

Where are the women?
Women as candidates and councillors in Canadian municipalities

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HE TELLS HER

He tells her that the earth is flat –
He knows the facts, and that is that.
In altercations fierce and long
She tries her best to prove him wrong.
But he has learned to argue well.
He calls her arguments unsound
And often asks her not to yell.
She cannot win. He stands his ground.

The planet goes on being round.¹

Canadian women have never seen gender parity at any level of government.

Consequently, men have been those at the helm of political power, elected to make life-changing decisions for women in this country for the last 151 years. Academic scholars from various backgrounds (sociology, gender studies, political science, law, etc.) have devoted their careers to studying the intersections of gender and politics. Despite all that has already been written, there has been minimal research on women in municipal politics in Canada. This begs the question, where are the women in Canadian municipal politics? This paper will attempt to answer this question and provide answers as to why women have not entered municipal politics at higher rates.

By the numbers

There is a common misconception in Canada that leads the public to believe that women have more political success within municipalities than at the provincial or federal levels. This could

¹ Wendy Cope, "Differences of Opinion: He Tells Her," *Poetry* (February 2006), online: <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=48086>>.

not be further from the truth. While the idea exists that women have an “at home” advantage at the local level, “the empirical evidence has been rather mixed and muted.”²

Since the 2015 federal election, women have held 26% of the seats in the House of Commons – only a 1% increase from the 2011 election.³ This fact was and remains largely overshadowed by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s appointment of a gender balanced cabinet. In June 2018, Ontario saw a rise in the number of women voted into Queen’s Park. Female representation at the provincial level rose 4.5% and women now comprise 39.4% of the decision makers in the legislature.⁴ As municipal elections across the country do not take place at a uniform time, women typically are elected to 16-18% of mayoral roles across the country and 26-28% of councillor seats at any given time.⁵ Nowhere in Canada is there gender parity at the municipal level. In the 2018 Ontario municipal elections, 27% of all candidates for councillor positions were women, up from 23% in 2014.⁶ At this time, the statistic is unavailable for how many of these candidates were successful in their races.

According to the most recent census, Canada’s population is almost split exactly 50/50 between women and men (please note that this statistic does not account for individuals who are gender non-conforming).⁷ While the population is evenly split, powerful institutions within the country, including and especially the political sphere, are run by outdated systems which favour

² Erin Tolley, “Do Women ‘Do Better’ in Municipal Politics? Electoral Representation across Three Levels of Government” (2011) 44:3 *Canadian Journal of Political Science* at 1.

³ Erin Anderssen, “We have a record number of female MPs, but hold the applause”, *The Globe and Mail* (20 October 2015), online: <<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/we-have-a-record-number-of-female-mps-but-hold-the-applause/article26887164/>>.

⁴ Sarah Boesveld, “Surprise Result From Doug Ford’s Win: There Are Now More Women In Queen’s Park”, *Chatelaine* (11 June 2018), online: <<https://www.chatelaine.com/news/ontario-election-women/>>.

⁵ Federation of Canadian Municipalities, “2012 – Municipal Statistics: Elected Officials Gender Statistics,” (11 May 2012).

⁶ Association of Municipalities of Ontario, Fact Sheet, “2018 Municipal Election – Fast Facts”, online: <<https://elections.amo.on.ca/web/en/stats>>.

⁷ Statistics Canada, *Age and Sex Highlight Tables, 2016 Census* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 05 May 2017), online: <<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/hltfst/as/Table.cfm?Lang=E&T=21>>.

the engagement and participation of men. For centuries, politics has been understood to be an exclusively male centred activity.⁸ Concrete changes must be made within these systems to create the space for women to participate and flourish. Without parity at the municipal level, the democratic system is disadvantaged and delegitimized.⁹

Understanding intersectionality

Historically, all women in Canada did not have the right to vote in federal elections. In 1960, the Canadian government finally extended voting rights to Indigenous women.¹⁰ Women's lives have been profoundly affected by gender and manufactured cultural and social norms.¹¹ The process of gendering is not natural, it is a social creation which has placed women in a subordinate position to men within society.¹² This paper analyzes the lack of female representation in municipal politics. While women have historically been disadvantaged and excluded from political processes and power structures, these exclusions have been magnified for women of colour, disabled women, and queer women. This paper will make mention of the intersections of various minority statuses and gender, however, it is important to note, that for many women (and men) who enter politics at any level, privilege plays a role in their ability to run for office and their success. Women face a multitude of barriers to entering politics and women with intersectional backgrounds are faced with additional obstacles. Unsurprisingly in 2018 –only 58 years after all women in Canada were granted the right to vote– Canada's electoral system falls short of producing political leadership

⁸ Heather MacIvor, *Women and Politics in Canada* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996) at 15.

⁹ Halena Seiferling, *Running in Place: Overcoming Barriers for Women in Canadian Municipal Politics* (MPP Thesis, Simon Fraser University School of Public Policy, 2016) [unpublished] at 7.

¹⁰ "Women & The Right To Vote in Canada: An Important Clarification", *CBC News* (26 February 2013), online: <<https://www.cbc.ca/strombo/news/women-the-right-to-vote-in-canada-an-important-clarification.html>>.

¹¹ Jacquetta Newman and Linda A. White, *Women, Politics, and Public Policy: The Political Struggles of Canadian Women*, 2nd ed (Don Mills: Oxford University Press Canada, 2012) at 11.

¹² *Ibid.*

that reflects the country's increasing diversity.¹³ In Canada, especially within municipal government, there remains an archetype of an elected official – “male, White, middle-class, middle-aged, Christian, Canadian-born, and majority language speaking.”¹⁴ While there are emerging archetypes that challenge this norm in some larger Canadian cities, minorities, women, and those at the intersection of the two, do not conform to the archetype and thus remain as the “other” and outside the norm.¹⁵ This paper does not approach the issue of women in municipal politics with a thoroughly intersectional lens. This is an area beyond the scope of the length of this paper, though it is imperative that further research on this topic is done to expand nuanced understandings of women in municipal politics. As noted by Halena Seiferling in, “Running in Place: Overcoming Barriers for Women in Canadian Municipal Politics,” an analysis of women in municipal politics without an intersectional lens runs the risk of replicating the archetype of a traditional elected official by simply replacing ‘male’ for ‘female’.¹⁶ Despite this shortcoming, this research and the questions the paper seeks to answer are still important and it carves out space for further research on the intersectionality of women in municipal politics in the future. As a white, middle-class, Canadian-born, and majority language speaking woman, I am acutely aware of my privilege and the space it occupies within my writing on this topic.

Why elect women?

The lack of women in politics is not a new issue. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (hereafter, “FCM”) has long-researched this issue and devised committees and

¹³ Caroline Andrew, John Biles, Myer Siemiatycki, and Erin Tolley, eds, *Electing a Diverse Canada: The Representation of Immigrants, Minorities, and Women* (British Columbia: UBC Press, 2008) at 255.

¹⁴ *Supra* note 11 at 18.

¹⁵ *Supra* note 11.

¹⁶ *Supra* note 9 at 5.

action plans in an attempt to close the barriers for women in municipal politics. In 2010, the FCM began a project titled, “Getting to 30%”, which aimed at preparing women to run successful campaigns for municipal government.¹⁷ This project, as evidenced by the title, acted on long-running FCM policy objectives to increase the number of women in municipal government to 30% by 2026.¹⁸ This objective was set in 2005, and in order to achieve this target, would have meant electing 100 women to municipal government each year.¹⁹ The FCM set this goal on the basis of a 1995 United Nations report which asserted that 30% female representation in government is the “minimum percentage required in a government body before policy can begin to adequately reflect women’s concerns.”²⁰

Electing women to municipal government benefits the region. In short, inclusion pays off.²¹ When women participate in municipal government, it creates a ripple effect throughout the community. Based on a two-prong approach, electing women to municipal government pays off socio-economically. First, electing women municipally maximizes the potential of everyone in the community and women in decision making positions create better and more effective services for women and families in the municipality.²² Second, by electing women to municipal government, female constituents see themselves reflected in local government and are encouraged to seek out and participate in leadership roles throughout the community.²³ To date, nowhere in Canada has reached a 30% level of female representation at the municipal level. As such, public policy at the

¹⁷ Federation of Canadian Municipalities, “Women in Local Government, Getting to 30%: Lessons Learned,” (2010) at 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid* at 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women*, United Nations, 1996, UN Doc A/CONF.177/20/Rev.1 (1996) 79 at 182.

²¹ Michael Adams, ed, “Increasing Women’s Participation in Municipal Decision Making,” *Federation of Canadian Municipalities* (September 2004) at 11.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ *Ibid*.

local level continues to fail women's issues and concerns. In order to attempt to reach the 30% target as laid out by the United Nations and set by the FCM, women must run for municipal office.

“Run!” – But not so fast

Women in municipal politics face obstacles at every turn. The challenges begin while women are even simply mulling over the idea of running and continue throughout campaigns and when women occupy elected political roles. These obstacles are the direct result of the structures of government which continue to be barriers to women's participation in public life.²⁴ Women are socialized to give deference to men in the political sphere; this allows men to build political capital which ultimately paves the way for a future as an elected official.²⁵ From a young age, “boys are taught that politics is an aggressive, masculine endeavor; girls are taught that politics is a man's world and that they are ill equipped to understand or participate in it.”²⁶ As such, even as women mull over the thought of running for elected office, they often lack the much needed social capital to plunge into a race. A history of a patriarchal and elitist political system has paved the way for future generations of male dominated councils.²⁷

For generations, women have not seen themselves represented in municipal politics. Prior to her election as mayor of Victoria, British Columbia in 2014 and again in 2018, Lisa Helps was elected to city council in 2011. As part of her 2016 Master's dissertation, Halena Seiferling interviewed Helps about her experience as a woman in municipal politics and running for mayor. Helps spoke about how women have been historically excluded from municipal politics:

²⁴ *Supra* note 20.

²⁵ *Supra* note 11 at 99.

²⁶ *Supra* note 8 at 233.

²⁷ *Ibid* at 240.

“When I was running for Mayor one of the things we heard a lot is... ‘you don’t look like a Mayor.’ And you know [we were] trying to figure [it] out; what does this mean? But then one day I had this revelation. If you go upstairs at City Hall you see [photos of] every single Mayor of Victoria that’s ever been since 1852 when the city was founded, and there’s row upon row upon row upon row of men. There’s only one woman. So of course I don’t look like a Mayor.”²⁸

When women run for municipal government, their gender is an issue. In Windsor, Ontario, there is one female city councillor (on a council of ten). Jo-Anne Gignac, the Ward 6 councillor on Windsor’s city council, has served as a municipal politician at the school board and city council levels for thirty years (minus a three-year hiatus between her jump from school board to city council).²⁹ Despite Gignac’s years of service to her municipality, her small role as a representative for women has not paved the way for other women to join her on Windsor’s city council. Perhaps, this is because she fits the archetype of a traditional elected official as previously discussed. Regardless of the exact reason, when women look at their mayors and councillors of their city, they most often do not see faces looking back at them that reflect the lived experiences of their lives.

Show me the money

Throughout their lives, Canadian (white) women in full-time jobs earn 72 cents for every dollar a (white) man makes.³⁰ For women from racialized backgrounds, this gap is even wider.³¹

²⁸ *Supra* note 9 at 25.

²⁹ The City of Windsor, “Councillor Jo-Anne Gignac Biography,” online: <<https://www.citywindsor.ca/mayorandcouncil/City-Councillors/Pages/Councillor-Jo-Anne-Gignac-Biography.aspx>>.

³⁰ Brittany Lambert and Kate McInturff, “Making Women Count: the unequal economics of women’s work” (2016) Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives at 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*

The lack of a readily disposable income is a barrier to women's political participation.³² Campaigns cost money and the fact that women spend their entire lives being paid less than their male counterparts puts them at a significant disadvantage when launching a campaign. Further, "not only are women paid less than men on average, which limits their ability to fund their own political efforts," but their aforementioned exclusion from "elite networks denies them access to rich sources of political funds."³³

These elite networks pave the way for campaign contributions which are detailed in sections 88.8-88.18 of the *Municipal Elections Act*.³⁴ In Ontario, individual contributions to a municipal candidate cannot exceed a total of \$1,200.³⁵ As such, connections with powerful circles benefit men as these networks afford them countless contributors who can easily afford the maximum campaign contribution. While times are slowly changing, women continue to occupy historically female roles within the workforce. It is much harder for a female teacher or nurse to reach out to her network for donations than a male lawyer or businessman.³⁶ Female candidates without these elite networks begin their campaigns already behind their male opponents. Municipal candidates are permitted to contribute to their own campaigns but these contributions are also capped. Municipal council candidates' contributions are capped at "\$5000 plus 20 cents for each elector entitled to vote for the office".³⁷ The candidate's contribution to their own campaign is limited to \$25,000 regardless if the 20 cents for every eligible elector adds up to reach an excess of \$25,000. Women have more to lose when seeking municipal office, and that only just begins with their hard earned 72 cents on the dollar.

³² *Supra* note 8 at 240.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Municipal Elections Act*, S.O. 1996, c. 32 s 88.

³⁵ *Ibid* at s 88.9.

³⁶ *Supra* note 8 at 240.

³⁷ *Supra* note 34 at s 88.9.1.

Mothering and othering

We cannot understand women within the political sphere until we have examined their place in the economy and the family.³⁸ Children pose the single largest obstacle to women becoming involved in municipal politics. The presence of children in a man's life poses an almost non-existent impact on a man's foray into municipal politics, as men's involvement in politics is the same with or without children.³⁹ As women consider throwing their hat in the political ring, another ring – a wedding ring – or lack thereof, can have an impact on their political aspirations. Women in municipal politics face a 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' situation when it comes to marriage and children.⁴⁰ Mothers wishing to enter municipal politics face financial and time constraints in regards to their children and unmarried women tend to be viewed negatively by the electorate if they are seen as not capable of sustaining a relationship.⁴¹ Conversely, for men, this is a non-issue. As an example, Naheed Nenshi, the current and three-term mayor of Calgary is 46 years old and unmarried; a fact which has not threatened his electability to govern the city. This is due to the fact that both the electorate and the media measure and challenge male and female candidates differently.⁴² The lack of focus on a male municipal politician's relationship or parental status is in part due to the fact that reporters typically ask female candidates different questions than their male counterparts.⁴³ While reporters tend to focus on female candidate's personal traits and lives, male candidates are privy to questions which highlight their relevant experience and ability to govern and contribute to the municipality.

³⁸ *Supra* note 8 at 15.

³⁹ *Ibid* at 236.

⁴⁰ *Supra* note 11 at 104.

⁴¹ *Ibid*.

⁴² *Ibid* at 105.

⁴³ *Ibid*.

Women, with or without children, consistently outperform men in the hours of unpaid work they complete each day. Globally, women spend between 3 and 6 hours a day on unpaid labour; whereas men only spend between 30 minutes and two hours completing unpaid work.⁴⁴ By assuming domestic and caregiver roles due to social structures within our society, women have less time to participate in economic, political and social activities.⁴⁵ In fact, it is women's unpaid work which often privileges men to enter political spheres. Drew Dilkens, the two-term and current mayor of Windsor, Ontario, said of his wife, Jane Deneau, in his victory speech when he was first elected mayor in 2014: "my wife has been a strong supporter of all my endeavors whether career, academic or political; she has always had my back like I will have the taxpayers back. She has always stood next to me regardless of my pursuit."⁴⁶ As per Deneau's LinkedIn profile, she has been the Director of Project Management at Wireless Ronin Technologies for nearly 22 years. In Dilken's 2018 re-election victory speech, he made no mention of his wife's contributions to his political career, despite her standing next to him during his address.⁴⁷ At the beginning of his political life as a city councillor and later as a first-term mayor, Dilkens' had two school-age children. Even now, Dilkens' children are teenagers who live in the family home and require daily parental support. In short, Dilkens' election would not have been possible without the unpaid labour of Deneau.

While women's unpaid labour benefits male politicians, it also is an obstacle for women as they make their foray into politics. Electoral politics is a system created by men for men. The specific design and procedures of the country's legislatures and councils were created on the basis

⁴⁴ *Supra* note 30 at 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ YouTube, "Drew Dilkens victory speech" (24 March 2018), online: YouTube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4hwXbuH5wI>> at 00h:03m:39s.

⁴⁷ City of Windsor, "Mayor Elect Drew Dilkens 2018-2022 term acceptance speech" (22 October 2018), posted on *City of Windsor*, online: Facebook <<https://www.facebook.com/CityofWindsor/videos/478947522608924/>>.

that men would run for and hold elected office. For the ten councillors elected every four years in Windsor, Ontario, there are 59 council boards and committees on which at least one councillor must sit.⁴⁸ The role of a city councillor in Windsor is regarded as part-time. While all municipalities across the country have selected different council meeting times, the city of Windsor's meeting structure is especially prohibitive to women with children. Windsor's monthly city council meetings take place on Monday nights beginning at 6pm. Depending on the agenda of the meeting, these meetings can span long into the night. Unlike the House of Commons, municipalities do not have on-site childcare for councillors and both Canada and Ontario do not have federal or provincial policies on affordable childcare. For women with school-aged children, meetings which take place outside of the school-day hours are prohibitive in nature to their participation.

It is important to note that municipal politics is seen as an 'easier' venue for women to begin their political careers. While municipal government hosts many barriers to women, it is also seen as the gateway for women to have political success precisely because it is close to home and their domestic responsibilities.⁴⁹ While provincial and federal politics would almost undoubtedly require a woman to live part-time in a different city, municipal politics permit a woman to live at home while juggling her domestic and elected responsibilities simultaneously.

Women in municipal politics can never truly "win". During municipal elections and the subsequent years spent on council if elected, women face significant pressure from the media which both blames them for spending too much or too little time on childrearing activities. Consider 2018 Winnipeg mayoral candidate, Jenny Motkaluk. Motkaluk, the only female

⁴⁸ City of Windsor, "Agencies, Board, Committees, Commissions Council Appointments Term 2015-2018" (Windsor: 19 June 2017).

⁴⁹ *Supra* note 9 at 14.

candidate in the eight-way race finished a distant second to incumbent mayor Brian Bowman.⁵⁰ Both Bowman and Motkaluk are married. Bowman is the father to two school-aged sons, and Motkaluk is the mother to one school-aged daughter. The *Winnipeg Free Press* published an opinion piece by political columnist, Dan Lett, three weeks before the election titled, “Staying at home, playing Monopoly doesn’t get votes.”⁵¹ The article was in reference to Motkaluk’s absence from Winnipeg’s Nuit Blanche event (an annual all night celebration of art and culture). Instead of attending the busy Saturday night event where there were an expected 20,000 attendees, Motkaluk tweeted a photo which pinpointed her whereabouts to her family’s dining room table, playing the Winnipeg version of Monopoly with her husband and daughter.⁵² Lett noted that while family time is important, “when so many potential voters gather in one place at one time, it’s essential that mayoral candidates put an oversized campaign button on their lapel [...] and wade into the crowds.”⁵³ Motkaluk responded to the piece with a blog post on her campaign website. Motkaluk “fact checked” Lett’s claims and explained that while Bowman was posing for photo opportunities at Nuit Blanche, she was at a three-hour meeting with volunteers and campaign staff at her campaign headquarters.⁵⁴ It was only after Motkaluk arrived home following a long day of campaigning that she began a game of Monopoly with her family at 10:15pm.⁵⁵ As for Bowman, nobody questioned where his two sons were during his evening spent mingling at Nuit Blanche.

⁵⁰ “Election results: Winnipeg mayor, council and plebiscite”, *Winnipeg Free Press* (24 October 2018), online: <<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/civicelection2018/All-Winipeg-2018-civ-498447311.html>>.

⁵¹ Dan Lett, “Staying at home, playing Monopoly doesn’t get votes”, *Winnipeg Free Press* (4 October 2018), online: <<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/civicelection2018/staying-at-home-playing-monopoly-doesnt-get-votes-495111021.html>>.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Jenny Motkaluk, “Open Letter to Dan Lett in response to his ‘Opinion’ piece on Oct. 4, 2018 in the Winnipeg Free Press titled “Staying at Home, Playing Monopoly Doesn’t Get Votes” (5 October 2018), *Jenny Motkaluk for Mayor* (blog), online: <<https://jennyformayor.ca/open-letter-to-dan-lett-in-response-to-his-opinion-piece-on-oct-4-2018-in-the-winnipeg-free-press-titled-staying-at-home-playing-monopoly-doesnt-get-votes/>>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

For men, having young children at home is seldom an issue while they run for and hold municipal office.⁵⁶

Historically, there is also a lack of accommodation for women who balance their role as a municipal politician with unpaid domestic labour. Across the country, the role of a municipal politician varies from a full-time employee to a part-time employee. However, some might argue that the role of a politician at any level of government is always a full-time job. Only in 2016 did the province of Ontario amend the *Municipal Act* to allow municipal politicians up to 20 weeks of maternity/paternity leave.⁵⁷ In order to have more diverse municipal governments, the laws governing these structures must reflect the current social climate. The previous iteration of the *Act* and even this amendment favours older councillors who are semi-retired and/or have no children or grown children.⁵⁸ How can we reasonably expect women to run for municipal government when in Ontario the role did not account for maternity leave until only two years ago? As per the *Employment Standards Act*, a pregnant employee is entitled to a leave of absence without pay up to 17 weeks in length.⁵⁹

The regulation of women's bodies by the state is not a new issue. In Nova Scotia, April 2018 amendments to the *Municipal Government Act* and the *Halifax Charter* now allow councillors who are pregnant or recent parents to miss up to three council meetings "without risk of losing their seat and without financial penalty for up to 52 weeks."⁶⁰ Under previous legislation, councillors would automatically lose their seats for missing three consecutive council meetings

⁵⁶ *Supra* note 11 at 102.

⁵⁷ *Municipal Act*, S.O. 2001, c. 25 s 259(1.1).

⁵⁸ Jane Sims, "London committee exploring change to Municipal Act that would give elected officials 20 weeks parental leave", *The London Free Press* (14 November 2016), online: <<https://lfpres.com/2016/11/14/london-committee-exploring-change-to-municipal-act-that-would-give-elected-officials-20-weeks-parental-leave/wcm/b30906f4-3b28-af68-bbc2-803c81e833b6>>.

⁵⁹ *Employment Standards Act*, S.O. 2000, c. 41 s 46-47.

⁶⁰ "Nova Scotia removes maternity leave penalties for municipal councilors", *Global News* (6 April 2018), online: <<https://globalnews.ca/news/4127725/nova-scotia-removes-maternity-leave-penalties-for-municipal-councillors/>>.

and parental leave was only granted by a motion of council and publicly debated.⁶¹ Under the new amendments to the *Act*, pregnant/new parent councillors do not need to seek approval from council prior to taking maternity/paternity leave.

Not all women are married and/or have children. For the purposes of this paper, to illustrate the barriers to women's roles on municipal councils, it is necessary to explore the relationship between mothering and municipal government. Mothering is also a deeply intersectional issue. Women with children from higher income brackets – women who are more likely to seek political office to begin with – can often afford to hire domestic help.⁶² While mothering does not rule out women as elected officials, it often delays their entry into the electoral field and confines their political careers to municipal politics as to be near their domestic responsibilities.⁶³

Being seen and being ignored

Women in municipal politics face a heightened sense of visibility in their elected role. Municipal politicians are highly visible to both constituents and the media as they live and work in their home community. Women who hold municipal office can be seen around their community in the official capacity of their role, for example, at city council and constituency events and in domestic roles, for example, at the grocery store or their child's school concert. The visible nature of a municipal politician invites a breeding ground for unwelcome attention and harassment. Michelle Holland served as a Toronto city councillor from 2010-2018. Over the course of a singular year in office, Holland received over 200 professions of love and sexually charged

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Supra* note 8 at 237.

⁶³ *Ibid* at 238.

comments from one constituent alone.⁶⁴ These uninvited advances were received over social media and a series of mailed cards and gifts.⁶⁵ This constituent did not remain anonymous and posted regularly on social media with messages to and about Holland. These messages were eerie as they begged “please, let me touch you again like [last week]” and warned “you are being watched, followed by angels, my revenge”.⁶⁶ As municipal politicians meet hundreds of constituents during their campaigns and tenure in office, Holland was unsure if she had ever even met the man who was seemingly obsessed with her.

During campaigns, most men are evaluated on the basis of merit whereas their female challengers are often viewed based on their perceived sexual and behavioural attitudes. Former Toronto city councillor (2010-2018) Mary-Margaret McMahon faced sexism and harassment during her campaigns and while on the job. During her 2014 re-election campaign, McMahon’s team found a website titled “Spank mob boss Mary-Margaret McMahon” which featured a game similar to whack-a-mole.⁶⁷ When reached by the *Toronto Star*, the website’s creator opposed the notion that the website was misogynistic even though the game targeted a singular female city councillor.⁶⁸ The creator of the website did “openly admit to being sexist” as “sexism is a normal state of mind for a heterosexual male. Men and women are not ‘equal’”.⁶⁹ It is these attitudes which pervade municipal spaces and dissuade women from seeking municipal office. Further, cities have limited power when it comes to addressing concerns municipal politicians have about harassment from constituents.⁷⁰ As per Toronto’s integrity commissioner, Valerie Jepson, “neither councillors,

⁶⁴ Samantha Beattie, “Toronto’s female elected officials face sexual harassment, threats on job”, *Toronto Star* (2 February 2018), online: <https://www.thestar.com/news/city_hall/2018/02/02/torontos-female-elected-officials-face-sexual-harassment-threats-on-job.html>.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

nor constituents are considered city employees and therefore aren't under the control of the city".⁷¹ As such, no solution has been developed to manage, monitor, or combat harassment against municipal politicians by constituents.

While women in municipal politics face heightened visibility on superficial issues, they conversely face an uphill battle to being seen and heard when it comes to substantive policy. Ana Bailao, a current third-term Toronto city councillor has spoken about the gender discrimination she has faced and witnessed while holding office.

“There's a discrepancy. Women councillors have to work a lot harder and be a lot stronger and more assertive than a lot of male councillors. It is how the media perceives and talks about female and male councillors. Sometimes we say the exact same thing and the male councillor gets (coverage), and the female councillor doesn't get a peep.”⁷²

Women's participation in municipal politics goes against historical gender norms.⁷³ When women's policy recommendations and opinions are ignored and viewed as secondary to those of their male colleagues, women are forced to aggressively champion their political and policy goals. When women assert themselves within a political sphere, they are seen as going against the norm, as women have been socialized to be demure, caring participants in democracy.⁷⁴ As such, women cannot win. Either their public policy opinions and suggestions go ignored – talked over by their male colleagues – or they are seen as too assertive in their pursuit of political equality.

Potential solutions

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Supra* note 11 at 101.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

The low numbers of women among political decision makers at the local level needs to be addressed through positive and tangible measures.⁷⁵ When women seek municipal office, other women in their communities feel a sense of “linked fate” with the candidate.⁷⁶ The idea behind this is that when persons from historically underrepresented groups seek office, those who see themselves represented by the candidate view them as “fulfilling a mandate of difference.”⁷⁷ When municipal councils are not comprised of at least 30% women, they are delegitimized as an institution as declared by the United Nations.⁷⁸ As the electorate very gradually squeaks towards this legitimization, would mandating parity through by-law reform cause more harm than good?

Many university student government bodies mandate specific representation on their councils. For example, the Board of Directors for the University of Manitoba Students’ Union is comprised of an elected executive team and elected council. The council is made up of members from each faculty and also includes board positions for the following communities: Accessibility Community Representative, Indigenous Students’ Association, International Community Representative, LGBTTQ* Representative and Womyn’s Community Representative.⁷⁹ Currently, some of these positions are vacant, however the mere existence of these roles ensures that if every single other board position was held by the stereotypical archetype of a politician, those from marginalized communities would still have representation on the board.

Outside of ivory tower institutions, this mechanism for equitable representation could be used on municipal councils. Ward governance could remain intact, and space could also be opened up to allow a women’s representative, LGBTTQ* representative, or others depending on how large

⁷⁵ *Supra* note 20 at 186.

⁷⁶ *Supra* note 11 at 96.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Supra* note 20.

⁷⁹ University of Manitoba Students’ Union, “Board of Directors” (2018), online: <<https://umsu.ca/about/council/#1501643307062-2c9c5042-0be3>>.

municipalities would be open to growing their governing bodies. These councillors would be members-at-large, as their constituency would encompass the entire municipality for the issues on which they were elected to represent. While this solution is a reasonable suggestion, it is unlikely to ever take effect and could face backlash from existing councillors and the community. Electing municipal representatives on the basis of their ‘otherness’ and diversity runs the risk of accusations of tokenism. Further, “merely having more members of traditionally disadvantaged groups in office [does not] necessarily ensure that those members will act on behalf of members of traditionally disadvantaged groups.”⁸⁰ In order to have more women on municipal councils, we must restructure the system which has excluded them for far too long. This includes reforms to policy, procedure and political operations. This process will take time and will require the willingness of male municipal politicians to recognize the benefits of having female municipal politicians on their team and simultaneously make space for them.

Conclusion

Despite years of organized feminism and the advancement of women throughout society, women still have a long road ahead of them to achieving parity – or even 30% representation – in municipal politics. A more just society begins at home. In order to uphold and achieve truly democratic governance institutions, municipalities must make a concentrated effort to bring more women onto councils. While the barriers to municipal office that women face show no signs of disappearing, municipalities can work together to create equitable solutions which would encourage more women to seek municipal office. Gender stereotyping and discrimination is embedded in our society and plays an enormous role in the barriers women face when running for

⁸⁰ *Supra* note 11 at 95.

municipal election. Women are seen as less assertive than men, and when women do assert themselves, they are seen as being too aggressive.⁸¹ For far too long women have not been able to win.⁸² It is time for women to ‘stand their ground’ and change the face of municipal politics to represent a more democratic and vibrant society.

⁸¹ *Ibid* at 97.

⁸² *Supra* note 1.

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