

Women and local government:

A case-study of the Birmingham City Council

P. Maharaj, P. S. Reddy

1. INTRODUCTION

The 1990's have been heralded as the decade of opportunity for women, a time when women will be a vital resource needed to fill the skills gap in the labour market. However, in spite of various countries, like Britain, enforcing equal opportunities in terms of legislation, women still remain in low status, lowly paid jobs and are under-represented in decision making structures. Inequality between the sexes in employment has been and still is the norm. This is clearly shown in the employment trends of women in local government in the United Kingdom.

In order to maximize the potential of women in local government, various strategic initiatives need to be developed and initiated by local authorities. An example of such an initiative is that of the Birmingham City Council Women's Unit. This paper reviews employment trends of women in local government in the United Kingdom, focusing specifically on the Birmingham City Council as a case-study.

2. EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The local government sector is of major importance in the UK economy for two important reasons. Firstly, it provides a vast range of public services such as education, social services, housing, fire protection services and secondly, it is a provider of jobs. In 1985, local authority employment in England, Scotland and Wales represented 11 % of the total workforce. Furthermore, the percentage of the employed workforce who are employed by local authorities increased from 12 % in 1979 to 13 % in 1985 (Stone 1988: 3). The afore-mentioned statistics indicate the importance of the local authority sector as a provider of jobs.

The increase in employment of women in local authorities is of even more significance. Figures show that in spite of changes in the economy, the percentage of female local authority employees has been steadily increasing relative to male employees. In 1954 only 44,4 % of general services local authority employees were women, in 1984 the figure was 60,9 % and in 1974 the figure was 57,4 %. The rise in the number of women employed may be attributed to the increase in part-time employment in local authorities. However, trends also reveal a higher percentage of women working in full-time positions. In 1984, 42,5 % of full-time local authority employees were women as opposed to 35 % in 1954.

Since women's participation in the labour force increased from 33,5 % to 43,6 %, it may be concluded that the growth in the importance of local authorities as employers of women outstrips that of the economy as a whole. However, the position of women local government employees relative to men in terms of earnings, status and job opportunities is poor.

Webster (quoted in Stone 1988: 3) states that »the limited information available about women workers in local government shows that, whether manual or non-manual, they are:

- concentrated in jobs in education, social services and libraries;
- concentrated in lower graded, lower status jobs;
- the majority of low paid workers; and
- the vast majority of part-time workers.»

Hence, job opportunities are restricted, and they are disadvantaged relative to men in terms of earnings and conditions of service.

3. BLACK WOMEN

Published data on the position of black women workers are non-existent. Although general-

sations may be made from figures collected by individual local authorities, it is made more problematic in the case of black women since the population of black people in the labour market varies greatly from locality to locality. Very few local authorities carry out ethnic monitoring of their workforces. Those that have ethnic records do not always break them down by sex as well as race, or the sex monitoring and race monitoring are conducted as separate exercises. This implies that whilst the position of women is known and that of black people is known, the position of black women specifically is not known. This problem is in keeping with universal research trends on women (Jenkins & Solomis 1987: 15).

Bell, Denton & Nkomo highlight this by stating that »the existing approaches to the study of women in management do not include women of colour as an area of research, nor do major literature reviews include the problems and issues confronting women of colour as an area of study». They go on to add that the omission of women of colour is more implicit than explicit and occurs when authors of studies of essentially white women generalize their findings to »women». The term woman often means white, heterosexual, not differentially abled, and from a privileged background (Fagenson 1993: 106).

Black women local authority employees suffer the disadvantages experienced both by black people and by women generally. They are under-represented in local authority workforces, as are all black people, and are found in lower paid jobs than are women generally (Commission for Racial Equality 1987: 56).

Black women tend to be more concentrated in manual jobs than are white women, and more concentrated in social services departments than in any other area of work. In local authorities that do not provide social services, Black women tend to fill the catering and cleaning jobs which have the lowest rates of pay. Black women who hold clerical and administrative jobs tend to be even more concentrated in the lower grades than are women generally.

In spite of the importance of the local government sector as a source of jobs, and in particular as an area where women workers are in the majority, women workers in local government are disadvantaged relative to men in status, pay and work opportunities. Black women experience this disadvantage particularly acutely.

4. EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING STRUCTURES OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Women hold very few senior management and policy-making posts within local government administration. Even in local authority departments where the majority of workers are women, such as social services departments, women are in the minority in senior management posts. Decision making about the management and administration of local authorities is controlled firmly by men.

Women are also under-represented in policy-making structures. An unpublished survey of all local authorities in Great Britain carried out in 1985 by the West Midlands County Council Women's Subcommittee revealed that 19,4 % of elected members were women, and that, women councillors were under-represented on certain committees and in leadership roles. Women were only 13 % of finance committee members, and 15 % of policy and resources committee members. Within the authorities that responded about the position of Asian and Afro-Caribbean women, there were only 10 black women councillors, who represent 0,4 % of all women councillors. One of these women chaired a social services committee.

It may be clearly seen that the imbalance of power between men and women in the administration of local government is not compensated for in the policy-making arena. Black women are more substantially disadvantaged in this area than women generally.

The third element in decision-making in human resource and employment policies and practices within local authorities is the trade unions. When women are in the unions, their numbers remain relatively few in positions of responsibility. This provides a negative signal about the real commitment of unions to equal opportunities, and the scale of action they are prepared to take (PSI 1992: 28).

It may be concluded that women are under-represented in the decision making process of local authorities. This is in direct contrast to the percentage of women in the local government sector workforce.

5. A REVIEW OF EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVES IN LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN THE U.K.

Given the position of women in local government employment, development of strategies to

promote equality for women at work and in society becomes imperative. A number of local authorities have established political and administrative structures designed to further the formulation and implementation of policies which result in equal opportunities for women in their employment. Local authorities have set up equal opportunities committees or women's committees or in some cases both. An officer or officers have been appointed to develop and implement equal opportunities policies. In some cases the equal opportunities officers operate within an already established structure such as a human resource department.

The Equal Opportunities Commission which carried out a survey in 1986 of all local authorities in Great Britain about the setting up of such initiatives, found that of the 446 authorities who responded, 82 had some sort of equal opportunities structure and 59 employed equal opportunities officers of some kind. Although this number is small compared with the total number of local authorities, it has grown rapidly in the last three or four years.

The advantages of implementing equal opportunities initiatives are (Collins 1992: 37).

- An improvement in motivation and morale. This is especially marked when staff are encouraged to participate in the equal opportunities programmes.
- Making full use of the talents of the entire workforce. An organisation which is committed to equal opportunities is not hidebound by unnecessary prejudice and discrimination.
- Numerous economic advantages: lower staff turnover and higher productivity.

The implementation of these initiatives is made complex by two important factors:

- a) the mechanisms that maintain women's disadvantaged position as employees are structural, in that established ways of carrying out human resource practices do not take into account the needs of women; and
- b) attitudinal, in that attitudes about the appropriateness of women in certain types of work or positions of responsibility prevent women from moving into certain jobs or progressing to higher grades.

The success of equal opportunities initiatives depends on the structural and attitudinal changes that result thereof. For this to occur, equal opportunities initiatives must be located within the political and administrative systems of local authorities in such a way as to be able to affect the

authority's decision making process. It requires an understanding of the functioning of local authorities, the tensions between the political and administrative systems and the roles of the elected members and officers within those systems.

Bringing about change in any organisation is no easy task. Local authorities are no different because like other organisations, local authorities develop their own internal politics determined by size, diversity and structure of the organisation. Bringing about change in complex organisations is a matter not only of influencing the decisions that are easily identified and articulated, but also of changing the very bases on which decisions are made.

The nature of the structural and attitudinal changes necessary to alleviate the disadvantage of women local authority employees compels one to examine the results of equal opportunities initiatives thus far. This paper reviews the initiatives taken in this regard by the Birmingham City Council which is the second largest local authority in the United Kingdom.

6. A CASE-STUDY: BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

6.1 Introduction

Birmingham City Council was established on 1st April 1974, following a reorganisation which resulted from the Local Government Act of 1972. At present, it is the second largest local authority in the United Kingdom. The council consists of 117 members, three for each of the thirty-nine geographical wards. There is a strong party representation in the Council and the current representation consists of 61 Labour Party, 43 Conservative and 13 Social Democratic Party members (Birmingham City Council 1991/92: 14). The city has a population of approximately one million people of which 21 % are from the ethnic minority communities, namely 62 000 from the Caribbean, 125 000 from the Indian sub-continent and 23 000 others (Chinese, Vietnamese and Africans). It has the largest population of ethnic minority communities than any other local authority in the United Kingdom and Europe.

6.2 Values

The core values of Birmingham City Council can be summarised as follows:

- put citizens first by providing a high quality service;
- improve citizen's access to services and to decisionmaking;
- pursue equality by meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged and furthermore by promoting equal rights;
- provide citizens with a city of opportunity and a choice of services; and
- make Birmingham safe by protecting the citizens from crime, accident and disease (Birmingham City Council 1992/93: 17).

One of the strategic initiatives that the City Council embarked on, was the creation of the Women's Unit.

6.3 Historical overview of the women's unit

The Women's Unit was created in 1984, reflecting the City Council's commitment to tackling the many forms of discrimination which women face.

As a new Unit, the focus of the work was initially to address internal issues around employment and provision of services. This included, *inter alia*, the following:

- Promoting the idea of Equal Opportunities for women.
- Raising awareness of why there was a need for a Unit and what was the role of the Unit.
- Assisting in the development of equal opportunities policies.
- Developing training for female staff and senior management (Birmingham City Council 1992/1993: 7).

In 1986 the role of the Unit changed as it was transferred to the Directorate of Equal Opportunities and Personnel (now called Equal Opportunities Division). The work of the Unit was reorientated with an external focus and increasingly reflected the needs and concerns of women within the various communities of Birmingham.

6.4 Aims

The aims of the Women's Unit have over the years broadened and developed, and can at present be summarised as follows:

- To initiate and develop corporate policies promoting women's equality.
- To highlight the disadvantages that women in Birmingham face.

- To ensure that all forms of discrimination which women face are addressed. Therefore, to tackle the needs of Black and Minority Ethnic women, women with disabilities, lesbians, in addition to other groups of women.
- To facilitate the delivery of quality services for women.
- To promote women's access to services, opportunities and resources.
- To consult with women to enable them to identify issues of concern.
- To produce and disseminate information on issues affecting women's lives.
- To assist the Council in complying with its legal obligations, for example the 1976 Sex Discrimination Act.
- To co-ordinate and develop the Birmingham International Women's Festival.

The successful achievement of the aims of the Unit requires effective organisational arrangements.

6.5 Locus of the women's unit within the council structure

The Women's Unit is structured in such a manner that it falls under the Community Affairs Committee of the City Council. The organisational structure can be depicted as follows (Birmingham City Council 1992/93: 10) (See figure 1).

6.5.1 Terms of reference of the community affairs committee

Community Affairs is concerned with ensuring that all citizens have full access to City Council

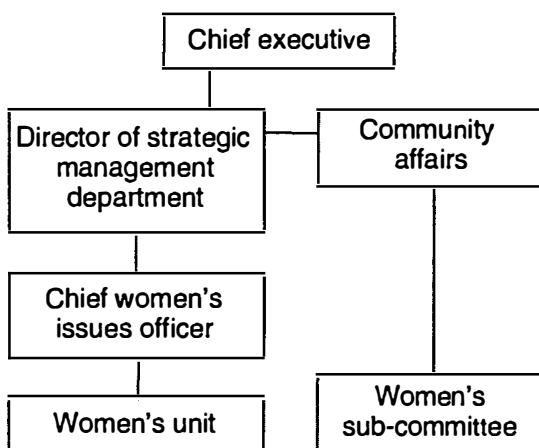


Figure 1

services and the opportunity to influence the decisions which affect their live The objectives of the committee are to:

- promote equality of opportunity to work towards the elimination of unlawful or unfair discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, disability, colour, ethnic and national origin, nationality, sexuality, marital status, responsibility for dependents, religion, trade union activity and age.
- promote and support the provision of activities which contribute to improving the positions of black and minority ethnic people and women, and which positively promote relations between people of all ages.
- provide a city-wide anti poverty strategy and make recommendations to appropriate committees on the provision of services to meet the needs of those disadvantaged by poverty in Birmingham.
- provide a city-wide community safety strategy and make recommendations to appropriate committees to increase confidence and reduce fears of crime for the citizens of Birmingham.
- co-ordinate and initiate policy on the decentralisation of the City Council's services generally and specifically to be responsible for neighbourhood offices and multi-benefit assessment.
- manage the officer, member and public consultation aspects of integrated area initiatives, and, in consultation with the Finance and Management Committee, advise on methods to ensure that local residents, tenants and community groups have the facilities for participation in the decisionmaking processes of

the City Council (Birmingham City Council 1994/95: 26).

6.5.2 The strategic management department and its functions

The Strategic Management Department carries out the aims of the Community Affairs Committee. The City Council's policy of providing easier and more efficient access to its services to the general public is maintained through the neighbourhood offices. Community safety, anti-poverty initiatives, disability awareness and welfare rights and money advice are provided by sections of this division. Also included under the Strategic Management Department, are the Race Relations Unit, which is instrumental in improving the position of ethnic minorities to prevent discrimination on racial grounds and improving relations between people of different ethnic groups, and the Women's Unit, which ensures that the interests of women are properly served by the City Council and that no discrimination is suffered (Birmingham City Council Budget 1994/95: 24).

6.5.2.1 Organisational structure of the women's unit

The Women's Unit staff complement has expanded from two and one-half posts in 1984, to eleven and one-half posts at the present time. It has developed its remit so that it now covers policy development, training, research, information, community liaison and a host of additional responsibilities. The organisational structure is shown below (Birmingham City Council 1992/93: 9), (See figure 2).

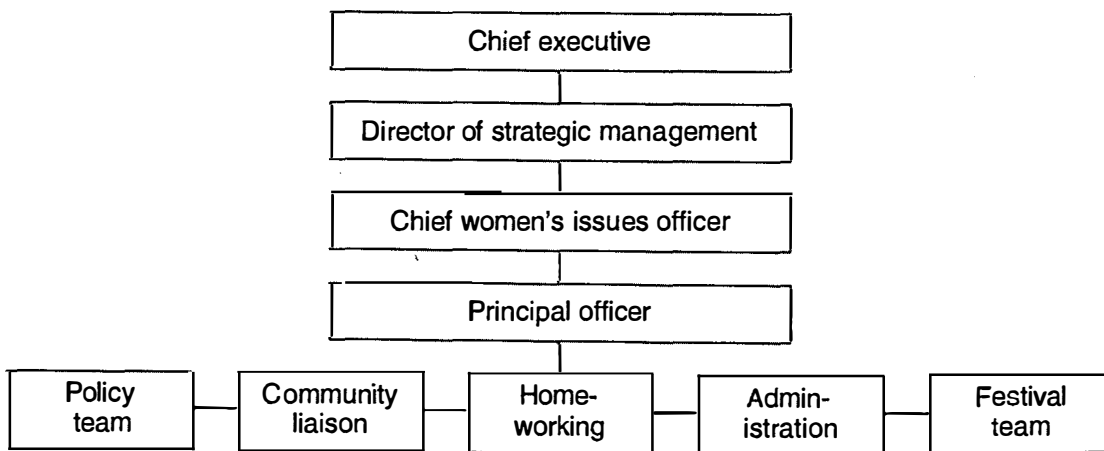


Figure 2

Annexure 1. Women's Unit income and expenditure

1992/93 Actual £'000		Estimate £'000	1993/94 Estimated Outturn £'000	1994/95 Estimate £'000
	<i>Expenditure</i>			
273	Employees	310	320	304
2	Transport	2	2	2
93	Supplies & services	93	97	90
73	Support services	72	86	89
4	Capital financing costs	5	4	5
445		482	509	490
	<i>Income</i>			
44	Government grant	32	33	21
3	Fees and charges	1	1	1
47		33	34	22

The functioning of the Women's Unit is dependent on the provision of adequate financial resources. Estimates of income and expenditure of the Unit are included in the budget of the Community Affairs Committee (See Annexure 1).

6.5.2.2 Strategic objectives

The strategic objectives of the Women's Unit are:

1. To ensure that the City Council through its various committees, develops, implements, monitors and evaluates policies which will contribute to equality of access and opportunities for women in service provision.
2. To support service committees in undertaking initiatives which further enhance the quality of services to women in Birmingham.
3. To take a lead on issues of strategic or corporate concern, e.g. Homeworking, Europe, Health, Safety.
4. To identify and raise awareness of social and legislative changes which impact upon women.
5. To continue to support effective participation of women.
6. To progress issues identified as key areas of concern.
7. To promote women's active participation in the City Council's decision-making process and in areas of partnership working for example, with health authorities.
8. To ensure the provision and dissemination of accessible information to women.

9. To profile and celebrate the contribution of women to the economic and social life of the city.
10. To promote the role of the City Council and Women's Unit at a local, national and international level (Birmingham City Council 1992/93: 10).

The achievement of strategic objectives depends on effective policy initiation and development.

6.5.2.3 Policy initiation and development

One of the key functions of the Women's Unit is to initiate and develop policies to promote women's equality in areas of key concern. The factors determining the issues that the Women's Unit cover include (Birmingham City Council 1992/1993: 26):

- Priorities and concerns identified by members laid down in committee strategies.
- New legislation which will impact upon women.
- Issues raised by departments and inter-departmental groups.
- Concerns and gaps in services identified by women in the city.

It should be noted that the concerns of women can only be addressed if there are effective communication channels in place. In order to facilitate discussion on various issues, the Women's Unit established a Women's Departmental Liaison Officers Forum.

6.5.2.4 The Women's Departmental Liaison Officers Forum

The Women's Departmental Liaison Officers Forum was established with representatives from all Council Departments, to identify and progress issues of women's equality in policy and service delivery across the Council. It is co-ordinated by the Women's Unit (Birmingham City Council 1992/93: 32).

The functions of the Women's Departmental Liaison Officers are to:

Ensure that equal opportunities for women is integral to departmental initiatives.

Identify areas for action and developing departmental programmes for action in conjunction with the Departmental Management Team.

Liaise with the Women's Unit, through the forum, to ensure the benefits of cross-council action are maximised (Birmingham City Council 1992/93: 32).

However, whilst these officers will have a key role in developing equal opportunities for women within their departments, equal opportunities and good practice is the ultimate responsibility of Chief Officers.

i) Operational Aspects of the Forum

The forum provides a formal link for all departments in the City Council, in identifying issues affecting women. Each Liaison Officer has a small core group of women in their departments to assist in identifying issues of concern to women. In addition, many of the Liaison Officers have established consultation sessions, open to all women in their departments, or regularly attend staff meetings, to pick up issues of concern. The Forum has enjoyed various achievements which include:

support for the development of suitable facilities in all new council buildings and, where feasible, in all existing buildings with public access;

providing support to women who are breast feeding on its premises, by ensuring all staff are aware of how to deal sensitively and supportively with women who choose to breast feed in public (Birmingham City Council 1992/93: 32).

6.5.3 AREAS OF PRIORITY

Among the areas of current priority are the development of:

- a) A Women's Safety Strategy;
- b) Women and Europe Corporate Policy; and
- c) Homeworking Strategy (Birmingham City Council 1992/93: 26).

a) Women's Safety Strategy

The Women's Unit is co-ordinating this strategy which aims to address the safety concerns of women including:

- To enable women to live in a safer city.
- To work towards creating an environment where women can live without fear.

b) Women and Europe Corporate Policy

This policy is being developed by the Women's Unit in conjunction with other departments. Its aims are as follows:

- To highlight opportunities and concerns arising from Europe.
- To develop policies to enable women to benefit from Europe.
- To raise awareness of how the city can address areas of key concern.
- To network with women's organisations across Europe.

c) Homeworking Strategy

This has been initiated as part of the Unit's work on Homeworking. Birmingham City Council defines a Homeworker as someone who works at home for a firm, a boss or an agent (Birmingham City Council 1992/93: 22).

The aims of the strategy include, *inter alia*:

- To increase the accessibility of Council services to Homeworkers.
- To involve Homeworkers in policy consultation and policy formation.
- To prioritise the development of a Homeworkers support group to break their isolation.

In addition to the afore-mentioned, the Women's Unit is involved in research and provides an advisory service.

6.5.4 Successful Initiatives of the women's unit

i) Small Grants Scheme

The Women's Unit Work Programme over 1992–93 included the administration of a Small Grants scheme of £20 000 from the Inner City Partnership Programme. Women's organisations serving Inner City Partnership Programme areas could apply for funds to enable women to:

- have better access to information, advice and services;
- develop community self-help networks; and
- reduce inequalities in health (Birmingham City Council 1992/93: 31).

ii) Training

The Women's Unit has been actively involved in providing quality training on various issues. The training function is important for the following reasons:

- It supports women's organisations and individual women in their work.
- It heightens awareness around key issues.
- It helps to equip women with essential and relevant knowledge and skills (Birmingham City Council 1992/93: 31).

Examples of training courses held by the Women's Unit include the »Black Women's Forum on Europe Training Programme«, Sexual Harassment, Training Day for Homeworkers, Strategies re: Child Support Act and Women's Health Advocacy and Interpreting Workshop.

iii) Research

The Women's Unit has initiated research to inform future policy development or service provision in the following areas:

- Safety (feasibility study into women's safety).
- Child Sexual Abuse (incidence of and services received by women with known histories of child sexual abuse).
- Health and Safety of Homeworkers (as part of the Health and Safety Scheme).

iv) Advisory Role

The Unit provides an advisory function to Council departments regarding policy development and changes in practice which will result in improving women's access to services and opportunities. Examples of input into departmental initiatives include:

- Child Support Act. The Women's Unit had a major contribution to the development of policy and guidelines to respond to the introduction of the Child Support Act 1991.
- Equality Performance Indicators.
- Guidelines to Voluntary Organisations in Formulating an Equal Opportunities Policy.
- City AIDS Policy.

6.5.5 Control in relation to local government

The Women's Sub-Committee is composed of a selection of councillors from all parties. It represents a body to which the Women's Unit is ultimately accountable, since the members of the committee are elected representatives of the people of Birmingham. The Women's Unit has to report to the sub-committee for various reasons:

- a) It is a process to document the work which the Unit is involved in.
- b) It highlights initiatives, and/or issues which have great relevance to women locally and nationally.
- c) It enables communication between officers of the Council and councillors.
- d) It ensures that the Women's Unit is accountable.

7. CONCLUSION

Most organisations under-utilise women because they fail to realise that women represent a valuable resource. Although women have joined the labour force in large numbers in general, and local government in particular, they still are the majority of the low-paid employees and face discrimination at all levels of society. Black and minority ethnic women find that such discrimination is compounded by racism.

Women are generally more likely to be users of council services than men; a greater proportion of women are reliant on benefits; women remain under-represented in local decision making processes and continue to suffer discrimination in employment.

The success of initiatives regarding improving opportunities for women depends on a strong management commitment to the belief that women can and should participate in the management of organisations. The establishment of the Birmingham City Council Women's Unit signifies a recognition of the unequal status of women and a commitment to challenging both the structural and attitudinal factors that inhibit equality of op-

portunity for women. Over the past nine years, the Women's Unit has gone from strength to strength despite barriers and obstacles which reflect inequalities prevalent within society. The development of the Women's Unit in terms of staffing structure and responsibilities reflect the strategic importance given to equal opportunities within the Council's vision and values.

Local authorities serious about equal opportunities in general and more particularly the status of women can certainly reflect and draw on the Birmingham experience. It has possibilities of replication both in the developed and developing world.

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