



ASSESSING GENDER EQUALITY IN NEWCASTLE LOCAL MUNICIPALITY, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the factors influencing the effective implementation of gender equality in the Newcastle Local Municipality (NLM). The study, being qualitative in nature, is based on a single case study considering the NLM as a locus. Information is gathered through literature review. The data is analysed through conceptual analysis. The findings obtained indicate a gender disparity at the NLM in terms of councillor and management positions. There are also social, economic, political, ideological, and institutional factors hampering the achievement of gender equality and, these are comprehensively addressed in the study. The study offers recommendations which can be applied in NLM and other municipalities to enhance gender equality. The importance of involving local government and municipalities in the fight against gender inequality cannot be underestimated. It is therefore necessary to address the existing research gap concerning gender equality in local government.

Keywords: *gender, bureaucratic positions, Newcastle Local Municipality, South Africa.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The term gender is concerned with “a culturally defined set of economic, social, and political roles, responsibilities, rights, entitlements obligations, associated with being female and male, as well as the power relations between and among women and men, boys and girls” (Interagency Gender Working Group (IGWG), 1998:2; also adapted by Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2018:3). Gender equality is a human rights matter and is concerned with the “equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys and implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognising the diversity of different groups of women and men” (Mediterranean Institute for Gender Studies [MIGS], 2005, cited in Nyiransabimana, 2018:4).

The legal notion of gender equality, in the context of international human rights, was laid down as early as 1948 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and 1979 in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Gender equality advocates that the responsibilities, rights, and opportunities for women should be equal to those of men; this implies that both men’s and women’s priorities, needs and interests should be taken into consideration despite the diversity of the two groups being recognised (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2018:9). Gender equality is a human right that facilitates fundamental growth (Nyiransabimana, 2018:1). Despite the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) recognising gender equality as a human right, an essential development goal, and vital to the fast-tracking of sustainable development, it remains a global challenge (Nyiransabimana, 2018:1-2). Kamrany and Robinson (2012:1) claim that appalling gender inequality continues globally notwithstanding considerable national and international measures taken to eradicate it. The World Population Report (WPR) (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2000:1) states that “gender inequality holds back the growth of individuals, the development of countries and the evolution of societies, to the disadvantage of both men and women”. The report articulates gender issues not only as women’s

issues and indicates that to understand “gender, means understanding opportunities, constraints, and the impact of change as they affect both women and men” (UNFPA, 2000:5).

Kamrany and Robinson (2012:1) assert that the reasons and degree of gender inequality differ from one country to another and indicate that the symptoms include, but are not limited to, femicide, honour killings, rape, misogynistic violence, infanticide, and sex-selective abortion. These authors emphasise that gender inequality results in up to a 25% loss of productivity, which forces women to suffer emotional and economic impacts. They also highlight that gender inequality leads to significant individual and societal losses for countries. Despite females constituting more than 50% of the population, only 7% of all governments are headed by women (Kamrany & Robinson, 2012:2). The lack of equal representation of men and women in policymaking institutions often results in resolutions being more beneficial for men. Kamrany and Robinson (2012:1-2) also posit that gender discrimination is entrenched in culture, traditions, and history, causing severe harm to female psychology regarding their value and self-esteem. The preceding statements indicate the need for discussions and debates at the macro level. A consensus is required to find appropriate strategies. Therefore, in 2015, the leaders of 193 nations across the world created a plan known as the sustainable development goals (SDGs), consisting of 17 goals that, if achieved, will rid the world of poverty, hunger, and climate change (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2015:3). Osborn, Cutter and Ulla (2015:2) describe the SDGs as a shared global vision for development and a safe, unbiased, and sustainable universe for all human beings to flourish. The SDGs are founded on the ethical principles that nobody should remain behind, and everybody has a mutual obligation to contribute to achieving the global vision – the goals are therefore seen as both ambitious and challenging for all nations (Osborn et al., 2015:2). There is a challenge to realise the goal as according to Vyas-Doorgapersad (2015:131) political will is still required for gender mainstreaming in policy design processes and emphasises that social imbalances have a ripple effect, whereby an absence of gender-based tasks and responsibilities, participation, and decision-making may eventually lead to gender-biased policy outcomes. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2014, in Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2017:101) emphasises that the South African Government should strive to set an example for the rest of the country in promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment, and hence to achieve the SDG 5.

SDG 5 is concerned with gender equality and empowering women and girls (UNDP, 2015:8). SDG 5 reads as follows (UNDP, 2015:20): Realising gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the goals and targets. The achievement of full human potential and sustainable development is not possible if half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities. Women and girls must enjoy equal access to quality education, economic resources, and political participation, as well as equal opportunities with men and boys for employment, leadership, and decision-making at all levels. SDG 5 prompted world leaders to work for a significant increase in investments to close the gender gap and strengthen support for institutions in relation to gender equality and the empowerment of women at global, regional, and national levels (United Nations [UN], 2015:20).

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The focus of the study is gender equality and locus are Newcastle Local Municipality (NLM). Since 2015, the NLM has undergone a transformative process aimed at developing sufficient organisational capacity to effectively deliver basic services (NLM, 2019a:487). The challenges faced by the NLM are typical of any learning and growing organisation and include issues such as gender equity (NLM, 2019a:487). The NLM hence experiences challenges related to gender equality at both the political and administrative (bureaucratic) levels. At the political level, the challenges include those described below.

- The primary researcher experienced challenges in drawing relevant and timely information as the official database is not updated. The information regarding local elections in Newcastle is only available since 2011 and hence was used in the study to draw inferences.



- Although the statistics regarding the number of residents indicating gender representations were available, the statistics were mostly based on predictions or outdated statistics (NLM, 2006; NLM, 2011; NLM, 2016a).

- There are no statistics available regarding gender representation for Newcastle registered voters and people who participated in the elections. Statistics are available for South Africa on www.elections.org.za and other websites, but nothing for Newcastle.

- These challenges highlight that the lack of updated information regarding gender-based candidate lists, the absence of official documentation regarding local elections and the voters' roll, and the inadequate gender-disaggregated database are some of the factors that influence the effective implementation of gender equality at the political level in Newcastle. There is a lack of official documentation regarding a gender-inclusive list of voters to determine community members' gender-based representation choices.

- The gender representation for males and females in the Newcastle population is, on average, 52% female and 48% male (NLM, 2021a:135). As per the statistics stated in the table, it is considered that even though in 2016 there was a significant proportion of female candidates at 65% compared to 35% male candidates, only 13% (29 out of 227) of the female candidates were voted into the council (NLM, 2021a:135).

Due to these challenges and the limited availability of information, the study focused only on exploring gender equality at the bureaucratic level in the NLM. The bureaucratic level in local government is also referred to as the municipality's administration and consists of the municipal manager as head of the organisation and all other employees. The challenges encountered at the bureaucratic level include those described below (Information obtained from the NLM Work Skills Plans (WSPs) submitted to Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority (LGSETA) for the period 1 May to 30 April of each of the following years: 2015-2022 (NLM, 2015; NLM, 2016b; NLM, 2017; NLM, 2018; NLM, 2019b; NLM, 2020; NLM, 2021c; NLM, 2022): the total employees appointed in the 2021/2022 period consist of 38% females and 62% males. The average percentage of employees appointed over the eight-years is 41% females and 59% males. The total employees appointed in management positions in the 2021/2022 period consist of 45% females and 55% males. The average percentage of employees appointed in management positions over the seven years is 39% females and 41% males. The total employees appointed in professional positions in the 2021/2022 period consist of 59% females and 41% males. The average percentage of employees appointed in professional positions over the five-years is 51% females and 49% males (NLM, 2015-2022). The statistics obtained indicate a gender disparity at the NLM in terms of councillors and management positions.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the social constructivism/interpretive social science research paradigm as it was deemed the most suitable paradigm for this study. According to Holloway and Wheeler (in Abrar 2017, as adapted by Mutandwa 2023:19), the interpretive approach is the root of qualitative research methodology, as it focuses on social reality and lived experience of human life. Abrar (2017, in Mutandwa, 2023:19) cites that interpretivism is the paradigm for qualitative research. Greyling (2014, in Nhlapo, 2020:24) posits that the understanding of qualitative research and methodology is closely linked to how qualitative researchers conceptualise the research they are conducting. In this regard, qualitative research can be arranged along a continuum, with one dimension marked by a holistic – somewhat paradigm-like – conception and the other by situational, pragmatic, and opportunistic methodological practices. Designing a study within a specific research paradigm means that the research is situated within a specific framework with interrelated assumptions, concepts, theories, values, and practices that comprise how one perceives that reality should be viewed (ontology) and studied (epistemology) (Schurink, 2009 and Bangani, 2019, in Maile, 2022:10).

In this study, the qualitative information was compiled through literature review that “is the surveying of scholarly articles, books and other sources relevant to a particular issue, area of

research, or theory, and by so doing, providing a description, summary, and critical evaluation of these works” (Ramdhani, Ramdhani & Amin, 2014:48). The significance of a literature review is explained by May (1997:4), stating that “successful research depends on a well-planned review of the available literature. A review of the literature is the way information about what is already known and not known is learned. It is important for the researcher to organise the search of literature around the key concepts to be studied”. The study utilised secondary data that was collected from the available literature.

The information is analysed through conceptual analysis, that, according to Furner (2006; and Nhlapo, 2020, in Makhubu, 2021:10) is a technique that treats concepts as classes of objects, events, properties, or relationships. The technique involves precisely defining the meaning of a given concept by identifying and specifying the conditions under which any entity or phenomenon is (or could be) classified under the concept in question.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

There could be social, economic, political, ideological, and institutional factors hampering the achievement of gender equality in any institution. These factors are described and explored in the study. All factors cannot be discussed in one publication. The existing article therefore focuses only on the institutional factors. The other factors form part of the future studies. The study explores the following aspects requiring discussions.

3.1 LACK OF WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN MANAGEMENT POSITIONS

The lack of representation of female employees at all levels in the NLM presents challenges that include a lack of female role models and difficulty in building networks in the municipality. A masculine organisational culture is more prevalent in organisations where women are underrepresented in senior roles, and the culture is determined by male gender roles, priorities, and values (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2014:35). The presence of women in management positions and the opportunity to network with these women is essential for motivating other women to move up the corporate ladder (Linacre, 2020:4). Formal and informal networking is indispensable in enhancing career progression prospects (UNDP, 2014:42). Gender differences in networking are an important factor contributing to the wage and promotion gaps between men and women. Male decision-makers are more likely to reward their predominantly male networks with promotions and higher earnings, resulting in disparities between males and females (Mengel, 2020:1). Research conducted by Uzzi (2019:1) indicates that men and women need different types of networks. While women need to establish similar networks as men, they also need to maintain a close inner circle of female contacts. Women also need to ensure that their inner circle of female contacts have minimum contacts in common to ensure that access to each other’s network will generate new contacts (Uzzi, 2019:4-4).

Establishing and maintaining networks and inner circles for female employees in the NLM appears to be close to impossible. The lack of sufficient representation in top management and senior management positions, where decisions can be influenced, provides limited contact with individuals with whom networks, and inner circles can be formed. In addition to insufficient female representation, the burden of additional family responsibilities makes it even more challenging for female employees to build and maintain networks.

The lack of representation of women in the council, committees, and organised labour creates a gap in the tabling of gender challenges to address the male-dominated organisational culture. The lack of gender issues tabled at decision-making bodies’ meetings led to the reinforcement of the male-dominated culture. A vicious cycle is created, where insufficient representation at meaningful levels leads to the reinforcement of the male perspective, which leads to insufficient representation at meaningful levels. Breaking this cycle requires management to commit to changing the culture by ensuring gender equality becomes a strategic objective.



3.2 LACK OF MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT TO PLACE GENDER EQUALITY AS A STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

Management commitment refers to the level of support for gender equality provided by top and senior management. It performs a crucial role in ensuring participation and progress in gender equality programmes. Findings confirm that achieving gender equality in municipalities is not possible without senior management's support. Literature presented an analysis of the NLM institutional gender equity frameworks, which included the integrated development plan, budget process, performance management system, employment equity plan, workplace skills plan and human resources management and development strategy.

The NLM's Integrated Development Plan (IDP) confirms the commitment to implementing programmes for gender equality in the Newcastle community. However, it lacks specific programmes aimed at achieving institutional gender equality. The analysis of the NLM's budget process did not reveal any information related to the implementation of institutional gender equality. The performance management system was identified as a primary instrument for monitoring, reviewing, and improving the IDP's implementation. Although gender equality is mentioned in the institutional development perspective, it is not translated into specific performance indicators.

The NLM's Employment Equity Plan highlights various barriers to employment equity but does not specifically address gender equality or equity. There is no evidence of management coordinating or attending meetings related to the execution of the employment equity plan. The discussion regarding the NLM's workplace skills plan indicates insufficient funding provided for its implementation and a lack of sufficient inclusion of female managers in planned training programmes. The human resources management and development strategy, reveals the absence of targets related to gender equality.

Employees' attitudes and motivation play an important role in shaping the public service culture. They are profoundly influenced by the work environment, including the efficiency of operational systems and management (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2014:34). Under-resourced and poorly managed work environments make it difficult for staff to respond to the community's needs (RSA, 2014:34). The current strain on municipalities to deliver basic services intensifies the pressure to ensure effective management and leadership at all levels (Qoboshiyana, 2011:16). As a result, municipalities may set aside other responsibilities, such as gender equality and gender mainstreaming (Qoboshiyana, 2011:16).

The NLM, like all other municipalities, is responsible for the provision of basic services, including electricity reticulation, firefighting services, water and sanitation services, refuse removal, traffic, street lighting, and cemeteries (NLM, 2021a:221). With the approval of the NLM organogram in 2021, a vacancy rate of 43,7% was indicated after the removal of 1 429 vacant positions from the organogram (NLM, 2021b:1). The decrease in the vacancy rate from 66,5% to 43,7% did not occur through filling vacant positions, but by merely removing 1 429 vacant posts (NLM, 2021b:1). As a result, the bureaucratic level of the municipality is expected to fulfil the primary functions of local government in the Newcastle Municipal area with only half of the human resources required to provide an effective service. This exerts a significant amount of pressure on employees. Under these circumstances, it is difficult for employees to prioritise matters such as gender equality when they are forced to choose between basic services and equality issues. Without the required managerial support to establish gender equality as a strategic objective, it will not be regarded as a priority. This will result in a lack of budgeted funds for programmes to be implemented, and programmes will not be monitored to determine if implementation is taking place.

3.3 PRACTICES IN HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

According to Thomas (2003, in Mekwa, 2012:29), supportive practices in human resources management are essential for achieving workplace equity and addressing unfair workplace discrimination. The barriers to gender equality revealed that the majority of barriers stem from

HRM processes and practices. Barriers were identified in all the processes related to recruitment and selection of employees. For instance, recruitment procedures do not ensure that employment equity targets are met; advertising of positions does not effectively attract target groups; selection criteria overly emphasise minimum qualification requirements; and appointments are made without considering employment equity targets. While recruitment and selection processes may not be inherently discriminatory, they can still be regarded as barriers if they are gender-neutral (UNDP, 2014:36).

Section 160(1)(d) of the South African Constitution provides municipal councils with authority to employ personnel, thereby increasing municipalities' autonomy in decision-making, considering their preferences, needs, and capacity (Chongo, 2015:9). The NLM has autonomy in the recruitment and selection of employees and must therefore take responsibility for the lack of gender equality in these processes. Human resources practices such as appointments, promotions, and salary determinations are often influenced by gender bias (Kalev & Deutsch, 2018:263). Although research has indicated that formal recruitment procedures decrease the opportunity for gender discrimination, it does not challenge the gendered traditions entrenched in organisational cultures (Kalev & Deutsch, 2018:263).

The institutional factors therefore support the male-dominated organisational culture, which in turn influences the economic factors where a significant portion of salary costs is allocated to male employees, allowing them more economic freedom within the community. Institutionally, with men representing the council, the employer, and organised labour, there is no one to ensure that gender-related issues are brought to the table and represented meaningfully.

Gender inequality has not been eliminated in South African municipalities, despite some successes. This can also be attributed to a failure to allocate sufficient resources for the implementation of gender equality programmes. The NLM has identified challenges such as 'legislation overload' and the implementation being treated as a mere 'tick box exercise'. However, the most significant challenge for South African municipalities rests in the survival mode of the majority of municipalities. According to a 2021 report issued by the Department of Cooperative Governance, 64 municipalities were deemed dysfunctional due to poor governance, weak institutional capacity, inadequate financial management, corruption, and political instability (Auditor-General South Africa [AGSA], 2022:4). By 2022, a total of 33 municipalities required administration interventions, so indicating severe dysfunction and necessitating intervention from national and provincial governments to restore governance, financial management, and service delivery (AGSA, 2022:4). Only 16% (41 out of 257) of all municipalities received a clean audit for the 2020/2021 financial year, while 9 municipalities were unable to submit financial statements to the Auditor-General of South Africa (Maluleka, 2022, in Harper, 2022:2). Gender equality is not a priority in such municipalities and NLM is not an exception.

The literature review and findings give an impression created by documents such as the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), Service Delivery Budget Implementation Plan (SDBIP), and Work Skills Plan (WSP) is that they are drafted and submitted for approval solely for compliance purposes. There is no integration between these different documents, sometimes not even within a single document. For instance, in the IDP, the various PMS approaches differ from the key performance areas, which further differ from the various departmental submissions. This creates the impression that the NLM departments are working in silos, with none of these silos addressing gender equality within the NLM. The lack of gender equality is evident at all levels in the municipality, including the political, policy, organisational, departmental, individual, and stakeholder levels.

4. CONCLUSION

The study aims to investigate gender equality in the NLM with specific reference to the bureaucratic level. It analyses the NLM policy framework, provides an overview of the composition of NLM employees, and explores the factors hampering gender equality in the NLM. A number of policies and collective agreements regulate the human resources practices in the Newcastle Local Municipality.



Although these policies are not discriminatory in nature, none of them have been designed to address gender inequality. The consequences of not having policy guidelines for gender equality become evident in the overview of the bureaucratic level in the NLM. It should be acknowledged that although gender equality is legally recognised, it has not yet been fully integrated into cultural, social, economic, and political strata. Female leadership can only be sustained if there is adequate female representation and women's meaningful participation. Ideological factors still view women as unsuitable for leadership roles and promote the restriction of women to traditional roles. Even when women are employed and involved in local government, there is still an expectation for them to continue fulfilling their family duties. Due to a poor understanding and misinterpretation of gender equality, both men and women resist behavioural changes. Practical solutions to address these challenges in South African municipalities include ensuring fair access to employment practices, promoting role models in local governance, establishing networks of local women to create discussion forums, and facilitating a balance between work and family responsibilities. The implementation of these practical solutions by the NLM and other municipalities will have a significant impact on achieving gender equality in local government. Gender programmes focus on empowering women to ensure that they are capable of successfully handling decision-making positions. However, gender equality has moved beyond this point, and it is time to ask if men are sufficiently empowered to handle women in decision-making positions. What are the challenges that men create as obstacles to gender equality, and what is required to address and break down these obstacles? These aspects will form part of future studies.

NOTE: The article is based on a completed unpublished PhD Thesis titled: Jansen, D.2023. Factors influencing the implementation of gender equality in Newcastle Local Municipality at UJ under the supervision of Prof S Vyas-Doorgapersad. Unpublished Thesis. Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg.

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