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## **WOMEN AND POLITICS: OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN LEADERSHIP**

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## SUMMARY

This is a collaborative project at the University of Guelph involving the Research Shop, the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW), and a faculty member of the Political Science department at the University of Guelph. CFUW Guelph is the local chapter of the CFUW national organization that is dedicated to women's advancement and gender equality. The overarching goal for CFUW Guelph is to increase the number of women politicians in the 2018 municipal election. The aims of this project were two-fold. First, the faculty member of the Department of Political Science and her student produced a literature review that informed the data analysis framework of the second portion of the project. In this second portion, we aimed to collect and analyze community data to serve as a guide for CFUW Guelph in supporting women in Guelph-Wellington to seek public leadership roles.

To bring us to this aim, we conducted interviews and focus groups. We interviewed 16 women who had run for, and were in public office. These positions included MP, MPP, Mayor, City Councillor, and Schoolboard Trustee. Additionally, we held 3 focus groups with women who are interested in politics and public leadership.

Our qualitative data analysis confirms the existence of obstacles that women in the Guelph-Wellington community endure when involved in leadership and politics. Our participants identified numerous cultural, psychological, institutional, and socioeconomic barriers. Participants further raised specific motivations that lead women to pursue leadership positions and the necessary supports that assist women in doing so. Solutions to overcoming the barriers women face were also discussed, with participants identifying the need for political mentors, cultural shifts to overcome misogyny, more opportunities for community participation, family oriented policies, and community-based support for women running for leadership positions.

The results of this research will provide CFUW Guelph with some key considerations for moving forward. During the completion of this report, we learned that the Women and Politics committee formed by CFUW Guelph has begun the development of a Campaign School in spring 2018, to be proceeded by a launch in the fall to get women and their supporters engaged.



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## INTRODUCTION

This report, prepared for the Guelph Chapter of the Canadian Federation of Women (CFW), is the result of the second phase of a collaborative project at the University of Guelph, involving the Research Shop and CFW Guelph. This project aims to support women in Guelph-Wellington and surrounding communities to seek leadership roles, particularly those who might consider running for political office or public boards of directors. The main goal of this portion of the research was to:

- To support CFW Guelph in creating a leadership training session for those wishing to stand in the municipal elections in 2018, and other leadership roles.

The first phase of this project included a University of Guelph, Political Science faculty member, and an undergraduate student. The undergraduate student undertook a literature review on women in municipal politics to illustrate the barriers women endure, as well as emphasize the lack of attention given to local politics. This report includes literature from the first phase, but will primarily discuss the results from the second phase, in which we conducted interviews and focus groups with women in the community.

## Background

Academic research on women in politics has identified numerous institutional, cultural, and socio-economic barriers that contribute to the under-representation of women in politics (Brodie, 1985; Lawless & Fox, 2010; Trimble et al, 2013). While there has been a growth in literature regarding women's overall involvement in politics, generally, research has been focused on representation at federal and provincial levels; little scholarship has been conducted locally. The limited literature on women in city politics suggests that women may face a "municipal advantage", which assumes that the barriers women face are less prevalent at the local level (Bashevkin, 1985; 2009). Empirical studies, however contradict the theoretical underpinnings of such an advantage. In Canada, for example, a municipal advantage is only observable in a few regions; the under-representation of women is clear at all levels (Tolley, 2011).

The literature and anecdotal evidence in Guelph point to gender-related issues rising out of women's experiences when becoming politicians. The political climate in Guelph during the last municipal election in 2014 was tense, with women candidates voicing concern about how technology was being used to intimidate and bully women



candidates, and to influence voters. It was pointed out that the use of social media exacerbates issues surrounding bullying, hate speech, safety and harassment, and the amount of external scrutiny experienced by public figures - leading to an environment characterized by negativity.

## METHODS

This research focused on identifying the barriers that women in Guelph face to running for public office and other leadership roles. To accomplish this task, we conducted 16 interviews and 3 focus groups.

The anecdotal evidence from the 2014 election prompted CFUW Guelph to want an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of local women politicians. As such, our recruitment was deliberate and non-random. We first identified local women politicians through an online search. Next, a non-probability sampling strategy was used which involved snow-ball and convenience sampling. From this strategy, we ultimately ended up with a list of 20 politicians. Subsequently, an interview guide was developed by the researchers, and was used in the interviews by all interviewers. This step ensured that all participants were answering similar questions; it was structured so that the order and wording of questions were flexible, and ideas could emerge through conversation. Interview participants answered open-ended questions, in person or over the phone, which queried information about their experience in leadership and politics. In total, we interviewed 16 women. These positions included MP, MPP, Mayor, City Councillor, and Schoolboard Trustee. In addition, we held 3 focus groups with women who are interested in politics and public leadership.

The community partner further wanted to know what hinders young women from entering politics and public leadership positions. As another data collection tool, 3 focus groups were held over November and December 2016. The goal of the focus groups was to satisfy CFUW's interest in learning more about how to engage young people in leadership and politics. Accordingly, the focus groups were intended to target younger women who had little experience in this context. The inclusionary criteria for focus group participants was only such that participants be women who were interested in learning about how to become involved in public leadership and politics. One focus group was held on the University of Guelph campus (to elicit uptake from younger women) and two focus groups were held in the community. One of the community focus groups was held at Shelldale, which is a not-for-profit organization that aims to enrich quality of life for



Guelph residents. Participants were asked similar questions about what role they consider gender to play in a public and political context. The answering format was interactive, with participants writing in notebooks, on large Bristol boards, and orally.

Following the interviews and focus groups, a thematic analysis was conducted. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis strategy used to identify common themes throughout the data. We employed a more deductive approach which used identified codes from the literature review, which were then grouped into themes (background; motivations; context; support; as well as institutional, socio-economic, psychological, and cultural barriers).

## RESULTS/FINDINGS

Our results showcase the ways in which women are motivated to participate in leadership, the supports they require, and the specific barriers they contend with. Our data speaks to the ongoing gender inequalities within public office and the existing cultural, psychological, socioeconomic and institutional factors that inhibit the participation of women in various leadership roles. Although barriers were often identified by participants, numerous solutions were also brainstormed. These proposed solutions include policy changes, systemic and cultural changes, as well as various programs and tools to encourage women to participate in leadership.

### Motivations and Supports

Interview participants were asked to reflect on their personal histories and motivations for becoming politically engaged, to allow us to identify common pathways to involvement. We also asked interview participants to elaborate on the types of people and organizations that assisted them throughout their process to participate in leadership roles, throughout their lifetimes. These questions allowed us to identify the supports that are needed for other women, who may not be aware of or exposed to similar people and organizations.

Many of the women interviewed were already civically engaged, particularly before they decided to run for public office. Nearly a quarter of women volunteered; some were involved in union activity, committee work or leadership roles at their children's schools. Education and issues of social justice, including poverty, were other factors that were raised. Political interest was also a significant motivator; in particular, they spoke of representation and the importance of having a voice. Many entered politics thinking



about community-building, being a change-maker, leader, and for reasons of social justice. For instance, one woman stated that, “none of us went into it as a career aspiration...it was about social justice and community activism” (Interview Participant).

These findings were interesting considering the responses from focus group members, regarding their understanding of politics. While women we interviewed had largely issue-based motivations, focus group members felt that leaders and those in political power, “did not have real-life experience” (Focus Group Participant). Focus group participants tended to associate politicians and politics with corruption, power, greed and control. Words such as negativity, hostility, high risk, competition, and inaccessibility were used to describe politics. These findings are interesting considering what the interview participants noted about why they got into politics. One focus group participant pointed out that this contradictory dynamic is defined as ‘ego dystonic’, which refers to when people’s thoughts and behaviors conflict with a person's own self-image. From this we learn that women politicians’ identities and understanding of politics conflict with how politics is defined from the outside.

In relation to the motivations for engaging in leadership, interview participants highlighted people and organizations that bolstered them throughout their political careers. A majority of participants (10 out of 16 interview participants) identified their family, including spouses and children, as a form of support. Having a supportive family was often identified as essential to participants’ success.

Having a strong reputation through community contribution and grassroots connections was also mentioned by half of the interview participants (8 out of 16) as a factor in success. Support from the public was the second most commonly cited support – with many participants arguing that previous engagement activities led to an increase in community support when they decided to run.

Mentors and other political candidates were also recognized as supplying participants with support; female candidates and other women in politics were discussed by 5 out of 16 interview participants. As one interview participant stated, “I’m sitting here today because a woman took the time and saw potential and removed barriers for me” (Interview Participant).

Participants further acknowledged organizations as forms of support, with 3 interview participants identifying the Guelph District Labour Council, and participants in one focus





group repeatedly mentioning Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis, a local community-based organization providing services to address abuse and sexual violence.

## Barriers

Further to these questions, interview participants were asked what barriers they faced when running for public office. With focus group participants, we inquired about their knowledge of barriers that women face when participating in leadership, and why they may abstain from certain positions. We additionally inquired about specific factors that impact the decisions women make regarding leadership positions in the community.

Like the literature on women in politics, we have divided the barriers our participants identified into cultural, psychological, socioeconomic and cultural barriers, and will discuss each in turn.

## Cultural Barriers

Cultural barriers were commonly discussed by participants. Many participants (7/16 interview participants and participants in all focus groups) identified familial obligations as a barrier to running for office. For example, participants argued that, in a heterosexual nuclear household, it is more acceptable for a man to be away from his family than a woman; women have multiple responsibilities in comparison to men and are expected to be more concerned with family life. The expectations of motherhood, in a heterosexual nuclear household, are still major deterrents.

Social media and internet were the second most discussed barriers among interview participants. The introduction of the Internet was associated with increased bullying and harassment. Four of the interview participants (out of 6) that have run for City Council had experienced social media harassment with some gender-related comments. One participant believed that women witnessing others experience such bullying could act as an inhibiting factor to participation.

Misogyny and multiple job responsibilities, were other barriers stated by interview and focus group participants. For example, participants voiced that people attack women in different ways, such as clothing for women, and policy for men. And in another way, participants explained that women face contending expectations regarding their behaviour - such as being diminutive, while at the same time, exceedingly competent. Many argued that women often suppress their leadership because they are judged as being bossy - rather than a positive quality - such as being assertive. Ageism and



sexism were also significant for participants, often discussed as barriers endemic to politics and leadership.

### Psychological Barriers

The psychological barriers experienced by women are considerable. Women in interviews expressed that double-standards and stereotypes about gender roles are major factors when in politics and public leadership. Eight women expressed that double-standards are an obstacle, and 5 women expressed that a lack of confidence is a major factor. Due to these reasons, women are prone to bearing larger burdens while also being self-effacing, lacking confidence in ability and experience, and feeling like an imposter. In the first focus group, psychological barriers discussed included a lack of confidence, a fear of rejection, and less credibility in a male-dominated environment. These findings are similar to what the women in interviews pointed to as barriers.

Women in the Shelldale focus group believed that there is a perception that women who stay at home to care for children are not going to be able to have a successful political career. For some, this related to a feeling they had that others perceived their work of raising children as insignificant and not credible. Participants noted, "Women running [for public office] are established career-wise. [They are] not stay at home moms, and they are very involved in their cities" (Focus Group Member). And, "I hate listing my occupation as homemaker" (Focus Group Member).

A lack of confidence was significant for these women, as was a lack of validation. They spoke about other people, in many cases men, speaking for them, and being the action-takers.

### Socioeconomic Barriers

Interview participants likewise highlighted socio-economic barriers. One fifth of socio-economic barriers identified within interviews related to a lack of accessible family care.

Similarly, family care was a significant barrier for women in the Shelldale focus group. Half of all mentions of socio-economic barriers were either related to family care or the general burden of responsibility placed on women. Much of the discussion was taken up by the intersection of socio-economic and cultural barriers that force women to choose between caring for their children or achieving their broader goals. For example, one woman noted, "I want an education, a title...but I question myself: do I give up nurturing my babies?" (Focus Group Member).



Challenges of funding/fundraising and access to potential donors, were also acknowledged by interview participants as key factors. "...men [will have] business contacts versus women coming from social services...therefore men are more likely to have contacts that are more likely to contribute" (Interview Participant).

Remuneration was also an issue for women, stating that "it is a part-time job, with full time hours, but not full time pay" (Interview Participant). The small wage of local politicians, and the long hours the job entails, were a barrier for interview participants. There was general recognition among participants that unless candidates (for Trustee or Councillor) could rely on a partner salary, or were retired with benefits, additional employment was needed. At the same time, other sources of income conflicted with running for, or holding a public office; although a second job was most often necessary for financial survival, a job in public office does not always allow enough time to have other sources of employment.

### **Institutional Barriers**

Several participants mentioned issues and obstacles that could be classified as institutional barriers. Many of the institutional barriers were related to the difficulties of running for public office and local politics. The time needed to run a campaign was discussed by numerous participants, as was the complexity of running, and the lack of information regarding its complexity (such as the process of getting nominated).

Finally, a lack of resources at the local level, including support staff, hours, and information were also institutional barriers identified by participants.

### **Solutions**

Participants were often energized when asked about potential solutions to overcoming the barriers outlined above. A majority of the solutions proposed by participants focused on having a support system including role models, a strong network, and a robust team. Initiatives to assist women in this goal were mentioned as a solution.

More than half of the interview participants (9/16) and participants at 2 focus groups identified mentorship to encourage women, particularly former female politician role models. To combat negative aspects of social media, more professional advice on social media and online bullying were identified as necessary to support women in politics (3 interview participants). In a general way, women discussed the need for an accountability mechanism to limit the harm caused by online aggressors.



Half of the interview participants believed that there must be more opportunities for women to have their voices heard in the broader community including networking, civic affair groups, advocacy (more knowledge about politics), outreach services, practical coaching (door-to-door scenarios), education (including general civic programs), which are ways to enable women to be more involved in politics.

Focus group participants discussed having more family-friendly policies such as flexible parental leave, universal income, inexpensive family care and education. Other participants believed that workshops to prepare female candidates could be helpful to women for support; information packages, connections with local organizations and educating women were also mentioned.

Other solutions included:

- Encouraging and promoting men to encourage women
- Ensuring that institutions are more welcoming to women of all backgrounds and abilities; applying a gender-lens and intersectional lens to organizations
- Having organizations promote the leadership of women (organizations cited included: YWCA, Rhyze, Innovation Guelph, Federation of Canadian Municipalities)
- A Campaign School
- Assistance with campaign signs and posters
- Distributing more information on the process
- A 1-800 help line for women running as candidates
- Accessible legal advice

## IMPLICATIONS

This research has identified key factors influencing women who run for leadership positions, the supports they require, the barriers they face, and some possible solutions. The results elucidate the current impediments women in the Guelph community contend with, providing the Guelph Chapter of CFUW necessary information to support women in leadership. Solutions offered by participants will also assist CFUW organize the



Campaign school, generate a list of resources, and identify possible policy changes needed to allow women equal opportunity in leadership.

## CONCLUSIONS

The data from our qualitative interviews and focus groups provide important information regarding the barriers women face to leadership. Participants discussed their own personal experiences as well as the experiences of other women, identifying specific impediments. Participants also discussed their views on politics, what motivates them to run for various positions, and what support women require when doing so. Participants were very vocal regarding their lived experiences, and were eager to share solutions for how to move forward.

Overall, this research provides information regarding the detailed experiences of women politicians in the Guelph community. These results point to areas of interest for the Guelph Chapter of CFUW to support women in the community.

### Limitations of the Report

Due to our sampling method, our sample of participants is not representative of the local women politician population at large. We employed purposive sampling for interview participants; we wanted to engage with women who are currently in public office, or who had previously held public office, so we cannot generalize beyond our sample. Furthermore, our recruitment for focus group participants asked for women interested in politics, which regrettably limited our sample to certain demographics who were available during the times of the focus groups. This method failed to include participants at different social positions, such as gender, age and ethnicity. More research must be conducted at the intersection of these variables, to understand diverse women's experiences.



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