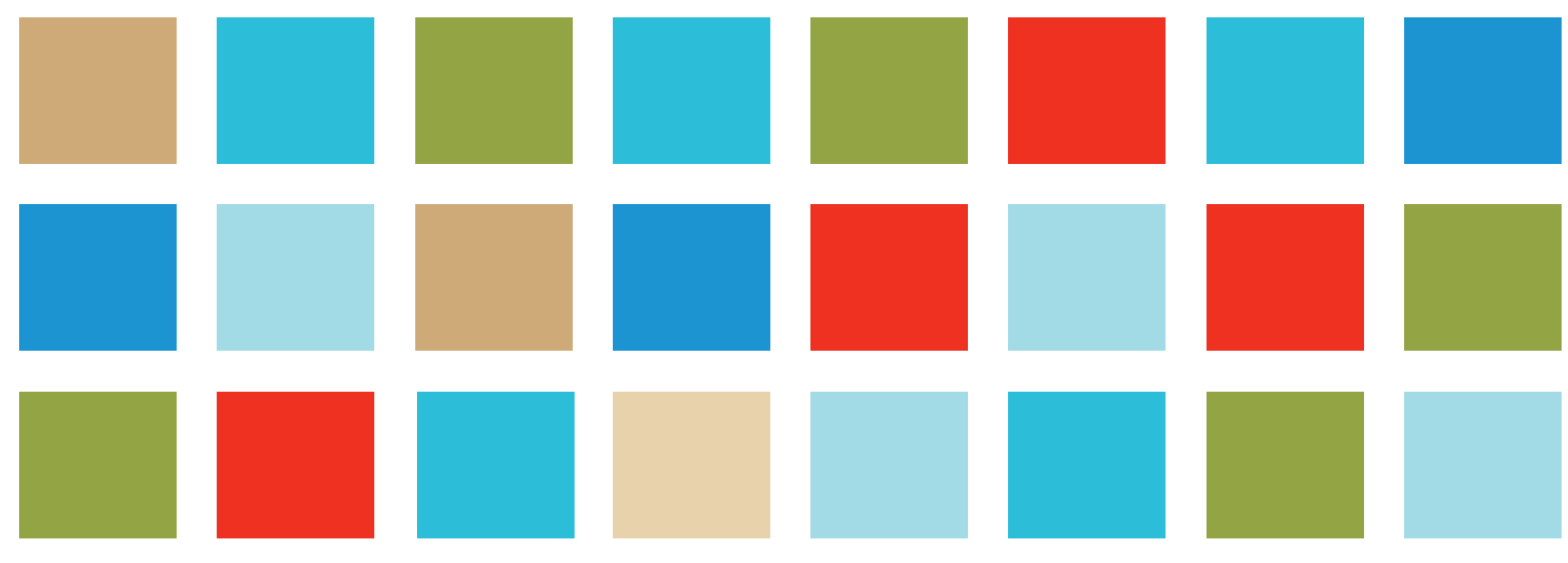


what we know...



The Research Shop

Introduction and Research Goals

After gender-related concerns surfaced during the 2014 municipal election, the Guelph Chapter of the Confederation of University Women (CFUW) identified the need to increase resources and support for local women pursuing political and public leadership positions. CFUW approached the Research Shop to assist in identifying the barriers women face when running for leadership roles in the community. The goals were three-fold: 1) To create a leadership training session for those wishing to stand the municipal and provincial elections in 2018 and other leadership roles; 2) To generate a list of resources that would be useful to women candidates; 3) To identify possible policy changes that would help alleviate systemic barriers. We specifically asked questions around:

- What motivates women to participate in politics?
- What forms of support do women receive when running?
- What barriers do women face when holding and running for leadership positions?
- What are possible solutions to women overcoming such barriers?

Background

Literature 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). However, we find two issues with the literature:

- 1) Although the literature on women in politics addresses a breadth of issues, we find that there is a lack of scholarship that is generated by and for women, in particular at the local level.
- 2) There is often mention of a “municipal advantage”, when thinking of women’s participation in local politics; it is assumed that many of the identified barriers do not apply to municipal politics. However, 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).

Methods

Together with CFUW Guelph, researchers from the Research Shop designed a qualitative study involving interviews and focus groups. For the interviews, we wanted to speak with women who were currently or had been involved in public leadership roles. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants through email. Those who expressed interest were booked for an interview with a member of our research team. In total we interviewed 16 women. Of these women, 58% of all campaigns were run within the last 10 years. 15 campaigns were successful and 11 were not.

Researchers also held 3 focus groups with women in the community who are interested in public leadership and politics. The average attendance at the focus group was 15 people.

Limitations

Due to our sampling technique, the sample of participants is not representative of the 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. Furthermore, our recruitment for focus group participants asked for women interested in politics, which skewed our sample to certain demographics who were available during the times of the focus groups. This limited our investigation of the intersection of variables such as gender, age and ethnicity.

WOMEN AND LOCAL POLITICS

Overcoming Barriers to Participation in Leadership

The Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW) Guelph is the local chapter of a national organization that is dedicated to women’s advancement and gender equality (www.cfuwguelph.org). Membership is open to all women interested in their programming and the organization strives to advance the status of women, encourage active participation of women, support excellence among women, and promote cooperation among like-minded organizations.

Table 1: Examples of Barriers Women Face to Leadership

Institutional Barriers	Socio-Economic Barriers	Cultural Barriers	Psychological Barriers
Time	Family care	Familial obligations	Double-standards
Complexity of the political process	Lack of resources (income, funding, access to networks)	Societal expectations	Lack of confidence
Low wages	Long hours and low wages	Social media and the internet (harassment)	Fear of rejection
Conflicts with existing jobs		Misogyny	Lack of credibility
Lack of resources		Sexism	

RESEARCH FINDINGS

“Barriers are so deeply rooted that it won’t take a woman to overcome them, but a generation of women to overcome them”

- Participants identified that women face institutional, cultural, socio-economic and psychological barriers when running for leadership positions and local public office
- Institutional barriers such as the effort and time to run a campaign, the complexity of running, the small wages for local politicians and a lack of information regarding the process were cited by several interview participants.
- Familial obligations, misogyny and sexism were regarded as important cultural barriers by participants.
- The increased use of the internet and social media have added an additional barrier for women wanting to run for political office. 4 out of 16 interview participants had experienced social media harassment and many others had heard of female candidates that were harassed, which they believed was a major deterrent for women.
- Psychological barriers experienced by women are considerable. Gender roles and double standards were identified as barriers that led to women having a lack confidence when running for leadership roles.
- A majority of participants (10 out of 16 interview participants, and participants in 2 focus groups) identified their families as forms of support, regarding strong support systems as necessary for women in leadership.
- Half of the interview participants also cited the importance of grassroots and public connections when running for public office; ensuring women have community networks before taking on leadership positions was found to be critical.

CONCLUSIONS

Although participants identified numerous existing barriers to women running for public office or holding positions of leadership, many were enthusiastic when discussing possible solutions. Proposed solutions included:

- **Mentorship** – a majority of participants identified the importance of a mentor, such as other female politicians and candidates.
- **Support system** – the need for a strong support system and campaign team was also emphasized by participants.
- **Advice and resources** – more professional advice and resources (such as a Campaign School) were deemed necessary for women wanting to run for office.
- **Increased opportunities** – for women to participate in their communities was also emphasized for women to build the necessary networks and support system.
- **Policies oriented towards women** – such as more family friendly policies were also discussed to better support women in leadership roles.
- **Programs and resources need to be tailored to women running for public office and leadership roles in order to assist them in overcoming barriers and to encourage their broader participation.**

Researchers

Yuriko Cowper-Smith, Research Shop Project Manager
Anna Kopec, Research Shop Intern
Tara Sutton, Research Shop Intern

For more information, please contact cesi@uoguelph.ca

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