



ACT for Parity

BRIEF

**Submitted to The House of Commons Standing
Committee on the Status of Women**

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ABOUT THE GROUPE FEMMES, POLITIQUE ET DÉMOCRATIE

The mission of [Groupe Femmes, Politique et Démocratie](#) (GFPD) is to educate the general public, and women in particular, about civic and democratic action, to promote greater participation by women in politics, and to support the full exercise of citizenship by all.

A non-partisan organization, the GFPD works closely with numerous local, regional and national partners, such as political parties, municipal unions, Réseaux des élues (networks of elected women representatives) in various regions, several working tables and numerous associations. It is also involved in academia.

The GFPD is especially proud of the results of its training sessions intended to provide tools to women interested in the halls of administrative and political power. The quality of the GFPD's work has been recognized in Quebec as well as internationally, and has won several awards.

March for Parity, a broad coalition

In addition, the GFPD has been actively working to promote parity with political parties and elected representatives in Quebec for several years. For the past three years in the month of April, the month that women won the right to vote in Quebec, the GFPD organized events at the National Assembly, first launching the *March for Parity* movement in 2016, then training a coalition of Partners for Parity in 2017 and meeting each party leader before the upcoming elections, and lastly officially submitting a parity bill in 2018.

March for Parity now brings together 26 ***Partners for Parity*** organizations, which themselves represent 494 organizations or more than 1.3 million people who are committed to supporting all actions in favour of parity and calling for a law to guarantee parity between men and women in all public decision-making bodies.

These actions have borne fruit: in April 2018, the National Assembly unanimously adopted a [motion](#) affirming that [translation] “the National Assembly is committed to making parity an objective in all sectors of society”. For the upcoming elections on 1 October 2018, the leaders of the political parties have also committed to nominating female candidates as soon as possible, or in the parity zone of 40/60. Public opinion has often come out in favour of parity among political candidates during these events. For example, in mid-April, 69% of respondents to a *Léger-Le Devoir* survey said that they believed that “political parties should have as many female candidates as male candidates.”

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INTRODUCTION

The GFPD would like to thank the House of Commons Standing Committee for this invitation. The underrepresentation of women in sectors of power and influence is an issue that is at the heart of the Groupe's mission.

This brief follows up on previous briefs (2011, 2012, 2015), in particular, a recent brief presented in December 2017 at the launch of an initiative mandate on the place of women in politics by the National Assembly of Quebec's Citizen Relations Commission.

1. OBSTACLES TO THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS

1.1 Recruitment and selection by political parties: the main obstacle

Women who would like to attain political office in our legislatures must go through several stages. Some of these stages do not pose any problems. There is no longer any impediment to eligibility. The recruitment pool is large enough: women are more educated than men;¹ many of them have the proper training and are members of professional associations that lead to politics, a large number of them hold positions that qualify them for a future career in Parliament, whether in the private or public sector or in civil society organizations. Therefore, they have clearly demonstrated that they have the skill. Furthermore, when they are named as candidates, they have as much chance of being elected as men if they are placed in winnable ridings as often as men are. Voters are not sexist.² The weak links are recruitment and selection by political parties.

It is also recognized that, in general, women are less inclined to run for a seat in Parliament or run for any political office at all. They are more hesitant than men for a variety of factors; in our opinion, the main factors are based on society's gender roles. The world of politics and power has always been reserved for men, while women were assigned to the domestic world. The culture, rules, practices, networks and this whole world were built by men, such that *women are less likely to think of themselves as full participants*.³ For some women, this situation therefore causes them to underappreciate their skills and undermines their confidence, which is why organizations such as the Groupe Femmes, Politique et Démocratie are there on the ground, to educate them and foster their civic engagement.

But overall, systemic and structural⁴ factors impede their access to politics. There are invisible barriers that must be removed. Responsibility for change cannot rest solely on women or on so-called natural progress. The rules of the game need to be transformed. However, political parties hold the keys to these rules, since they are the ones recruiting and selecting candidates.

¹ In 2014, in the population of women aged 25 to 64, 32.4% had a certificate, diploma or university degree. The same was true for 27.2% of men. *Portrait des Québécoises en 8 temps (2016)*. Quebec, Council on the Status of Women

² See Appendix I for two tables compiled by the GFPD on provincial and federal elections.

³ Manon Tremblay, *100 questions sur les femmes et la politique*, p. 108.

⁴ See Appendix I, Table I, Main Obstacles Explaining the Underrepresentation of Women in Politics.

Furthermore, at least in Quebec, the provincial political parties are now largely funded by public money, through taxes paid by both women and men. In 10 years, contributions from the province increased from 14% of the budget in 2006 to 73.5% in 2016.⁵ We believe that the province should require the parties to endorse and implement the principles enshrined in our charter of rights, in this case gender equality.

It is often said that equality (or parity) between men and women is underway, that we can do nothing but let the years go by, and that it will happen all by itself. In Quebec, however, the number of women participating in the National Assembly of Quebec and the Canadian House of Commons has stagnated and even decreased. The proportion of female representatives in June 2018 is lower than in 2003 (30.4% in 2003, compared to 29.6% in 2017). During this time, over one hundred countries have adopted restrictive measures to correct the exclusion of women from their political system. In 1998, Quebec ranked 15th in the world in terms of its proportion of female members of Parliament, but it now ranks 48th, behind most European countries.⁶ Canada, with 26% female representatives, ranks 61st. If things are left as is, how long will we have to wait for parity? A quarter of a century, half a century, even a whole century?

1.2 Obligation for results at the candidate stage

Equality between women and men is a principle enshrined in Canadian and Quebec law in our respective charters of rights and freedoms. Internationally, Quebec has also declared that it is bound, by Order in Council, by the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* adopted by the UN. Among other things, this declaration stipulates that States must take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to guarantee that women can fully exercise their political rights. In a context of stagnation and decreasing numbers, not legislating to make parity mandatory is equivalent to preventing women from accessing political power.

This is why we believe that the political parties should be obliged to provide results: they should be legally required to submit an equal number of female and male candidates. This way, after an election, the number of elected representatives will be in the parity zone, between 40% and 60%, or ideally between 45% and 55% for both sexes.

To implement this change, the political parties could temporarily be granted additional financial resources in order to take concrete steps to bring parity to their lists of candidates before and during electoral campaigns.

This could also be done, for example, by sending clear invitations to women and encouraging them to run as candidates. Joint recruitment teams that are favourable to the presence of women should start their work well before election campaigns (since women need more time to be convinced), and target pools where female candidates for various parties are likely to be

⁵ Chief Electoral Officer, *Portrait sur le financement des partis politiques provinciaux, Exercice financier clos le 31 décembre 2016*, p. 23.

⁶ As of 1 October 2017, *Women in National Parliaments, data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union*, <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.

found. Parties could offer training and support for candidates if necessary, and reserve priority spots for female candidates.

Our first-past-the-post voting system is often decried as one of the biggest reasons for the under-representation of women. If we all stand in favour of a replacement for this type of voting, we do not believe that this change is the first prerequisite and *sine qua non* for really committing to parity. Additionally, numerous experts state that several strategies may be used, and have been used effectively with the current voting system to increase the number of female candidates: short lists of candidates for vacant seats, groups of ridings with fixed regional objectives, equal representation of candidates at nomination meetings,⁷ etc. If necessary, parties may also modify their internal rules to allow for equal representation of women and men on their candidate lists.

Therefore, we recommend:

- *Legislating the obligation of political parties to submit a list of candidates containing equal numbers of women and men in electoral laws;*
- *Amending these laws so that political parties receive an allowance specifically dedicated to recruiting, accepting, assisting, supporting and electing women during a catch-up period that should not exceed two elections;*
- *Granting institutions such as the Chief Electoral Officer the ability to follow up on these new regulations with political parties in order to ensure that they are successfully meeting the objectives within the specified deadlines.*

1.3 Parity in the Cabinet

In 2007 and 2008, there was parity in two cabinets in Quebec during the term of premier Jean Charest. However, this progressive and courageous decision is based on individual will, which may be revoked at any time. Parity in the pool of representatives would make it easier to choose female candidates for cabinet positions. As with members of the National Assembly who exercise legislative power, it is just as important for parity to exist among women in government, i.e. at the executive level, considering the major directives that are made there, particularly in the choice, presentation and enforcement of laws, policies and programs. **Consequently, the GFPD recommends:**

- *Immediately establishing in law the principle of parity in the Cabinet.*

⁷ Manon Tremblay, *100 questions sur les femmes en politique*, p. 190-191, and Rosalie Readman, *Femmes et politique: facteurs d'influence, mesures incitatives et exposé de la situation québécoise*, DGEQ, 2014, documenting some experiences in the United Kingdom and by the NDP in Canada to promote female candidates. Women-only short lists have been used to fill half of a party's vacant seats in ridings with potential for an election victory. By grouping ridings together, objectives can be set to increase the representation of women, as well as of minorities throughout the region.

1.4 Support and training for female candidates

Lastly, numerous women are interested in politics, as shown in a recent *Léger* survey⁸, and would like to perfect their knowledge and skills in order to accede to decision-making positions. Over the years, we have persuaded and equipped women who have gone on to become municipal councillors, mayors, and members of Parliament. This is why it is important:

- *To continue to provide recurring financial support for organizations such as the Groupe Femmes, Politique et Démocratie in order to prepare and support female candidates at all decision-making and governmental levels;*
- *To maintain support for organizations and programs, including awareness and training activities that complement the measures mentioned above.*

2. DIFFICULTIES FOR WOMEN ALREADY HOLDING OFFICE

2.1 Partial and scattered data

One observation stands out: although several academic studies have been carried out on the under-representation of women in politics, there have been very few studies on the challenges faced by women who already hold positions. As for the question of the representation of women in elected positions in general (federal, provincial, municipal, school boards), as well as in other decision-making positions, there is a lack of data, and the data that exist are scattered in various sources. There is clearly an urgency to develop reliable databases on the presence of women in decision-making positions, to centralize data in one place and to promote research on the subject.

2.2 Work-life balance

The issue of work-life balance is regularly raised as an obstacle for women's participation in politics, but it is important to recognize that reconciling parliamentary and family life is difficult for all members of parliament, men and women. Carrying out duties is a challenge first of all for young parents, who need to be able to take a leave of absence for some time when their child is born. But people most often start their political careers as parliamentarians a bit later in their careers. During the current session of the legislature in Quebec, the average age of women is 52.1 years, and 51.4 years for men,⁹ a period where children are usually school-aged, adolescents or young adults. In addition, many male and female representatives might have a spouse with an illness, or might need to support elderly parents. It therefore seems that this

⁸ Source: "Élections municipales au féminin," *Premières en affaires*, special edition issued in collaboration with the Union of Quebec Municipalities, 22 November 2017, p. 21. Survey conducted by Caroline Roy, Vice-President and Associate of the Quebec office of *Léger*, about women and municipal politics, on behalf of *Premières en affaires*. The survey confirmed that women are just as interested in politics as men, but at a different frequency.

⁹ *Statistics on MNAs*, National Assembly of Quebec website.

needs to recognize the wide variety of family responsibilities, and encourage and provide solutions for both sexes.

Unlike involvement at the municipal level, one of the main difficulties for members of parliament is that they are far from home for long periods every week. In 2009, efforts were made to reform Quebec's parliamentary calendar to make it stable and predictable, concentrating sittings in the middle of the week from Tuesday to Thursday and reducing the number of periods with intensive sittings. Weeks reserved for constituency work were added, coinciding with various holidays and school breaks. Night work was eliminated under the impetus of female representatives. But work remains to be done to help both men and women who need to reconcile their parliamentary duties with their family responsibilities.

2.3 Parity in parliamentary duties

Furthermore, once elected to legislative assemblies, in addition to departmental functions, representatives may be assigned to various other duties, including whips, parliamentary leaders, caucus chairs, chairs and vice-chairs of the assembly, and commissions. All of these decision-making positions may have a strong influence on parliamentary directives, practices and procedures. Even if there are still not an equal number of women, parliamentary roles and duties could nevertheless be shared more equally.

2.4 Parliamentary culture

Other questions: how do we establish a professional and respectful culture prohibiting all forms of harassment and discrimination? How do we transform certain criticized practices, such as confrontational debates, belligerent speeches in the Assembly, and the demanding relationship with traditional media and social media? For many women, but also men, partisanship and the obligation to follow the party line can be stressful. Is there a way to mitigate or modify these conditions? There must be, and it would certainly be helpful for a large number of female and male representatives to contribute their ideas.

2.5 Gender-sensitive parliament

Internationally, there is increasing interest in examining how parliaments can better meet the needs and interests of men and women through parliamentary structures, operations, methods and actions. This is known as a gender-sensitive parliament, an initiative promoted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union,¹⁰ which proposes a framework for analysis and an action plan to help carry this out. Equal access to parliament is the primary objective. But a series of other fields of activity are also suggested: parity in parliamentary duties, preventing harassment with codes of

¹⁰ The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) is an international organization of parliaments in sovereign States founded in 1889, which notably contributed to the formation of the League of Nations and afterwards the UN. Among other things, the objective of the IPU is to foster communication, coordination and sharing of experiences between different parliaments and members of parliaments in all countries; to examine questions of international interest, and to make appropriate recommendations in order to generate action among parliaments and members of parliaments. http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Inter-Parliamentary_Union

conduct, work-life balance policies, accounting for gender in legislative work itself and in parliamentary controls such as the budget, and ensuring that political parties and male members of parliament participate in efforts to establish a culture of equality. This program has been mapped out to inspire other initiatives.

2.6 Structures dedicated to equality

Among the suggested best practices are the creation of a group of female representatives or a standing committee on gender equality. A Circle of Women Members has existed in the National Assembly of Quebec since 2010. This Circle is a non-partisan place to reflect and share with the aim of better equipping women to perform their legislative and executive roles. The Circle meets at least twice per parliamentary session.

Your committee specifically dedicated to gender equality in the Parliament of Canada is another example of permanent infrastructure, which is considered to be a fully-fledged organ of Parliament and has its own technical, professional and administrative staff. Over the years, you have examined questions as diverse as a gender-based analysis, violence against girls and women and the condition of Aboriginal women. Such structures can study questions on their own initiative, act as a permanent liaison with national mechanisms and NGOs to promote women, and depending on the country, have been able to deliver tangible results concerning gender equality.

In summary, the GFPD believes that there is little data and few studies that can help clarify the challenges faced by female representatives and help provide solutions. Women currently serving as representatives and former representatives seem to be in the best position to suggest courses of action to improve their living conditions, alongside male allies who also stand to benefit. **However, we believe that this work must not delay any decisions and actions taken to substantially and quickly increase the number of women serving in parliaments. In our opinion, this is the most powerful engine to establish true equality between men and women.**

We recommend:

- *Creating a central site where up to date gender-based data can be found for any questions concerning the participation of women in decision-making positions and positions of power;*
- *Extending the concept of parity to all parliamentary duties;*
- *Providing legislative assemblies with clear policies on maternity and paternity leave, caregivers, and the availability of daycare services, as well as measures to allow representatives to work remotely for family reasons;*
- *Examining opportunities to strengthen or create a structure within legislative assemblies with sufficient resources and powers and with a mandate to diagnose gender sensitivity and establish an action plan to prioritize parity.*

CONCLUSION

Women obtained the right to vote and stand as candidates in Quebec in 1940, and in 1918 at the federal level. However, decades later in Quebec and after a full century in Canada, they hold only 30% of the seats in our legislative assemblies.

Experiences around the world show that there are solutions. They involve restrictive measures, whether they are called quotas or parity legislation, and it is the political parties that hold the keys to this transformation, since they are the ones that select and recruit female candidates, but they are also the ones that form governments and adopt laws. Success depends on their engagement, and most of the time, this does not occur without the impetus of and pressure from the public and the women's movement.

Our collective challenge is to make parity between women and men an essential condition for democratically exercising power and governing the "res publica." Attaining parity in the halls of power and influence should be everyone's concern, both women and men, in all environments and in all parts of the social fabric. Together, we must *ACT* for change and choose the path towards parity.

Researched and written by: Thérèse Mailloux, president of the GFPD, and Nathalie Lavoie, political scientist and GFPD communications coordinator

APPENDIX I

TABLES

**Female candidates and elected representatives by party affiliation
2015 federal election – Canada¹¹**

Political Party	Elected	(%)	Female candidates (%)
NDP	18/44	40.9	42.8
Green Party	1/1	100	40.4
Liberal Party of Canada	50/184	27.2	31.1
Bloc Québécois	2/10	20.0	28.2
Conservative Party	17/99	17.2	18.6
Other parties	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total	88/338	26.0	29.9

**Female candidates and elected representatives by party affiliation
Quebec elections, 2003 to 2014 – Québec¹²**

Candidates	2003 Elections (%)	2007 Elections (%)	2008 Elections (%)	2012 Elections (%)	2014 Elections (%)
PQ	31.2	29.6	30.4	27.4	37.1
PLQ	28.8	34.4	31.2	34.9	28.0
ADQ/CAQ	25.6	19.2	20.0	20.0	22.4
QS		48.8	50.0	46.8	50.4
Elected	30.4	25.6	29.6	32.9	27.2

¹¹ Groupe Femmes, Politique et Démocratie. 2015. "AGIR pour une démocratie paritaire." Brief published in December 2015. Quebec: p. 10, URL: <http://gfpd.ca/files/documents/dm/33/m-moire.pdf> (in French only)

¹² *Idem*

List of GFPD Recommendations

TO ENSURE PARITY IN ACCESS TO PARLIAMENT

Obligation for results at the candidate stage

1. Make it mandatory for political parties to submit a list of candidates with equal numbers of women and men in electoral laws;
2. Amend these same laws so that political parties receive an allowance specifically dedicated to recruiting, accepting, assisting, supporting and electing women during a catch-up period that should not exceed two elections;
3. Grant institutions such as the Chief Electoral Officer the ability to follow up on these new regulations with political parties in order to ensure that they are successfully meeting the objectives within the specified deadlines.

TO ENSURE PARITY IN THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS

4. Immediately establishing in law the principle of parity in the Cabinet.

SUPPORT AND TRAINING FOR FEMALE CANDIDATES

5. Continue to provide recurring financial support for organizations such as the Groupe Femmes, Politique et Démocratie in order to prepare and support female candidates at all decision-making and governmental levels;
6. Maintain support for organizations and programs, including measures that are complementary to the cause.

STRUCTURES DEDICATED TO EQUALTY AND RELIABLE AND CENTRALIZED DATA

7. Create a central site where current gender-based data can be found for any questions concerning the participation of women in decision-making positions and positions of power;
8. Extend the concept of parity to all parliamentary duties;
9. Examine opportunities to strengthen or create a structure within legislative assemblies with sufficient resources and powers and with a mandate to diagnose gender sensitivity and establish an action plan to prioritize parity in the years to come.