



Racial Discrimination, Sexual Harassment and Poverty as Barriers to Women in Politics

YWCA Canada Brief to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women's Study on Barriers Facing Women in Politics
June 18th, 2018

Introduction

YWCA Canada is the oldest and largest women's multi-service organization in the country, providing front-line services in 300 communities across Canada. For the past 149 years, our advocacy work responds directly to the lived realities of the 330,000 women and girls who use these services at our Member YWCAs.

The UN's Fourth World Conference on Women culminated in the Beijing Declaration, which set an internationally agreed-upon goal of gender balance in political participation.¹ In Canada's 2015 federal election, 33% of candidates running across all parties were women, and 26% of MPs subsequently elected to the House of Commons were women.² Canada's international ranking on women's political representation currently sits at 61st.³

The federal government has committed to utilizing GBA+ when developing policies, programs and legislation.⁴ GBA+ mandates examining how gender intersects with other identity categories, such as race and ethnicity. As some women in politics face the combined impact of racism and sexism, federal initiatives addressing women's participation in politics must aim to *address barriers particular to Black, Indigenous and women of colour looking to enter the political realm and stay in governance roles*.⁵

1) Racial Discrimination as a Barrier to Black, Indigenous and Women of Colour in Politics

In the 42nd Parliament, a Black woman MP has described facing frequent racial macroaggressions,^{6,7} and a woman of colour MP received a multitude of racist and misogynistic hate mail and death threats.⁸ Women of colour running in provincial and municipal races have reported racial harassment on the campaign trail.⁹

Even though the current Parliament has ten Indigenous MPs – three of whom are women – public displays of racial insensitivity towards Indigenous peoples have recently occurred within the House of Commons.¹⁰

2) Sexual Harassment as a Barrier to Women in Politics

Former MPs have identified the culture on the Hill as a reason women stay out of politics.¹¹ Presently, women report relying on "whisper networks" in order to stay safe from known harassers.¹² The Young Women's Leadership Network recently conducted research with 60 individuals impacted by sexual violence and harassment in political institutions in Canada, and found that 80% of participants left or decreased their participation in politics as a result of their negative experiences.¹³ As sexual harassment

represents a deterrent for women in politics, YWCA Canada echoes the Young Women's Leadership Network's call for "non-partisan, trauma informed, survivor-centric support mechanisms",¹⁴ as well as evidence-based sexual violence and anti-oppression policies. These measures should be enacted alongside a culture shift that promotes bystander intervention in cases of harassment.

3) Women's Economic Equality enables their Equal Political Representation

The 2011 UN General Assembly Resolution on Women's Political Participation identified "the disproportionate effect of poverty on women" as a key factor that prevents women from accessing the political sphere.¹⁵ More than 1.5 million women in Canada are living on a low-income,¹⁶ and there is a heightened impact of poverty on Indigenous and racialized women.^{17,18}

In order to address women's poverty and thereby further women's opportunities for political participation, Canada's Poverty Reduction Strategy should be informed by a GBA+ analysis, be in line with relevant Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, and coordinate with the National Housing Strategy and Federal Gender-Based Violence Strategy. Further, lack of affordable childcare is a key driver of women's poverty,^{19,20} and presents an important consideration for many women considering running for office.²¹

YWCA Canada Recommendations

1. The Federal Anti-Racism Strategy consultation process should include specific consultations with Black, Indigenous and women of colour seeking to enter or stay in politics, and include their recommendations in the resulting strategy.
2. The Federal Gender-Based Violence Strategy should be linked to the Anti-Racism Strategy.
3. The Gender-Based Violence Knowledge Centre should support data collection relevant to the barriers faced by women of colour in politics and include disaggregated data for racialized, Indigenous, LTGBQI and Two-Spirit individuals. An annual report card should be issued to the public.
4. Support staff working on the appointment process for ministers carry out outreach activities to diverse women candidates with clear performance indicators.
5. Create non-partisan, trauma informed, survivor-centric support mechanisms, as well as sexual violence and anti-oppression policies.
6. Coordinate with the newly formed Indigenous Women's Circle at Status of Women Canada to develop a strategy to support Indigenous women in politics.
7. Canada's Poverty Reduction Strategy should be informed by a GBA+ analysis, be in line with relevant Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (#57), and coordinate with the National Housing Strategy and Gender-Based Violence Strategy.

¹ United Nations, Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, 27 October 1995, available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf>

² Munn-Rivard, Laura, "Women in Canada's Parliament," Hill Notes: Research and Analysis from Canada's Library of Parliament, Nov 4 2015. <https://hillnotes.ca/2015/11/04/women-in-canadas-parliament-making-progress-2/>.

³ "Women in National Parliaments," Inter-Parliamentary Union, last modified May 1, 2018. <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.

⁴ "Government of Canada's Approach: Gender-Based Analysis Plus," Status of Women Canada, last modified Nov 3, 2017. <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/gba-acg/approach-proche-en.html#commitment>.

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- ⁵ Desmarias, Anna, "Diversifying Canada's Most Diverse Parliament," *iPolitics*, June 1, 2018. <https://ipolitics.ca/article/diversifying-canadas-most-diverse-parliament/>.
- ⁶ Cruikshank, Ainslie, "Black Liberal MP speaks out against 'draining' discriminatory acts on Parliament Hill," *Toronto Star*, Dec 15, 2017. <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/12/15/black-liberal-mp-speaks-out-against-draining-discriminatory-acts-on-parliament-hill.html>.
- ⁷ Omar, Mohamed, "Celina Caesar-Chavannes, Liberal MP, Says 'Microaggressions' Feel Like Death By A Thousand Cuts," *HuffPost Politics*, Dec 15, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/12/15/celina-caesar-chavannes-liberal-mp-says-microaggressions-feel-like-death-by-a-thousand-cuts_a_23308582/.
- ⁸ Harris, Kathleen, "'Kill her and be done with it': MP behind anti-Islamophobia motion reads out hate mail," *CBC News*, Feb 16 2017. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/threats-hate-islamophobia-khalid-1.3986563>.
- ⁹ Colley, Sherri. "One day that door will open': Women of colour talk about racism on campaign trail," *CBC News*, April 17, 2018. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/election-campaign-women-of-colour-voting-rights-black-muslim-1.4615089>.
- ¹⁰ Gilmore, Rachael, "Tory MPs slammed for high fiving after voting against UN Indigenous rights bill," *iPolitics*, June 4, 2018. <https://ipolitics.ca/2018/06/04/tory-mps-slammed-for-high-fiving-after-voting-against-un-indigenous-rights-bill/>.
- ¹¹ "50% population, 25% representation. Why the parliamentary gender gap?" *CBC News Interactive*, [no date given]. <http://www.cbc.ca/news2/interactives/women-politics/>.
- ¹² Young Women's Leadership Network, *It's Time: Addressing Sexual Violence in Political Institutions* (Toronto, 2018).
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ General Assembly Resolution 66/130, Women and Political Participation, A/RES/66/130 (19 March 2012), available from <https://undocs.org/A/RES/66/130>.
- ¹⁶ "Persons living in low income after tax, 2012," Statistics Canada. <http://statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/famil19e-eng.htm>.
- ¹⁷ "First Nations, Metis and Inuit Women," in *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report*, Statistics Canada. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2010001/article/11442-eng.htm#a28>.
- ¹⁸ "Snapshot of Racialized Poverty in Canada," Employment and Social Development Canada, 2016.
- ¹⁹ Fortin et al., *The Impact of Low Cost Child Care on Women's Employment and Overall Economy*, University of Sherbrook, 2012.
- ²⁰ "Ready for Life: A Socio-Economic Analysis of Early Childhood Education and Care," The Conference Board of Canada, October 26, 2017. <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/e-library/abstract.aspx?did=9231>
- ²¹ Silbermann, Rachael, "Encouraging More Female Candidates by Subsidizing Childcare," Yale Institution for Social and Policy Studies. <https://isps.yale.edu/news/blog/2013/11/encouraging-more-female-candidacies-by-subsidizing-childcare>.