

Victorian local government and women's political participation in small towns.

Dr Anna Macgarvey
Deakin University

P.O. Box 423, Warrnambool 3280
Telephone (03) 55633255
Fax (03) 55633534
Email: annamac@deakin.edu.au

Rural women were involved in the struggle for women's suffrage in Victoria but their entry into local government has been slower than in urban centres. This paper takes as its starting point Ken Dempsey's analysis of the hegemonic masculine structure of small Victorian towns in the 1980s and Amanda Sinclair's notion of the maternal feminist being the prototype of the rural woman councillor at that time. My study, which is based upon a qualitative interview study with 12 women councillors across rural Victoria during February 2004, reveals that women in small towns are now much more likely to challenge the notion of masculine hegemony by playing a more proactive role in community affairs in small towns. For them, local government service is a logical and practical way to help improve the quality of life in their constituencies. This is also because the traditional rural definition of local government with its main function to ensure adequate infrastructure provision for its ratepayers to maintain viable farming and other productive operations is changing. Furthermore, these women challenged the notion of the maternal feminist by embracing broader political agendas and operating with different representational styles than those associated with previous generation of women on local councils in small towns. On a theoretical level, the paper concludes by suggesting that while the notion of a 'critical mass' in terms of women's political participation is important, there is also a need to explore women's accounts of 'critical acts' in the everyday decision-making of local government.

Introduction

The Victorian Centenary of Federation Women's Petition 2001 emphasised the need for equal representation of women in all areas and levels of decision making, including local government. The petition draws its inspiration from the Great Petition of 1891 and secured more than 30,000 signatures in support of women's suffrage. It was called the Monster Petition, as it was the largest ever collected in Australia (Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition,

This paper was subject to a double-blind peer review process.

ISBN number 1920948848

Published on-line by the Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities, La Trobe University

www.latrobe.edu.au/csrc/2ndconference/refereed

2002). Whereas little is known about the country women who were involved in the struggle for women's suffrage in Victoria, it is noteworthy that Progressive Leagues (suffragette

societies) were formed in many country towns at the time. Country women worked vigorously, and sometimes independently of the city groups, in organising petitions and lobbying members of parliament, which means that the support of country women (and men) was important to the suffrage campaign (Fanon, 1981, p. 19). This activism and support for women's suffrage in small towns and rural districts did not however immediately translate into women's engagement with local government.

Victorian women's participation in local government has been more substantial than at the other levels of government. While the proportion of women councillors remained the same at 22 per cent after the local government reforms in the mid 1990s, the decline in actual numbers of women in local government had major implications for female participation and representation at the local government level (Women's Participation in Local government, 2004). This paper explores twelve rural women's experiences of community leadership and local government to investigate their contributions to decision-making and the barriers they have encountered in the day-to-day involvement in local government and the public nature of their lives. Contrary to the popular belief that country life is a slow and comfortable one, rural Australia is now experiencing unprecedented rates of change (Haslam McKenzie, 2003, p. 36). Women are responding to the challenges this presents, including in their engagement with local government as democratically elected representatives of their communities. It is therefore important to begin a documentation of rural women's experiences in local government given that men have always dominated local government in Australia.

This study extends previous research which investigated women's contributions to local economic development in south-west Victoria which revealed that a significant number of women are involved in local community development activities which focused on the wider social, cultural and organisational context of development. It was also evident that these women had strong ties to local governments in their areas by having served on local council or planned to stand for council election (O'Toole and Macgarvey, 2003; Macgarvey and O'Toole, 2003).

The study of women's participation in local government decision-making is important because, local government touches the lives of women in at least three ways: 'It employs women; it provides services for women; and it is a place of political power and public advancement for women.' (Hollis, 1987, p. 470-1). Indeed, Newman (1990) and Neylan & Brasch (1992) state that there is considerable empirical evidence to suggest that women have been particularly successful in agitating and campaigning on various 'quality of life' issues and striking a responsive chord with voters in their quest for a position on their local council.

The Background: Maternal feminists and girl guides

Victorian local government originated in 1842. Twenty years later the 1863 Act introduced plural voting which ensured that owners of valuable properties had three votes and that those who were not property owners or household heads had none. This meant effectively that the establishment of local government in Australia as a major political institution reflected the prevailing Anglo-Celtic class, gender and race relations of the day (Roberts, et al, 1997) such that local government was 'a de facto if not de jure masculine preserve' (Sinclair, 1987, p. 13). It is therefore not surprising that women's progress to achieve proportional representation as elected councillors was pitifully slow until the 'trickle' (Sturrock 1986) turned into a steadier flow from the 1970s onwards. The 1980s in turn saw a solid if unremarkable number of women elected to Victorian local government, particularly in urban and suburban councils with the more significant changes presently occurring in non-

metropolitan Victoria, where traditionally exclusively all male councils are seeing the election of one or even more women. Between 1979 and 1985, for example, the number of women in rural municipalities increased from forty-six to eighty-six, surpassing the main cities in numbers, if not in proportion to male councillors (Sinclair, 1987, pp 8-9). The most recent survey of councillors by the Municipal Association of Victoria reveals that 29 per cent of Victorian councillors are women with most in rural (40.32 per cent) and metropolitan councils (31.45 per cent) than in interface and regional cities (Municipal Association of Victoria, 2003).

The most comprehensive study of 60 Victorian women councillors was undertaken by Sinclair et al in the 1980s and they found that a high proportion of these women had come from considerable involvement in community activism. What is significant about Sinclair's research is the difference she found in their motivations to stand for council election between geographic areas and among younger and older women. She discovered that considerable involvement in larger and traditional organisations and voluntary organisations like Red Cross, Girl Guides the National Council of Women and the Country Women's Association was the norm in rural Victoria, and particularly among older women councilors. In urban areas, by contrast, elected councillors tended to come from a background of community involvement in environmental, childcare and locally organised groups. Sinclair describes these differences within five categories. Three of these - the *maternal feminist*, the *committee woman* and the *party woman* - conformed in many ways to the stereotypical images of femininity of the time and conventional political pathways. The girl guide or maternal feminist is older than the others, has a long history of community involvement in traditional organisations, is asked to stand for council to fill a vacancy and does so because she now has fewer family responsibilities. The committee woman is middle aged with some family responsibilities, has considerable experience in local groups and is likely to make local government a career; while the party woman comes to local government through her involvement in a political party. However, Sinclair also noted that two new types of women councillors had emerged during the preceding decade: the *modern or super mother* and the *career activist*. The modern or super mother is younger than the others, has developed her aspirations through higher education and career choices and is involved in school councils, kindergarten and sporting clubs. The career activist with similar educational credentials has, on the other hand, come into local government as part of her career path.

Sinclair's observations about rural women councillors in the 1980s subscribing to the maternal feminist or girl guide can be understood in the context of the prevailing inequalities between women and men in rural Victoria. This was documented by Dempsey in *A Man's Town* (1992), a study of gender relations in the 1970s and 1980s in a small agricultural town in Victoria. It shows that there are two major axes of men's dominance and control in a wide range of domestic and community activities in the town:

The first axis is men's superior power, especially material power, and the economic dependence of women that results. The second axis is an ideology of gender which defines men and their activities as superior and women and their activities as inferior. This ideology legitimates men making paid work a central life interest and women treating home-making and child-rearing as central life-interests.
(Dempsey, 1992, p. 4)

There are then clearly defined expectations of a woman's place in the domestic sphere, facilitating men's engagement in work, town affairs and at leisure. Key institutions of male dominance are the service clubs, the churches, and the prevalent view that this is a town for

the sports-loving and drinking man. Where women participate in these activities it is always in a supporting rather than decision-making role. If breaching the code of respectability, when a woman was believed to be having affairs with two married male members of the Jaycee Club she was forced to surrender her membership, but not the male members, because it could put the happiness of two families at risk. It is in this social and cultural climate that Sinclair's maternal feminist sought election on shire or town councils. While women's contributions to economic and social life was rendered invisible by their supporting role at home and in the town, as well as in the surrounding district (Alston, 1990, Alston, 1995, Beilin, 1995, Gooday, 1995, Sachs, 1996, Williams, 1992), women nevertheless made significant contributions to their communities in women's auxiliaries and voluntary organisations such as the then largest Australian women's organisation – the Country Women's Association - which established club rooms in small towns, baby health centers, hospitals, residential hostels, convalescent and holiday homes across Australia (Teather, 1992b).

Data collection in small Victoria towns

Sorenson and Epps (1996) argue that local government can supply leadership in rural Australia, as they provide 'the wider development path required in small places, incorporating such aspects as a sense of community, environmental improvement, and the development of social and cultural facilities' (Sorenson and Epps, 1996, p. 117). The mid 1990s was a period of major change in Victorian local government. In the period between 1993 and 1994, 2125 elected Victorian councillors were dismissed and commissioners appointed to replace them temporarily. In the wake of the local government reforms the number of councils was reduced from 210 to 78 in a process of amalgamations. This essentially means larger municipalities, both geographically and in population and heavy workloads for councillors, in spite of a role which is supposed to be more direction-setting than 'hands on'. There is also greater responsibility for service delivery by local government, taking on some of the responsibilities of state governments, requirements for accountability have been further enhanced, including community expectations of public consultations and involvement in community development, environmental management and strategic planning (Davis & Weller 2001). It is in the wake of these changes and reforms that this study took place. The present study is among the first in Victoria which explores both the impact of local government reforms and women's participation in local politics.

The method of data collection in this study adopts a feminist epistemology that highlights the subjective nature of knowledge and that argues for the legitimization of women's subjective experience as a valid way of knowing and understanding the world as they see it (Hughes, 1997). The twelve participants were selected from the current list of women on local councils by the *Women's Participation in Local government Coalition* (2004) from across rural Victoria and with the diversity of small towns in mind. The participants were subsequently contacted by phone and all agreed to meet for a face-to-face interview in their town at a mutually convenient time during February 2004. It is noteworthy that the Victorian Women's Trust (2004) undertook a survey of female federal and state representatives and women in local government in Victoria in many respects probing the similar questions to my own, however only sixteen female local government councillors returned their survey. This confirms the importance of undertaking qualitative research, which incorporates the social dimension of the research process. The anonymity and privacy of participants has been ensured through the adoption of pseudonyms and in not providing any identifiable characteristics of individual towns.

The semi-structured interview focused essentially upon three aspects of the women's involvement in local government:

- their motivation to stand for council election;
- their contributions to local decision-making and;
- their experiences of public life on council and in their local communities.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed for patterns of commonality and diversity in terms of the women's individual experiences of public life.

The demographic profile of the twelve women was in many respects diverse:

- They ranged in ages from their early thirties into their sixties;
- Only one woman had never married and one had lost her husband some ten years ago, raising her children as a single mother;
- Most of their children were of an age when they were either in secondary education or had left home. Two of the younger women have pre-school or primary school children;
- The women's occupational experiences are varied and considerable, such as in farming, professional employment in teaching and health care, running their own small businesses, or entering what has been considered distinctly male occupational territory, such as the trucking and aviation industry.

This is consistent with the observed patterns of the women in the local economic development studies (O'Toole & Macgarvey 2003; Macgarvey & O'Toole 2003) and with the Municipal Association of Victoria's 2003 councillor census. Their census reveals that most rural women councillors are between the ages of 46-55 (37.3 per cent). The census does not provide consistent gender and urban/rural comparisons, but reveals that 85 per cent of councillors are married or live in a de facto relationship and with no children under the age of 16 (66 per cent). Councillors in rural areas are also more likely to be self-employed (64.36 per cent) and primary producers (27 per cent) (Municipal Association of Victoria, 2003). It is not surprising that the majority of women councillors are between 46-55 years of age given the heavy work loads associated with the duties in the newly amalgamated council and women's family commitments when caring for younger children, as well as their likely involvement in either full or part time employment (Frere, 2002 & 2004).

Women and change in local government: If I can't beat them I'll join them

The interviews with the twelve participants in the study demonstrate that there has been a shift in the place of women in decision-making in a number of local councils in rural Victoria as individual women councillors are mounting a challenge to the patriarchal discourses and practices that are still evident in rural councils. Through their participation in local government affairs these women are now beginning to play a more central role in local decision-making. Randall (1987) discusses women's political activity at the community level and challenges us to recognise the forms of indirect political participation in which women have been substantially involved. Whereas in the past, women's organisation served as important training grounds for leadership, country women now come to their council duties with a broad and extensive range of experiences from political activity at the community level and on local and state committees, as well as in paid employment. All the women interviewed for this study had been actively engaged in campaigns to save the local hospital from closure, protests against 'inappropriate' town

development and issues to do with waste management, for example, as well as lobbying for better services in their towns. On top of this, the women councillors had also been heavily involved in a wide range of mixed-gender organisations for many years. This provided them with a significant source of community support, considerable insight and knowledge of their communities as well as important leadership skills.

The participants often thought about whether or not to stand in local council elections for some considerable time and were generally 'fired up' by diverse and overlapping concerns. These concerns generally focused upon the future of their towns in the wake of council amalgamations, single issues often to do with town planning or other environmental concerns, lack of appropriate council services, a sense of frustration with council representation, and a growing awareness of the need for a greater gender balance in local government. There is little doubt that council amalgamations have had a significant impact upon many small towns with the loss of their local government institutions in the 1990s. These issues were raised in several interviews, and particularly by Maureen:

We felt that we were being left out. Well instead of our own little Shire, all of a sudden we were with [four other small towns] and it was a big thing because we're a very tight community and although we don't live in each other's pockets we are always there for each other. You could ring the councillors anytime and get action and then with the amalgamation our council representative doesn't even live [here].

Carol also felt that her community was missing out by not being able to get things up in council and thought: 'I'll get in there and see what I can get for our community – that's why I became a councillor . . . and I believe the community likes me working with them,' while Karen thought it was time for a change in the local council after having been forcibly ejected twice from meetings, when she was trying to deal with kindergarten issues. She eventually stood 'thinking it would probably give those that were on council a bit of a shake-up.' Whereas Angela, now serving her second mayoral term links her interest in the community with concerns about women's representation in political life:

. . . I realised that I was more interested in the community than most and I bemoaned the fact that there weren't enough women in local government . . . then one day it occurred to me that I could do it myself so I nominated and was duly elected . . . it seems to me I've been training all my life for this job. It's like the culmination of everything that I'd done.

It is quite evident that although the women candidates are often well prepared for their entry into local politics they are often surprised by their success, despite their considerable experiences of community participation. They make frank observations about the first few days of stepping into their role as local council representatives. Alice, for example, spent a whole morning on the phone when the other four councillors were all vying for her support, but as she said 'I'm not the meat in the sandwich . . . and I don't trust them – I wouldn't buy sheep off them at this stage'. Jan, on the other hand, recalled her excitement at the swearing in where the following interchange took place between the CEO and her father: 'You must be really proud, did you think your daughter would end up in local government representing her community?' And without batting an eyelid, he said. 'No actually I thought she'd end up in jail'. I was a bit of a rogue teenager, she explained in the interview.

Making a Difference: Stand up for what you believe and follow it through

It was very evident that the women were very conscious of their obligations to represent the views of residents even if they themselves did not agree with these views because ‘it is my job to do whatever they require me to do’ (Hanna). This is especially significant because ‘you get diametrically opposed views in your community’ which means that all you can do is say to people: ‘I will take it to council and we will discuss it and then council will make a decision’ (Marilyn). Another dimension of decision-making is the sense of sometimes being overwhelmed by the magnitude of council decisions, which was significant for Elise:

. . . well for me there are times when I feel overwhelmed by the amount of work and feeling that I’m not giving well enough to things because it’s too much. Some of the issues can be really scary . . . For example when you see a budget increase with CPI . . . [and] what we do with our flora and fauna, for example is going to impact on neighbours too. How we use what sort of fuel will impact on global warming, you know.

The participants identified many of their achievements including attempts to extend the range of issues considered by councils and changing community perceptions of the council through their openness, their accountability, or their preparedness to listen and consult. Marie commented that ‘you get phone calls of an evening, phone calls on the weekend. You get phone calls before I go to work . . . You have invitations – that many invitations – and naturally you can’t do them all because a lot of them clash. I try and go to as many as I can.’

Most also felt that their approach to governance is distinctly different from many of their male colleagues, due to their own focus on researching issues of relevance to sound decision-making and their diligence in carrying out their council responsibilities. There is also a strong sense that since local government has moved away from the traditional ‘roads, rates and rubbish’ focus, women councillors are perhaps more adept at coping with this change and the diverse issues local government is now required to consider. It is significant though that the ‘roads, rates and rubbish’ issues may take on a different dimension when considered from a woman’s point of view as reflected in Joan’s statement:

I’m interested in roads . . . because all of our towns have ageing populations and our elderly are meant to get out of their front door and have a footpath to follow to the main street.

The women identified a range of improvements in their communities they had initiated, maintained or supported such as improved infrastructure, facilities and services. Many specific projects related to community services such as parks, playgrounds and community centers. These achievements can at times seem insignificant, but in the words of Jan:

It’s when you see how important they are to people, that makes you feel good . . . if I screw up and make a mistake or if I don’t see something for what it is or what it should be, then I would hope that somebody would grab me by my shirt back and say, hey girl, remember . . . And the day I can’t do it, Anna, is the day I shouldn’t be there.

Alice elaborated along similar lines, outlining what can only be considered a community development approach to the small grant scheme (\$ 5,000 in money and \$ 5,000 in kind) in her town, where she actively encouraged and supported her community to apply for this funding:

It actually gets something substantial happening in your shire. And since I got on council . . . no one hardly ever got a grant before for [this town] and now I have the most [in the shire] because I get out there and say, look here's a community grant scheme, you can do it.

Some of these women have also been successful in lobbying the other tiers of government or made the most of available funding opportunities. The following are Pat's reflections in relation to her imminent retirement after 20 years of service:

It's really hard to measure, isn't it? I often think when I do finish up in council – which I will be at the end of next year – I'll look back and think, what have I achieved? Have we managed to get heritage studies done . . . the big thing is like saving some significant buildings around town. I see that as very important and we were offered a grant from state government (\$ 35,000) to upgrade our heritage listing. Now we only got that through council by 5 to 4 votes. And I just don't understand them. Why would they say no? This is money for nothing, for something that needs doing.

It is also important to recognise that while the achievement made by individual councillors may be relatively modest, sometime attempts to make significant changes may also fail, which is acknowledged by Maureen, who formulated this advice to other women in decision-making positions at the close of the interview:

Don't let anyone in high places fob you off. Stand up for what you believe in and follow it through. That's the main thing; try and do something within your community. If you succeed that's good. If you don't succeed, if you tried, well to me you've still succeeded because you have put the effort in.

Clearly being involved in local government has many rewards for these women including a strong sense of contributing to their communities and all but one, who had served 20 years on her council, would seek reelection. This suggests an overall satisfaction with being in local government, as does the women's aspirations to become mayors. Three of the women had experiences as mayors and had enjoyed the opportunity to be involved in the 'big picture', playing a leading role in decision-making and negotiations with the other levels of government. In the words of Cheryl:

. . . once you make that transition from councillor to mayor you know everything that is going on. It is a steep rise. I did enjoy it though. I thought it was just fantastic . . . you have your finger on the pulse of absolutely everything that is going on . . . you get quite a good network too of . . . you know under-secretaries, the secretary, and that sort of thing which is really handy. So you have little backdoors into the minister's office. And they are things you don't want to lose when you go back to being a councillor. But you are stressed out a fair bit as mayor because the buck always stops with you

Two of the other participants also became mayors after these interviews although Pat had previously been told by a male councillor that 'you'd make a good mayor one day . . . but you will have to work harder. And I thought shit! No one tells the fellas to work harder!'

Challenges: Sexism, intimidation and glass walls

Despite the overwhelming sense that these women brought considerable experiences to local government and worked hard for their constituencies, they did draw attention to the formal and informal barriers they had encountered over the years. Marie, the youngest woman councillor commented on the difficulties she experienced in terms of her gender and age, as well as the fact that she had defeated an older male councillor in the election, while Carol recounted her first impressions of one of her male colleagues:

You're a bit of an unknown quality especially if your reputation precedes you . . . there was a pretty concerted effort to poison the pond before I got there. I felt it straight away. There were people who had been on council with him who got on really well with him and they were part of a voting block and I come along instead of him and they're like, sigh! He was a top councillor and now look what we have got. But that's all right, you know . . . what can you do? Can't be a bloke.

I sat beside a councillor . . . he was in his mid-sixties at that stage . . . and he put his arm around me and said, sit back, girlie and watch how the boys do it. And I said, 'if I've got balls to join this f*#%ing boys club, I'll f*#%ing do it!' Well, he sat back in his chair and that set the standard . . . I may not know what they know . . . But also I'm a mother, we live on a farm, I run a business, and I've got my council duties. [And] then you get comments like, 'she's the only woman on council . . . yeah, but she's a good looking one, she keeps us in line' . . . and you think that's a crock of shit because you can't keep them in line. And I don't believe in using sexuality as a way to get your point of view across.

Carol has become a very successful and respected member of her local council and topped the list in an undivided council election. All the male councillors, however, stood her up at the luncheon to celebrate their election after the counting of the votes. These are demonstrable examples of what may transpire once women enter the male preserves of local decision-making, but the starkest example of intimidation was told by Marilyn when during a public meeting one male councillor subjected her to physical assault and public ridicule. This is how she recalls the incident, which took place a couple of years ago:

He called me aside outside and grabbed me, shook me, and told me he wouldn't support me in any decisions that I made in council. I was just in shock. I thought about what he had said to me. How he stared me straight in the eyes . . . then that night after the forum was over he actually got up and said he had something else to do and he said [publicly] hat the other chap and myself . . . was the weakest link in the council – it was shocking. . . someone said I could charge him. And I said, look, I'm a councillor, he's a councillor . . . I don't really want to. I just want to get on with my life, get on with my community . . . prove that I am not that bad [as a councillor], you know what I mean?

While such incidents are fortunately rare, the masculine culture of local councils still present significant challenges to women, as described by Marie as 'not the glass ceiling but more like the glass wall. You can look in but [they're] not opening the door', which operates as an informal strategy of exclusion. This atmosphere can of course be even more of an issue in the councils with only one woman representative, which Pat observed where previously '[the two women] could give each other a wink across the table and know [they'd] caught them out.' Now Pat has now developed a fairly useful strategy of drawing attention to instances of

sexism during council meeting by putting up her finger up and counting ‘that’s one, that’s two, that’s three, and they’ve been better since then.’ Without such strategies and Pat’s considerable experience in managing exclusionary practices newer councillors like Elise and Jan at times find it difficult to manage their sense of isolation:

It’s lonely up there with the black suits – I think, here I am amongst all these men having a voice . . . probably two occasions that I can think of where I was talked over or what I was saying was virtually halted and they moved on to other business. I thought that’s not right . . . you think, why did that happen? . . . They probably didn’t want to hear what I had to say and just moved on.

. . . I could be in council chamber all day, for nine hours, with fourteen males . . . You can’t even duck down to the toilet and say, wasn’t that a dumb thing that George said? You don’t have that. The guys do that at the urinal that was a dumb thing that Jan said! Ah, let it go, she’s probably having a girl thing. They can do that, I can’t. . . .

But being ‘other’ can also be turned into an advantage, which has worked well for Carol

. . . this is my fifth year on council . . . and my counterparts still don’t know where I’m coming from. I love that. It’s not an air or mystery or anything, it’s just they haven’t been able to work me out. And I hope they never work me out – that’s an ace up my sleeve because they never know . . . I’m not a feminist . . . I don’t know what you’d call me.

Although the participants all pointed to issues relating to the masculine culture of local councils, women didn’t always support each other and were sometimes even perceived to be more difficult to work with than men. Hanna initially thought that with three women on council that ‘the sisterhood will come into effect and we’ll stick together.’ But ‘the line was drawn in the sand from the first day’ and so she is now ‘the only girl amongst four blokes basically’, but this support comes at a price:

They were perhaps a little bit protective of me sometimes. At one stage we had an issue that was quite ugly and they sort of didn’t want me to go to meetings because I might be abused or something like that. And you sort of get to a stage and say, well, hang on a tick, I’ve got to find my way – I’ve got to experience that. I’ve got to do that.

Angela’s observations are also instructive in this respect. Despite her considerable past engagement with women’s services, her more recent leadership role has, in her own words “bloke-fied” her. She went on to say that

. . . because all my life I’ve been involved in things where the majority of power brokers were men . . . so they don’t frighten me or shock me . . . I have been known to land a few blows. Mind you, men are easy to get along with because you can have a barny with a man and an hour later you’re having a great old natter over a cup of tea. . . . Women bear grudges and it is not doing them any good at all.

While these women are undoubtedly dedicated and conscientious in their representational roles, they nevertheless feel they need to work harder than male councillors to overcome the public perceptions that politics - even in the sphere of being closest to the community - is still largely marked out as a male preserve. This means in turn that once women enter this domain

they become highly visible members of their communities, which was another common theme in the interviews. The women talked about taking greater care with their appearance when ducking into the supermarket for groceries, making sure to place the shopping trolley in the designated area and observing, like Pat, that ‘you can’t go to the supermarket without someone stopping you. And if you are in a hurry you go to the supermarket in a different town’. It also means that in Marilyn’s words, ‘you have to be very thick-skinned - no good standing if you get upset very easily about anything whatever’ and this is of course particularly the issue divided communities as both Jean and Maureen observes:

. . . I was sitting outside [a local café] one day having a cup of coffee and this lady walked past and said, ‘you should have your bullet proof vest on.’ I mean it really hurts when all you’re trying to do is work for a community. And I represent the whole of the shire, not just [my own] riding. And everyone knows you, whereas in State or Federal Government, you’re a long way from home.

You go to meetings where you hear people referring to councilors as parasites and maggots. What the hell am I doing this for again, please remind me? [But] it doesn’t really bother me to any huge extent that there is a small group of people out there who absolutely hate my guts – personally – me.

Conclusion: Deeds not words

Although local government has a dinosaur-like reputation in some circles, the women in this study are neither ‘token women’ nor are they ‘one time wonders’. This is evident in their commitment to claim and redefine local political agendas and thereby making a transformative difference in their communities, which means that they do not fit the notion of the ‘maternal feminist’ with a firmly established support base in traditional women’s organisations. Yet only few readily claimed a feminist political stance and affiliation with the Australian Local Government Women’s Association. Interestingly though, they have nonetheless challenged the masculine preserve of municipal decision-making in each their own ways, often with a feisty sense of humor and pragmatic approach ‘to getting things done.’

In addition, frequent references to the perennial feminist dilemma about equality versus difference (Van Acker, 1999) cropped up in the interviews about women’s participation and representation in political institutions. The demand by women councillors for equality with men fails to acknowledge the inherent danger of ignoring the gendered, and masculine culture of leadership and decision-making processes, because the expectation would be that women emulate masculine political styles. For them, any engagement with women only organisations was therefore seen as a backward step, undoubtedly reflecting a desire to disassociate themselves from the maternal feminists of the past. On the other hand, an insistence on the differences of life experience between women and men councillors, might easily lead women into a position where their influence becomes confined to committees that deal with the so-called ‘soft’ issues. Most avoided this potential trap by involving themselves with a broad range of decisions in relation to community needs, the environmental and development, and in tough financial decisions. Another significant dimension of feminist debates about women’s political participation and representation has focused upon the notion of a ‘critical mass’ to bring about sustained changes in political institutions. The general consensus is that 30 to 40 per cent is about the right level for this to become a reality. (UN Commission on the Status of Women in Lister, 2003, p. 145) Women’s representation in local government is currently just under this threshold, but unequally distributed across the 78 Victorian municipalities. This leads to a consideration of Drude Dahlerup’s (1989) notion

of 'critical acts' designed to improve the situation of women as a group and their communities that are more important in bringing about positive change than mere numbers. This suggests that although this study is inevitably an early and partial view of women's political participation in small towns. It nevertheless provides some insights into women's experiences of public life, decision-making and their achievements in a changing social and cultural context, on the one hand, and with the opportunity for further explorations of the relative theoretical and practical significance of numerical representation and critical acts in women's political lives.

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