MEN, MASCULINITIES AND THE (RE)GENDERING OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN RURAL AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

While feminist scholars have highlighted the fact that citizenship should not simply be equated with political representation, they have also emphasized the importance of equity of participation for women in the formal sphere of politics (e.g., Lister, 2003; Staeheli & Kofman, 2004). Thus, the focus of this chapter is on women’s representation in mainstream politics and more particularly, within the political arena of local governments in rural and regional areas. The aim of the chapter is to use a feminist theoretical lens to examine gender and representation in rural local governments in Australia. To do so, I draw on data from nineteen interviews with women elected mayors in the Australian state of Queensland. While women continue to be seriously under-represented in the local government sector in rural areas in Australia (see Table 1), women’s presence has increased dramatically in the arena of local government in recent years (Sawer, 2001; Pini, Brown, & Ryan, 2004). Nineteen represented a record number of women mayors in the state of Queensland in 2002. Furthermore, all of these women represented...
Table 1. Women’s Representation on Local Governments: Excluding Capital Cities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Regional LGAs</th>
<th>Women Mayors (N)</th>
<th>Women Mayors (%)</th>
<th>Women CEOs (N)</th>
<th>Women CEOs (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>527</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Transport and Regional Services, 2005.

constituencies outside the state’s capital city of Brisbane. In fact, ten were located in very sparsely populated shires in the western areas of the state (populations ranging from 400 to 7,000 people), two in areas with populations of approximately 15,000, and the remainder in regional towns with populations ranging from 40,000 to 120,000.

The chapter is divided into five sections. It begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework informing the study. The second part of the chapter provides an overview of the research methodology. The presentation of empirical data in the third part of the chapter begins with participants’ description of a particular feminine subject position they call ‘woman councillor’. This is a subjectivity men found acceptable, but which women rejected. In the fourth section of the chapter I report on the resistance strategies men have deployed in order to (re)gender the local government space as masculine in the face of women’s entry. These include minimizing women’s power as mayor, excluding women from networks, knowledge and information, denigrating women and sexualizing women. The concluding section of the chapter identifies areas for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist writers have been instrumental in debunking and critiquing the fallacy that organizations are benign and gender neutral. In a seminal paper Acker (1990) espoused a ‘theory of gendered organisations’ in which she
argues that gender is implicated in a myriad of organizational processes, practices, symbols and images. These may include the tendency of particular occupational roles to be gendered as masculine or feminine, the typical over-representation of women in subordinate positions structurally within organizations as well as the continued lack of responsibility organizations take for the familial and care work of employees. To demonstrate the dynamism and pervasiveness of this process, Acker (1990, p. 146) uses the term ‘gendering’ arguing that every facet of organizational life can be viewed as producing and reproducing hierarchical gendered divisions and differentiations which position the female/feminine/woman as subordinate to the man/masculine/male.

In seeking to further Acker’s (1990) examination of gender as a relational social process embedded in organizations, a number of scholars have found it useful to engage West and Zimmerman’s (1987) concept of ‘doing gender’, which suggests that gender is not something we have or are, but something that is done (e.g., Gatenby & Humphries, 1999; Kvande, 1999). A central tenet of this work is a rejection of the conceptualization of the subject as unitary, singular and stable, for an understanding of subjectivity as fragmented, contradictory and plural (Hekman, 1990; McLaren, 2002). Thus, subjectivity is never complete or fixed but, as de Lauretis (1990, p. 116) explains ‘shifting and multiply organized across variable axes of difference’ or, according to Weedon (1987, p. 32) ‘in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak’. There are different discourses – the historically, socially and culturally specific terms, beliefs, values, institutions, statements and practices – by which we may constitute ourselves as ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ (as the widely adopted terms ‘masculinities’ and ‘femininities’ indicates), but there is no fundamental self-evident category ‘man’ or ‘woman’ (Scott, 1988; Probyn, 1993). Any sense that these are immutable, durable and natural is illusory (Butler, 1990).

There is, of course, a wide variety of ways in which we ‘do gender’ in organizational contexts and thus mark ourselves as located inside/outside of particular discourses of masculinity or femininity. Indeed, the doing of gender has been described as riding a metaphorical bicycle because its creation is so routine and repetitive (Martin, 2003). Important to this chapter is the fact that management and leadership are occupational roles that are strongly connected to particular definitions of masculinity. ‘Doing masculinity’ and ‘doing management’ are thereby often conflated as one and the same. In the first instance this is related to the fact that, as Collinson and Hearn (1996, p. 1) note, ‘most managers in most organizations in most
countries are men'. The local government sector – both in terms of elected leaders and employed staff – has traditionally been no different. It is, however, not merely the dominance of men's biological bodies in managerial positions that is of concern. More important is that, in both definition and practice, leadership and management have largely been constructed around notions of 'hegemonic masculinity'. This is a particular version of masculinity which, in a given site and time, is culturally dominant or idealized and defined in terms of other subordinated masculinities as well as all femininities (Carrigan, Lee, & Connell, 1985). While emphasizing its fluidity and slipperiness, Connell (1995) suggests that hegemonic masculinity as it is currently manifest in western culture revolves around notions of heterosexuality, competitiveness, instrumentality, aggression, independence and rationality. This definition is strongly suggestive of dominant socially constructed notions of what it means to be a manager/leader. That is, someone who is controlling, authoritative, decisive, strong, unemotional and resolute (Kerfoot, 2002).

As stated, specific studies of masculinities and political representatives in local government have not been undertaken. Evidence from the broader literature on gender and politics however, suggests that hegemonic masculinity is strongly embedded in the processes and practices of political institutions. Whitehead (1999, p. 28), for example, describes Westminster as having a 'prevailing adversarial culture of aggressive, manipulative and vicious competition'. Further, the more specific literature on women and local government indicates that hegemonic masculinities may be equally manifest within local tiers of government. Yule (2000, p. 42), for example, recounts the way in which male British councillors position themselves as innately more rational and intelligent than their female counterparts. Similarly, in their study of women's experience of local government in Northern Ireland Wilford, Miller, Bell, and Donoghue (1993, p. 347) describe the 'clubby nature of male councillors' characterized by 'slaps on the back and drinks at the bar' while in Japan Bochel, Bochel, Kasuga, and Takeyasu (2003) describe the 'masculine political culture' as a key constraint for women in local government. Further exemplifying that the environment of local government has been one in which hegemonic masculinity has been able to flourish is a report by Irwin (2001), which documents bullying, adversarial politics and personal attacks as common among councillors.

Given that hegemonic masculinities appear to have been strongly embedded in local government, women's relatively recent entry to the sector is of significant theoretical interest. This is particularly so given the fact that the literature on gender and organizations demonstrates that men
are highly resistant to women trespassing on previously male terrain (Sinclair, 1998; Cockburn, 1991). In a recent study on the subject Prokos and Padavic (2002) turn their attention to the police academy. They report that, in the absence of any legislative barriers to exclude women, police force officers have enacted informal barriers to restrict female entry. The doing of particular discourses of masculinity that objectify and denigrate women is central to these barriers. The need to display masculinity as well as the means for displaying masculinity is bound up with the women recruits. Women and feminine subjectivities are positioned by the male trainees and supervisors as 'other' as a 'gendered boundary marker' against their own masculine subjectivities (Prokos & Padavic, 2002). In much the same way, Agostino (1997, p. 15) describes how Australian navy men have reacted to women's entry and policies of equal employment opportunity by adopting practices which establish and reinforce 'binaries' between discourses of masculinity and femininity. These collective male practices, which include watching pornographic videos and boasting about sexual exploits, de-center and marginalize any alternative gender discourses beyond one focused on heterosexuality, power and strength.

The organizational contexts of the police/military are strongly infused materially and symbolically with hegemonic masculinity. They are therefore quite distinct from many other sites, including the local government sector. At the same time, I have suggested that local government has also been an arena that has provided opportunities for the articulation of hegemonic masculinity. It is in this light that I seek to address the question of how gendered identities in local government have been shaped and reshaped in the presence of women.

**METHODOLOGY**

Data for this chapter are drawn from nineteen semi-structured interviews with women mayors in the Australian state of Queensland. This approach to data collection, described by Mason (2003, p. 223) as 'interactive, situational and generative' was useful on a range of counts. First, the method gave voice to women's own perceptions and experiences of being leaders in the local government sector and was thereby consistent with our feminist intent to privilege the subjective as we uncovered different layers of understandings about the phenomena in question (Moss, 2002). Second, while it ensured that the three interviewers undertaking the research covered the same general territory in their questioning, it also allowed for flexibility in the
manner and order in which questions were asked as well as opening up space for participants to raise issues not anticipated by the researchers (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

The 19 women interviewed represented the entire cohort of mayors in the state of Queensland in the period 2000–2004. The selection of this group to interview is consistent with the notion of purposeful sampling in qualitative interviewing described by Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, and Alexander (1995, p. 162) as ‘selecting informants on the basis of relevant issues, categories and themes’. In a number of respects the women were typical of the broader population of women in local government in Australia (Purdon & Associates, 1997; Whip & Fletcher, 1999; Irwin, 2001). None was under the age of 40 and just three were aged between 40 and 50. Prior to becoming mayor all but one had been involved in paid work in a range of sectors including health, education, public administration and small business. Seven had tertiary qualifications. While most had been elected as mayor only in 1999 or 1996, all but one had prior experience as a councillor. Over half had first entered local government before 1990. The sixteen mayors who had children had thus had to juggle work and family over the course of their elected life, although the majority now were the mothers of teenagers or young adults.

Interviews took approximately one hour. They began with questions about the women’s background prior to entering local government before moving on to questions which focused on the participant’s initial entry into political office, such as motivations for seeking office, campaigning strategies and skill development. Following this, attention shifted to women’s experience of being a mayor. In the state of Queensland mayors are directly elected by the people rather than by council members so the position holds particular prominence and status. Women were asked a range of questions to elicit information about their gendered experiences of the mayoral role. For example, they were asked what advice they would give to aspiring women candidates, what major challenges they had faced and achievements they had enjoyed while in office and what their opinion was of women-specific local government organizations.

Interviews were transcribed in full for analysis and followed a four-stage process that was iterative and ongoing rather than linear and definitive. The first was the detailed and repeated readings of the women’s narratives as texts while the second was the development of analytical categories, which were developed through both an inductive and deductive approach (Schmidt, 2004). That is, they emerged from the data as well as from the researcher’s own knowledge of the literature and theory. Qualitative software was
engaged to assist with the third stage in the process, that is, the coding of data according to the identified thematic categories. At the same time the fourth stage of the process involved returning to the transcripts to review themes, examine the relationship between themes and the interweaving of themes across the narrative whole. Cumulatively, this analytic investigation revealed the ways in which men in local government enact hegemonic masculinity as a means of resistance against women’s presence in the sector.

**PATERNALISTIC MANAGERIAL MEN AND THE ‘WOMAN COUNCILLOR’**

When the nineteen women participants first entered local government, they were typically the only woman councillor or one of two women councilors. Their recollection of this period was that it was not their presence as a woman on council which generated resistance, but their failure to configure their identities around normative constructions of femininity. The women described entering councils run by older male figures who had been in their positions for extended periods of time. These male mayors, along with other senior male councillors privileged a form of paternalistic managerial masculinity (Collinson & Hearn, 1994; McDowell, 2001). The literature has demonstrated that while in many contemporary organizations this discourse of management has been superseded by new discursive regimes, paternalism remains prevalent in some rural and farming organizations (Charles & Davies, 2000; Pini, 2004). This also seems to be the case in terms of rural local governments. When the women transgressed the contract of paternalism and sought to contest the traditional discourse of femininity ascribed to them they experienced significant resistance. One described how at her first council meeting, two incumbent female colleagues took her aside to explain that the practice was for the women to take it in turns to organize and serve refreshments at the conclusion of business. The newly elected woman member suggested that she would only do so when every other man in the room had done so. Then, she stated, ‘I heard the story that this radical feminist had been elected’.

This anecdote provides a rich picture of the ‘way things were’ – and perhaps still are – in some rural local government offices. Female administrative staff and female councillors provide a service role for the male councillors, fulfilling domestic duties as required (Pringle, 1988). This is an extension of their socially constructed roles as rural women/wives/daughters/mothers (Little, 1997; Hughes, 1997). Present at the particular
meeting described by the women above was the male chief executive officer (CEO). Clearly, food preparation was not a work related task designated to be undertaken by employed staff for representative staff, but a gendered task for women to undertake for men. Importantly, it was not merely this woman’s presence as a council member which led to the appellation ‘radical feminist’, but her failure to subscribe to the discursive construction of the ‘woman councillor’ acceptable to male colleagues. It appears that there is a ‘new’ feminine subject position available to women to take up as they enter local government. It is a subject position that locates women within a discourse of domesticity and servitude rather than one of public leadership and management.

In another interview a second participant shared her own experience of not conforming to the expectations of a paternalistic and authoritarian male leader in terms of appropriate actions and behaviours and being sanctioned. What was different in this instance was that the male council of which Agnes became a member acted in stereotypically feminine ways in relation to the leadership of the former male mayor. It was, she explained, expected that she do the same:

*Agnes*: There was an expectation from the Chairman who was a wife batterer and a bully, that women were very submissive. He was quite comfortable having me there as long as I behaved as the men did in that I would be submissive and that he would say what the go was. But it turned out that the one woman, me, was the only one who would occasionally seriously question his view ... For that I had three, I won’t say violent, but very aggressive council meetings where he was literally standing up and leaning over the table, shake his fist at me and roaring at me, and with not one fellow backing me up because they were all terrified to do so.

Agnes’ failure to locate herself within the dominant discourses of acceptable council behaviour – as passive, compliant and acquiescent – elicited a powerful reaction from the male mayor. Her revelation is important for revealing the complexity of gender relations and the need to decouple notions of masculinity/femininity and male/female.

Even if they had, in the past, subscribed to the male version of acceptable behaviour and practices as a ‘woman councillor’, once elected to mayor this was no longer an option for women members. They were the leaders of their councils – the managers of staff, budgets and policies. It is not surprising then, that it was at this stage that women mayors experienced a strengthening of resistance they had previously not encountered in their roles as councillors. The strategies by which men mobilized masculine subjectivities as a means of (re)gendering the space of local government are outlined below.
DISCOURSES OF RESISTANCE

Mayors in Queensland have a role that is significantly different from mayors in other parts of Australia. In Queensland, as well as Western Australia and South Australia, all mayors are popularly elected directly to the position by the public. This differs from Victoria, Tasmania, the Northern Territory and some local government authorities of New South Wales, where mayors are elected by Council members from amongst their own numbers; they serve one term and then step down from the position. As such, these mayors perform a largely ceremonial role, and do not carry responsibility for community leadership over and above that of an ordinary Council member (LGF, 2003). In contrast, those directly elected as Queensland mayors perform a managerial function acting as leaders of Councils. As Neylan and Tucker (1996) argue, in this role mayors are high profile political and community leaders in their own right. The fact that the role of mayor is quite different from that of councillor, and the gendered implications of this did not go unnoticed by the women participants. One explained that 'being one of eight or so wasn’t so bad. They could live with that. But having a strong woman run for mayor. That was different'.

It is perhaps not surprising that one of the most typical forms of resistance engaged against the women mayors was to undermine this authority, and minimize the formal position she held. One of the women mayors, for example, commented, 'The line used most frequently at the council table is, “Well, you’re just a councillor like us, you just happen to be full time and that’s all the difference is”'. Participants also reported being constantly reminded of any limitations in their powers or constraints to their enacting their powers such as needing to gain approval for decisions from an all-male council. Some of the attempts to diminish the standing and role of the woman mayor were highly aggressive and adversarial. In the quotation below Wanda describes the actions of a councillor who deliberately sought a public confrontation with her, not only as a means of undermining and discrediting her, but also as a means of demonstrating his masculinity as a powerful and strong fighter.

Wanda: This one particular councillor who didn't want to work with me. He stood up in a council meeting over a particular issue rather than come and see me privately he's basically torn me to shreds in front of a full council. When I said to him, 'Well, you know the right thing you should have done was to actually come in and talk to me'. And he said, 'Oh, I'm not going to be treated like a school kid and go into your office and talk to you'.

This male councillor attempts to discredit Wanda's leadership, by locating her power and authority, not within the masculine identity of 'mayor', but
the highly feminized and diminished identity of 'school marm'. He seeks to delegitimize her position not only by refusing to meet with her, but also by constructing any such dialogue as infantile and beneath him.

The second form of resistance was one of exclusion. This was manifest in a number of different ways. One was simply to vote as a block of men and refuse to support a woman mayor on any issue, or particularly salient issues. Another was to exclude women from vital information or knowledge. This was a form of resistance women mayors experienced from male council staff as well as representative colleagues. When elected to office, the women inherited the staff of the previous administration. This became problematic when the staff, and particularly the CEO acted against rather than with the new female mayoral incumbent. Typically, these resistant CEOs had been in their positions for an extended period of time. In some instances they used the knowledge gained through this employment experience to undermine the newly elected mayoral women. The women mayors were critically aware of the importance of information, and the fact that denial of information, had, on occasions, caused them to be labelled as uninformed, and incompetent. Those males who were privy to information were able to correspondingly position themselves as knowledgeable and efficient. The gendered hierarchy between femininity/masculinity and female/male was thus afforded voice, and the reinscription of local government as a legitimately masculine arena legitimized.

Women mayors were also excluded from information and knowledge through the use of jargon and technical language as the following participant explained:

Martha: The stuff that you deal with is boys' stuff. It's roads and it's water and it's sewerage. The engineer in place here at the time I was elected as councillor was really difficult. There were gutters not operating properly in my division and he was there saying, 'no, the water flows from here to here'. And I'm saying, 'Well, it can't because that goes uphill and you've got the inlet up the top up there'. And then he'd start to use jargon and he actually at one stage told me not to bother my little head about it.

Martha's statement is useful in highlighting the fact that historically local government has been a space in which hegemonic masculinity has been propagated and affirmed. Male councillors have been able to draw upon some of the central artifacts, objects and metaphors of hegemonic masculinity as they attended to the traditional 'roads, rates and rubbish'. It has been a space in which 'boys' stuff' has predominated. Like the Health and Environment Unit of a British authority Maile (1999, p. 150) calls 'Westward District', managerial masculinities were traditionally 'secured' through particular modes of operating and work priorities such as an
emphasis on utilities over services and engineering over the environment. Now, however, there has been considerable change in the local government sector and the possibilities for enacting hegemonic masculinity are lost or highly fragile. As one woman mayor explained, 'You're more a board of directors now. There is less hands on. You can't go out there and tell someone how to build a road or not to build a road like that'.

The changed role of local governments has removed some of the important resources through which male councillors have traditionally been able to demonstrate their masculinity. While new and emerging roles may offer other opportunities for masculine identity work, the evidence suggests that some male councillors remain strongly attached to past responsibilities in which they had invested so much of their masculine selves. The issue of a reshaped local government agenda was further gendered by the fact that women reported that for some long-term male councillors, this unwanted change was viewed as synonymous with their entry to local government. Within a range of changes introduced, some could be positioned as 'feminizing' the agenda of local government in that the sector was now designated responsible for community building and environmental management. The refusal of some male councillors to see these roles as the 'real' business of local government could be read as a reaction against what they saw as a de-masculinizing of the local government agenda.

The form of exclusion which women found most difficult to name and identify was exclusion from social networks and informal gatherings. At the same time this type of exclusion has been found to be profoundly effective in positioning rural women as 'outsiders' in seeking leadership positions to regional development boards (Grant & Rainnie, 2005), agri-political groups (Pini, 2002) and new rural local governance organizations (Pini, 2006). Women were aware that male councillors tended to congregate at particular pubs, all-male service clubs or sporting events outside of meetings and discuss council business. Homosocial relations between representative and employee men in local government were also maintained and solidified in these networks outside of the formal spaces of the council. Women mayors were also conversant with the fact that different masculinized environments provided men with opportunities for fraternal networking, solidarity and politicking and that their sex largely denied them entry to these spaces, but found it difficult to label what was occurring.

Rita: It's sort of hard to put your finger on. It's more just a feeling and an awareness. You couldn't say they make you go over into the corner there because you're a woman. I mean you're not treated like that, but there's still - you just get that feeling of male dominance. It's hard to identify specific things but we ladies often do chat about it.
While urban studies of women and leadership report that exclusion is not a problem encountered only by rural women (e.g., Sinclair, 1998). Little (2002, p. 94) reminds us that the use of space is profoundly gendered in rural areas. Indeed, in his detailed and long-term study of 'Small Town' Australian sociologist Ken Dempsey (1992) observes that particular spaces such as the pub and sporting field serve as important symbols of masculinity for rural men. Further, women's entry to these spaces is closely monitored and trespassers sanctioned. In more recent work authors such as Leyshon (2005) and Campbell (2006) also demonstrate the way in which spaces such as pubs operate as sites of power in rural communities as they provide particular men with opportunities to demonstrate hegemonic masculinity and to exclude those (women and some men) who do not conform to this gender discourse.

The final form of resistance male councillors enacted against women entrants to local government was to sexualize them. The most pronounced illustration of this was that directed at a woman mayor in a large regional centre. During her campaign for mayor web sites were established which labelled the woman a 'lesbian'. This was taken up by some of the male protagonists on council and became front page news in the local paper. Dot believed that an important factor in the questioning of her sexuality was her decision to shave her head for leukemia research. She also spoke of the fact that she had never been a 'girlie-girl' and afforded little attention to matters of dress or make-up. Beyond her bodily transgressions, she also named her strength, resilience and forthrightness as factors that would have contributed to rumours about her sexuality. These rumours coalesced with other discourses of denigration that positioned Dot in masculinized ways as 'ball-breaker' or 'bitch'. To understand the impact these claims may have had on Dot and her family, as well as her position in the community and her future electoral success, one needs to recognize the centrality of heterosexuality to notions of rurality. As Little (2003, p. 406) has commented, 'rural society normalizes and reinforces a conventional form of moral heterosexuality' (Little, 2003, p. 406). Thus, the men who labelled Dot 'a lesbian' positioned her outside of accepted and conventional intersecting discourses of femininity/sexuality/rurality. She was an anathema.

While Dot's experience was most extreme, all women mayors were acutely aware of the negative consequences of sexuality for females in positions of leadership, and described being vigilant in managing their sexuality to avoid it being used against them. This was a constant struggle as they were routinely subjected to displays of men's heterosexuality through joke telling, innuendo and physical actions.
Jessica: You’ve got to be careful of the sleaze factor. The men throw sleaze on a woman and it really matters. Whereas being a male, things like that don’t seem to carry much weight. But for a woman it can really destroy her. So you’ve got to be squeaky clean at every level. Make sure you dot your “i’s” and cross your “t’s.”

Collinson and Collinson’s (1989, p. 103) observation that ‘where women enter male-dominated areas, men may use sexuality to maintain their dominant position’, is evident in Jessica’s quotation. She reveals the truism that for men leaders (hetero)sexuality is valorized and unproblematic, but for women troublesome and a liability (Sinclair, 1995; Pini, 2005). Women’s desire to dissociate themselves from sexuality is not easily done as they are typically defined in terms of their sexuality and also expected to support men’s performance of heterosexuality (Ozga & Walker, 1999). They are subsequently controlled and subordinated by the dominance of hegemonic discourses of heterosexual masculinity in the local government sector.

DISCUSSION

In recent years rural studies scholars have documented Australian farm and rural women’s increased participation in political arena and their engagement of new gendered subjectivities such as ‘woman leader’ and ‘woman political activist’ (Liepins, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; Panelli, 2002; Panelli & Pini, 2005). What has not been examined is how rural and farm men have reacted as women have taken up these new subject positions. The question is: If rural men have traditionally used particular arenas (such as local government) and undertaken particular activities (such as the role of councilor or mayor) as a means of demonstrating and affirming hegemonic masculinity what happens when women enter this environment and begin taking on these roles? The data presented in this chapter reveal that this leads to considerable tensions. Importantly, this is not the case if women take up the feminine subject position ‘the woman councillor’. This subject position is strongly connected to notions of normative femininity and traditional socially constructed definitions of ‘rural woman’ (Little, 1997, 2002; Hughes, 1997). It emphasizes passivity, compliance, care and deference to men. According to participants, those women who have subscribed to this configuration of gendered subjectivity have met with little resistance from men. This is not the case however, for the women mayors who, by definition, do not ‘fit traditional feminine identity patterns’ in their rural communities (Hughes, 1997, p. 135). These women have been subjected to a range of resistance strategies from men who have minimized
their role as mayor, excluded them from knowledge and networks as well as
denigrated and sexualized them. These discursive regimes have served a dual
purpose. In the first instance they undermine and problematize the place of
feminine subjectivities in local government. They emphasize and legitimate
the lack of fit between being both a ‘mayor’ and a ‘woman’. In the second
instance these strategies enhance men’s own performance of hegemonic
masculinity and strengthen the allegiances and connections between male
councillors and employees in the sector. Men thus validate, reinforce and
repair their own gendered subjectivities as masculine men in local
government. This recuperative identity work is complex in that it is
connected, not just to women’s entry to the sector, but to the changing role
of local government. The process is thus one of both ‘keeping women out’
and ‘writing men back in’. In this respect, despite rural and regional
women’s increased presence in the sector, local government is (re)gendered
as masculine. Thus, while we may view rural women’s electoral success
positively as it indicates that constructions of rural womanhood and
leadership are shifting amongst the constituents of non-metropolitan areas,
we can also see that this is being powerfully resisted by some male local
government incumbents.

NOTE

1. Chris Ryan and Kerry Brown assisted with data collection for this project.

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