# THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN MUNICIPAL POLITICS

**ABSTRACT**

This article comes from a March 2004 report entitled Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Processes. Using the focus group approach, the research project was managed by Barbara Cottrell, Meta Research and Communications. It was concluded that although women are involved in municipal politics in a variety of ways that range from voting to sitting on Council, they are not involved as much as they could be. If more women participated, the City [of Halifax] would have better access to women's understanding of issues that affect the quality of life for Haligonians, and the City would benefit from women's collaborative style of working. Citizens would also benefit by having more female leadership role models. Many barriers to this are identified in the report, including lack of confidence, lack of information, and logistical problems.

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In the fall of 2003, The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) began a one-year research project, funded by Status of Women Canada, to strengthen women's involvement in municipal public participation processes. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities selected six organizations to become part of the national *Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Processes* project. One participating organization was The Halifax YWCA. The YWCA undertook the research to better understand why women in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) are under represented in municipal decision-making bodies. As of February 6, 2004, there were 23 Councillors and a Mayor on HRM Regional Council: six women (26%) and 18 men. Additionally, there were 124 men on municipal advisory committees and 61 (33%) women. Twenty of the women are from diverse groups and just two women chair committees.

## Methodology

The goal of the Halifax YWCA's project was to identify ways women participate in municipal processes, identify barriers to participation, and to provide an opportunity to share ideas and build partnerships to begin overcoming the barriers to participation. A project Advisory Committee was formed and consisted of 19 women to provide expertise in data collection methods, data analysis and report writing. A guide for use in the focus group discussions was developed in consultation with members of the Advisory Committee.

Focus group questions were designed for participant sharing and interaction:

- What experiences have you had with municipal government? (Have you ever met a Councillor, voted, attended an HRM Council session or a consultation, lobbied, been a member of an Halifax Regional Municipality Board or Committee, run for office?)
- How would women benefit in their community if they could participate? How would municipalities benefit if women were more involved in municipal processes?
- What makes it difficult for women to participate in municipal processes? What would help increase women's participation?

Seven focus groups were held with 60 diverse women residents of HRM – students, youth, immigrants, low-income women, and women serving in community leadership positions. They ranged in age from 14 to over 66. Participants also represented a variety of ethno-cultural groups, including African Canadians, Mi'kmaq and Cree, and new Canadians. Focus groups were held with community organizations including Stepping Stone, Metropolitan Immigrants Settlement Association (MISA), The North End Parent Resource Centre, and the YWCA.

## Focus Groups Summary

The women's experience with municipal government was diverse – from not voting or knowing how to vote to running for office and becoming elected to HRM Council. The women who participated in the Stepping Stone and MISA focus groups made very little distinction between municipal and other forms of government.

Participants agreed that men look at issues differently from women, since social and economic issues affect women more than men. The participants felt that men are not as concerned as women about 'women's issues' such as schools and day care, recycling programs, green space, environmental issues and dumping sites. One MISA focus group member said that, "Women walk in women's shoes. They know what women go through, and know what's needed to help them." This is why women's participation is valuable.

The participants also agreed that they feel more comfortable talking to women than to men. The women in leadership positions believe that women are more collaborative than men, and that women's understanding of social connectivity would benefit the planning process. They also feel that women think long term, rather than focus on immediate outcomes, and that women are concerned with how policies will affect the entire community.

The African Nova Scotian (ANS) participants believe that when they participate, they talk about their participation at home and as a result their children hear about politics and are better informed. One woman said, "Girls see that women can grow up to be involved and important; it's important for our Black children to see us participating."

For some immigrant women their own communities present an especially difficult barrier. One participant said, "Ours are patriarchal societies, we have to do what our fathers and husbands say. The men don't like it when we get involved in politics, and our mothers-in-law scold us because of how it looks in the community."

The Dalhousie participants and women in leadership positions said that the increased participation of women generates more female role models for women to look up to and emulate. The youth also believe that if more women are elected, having women in politics will begin to be seen as 'normal'.

The ANS participants said they felt that they would benefit if they were more involved because they could change things. One woman said, "Many 'yuppies' have moved into the area and because they know how to approach the city, they get to change things, and the changes don't improve things for us and our children. For instance, they took the area where our kids used to play baseball and they made it into a community garden. Where can our kids play now? No one's paying attention to the long-term needs of this community. But the politicians know the yuppies vote and the yuppies aren't intimidated by the politicians, so they get what they want at our kids' expense. We need to get out there and vote, and learn how not to be intimidated so that the politicians listen to us instead."

The women who are community leaders agreed that women's participation can effect greater change. It can empower more women to participate, help create a sense of community and improve the quality of life for all Haligonians. They also felt that councillors need women's input to make decisions.

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### The Barriers to Women's Participation

One of the major barriers to women's participation that was identified is the sense that their voices are unheard. As one woman put it, "The politicians pay attention to where the people vote. They know we don't vote, so they don't take any interest in us. We need to see results." Another participant said that she and a group of women gathered to fill out an application to be on a municipal committee, but "we didn't even get a response." They believe that "they know who they want on their committees and boards, and it's not us. They're looking for people with money and connections. They probably always have the same people."

The Stepping Stone participants echoed these views. In addition, a number of the participants in the Stepping Stone focus group believe that, while women politicians are more likely to hear them, eventually, "They stop listening to us." They feel that when women first take office, they listen and are available to them and try to help, but after a while they realize they have to try to fit in with the other politicians and they can't be seen as favoring women and only being interested in women's issues.

Immigrant women also felt that not seeing any changes as a result of what they say makes them feel there is no point in taking part. They want to be informed about what impact their input has. "Immigrants feel so lucky to be in Canada, they don't want to be seen as complaining," one woman said. "[Still] I need to hear that my opinion is welcome, that the government wants to hear from me." The women who are community leaders felt that some citizens are complacent, or feel that "it's a done deal" and they cannot make a difference.

MISA participants felt that women need to overcome their own cultural thinking. As one participant said, "We don't get involved because traditionally the women look after the family and children, and politics have been part of the man's role in the family. We think the men will take care of it and leave it to them without thinking about it. But things are changing. More women are going out to work now and getting more involved in helping support

their families. We need to get more involved in this too." Another agreed: "If we try, we can fly! We need to get up the courage to do this."

The formality of City Hall and municipal meetings was an issue for all groups. As one participant in the ANS group said, "The process is stiff and formal. The way it works, it is presented, makes it feel very distant from us, like it's out of our league." One of the Professional participants said the many women feel unable to participate because the implicit and explicit hierarchy limits inclusion and the environment is intimidating. Another put it this way: "There is a foolish sense of self importance about the process."

The ANS participants and the Dalhousie students felt that they do not know enough about the municipality, about how it is governed, what the municipality is responsible for, or when meetings are taking place. The participants said that they did not know they could "just call your Councillor" and did not know how to get in touch with councillors. Lack of sufficient information about what municipal government does and how to get involved was cited as a major barrier by participants in the Stepping Stone, MISA, and student focus groups. One student said, "Women don't know how to get started or how to approach increased participation. What can I do?"

> "City Councillors need to get out more and see what is happening in the community. If they got to know us, and found out how we struggle to live, they might be more helpful."
>
> Stepping Stone Focus Group Participant

Child care was also an issue for the ANS focus group participants. One woman said she needed a babysitter but couldn't afford one. The single parents agreed: "When you're a single-parent you're concerned about survival and politics is the last thing on your mind." Both the Dalhousie students and the 'community leaders' felt that women do not participate because of transportation and other responsibilities such as family and/or children. They and ANS women all agreed that lack of time is a barrier to participation.

Not believing the politicians' promises was one barrier to involvement for the Stepping Stone participants. They feel that politicians fail to connect with them and have no idea what their lives are like. One participant said, "They live in big houses and have cars and never have to worry about not having enough to eat or feed their kids, or worry about bills, or worry about how they're going to get from one place to another."

One of the participants in the MISA group felt that people in power are seen as arrogant, and that women in power need to promote a different image, one that will encourage others to get involved. One Dalhousie participant also said that the "intimidating feel of municipal and other government processes" is a barrier. The students expressed a lack of confidence that women's ideas or opinions are valid, or that change is possible with more participation.

### Solutions

The ANS participants agreed that if they were to form a group, they may be listened to. As one woman said, "We have a big problem with pit bulls in this area. We're afraid to take any action because we're afraid the people we report will come after us. But, if we got together as a group, we could take some action. No one would come after us if the snitch was a group of us." The ANS women felt that a group would attract others like them and draw them into the discussion. "We need to discuss these issues and what we can do to get involved."

The MISA group also agreed that women need to get together to offer each other support. As one participant said, "We can't leave it to men to train us. We need to increase the solidarity between women." One ANS woman suggested that the women need to attend the meetings, sit in the front seats, introduce themselves to strangers, and not be intimidated.

In order for ANS women to participate, they believe that City Hall should show an interest in them, make them feel invited and welcome, and make sure they are informed about meetings, committees and boards. They suggest community outreach and grassroots publicity, and meeting agendas that are meaningful to women. The MISA participants also suggested more education and outreach so that women could be informed and encouraged to vote. They would like to see a series of public talks and/or workshops on how government is run, and why and how women can participate. They believe this could, "Provide a positive welcome for immigrants so they do not feel they are complaining."

The Stepping Stone participants felt that HRM needs to pay more attention to the "little people" and less attention to wealthy people. They want councillors to be more sincere, more welcoming, and more respectful. They also wanted more open reporting processes about where tax dollars are spent, and added that "it needs to be in a way we can understand; then we'd take an interest." We need a lot more open meetings where we can learn about what they do. A MISA group participant also wanted more information. She said, "We need to learn whether we can make a difference, and how to do it." MISA participants suggested that women should be encouraged to support other women by voting for them.

One Dalhousie student suggested that the City make hours more flexible so that women with other responsibilities can have the opportunity to participate. Another student felt that the City should acknowledge that women do have familial responsibilities and allow for more flexible hours. The ANS, Stepping Stone and Dalhousie participants felt that the provision of daycare would facilitate their involvement.

### Conclusion

Although women are involved in municipal processes in a variety of ways that range from voting to sitting on Council, women are not involved in municipal politics as much as they could be. If more women were involved, the City would have better access to women's understanding

of issues that affect the quality of life for Haligonians, and the City would benefit from women's collaborative style of working. The citizens would also benefit by having more female leadership role models.

In order to be more involved, women need to be better informed about municipal affairs and processes, they need a more welcoming environment, and they need to see evidence that their opinions are valued. Strategies need to be in place to overcome the logistical barriers to participation that women face, such as lack of child care and inadequate public transportation.

To overcome the barriers to women's participation, women suggested that partnerships be formed to work on solutions which include finding ways to increase women's confidence in themselves and in the process, to develop a course of action that will include informing women about HRM and educating HRM staff and councillors about women's participation.





**JIMI**

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