



RESETTING NORMAL:

GENDER, INTERSECTIONALITY AND LEADERSHIP



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Resetting Normal is a series of reports on gender equality and the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. They explore risks to human rights exposed by the pandemic and propose new ways to build a gender-equal Canada in pandemic recovery efforts.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people have been leading effective responses to multiple ongoing crises through political leadership, community organizing, and public health roles. Women in medicine and public health working in a crucial, yet generally underfunded, health sector appear daily at press conferences across the country to explain COVID-19 and guide public behaviour, many of them new to the glare of heightened public exposure. Media outlets have praised women leading countries around the world, holding them up as examples to follow – sometimes with a tone of surprise – and favourably compared the results of their decisions to outcomes achieved by men in leadership. This has elicited further discourse, comparative research and commentary on gender and leadership. At the root of this flurry of activity is a persisting intersectional gender justice issue: the under-representation of women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people in public leadership positions, and particularly, in Canada, Black, Indigenous, racialized, and disabled women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people.

At the same time, racist and misogynist violence against women in leadership continues unabated by the global emergency. Systemic discrimination remains deeply embedded, all too often shaping leadership and access for women, and, more deeply for Black, Indigenous, and racialized women and transgender people. The pandemic has thrown this into stark relief. Gender justice requires paths forward for women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people in all their diversity to reach leadership positions and effect change. Dismantling systemic discrimination and increasing meaningful representation requires a priority on creating the conditions for their leadership, including eliminating gender-based violence and harassment, online and offline, and on developing pathways to leadership for Black, Indigenous, and racialized young women, transgender, and Two-Spirit youth.

Throughout the pandemic, women have occupied the frontline of public health leadership and the frontline of COVID-19 care, comprising 70% of health and social care workers in 104 countries globally and earning 11% less than men ([Hutt, 2020](#)). This story is the same in Canada, where primary and long-term care staff are largely women – more than 90% of nurses, 80% of medical lab staff and up to 90% of the personal support workers – many of them Black, racialized, immigrant, migrant, and/or undocumented women ([Statistics Canada, 2016](#)). Many racialized, immigrant, migrant, and/or undocumented women are concentrated in low paying precarious caring jobs with “a high risk of exposure to coronavirus infection and are less likely to offer important protections such as paid sickness leave or health benefits.” ([Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives et al., 2020](#)). Additionally, Black, Indigenous, and racialized women and gender-diverse youth have been leading local responses to the systemic gaps amplified by the pandemic through the creation of mutual-support networks and community emergency response programs, highlighting the leadership potential that is often overlooked in mainstream narratives about gender and leadership. While solving issues such as economic inequality and healthcare access requires holistic, multifaceted and cross-sectoral responses, advancing representation in leadership and decision-making may provide one route for change.

VISIBILITY AND PANDEMIC LEADERSHIP

Across the country, women in public health leadership – medical officers of health (MOHs) and Chief Medical Officers of Health (CMOHs) – have provided regulatory updates, health advice and shared medical knowledge, many on a daily basis, since mid-March 2020. With Dr. Theresa Tam as the national Chief Public Health Officer, and women heading public health in five provinces and the Northwest Territories, this may be the longest sustained period of highly visible women in public sector leadership positions in the country’s history, and during a fast-changing global pandemic. In contrast, positions of political leadership, especially on the federal, provincial, and territorial levels, are largely occupied by men, a stark contrast to 2013, when six women were leading provincial governments in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Nunavut, and governing more than 85% of the country’s population as well as its largest economies.

The motivation to place an intersectional gender lens on leadership in this report is not to engage in a comparison of leadership between individual women and men, or to suggest that leadership provided by any gender is monolithic. Rather, the sudden attention to successful pandemic leadership by women sparked this report because of the dismal under-representation of women in public leadership positions in Canada pre-pandemic, and the deep under-representation of Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, as well as trans, non-binary and Two-Spirit people. Under-representation and inadequate representation in leadership and decision-making have consequences, contributing to ongoing marginalization and inequality. Without meaningful representation, policies, programs and plans will fail to adequately consider the intersectional impacts of decisions. Without adequate inclusion

and input of Black, Indigenous, and racialized women and gender-diverse people, policy decisions will continue to enhance systemic oppression and further marginalize underfunded and underserved communities.

Meaningful inclusion and representation are pillars of good and effective governance. The development of a holistic, intersectional leadership development conduit, combined with systemic reforms in governance models is necessary for developing the conditions for meaningful civic participation and leadership of women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people. From challenging issues such as sexist media coverage and gender-based violence to creating structural reforms such as gender quotas and electoral reform, there must be a multifaceted response to ensure that governments in Canada accurately reflect their populations and serve their needs. Simply put, meaningful representation “allows for even stronger and more vibrant communities,” economies, and governments ([Federation of Canadian Municipalities \(FCM\), 2017, p.7](#)).

From the major contributions of public health leaders such as Dr. Tam and Dr. Eileen De Villa, who have prioritized equity and intersectionality in their COVID-19 response, to the local leaders who have redefined leadership through their ongoing community-focused COVID-19 response, this report seeks to build on an increasingly visible wave of leadership and action by women and gender-diverse people. By celebrating the present moment and highlighting opportunities for improvement, this report aims to reset the conversation on gender, intersectionality, and leadership amid the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

GENDER-RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP - KEY TO FEMINIST COVID-19 RECOVERY

A year into the pandemic, it is well-established that women have been disproportionately impacted. Women in Canada are bearing the brunt of the economic downturn, which paints a grim picture of potential long-term impacts of the pandemic and threatens decades of progress. From frontline health workers to educators to service workers, women in feminized fields have been at the centre of the pandemic response, often for low pay, without job security or protections and with higher exposure to infection ([Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2020](#); [OECD, 2020](#)). Women working from home have faced challenges of juggling work and rising childcare responsibilities during closures of childcare centres and schools and the substitution of virtual education. The accumulation of domestic labour has significantly impacted their ability to work from home, and to rejoin the workforce when local economies open up. One in three Canadian women have considered quitting their jobs to take on additional childcare responsibilities related to virtual education, a decision disproportionately experienced by Black and Indigenous women ([Desjardins & Freestone, 2020](#)). In a survey released June 2020, 49% of Indigenous women and 55% of Black women reported struggling financially due to unpaid care work, compared to only 34% of white women. Increased care responsibilities had caused Indigenous women to give up looking for work at three times the rate of white women ([Bolis et al., 2020](#)).

The economic setbacks have been amplified by rising rates of gender-based violence amid lack of access to services and an exasperated gender-based violence response sector ([Violence Against Women Learning Network, 2020](#)). There is a real risk that these combined pressures will reduce gender engagement in electoral politics, impacting who seeks representative office and who is likely to retain it.

Mutual Aid – Life-Saving Leadership

At the same time, Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people, as well as disabled communities, have given rise to mutual-support networks in response to lack of and/or inadequate government support, a longstanding tradition rooted in survival and resistance, highlighting the range of women's leadership amid an ongoing pandemic ([Mochama, 2020](#)).

Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities and women in particular are often left out of government support and funding, and the lack of support in wake of the pandemic came as no surprise to these groups. Over the course of the pandemic, mutual aid funds have been created to support racialized single mothers, students, those who lost income/employment as a result of the pandemic, and costs associated with housing and groceries. Throughout history, mutual aid has helped people pay rent, have access to health care or childcare, and support people's access to education, legal representation, and other supports.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Ontario-based organization [Black Women in Motion](#) launched *The Love Offering Community Emergency Relief Fund*, supporting “Black Womxn, Non-binary and Gender non-conforming” individuals facing food and income insecurity as a result of COVID-19. Massive google docs were circulated online highlighting different gofundme and donation pages supporting sex workers. Instagram accounts such as @funds4caregivers and @openurpurse were started to allow for direct support for Black women, Black caregivers, and the Black community.

The growth in popularity of mutual aid and advocacy groups highlights what has been the

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greatest support for racialized women and their communities throughout the pandemic - each other.

Leadership in racialized communities has always centered around strength and support from those within the community, who are often the women. Advocacy, community organizing, and mutual support are long standing practices in racialized communities because they are done as acts of survival. Young, racialized women do not choose to advocate for issues that they care about. The ongoing violence and discrimination they and their communities face forces young women into leadership roles as advocates, organizers, and caregivers. Their leadership is not an act of volunteerism, it is an act of survival and self-preservation.

Taken together, the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women, especially Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, call for a multifaceted study of the role of gender-responsive leadership and decision-making to not only respond to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, but rebuild the economy and shift decision-making toward long-term advancement of gender equality. From investing in the gender equality sector to increasing the role and numbers of women in decision-making processes, creating the basis for long-term gender equitable advocacy and decision-making is crucial to the advancement of women and gender-diverse people beyond the COVID-19 pandemic ([OECD, 2020](#)).

CENTERING YOUNG WOMEN, TRANSGENDER, AND TWO-SPIRIT YOUTH

The social and economic setbacks of the COVID-19 pandemic pose significant challenges to the advancement of women's civic engagement and political leadership, as they amplify pre-existing challenges, including gender-based barriers such as imbalanced care responsibilities and economic challenges such as a lack of access to a financial support system. This is especially concerning in the long-term, as young women experienced the majority (59%) of early pandemic job losses by youth, and over one-third (36%) of all job losses reported by women ([Scott, 2020](#)), while receiving significantly less government financial support as students, and graduating into a shrinking and uncertain labour market. While there is no specific data on transgender and Two-spirit youth unemployment levels, employment rates for Canadian youth remain

10% below February 2020 levels, and much further behind the recovery of other major demographic groups ([Statistics Canada, 2020a](#)). This lack of intergenerational, intersectional data undermines government ability to meaningfully respond to the rising needs of young women, transgender, and Two-Spirit youth, especially those from Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities and/or living with disabilities. Whether addressing gender-based violence or improving their economic conditions, COVID-19 recovery measures must take an integrated approach to strengthening the social and economic determinants of civic engagement to create a fertile ground for the civic participation of young women, transgender, and Two-Spirit youth, both on grassroots and institutional levels.

WOMEN'S CIVIC LEADERSHIP IN CANADA

Pre-Colonization

Prior to colonization, women across many Indigenous cultures participated in public life and held leadership positions, responsible for land holdings and allocation of resources (Hanson, 2010). The imposition of colonial rule and ongoing colonizing violence, especially gender-based violence which undermined women's autonomy and power, erased this leadership from law, culture and the mainstream psyche, replacing it with an ahistorical view of First Nation, Métis and Inuit women as powerless, angry, and unprofessional by Canadian standards. On the other hand, in Canadian civic institutions, white women were first granted the right to vote federally only in 1918 and allowed to run for federal office in 1921. It wasn't until the 1960s that all Indigenous women were able to exercise their vote (Tait, 2019).

Women at the Helm

Before 1990, no woman had served as a first minister in Canada, that is, as a provincial or territorial premier or as prime minister. Rita Johnston was the first to break "the glass ceiling", assuming leadership of the governing Social Credit party in British Columbia after the resignation of the party leader and premier in scandal. Like Kim Campbell, who became prime minister after winning the leadership of a federal Progressive Conservative party in popular decline, Premier Johnston was defeated in a general election before the year was out. These two firsts established a pattern common through the 1990s and 2000s of women becoming premiers by winning the leadership race of a governing party that was low in the polls and lost power in the following election. The term "glass cliff" applies to this experience of women elevated to positions of leadership when power is on the wane. Often,

when women reach the upper ranks of power, they're put into precarious positions, and with a higher likelihood of failure and a greater risk of falling (Stewart, 2020). Exceptions to the glass cliff in Canada began with the election of the second woman to serve as first minister, residential school survivor Nellie Cournoyea, who led the government of Northwest Territories 1991-1995 after election through the territory's consensus process. In Prince Edward Island, Catherine Callbeck became premier through a party leadership race in 1993, and then led her party to re-election.

Women leading provincial parties to victory in provincial elections has become more common in recent years, but Canada's political landscape is still rigid and patriarchal. Movement toward long-term gender equitable impact and leadership has not been steady and sustained. The 2010s saw a record-number of women at the helm of provincial governments, with six women leading provincial and territorial governments by 2013, but those ranks slowly thinned as a succession of women premiers covering the range of the political spectrum lost their re-election bids or were pushed out of politics (McQuigge, 2019). Now, amid a pandemic where women leaders have acted swiftly and efficiently to enact public health measures that save lives (Taub, 2020), only Northwest Territories has a woman – Premier Caroline Cochrane – heading a government at the crucial level that delivers health and social services to the public.

Women's voices are significantly missing from the public discourse on pandemic response and post-pandemic economic reconstruction, and this is an issue globally. An international review of just under 150,000 articles on COVID-19 published between March 1 and July 31, 2020, found there were five mentions of men who were politicians for

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every mention of a woman. In articles on childcare and domestic violence, half of those quoted were women, but in economic coverage it was one in six (Jones, 2020). In Canada, insistent messaging from feminists in leadership roles that this is a “she-cession” requiring a “she-covery” and national childcare, combined with a flood of insightful economic analysis from policy organizations, has managed to place the need for a feminist recovery plan with an intersectional gender lens on the federal government agenda (Department of Finance, 2020).

Slow Progress toward Equity

While women make up slightly more than half of the population, they occupy only 29.6% of the seats in Parliament – the highest percentage in history – and representation is significantly lower for Black, Indigenous, and racialized women who face not only multiple barriers to entry, but also to success in Canada’s civic institutions. Although each of the last four elections has returned a new record number of women to the House of Commons, the percentage representation by women only moved from 22% to 29.6% in the twelve years from 2008 to 2020. At the current rate of change, closing this gender gap is more than 30 years away.

The change that has happened is partly due to concentrated efforts by grassroots women’s political advocacy initiatives and partisan focus on nominating an increased number of women but is still too low to adequately represent the voices and needs of Black, Indigenous, and racialized women living at multiple intersections. In municipal governance, women make up only 19% of Canada’s mayors, and 30% of municipal councils of Canada’s largest cities; far short of equal representation, only 12% of municipal councils across Canada have an equal or higher number of women than men

(Ogilvie et al., 2020). A number of multifaceted issues impact candidacy and election to public office for women, but the most significant one is that they don’t run for office at the same rates to men. This may sound simplistic, but it actually describes a complex gap related to gendered, underlying, intersecting, social and economic conditions that support not only electoral success but access to candidacy for women, transgender and Two-Spirit people. From a systemic lack of access to economic safety and financial support to gender-biased and sexist media coverage, they face additional hurdles in their pursuit of public office.

Thirty percent (30%) is accepted as the critical mass needed to create an influential body of decision-makers, and a 40%-60% rate of representation is needed to achieve parity, something only the Yukon and Northwest Territories have managed to accomplish. A gender-first approach alone will not create the mechanisms necessary to advance the electoral success of women, especially Black, Indigenous, and racialized women whose chances of running for office are hindered by growing economic inequality, and whose capacity to meaningfully engage with government decision-making is impacted by systemic challenges including racism and Islamophobia. In addition to achieving a critical mass and parity, there must be a significant focus on addressing underlying social and political challenges that impede on women’s access to political leadership. Leadership opportunities are scarce for most women and are even scarcer for women of diverse and intersectional backgrounds, including women who are Black, Indigenous, and racialized, LGBTQ2S+, newcomers, living with disabilities or earning low incomes. Systemic barriers, stereotypes and biases are among the challenges to women being – and remaining – elected in municipal government. Women of

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diverse backgrounds face these challenges to a higher degree or with compounding impacts (FCM, 2020, p.6).

While Canada's 50-50 women-men federal cabinet and the appointment of the first woman as finance minister have changed the look of political leadership at the federal level, beyond representation, there is much to be done to

ensure adequate and meaningful inclusion of the voices of women, transgender and Two-Spirit people in decision-making. After a century of effort, increasing women's representation in decision-making spaces still requires systemic efforts to challenge inaccessibility and sexism in Canada's civic institutions from political parties to legislatures themselves.

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH AND CIVIC LEADERSHIP

Gender equality is much more than representation and equal statistics. It is heavily reliant on systems and infrastructures that equitably protect and encourage women's participation in all paths of life. That includes intersectional feminist systemic analysis, decision-making, and policy development which is led and informed by the experiences of women and gender-diverse people, particularly those facing compounding barriers to accessing resources and contributing to decision-making. The movement toward building social and economic infrastructure for gender equality requires intentional anti-oppressive and feminist leadership – not just in civic institutions and policy-development spaces, but in spaces where women's leadership, visible and invisible, continues to shape gender-equitable outcomes. That includes women-majority sectors such as healthcare and education, as well as grassroots and community-based initiatives and the nonprofit sector. Whether partisan and political or civic and community-based, leadership does not occur in a vacuum, and is a culmination of skills, passion, necessity, and opportunity shaped by experience and circumstance. To fully grasp women's civic leadership and participation, a systemic lens must be applied to their leadership journeys to paint a clear picture of gaps and areas where access could be improved. Civic engagement and leadership among women and gender-diverse people is closely tied to multiple socio-economic factors including employment status and educational attainment. A holistic analysis of their broader socio-economic circumstance is needed to develop leadership development approaches and opportunities ([Turcotte, 2015](#)).

There is considerable overlap between the social determinants of civic engagement and of health, an intersection that not only explains poor health outcomes and economic participation rates among

women during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also paints a clear picture of the systemic gaps and barriers to women's equitable participation in the economy and decision-making processes. Education and income levels, employment and social status are all determinants of health and of civic participation ([Government of Canada, 2020](#)). The economic impacts of COVID-19 have exacerbated pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities such as lack of access to financial support networks that hinder women's participation in electoral politics ([Mlambo and Kapinguara, 2019](#)). This is not only true in the case of candidates and women interested in running for office, but also among voters. While studies on Canada's voter turnout have not yet focused on the relationship between income and electoral participation, it is known that proxies for income, such as home ownership and education levels, do impact electoral participation ([Uppal and LaRochelle-Côté, 2016](#)).

Creating the conditions for women's full participation in decision-making requires examining the social determinants of civic participation and putting the economic conditions for their leadership advancement in place. It is also crucial to distinguish between institutional and/or corporate leadership and community-based civic leadership. While both categories are influenced by one another, the circumstances for engagement and leadership within each category is defined by a varied set of socio-economic opportunities and experiences that contribute to the reproduction of oppressive power structures that benefit some women and leave the rest behind. Mainstream conversation around leadership focuses on increasing the number of women elected to the House of Commons or appointed to major corporate boards with the result that women and gender-diverse people advocating for and

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advancing the needs of their communities through advocacy and community engagement work are often left out of the equation. At the same time, community-focused initiatives and local leadership are some of women's most common entry points to institutional leadership. In fact, women are more likely to begin their political careers in roles in municipal and local politics, such as municipal council or school boards. Reductions in these positions reduces those entry points and stalls access to representation. Within a democratic

society, all citizens are encouraged and expected to contribute to civic discourse and decision-making, whether through direct actions such as voting or indirect social change through advocacy and group participation. To prioritize one form of civic leadership over another reinforces power hierarchies, most often patriarchal and oppressive in nature, that rarely advance the needs of women and gender-diverse people in substantive ways.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence (GBV), that is, experiencing violence based on gender, gender identity, gender expression, or perceived gender, is a fact of life in Canada and a significant barrier to achieving gender equality. GBV takes many forms: physical, sexual, societal, psychological, emotional, economic and cyber. Neglect, discrimination, and harassment are forms of GBV. In politics, gender-based violence refers to “physical, psychological or sexual aggressions taken to shorten, suspend, impede or restrict the exercise of their office, or force a woman to make decisions against her will” ([International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics, 2014](#)). It is a symptom of sexist, misogynist, ableist and transphobic attitudes that often intersect with racism and colonialism to normalize behaviours which create toxic work environments for women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people engaging with leadership spaces. In politics, those toxic work environments range from grassroots movements to civic institutions.

Gender-based violence in politics is a global phenomenon and a frequent concern of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which issued Guidelines for the elimination of sexism, harassment and violence against women in Parliament in 2019 ([Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019](#)).

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence continues to impede the civic leadership of women and gender-diverse people, undermining their roles in Canadian politics at all levels. From sexual harassment in the form of sexist comments and jokes to sexual assaults such as groping and rape, sexual violence largely continues to be dealt with behind closed doors and through whisper networks despite its prevalence in political institutions and spaces across Canada. It is a health, social, and public

safety issue that continues to discourage women and gender-diverse people from entering the political arena, and drives sexual assault survivors away. Gender-based sexual violence in politics results from the normalized misogyny and rape culture in broader society and political institutions in Canada. It is upheld through intersecting systems of oppression which both objectify and disempower women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people within political institutions and simultaneously privilege those who have systemic power ([Young Women's Leadership Network, 2018](#)).

For young women, sexual violence is a major contributor to democratic deficit, with 80% of young women with a median age of 25 either leaving or significantly reducing their engagement with Canada's political institutions as a result of wide-ranging experiences of sexual violence ([Young Women's Leadership Network, 2018](#)). Beyond impacts on psychological, emotional, and physical health, sexual violence deters survivors - women, and particularly racialized women - from pursuing careers in political institutions. The social and professional isolation faced by those who experience sexual violence was cited as a deterrent for pursuing other careers in politics.

Cyberviolence

Women and transgender people in politics endure high rates of cyberviolence, a form of gender-based harassment that includes violent, sexist and sexually abusive digital communications, including but not limited to emails, blogs, and social media posts ([International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics, 2017](#)). They are more likely to be targeted online than cis male politicians with threatening and degrading emails, and social media messages ([Canadian Press, 2017](#)). Targeting

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

women and transgender people in politics and as activists operates as a form of social and political control against those who transgress patriarchal stereotypes and expectations. It controls behaviour by creating discomfort, anxiety, and fear ([Canadian Women's Foundation, 2019](#)).

Cyberviolence in Canadian electoral politics has become “the norm” for women in politics across the country and is regularly reported at the federal and provincial levels. Women holding electoral office have equated becoming elected

with becoming a target of the “online vitriol including fat shaming and homophobic tirades” ([Canadian Press, 2017](#)). Pandemic times have not been an exception, with Dr, Theresa Tam and provincial health officers experiencing waves of cyberviolence, and a federal cabinet minister forced to physically prevent harassment of her staff ([Forrest, 2020](#)). As Manitoba MLA Nahanni Fontaine told CBC, in the political sphere, women work in a field established “by and for men in the preserve of patriarchy.” ([CBC, 2017](#))

INCREASE WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION, IMPROVE OUTCOMES

The lack of adequate representation of Black, Indigenous and racialized women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people at all levels of government has resulted in democratic deficits leading to gaps in policies and plans that adequately serve these populations. Representation results in better decision-making and in greater citizen satisfaction with municipal services ([Iyer et al., 2011](#)). A recent literature review of women's leadership in local governments in Canada affirms that "women's participation and representation contribute to the strengthening of Canada's democracy and the effectiveness of its institutions. It also promotes greater diversity of thought and experience, enables the construction of more inclusive and meaningful citizenship, and generates the conditions for the empowerment of marginalized groups." (Brooks, 2018, p.15-16). Further, research demonstrates that there is a positive correlation between the number of women on councils and investment in social welfare programs ([Hess, 2015](#)) and in policies that respond to women's needs and concerns ([Chattopakhya & Duflo, 2004](#)). In addition, "advancing women's equality in Canada has the potential to add \$150 billion in incremental GDP in 2026, or a 0.6 percent increase to annual GDP growth" ([Devillard et al., 2017](#)).

Along with improved decision-making outcomes, increasing the number and diversity of women on local councils can have a catalytic effect. Specifically, it has been demonstrated to have

a "role model effect", where increased numbers of women in office spark political interest and participation of more women - and girls - who may themselves decide to run for office ([Gilardi, 2015](#)). Achieving this requires greater investment in removing systemic barriers to diversity, as well as addressing the social determinants of civic participation. From stereotypes and biases to unfair distribution of household duties, women are at a disadvantage before they even begin their political careers ([FCM, 2017](#)). And when they are elected, they face gender-based violence and harassment, including online harassment and bullying when running for and when serving in elected office, which impacts their ability and desire to run for political office at all levels and in all communities across Canada.

The sum of the barriers women face in local leadership persists even after they have been elected. For some women, these challenges are further aggravated by other forms of systemic discrimination related to age, race, Indigeneity, religion, ability, sexuality, and other identity markers. The FCM Diverse Voices project and the Toward Parity consultations have shown how lack of role models, racism, sexism, economic disparity all have a significant impact on women's decision to run but also to stay in politics. These barriers have a compounding impact, particularly on Indigenous, Black and other women of colour.

THE GLOBAL VIEW

The importance of gender equality and women's empowerment has been enshrined in global normative frameworks, notably the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which dedicates Goal 5 to Gender equality and women's empowerment. The importance of women's leadership is reflected in Target 5.5 : *"ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life"* ([UN Women, SDG 5](#)). The 2016 New Urban Agenda also makes several references to the importance of gender inclusive and gender responsive cities, noting specifically that it strives to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal rights in all fields and in leadership at all levels of decision making" ([United Nations, 2016](#)). The UN has stated clearly that achieving gender equality would have a catalytic effect on achieving all other goals set out in the 2030 Agenda ([UN Women, 2016](#)). Canada's 2018 report on its achievement of the SDGs highlighted both progress and challenges in achieving Goal 5. While the report focused primarily on the federal level, it notes that gains have been limited and there is much work to do for Canadian leadership to reach parity.

In spite of these gains, and decades of work towards achieving gender equality in political representation, there continues to be an important gender gap in leadership at all levels of government in many countries. There is also an increasing backlash and, in some cases, trends are reversing. There are fewer women heads of government today than there were five years ago: 10 out of 193 countries, down from 15 in 2014 ([UNDP, 2020, p.1](#)). At the same time, sexist biases appear to not only persist, but advance as well. A recent United Nations Development Program ([UNDP, 2020](#)) report found that globally, "91 percent of men and 86 percent of women show at least one clear bias against gender equality in areas such as politics, economic, education, intimate partner violence and women's reproductive rights" ([UNDP, 2020, p.8](#)), and that "globally almost 50 per cent of people say they think men make better political leaders" ([UNDP, 2020, p.1](#)). At the current rate, it would take 95 years to close the global gender gap between women and men in political representation ([Hutt, 2020](#)).

COVID-19 AND ELECTIONS

Between 2020 and 2022, municipal elections will be held in all jurisdictions across Canada, which presents new challenges and risks for Canada's civic institutions. It is expected that the number of new candidates will decrease, especially among women, who have taken a massive economic hit during the pandemic. The crisis has exacerbated the barriers to women's participation in public life, including but not limited to additional care responsibilities, financial impacts, mental workload and an increase in violent rhetoric. This may not only lead to potential vacancies on councils, but, without candidates to challenge them, may result in the re-election of incumbents, which would continue to preserve existing gender imbalance and other representation gaps. However, it could also provide an opportunity to make significant gains similar to Nova Scotia's municipal elections in October 2020, which can be partially attributed to promotion campaigns held at both the provincial and local levels. Similar trends are predicted for provincial and federal elections, with women facing

additional steps and challenges within a partisan process that requires more resources, including but not limited to time and financial support.

Electoral campaigns which are centred around voter engagement will need to significantly shift due to the COVID-19 pandemic, moving away from door-to-door canvassing and toward methods of communications, such as digital, including social media, and print media, perhaps more so than ever before. This can pose significant concerns for women candidates who face disproportionate amounts of gender-based violence online, including death and rape threats. This is even more concerning for the engagement rates of Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, as research shows with Black women journalists and politicians in the UK and US are 84% more likely to be mentioned in abusive posts on Twitter than white women journalists and politicians ([Amnesty International, 2017](#)).

STRATEGIES TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S AND GENDER-DIVERSE LEADERSHIP

Decolonizing Leadership

Common perceptions of leadership in Canada are rooted in colonial – that is, white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal – notions of power and are uninformed by how leadership is understood and practiced beyond that lens ([Garcia & Natividad, 2018](#)). For example, Indigenous women traditionally had reciprocal relationships with and responsibilities to the Earth ([Dennis & Bell, 2020](#)), roles evident in contemporary environmental leadership in the face of resource extraction and climate damage as well as in land-based healing work. Environmental violence is directly linked to violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people ([National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019](#)).

Conversations on civic leadership need a broader lens that takes the place of Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people into account and advocates for “urgent and special measures to ensure that Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people are represented in governance and that their political rights are respected and upheld. These efforts must include the development of policies and procedures to protect Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people against sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and racism within political life” ([National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019](#)).

Decolonizing leadership requires revising understandings of “professional” qualifications that impede access of Black, Indigenous, and racialized women and transgender people to skill-development and power within grassroots and institutional decision-making spaces. Much of women’s leadership occurs outside of traditional and institutional leadership spaces, including in politics and corporate governance, and is

disguised as care work and made invisible through the feminization of labour. For Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, the feminization of labour is also shaped by the “white racial frame”, in which white and euro-centric concepts of power shape decision-making in politics and the economy, including their leadership.

Racialized, and especially Black, women are expected to act as problem-solvers and community-builders, without recognition of these contributions to building thriving communities and providing them with resources and recognition. Throughout systemic racism and chronic underfunding of Black communities, Black women step up and lead within their communities, creating and developing nonprofit organizations, community groups, and movements such as Black Lives Matter that advance social and political discourse in Canada, and inspire policy-development and leadership.

Within a white racial frame, this leadership is often devalued and overlooked contributing to continued erasure and underfunding. Similarly, political parties often overlook it, resulting in a lack of adequate representation from Black communities, and continuing exclusion from decision-making spaces. Decolonizing leadership qualifications requires understanding the contributions of marginalized women and transgender people to social change and advancement, regardless of their attachment to institutional power.

Redefine Leadership and Qualifications

Leadership development opportunities targeting youth typically reward those with financial and social capital to engage in unpaid work, leaving low-income and working-class youth to choose

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between leadership skill development and income. This significantly impacts Black, Indigenous, and racialized young women who are systemically underpaid and precariously employed ([Canadian Labour Congress, 2016](#)). Such programs fail to account for the unpaid reproductive labour performed by Black, Indigenous, and racialized young women, who are often caregivers for younger siblings, homemakers for their families, and active participants in their communities.

Young, racialized women are left at a greater disadvantage when their lived experiences as leaders in their communities is overlooked. This not only hinders their leadership development but impacts overall civic participation as well. Studies show that the young, the less-educated, and the less-wealthy consistently vote less than others ([Uppal & LaRochelle-Côté, 2012](#)), with women and youth citing everyday life issues, such as being too busy, as the reason for not voting ([Statistics Canada, 2020](#)).

Creating leadership development opportunities for marginalized young women requires substantively improving their economic circumstances and redefining leadership qualities to reflect their major contributions to the social fabric of society. This will require a fundamental rethinking of leadership through an intersectional feminist lens given that although voter turnout among women is close to 3% higher than men, women still make up less than 30% of Members of Parliament and engage with politics differently than men ([Statistics Canada, 2020](#)). Decolonizing and redefining leadership entails valuing community-based leadership and care as major contributions and challenging leadership development opportunities that further marginalized Black, Indigenous, and racialized women.

Survival v. Leadership

Amid a pandemic, recurrent lockdowns and economic backlash, communities that faced marginalization pre-pandemic entered a crisis that continues unaddressed by governments and support services. Among these are transgender people and people with disabilities, whose socio-economic conditions have worsened significantly.

Pre-COVID-19, transgender people in Ontario earned a median of \$15,000 per year, pointing to severe unemployment and underemployment in normal job market conditions ([Bauer et al, 2011](#)). Canadians with severe disabilities experienced a 74% unemployment rate pre-pandemic.

The one in four people with disabilities with employment earned a median income of \$10,800 to \$24,200 ([Raso, 2018](#)). Black, Indigenous, and racialized transgender people and women with disabilities often face higher unemployment and greater marginalization. The majority - 53% - of transgender and non-binary Canadians say the pandemic negatively impacted their financial situation ([TransPulse, 2020](#)).

Economic inequality compounds the gender-based barriers and violence faced by women and transgender people. One in three racialized transgender Canadians report sexual violence and physical gender-based violence ([Chih, et al., 2020](#)), and 60% of women with disabilities experience sexual violence in their lifetime ([Canadian Women's Foundation, 2020](#)).

Collective leadership and mutual aid capacity, especially among Black, Indigenous, and racialized transgender people and people with disabilities, responds to systemic erasure and marginalization that has continued throughout the pandemic. The stark pre-pandemic picture clarifies the absolute necessity of organizing and leadership among

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marginalized communities, especially among transgender women and women with disabilities, both historically and during the pandemic. While it is important to recognize this organizing and care work as leadership, it must be noted that the conditions and motivations of leadership are starkly different for many marginalized women and gender-diverse people.

Beyond the Binary

The persistence of the gender binary in feminist discourse and more broadly in society, erases transgender and Two-Spirit people from the narrative and upholds oppressive notions of gender that contribute to gender inequality. However effective it may be in advancing leadership of the majority of the population, treating the concept of 50-50 gender equal representation between women and men as gender parity is trans and non-binary erasure. This reinforces the gender binary, erasing a section of Canada's population.

A unitary gender-first approach to leadership, rather than an intersectional and anti-oppressive one, misses the compounding factors contributing to gender equality and leadership development and fails to consider women's multiple intersecting identities and lived experiences. Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, as well as women with disabilities, live at multiple intersections which impede their access to power, and a multifaceted intersectional feminist approach is needed to create systemic changes that increase their chances of meaningful participation in leadership.

Representation politics assumes the voices, opinions, and perspectives of citizens, especially those with intersecting marginalized identities, are "present" when a member of that marginalized

group gains access to power and influence within a dominant system (Najibzadeh, 2020). This is exemplified for women who run for positions of political leadership, whose values and political platforms are assumed to be in alignment with the needs of their communities, creating the expectation that marginalized candidates, especially Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, should simultaneously represent the entirety of their communities, while being the first, and sometimes only, member of their community in an institution of power that was not designed to accommodate them.

Conversations surrounding the advancement of women into positions of leadership need to emphasize the understanding of the systemic barriers, feminist ideologies, anti-racist and anti-oppressive lenses that are necessary to bring forth real, meaningful, inclusive change for women.

Toward Parity in Municipal Politics (TPMP)

FCM has been working on increasing women's participation in municipal government for more than two decades. FCM believes:

"Canada's true democratic deficit is this: women from diverse backgrounds, who comprise about one half of the population, make up just 26 per cent of municipal councils. FCM wants to help close this gender gap, because Canada and its communities cannot afford to lose the insights and expertise of one half of our population."

(FCM, Framework on Increasing Women's Representation in Municipal Politics)

FCM has recently developed the first ever pan-Canadian framework to attain parity in local government in Canada. Convened by FCM, this initiative has created momentum amongst Canada's municipal Provincial and Territorial

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Associations (PTAs), all of whom contributed to the framework and have launched it to varying degrees across Canada.

The Framework outlines the strategies and actions that, in the long term, can bring about the systemic change necessary to attain parity in municipal government in Canada. Launched in June 2020, the Framework prioritizes action in four key intervention areas which capture the predominant systemic barriers, both formal and informal – such as social

bullying, discrimination, lack of work/life balance, token recruitment, low pay, fewer connections and less powerful support system - that discourage women from entering into municipal politics and continue to present themselves throughout their political career. Efforts at the individual, local, regional and national level are required to remove these barriers, which will help more women run for office and create the conditions to make them want to stay and run again.

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Run, Win, Lead, Toward Parity in Municipal Politics Framework

INCREASED SUPPORT INCLUDES:

Increased mentorship and encouragement
Enhanced work-life balance and support for familial responsibilities
Enhanced and shared practical supports
Inclusive workplace accommodations

IMPROVED ACCESS TO INFORMATION INCLUDES:

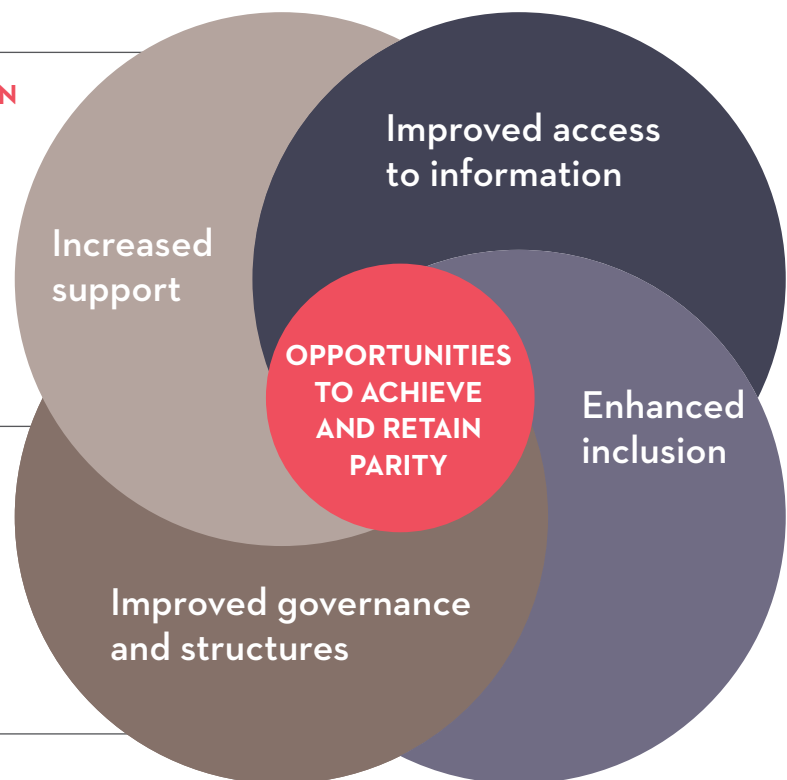
Collection of disaggregated data
Enhanced knowledge sharing and best practices
Greater access to tools, training and manuals
Overcome negative stereotypes and false perceptions

IMPROVED GOVERNANCE AND STRUCTURES INCLUDES:

Enhanced inclusive policies
Strengthened relationships between women's groups and councils
Increased women's participation and input into consultation processes

ENHANCED INCLUSION INCLUDES:

Recognition and action to reduce societal/systemic barriers (sexism, racism, etc.)
Action to mitigate economic inequalities
Inclusive and transparent processes
Reduction of intimidation and harassment



Source: FCM 2020

FCM notes that women are interested in exploring various avenues of local leadership. Local targeted initiatives that provide information, opportunity and capacity building are effective in translating the interest into action.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen the Social Determinants of Civic Engagement

- Increase public funding for post-secondary education and gradually eliminate tuition fees for all students.
- Implement national access to affordable, inclusive childcare.
- Increase flexible funding for non-profit organizations and grassroots movements led by and addressing the needs of diverse Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people.
- Further explore parental leave policies to ensure women and families at all levels of government can access and are not punished for pursuing opportunities afforded to virtually every other sector.
- Increase financial stability and equity among women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people, especially those from Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities, and those living with disabilities, through equal pay measures and equitable labour practices.
- Ensure all people have access to sick leave removing burden and potential of losing employment due to illness.

Advance Women's Representation in Leadership

- Work with women's movements and organizations as key partners in reaching women and in working collectively to address the systemic barriers to gender equality and women's leadership in municipal government:

- Ensure equitable, inclusive and accessible leadership and skills training to complement women's experiences to pursue elected and leadership positions.
- Foster opportunities and increase support mechanisms including mentorship, peer-learning and connecting with other women and leaders.
- Promote and normalize measures that accommodate healthy work-life balance and that recognize the value of unpaid care work.
- Foster greater linkages between governance bodies and women's organizations, CSOs and diversity seeking groups to promote, value and recognize women's participation and expertise.
- Enhance a culture of respect and civility toward women, in all their identities, and transgender and Two-Spirit people in leadership and as elected officials.
- Address cyber-bullying and harassment of women in electoral politics.
- Ensure adequate remuneration for women in leadership, recognizing the true value and unpaid contributions of many community leaders, including part-time elected officials, volunteers, and community mobilisers.
- Value, promote and celebrate diversity in leadership to ensure children have a multiplicity of role models.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Decolonize Leadership and Qualifications

- Recognize civic engagement and women's leadership as a spectrum to create opportunities and resources that meet them where they are at.
- Engage marginalized women in cohort-based leadership programs and opportunities led by members of their communities, allowing for engagement to move beyond tokenism.
- Develop trauma-informed, survivor-centered approaches, including policies, to identify and address sexual violence within political institutions and civic spaces.
- Develop policies and recruitment processes that embrace decolonized understandings of experience and qualifications, and value lived experience and non-institutional leadership as indicators of advanced leadership skills.
- Challenge systemic oppression including but not limited to colonialism, anti-Black racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, and ableism within civic institutions and the broader society.
- Recognize colonialism as the root cause of systemic violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people and implement the recommendations of the Final Report of the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous women.
- Develop resources, programs, and leadership opportunities that address the intersecting experiences and needs of Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, transgender, and Two-Spirit people.

Develop Leadership of Young Women, and Transgender and Two-Spirit People

- Prioritize meaningful engagement with young women, transgender, and Two-Spirit youth in a multifaceted, intersectional, and gender-responsive COVID-19 recovery plan.
- Increase collection and release of intergenerational, intersectional disaggregated data to build the capacity of government at all levels to meaningfully respond to the needs of young women, and transgender and Two-Spirit youth, especially those from Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities and/or living with disabilities.

Address Leadership and Decision-Making in COVID Recovery

- Respond to the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women, especially Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, by creating a basis for long-term gender equitable advocacy and decision-making:
- Conduct a multifaceted study of the role of gender-responsive leadership, decision-making and long-term advancement of gender equality.
- Ensure COVID-19 recovery measures take an integrated approach to strengthening the social and economic determinants of civic engagement to create a fertile ground for the civic participation of young women, transgender, and Two-Spirit youth, both on grassroots and institutional levels.

CO-AUTHORS

Canadian Women's Foundation

Launched in 1991 to address a critical need for philanthropy focused on women, the Canadian Women's Foundation is one of the largest women's foundations in the world. With the support of donors, the Foundation has raised more than \$100 million and funded over 2,000 programs throughout the country. These programs focus on addressing the root causes of the most critical issues and helping women and girls who face the greatest barriers.

Platform

A civic leadership platform for Black, Indigenous, and racialized young women and gender-diverse youth. Through capacity building and advocacy initiatives, Platform is on a mission to reshape the civic landscape to advance the priorities of young Black, Indigenous, and racialized women and gender-diverse youth within intersectional feminist, anti-oppressive, and transformative frameworks.

Contributor

Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM)

FCM has been the national voice of municipal government since 1901. Our members include more than 2,000 municipalities of all sizes, from Canada's cities and rural communities, to northern communities and 20 provincial and territorial municipal associations. Together, they represent more than 90 percent of all Canadians from coast to coast to coast. Municipal leaders from across Canada assemble each year to set FCM policy on key issues. Today, we advocate for municipalities to be sure their citizens' needs are reflected in federal policies and programs.

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