



Briefing Note Submitted to
House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women

Barriers Facing Women in Politics

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CRIAW/ICREF

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIA W) promotes social justice and equality for all women. CRIA W recognizes women's diverse experiences and views. It helps to build women's knowledge. It works to reduce regional isolation. And it helps link researchers and groups that work to promote social justice and equality for all women.

Women Transforming Cities

Women Transforming Cities (WTC) is a non-profit society that believes that cities that work for women and girls work for everyone. WTC's vision is to live in cities where all self-identified women and girls, in all their diversity, have real social, economic, and political power. WTC calls for all cities to put a gender intersectional lens on their policies, programmes, budgets, funding decisions, staffing, and governance.

Our organizations are currently partners on "Action on Systemic Barriers to Women's Participation in Local Government," a multi-year project funded by Status of Women Canada. This project aims to find ways to improve gender and diversity equity and inclusion within local governments. Read more at www.womentransformingcities.org/systemic-barriers.

Background

Women are underrepresented at all levels of government. Women comprise 18 percent of Mayors, 28 percent of City Councilors, 27 percent of provincial and territorial representatives, and 26 percent of Members of Parliament.ⁱ

Barriers to women's political involvement

Women face significant challenges in society which are also barriers to running for office, such as pay equity, access to affordable childcare, performing unpaid labour, sexism, and violence.

Women are still more likely than men to be principally responsible for caregiving and domestic labour, and they perform double the number of hours of unpaid childcare work as do men.ⁱⁱ Being a political representative involves long and unpredictable days, which can dissuade women from running for office.ⁱⁱⁱ The lack of accommodation for caregiving in many political spaces can also limit women's opportunities.^{iv}

The current political culture is another barrier. Archaic expectations about women's roles can lead to politics being seen as an inappropriate arena for women. 'Old boys clubs' may also make women feel unwelcome^v, and these 'clubs' often decide who a party's candidates will be, how much support the candidate is offered, and whether they are offered a winnable seat. Moreover, political spaces are often confrontational and divisive; women may desire a space more conducive to cooperation and may therefore feel the political arena is not for them.^{vi}

Women are likely to face sexism and gendered comments, both on the campaign trail and once in office, from the public, the media, and fellow candidates and elected officials.^{vii} Women also face racism, homophobia, and other prejudices; for example, women's age is scrutinized more than men's.^{viii} The media is more likely to refer to women by their first names, rather than their official title or their last names, which downplays their contributions and capabilities as serious politicians.^{ix} Women are also more likely to be asked questions about their clothing or hair instead of their policies.^x Lesbians and trans women must also deal with homophobia and transphobia that make their participation in political life even more challenging.

Financing a campaign can be very expensive, and having 'early money' can be vital; having such funding can often pose more of a barrier for women than for men.^{xi} As of 2017, Canadian women working full time earn 87 cents for every dollar made by men.^{xii} Racialized women, Indigenous women, and women with disabilities experience an even larger pay gap, earning 26 cents less than white women.^{xiii} Further, women in Canada outspend men by up to 10 percent on campaigns, due to greater childcare and household responsibilities as well as to overcome male incumbency or negative perceptions about women.^{xiv} Being an elected official also provides no Employment Insurance, and is often low-paying.

Finally, the electoral system itself poses a barrier for women. First-past-the-post systems favour incumbents over challengers^{xv}, putting women at a disadvantage. Further, in these systems, parties are less likely to put forward a diverse slate of candidates.^{xvi}

Given these barriers, women often question their abilities or interest in running for office. Women are often asked to run several times before they consider it, whereas men are more likely to make the decision quickly.

Once elected, women face further barriers such as continued sexism^{xvii}, less access to professional development and mentorship, and being given ‘softer’ policy portfolios (such as those relating to children) which may constrain women’s career development within politics.

Women at all levels of government

Women are underrepresented in all levels of politics, and experience similar barriers at all levels. Many women begin their political careers by running for their local School or Park Board or another municipal office before transitioning to provincial/territorial or federal politics.

Therefore, in the context of immediate change to political participation, our recommendations to the Committee focus on improving women’s access to civic and political involvement overall.

Recommendations

1. Ensure 50% women on political decision-making bodies.

With more women present in decision-making spaces, such as advisory committees and boards, policies and decisions made will better reflect the needs and perspectives of women. Women will also learn policy-making skills and develop professional networks. Moreover, sexism and the unwelcoming political culture will likely change.

2. Ensure that all governance bodies have a Women’s Advisory Committee to review policies and proposals.
3. Ensure that policies, programmes, budgets, funding decisions, staffing, and governance are reviewed using an intersectional gender analysis, such as Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+), to assess the potential, differing impacts on different peoples.
4. Offer childcare for elected officials and more flexible work arrangements.

Providing childcare and flexible work arrangements (such as changing hours of sitting) will encourage more women to run for office, as they will not be held back by childcare responsibilities.

5. Within political parties, actively encourage all self-identified women to run for office.

Be assertive in asking women to run, especially Indigenous women and those of diverse backgrounds. Provide them with all the information they need and ample time to make the decision, and direct them to resources such as past elected women who can offer mentorship. Provide ample funding and support.

6. Implement a proportional voting system.

Electoral systems such as proportional representation are less competitive, as voters can choose more than one candidate on their ballot, which improves women’s chances of being elected. These systems also usually use lists to indicate a party’s candidates, providing an obvious way to see how gender-balanced the candidates are. Public pressure for gender equality will likely make parties more likely to run gender-balanced lists, creating more opportunities for women to run.^{xviii} A 2012 study found that countries using proportional representation had, on average, 8 percent more women than countries using other systems.^{xix}

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- ⁱ Federation of Canadian Municipalities 2015, https://www.fcm.ca/Documents/reports/Women/2015-05-01_FCM%20_gender_stats_EN.pdf; OECD 2018, <http://www.oecd.org/gender/data/governance/> .
- ⁱⁱ McInturff 2014, <http://behindthenumbers.ca/2014/09/12/where-are-all-the-women-candidates/>; Cool 2011, <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/LOP/ResearchPublications/2011-56-e.pdf>; Equal Voice 2007, www.equalvoice.ca/pdf/288_46709afdc27f.pdf).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Godwin 2010, Awaiting the watershed: Women in Canada's Parliament." *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, 33(2), 32-37.
- ^{iv} Trimble and Arscott 2003, *Still Counting: Women in Politics across Canada*. Toronto, ON: Broadview Press.
- ^v Trimble and Arscott 2003.
- ^{vi} Sawer 2000, Parliamentary representation of women: From discourses of justice to strategies of accountability." *International Political Science Review*, 21(4), 361-380.
- ^{vii} Seiferling 2016, Running in place: Overcoming barriers for women in Canadian municipal politics. Masters thesis. Retrieved from <https://theses.lib.sfu.ca/thesis/etd9528>.
- ^{viii} Seiferling 2016.
- ^{ix} Godwin 2010.
- ^x Seiferling 2016; McInturff 2014.
- ^{xi} Ballington and Kahane 2014, Women in Politics: Financing for Gender Equality. In E. Falguera, S. Jones, and M. Ohman (Eds.), *Funding of Political Parties and Election Campaigns: A Handbook on Political Finance* (301-343). Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance; Cool 2011; Equal Voice 2007.
- ^{xii} Israel 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/business/statistics-canada-gender-pay-gap-1.4014954>.
- ^{xiii} Lambert and McInturff 2016, <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/making-women-count-2016>.
- ^{xiv} United Nations Development Programme 2007, <https://www.ndi.org/files/Electoral%20Financing.pdf>.
- ^{xv} Godwin 2010.
- ^{xvi} Fair Vote Canada n.d., <https://www.fairvote.ca/women/>.
- ^{xvii} Seiferling 2016.
- ^{xviii} Godwin 2010.
- ^{xix} Fair Vote Canada n.d.