Women and Representation in Local Government
International case studies

Edited by Barbara Pini and Paula McDonald
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10 Gendering local government amalgamations
An Australian case study

Denise Conroy

This chapter focuses on the impact of local government amalgamations upon women incumbents and those standing for election in the Australian state of Queensland. The chapter begins by briefly reviewing the moves towards amalgamation in the Australian local government sector, with a particular focus on Queensland, and detailing the history of women’s involvement in local government across the state. Following this, discussion turns to the major focus of the chapter, namely the gender effects of the most recent local government amalgamations in 2007. A quantitative analysis of electoral data, as well as interviews with a sample of women mayors serving at the time of the amalgamations and/or elected to office post-amalgamation in 2008, provide insight into the ways in which structural change in local government institutions may shape opportunities for women’s involvement.

Background
Historically, local government boundaries in Australia were defined by geographical features such as rivers, mountain ranges, catchment areas and coastlines (Dolley and Marshall 1997: 154). However, over the past 25 to 30 years, local governments have come under increasing pressure from a variety of sources — declining rural industries and populations, demands from constituents with greater leisure time, an ageing population, and periods of high unemployment. Such factors increase community demands and expectations of local government to provide additional services, yet simultaneously result in higher costs as local governments seek to extend services. Amalgamations have been used as a mechanism for distributing and redistributing resources; they also address methods of coping with market inequalities and, more recently, have been used to increase the financial viability of local governments (Dolley and Marshall 1997; Local Government Reform Commission 2007a, 2007b). As a consequence, significant amalgamations, both voluntary and forced, have occurred in all Australian states and territories (see Table 10.1).

Prior to the 2007 amalgamations in Queensland the most extensive reforms had occurred in Victoria in 1992 to 1993, in South Australia in 1995 to 1996 and in Tasmania in 1993 (see Table 10.1). In Victoria, councils were reduced from
Table 10.1 Local government, Australia by state, 1910–2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Councils</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>152</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>73 (including (+32 Indigenous councils))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>139</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,067</strong></td>
<td><strong>826</strong></td>
<td><strong>615</strong></td>
<td><strong>556</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Notes
n/a (not available).
1 In the early 2000s, mergers in a number of regions reduced councils from 172 to 152. There had been a significant number of mergers in the late 1970s and early 1980s in New South Wales.
2 Amalgamations from 1993 to 1995 reduced the number of councils from 210 to 79.
3 Queensland amalgamated some councils and changed some boundaries in 1993 to 1994. The number of councils reduced from 134 to 125. In 2007 a Local Government Reform Commission recommended significant structural changes (amalgamation), reducing the number of councils from 157 to 73.
4 Little reform since 1910. Voluntary mergers of “doughnut” councils have, since 1996, reduced the number to 139. Amalgamation and resource sharing is being encouraged on a voluntary basis.
5 Voluntary structural reform from 1996 to 1997 reduced the number of councils from 118 to 72. Further reductions have occurred.
6 Tasmania reduced the number of local authorities from 46 to 29 in 1993.
7 Reforms took effect from 1 July 2008 when the number of local governing bodies was reduced from 61 to 16.

210 to 78 and 2,125 elected councillors were initially replaced by 229 appointed commissioners, only 37 (16 per cent) of whom were women. Before 1993 women represented 21 per cent of all councillors in Victoria. In the 1996 elections in 20 of the newly amalgamated councils, a significant number had no female representation and in the 1997 elections only 134 women were elected councillors, compared to 453 prior to amalgamation. The amalgamations increased the size of each council area and this meant greater distances to travel and a more diverse population to serve. There were also changes to the method of operation of councils with more emphasis on strategic planning (Galligan 1998). As will be seen, in the Queensland elections in 2008, the change of emphasis and the increased size of electorates influenced many women not to run (Cumberland 1997, 2000; Cumberland et al. 1997; Hartnell-Young et al. 2000). It had not been until the 1998 to 1999 elections (20 councils) that the percentage of women councillors increased to the pre-amalgamation period (24.4 per cent). The elections in Victoria remained ‘staggered’ until 2008 but there was a steady increase in each election up until 2006 when there were 31 per cent women councillors. However, in the November 2008 elections, the first full council elections since 1996 to 1997, the number of women elected as councillors was 188 (29.8 per cent). Women mayors comprised 25 per cent of total mayors (Victorian Local Government Association 2009).

The reforms to local government in South Australia and Tasmania also had an impact upon women in those states; however, no detailed studies have explored the reasons for change, or sought to understand why women do or do not choose to enter this level of government. Voting in these two states is voluntary with voter turnout in South Australia ‘peaking’ at 40 per cent in 2000 (but dropping to 31 per cent in 2002), and in Tasmania the participation rate rose from 12 per cent to 65 per cent with the introduction of postal voting. The lower turnout in South Australia may also be affected by the proportional voting system and by the fact that voting is limited to property owners (Local Government Association of South Australia 2008; Tasmanian Electoral Commission 2005, 2007, 2009; Wolstenholme 2002).

These aspects – the voting system and whether or not voting is compulsory – can affect outcomes and may have an impact upon whether or not women choose to contest an election. These issues will be discussed in the case of recent changes in Queensland. The different contexts of the states thus limits any direct comparisons being made with Queensland but the situation in Victoria, which has been subject to the most detailed gender analysis, has demonstrated that amalgamations can have a negative impact on women’s participation in local government.

**Local government amalgamations in Queensland**

While the majority of changes to Australian local governments occurred in the 1990s, agitation for reform had a long history. This was particularly the case in Queensland. For example, as early as 1896 the colonial government established a Royal Commission to review local government which recommended that an inquiry be held to assess the amalgamation of local councils. However, a committee was not established until 1927 and it reported in 1928. It recommended a reduction from 152 local authorities (11 cities, 17 towns, 124 shires) to 86 local authorities (9 cities, 3 towns, 74 shires). There was a hostile reaction to this report and, as it was tabled just prior to the 1928 state election, no action was taken. The Labor Party was defeated at the 1928 election but, on its return in 1931, more pressing matters (The Great Depression) occupied its attention (Window 1978: 37). While reform of local government was raised again throughout the following decades and led to some changes in the sector’s composition, the next major review of the state’s local government boundaries did not occur until a report by the Electoral, Administrative and Review Commission in 1989. Reverberating with the past, amalgamations were suggested but eventually rejected by the state government. In the last decade of the twentieth century, however, small changes began to occur in terms of a trend towards
reducing the number of elected representatives. However, major restructuring of
government in Queensland did not eventuate until 2007. Rationalizations
for reform echoed those engaged by state governments across the country such
as the need for increased efficiencies and the opportunity for financial sustain-
bility (Commonwealth Grants Commission 2001; House of Representatives
In 2005, Queensland local governments responded to state moves to reconfigure
the sector with the Size, Shape and Sustainability review, which was to enable
them to improve their sustainability, efficiency and capability to deal with
immense population and economic growth experienced during the past 20 years.
This was a voluntary review using a sustainability framework prepared by the
LGAQ in association with the state government (Local Government Association
Queensland 2005, 2006). Its uptake was encouraging but slow, and it became
evident to the government that the reforms would not be achieved before the
2008 local government elections (Department of Local Government, Sport and
Recreation, Queensland 2008: 4). Subsequently, as Dollery et al. (2007) point
out, the political decision for amalgamation was ‘predetermined’ and, in 2007,
the most significant reform to Queensland local government was legislated.

The most dramatic impact of local government reform was the reduction in
the number of local governments from 125 to 59 while the number of indigenous
councils was reduced from 32 to 14. Of the 73 resultant councils, 54 were
amalgamated and Logan City Council was adjusted. There were 39 unaffected
councils, including ten indigenous councils. Associated with the marked decrease
in the number of councils was the significant reduction in the number of mayors
and councillors from 1,286 (including indigenous mayors and councillors) in

Indigenous councils (15 Aboriginal and 17 Torres Strait Islander entities,
originally established in 1984, were not only reduced in number by the change
process but ‘mainstreamed’. This commenced for the Aboriginal councils in
2005 while the 17 Island councils remained under the Community Services
(Torres Strait) Act 1984. The move to build governance in these councils was
addressed through a Community Governance Improvement Strategy. In 2007 the
Local Government Reform Commission reviewed all indigenous councils and
amalgamated three Aboriginal councils in the northern peninsula region with
two Island councils to form a new local government entity. The remaining 15
Island local authorities were also amalgamated to form the Torres Strait Island
Regional Council (Department of Infrastructure and Planning, Queensland
2010).

Along with the reduction in the number of councils and councillors there
were other changes to the local government sector. For example, for the first
time, councils did not conduct their own elections – the 2008 election was run
by the Electoral Commission Queensland (ECQ). Furthermore, and again for the
first time, candidates nominated with an understanding of the likely remunera-
tion they would receive as an elected representative. The Local Government
Remuneration Tribunal was established as part of the reform process and
determined remuneration scales for each of the 73 councils (LGAQ 2008: 1).

Finally, the reform process provided that new councils would be what is referred
to as ‘undivided’ unless all the affected or amalgamating councils unanimously
agreed to be ‘divided’. In divided councils there are electoral divisions for coun-
cillors as well as ‘optional preferential’ elections for mayors and councillors,
while in undivided councils there are no electoral divisions and there is first-
past-the-post voting.

Women and representation in Queensland local government

In Queensland, women have had the right to vote in local government elections
since 1879 and the right to stand since 1920. For the Brisbane City Council,
these rights were in effect from the proclamation of the City of Brisbane Act
1924. Queensland’s first female councillor was Dr Ellen Kent-Hughes, elected
to Kingaroy Shire in 1925. Other Queensland ‘firsts’ were Petronel White, the first
woman to represent an Australian capital city council when she was elected to
the Brisbane City Council Hamilton Ward in 1949, and Sallyanne Atkinson
when she became Brisbane’s first (and to date, only) female Lord Mayor in
1985. She was the second female to be Lord Mayor of a capital city in Australia

Importantly, compared to the participation rate of women in federal and state
parliaments, the participation rate of women in local government trebled between
1980 and 1994. At the beginning of the 1980s, women comprised 6.2 per cent
of all councillors in Australia; in federal parliament they represented 6 per cent of
all members and in state parliaments they represented 6.5 per cent of all members.
In 1994 women councillors comprised 20.5 per cent of all councillors in Australia,
while women in federal parliament had risen to 13.9 per cent and in state parlia-
ments women comprised 12.9 per cent (Neylan and Tucker 1996: 130).

In 1973, there were 45 women elected as councillors in nine cities and 31
shires (of 133 local authorities); in 1980, 47 women were elected, representing
3.7 per cent of all councillors. In 1991 a record 236 women were elected, an
increase of 48 per cent on the 1988 election (Neylan and Brash 1992: 4). In
1991 women candidates for councillor comprised 19.1 per cent overall with
more women contesting urban areas (27.9 per cent) compared to rural areas
(15.5 per cent of representation), but this composition changed in 1994 when the
number of women contesting urban councils decreased as a proportion (25.9 per
cent), whereas those contesting rural councils increased to 21 per cent. However,
in 1994 the success rate for women was higher in urban councils – 29.7 per
cent of all candidates or 41 per cent of women candidates were successful; in rural
councils, women won 20.1 per cent of positions but their success rate was 37.6
per cent (percentage of women standing who were elected). This was the same
success rate as for male candidates (Neylan and Tucker 1996: 137, 144). While
there is a paucity of data relating to local government elections, the foregoing
information provides some benchmark data with respect to an urban/rural divide.
In 1994, candidates for mayor were 254 males (88.2 per cent), fairly evenly distributed across urban and regional councils, and 34 females (11.8 per cent) with twice as many contesting urban councils than rural councils. Ten women mayors were elected (an increase of one since the 1991 election), with eight of the ten from rural councils. In 1994 women represented 21.2 per cent of elected members. Consequently, over three elections, an upward trend had been established.

In the 2000 election, 19 women were successful mayoral candidates (15 per cent), the highest number ever elected. Five were elected unopposed, eight were re-elected and there were six new women mayors, an increase of three from the 1997 election. Of the 58 women candidates for mayor, 19 were elected, representing a 32.8 per cent success rate among women candidates but only 15 per cent of all elected mayoral positions. For councillor positions, there were 656 women candidates, with 328 elected – 28 per cent overall, or one in two women candidates elected (LGAQ 2000: 3).

In the 2004 elections of Queensland’s local government (the first of the quadrennial elections), 23 women were elected mayor (of 125 councils), representing 18.4 per cent of the total with an additional three women elected as chairpersons of indigenous councils (LGAQ 2004). This was the highest representation of women mayors to date and continued the upward trend in female representation. Following a brief overview of the methodology used for the study, the following sections of this chapter detail the quantitative and qualitative impact of the 2007 reforms upon women.

Methodology

The empirical data reported in this chapter are derived from both quantitative and qualitative sources with respect to women elected as local government councillors and mayors in Queensland. Quantitative information was obtained from election statistics (raw data analysis as well as reported compiled data), council websites, websites of all state associations for local government, websites of all state branches of the Local Government Manager’s Association, the Australian Local Government Association website and publications, and the Australian Local Government Women’s Association website and publications, including surveys.

Qualitative data were gathered from interviews with a selection of elected women mayors – women who served during the 2004 to 2008 period of local government in Queensland, and women who were elected at the 2008 local government election (post-amalgamation). Following the amalgamation announcement, 11 of the existing 23 women mayors chose not to contest the next election (one ran for mayor in an adjacent council). Three were defeated – all in amalgamated councils, five ran as councillors in three amalgamated councils and two previous mayors were elected. Only one incumbent female mayor who contested the position in an amalgamated council was successful (Electoral Commission Queensland 2008 data analysis). Apart from this woman, a further ten were elected mayor.

Five mayors who chose to run for councillor positions in 2008 were interviewed. All interviews were semi-structured such that, while a list of questions was prepared, respondents were able to raise issues they deemed relevant to the discussion, and the interviewers could engage in non-directive probing to follow up on responses provided. Questions focused on their motivation for standing for local government, whether they experienced any difficulties in either the campaign or raising funds and how they campaigned. Respondents were asked to reflect on their goals before election and subsequently, their most important achievements as mayor, and about women as candidates for mayor and councillors with respect to obstacles or difficulties encountered. The interviews took place approximately 12 to 14 months after the 2008 election.

Analysis of qualitative data obtained from the current and former women mayors interviewed was facilitated by the audio-taping of interviews and their subsequent transcription. Categorization and coding were carried out thematically (based initially on set questions) as well as relevant areas of importance identified in the literature on women in local government (Bochel and Bochel 2008; Briggs 2000; Broussine and Fox 2002; Hermson et al. 2003; Pini et al. 2004; Sinclair 1987). Data pertaining to women who chose not to contest the mayoralty in amalgamated councils or not to stand for councillor positions in the 2008 election are the subject of a separate study.

The effects of amalgamation on the 2008 election

Major effects of amalgamation were seen most directly in the candidate ‘pools’. There were 51 mayors who did not contest the 2008 election, including some high-profile and long-serving mayors, 11 of whom were women. There were 1,634 candidates for the 553 positions – a ratio of 2.95 candidates per position compared to 2.1 in 2000 and 2004. Multiple mayoral challenges occurred in 68 councils with an average of 3.9 candidates per position, an increase from the 2004 (2.4) and 2000 (2.6) elections. In 37 (of 73) councils, there were more than twice as many candidates as positions available compared to 2004 (37 of 125 councils) and 2000 (30 of 125 councils) (LGAQ 2008: 3-4).

In 27 (of 73) councils, there were very large fields for mayors and councillors ranging from 20 to 87 candidates seeking election. Brisbane City Council had the largest field of councillors (78 for 25 positions) and mayor (nine candidates); but it was unaffected by amalgamation. Gympie Regional Council had the highest average field for councillors with 42 candidates for eight seats (5.25 candidates per position) and another eight councils had more than 40 mayoral and councillor candidates. Of these ten councils with more than 40 candidates, seven were ‘divided’ (ECQ 2008 data analysis).

In the 2008 elections, 468 women stood for election – 46 for mayor and 422 for councillor positions. Women candidates represented 28.7 per cent of nominations (422 of 1,463), compared with 27 per cent in 2004 and 26 per cent in 2000, thus continuing the trend to an increasing interest by women. For councillor positions, women represented 31 per cent of the candidates, with a 40.0 per cent
success rate (169 of 422 elected). This was higher than the success rate for male candidates for councillors (32.8 per cent, or 308 of 939 elected). For mayoral positions, women candidates comprised 17 per cent of the total (46 of 271), with a success rate of 23.9 per cent compared to 27.5 per cent for men (LGAQ 2008 data analysis) indicating a much higher interest in standing for election as mayor than in 2004 given the reduced number of positions.

The current women mayors who contested the 2008 election indicated their commitment to continuing the work they had started, but only two of these five were in areas affected by the amalgamation. One had decided to exit to an adjacent shire before any amalgamation details had been announced and the other was determined ‘to meet the challenges of economic development in the new regional council’. All five were in rural areas; one faced six other candidates (three males and three females) and each of the other four was the only female in a field of two or three candidates.

The effects of amalgamation on women

The election results for the 2000, 2004 and 2008 elections with respect to women have been detailed above. Of the 2000 cohort of women mayors, 13 were re-elected in 2004 but, in 2008, only three of this same cohort stood for election. All three were re-elected, including one who ‘shifted’ to an adjacent shire. Nine of the remaining 2000 cohort did not stand for mayor in 2008 – all were in councils which had been amalgamated, but one ran for a councillor position in a newly amalgamated regional council. In 2004 there were ten new mayors elected and, of these, three did not stand (two of these were from councils which had been amalgamated), two were defeated (both in amalgamated councils), and five ran as councillors in newly amalgamated regional councils. This may be regarded as a strategic move by the ‘sitting’ mayors who ran for councillor positions in their amalgamated regional councils, as all were successful.

Interestingly, in one council a woman toppled the poll for her council and also ousted the person elected as mayor. In this council, the first six positions (of ten) were won by women. There were seven women candidates (of 29), two were sitting mayors and five were sitting councillors, and all were elected. Of eight sitting male councillors only two were returned and there were 14 new candidates (all male) who were unsuccessful (LGAQ 2008 data analysis).

The most significant amalgamation was Toowoomba Regional Council which was formed from eight surrounding councils – Toowoomba City, Cambooya, Clifton, Jondaryan, Millmerran, Pittsworth, Crows Nest and Rosalie shires. The area was previously served by 61 councillors (excluding the mayors) and is now served by ten councillors. There were only three candidates for mayor – sitting mayors from Jondaryan and Clifton shires and a sitting councillor from Toowoomba City Council (all males). Of the 36 candidates for the ten councillor positions there were 14 women (including two sitting mayors and one sitting deputy mayor, all of whom were elected), and 22 men (including two sitting mayors, three deputy mayors, seven sitting councillors and ten new candidates).

The two sitting mayors and three deputy mayors were elected, together with three sitting councillors. Of the nine sitting female councillors and two new female candidates, none were elected (LGAQ 2008 data analysis). The major incentive for the former women mayors standing was to continue to represent their former electors, albeit in a much larger electorate. Reasons for not contesting the mayoralty in the newly amalgamated councils included the reality that they ‘could not win, but still wanted to serve’. One commented: ‘I have a lot to offer with my experience and I was strongly encouraged by locals to stand.’ Another said: ‘It’s a big ask to run for mayor, coming from a smaller base.’

The councillor poll results were dominated by sitting mayors and deputy mayors (both men and women) and by those ‘outside’ Toowoomba City. The composition of the council is seven males and three females in a ‘reduction’ of 51 councillors for this area. In 2004 (pre-amalgamation) there were 48 males and 13 female councillors for the eight councils. In percentage terms, there has been an increase in the representation of females (from 21.3 per cent to 30 per cent), but election results per se do not indicate success or failure.

All women mayors elected in 2008 reported community interest as a motivation for entering local government. These motivations were expressed variously as ‘to progress the shire’; ‘to grow the community’; and ‘to give the community a say in governance matters’. Reasons for standing for mayor varied between the adjusted/amalgamated and non-amalgamated councils, but also with respect to the issues they perceived as important to the electors. All women had been heavily involved in their communities through their children (sport, school), church and/or a variety of community organizations.

Two sitting mayors in rural areas claimed they did not run a campaign, with one winning by just four votes. Of those who ran extensive self-funded campaigns, one new mayor with no previous council experience had a landslide victory, winning every division in a non-amalgamated council, defeating a sitting mayor, on a campaign based on ‘environmental controls and halting population expansion’. Seven of ten councillors on this council are women. The other new mayor with no previous council experience defeated three candidates, including the sitting mayor who had strong financial support from developers. Her reason for standing was simply that ‘no one else would take him on’. In this local government context, six of the ten councillors are women.

Another council with a representation of 70 per cent women had two former women mayors elected as councillors. Their concerns about not nominating for mayor were ‘the need for someone with experience to be elected’ and ‘concern about the much greater area to be covered’. A comparison of the 2004 and 2008 election results for women mayors and councillors is presented in Table 10.2.

The record number of women mayors elected in the 2000 (19 mayors, 15 per cent) and 2004 (26 mayors, 16.7 per cent) elections was reduced to 11 (15.1 per cent of total mayors) in 2008. Seven new women mayors were elected, including two without previous council experience with those two leading ‘landslide’ victories as stated above. One other new woman mayor in a rural area had a significant win (achieving over 50 per cent of the vote), defeating a sitting mayor.
### Table 10.2 Data on women elected to local government, Queensland (pre-amalgamation 2004 election and post-amalgamation 2008 election)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Election 2004</th>
<th>Election 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of councils</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous councils</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total councils</strong></td>
<td><strong>157</strong></td>
<td><strong>73</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women mayors (including indigenous councils)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women councillors</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total elected positions (mayors and councillors)</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,286</strong></td>
<td><strong>553</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women mayors not standing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12^1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women sitting mayors defeated</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New women mayors</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women candidates for mayor</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total candidates for mayor</strong></td>
<td><strong>315</strong></td>
<td><strong>271</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage women standing elected as mayor</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women mayors elected</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women candidates for councillor</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total candidates for councillor</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,064</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,263</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women councillors elected</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage women standing elected as councilors</td>
<td>50.3%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitting women mayors contesting amalgamated councils</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>6^2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitting women Mayors elected in amalgamated shires</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: ECQ (2008), LGAQ (2004); LGAQ (2008).

Notes:
1. Thirty-four councils are unchanged including ten Indigenous councils; three have boundary adjustments; 36 are amalgamations of previous councils.
2. Five female mayors ran for councillor positions in amalgamated LQAs, one former mayor ran as a new candidate for mayor in another LGA.
3. Includes three from Indigenous councils.

She had identified 'the inadequacies of the previous leadership' as a primary reason for standing and she had sought the leadership role for 'a personal and professional challenge'.

The major structural impediment to the success of women mayors in the 2008 election was the reduction in the number of councils (Table 10.3). Anecdotal and other evidence suggests that those who chose not to stand were against amalgamation and did not want to lose the sense of 'community' which existed in the smaller councils. The Local Government Association Queensland reports that a number of candidates enter and leave local government after one or two terms due to the demanding nature of the roles of councillor or mayor and that this turnover increased following amalgamation. The loss of confidence and morale

### Table 10.3 Councillor candidates by council electoral and review status, and urban-rural status (2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Male candidates</th>
<th>Male Rural</th>
<th>Male Urban</th>
<th>Male Non-amalgam</th>
<th>Male Amalgam</th>
<th>Male Total</th>
<th>Male Sitting</th>
<th>Male New</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electoral status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At large/undivided</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divided</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>550</strong></td>
<td><strong>106</strong></td>
<td><strong>202</strong></td>
<td><strong>237</strong></td>
<td><strong>185</strong></td>
<td><strong>66</strong></td>
<td><strong>103</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amalgamated/adjusted</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-amalgamal</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>550</strong></td>
<td><strong>106</strong></td>
<td><strong>202</strong></td>
<td><strong>237</strong></td>
<td><strong>185</strong></td>
<td><strong>66</strong></td>
<td><strong>103</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>550</strong></td>
<td><strong>106</strong></td>
<td><strong>202</strong></td>
<td><strong>237</strong></td>
<td><strong>185</strong></td>
<td><strong>66</strong></td>
<td><strong>103</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: LGAQ (2008 data analysis).

Note:

by existing elected members following the 2007 reforms also contributed to the decision of many to not stand (LGAQ 2008).

In Queensland's 2008 elections, both for amalgamated and adjusted councils, the percentage of women standing who were elected was lower than in non-amalgamated councils (38.9 per cent to 41.5 per cent). In contrast, fewer males were elected in amalgamated councils (29.0 per cent) compared to non-amalgamated councils (38.7 per cent). There were seven councils in rural areas with no women councillors, and one council with no women candidates. An analysis of results for women in 'divided' or 'undivided' councils revealed that for 'undivided' or 'at large' local government authorities, the percentage of males elected, compared to those standing, was 35.4 per cent and for females it was 35.7 per cent (based on the first-past-the-post voting method). For 'divided' councils the proportion of males elected was 29.8 per cent and the proportion of females elected was 40.5 per cent. Thus, in all cases, sitting members had a higher success rate than new candidates.

With respect to women mayors, over the past three elections (2000, 2004 and 2008), the majority of those elected were from rural councils. In 2000 there were 12 of 19 from rural areas; in 2004, 14 of 26; and in 2008, seven of 11 from rural areas. This reflects previous research which reported that women in rural areas are involved in community activism in larger, traditional organizations (Sinclair 1987). Margervey (2005) has contrasted this with Dempsey's study – A Man's
Town – a study of gender relations in the 1970s and 1980s in a small agricultural town in Victoria. More recent studies via councillor censuses (Municipal Association Victoria 2003) indicated by Freire (2002) indicated a shift in the place of women in decision-making. Women councillors in rural shires in Victoria increased in numbers vis-à-vis women in urban councils, and mounted a challenge to the patriarchal discourses and practices evident in rural councils (Margarey 2005: 5). While the percentage of women candidates remained, in 2008, the same as 2004, the result for the number of women mayors elected in 2008 reflected a loss of 38.5 per cent of the 2004 cohort. Hence, what was evident in the 2008 elections was that there were one-third more new candidates than sitting candidates in non-amalgamated councils for both women and men, and incumbency won out.

All elected women mayors and female mayors elected as councillors in 2008 who were interviewed were asked to identify why women may have chosen not to run in the amalgamated councils. Their responses are based on discussions with women in their electorates, former councillor colleagues and councillors who belong to the Australian Local Government Women’s Association (see also DIP 2009). The reasons include, inter alia:

Workload:
- ‘higher workloads and a full-time status, whereas in non-amalgamated councils one could combine other activities and responsibilities with council representation’;
- ‘no flexibility because of increased tasks’; ‘you go all day and at night as well as weekends’;
- ‘extra time commitments makes it difficult to run one’s own business or help one’s partner in business’.

Costs:
- ‘higher cost of elections – up to 10 times at least’;
- ‘one councillor spent $84,000’;
- ‘the allowable tax deduction for campaigns is $1,000 – the costs exceed this just posting 65,000+ letters’.

Size:
- ‘the sheer size of the new electorate’; ‘it is impossible to cover the whole electorate whether campaigning on election day (booths) or as a councillor’.

Family impact:
- ‘lack of family-friendly work practices’; ‘not conducive to women with young children’; ‘unknowns about local government roles make it hard to plan’.

Workplace:
- ‘workplace bullying; boy’s club – there are some horrific stories out there’.

Other:
- ‘lack of encouragement for women to stand’;
- ‘women undervalue themselves’;
- ‘women’s self-worth – they play down their ability’.

Certainly, there is evidence that incumbency is an advantage for both males and females and this aspect has significance for women who may challenge ‘sitting’ mayors, as has been determined by a number of previous studies (Kenny et al. 2009; Schwindt-Bayer 2005; Tremblay 2006). Some scholars also give equal weight to the number of constituencies and constituency magnitude as barriers to women’s success (Gallagher 2005; Norris 2004). There is some debate about the ‘democracy’ of different voting systems; however, that aside, there are views that proportional voting would be beneficial for getting more women (and minority parties) elected (Hearfield and Dollery 2009; Salmond 2006; Studlar and Welsh 1991). However, this voting method benefits political parties where a high-profile candidate’s votes can flow to other candidates in the same party or, where individuals do prefer to run without joining a political party, they are likely to be approached to join a list. The individuality of local government campaigns would be lost or compromised under such a voting system, and current evidence from women elected to local government office indicates that they would be opposed to such a move. Women are currently attracted to local government as it is substantially devoid of party political contests (Drage and Nicholl 2000; Ryan et al. 2005; Salmond 2006). This was certainly the view of women participants in this study who explained that they were opposed to party politics entering local government. (Currently only one of the state’s council, the largest, Brisbane City Council, is party political.) Only one female mayor admitted to accepting donations from businesses for campaigning but stressed that no funds were accepted from property developers.

The reality is, though, that in a single-member district (such as for mayor in the Queensland system), winning is a zero-sum game where only one sex can be represented in each district so, undoubtedly, candidates need to weigh up their position to run in the next election against any other changes which the government may introduce.

Conclusion
It is evident that, post-amalgamation, structural change has had an adverse effect on the number of women elected to Queensland local government in 2008 both as mayors and as councillors, in actual and percentage terms. There were some successes where women councillors held over 50 per cent of the seats, but conjecture remained as to why this occurred, including that ‘it was an opportunity for major change to turn over tired candidates’, to anti-development sentiments, to suggestions that voters were willing to support women who were former mayors but who, in 2008, contested councillor positions (LGAQ 2008). Of concern though was the reduction in the number of women mayors which was significant.
Women who stood for mayor in rural areas had a higher success rate than those in urban areas. Importantly however, all urban areas where women succeeded were ‘divided’ electorates. Two of the new mayors in these electorates had no previous experience on local government councils. Perhaps the ‘divisional’ basis created the effect of voters being closer to the council, as they at least would have a local representative who is likely to be more visible due to a comparatively small area and this can be a conduit to the mayor. This smaller electorate base would also tend to advantage community-activity-aware women candidates. As noted earlier, one aspect of amalgamation was to declare all amalgamating councils to be ‘at large’ or ‘undivided’ so the number of divided councils was reduced as a result of the reforms. If the trend to have all councils undivided continues, this may have a further negative impact upon the number of women contesting mayoral and councillor positions.

The voting method for ‘divided’ councils is optional preferential, whereas with ‘at-large’ councils it is first past the post. The first-past-the-post method is generally seen as a disadvantage for women. However, Tremblay (2006) suggests that this proposition needs further research, and Salmond (2006) has critiqued previous studies which he claims overstate how much difference an electoral system can make. There were 11 (of 73) Queensland councils in 2008 where women topped the poll for councillors and only seven of these were amalgamated councils. This supports the call for more research into voting systems and their effect on women candidates.

In the previous period between elections (2000–2004), it was evident that women’s success spurred other women to contest the mayoral position, as the number of women mayors elected in 2004 was the highest ever up until that time. However, for these 26 women mayors elected in 2004 (half of them for the first time), only three were in councils which had not been amalgamated in 2007. In other words, only 11.5 per cent of successful women mayors in 2004 were unaffected by the amalgamation process. Of those elected in 2004, 11 did not stand, five ran for councillor positions, five lost, one did not stand in her former shire but ran successfully in an adjacent shire and four were elected.

Of the 11 women mayors elected in 2008, seven (64 per cent) were aged 55 years or over, two were aged 51 to 55, one was aged 40 to 50 and one was under 40. Six of the 11 women were elected as mayor for the first time. Male incumbency has been further entrenched by amalgamation, with 35 sitting male mayors returned (holding 48 per cent of mayoral positions). A further 28 new male mayors came from sitting councillors and new candidates. In this latter category, two female and 14 male mayors had no previous experience in the role of mayor or councillor (LGAQ 2008).

Ryan et al. (2005) undertook research on Queensland woman mayors elected or returned in 2000 and concluded that the profiles of these women had changed over the decade 1990 to 2000, and that, if the local government sector was to remain robust and viable in changing social and economic times, there should be a focus on dismantling stereotypes and implementing strategies to
develop women leaders. It is thus concerning to note that in 2010 barriers not only continue to exist for women in local government but many of the previously cited barriers may have been further entrenched as a result of amalgamation. These barriers may be categorized as structural, situational and cultural. Structural constraints include the size of the electorate and the increasing costs of running for election. ‘New’ structural constraints may emerge as the complexity of larger scale operations of the amalgamated councils will lead to the professionalization of local councillors, and the much higher salaries and full-time role are sure to attract more men to contest these positions. Situational factors that impede women’s participation in local government include the fact that women still shoulder an unequal burden of family responsibilities and may, as a consequence, find it problematic to commit to the non-standard work hours (and, in the new amalgamation context, increasing hours) required of a local government representative. Finally, the limitations of socialization refer to factors such as women’s propensity to underestimate and undervalue their qualifications and experiences and women’s potential inexperience in the corporate/political sphere which may be seen as of greater importance in the reconfigured local government arena.

Continued research on women in local government will assist in understanding which of these categories of constraints continues to be significant in shaping women’s involvement in local government. Given the general consensus that a significant numerical representation of women is essential to the quality of our democratic process, it should be of concern that the 2007 amalgamation of councils in Queensland has had a negative impact upon women’s participation in this process. The role of council amalgamations in negatively impacting upon women is aggravated by plans by the Queensland government to review the local government electoral process, and to introduce (as is widely speculated) proportional representation. This change will constitute another potential barrier for the reduced number of women who survived the election after amalgamation to consider. This is because all current women mayors are strongly independent with respect to their politics and campaign fund sources, and proportional representation will accelerate the push towards party politics in local councils or, at the very least, the grouping of candidates. The 2012 quadrennial elections will be watched with interest and will provide yet another opportunity to track the effects of structural changes on women candidates.

References


LGADQ (2006) Size, Shape and Sustainability: Guidelines and Kit, Brisbane: LGADQ.


