Article

Women and Men Municipal Managers Doing and Undoing Gender

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Abstract

Drawing on the literature from critical gender studies and feminist critiques of bureaucracy, we explore the demands for gender work created when women occupy traditionally masculine roles in municipal government management. The article traces the work performed when municipal managers and municipalities respond to gendered demands, maintain gender perceptions, and negotiate gendered expectations, collectively referred to as gender work. To examine this process, we apply inductive qualitative method to analyze 21 semistructured interviews with men and women municipal managers in southeast United States. Our study reveals gender work at different levels of organizational hierarchies and in multiple ways. We find that women CAOs perform masculine gender work to negotiate a place in municipal leadership. We also find that municipal governments and men CAOs do feminine gender work to cultivate an environment for women to occupy counterstereotypical roles. This study suggests that jobs, institutional rules and policies, informal arrangements, work structures, and individuals’ private lives interplay to require gender work from women that is more complex and more demanding than that required of men in the same roles.

I am not a trailblazer. I am not the first woman to multitask. I am not the first woman to work and have a baby. I know these are special circumstances but there will be many women who will have done this well before I have. Ardern, Jacinda. Prime Minister of New Zealand (quoted in Quackenbush 2018)

In 2018, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern became the first democratically elected head of state to take maternity leave (Quackenbush 2018). Ardern implemented this feminine organizational practice in a Prime Minister’s office that had been occupied by 37 men and only 3 women. If, as Butler (2004) contends, gender is “done” and “undone,” then Ardern’s maternity leave was an undoing of the dominant gender structure, what Smith (1987) labels gender work, introducing a feminine gender practice to replace the practice of assigning most domestic labor to one’s spouse.

This article examines how women in municipal management do gender work in their organizations, how they themselves do gender work to fill their roles, and how their mentors, mostly retiring men do gender work to prepare cities for women leaders. Analyzing 21 semistructured interviews with women and men Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs), the study explores the following question. How do municipal managers and municipalities perform the gender work that promotes and supports women CAOs in municipal governments? Insight into this question is gathered from a review of critical gender studies (Sedgewick 2005).
and feminist critiques of public organizational theory (Mastracci and Arreola 2016).

After the literature review, a description of methods is followed by a report of themes identified in the data. Findings suggest that both men and women perform masculine gender work as they pursue careers in municipal management. We also find men who mentor women adopt feminine gender work to serve their mentees, even as women CAOs work to adopt some of their predecessors’ processes. Municipal organizations generally perform masculine gender work, but we also find evidence of women CAOs installing feminine practices in their organizations. Based on these findings, we argue that the career paths of both men and women CAOs include gender work. Following presentation of our results, we use Turner’s (2006) mapping of gender work to draft a spatial representation of the differences between the gender work performed in municipal management offices overseen by women and men.

Gender Work in Municipal Management

Gender is performative (Butler 2004). Unlike sex or sexuality, gender is a public-facing social construction in which phenotypes, actions, and rationalities are made to connect with terms like man, woman, gender fluid, and transgender (Kennedy, Bishu, and Heckler 2019). Gender is the glue that holds together ideas like masculinity with concepts including strength, aggression, power, heavier and larger bodies, clothing, and habits. Only one of the concepts involved in masculinity is maleness, and many people who were not born male live normal lives as men (Kennedy, Bishu, and Heckler 2019). Butler’s (2004) performative gender is not dependent on sex, but rather on the gender work performed by individuals and organizations (Smith 1987).

Gender work is how individuals and organizations manage and manipulate their position on a spectrum between masculine and feminine. In identifying gender as a central organizing principle of modern life, Smith (1987) argues for a generous concept of “work” capturing the “actualities of our experienced worlds” (110). In this context, gender work encompasses the activities and tasks that people do to manage perceptions of their gender, negotiate their relationships to gender, and undertake expectations assigned to their gender.

Masculine Gender Performance

Gender gives power to people who align with masculinity, and so people who identify as men perform masculine gender work to manage their perceived alignment with the masculine (Kimmel 2013). Scholars find that men and boys work hard to align with masculinity. Katz (1995) document tasks that young men take to assert their masculinity in high school and in the locker room. Kendall (2000) finds that men in online communities secure their masculinity by asserting an alternative masculinity. Feeling threatened by their status as “nerds,” these men align themselves with masculinity through humor objectifying women and positioning themselves as rebels against traditional norms. Similarly, Cooper (2000) finds that men software engineers work through paternity leave motivated by a pressure from masculine expectations demanding “a tremendous personal cost” (394) of fathers. These men sacrifice their connections with their families to defend their masculinity. Mumby (2006) situates this masculine gender work in a modern context where blue-collar masculinity is replaced by a white-collar masculinity focused on upward mobility derived from mastery of the world through technocracy.

Feminine Gender Performance

In professional environments, many women perform gender work to negotiate the masculine expectations of their role with gendered perceptions about their abilities. Implicit assessment tests find that women are subject to biases in the workplace (Banaji and Greenwald 2013). This may explain why one study finds that leadership training emphasizing masculine socialization often results in increased gender disparity (Trumpy and Elliott 2018), and why a meta-analysis of gendered leadership finds that women consistently adopt more democratic management styles than their men peers (Eagly and Johnson 1990). A separate meta-analysis finds that women tend to approach leadership differently, expounding communality over agentic values and adopting more democratic approaches than their peers who are men (Eagly and Johnson 1990).

Whether or not they serve in leadership roles, women negotiate workplace norms differently than men (Bishu and Headley, forthcoming). Kanter (1977) argues that women in corporations in the 20th century were obligated to loyalty and adaptability, whereas men were expected to be ambitious and strategic. Those women who manage to achieve masculine ideals of success were tokenized as a “representative of their category rather than independent individuals” (Kanter 1977, 6). To this day, women feel pressure to disassociate from the feminine by performing masculine gender work to meet workplace expectations while simultaneously performing feminine gender work to manage gendered perceptions (Inayatulla and Robinson 2020). These women also report feeling pressure to overperform so as to avoid creating perceptions that hurt other women in the future (Block, Croft, and Schmader 2018).

The literature indicates that women are more likely to need to reconcile gendered perceptions of themselves with their workplace roles. Eagly and Johnson’s
(1990) meta-analysis finds that congruence between the gender of a leader and the role they fill affects leadership styles. “...[T]he tendencies for female leaders to be more interpersonally oriented and more democratic than male leaders weakened to the extent that a role was male dominated” (Eagly and Johnson 1990, 248). Also, Player et al. (2019) find that leadership potential is valued in men, whereas leadership experience is valued in women making it more challenging for women to enter leadership in the first place. Masood and Nisar (2020) show that Pakistani women physicians relied on close social networks to navigate their traditionally masculine roles. Similarly, a study of women police indicates that outcomes begin to change only after a critical mass of women is achieved (Schuck and Rabe-Hemp 2014). Popular literature debates between “leaning in” to the expectations of the workplace (Sandberg 2013) or “stepping back” to prioritize meaningful lives (Slaughter 2015) reveal that both positions are feminine gender work when undertaken in response to gendered perceptions. Women must work to position themselves simultaneously as women and workers, uncompensated gender work less often required of men (Player et al. 2019).

Undertaking Gendered Expectations

Working women, more so than men, are expected to perform caritas for their families and partners (Hochschild and Machung 2012). These private-life expectations constitute a “second shift” that is unequally placed on the shoulders of women workers (Hochschild and Machung 2012). The last two decades have witnessed increasing inequality between women and men when it comes to domestic labor (Sayer 2016). In response, some women “step back” from their careers to manage the burden, whereas others find themselves caught between irreconcilable expectations (Hochschild and Machung 2012). Still others delay starting a family, or find innovative ways to undertake their family, social, and work aspirations simultaneously (Bowles 2012; Cooke, Mills, and Lavender 2010). One study finds quantitatively that this juggling of obligations hurts the job satisfaction rates of women (Mullins, Charbonneau, and Riccucci 2020). As employees work to facilitate their families’ care, they are undertaking gender work necessary to meet obligations inordinately placed on women.

Women and Men in Masculine Public Organizations

Organizations perform gender work differently than individuals. For example, offering flexible work arrangements could be feminine gender work performed by an organization because it helps women manage the second shift (Mullins, Charbonneau, and Riccucci 2020). Public organizations construct gender images that manage perceptions of their legitimacy, often adopting masculine images to appeal to dominant gender structures (Stivers 2000). Individuals in these organizations perform and receive gender performances from their colleagues, making sense of their place in the organization using gender as an interpretive device (Acker 1990).

Most public organizations perform masculine gender work. Historically, many public organizations were considered feminine, with some scholars even referring to local government work as municipal housekeeping (Addams 1913). Stivers (2000) tracks the transition from the feminization of municipal government to masculinization through the offices of the Bureau of Municipal Research. The Bureau reframed municipal government as masculine by applying statistical analysis “spurred by the prospect of rationalizing and systematizing public life” (Stivers 2000, 23). These methods are not gender neutral, Stivers argues, but instead laced with masculine gender work conducted by “Bureau men” seeking distance from devalued femininity.

Mastracci and Arreola (2016) conclude that most public organizations continue to lean masculine. Masculinity reveals itself in the ways that public administration approaches research, emphasizing statistical analyses, and attempted scientific objectivity that conceals a masculine bias (Stivers 2000). Calling for recognition of the “masculinism” in public organizational leadership, Duerst-Lahti and Kelly (1995) argue, “Since men have long controlled social and political institutions, they also have shaped the conventions of those institutions” (261). Public organizational masculinity results in hierarchies of men-dominated jobs over women-dominated jobs, and in barriers to women seeking leadership roles (Mastracci and Arreola 2016). Even in more inclusive hierarchies, flatter structures at the top can conceal strong hierarchies over jobs still dominated by women (Burris 1996). To negotiate masculine jobs, women managers trade gender capital (Huppatz and Goodwin 2013), doing masculine gender work to perform government roles that have been designed by and for men (Mastracci and Arreola 2016).

Women quietly adopt masculinity to negotiate masculine public organization. When differences between men and women are observed, women are often considered deficient by default (Knights 2019). Therefore, women often avoid speaking about their private lives in the workplace even as men are rewarded for discussing theirs (Cooper 2000). This suppression of gender is feminine gender work when it is performed by women to secure success in masculine organizations.

Public organizations create jobs and processes based on gendered expectations. Many cities are “greedy organizations,” workplaces where employees
are expected to dedicate almost all their time, energy, and attention to the needs of the organization, with de minimis personal and domestic distractions (Coser 1974). These jobs demand an abstract worker with no outside obligations. In a study of city management and policing, Bishu and Headley (forthcoming) reveal how these expectations are gendered by creating a gender-suppressed double standard where men and women alike are expected to have stay-at-home spouses to care for their children, their elders, and cook and clean for the worker who must focus all of their efforts on the needs of the greedy organization (Franzway 2001). Because of the second shift, women in greedy organizations often work even harder to do their feminine gender work at home while keeping up with the hyperdedicated men they work alongside (Hochschild and Machung 2012).

Women and Men in Feminine Public Organizations

Some public organizations are more feminine. In feminine organizations, men may be called upon to perform feminine gender work. McDowell (2015) finds that men working as nurses take on feminine discourse styles, even as they learn ways to protect their masculinity. Similarly, Buschmeyer (2013) and O’Keeffe (2018) find that men in childcare professions negotiate the feminine cultures of their profession with their own desires to maintain masculinity. Doucet (2018) interviews stay-at-home dads to discover that they do mothering through attentive love, which is acknowledging the faults in one’s charges by tirelessly training them to improve. This feminine valuation can be observed in Newman, Guy, and Mastracci’s (2009) argument for affective leadership, managing by caring for subordinates, and working with them to develop unique solutions to contextual problems. Affective leaders can be men so long as they are willing to perform feminine work to adopt the affective role.

One example of work that can be both masculine and feminine is mentoring, especially when a man mentors a woman protégé. Bozeman and Feeney (2008b) argue that mentoring is important for equity in the public sector because it can break down barriers for women, and call for more research on why this is so. In study of mentoring in municipal management, Fox and Schuhmann (2001) find women are disadvantaged when attempting to leverage mentoring to get jobs as CAOs. “[M]en and women are more reliant on same-sex mentors and... ...there are significantly fewer women in the universe of possible mentors” (Fox and Schuhmann 2001, 388). This finding takes on increasing significance in light of findings that women are more successful when mentored by men (Noe 1988), though it is noteworthy that at least one other study indicates that gender congruence has no statistical effect (Bozeman and Feeney 2008a).

Men mentors to women protégés often perform feminine work by taking on a role usually performed by women, and by encouraging women into leadership roles in masculine organizations. These men engage in mentoring that looks more like what Doucet (2018) calls mothering. While men generally do not engage as closely with women protégés (Ragins and Cotton 1999), women protégés of women mentors in academia report holistic and communal attitudes to mentoring help nurture success (Palmer and Jones 2019).

Masculine and Feminine Gender Work Defined

Using the context provided by the literature, gender work are actions that attempt to manage gendered perceptions and/or shoulder gendered expectations. Gender work is performed in concert with other players including managers, mentors, protégés, clients, citizens, and peers (Acker 1990). Gender work includes both an expectation and an action to manage that expectation. For example, organizational procedures may establish a precedent that managers are men performing mostly masculine gender work. When a woman becomes a manager, she will likely have to perform some masculine gender work to negotiate gender perceptions about women by conforming to the masculine perceptions of managers. This same woman may have to undertake the private-life obligations placed on women by historic norms. To accommodate this second shift, she may perform feminine gender work to make the management role more feminine as needed to fulfill her expected role as a woman even as she negotiates a conflict with the masculine expectations of her job. Although it is likely impossible to strictly divide masculine and feminine gender work, the attempt to draw the distinction helps generate a better understanding of the ways that gender is maintained, reproduced, and ultimately changed (Smith 1987).

Propositions: Municipal Management as Gendered Performance

The CAO position was established in the early 1900s when the council-manager form of government introduced separation of political roles from professional leadership in municipal governments (Nelson and Svara 2015). CAOs are responsible for the day-to-day administration of municipal governments. Their administrative roles include overseeing human resources, budgeting, and policy oversight (Nelson and Svara 2015; Wheeland 2000). CAOs also play active roles in mediating community and elected officials’ interests and as policy advisors. Often, CAOs engage in administrative roles including implementing policy and budgetary decisions initiated by elected officials. In other cases, studies report that CAOs’ roles can extend to making policy and budgetary decisions in
conjunction with elected officials (Selden, Brewer, and Brudney 1999).

The CAO position is dominated by men (Aguado and Frederickson 2012). According to International City County Management Association (ICMA) members’ demographic data, women represent 16.9% of CAOs. Arguing for changes to the MPA curriculum, Beaty and Davis (2012) argue that the field has sufficient numbers of women trained to be city managers, but discrimination continues to prevent women from attaining the CAO position.

We examine the following propositions based on the literature described earlier:

1. Men who mentor women in municipal management do gender work to support women CAOs.
2. Women CAOs do masculine gender work to secure and perform their job.
3. Cities with women CAOs do feminine gender work to accommodate incoming women CAOs.

Method

We applied inductive, qualitative research methods to build a theoretical explanation for the gendered experiences of men and women CAOs. We started with two open-ended interview prompts: tell us about your career paths and what are the factors that determined your career choices that lead to your current role.

Data Collection

To find hard to reach CAOs, we used a professional contact with an ICMA state chapter in the US southeast to distribute an invitation to 30 CAOs. Of the 30 invited CAOs, 12 men and 9 women CAOs participated. Human subject research approval was obtained from the Florida International University institutional review board prior to conducting interviews. Our interviews with CAOs followed semistructured protocol.

Data Analysis

Analysis focused on the social and institutional factors that drove the career paths of men and women CAOs. Gender was a central focus of the analysis (Smith 1987). Emergent coding identified the formal and informal processes and practices that shaped the

<table>
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<th>Percent</th>
<th>Men CAOs (n = 12)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<td>88.9</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>24,962</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average work experience (years)</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family status (married or with partner)</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>91.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees at the Time of Interview
career trajectories of informants. We then used theory and textual evidence to analyze the gender work performed by each group. Comparing and contrasting how men reported their experiences with the ways that women reported their experiences highlighted differences in which gender work could be observed. This observed gender work supported the identification of themes that differed between the career paths of men and women CAOs. By applying gender as a central structure shaping social realities, our analysis revealed the relevant gender work.

To analyze the interview data, statements were coded according to their relevance to the propositions, and the gender work performed by CAOs was mapped using institutional ethnography. Smith (1987) developed institutional ethnography to reveal the ways that gender dictates social interactions. In her edited volume on institutional ethnography methods, Smith (2006) recommends Turner’s (2006) tool of mapping institutional processes, including gender work, saying “The power of Turner’s method is to enable research to arrive at a map that is a schematic representation analyzing an institutional process” (9). After gathering and analyzing data to observe themes, we mapped identified gender work to provide a heuristic for clearer understanding of the system of gender work embedded in CAOs work experiences.

Findings

Context: “This position is very demanding on your personal life. It is very volatile…”

CAOs operate in a context characterized by uncertainty and conflict. Most women CAOs and some men CAOs who participated in the study emphasized the impact of uncertainty on their lives. Our data show that support from elected officials is important to their career choices and tenure on the job. These statements exemplify this theme.

This position... ...is very volatile...politically speaking it is what we call a hot potato because you know the managers are as good as stable as their commission allows to be and the reason for that is because the positions have become highly politically charged. (Woman CAO F)

In [City], I had been given a performance evaluation and I scored 99.9% satisfaction rating from my council a month before I left. I was basically forced to leave. So that could show you, it was not a performance issue, it was political. (Woman CAO D)

CAOs Navigating Career Paths

We find that men CAOs reported engaging in gender performances as they (a) stumble into municipal administration; (b) seek economic and leadership opportunities; and (c) intentionally pursue executive roles. We also trace masculine gender work women CAOs do as they overcome hurdles and grasp opportunities. We also observe municipal governments performing feminine gender work to create space for women leaders. Beyond the propositions, we explore commonalities in the masculine gender performances of men and women CAOs.

Men CAOs’ Career Paths: Stumbling and Climbing

Men in our study found their way into municipal management differently than women. Some men CAOs entered the career almost unintentionally, whereas others followed their ambition. Both career trajectories employed masculine gender work. When compared with women, men CAOs less frequently recognized the gender work used to navigate ascendant career paths.

Stumbling: “…my career was almost by accident,...”

Three men CAOs described entering municipal leadership almost unintentionally. This subcategory reveals the relative ease with which men CAOs ascend to management. For example, one CAO described his rise as unimpeded by substantial barriers.

The selection of my career was almost by accident, it was not intentional. I started in local government as an entry level position as a parking citation clerk. [Some years later] I was the director of operations of a parking authority in Miami...The transition after that was mostly local government. (Man CAO B)

Overall, this subtheme highlights the extent to which some men city managers came into their roles by following their career’s momentum and without substantial awareness of gender work they performed along the way.

Opportunities: “I could make more money...”

Four men CAOs in our study described opportunity seeking as a primary driver in their career. Some men CAOs perceived their career path as an opportunity for better economic benefits and for leadership experience. A man CAO explained:

I was an elected official first and decided to go back to school and continue my education, stumbled into public administration and realized that I could make more money in the public administration side then political science side and the rest is history. (Man CAO A)

Men CAOs in this subcategory identified an opportunity in their lives and seized it, again indicating few barriers except for the ability to recognize and take advantage of opportunities.
Ambition: “…started off as a teller and I want to be the president”
The largest subcategory of men CAOs included five who reported ambition to be an executive as a primary driver for their career choices. CAOs that identified ambition indicated that the drive to be in executive roles was the main reason for their career choices. Two quotes exemplify this theme.

Even if it was in the bank teller just like anybody else I would have started off as a teller and I want to be the president. You know just like I said, I would have started as a cashier at Wal-Mart but I want to be the president or CEO. So that was my goal. [Pause.] I applied here. When I came here, I came here originally as a public works director. I was a public works director from 2006 to 2012. I was one of the original department heads. Our then manager left, and I became interim manager in 2012 and became permanent manager in about a year. (Man CAO E)

Well, I retired from the army in 1976 and I used my GI Bill to go back and get my Master's in Public Administration.... ...[O]nce I got a masters I started to look up in the ground and the city manager position just intrigued me you know, because of the masters courses in public administration were in local government. So first job, I applied for I got it. So my first job was as an administrator. I was in charge of hire and fire. (Man CAO K)

Men in this category describe ambition as a primary driver for their career choices, and a determination to overcome the relatively minor hurdles they encountered.

Gender Divisions: “And my wife was the caregiver for the most part”
Nine men CAOs described gender divisions at home as an important factor in their career paths. Some men CAOs justified their reliance on their spouses to care for children using arguments that women were better caregivers.

I think also there are certain elements especially when the kids are younger, that the dependency on the mother figure is more, just because there are things that are really basic that men are just not adept to doing, at least not until now. (Man CAO A)

Men participants also identified their own work as masculine using language describing traditionally gendered divisions of labor.

And my wife was the caregiver for the most part. My wife was a stay-at-home mom and did not work at the time. That makes me the primary bread-winner. (Man CAO K)

Despite the demanding nature of the CAO role, men in this group repeatedly touted the flexibility the position affords them to work irregular hours and outside the office.

I have been fortunate enough to be in a position where I have flexibilities. [Pause.] My work ethic dictates for me that if I go to a non-work related event, for example when my daughter played softball or when my son played soccer and has a game at one o’clock, I have the flexibility of going to the game and come back to the office two hours later [to work late hours]. (Men CAO B)

Some men CAOs engaged in feminine gender work by taking up some childcare, but differently and less extensively than the women CAOs in the study. Two men participants describe the sacrifice of avoiding moving when kids are in secondary school, performing feminine gender work of resisting their ambition to provide a stable home for their children.

[T]his is a very mobile profession we know that, but at the same time when your kids start getting into high school and now that opportunity comes, you realize you have to maybe uproot them. I was not interested in doing that. (Man CAO A)

For me at this point in my life because of family, I do not want to be mobile...Once the kids grow up I can relocate. (Man CAO J)

Overall, we find that men performed masculine and sometimes feminine work to manage childcare, heavily relying on spouses and traditional gender roles, with some men indicating a willingness to make career sacrifices to serve family needs.

Proposition One: Men Who Mentor Women in Municipal Management Do Gender Work to Support Women CAOs

The Gender Work of Men Mentors: “…my very strong mentor”
Unlike any men CAOs in our study, four women CAOs were mentored into the CAO position by retiring men. As they mentor their replacements, these men CAOs perform feminine gender work to support their mentees. Women CAOs reported that men mentors engaged in psychosocial and career development they prepared protégés to undertake traditionally masculine roles never before held by women. Men mentors also did gender work to prepare municipalities for women leaders by sharing the spotlight with protégés and setting norms of women in leadership. For example, one woman CAO described behaviors associated with affective leadership of the man she eventually replaced. Her mentor shared credit by creating opportunities for her to present their shared work.
Here, a man mentor does feminine gender work in two ways. (a) He does feminine gender work by establishing the norm of women in city leadership. (b) He does feminine mentoring by creating space for his protégé to succeed and encouraging others to recognize her leadership. Despite the feminine gender work, the man mentor socializes his future replacement into his proven processes paving the way for a less disruptive leadership transition.

Another woman CAO notes that she began to replicate part of her mentor’s approach.

The [retired] manager in the city where I work now was my very strong mentor. These two managers [that I worked under] were always basically my mentors…When you are learning you pick up [the leadership] style of the people you work for. (Woman CAO E)

Mentorship is important for bringing women into CAO positions (Fox and Schuhmann 2001). Even as mentorship facilitates women to move into management, mentorship trains those women in systems and processes developed by men in a profession and offices occupied by mostly men. Thus, men mentors help socialize women to adopt the masculinity of the CAO profession, give them the political connections and organizational knowledge to gain the office, and normalize women leadership in municipalities.

Proposition Two: Women CAOs Do Masculine Gender Work to Secure and Perform Their Job

Women CAOs’ Gender Work: “...institutional knowledge is huge…”

Eight women CAOs in our study described step-by-step career paths working up through a small number of organizations and intentionally acquiring skills. This slower, more vertical movement diverged from the mobility described by men CAOs. Women’s years of deliberate ascension reveal how they squeezed through an institutional stiffness not apparent in men’s career paths. Like corporate secretaries in Kanter’s (1977) research, women CAOs’ were rewarded for their loyalty to their organizations. Informants reported that this stability helped women CAOs manage their second shift even as it helped them develop necessary leadership competencies. As they worked their way up through a limited number of organizations, future women CAOs gained organizational knowledge, demonstrated loyalty, and positioned themselves to take advantage of geographically limited promotional opportunities.

We find that women CAOs’ career paths were not characterized by stumbling into their jobs or following their ambition as men’s were. Instead, women participants focused on strategies for coping with the second shift and readying to grasp at sporadic opportunities. Examples are numerous in our data.

Before that I was director, I mean it has been promotions from within, I think I started as code compliance then director of neighborhood services, and then I think we did director of administration and neighborhood services and then assistant manager. I was employed in [City X] as admin services manager and then I moved here, started out as contract here first and then eventually moved to be converted [to fulltime]. (Woman CAO B)

Another woman city manager describes how carefully she selected her work to gain well-rounded experience in different roles.

I have worked in two other cities. [Pause.] One, I came in as the zoning administrator and another one I was the planning and zoning manager in two different cities. In my work life in the public sector I have worked for three different cities. I have worked up through the organization. They did not go outside, at the time they made me the interim and then they decided after I think four or five months and at that point they just appoint me to permanent position. I was the assistant city manager and then the city manager resigned in the same city where I was serving as a city manager. (Woman CAO C)

The women reporting on their climbs up the organizational ladders highlighted the intentional experience building that eventually led to their CAO positions.

As they engage in their slow vertical climbs, women CAOs learn existing organizational processes and develop relationships with elected officials. They do so by making themselves indispensable through traditionally feminine traits like loyalty and authentic relationship building. In the following quotes two women describe how they used both masculine and feminine gender work to position themselves as the best candidates for CAO.

I bring with me institutional knowledge which is extremely important. Commissions come and go but institutional knowledge is huge in terms of applying for grants for your day-to-day for your projects, for your capital improvements for your
infrastructure. I think it is the most valuable asset anyone brings to the table is institutional knowledge. (Female CAO F)

They were saying our employees have low morale. We need to really want to make some positive changes and when I said [pause] I am not going to apply because I have a job but I will sit down and I will talk to each of the commissioners individually...I knew that [the previous municipality] could handle my leaving and so I came here and I am working here. (Woman CAO A)

The Second Shift with “...a really good triangle”

Work–family balance is a constant struggle for both men and women CAOs with families. The major difference among the two groups is that women CAOs in the study are primary caregivers, whereas their men counterparts are not. Women CAOs engage in simultaneous overlapping masculine and feminine gender work, meeting the grueling demands of a 50- to 80-h work week while meeting their demands as caregivers to their families. Some women CAOs facilitated the required masculine gender work by delaying childbearing, whereas others were only able to pursue the CAO role because of access to social and institutional supports. In the following quote, a woman describes how she had “a great formula” that enabled her slow climb to CAO:

So for me [pause] it very well could be that the 20 years in the same chair was because I had this great formula of, where I lived, where my daughter went to school and where I worked. I had help raising my child but from a financial point of view it was just me. So my decisions needed to be solid decisions. [Pause]. So I live 0.6 miles from work, my daughter's school was maybe 1 mile...I was in a really good triangle. To manage a lot of things for that, which was important to me, so my location my geography was probably more influenced than other things [...] I made certain I had good support. (Woman CAO A)

Another woman CAO explains how difficult it would have been for her to be in the CAO role had she not had social supports.

I could not have done what I have done without my mother and my father in my life and in my children's life. You know, my mother and my father took care of my kids if my husband was working, or even if my husband was home, my father and my mother would always be with me. We always lived two or three blocks away from each other so that made it really comfortable for me because my children were bonding with their grandparents and they were really not missing out because of my absence. (Woman CAO F)

These quotes are characteristic of the gender work that women with families performed to meet the demands of the CAO role and their second shift as mothers. These women carefully considered their family commitments as an important part of their career decision-making process. Because of women CAOs' dependence on social and institutional support, their mobility was limited, which informants described as a career hurdle.

Delay: “…a conscious decision to not have family…”

Two women CAOs in our study deliberately delayed family formation to pursue the CAO profession.

I just turned 48 and also just had my first child. I purposefully throughout my career made a conscious decision to not have family because my focus was more work. And then as I, obviously you become older and wiser and then you realize your life cannot be all about work and family is important and then I made the decision to have a child. (Woman CAO D)

Similarly, another woman CAO describes doubt about whether she could have achieved her position had she started a family earlier in her career.

Interestingly enough I do not think I would have been as successful [pause] or build my career as well if I had my children earlier. I do not think that I would have necessarily have been up for the hours and the time commitment that it requires. I was putting in 50 and 60 hours weeks in that job and there is no way, there is no way, I could have worked the hours I was working and had a family. (Woman CAO G)

No men CAOs reported delaying family, nor did they opine if they could have achieved their position with a family. Being primary breadwinners and having spouses who are in charge of care giving helped free the men in our study to stay focused on building their careers. This freedom was not experienced by women CAOs who worked to maintain “a really good triangle” dependent on the generous support of their families and friends. Women CAOs had bounded choices in situations that required them to stay anchored to a geographic location, whereas men CAOs had more geographic mobility to pursue diverse opportunities. When mobility was a priority for women CAOs, it came at the cost of delaying family, masculine gender work that helped women take on the role of the “gender neutral” and “abstract” worker unimpeded by a private life.
Proposition Three: Cities with Women CAOs Do Feminine Gender Work to Accommodate Incoming Women CAOs

Our data indicate that cities with women CAOs perform feminine gender work differently than cities with men CAOs.

Municipalities with Women CAOs: “something in the water”
The data show that municipal governments perform feminine gender work in two stages. First, municipalities perform feminine gender work to accommodate the needs of women CAOs. Second, once stable, some women CAOs formalize the practices that accommodated their needs, enlisting the organization in more durable feminine gender work.

Municipalities represented in the study performed feminine gender work to recruit and retain women CAOs, but this gender work was case specific, informal, and negotiated. As discussed earlier, women CAOs leveraged their stability to make themselves indispensable. Some women CAOs managed to use this position to bargain for accommodations to facilitate their caregiving responsibilities, thus enlisting the city in limited feminine gender work. As one woman CAO described,

I knew in the later organization that my city council was very supportive of my personal agenda. They knew I wanted to get married and I wanted to have children, they knew that after I have the children...[Pause]. They did not want that to be a reason for me not to take the job. So a couple of things that they did that gave me some reassurance. One is they let me pick my own deputy so I would have a strong second person...I still remember one of the council members telling me that he will be fine and I brought a crib in my office, they were really completely supportive. (Woman CAO G)

For the most part, this feminine gender work was not institutionalized for the entire organization but individual, contractual, and/or informal. In some cases, however, CAOs reported that other women in their institution also benefitted. One woman CAO described this benefit to other women.

...the town is very accommodating and very very supportive of women... ...[We] would joke about [having] 4 babies that year. So we’re just joking that there must be something in the water because we were just like this is a fertile group and we were all having babies at the same time. (Woman CAO B)

Less often, women CAOs are implementing family-friendly policies, thereby inducing municipalities to institutionalize more durable feminine gender work. As women CAOs adopted these policies, organizations became more feminine, undoing some of the masculinity that dominated most municipal governments. One woman CAO described embracing the idea of hiring entire human beings instead of only abstract workers.

[My city] was probably the only city that offers a conference room for nursing moms, you know, for pumping. You need to be able to balance... We reduced the price of health insurance. We had no subsidy for family coverage before. The employees had to pay 100% of their family’s coverage. We would cover them, but we would not cover their immediate family. So, we changed to, we-pay-half-you-pay-half, because you know that is a positive statement that we are in for the whole person...We are not hiring a bunch of computers. We are hiring people and to pick good character and to take good care of them, you get amazing at things as a result. (Woman CAO A)

While feminine gender work of municipal governments appears repeatedly in interviews with women CAOs, men CAOs did not mention it as an important driver of their career paths.

Emergent Findings

Here, we report emergent findings that capture themes beyond our original propositions. These findings speak to public organizational masculinity theory. We first present some of the ways that both men and women CAOs report masculine gender performance as leaders in municipal governance. We also find that mentorship operates as a tool to establish retiring male CAOs’ leadership legacies, thus further exploring the dual gender performance needed for men to successfully mentor women leaders.

Men and Women CAOs Doing Masculinity: Accepting Uncertainty versus Cultivating Stability

Men and women CAOs in our research reported different challenges when relating to elected officials, with distinct consequences on their careers.

Municipalities with Men CAOs: “…like football coaches”

Work politics played an important role in the career choices for 10 of the 12 men CAOs. One man CAO described how important politics were for his career path.

So I think there is another variable there that is important to understand and especially in the political nature in which managers work... ... You can work as hard to get a job in your [city] or even in your own community but if [the]
elected body is not favorable to your background or for whatever reason, they are not going to get it off. (Man CAO A)

Some other men CAOs described the unpredictability of the CAO role as a factor in their career path, reiterating the masculine assumption that the private lives of CAOs are subservient to workplace considerations.

You know if the council decided you are not the manager here any longer, I would be displacing [my family]. I think a lot of times as managers we are like football coaches. You know, it is based on merit, it is based on how you are doing at that point, what you did ten years ago does not matter. (Man CAO D)

Managers are not elected to be popular managers they are selected because we get the code, the black book, and we implement it. And then I have the budget that I have to deliver, the balanced budget that I have to deliver. Those are my two functions and I am not popular. So that is why the position of the city manager or a town manager is very volatile because at some point you make somebody mad. (Man CAO H)

These men operate in organizations that are “volatile” and require “displacing” family to continue operating “like football coaches.” When municipalities hire these men, the men CAOs are incapable of replicating the existing systems and processes they do not know, instead bringing with them some inevitable organizational disruption. This mobility is a masculine gender performance in part because men move their families to the new city as discussed earlier, and in part because these men CAOs institute processes from other offices that are generally masculine in a profession dominated by men.

Women CAOs Seek Legitimacy: “They just do not take what I say as a given”

Four women CAOs in our data performed masculine gender work to legitimize their authority in their interactions with elected officials. Women CAOs described having to put in extra effort to justify their decision making. Echoing the concern that early municipal researchers felt about the relationship of municipal research to femininity (Stivers 2000), one woman CAO described turning to objective data to perform the masculine gender work necessary to legitimize her leadership.

And I know the difference of how elected officials react to those two gentlemen who were much older—you know, I call them fondly and nicely the “good old boys club”—versus how they react to me. [Pause]. They just do not take what I say as a given, where they do with the men. With women you have to prove that what you say, you have to show the back of, you know the cost-benefit analysis, the research, the information for them to take what you are saying at face value, whereas with men..., I do not know if it is a trust issue...The woman is measured at a different scale than men. (Woman CAO D)

Here, the municipality performed masculine gender work by acting on gendered perceptions of women’s abilities, and women CAOs respond by performing masculine gender work to establish their legitimacy through Stivers’ (2000, 23) “rationalizing and systematizing public life.”

Hiring Women CAOs as Masculine Gender Work: Stability “needed here”

Above, we find that men mentors of women CAOs do feminine gender work to prepare women and municipalities for the new women CAOs’ leadership. Complementary to that finding, we also offer a limited finding that some municipalities hire women CAOs partially for the benefits of stability that comes from hiring a person who has been directly trained by the retiring CAO. We present this finding based on two data points. First, no men CAOs in our data indicated that they attained their position based on the recommendation of a retiring CAO. Second, all men CAOs that engage in mentorship of women CAOs were retiring CAOs preparing their organizations for a stable transition. On one occasion, a woman CAO who had left municipal government seeking opportunity elsewhere explains how she was recruited back by her former CAO mentor because she was “needed.”

My first job [was] here. I left the city on three occasions and I came back. I left once for a banking position and twice for local government positions. And all three times my boss [the CAO] at the time felt that I was needed here and offered me an opportunity. (Woman CAO F)

Based on this theme in our data, further exploration of the motivations of city councils and other hiring agents in hiring women CAOs would reveal the extent to which stability was a factor in hiring an outgoing man CAO’s woman protégé to replace him.

Discussion

Our data reveal multiple ways that both CAOs and municipal organizations perform gender work. Out of the complexity of the findings, this section develops theoretical understanding of the gender work performed by the CAOs in the study.
Masculine and Feminine Gender Work in Municipal Governments

Our analysis reveals a profession in which CAOs and organizations perform gender work to maintain a masculine apparatus. In municipal governments, greedy organizations hire abstract workers to fit the social reality of mostly men doing masculine gender work both in their private and public lives as CAOs. Like Acker’s (1990) abstract workers, men CAOs have the privilege of more neatly separating their private lives from their public lives finding fewer hurdles and expressing a greater sense of control over their career paths. Contrarily, women CAOs negotiate their jobs and the second shift, struggling to overcome hurdles created by gendered perceptions and gendered private life demands. Hence, women must simultaneously perform higher levels of contradictory masculine and feminine gender work to participate fully in the profession.

Our data demonstrate that both men and women CAOs engage in masculine performance throughout their careers. Men CAOs engage in masculine gender work as they make choices guided by ambition and opportunity seeking relatively unconstrained by family considerations. Similarly, our data show that men CAOs perform masculine gender work when conforming to stereotypical social roles at home, leaving all or most of the home maintenance work to their spouses.

Similarly, we find that women CAOs in our study engage in masculine gender work as they learn to adopt and fit into the mold of the ideal worker. Women CAOs perform this masculine gender work though they are often appointed because of the stability contributed by years of feminine gender work in the organization, and as they juggle feminine gender work as primary caregivers at home. This finding reflects Kanter’s (1977) that women in corporate settings succeed using strategies of loyalty and stability as secretaries for powerful men. In our analysis, many successful women CAOs used these same strategies to become the power players themselves.

Our data also demonstrate that municipalities perform feminine gender work to recruit and retain women CAOs. Municipal governments perform feminine gender work by providing informal arrangements and institutionalized policies to support the social realities of women CAOs and other women employees. Municipal governments nurture women into management positions by providing a way for women to bring the full person to work, encouraging women to bring cribs into offices and pumping milk in boardrooms. While some municipal governments engage in minimal feminine gender work, others perform more radical femininity under the leadership of women CAOs by formalizing policies to support caregiving.

Our data support findings of the importance of the mentorship relationship for women CAOs (Bozeman and Feeney 2008b). Outgoing men CAOs help socialize women candidates into the profession and to the masculine apparatus of municipal governments. Mentors act as sponsors for future women CAOs by performing feminine gender work through affective leadership and attentive mentorship. Men CAOs sponsor women by showing them the processes that worked for the outgoing CAO and by using political and social capital to present the future CAO as their successor.

Municipalities perform masculine gender work as men CAOs navigate work politics, mainly in their interactions with elected officials. Most men CAOs who discussed work politics noted that ambition and opportunity seeking were insufficient to secure career opportunities. This is because municipal executive positions are often unstable. For men who play primary breadwinning roles, the volatility of the profession was a major factor determining which career opportunities to pursue. Also engaging in politics, women CAOs reported having to legitimize their authority using masculine gender work. Women who worked their way up through the organizational ladder found it constantly necessary to prove that they were capable of running their organizations.

We find that municipalities perform feminine gender work to facilitate women entering the CAO position. The incremental feminization of organizations demands women’s continual performance of masculine gender work, whereas organizations perform feminine gender work to create the space for women to thrive. We find that some organizations seek women CAOs when cities seek femininity in leadership and the stability it engenders. This is evident in the fact that women CAOs in our study, but not men CAOs, were sponsored into their role by outgoing men CAOs. Municipalities seeking change are more likely to seek outside candidates rather than the “institutional knowledge” that women CAOs in our study describe as their competitive advantage. Contrarily, men CAOs describe uprooting and moving like “football coaches” bringing their styles and change with them.

Last, we find that organizations engage in feminine gender work as they seek to support incoming women CAOs. Once a woman CAO is established in the organization, the organization performs feminine gender work for two reasons. As with the staff who felt supported to start families once the woman CAO took over and started a family herself, simply modeling starting a family may have had an effect. Additionally, some women CAOs gained the social and professional capital to implement deliberate organization-wide changes to support the full lives of employees including childcare, healthcare, and the flexibility needed to meet the demands of the second shift. The implications for
gender equality in municipal government are two-fold. First, mentors aid in normalizing the presence of women in men domains. Second, feminine gender work is sustained in organizations that seek continuity with the leadership of outgoing men CAOs.

Mapping Gender Work of Women and Men CAOs
Maps of gender work clarify and contextualize these findings. Looking at figure 1, a man CAO performs primarily masculine gender work to satisfy the demands on him as a breadwinner for his family, moving when necessary to accommodate the volatility of the profession. These men CAOs do masculine gender work to meet their obligations in greedy organizations, leaving domestic labor to spouses and other relatives. Meanwhile, they do gender work to meet the expectations of the municipal management profession, a profession dominated by men. Men CAOs perform some feminine gender work to maintain the day-to-day municipal housekeeping. However, family is mostly expected to accommodate his need to serve the greedy institution and follow him from one municipal government to another as he pursues his career. Our data indicate that men CAOs do masculine gender work far more than they perform feminine gender work.

By contrast, our analysis reveals that women CAOs do femininity and masculinity more equally (figure 2). Women CAOs do masculinity to negotiate the demands of greedy organizations. While their mentors are performing feminine gender work with attentive mentoring, women CAOs are learning to replicate masculine processes while negotiating gendered perceptions that women are less capable CAOs. They learn the levers and politics of their workplaces to gain promotions, negotiate for more authority, and meet their own demands as breadwinners. Even when they are primary breadwinners, women CAOs do feminine gender work to shoulder much of the childcare. To meet their needs to perform this femininity, they work to secure unofficial family-friendly concessions, occasionally institutionalizing these practices, performing feminine gender work while recruiting the city to perform feminine gender work also. The day-to-day municipal housekeeping is a driver for city councils and men mentors to appoint these women to maintain a stable and reliable municipal government. In other words, we find that women CAOs are hired for their ability to perform feminine gender work akin to domestic labor emphasizing continuity and stability, even as they are considered serious candidates through their ability to perform masculine gender work by replicating their predecessors in negotiating greedy institutions. Overall, women CAOs are required to perform more and more complex gender work than men CAOs. Where men CAOs mostly reengage masculinity, women undo their gender as much as they do it.

Limitations and Implications
This study explores the career paths of women and men CAOs to offer potential explanations for the gender

![Figure 1](https://academic.oup.com/jpart/article-lookup/doi/10.1093/jpart/mqab014)

**Figure 1.** A map of gender work performed in a municipality with a man CAO.
gap in municipal leadership. It does so by highlighting gender work. For this kind of interpretive research, rigor derives from the extent to which the investigation captures the shared understanding of a group of participants (Smith 1987). Saturation is the point at which additional interviews would not add substantially to the understanding of a particular theme or concept (Gravlee 2011). It is difficult to know when saturation is reached because it is always possible that the next interview would bring up new themes or contradict existing themes. When themes are sufficiently significant, saturation can be reached in numbers as low as five or six interviews (Ebbinghaus 2005; Sandelowski 1995; Sim et al. 2018). Instead of improving the rigor, larger numbers of participants may incentivize researchers to magnify minor themes (Ebbinghaus 2005). Similarly, when comparing groups of men and women, larger numbers increase the chance for inadvertently confusing within- and between-group variance. Just as with quantitative regressions where larger data sets risk Type I error, interpretivist research is most authoritative when it is neither too large nor too small (Sim et al. 2018). When themes present themselves repeatedly and consistently, additional data could have the effect of muddying findings (Sandelowski 1995). Whether the number of participants in our study is just right is nearly impossible to ascertain. This is a limitation of all inductive qualitative research, and not a limitation that we have managed to eliminate.

Because rigor is determined by the extent to which it sufficiently captures the understandings of a particular group, inductive qualitative research is limited in its generalizability (Esterberg 2002). The findings can be helpful for developing theory from which to generate hypotheses for testing, but it is not in itself generalizable to all of society, or even to all CAOs. It could be that the southeast context is crucial for our findings or that the group of people willing to sit down for our interviews have a substantially different view of the world than most CAOs.

Another limitation that must be mentioned is the use of inference to substantiate our proposition that municipalities hire women CAOs because they seek the kind of stability and continuity that can be provided by hiring women who have experience in their cities and were mentored by the outgoing CAO. This limitation can be mitigated through future research by interviewing elected officials in the process of hiring women CAOs, performing textual analysis on council minutes and other documents, or performing statistical analysis on city budgets and approval ratings of city councils that hire women CAOs. Our data support our inference, but subsequent data could improve or disprove the argument.

Despite these limitations, this research makes several contributions to the public management literature, the critical gender literature, and scholarship on municipal management. This study provides additional empirical support for some findings already in the literature, such as the existence of a second shift that creates conflicting demands for successful women leaders (e.g., Bowles 2012; Eagly and Johnson 1990;
Trounstine 2015; Deckman 2006; Holman 2015) and city councils (e.g., Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and facilitate the election of women to school boards and a growing body of research into the conditions that pointed by elective officials, work that overlaps with to investigate how women CAOs are selected and ap- future research is needed explain similarities and differences of men’s and (Kennedy, Bishu, and Heckler 2019). public management are too numerous to examine here mated, and the implications of critical gender theory in performative theory of gender should not be underesti- mation of the gendered accounts of men and women CAOs identified in our research to succeed. Doing so highlights gender work occurring at multiple layers of the organiza- tion. Last, we performed comparative mapping of the gender work in municipalities with men and women CAOs. This institutional mapping reveals how jobs, institutional rules and policies, informal arrange- ments, work structures, and individuals’ private lives interplay to require gender work from women that is more complex and more demanding than that required of men in the same roles. As our participants, Prime Minister Ardern, and the “many women who will have done this” (Quackenbush 2018) describe, this article documents a small segment of the women and men negotiating their gendered reality by performing gender work.

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Conclusion
In this article, we explore the gender work that is involved when men and women occupy masculine roles such as city manager. While our study is applied within the context of municipal management, one can identify parallels in man-dominated jobs in private-sector organizations and in other public and nonprofit organizations. Our study reveals gender work performed at different levels of organizational hierarchies and in various ways. Gender work can be performed through formal platforms such as adoption of work–life balance policies or through informal arrangements where leadership accommodates the needs of specific women managers. Our examination of the gender work of women CAOs illuminates the challenges that they face as they pursue the position, and how multiple factors narrow their pathways to leadership.

The contributions of the study are threefold. First, we apply theories of masculine and feminine gender work to illuminate the factors that make it difficult for women to occupy the CAO role. Second, we examine the gender work of men and women CAOs, municipal government leadership, and organizations that determine their career choices. Our article locates formal and informal processes and arrangements that enable women CAOs to succeed. Doing so highlights gender work occurring at multiple layers of the organization. Last, we performed comparative mapping of the gender work in municipalities with men and women CAOs. This institutional mapping reveals how jobs, institutional rules and policies, informal arrangements, work structures, and individuals’ private lives interplay to require gender work from women that is more complex and more demanding than that required of men in the same roles. As our participants, Prime Minister Ardern, and the “many women who will have done this” (Quackenbush 2018) describe, this article documents a small segment of the women and men negotiating their gendered reality by performing gender work.
Data Availability
The data used for this article cannot be shared publicly due to the privacy of informants. Anonymized data can be shared upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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