

WOMEN IN POLITICS AND THE OBSTACLES THEY FACE

Brief submitted by:

La Table de concertation du mouvement des femmes de la Mauricie



In collaboration with:

La Table de concertation des groupes de femmes du Bas-St-Laurent



La Table de concertation des groupes de femmes de la Montérégie



**Table de concertation
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As a minority in the democratic institutions of Quebec and Canada, women are faced with a number of obstacles that not only restrict their participation in political life but also alter their experiences of public life.

With funding from Status of Women Canada, the Table de concertation du mouvement des femmes de la Mauricie (TCMFM) is coordinating a project entitled *More women in Politics? The Media and Municipal Authorities as Key Players 1*, with a view to better understanding the obstacles to women`s participation in political life. The Table de concertation des groupes de femmes du Bas St-Laurent (TCGFBSL) and the Table de concertation des groupes de femmes de la Montérégie (TCGFM) are full partners in the project.

The project began in February 2017 and was officially launched in September 2017. Since that time, a number of actions have been taken, including the holding of focus groups. Eighteen focus groups have been held in the three participating regions, consulting a total of 137 women. This allowed the systemic obstacles facing women in municipal politics to be identified. The obstacles that arise in municipal politics are the same as the obstacles that women encounter at provincial and federal level.

The women identified the following obstacles:

- The family-work-social-involvement balance remains a major challenge. (Women in a number of households often mention the mental burden and domestic responsibilities).
- The lack of media exposure sometimes makes the task difficult.
- Media coverage is different for women in politics than for men. (With women, the focus is more on physical appearance, or on the fact that a woman may be "a mother of three").
- A lack of public knowledge about the scope of the task and the role of a woman in elected office.
- Sexism, ageism and racism, which subvert the working environment and adversely affect credibility.
- The rigidity of the structure, the protocols, procedures and practices of a council may seem off-putting and little suited to public participation. Public meetings attract few members of the public except with hot issues ... or in order to criticize council decisions.

The focus groups also identified possible solutions that may lead to the development of strategies that municipal authorities can use as a way to smooth out some of the obstacles that make women`s participation in municipal politics more difficult.

The women in attendance proposed a number of solutions:

- Promotion and demystification of the role of women elected to municipal office;
- Training;
- Mentoring;
- Support for the family-work-social-involvement balance;

- Changes in the structure of work through better organization and greater efficiency in public meetings;
- Improving the working environment (such as zero tolerance for sexist jokes...).

Since the media play a major role in women's participation in public life, two studies focusing on the media have been led by the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières (university newspapers) and the Université du Québec à Montréal (private and community newspapers). The studies have produced recommendations that will be officially announced in September 2018¹. Although they will be of primary interest to the media, political parties and municipal authorities may well also wish to implement them in their communications:

- Provide male and female politicians with media exposure proportional to the space they occupy in the political sphere;
- Provide male and female politicians with prime space in a similar proportion, according them equivalent value;
- Be conscious of the importance of using neutral labels to designate candidates in articles;
- Ensure that disproportionate attention is not given to the physical aspects of female candidates at the expense of their message;
- Ensure that descriptions of the characteristics and skills of female politicians are free from stereotypes and gender-biased expectations;
- Consider the use of expressions such as "the first woman...", which serve to focus on a politician's gender and emphasize the unusual nature of her status and of her effect on female members of the public.

It is important to remember that the media and political institutions at municipal, provincial and federal level, have a major role to play in increasing the number of women who enter and stay in politics. As previously mentioned, the experience of an ongoing project, conducted by the Tables de groupes de femmes de la Mauricie, de la Montérégie et du Bas-St-Laurent confirms the fact that the obstacles encountered by women in municipal politics are also the obstacles observed with women involved provincially and federally.

La Table de concertation du mouvement des femmes de la Mauricie (TCMFM) is a regional feminist group established to collectively defend rights. Its mission is to encourage dialogue and action on issues involving the interests and the lives of women. For almost 20 years, the Table has been working to enhance women's involvement in decision-making and political circles.

¹ The reports entitled *Les représentations médiatiques des femmes aux élections municipales* and *La politique vue par les journaux étudiants universitaires québécois : des représentations genrées équilibrées* will therefore be available on the websites of the Table de concertation des groupes de femmes de la Montérégie and the Table de concertation du mouvement des femmes de la Mauricie.