015). All six women identified with the profile of a *quiet leader*, one who is motivated by representing and serving her community and not for public recognition. Often *quiet leaders* can be viewed as weak (Chin and Trimble 2015), which is a mistake as these leaders are every bit as capable of standing strong and being

forceful when required. Quiet leaders possess all the necessary traits of the archetypal male heroic style of leader, yet they make an informed decision to choose less confrontational and authoritarian management styles (Badaracco 2003; Eagly and Carli 2007; Elix and Lambert 2014; Western 2019).

Five of the six women did not refer to themselves as a leader; however, all six expressed that they had leadership qualities and skills to fulfil the duties of an elected councillor. These findings were similar to Elix and Lambert's (2014) study on women leaders in the Australian environmental movement, who were also uncomfortable applying for or having the label of leader applied to them; yet they knew they could competently do all that was required of them in the leadership role. There was only one woman in this study who identified herself as a strong capable leader and said that she was *"recognised by others as a leader too"*. This participant was also the only woman to be elected from the combined field of 43 women candidates across the two council areas under study. Factors identified in this study for why this may be are varied, but largely focus on the regional area's predominance of traditional conservative thinking in respect of gender roles (Sheridan et al. 2006; Maguire 2010; Murphy 2010; Litchfield 2022). Regional women face a *"socialisation process whereby they are not taught to be as confident or as assertive as men"* (Briggs 2000, p. 78); and are *"socialised not to pursue certain careers"* (Farrell and Titcombe 2016, p. 870).

*The servant leader* style and the participants' motivation for becoming a candidate being service *to their community* marries well with the socialised gender expectations of women in rural and regional areas to focus on domestic, community and voluntary roles. Community service as a motivator for women to stand for council is also consistent with Briggs' (2000) study on women candidates which describes one type of woman councillor as being the *"community representative,* [who is] *deeply committed to their area … and interested in politics only to protect the interests of a set area and community"* (p. 82). However, it would also seem to relate to the most powerful motivators for women to seek leadership, irrespective of where they reside, found by Longman and Lamm Bray (2017), as being a sense of purpose and calling to *"make a positive contribution to society"* and to benefit others in the community (pp. 212–213).

Manion and Sumich's (2013a) research findings are similar to those of this study in terms of motivating factors to stand for council. The factors cited in Manion and Sumich's 'Arrive and Survive' study are, in order of importance to participants: 1. Using their experience and knowledge (90%); 2. Wanting to directly influence council decisions (82%); and 3. Wanting to resolve problems for individuals in their community (69%). All six women in this study were in agreement in the order of their priorities: 1. Representing their community (wanting to resolve problems for individuals in their community); 2. Keeping the other councillors accountable (wanting to directly influence council decisions); 3. Knowing they could fulfill the duties of councillor by drawing on their life, work and education experiences (using their experience and knowledge). These results are consistent with other studies with

women leaders that found gender was not a factor and service to the community was their strongest motivation (Bjørnå 2012; Manion and Sumich 2013a, 2013b; Elix and Lambert 2014).

Campaigning because they were a woman, or for other women, or on gender equity issues did not rate as a motivator (Manion and Sumich 2013a, 2013b; Elix and Lambert 2014). Despite women having knowledge and awareness around gender equity issues, the women in this study and in other scholarly studies did not believe that addressing gender disparity or other women's issues should be a local government responsibility (Bjørnå 2012; Manion and Sumich 2013a, 2013b; Elix and Lambert 2014). The ambivalence towards campaigning from a position of being a woman or in speaking about gender disparity issues is a not uncommon finding among studies into women's motivation to contest elections (Gillard 2014). This is largely due to a valid concern that to push a woman's agenda could be a campaign-killer, and a *"fast-track to marginalisation"* (Sinclair 1998, p. 21). However, that concern creates a negative feedback loop which continues to exclude women from entering this male-dominated arena (Farrell and Titcombe 2016). Briggs (2000) argues that the *"gender disparity* [on councils] *prevents women from nominating"* (p. 4), and until this is addressed by increasing the number of women contesting elections, the disparity will be maintained. Therefore, the traditional conservatism and social discourse in regional council areas, which has played a significant role in creating the entrenched gender disparity, remains unchallenged.

At the individual level, these results may draw women's attention to the importance of aligning themselves with women's organisations like ALGWA, and supporting and encouraging other women to contest future elections. Research into women achieving positions of leadership have found that a key factor has been the support given to the individual by another woman (Ryan et al. 2005; Hoyt and Simon 2017; Sanford et al. 2015). ALGWA holds annual conferences, workshops and ongoing mentoring programmes, as well as producing publications to support women seeking election to councils. However, five of the six women in this study had not heard of ALGWA nor searched for, or participated in, any local government women's support organisations or workshops.

Heuristic inquiry, the methodology for this study, is said to have the ability to transform the researcher while also *"empowering* [participants] *and communities"* (Kumar 2017, p. 3). This was true of the sole elected participant in this research. During the interviews she stated that gender was not a consideration for her to stand for election and that she had not heard of ALGWA. But later the authors observed that during her term on council she became an ALGWA member and a strong advocate for greater women's representation. In the 2021 election it was pleasing to see an increase to three women in the larger council and one in the smaller council (NSWEC 2021). However, the woman elected in 2017 did not stand for re-election.

At the local government and organisational level, the results of this study have implications for improving existing mentoring programmes and practice to engage with a greater diversity of women in

regional areas. These results may also have implications at a societal level. While there are calls to dismantle the 'boys' club' that discourages women from being politically active (Farrell and Titcombe 2016), this study also highlights the need to build up the positive perceptions of women in leadership, which can start with reimagining the outdated stereotypical profile of women councillors. By taking these two steps simultaneously, the authors see scope for positive social change and an increase of female representation on councils. However, while this study's findings are significant in themselves and consistent with other studies on women councillors and women leaders, the number of participants was small and therefore the findings cannot simply be generalised to a broad cross-section of women in the community.

## Conclusion

There is no easy answer on how to correct the gender disparity seen in regional local governments, as there are many inter-related factors at work creating this phenomenon. ALGWA suggests that one way to tackle entrenched gender disparity is for women to support and encourage other women to seek and secure election. While all six lead women candidates in this study agreed there needed to be a woman's voice on councils, five expressed ambivalence towards campaigning from a position of being a woman or in speaking about gender disparity issues. They believed that to serve their community equally meant not to campaign on gender issues. Nor were they motivated to contest the election due to the lack of women on council in their region. These findings have significant implications on an individual, organisational and societal level. As a society, we need to invest in more research to understand the barriers that regional and rural women face in choosing to stand as candidates and in becoming elected representatives in local government, so that we can then develop new ways in which to encourage, support and develop women to contest elections. The authors suggest research into the factors which contributed to the marked increase in women in the December 2021 local government elections in NSW would be a valuable way to investigate developmental approaches.

## Declaration of conflicting interest

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