The Barriers Project:

Retention of women and gender minorities in municipal elected offices in British Columbia and Alberta

This is a research project from **The Feminist Campaign School** in partnership with the **Climate Caucus**

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TERRITORIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was written on the territories of the hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ speaking peoples as well as the Snʊ̓neɪməxʷ nation.

We recognize that it takes more than an acknowledgement to enact change. It takes the clarity and courage to recognize our own role in ongoing systems of colonization and to push for change, especially when it is difficult to do so. The Feminist Campaign School is actively committed to learning, unlearning, and recognizing opportunities to challenge and change harmful colonial practices. The full report included a Decolonization audit to ensure our recommendations are aligned with our values.

BIOS

Dr. Karen-Marie Elah Perry (they/them)

Karen-Marie Elah Perry is an applied anthropologist with a focus on social justice and the ways inequalities shape access to services. They have done applied research in policy, practice, and law for over two decades. This has included work with the Justice Institute of BC, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the Hospital Employees' Union, the North American Opiate Medication Initiative (NAOMI Study), BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, the Canadian HIV Trials Network, and the Te'mexw Treaty Association, among others. Their experiences as a community organizer in Southern and Northern BC powerfully inform their approach to research. Karen-Marie is a recipient of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's Doctoral Scholarship and has worked as an educator at the University of Victoria. Karen-Marie believes that research has the capacity to uplift women and gender minorities, including the fight for their equitable participation in local elected roles and more meaningful forms of democracy. Interested in research support for your own organization? Contact **info@shiftresearchcollective.ca**.

Nadine Nakagawa (she/her)

Nadine Nakagawa is a community organizer and local activist based in the unceded territory of the hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ speaking people, colonially known as New Westminster. Prior to and during her time on New Westminster city council, Nadine has focused on issues relating to housing, public spaces, Reconciliation, and public engagement. She was first elected in 2018 and was re-elected in 2022. For her work in the community, Nadine was named the 2017 Citizen of the Year at the Chamber of Commerce Platinum Awards. She works as an equity and inclusion strategist, runs a campaign school for underrepresented people, and is a researcher on representation in local government. Nadine has a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies. When not working on community projects, Nadine is a creative writer, gardener, and avid reader.

Trudi Goels (she/her)

Trudi is a community convener, organizer, and connector living on the unceded territory of the hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ speaking people, colonially known as New Westminster. She is active in trialing better forms of leadership as a co-chair at Women Transforming Cities[1], a grassroots non-profit based in Vancouver that works to build the participation and power of people historically excluded from civic processes; is a member of Feminists Deliver[2], a grassroots collaboration among diverse BC-based women and organizations; and is a co-founder of New West Women on Wednesdays. Her work and interests are in creating better systems to build communities where we all belong. She's fueled by coffee, laughter, music, and shine theory, a practice of mutual investment[3].

Manjot Bains (she/her)

Manjot Bains is a freelance writer and communications consultant who brings an anti-racist and decolonizing lens to her work at Digital Handloom[4], an interdisciplinary storytelling and community engagement practice. Her work is rooted in community-based storytelling and relationship-building steeped in empathy and authenticity. In 2010, Manjot co-founded Jugni Style, an online magazine for South Asian arts, cultures, and ideas. As Editor-in-Chief, she interviewed and wrote a number of short and long-form profiles of interesting people and produced the first two seasons of the Nameless Collective Podcast, which was featured on CBC Radio and in Walrus Magazine, Vancouver Magazine, and International Public History Journal. Manjot has spoken about systemic racism and representation for a number of panels, podcasts, and media conversations, and her 2019 essay on systemic racism was one of three stories from HuffPost Canada to win the RTDNA Canada Sam Ross Award for Opinion and Commentary in 2020.

Consultants

We would like to thank Hummingbirds Rising, Micaela Evans, and Talk Science to Me for their careful auditing and copyediting of this report. Their recommendations and edits made the work better while any errors or omissions are the authors' alone.

1 To learn more about Women Transforming Cities, visit **https://www.womentransformingcities.org**.
2 To learn more about Feminists Deliver, visit **https://feministsdeliver.com**.
3 To learn about shine theory, visit **https://www.shinetheory.com**.
4 To learn more about the Digital Handloom, visit **https://www.digitalhandloom.com**.

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A TRIGGER WARNING: LETTER TO READERS

Before beginning this project, we had heard stories through the whisper network about the challenges that women and gender minorities faced on municipal and regional councils. They ranged from councils' refusal to reschedule meetings so councillors could meet their caregiving duties, to overt experiences of racism, sexism, transphobia, and sexual harassment. In our society, we've been taught to assume that experiences like this are isolated or occur because of one bad apple.

As we embarked on one-on-one interviews with elected officials in British Columbia, we were overwhelmed by the candid and consistent experiences that were shared. During our research team debrief, we discovered how difficult the interview process was for our team, as well as for the interview subjects. Listening to and recording these disclosures triggered anger, overwhelming sadness, memories of personal experiences, and deep empathy.

We were unprepared for the depth, consistency, and relentlessness of these accounts. One story is bad, and more than forty of them becomes overwhelming. We did not have sufficient processes in place to support the interviewees through these difficult and potentially harmful disclosures, nor did we have support in place for ourselves.

We quickly revised our approach to the surveys and interviews for the Alberta portion of the study. We implemented a trauma-informed protocol for opening and closing the interviews to support the interviewees, and we added a debrief process to support the research team.

Echoing the experiences of women and gender minorities participating in the study, the research team also experienced harassment and pressure to shut the study down; we endured the taunts of ineligible participants who mocked the survey for only being open to women and gender minorities. This strengthened the resolve of the research team to proceed with the study.

Witnessing descriptions of harassment, bullying, and disrespect can be a traumatic experience as it may cause the witness to reconnect with their own lived experiences. Bringing these experiences into the light may be difficult for readers of this report, so we caution you to go at your own pace and stop when needed. A list of resources is also provided at the end of this report (see Appendix F: List of Resources).

In solidarity,

The research team

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The threats, harassment, and physical and sexual abuse reported by women and gender minorities[5] participating in this study reflect high stakes for Canada's democracy. From April 2022 to May 2023, over 100 local elected officials in British Columbia (BC) and Alberta shared their experiences with the research team. Our respondents were pushed out of public office when they were able to gain seats in local governments or blocked from performing elected roles by institutions not designed for their participation. Our study reveals persistent experiences of abuse and harassment as well as systemic barriers to equitable participation in municipal and regional governments.

In Alberta, 10% of survey participants experienced sexual harassment from their own council colleagues. In BC, 31% endured threats from the public. Participants shared stories of racial profiling by city and district staff while working late at night in their offices. Doxing[6], hate crimes, physical and sexual abuse, and threats from the public dominated our respondents' experiences of serving in local elected roles, all while, as women and people belonging to gender minorities, they balanced the high work demands associated with holding public office. This resulted in a double duty for women and gender minorities who are elected to local governments. Tasked with managing large portfolios associated with their government roles, many also fought for their emotional and physical safety at the same time. Their experiences highlight the tensions between what Canadian democracy is believed to be—fair, just, and equitable—and the realities of inequalities that block democratic practices. International research too suggests a direct connection between gender-based violence and retention rates in political roles (House of Commons, Women & Equity Committee, 2022), a connection our study echoes.

Some of the biggest challenges of our time—including climate change, Decolonization, a toxic drug supply, racism, homelessness, and growing economic inequalities—require strong leadership acquainted with the diverse realities of Canada's population. Statistics in this and other studies point to demographic gaps between the diversity of the Canadian population and just who makes it into municipal and regional government roles. The question of who is also a question of why. As this study documents, persistent inequalities block democracy.

Additionally, the research project and research team themselves experienced harassment and abuse while undertaking the survey in BC and especially in Alberta. Angry men serving on municipal councils both completed the survey with mocking and offensive answers and called the project team to challenge the concept of gender and question the validity of the research itself. This harassment was symptomatic of the issue existing at municipal councils in BC and Alberta and likely across Canada.

5 The term 'gender minority' is imperfect both because it reads as somewhat grammatically odd and also in that it incorrectly seems to suggest that few people identify as Two-Spirit, gender queer, gender fluid, non-binary, transgender, and additional identities outside of the gender binary. We chose to use the term gender minority because it is more readable than other terms while also recognizing that it is imperfect and knowing that language and terminology evolve over time.

6 Publishing private information, such as a phone number or address, about an individual online with malicious intent.

Drawing from in-depth qualitative interviews, surveys, and focus groups, we detail the current crisis in local politics for women and gender minorities in BC and Alberta and provide four explicit calls to action. Some of the calls to action are targeted at local governments, others at the provincial government, and some at allies in the general public.

The first call to action is rooted in an urgent need to remove institutional barriers to ensure equitable representation on councils that better reflect the needs of local populations. The second call to action demands an immediate stop to the abuse and harassment of women and gender minorities in local elected roles through the development of accountability processes. The third call to action focuses on the link between complacency and abuse, calling for a stop to the normalization of abuse. The fourth call to action addresses the gap in representation, including the need to counter tokenism and develop meaningful representation and associated democratic practices.

Each call to action is broken into multiple specific actions that fall under the responsibility of different levels of government.

INTRODUCTION

Women are underrepresented in local governments across Canada. According to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (n. d.), women continue to hold approximately 18% of mayoral positions and 28% of councillors' seats (p. 7). There is currently no comprehensive research on the number of people who identify as gender minorities elected to local government. The United Nations states that "gender minorities include considerable diversity as well as a multiplicity of identities" (O'Malley & Holzinger, 2018, p. 10). For example, this can include diverse Two-Spirit identities, non-binary people, genderqueer identities, and other expressions of gender-non-conforming identity. We do know that in Canada, 2SLGBTQIA+ municipal candidates have reported threats, hate mail, and harassment (LeBrun, 2022). We also know that women—especially Indigenous, Black, and of colour—face violence and harassment "at every level of government" and that these experiences are "ubiquitous throughout Canadian politics" (SSHRC, 2022).

We often do see women and gender minorities not re-offering for additional terms, and they often leave elected office sooner than their counterparts. This research seeks to understand why women and gender minorities do not re-run for office, the issues they face while serving in public office, and solutions to address the lack of representation.

Climate Change, Representation, and the Link to Effective Policy Response in Challenging Times

In Canada, municipalities are facing a climate crisis as well as a pandemic, a housing crisis, and a toxic drug supply crisis causing unprecedented numbers of overdose deaths. However, the impacts of these issues are not felt equally by all citizens. Studies show that climate change disproportionately affects women, IBPOC communities, disabled, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people (Thuringer, 2016; Patnaik et al., 2020; Reta, 2022; United Nations, 2022). For example, queer, transgender, and Two-Spirit people have been explicitly targeted following natural disasters or even blamed for extreme weather events (Lecaque, 2022), while women and girls experience a sharp rise in domestic violence following natural disasters (van Daalen et al., 2022). Geographies of pollution contributing to climate change are also highly racialized in Canada, with toxic waste from tar sands, mining, and other forms of resource extraction disproportionately affecting IBPOC communities (Waldron, 2018).

More equitable and just representation at the municipal level doesn't only have implications for the immediate experiences of women and gender minorities in office, but also for the types of policies and community plans implemented that address climate change and other important issues. To not give a seat at local government tables to those most impacted by climate change is a loss to communities grappling with how best to respond to extreme weather events, coastline erosion, diminished air quality, related diseases, and other disruptions to day-to-day life. As one participant in our study noted, without more equitable representation, you're not representing "anybody who is going to be most impacted by climate change." If we are to address the climate crisis, we need experienced and returning city councillors who will drive action within their municipalities and regional districts. When it comes to municipal politics, representation matters.

One example of strong representation from affected communities is the Climate Caucus. The Climate Caucus is a coalition of elected officials from local governments, activists, and representatives of non-governmental organizations that was created in 2019 to address socially just climate policies in communities across Canada. While women are significantly underrepresented at local levels of government across Canada, collectively they make up over 50% of the Climate Caucus' membership (pers. comm., Judy O'Leary, Network Coordinator, May 19, 2023). The Climate Caucus can be seen as a positive role model for other organizations and governments looking to address issues that disproportionately affect specific groups.

Research Report Overview

Part 1 of this report provides a summary of the study's research methods, including interviews, surveys, and focus groups conducted with women and gender minorities who sit on municipal and regional councils across British Columbia and Alberta. From April 2022 to May 2023, over one hundred elected officials participated in this study. This section also addresses the methods adopted in this project, including social-justice-based research practices and attention to the nuances of identity and social inequalities. The project calls attention to the persistent silences in research addressing the experiences of women and gender minorities in municipal and regional elected roles, while also uncovering new areas for action.

Part 2 provides a review of academic, government, and non-profit literature addressing inequitable representation in local Canadian politics. It also highlights the municipal and regional governance contexts in BC and Alberta to help better situate participant interviews, surveys, focus groups, and the study's concluding recommendations. Finally, an examination of potential solutions to inequitable representation in local governments is explored. This section provides a holistic review of legal, policy, and educational solutions that can help foster more democratic representation in local governments and the retention of women and gender minorities in public office. Critically, many factors—such as abuse, harassment and the resurgence of hate groups—impact not just women and gender minorities here in Canada but reflect larger global trends that represent a threat to democracy more broadly. It is essential to take action now before a broader culture of hate further erodes democratic practice in our local communities and globally.

Part 3 examines research findings from interviews, surveys, and focus groups that document personal experiences of harm, lack of accountability, ineffective codes of conduct, and gaps in local representation. More specifically, research findings provide insight into:

- Demographics and social inequalities, including:
    - Diverse IBPOC participant experiences
    - Disabilities and ableism
    - Discrimination against people belonging to gender minorities and 2SLGBTQIA+ people
    - Age, retirement, young families, and access to pay and benefits
    - Self-identification as a feminist
    - Rural vs. urban experiences.

- Experiences of discrimination, including:
    - Sexual and verbal harassment and threats
    - Online harassment
    - More subtle forms of systemic discrimination
    - The targeting of the research study itself
    - Reporting and accountability
    - A lack of CAO diversity and training.

- Retention and experiences of public office, including:
    - Experiences of retention
    - Support from colleagues and sense of impact and gratification
    - Logistics.

Part 4 concludes with recommendations for creative solutions to ongoing social inequalities, including for removing institutional barriers, developing accountability mechanisms, stopping the normalization of abuse, countering tokenism, and developing meaningful representation and associated democratic processes.

These recommendations are based on both the literature review and the primary research findings. As highlighted in the introduction to this report, the public stands to gain from diverse representation at the municipal level and the benefits it brings to social policy and municipal planning. Balanced electoral representation has also been shown to be a clear indicator of healthy democratic practices internationally and in Canada (Andrew et al., 2009).

PART 1: RESEARCH METHODS

This research study encompasses four components:

1. A review of academic, government, and non-profit literature that discusses representation at the local government level to better conceptualize recommendations and situate participant perspectives and experiences in municipal politics. The review also explores solutions to inequitable representation that have been identified by researchers and compares BC's and Alberta's municipal and regional governance contexts.
2. Surveys querying the range of experiences of women and gender minorities who were elected to local office in BC and Alberta.
3. In-depth qualitative interviews with women and gender minorities elected to local governments in BC and Alberta to triangulate survey findings and go into greater detail regarding participant experiences.
4. Focus groups with research participants centred on identifying solutions.

Over one hundred elected officials participated in this study from urban and rural municipalities and regional districts across BC and Alberta. This included 18 in-depth qualitative interviews with officials in Alberta and 35 in BC. As well, 62 elected officials responded to survey queries in Alberta and 45 in BC. (For more information, see Appendix C: Quick Overview of Research Participant Demographic Profiles.) Participants were recruited through municipal and regional governance organizations. Interviews were recorded and notes were taken for the purpose of writing the final report. Identifying information has been removed or altered to protect participant confidentiality.

Project interviews addressed demographic information, motivations for running for elected office, work culture, general experiences of working in a municipal office, bullying and harassment, discrimination, supports, and recommendations. The project survey provided participants with an opportunity to respond to questions regarding demographics, accessibility, discrimination, harassment, efficacy, and work environments.

For a complete list of survey and interview questions, see Appendix A: Survey Questions and Appendix B: Individual Interview Questions. For a list of focus group themes centred on potential solutions, see Appendix E: Focus Group Themes.

Recommendations from this report have been circulated to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the Union of BC Municipalities, Rural Municipalities of Alberta, and the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association. The report has also been made available to the general public through media outreach and is available online at **LocalRepresentation.ca**.

Mind the Gap: Missing Data and Research Participants

There is a lack of detailed information on the demographic characteristics of people who serve in local governments. While Civic Info BC now collects data on council candidates' gender, they do not collect historical and intersectional data and that information is not present elsewhere within the literature. This includes data on race or ethnicity, age, housing tenure (tenancy versus home ownership), disability, gender beyond the binary, Indigeneity, and the intersections of any or all of these things.

Demographic information is an important tool for fighting injustice. We cannot act on what we do not know. For example, the Government of BC recently established the Anti-Racism Data Act (2022), developed in consultation with the Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, the First Nation Leadership Council, and Métis Nation BC in order to better address injustice in healthcare, service delivery, education, and social policy through data gathering.

Intersectional Research and Naming Harm

This study uses an intersectional analysis when considering questions, findings, and recommendations. Rooted in Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw's analysis of the experiences of Black women and the legal system in the US (1989), the concept of intersectionality honours the complexity of identity and the intersections of factors such as ethnicity, gender, and class and their role in experiences of oppression and privilege. Researcher Dr. Olena Hankivsky explains:

> Intersectionality promotes an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations (e.g., "race"/ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion). These interactions occur within a context of connected systems and structures of power (e.g., laws, policies, state governments and other political and economic unions, religious institutions, media). Through such processes, interdependent forms of privilege and oppression shaped by colonialism, imperialism, racism, homophobia, ableism and patriarchy are created. (2014, p. 14)

Discussions of "barriers" often invisibilize systems of racism, sexism, ableism, transphobia, and colonialism by using euphemisms to describe the harm caused. This report uses accurate and direct language to name the systems that create harm and the challenges that elected officials face while in office.

For the purposes of this study, we firmly locate transgender women as women and recognize that IBPOC women often face additional forms of violence due to the legacies of racism and colonization (Goven & Smith, 2021). Racism and colonization have also played a pivotal role in efforts to erase diverse expressions of gender and sexuality (Morgensen, 2012). Our own study shows that Black women and Indigenous women face significantly higher levels of violence and discrimination than white women and members of other racialized groups.

Social-Justice-Based Approaches to this Project

We undertook accessibility and Decolonization audits on the survey and interview questions during project development. The results and recommendations of these audits were adopted in the survey and interview plans. An additional round of audits took place after completion of the preliminary report and were incorporated into the final document. To promote accessibility, the report has been made available in multiple formats including a six-page version and a plain language summary which are both available online.

To resist heart/mind dualisms and the historical harms research has caused (Smith, 1999), this project also centres trauma-informed approaches to research (Seedat et al., 2004) with holistic participant and researcher supports. This included offering debriefing sessions to researchers who undertook interviews with difficult subject matter content and offering community resources and debriefing to elected officials who reported violence, harassment, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and racism.

The research team was initially unprepared for the scope of sexualized violence reported in the study, and project methods were revised accordingly. In the first set of interviews conducted with officials in BC, we prefaced interviews with a with a disclaimer:

> Content warning: Some questions may be triggering as they deal with sensitive topics related to sexual harassment and discrimination based on race, disability, and other factors related to your identity. If you wish to take a break at any time or not answer a question, please let us know and we will accommodate you.
>
> Confidentiality: Interviews will be recorded for note-taking purposes. The recordings will not be shared publicly, and your identity will be kept anonymous in our reporting. During the interview, if you would like to stop at any time, please let us know and we will end the interview.

We initially had no explicit process for closing the interview to allow interviewees an opportunity to recover from the emotions they experienced. Some found the opportunity to speak about it cathartic, while others found it emotional and asked for time to stop and re-centre themselves, or to cry and express the pain they felt.

In the second iteration of the interviews, with the elected officials from Alberta, we included a formal opportunity to acknowledge emotions, an opportunity to check in and redirect interviewees to support services if needed, and a shift to discussions of future options for solutions to these issues (see Appendix F: List of Resources).

Team reflections can be found in Appendix D: Lessons Learned for Other Research Teams and are available as a resource for other organizations and research teams working on municipal projects that address systemically oppressed communities, violence, and inequalities.

PART 2: CONTEXTUALIZING OUR RESEARCH: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study addresses gaps in the demographic information available on elected local officials in BC and Alberta as part of an effort to foster more equitable representation within regional politics. While little demographic information exists on disability, socio-economics, ethnicity, and gender minority status among those serving in office, statistics do exist that document the lack of women in office across Canada. Case studies brought forward in this report also indicate the stakes involved for IBPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ candidates who are subject to harassment and abuse. Part 2 of this report contextualizes our research findings with a literature review, providing:

- An examination of the literature that addresses inequitable representation in local politics and a current demographic snapshot of municipal officials in Canada.
- A comparison of municipal and regional governance structures in BC and Alberta.
- Potential solutions to inequitable representation that are driven by economic, legal, policy, and educational initiatives.

As this study documents, it is also important to note that women and gender minorities in office can face discrimination from both within municipal structures and outside of them as they encounter the public. Furthermore, the anonymity of the internet has helped foster the cyberbullying of women and gender minorities in elected office. Researchers emphasize that Canada currently has inadequate legal frameworks to respond to, and cope with, the challenges cyberbullying poses (Gutenkunst, 2014).

Inequitable Representation

Women in Elected Municipal Roles in Canada

While there are pronounced absences in formal demographic statistics on municipally elected officials in Canada (notably statistics capturing information about people with disabilities, IBPOC communities, and gender minorities), several studies are available that indicate that women are underrepresented.

In Canada, statistics indicate that women remain underrepresented at all levels of government (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, n. d.). In fact, in a 2022 report, the World Economic Forum ranked Canada 25th out of 146 countries when it comes to overall gender parity (World Economic Forum, 2022, p. 10). As the introduction to this report states, equitable representation matters when it comes to policy response in challenging times. Women bring much to the table, and leadership that reflects the diversity of Canadian communities enhances the ability of municipalities and regional districts to more aptly respond to community-based needs (Vyas, 2018).

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities reports that “the overall portrait in Canada remains close to Federation of Canadian Municipalities’ 2015 statistics, where only 18 percent of mayors and 28 percent of councillors are women” (n. d., p. 7). Recently, Québec and BC surpassed 30% representation in local municipal governments, at 34.5% and 36.7% respectively (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, n. d., p. 7); however, women represent approximately 50.94% of Canada’s total population and non-binary people are reported at 0.14% (Statistics Canada, 2022b). Nationwide statistics on municipal offices held by non-binary people are not available and are part of the missing data to which this report seeks to draw attention.

Figure 1: Men, Women and Non-Binary Identification in Canada

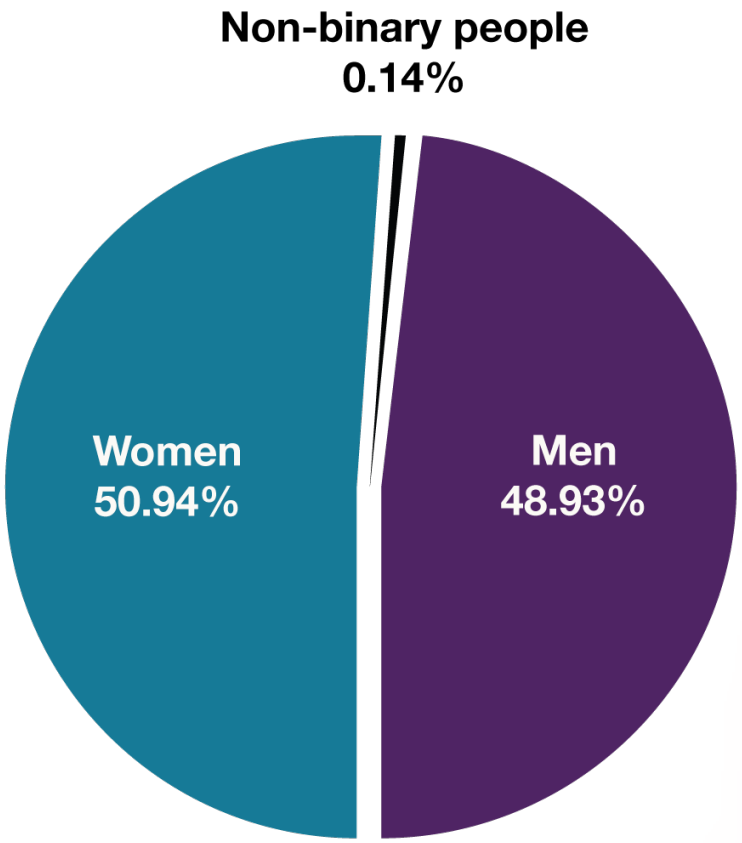
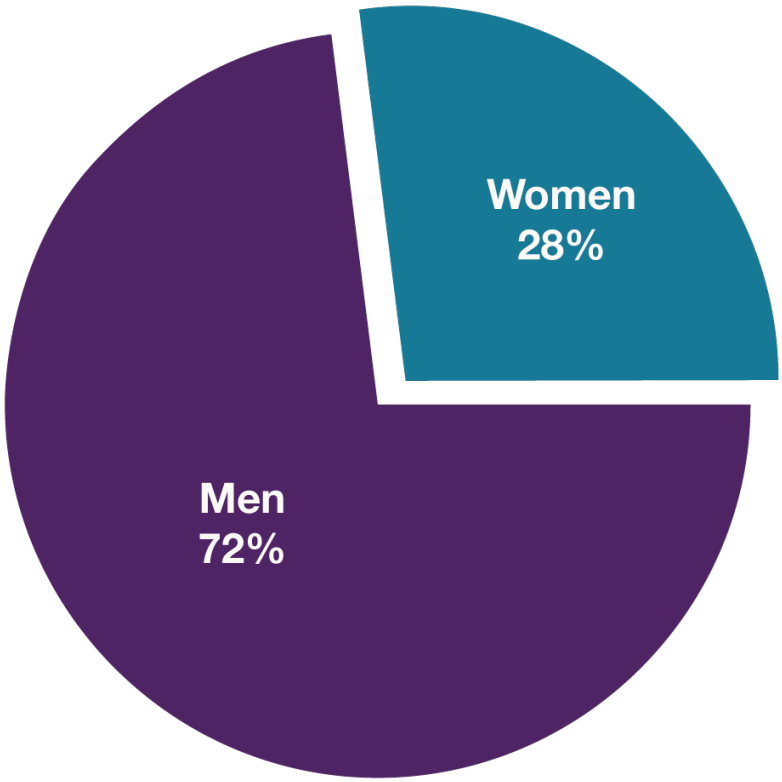


Figure 2: Approximate Percentage of Councillors in Canada Who Are Women[7]



IBPOC Representation and Municipal Office

The term IBPOC (Indigenous, Black, and people of colour) has been adopted for this report. Statistics Canada utilizes the term "visible minority"; however, "visible minorities" represent the global majority:

> Describing someone as a visible minority situates whiteness as the reference standard and the norm by which all people are judged. It is a term of disempowerment that promotes the othering of racialized peoples and implies subordination to white power structures. (Maharaj & Campbell Stephens, 2021)

While we use the term IBPOC, it is important to recognize the diversity and interconnections within and between these communities so that the I, the B, and the POC are not flattened into a static whole (Grady, 2020). For example, the experiences of diverse Indigenous-Black communities in Canada are unique and should be honoured when pursuing community-based research focused on social justice (Beals & Wilson, 2020). Wherever possible, in our primary research findings, specific terms are used that reflect the preferred identification of the research participants themselves. We use IBPOC as a solidarity term; it is not meant to refer to individuals.

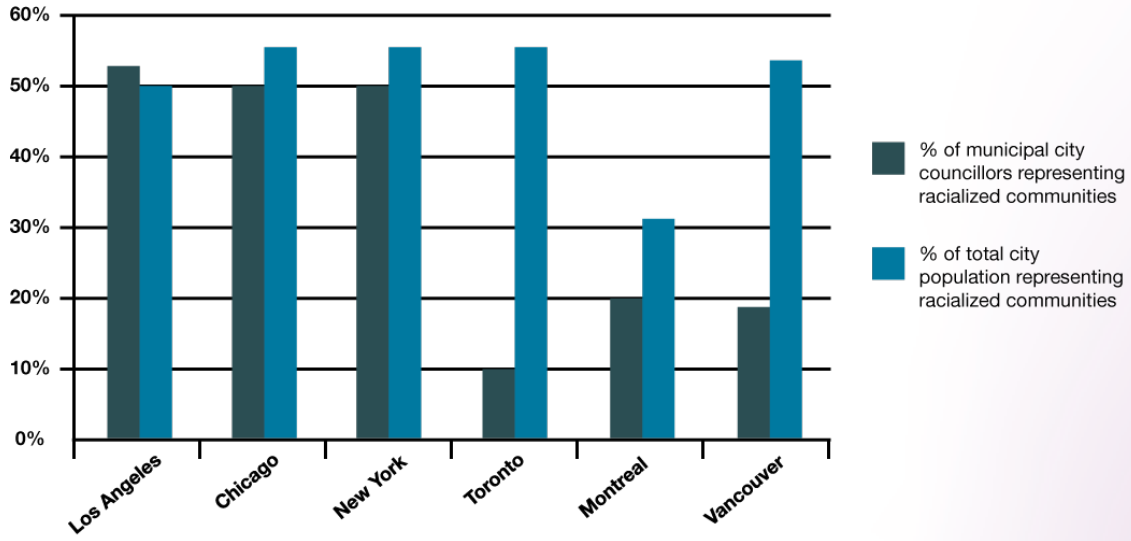
7 Statistics are missing on non-binary people elected to local office; this report draws attention to this absence.

The current data gap in municipal statistics means that very little detailed information is available on IBPOC representation. Federally, a modest increase of three racialized Members of Parliament (from 50 to 53) was documented between 2019 and 2021, but compared to the demographic profile of the total Canadian population, this is “a sizable representation deficit that has barely changed over time” (Black, 2022).

Researchers note that IBPOC communities and other systemically oppressed groups “are less likely to see themselves represented among mayors and heads of council, and indeed on municipal councils, committees, and commissions” (Smit et al., 2020, p. 15). Public consultations have also been criticized for lacking sufficient inclusivity (Smit et al., 2020, p. 15).

While Canada is often hailed as a “multicultural melting pot” (Fleras, 2023), a 2018 comparison of demographic representation on municipal city councils across Canada and the United States reveals that Canada has a long way to go in terms of IBPOC representation and equitable frameworks for democracy.

Figure 3: Political Diversity in Major Canadian and American Cities, 2018[8]



Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York all feature significant racialized representation at the municipal level at 50% or higher, while major Canadian cities lag far behind. Since 2018, Canadian city councils have made modest gains (Szeto, 2022); however, systemic inequalities persist, marking Canadian politics at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels.

8 Mulligan (2018).

Mapping a Broader Culture of Hate

While colonization, racism, sexism, transphobia, and homophobia have always upheld dominant political structures because of complex histories of discrimination (Walia, 2013), organizations across North America have documented a sharp rise in hate crimes in recent years (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Wang & Moreau, 2022; United Nations, 2022b). The cultural environment occupied by elected officials is shaped by increasing political polarization (Spearchief-Morris & Curry, 2022), racist responses to the pandemic (Project 1907, 2022), a backlash against recent political gains by systemically oppressed communities (Bump, 2022), the emergence of incel[9] groups that target women via online and offline harassment and violence (Fifth Estate, 2019), and the revitalization of overt white supremacist organizations in Canada and the United States (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2021).

Unique forms of grassroots organizing have also emerged in response to these challenges, fostering powerful networks of support. Three examples of such organizing are The Feminist Campaign School (2022), which offers social-justice-based leadership training for municipal elections with an anti-oppressive lens; Climate Recentered (2023), an IBPOC youth-driven leadership initiative; and the On Canada Project (n. d.), which offers a critical take on culture and politics.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (2021) is also careful to address the broader cultural impacts of a global increase in authoritarianism:

A move towards authoritarianism is often accompanied by a resurgence of patriarchal values, with devastating effects on gender equality. Leaders with authoritarian leanings will encourage intolerance of, and misogyny against, women in public life with the goal of dividing and cultivating fear. (2021, p. 5)

Recent attacks on abortion rights and women's healthcare in the United States (Bosurgi, 2022), health care rationing for disabled people during the pandemic, the January 6th insurrection in Washington (Garver, 2022), and former president Donald Trump's targeting of IBPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ communities (Human Rights Campaign, n. d.) exemplify these findings. These political transitions have impacted the political climate in Canada (Greaves, 2020), further fostering hate and divisive politics.

9 An "incel," short for "involuntarily celibate," is a member of an online community usually comprised of young men who consider themselves unable to attract women sexually which results in anger, frustration, and sometimes violence towards women.

CASE STUDY:
Mayoral Candidate Grace Yan (Calgary, Alberta)

In 2021, Grace Yan, a Filipina businesswoman and local community leader, decided to run for mayor in Calgary, Alberta. Only four candidates out of 27 were women. During the campaign, women candidates experienced unprecedented levels of cyberbullying, harassment, physical threats, and vandalism to their private property and campaign offices. Grace Yan endured racist slurs, physical threats, and the daily defacing of election signs; her car windows were smashed in, prompting a phone call to police (Labby, 2021). As a racialized woman, Grace had to contend with both racism and misogyny during the election.

Sarah Elder-Chamanara, a Calgary business owner, community organizer, and founder of the business Madame Premier, points out that much of the backlash was rooted in a perception that the women challenged the status quo (Labby, 2021). Grace Yan said, "it takes a lot of courage to stand for mayor" (Labby, 2021).

CASE STUDY:
Mayor Julie Lemieux (Très-Saint-Rédempteur, Québec)

In 2017, Julie Lemieux became the first woman elected as mayor in Très-Saint-Rédempteur, Québec, as well as Canada's first openly transgender mayor (CTV News Staff, 2017). Much of Lemieux's platform was focused on supporting the right for residents to keep backyard chickens and on the renovation of the local church, which now serves as a community and cultural centre after years of sitting in disrepair (Stevenson, 2017). The small, largely Catholic farming community, with a population of less than 1,000, showed enthusiastic support for Lemieux's campaign.

Lemieux has been targeted by the Family Policy Alliance (Curry, 2017), the lobbying arm of the far-right American evangelical organization Focus on the Family started by James Dobson (GLAAD, 2022). The Family Policy Alliance smear campaign notes:

> Canadian headlines excitedly reported Julie's "remarkable" accomplishment last month as the "first female mayor" in over a century. Yet, the sad reality is that a man who calls himself Julie and identifies as a woman was elected. Electing a male mayor in this Canadian municipality is not particularly noteworthy. And, a woman still has never been elected to this mayoral office. (Curry, 2017)

Apart from explicit support for anti-trans bills and the establishment of an associated training academy for American legislators, the Family Policy Alliance is against same-sex marriage and consent-based sex education training, and advocates for “traditional” gender roles (GLAAD, 2022).

Lemieux notes that she has experienced solidarity for her work in her own community: “It shows something we don’t necessarily see in the media: in the villages, too, there is acceptance and social openness” (Lemieux qtd. in Stevenson, 2017). While municipal officials face hate in Canada, vitriol also originates south of the border from well-funded right-wing organizations with connections to more extreme Republican political structures.

CASE STUDY:
Mayor Lori Ackerman (Fort St. John, BC)

In 2020, Fort St. John mayor Lori Ackerman reported experiencing threats to both herself and her family during COVID-19 lockdowns and public health orders (Scott, 2020). In a 2022 interview with CTV News, she says she was not alone in this experience, noting that several of her colleagues made the decision not to run again due to harassment: “It’s not the reason I’m not running, but I did experience threats… some of my colleagues made that decision (not to run) based on that, and that’s really unfortunate” (Daflos, 2022). Interior and Northern BC, in particular, have experienced a rise in arrests in the wake of personal threats and intimidation resulting in difficulties recruiting new candidates for municipal elections (Daflos, 2022).

Municipal Governments and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Communities

For thousands of years prior to settler colonization, diverse Indigenous communities employed their own systems of governance and mechanisms for community accountability based on each Nation's unique values and needs (Palmater, 2020). Colonial governments have not only disregarded sovereign Indigenous nations, but also blocked their peoples from participating in elections established by the settler states. For example, it wasn't until 1960 that First Nations peoples in Canada were able to vote without conditions (Elections Canada, n. d.). Métis communities, however, were not prohibited legislatively from voting, and in the 19th century, Métis politicians occupying political office fought fiercely for their people (Leslie, 2016). In the North, the Inuit were initially prohibited from voting under the colonial authority of the Hudson's Bay Company (Leslie, 2016). The history of Indigenous enfranchisement in Canada is complex. Today approximately 50% of Indigenous people live in urban centres (Anderson & Flynn, 2021)—geographic areas that Indigenous communities have occupied for millennia. In both rural and urban municipalities, there is a need to rethink Indigenous-municipal relationships in light of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) and the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). Doug Anderson (Bungee Métis) and Alexandra Flynn (2021) write:

> There is an urgent need to review, clarify and deepen Indigenous-municipal relationships across Canada, and for municipalities to rethink their approaches to governance in light of Indigenous laws, rights and responsibilities.

Statistics Canada reports that First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples account for 5% of the total Canadian population, with a 9.4% increase reported between 2016 and 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022a). Comprehensive statistics are not available on the number of municipally elected Indigenous officials in Canada. However, Indigenous municipal incumbents and candidates have much to say about their experiences.

In the 2022 municipal election, Burnaby, BC, elected its first Indigenous politician, Mikelle Saskamoose (Syilx, Cree, and Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc),[10] to take a seat on the city's school board. Mikelle situated her candidacy in relation to her family's experiences in residential school and the need for change: "My dad went to day school. My grandpa went to residential school, and I know my aunts, uncles and cousins went to residential school." Former Vancouver city councillor Andrea Reimer (Métis and Cree ancestry) notes the pivotal role political parties have to play in the fight for Indigenous representation: "I think we have to make it clear that you are not a serious party if you are not running Indigenous people" (Reimer qtd. in Jung, 2022).

Matthew Norris (Lac La Ronge), a former Vancouver council candidate and current president of the Urban Native Youth Association, has spoken about the lack of attention placed on Indigenous rights:

> We were missing Indigenous voices in this city during the last year ... so that was my incentive, to put my name forward to bring that perspective and experience into the dialogue… We've seen a lack of attention to Indigenous rights ... and those concerns aren't going to go away. (Norris qtd. in Jung, 2022)

10 Specific Indigenous identity references in this section are reproduced from initial media interviews.

Norris also says that political parties and the media need to place much more attention on Indigenous voters during municipal elections (Jung, 2022).

There are currently no statistics available on municipally elected Two-Spirit officials. In 2021, Blake Desjarlais (Métis and Cree), who identifies as tastawiyiniwak (a Cree word for "the in-between people"), became the first openly Two-Spirit member of Parliament (Gallant, 2021). As a New Democrat representative for Edmonton Griesbach, Desjarlais says, "particularly to Two-Spirit folks… I hope they know that they're really needed in our country and in our world right now, they have a power within them, a healing force, that we really need" (Desjarlais qtd. in Gallant, 2021).

Within all levels of government Indigenous people also face challenges associated with engaging with a political system rooted in oppression. Chris Livingstone (Nisga'a) points out:

> The way that I used to feel when I was younger was that a vote for anybody is a vote for your killer or a person that's trying to hold you down ... so that's a big hurdle… within the historical context, we've looked at institutions ... and most of these social systems as being bent on destroying us. (Jung, 2022)

Livingston ran unsuccessfully for Vancouver's park board in 2022.

People with Disabilities in Municipal Roles in Canada

A lack of flexibility in government roles, ongoing stigma, and significant structural barriers are obstacles to true democratic practices that include people with diverse disabilities and accessibility needs in local municipal governments. Many politicians with disabilities also remain hidden, "passing as non-disabled" people (D'Aubin & Stienstra, 2004). Similar to the lack of data on non-binary Canadians (communities that are not mutually exclusive), there are persistent absences in data highlighting the experiences of disabled politicians in local municipal politics.

Accessibility should remain a priority for local governments in their efforts to democratize communities (City for All Women Initiative, 2015), including providing equitable access to public spaces, conducting municipal planning with diverse populations in mind, and making multiple media formats available to the public. Statistics Canada's most recently published Canadian Survey on Disability (Statistics Canada, 2018) reveals that over six million Canadians (aged 15 and over) report having a disability, approximately 22% of the total population—an enormous, and diverse, community that remains underrepresented in local Canadian politics.

International research highlights significant barriers to the equitable participation of people with disabilities and various accessibility needs in local politics (Evans & Reher, 2020). There is also a pronounced gap when it comes to the inclusion of IBPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ candidates with disabilities and the inclusion of people with mental, intellectual, or multiple disabilities. Sophie Poost, a disability advocate who works as the Director of Programs with the Disability EmpowerHer Network, points out, "if you look at any panel or conversation of disabled people who have gotten elected, you see the same kinds of people… They're usually cis, they're usually white, they're usually [people with] physical disabilities with some limitations" (qtd. in Loeppky & Green, 2022).

Connell Crooms, a Deaf labour organizer and congressional candidate, says,

> Ableism is a cultural problem… a lack of disabled leadership at the highest levels—where laws are crafted that shape our social conditions—[is] a big reason for this. We need more community control models to craft better policies and normalize disability in everyday society. (qtd. in Loeppky & Green, 2022)

While multiple barriers impact people with disabilities and various accessibility needs, researchers point to ongoing issues in three key areas:

1. **Accessibility**, including "inaccessible venues… a lack of facilities, a lack of interpreters and assistive technology to aid communication, and inaccessible formatting of documents and materials preventing disabled (aspiring) candidates from participating in events at all stages of the recruitment process" (Evans & Reher, 2020, p. 11).

2. **Resourcing**, including "a lack of financial resources preventing the necessary reasonable adjustments that disabled people are entitled to by law" (Evans & Reher, 2020, p. 11).

3. **Ableism**, including "the assumption that political candidates would (and should) be able-bodied and able-minded and be able to adapt themselves to the existing political structure" (Evans & Reher, 2020, p. 11).

Traditional campaigning is also inherently ableist. For example, the structure of 12-hour days spent knocking on doors, the requirement to take part in candidate debates, and the financial resources required to run a campaign exclude many people with disabilities and various accessibility needs. This means that many disabled people can't reoffer for second or further terms because they can't make it to the table in the first place.

People may also fear losing their disability benefits if successful in securing a seat in local government (Loeppky & Green, 2022). Clearly much work remains to be done to democratize public office in meaningful ways so that Canada's diversity is reflected in public office. This includes building space for people with disabilities and various accessibility needs.

2SLGBTQIA+ Communities and Public Office in Canada

According to Statistics Canada, the country is "home to approximately one million people who are 2SLGBTQIA+, accounting for 4% of the total population aged 15 and older" (Statistics Canada, 2021). Given ongoing social stigma and inequalities associated with reporting the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, the numbers are likely higher, especially for those who may conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity in order to feel safe (National Seniors Council, 2017). The Government of Canada notes that nearly half of gay, lesbian, and bisexual women have experienced intimate partner violence (Jaffray, 2021), while 59% of transgender and non-binary people in Canada have experienced physical or sexual assaults (Statistics Canada, 2022c), often because they are targeted for their gender presentation.

For many, a history of discrimination in Canada, including the criminalization and medicalization of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, made it impossible to serve in public office while "out" until relatively recently, and created a lack of trust in government that still ongoing for some (Tremblay, 2019). For example, it wasn't until the early 1990s that the federal government lifted the ban on queer public servants and military personnel and ceased use of the "fruit machine," a device measuring pupil size, perspiration, and heart rate, designed to test federal workers' sexual orientation (Knegt, 2018). Civil liberties, marriage equality, access to benefits, and even 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion in Canadian human rights law are all recent advances (CBC News, 2015). When it comes to diverse 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, transformations in Canadian law have helped open up new possibilities for elected office.

Formal accounts of 2SLGBTQIA+ history often neglect the leadership of diverse Two-Spirit people, who existed prior to colonization and who—varying in their social and spiritual roles across distinct cultures—often took on community leadership roles, "such as healers, matchmakers, and counsellors," among other responsibilities (Trans Care BC, 2023). Knowledge of these historical roles has served as a revitalizing force for young "Indigiqueers" occupying community leadership roles today (Beaulne-Stuebing, 2021).

In 2013, Proud Politics was established to increase the number and visibility of 2SLGBTQIA+ politicians in Canada (Proud Politics, 2023). The program encourages 2SLGBTQIA+ people in Canada to run for office at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels and offers training programs and political support to candidates. Furthermore, it maintains a self-submitted database of 2SLGBTQIA+ politicians (Proud Politics, 2023). Formal statistics documenting the exact number of people who identify as gender minorities elected to public office are lacking. Case studies and interviews in this report highlight some of the stakes for candidates and speak to the need for more equitable representation.

Like women, when 2SLGBTQIA+ community members do run for public office in federal and provincial elections, they are often placed in hostile ridings—a phenomenon referred to as "the glass cliff" (Lenti, 2019). Another example of the glass cliff is when someone from a systemically oppressed group may be placed in a position of traditional power but receives little support in precarious conditions, which then sets them up for failure (Stewart, 2018). The practice of placing 2SLGBTQIA+ candidates in hostile ridings is less relevant in a municipal context, but as this report demonstrates, adjacent patterns emerge throughout municipal politics, including of a lack of support, resourcing, and opportunities. This demonstrates the need for systemic change and anti-oppression training.[11]

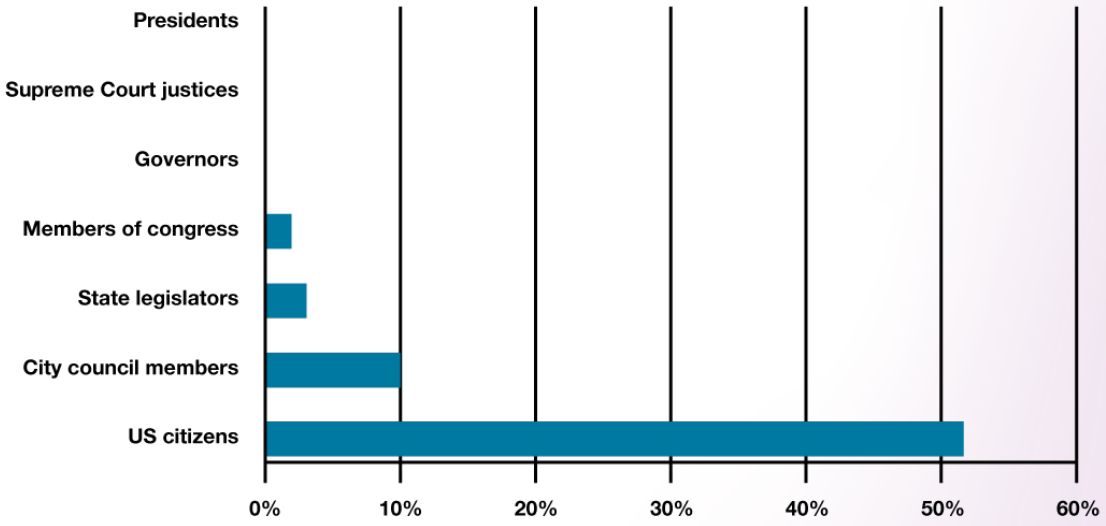
11 Anti-oppression training helps people to reflect on their own experiences of privilege and oppression along a spectrum. It also draws attention to racism, ableism, colonization, transphobia and other social inequalities and how they impact individuals and communities. For more information on anti-oppressive practice, see Appendix F: List of Resources.

Social Class and Elected Office

Ongoing inequalities effectively exclude most working- and poverty-class people from adopting roles as elected officials in the first place. This situation highlights weaknesses in popular conceptions of democracy that are built more on access to education, wealth, and social networks than on equitable community-based politics (Carnes, 2018). Research shows that social class determines who can run for elected office; furthermore, class strongly mediates political agendas (Traber, et al., 2022). Studies also reveal a downturn in low-income voters in Canada since the late 1980s (Polacko, 2017). Former Vancouver City Councillor Andrea Reimer says, "If you are low-income, you are more likely to be brown, Black, Indigenous, a woman, young and much more likely to be a renter" (2021).

While working-class voter turnout has declined in Canada in recent years, many argue that voter turnout isn't the key issue; rather, the cost, loss of income, and time commitment involved in campaigning essentially shuts out working-class people from running for office. Our own study shows that class significantly affected the retention of women and gender minorities (for more information, see the Demographics and Social Inequalities section in Part 3: Key Findings from Interviews, Surveys, and Focus Groups). Political scientist Dr. Nicholas Carnes writes, "It is the thought of losing income or taking time off work that uniquely screens out working-class [communities]" (Carnes, 2018). Studies indicate that the impeding factors preventing people of some class backgrounds from running for office are an ongoing concern for groups that want democratic practices to reflect the communities they serve. For example, working-class people make up 52% of the population in the United States, but account for only 10% of municipally elected leaders (Carnes, 2018).

Figure 4: Working-Class Citizens and Percentage of Working-Class Elected Officials in the US



There is much work to be done to bring even adequate levels of representation to public office across Canada. The next section of this report provides an overview of municipal and regional legislation in BC and Alberta, including a discussion of ethics, oversight, the relationship between local and provincial governments, and regional autonomy. These legal features help situate research participant responses in BC and Alberta and support the study's recommendations for more inclusive and representative local governments. Understanding the law is also critical to updating provincial legislation in order to support more robust democratic practices.

The Context in BC and Alberta

Local governments in Canada are guided by a complex series of provincial laws, regulations, and municipal guidelines. Municipal authority has expanded across Canada since the 1990s, with popular revisions to municipal acts granting more and more authority to local governments (Taylor & Dobson, 2020). Across Canada, local governments serve a range of roles, including community service delivery, the establishment of infrastructure, economic development, and the creation of local arts and culture initiatives. On top of general legislation addressing local governance, provinces have also increasingly adopted distinct laws for larger cities, such as the Vancouver Charter (1953), the City of Toronto Act (2006) and the City of Winnipeg Charter Act (2002) (Taylor & Dobson, 2020, pp. 53–58). This section provides a brief comparison of legislative frameworks for local governments in BC and Alberta. More specifically, it examines:

- Frameworks for provincial consultation
- Alberta's municipal districts vs. BC's municipalities and regional districts
- The authority and scope of mayoral powers
- Ethical oversight
- Local autonomy to create ward systems and boundaries.

Frameworks for Provincial Consultation

Across Canada, there are legal variations among the directives requiring provincial governments to consult local governments regarding decisions that impact them. The Government of BC, like Ontario, is legally required to engage with municipalities regarding decisions about local government matters (Taylor & Dobson, 2020). BC's Community Charter (2003) explicitly highlights engagement principles between the province and municipalities, including: "mutual respect, a duty to consult, and a commitment to resolving conflict through negotiation" (Taylor & Dobson, 2020, p. 13). BC's Community Charter also sets out municipal councils' role "as an order of government within their jurisdiction" (Government of BC, 2003). Alberta, in contrast, has often adopted memorandums of understanding (MOU) with local governments or related municipal associations highlighting duties to consult on specific activities (Taylor & Dobson, 2020). For example, in 2015, a MOU was struck between municipal associations and the Government of Alberta to govern consultation on revisions to the Municipal Government Act (Government of Alberta, 2015).

Alberta's Municipal Districts vs. BC's Municipalities and Regional Districts

While BC adopts a "two-tier municipal structure" incorporating both regional districts and municipalities into local governance frameworks, Alberta lacks regional governments, opting instead for large municipal districts "with a geographic footprint that is much larger than municipalities in most provinces and states" (Burke, 2015, p. 10). Alberta, unlike most other provinces, has adopted reforms that effectively provide regulations that rewrite general legislation as applied to the unique needs of each municipal district (Taylor & Dobson, 2020). However, "Canadian parliamentary committees and courts" have warned provinces against the "use of regulation to modify primary legislation," citing the erosion of parliamentary powers and a lack of appropriate processes for review and approval (Taylor & Dobson, 2020, p. 60). It is likely Alberta's reforms will be challenged, as they reflect significant municipal authority compared to the rest of Canada (Taylor & Dobson, 2020, p. 60).

Authority and Scope of Mayoral Powers

A mayor, or reeve, generally serves as the Chief Elected Official (CEO) and is responsible for leading and representing council and the municipality or district. Laws governing municipalities and regional governments commonly identify the responsibilities and authorities of local heads of council.

Across Canada there is considerable variation in related legislation. For example, the province of BC grants expanded powers to heads of council in certain circumstances. This can be a complex problem when mayors are themselves perpetrators of abuse. One example is the former Burns Lake mayor, Luke Strimbold, who was sentenced to two years in jail after pleading guilty to four counts of sexual assault involving minors (Boynton, 2019). Many of the assaults took place while Strimbold held public office between 2011 and 2016. In 2022, BC announced special legislative changes to address the issue of local elected officials charged with or convicted of a criminal offence, including amendments that disqualify officials convicted of an indictable offense and mandatory paid leave for officials facing criminal charges (Government of British Columbia, 2022b).

The following table provides a comparison of the authority and duties of heads of council in BC and Alberta. Under the Community Charter (2003), BC grants expanded powers to heads of council, who have the authority to suspend employees, require reconsideration of council decisions, and appoint standing committees (Taylor & Dobson, 2020, p. 33). Regional district chairs are also granted these powers under related legislation (Taylor & Dobson, 2020, pp. 33–34).

Table 1: Authority and Duties of Heads of Council in BC and Alberta[12]

Power	BC	Alberta
Preside over council	√	√
Lead council	√	√
Represent municipality	√	√
Act as CEO	√	√
May suspend employees	√	
Appoint standing committees	√	
May require reconsideration of council decision	√	

There are also differences between BC and Alberta's mayoral selection process. Notably, in Alberta, municipal councils can pass bylaws to select a mayor by a vote of council, whereas in BC there is no alternative to a direct election.

Ethical Oversight

Canada is less directive than other countries in legislating codes of conduct for municipal councillors (Taylor & Dobson, 2020). One of the strongest legal frameworks can be found in the Government of Québec's Municipal Ethics and Good Conduct Act (2010), while Ontario provides for integrity commissioners in associated legislation (Taylor & Dobson, 2020). Like Alberta, BC has created a role for a provincial ombudsperson to assess complaints "about administrative shortcomings" by municipal governments in the province (Taylor & Dobson, 2020, p. 43). BC's Community Charter (2003) provides some directives for councillor conduct: for example, recent revisions "now require municipal councils to consider (and then reconsider) the establishment of a code of conduct" (Harding & Falzon, 2022, p. 1). Alberta, however, goes further in requiring mandatory codes of conduct. Recent legislative revisions in Alberta specifically address improper influence, conflicts of interest, respectful interactions, and the adoption of a complaints process in municipal districts, among other directives (Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties et al., 2017, p. 4).

12 Adapted from Taylor & Dobson (2020, p. 34).

Table 2: Ethical Oversight in BC and Alberta[13]

	Legally mandated code of conduct for councillors	Dedicated provincial integrity commissioner for local government	Provincial ombudsperson	Dedicated provincial auditor general for local government
BC	**NO** Some rules are set out in the Community Charter. Municipalities are required to "consider" adopting or updating a code of conduct following a general local election.	**NO** Some elements of this role may be filled by the Inspector of Municipalities, but there are significant gaps in accountability and oversight.[14] A patchwork of local integrity commissioners is spread across various parts of the province.	**YES** The ombudsperson office is not dedicated to local government, but has an extensive portfolio including provincial ministries, crown corporations, health authorities and hospitals, boards, commissions and tribunals, public schools, universities and colleges and organizations that regulate professions.[15]	**NO** The BC Auditor General for Local Government Office ceased operations in 2021. Established by the BC Liberal Government in 2013, its focus was on fiscal austerity and not systemic inequalities or related matters of conduct.[16]
Alberta	**YES** However, "the code of conduct and any sanctions imposed under a code of conduct cannot remove a councillor from council and must not prevent a councillor from fulfilling the legislated duties of a councillor."[17] The provincial government is "considering making municipal codes of conduct optional, or keeping them mandatory but limiting the sanctions."[18]	**NO** A patchwork of local integrity commissioners is spread across various parts of the province. The Office of the Ethics Commissioner Lobbyist Registrar is largely provincial in orientation and is not focused on systemic inequalities or related matters of conduct.[19] The United Conservative Party of Alberta recently adopted a resolution requiring municipal politicians and staff to register as lobbyists. If legislated, this could block effective engagement with both the public and the province as each interaction could be perceived as a conflict of interest.[20]	**YES** The ombudsperson office is not dedicated to local government, but has an extensive portfolio including provincial government, patient concerns, self-regulated health professions and other designated professional authorities.[21]	**NO** The provincial Minister of Municipal Affairs may intervene.

13 Elements adapted from Taylor & Dobson (2020, p. 40).
14 The Government of British Columbia specifies that "the Inspector of Municipalities, appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council, is responsible for oversight of local government financial matters and approval of certain local government decisions to ensure consistency with provincial legislation" (2022a).
15 British Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson (2023).
16 Government of British Columbia (2022c).
17 Alberta Municipal Affairs (2017).
18 French (2021).
19 Office of the Ethics Commissioner Lobbyist Registrar of Alberta (2023).
20 French (2022).
21 Alberta Office of the Ombudsman (2023).

In both BC (CBC News, 2022) and Alberta (KPMG for Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2015) there have been calls for the establishment of a province-wide integrity commissioner for municipalities and districts. Local codes of conduct can be nothing more than symbolic when it's "councillors policing themselves"; this approach raises the issue of conflict of interest (CBC News, 2022). This problem is also a key finding in our own study dealing with the experiences of women and gender minorities elected to local offices in BC and Alberta (for more information, see the A Closer Look at Experiences of Discrimination section in Part 3: Research Findings from Interviews, Surveys and Focus Groups).

Currently, systems of oversight are ineffectively split between governing bodies with little consistency or specialization (see Table 2: Ethical Oversight in BC and Alberta). More specifically, a provincial integrity commissioner for local government could:

1. **Devote** greater attention to local government.
2. **Provide** anti-oppression education for local governments that is more attuned to structural inequalities that block democracy. An ongoing issue is that harm is not addressed or mitigated because education on structural inequalities is lacking. Furthermore, addressing issues such as racism, colonization—including the Indian Act, treaties, and UNDRIP—ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination in local governments is encouraged by the United Nations (2007; 2022b) and the UN's Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2022), the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (2018; n. d.), and other groups in order to improve democratic practices.
3. **Enforce** codes of conduct by investigating alleged breaches.
4. **Advise** individual local government elected officials on how to meet standards of conduct (Capital Regional District, 2017).
5. **Educate** local government elected officials on issues of ethics, integrity, and personal conduct (Capital Regional District, 2017).
6. **Impose** legal sanctions in the case of misconduct and abuse, including the removal of councillors or mayors and the implementation of financial penalties. This could help remedy the lack of meaningful accountability.

Local Autonomy to Create Ward Systems and Boundaries

Few provinces grant significant autonomy to municipalities to create ward systems and boundaries (Taylor & Dobson, 2020). Notably, Alberta allows restructuring in this regard (Cook, 2020; Kaufmann, 2019; Ward Boundary Commission, 2020). In contrast, BC does not provide municipalities with significant legal authority to restructure themselves (Taylor & Dobson, 2020). In BC, protocol is outlined in legislation and "unless the municipality was originally divided" into "neighbourhood constituencies" in the "letters patent incorporating it, its council may establish new boundaries only with the approval of the Lieutenant Governor in Council" (Taylor & Dobson, 2020, p. 37).

Municipal restructuring can have a dramatic impact on "political representation, identity, and service delivery" (Alberta Association of Municipal Districts & Counties, 2015, p. 10). As a political tactic, gerrymandering—which means altering electoral boundaries to favour one political party or group—has been used as a way for parties to gain political power. Electoral boundaries can have far-reaching implications for representation and democratic processes.

In a 2014 study, legal researchers Michael Pal and Sujit Choudhry reviewed the voting power of racialized communities in Canada and compared their voting strength to the strength of voters who were not racialized. They did this by reviewing the 2004 federal election map along with data from the 2006 census and provincial electoral districts (2014, p. 85). The study concluded that racialized communities experienced "vote dilution" because their votes were concentrated in the ridings with the largest racialized populations (2014, p. 85).

Furthermore, in a 2007 review of voting power, they found BC and Alberta to be the worst provinces for diluting the voting power of racialized communities:

> Dilution is at its worst in two provinces that are underrepresented in the House of Commons—Alberta and British Columbia—but it occurs in Ontario to a lesser degree, notwithstanding the fact that Ontario voters as a whole are most underrepresented at the federal level. (Pal & Choudhry, 2007, p. 4)

The next section of this literature review includes discussion of potential solutions, including a more in-depth discussion of representation in local politics, quotas, and innovative solutions to systemic inequalities in local government.

Solutions to Inequitable Representation in Local Government

A Closer Look at Representation

Equitable representation centres the idea that the composition of elected officials should mirror the demographic composition of the populations they serve (Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005). For healthy and functioning democracies, there are good reasons to explore systemic inequalities that block equitable representation in municipal, provincial, and federal governments in Canada. As earlier sections of this report indicate (see the Inequitable Representation section in Part 2: Contextualizing Our Research: A Review of the Literature), Canada has fared poorly in securing local governments that reflect the communities they serve. In Electing a Diverse Canada: The Representation of Immigrants, Minorities and Women (2009), Andrew et al. write, "there is an archetype of the Canadian elected official—male, white, middle-class, middle-aged, Christian, Canadian-born, and majority-language speaking" (p. 255).

Researchers have found that representative governments enhance trust, pride, and political participation. For example, American researchers demonstrate that cities with Black mayors increase African-American voter turnout (Banducci et al., 2004). In Aotearoa/New Zealand[22], seven Māori electorates ensure seats for Māori representatives in parliament, thereby helping to balance representation, empower Indigenous communities in governance, and secure a future for the country, directed, in part, by Māori leadership (Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa, 2022).

Proportional Representation

In 2022, women outnumbered men for the first time in Aotearoa/New Zealand's parliamentary history, as the legislative body saw 59 men and 60 women take seats (Mercer, 2022). The first country to allow women to vote in parliamentary elections (25 years before Canada), Aotearoa/New Zealand also adopted mixed-member proportional representation in the 1990s, resulting in significant increases in women's participation in the electoral system after years of poor women's representation (Mercer, 2022).

In mixed-member proportional representation, voters elect local MPs in addition to "a team of regional ones to make the overall results proportional in each region" (Fair Vote Canada, 2022). In Canada, the model has been recommended by the Law Commission of Canada (2004) and has been notably adopted in Scotland and Germany (Fair Vote Canada, 2022).

Internationally, a large body of research demonstrates meaningful increases in women's political participation in countries that adopt proportional representation (Norris, 2004). For example, in an international survey of governance systems, Lijphart (2012) found that countries adopting proportional representation have 8% more women in their parliamentary bodies.

22 The geographic region of New Zealand, originally referred to as Aotearoa by the Māori, loosely translates to the "land of the long white cloud" (Frost, 2022).

Figure 5: Research on Proportional Representation[23]

While specific models of proportional representation can differ (for example, Aotearoa/New Zealand's mixed-member proportional representation, which also adopts an emphasis on unique Māori electorates), systems of proportional representation better reflect democratic values in their emphasis on more equitable voting counts. Generally, under a proportional representation system, if 60% of people vote for a political party, 60% of seats in government would go to that party. Under the current system, a party can win with less than half the vote.

It's not just women who benefit from proportional representation; research has highlighted a number of benefits in a variety of other areas, summarized in Fig. 4. Proportional systems have also been shown to result in higher levels of policy congruence between community preferences and government agendas (Powell, 2000). Aligning community preferences and needs with the issues for which their elected representatives advocate is a tenet of substantive representation. According to Pitkin (1972), substantive representation means that elected representatives focus on issues relevant to a particular group of people, whereas descriptive representation means that the elected representative may have a similar background or personal characteristics to those represented.

23 Fair Vote Canada (2018).

Quotas

Many countries and electoral districts have different forms of quota systems that dictate the percentage of a governing body that must be made up of women or others who are underrepresented. By 2008, over 100 countries had some form of quota system, with gender quotas being the most common (Hughes, 2011).

Quotas can advance the representation of women in politics; however, the manner in which quotas are implemented in practice can have a dramatic impact on outcomes in terms of equitable representation. For example, France has experienced increases in women candidates following the adoption of gender-based quotas in the early 2000s, but "most parties still put up more men for election, despite France having a system in which a party's funding is restricted if women do not make up at least 49 percent of candidates" (Kelly, 2017). In Jordan, quotas have inspired more women to run for political roles (Nanes, 2015), and "the fact that women could actively enter Jordanian politics as independents—i.e. without the support of the 'expected' political party networks—is certainly a byproduct of the presence of gender quotas" (Welborne, 2020, p. 268).

However, simply running a certain percentage of women does not ensure that any number of them will be elected. At the provincial and federal level, parties often choose to run women in unwinnable ridings. For example, former Ontario politician and Canada's first openly gay premier, Kathleen Wynne, says, "My experience is that often what has happened with parties is women have been run in ridings that are not winnable" (CBC Radio, 2015). For a quota system to be impactful, it must include both placement mandates and penalties for non-compliance (Hughes, 2011).

The State of California has adopted the first quota in the world to address "racial inequality, sexual orientation and gender identity," prompting new possibilities for discussions about the implementation of quotas (Rosenblum, 2020). Gender quotas on their own are likely to further advantage women who already have comparative advantages in terms of factors such as race, class, education level (Hughes, 2011), and political connections (Welborne, 2020), among others. Quotas that focus on IBPOC communities often benefit racialized men. However, research from around the world has shown that broader "minority" quotas have more impact on less-privileged women than gender quotas (Hughes, 2011). A global pattern has emerged in which racialized women are elected more often once racialized men have already been elected rather than once white women have already been elected (Hughes, 2011). For example, in Canada, Agnes McPhail was the first (white) woman elected to parliament in 1921 (de Bruin, 2020). Jean Augustin was the first Black woman elected to parliament in 1993, 25 years after Lincoln Alexander, the first African-Canadian man (Operation Black Vote Canada, 2020), but 72 years after Agnes McPhail.

A Cultural Shift: Fighting the Normalization of Abuse

Much work remains to be done to stop the normalization of the abuse of women and gender minorities in politics. Allies too have a central role to play in stopping violence, harassment, sexual assault, transphobia, homophobia, and misogyny.

Much work remains to be done to stop the normalization of the abuse of women and gender minorities in politics. Allies too have a central role to play in stopping violence, harassment, sexual assault, transphobia, homophobia, and misogyny.

The #MeToo movement, started by Tarana Burke, an African-American activist and community organizer, makes visible the magnitude of sexualized violence by encouraging women to take up public space with their stories (Ohlheiser, 2017). Part of how sexualized violence and misogyny have become so pervasive is that they work to downplay and ignore women's experiences. The solutions, therefore, include a shift toward a culture that inherently values women's lives and experiences. The impacts of sexualized violence are also disproportionately felt. For example, missing and murdered Indigenous women, sexualized violence in rural BC's pipeline worker camps (Linnitt, 2020), and the targeting of IBPOC transgender women (Chih et al., 2020) all reveal how high the stakes are for women who belong to systemically oppressed groups.

The case studies presented in this report bring to light a variety of issues in local politics in Canada, including the experiences of women navigating harassment, racism, and transphobia (see the Case Studies in Mapping a Broader Culture of Hate section in Part 2: Contextualizing Our Research: A Review of the Literature). More broadly, women and gender minority politicians encounter a number of structural barriers, practices, and policies that discourage them from running for office in the first place, or from sticking around for additional terms if they have successfully secured incumbency. Studies also tell us that "women and marginalized people are less likely to run for office and that it takes up to a dozen times for them to be asked before they decide to do it" (Therrien qtd. in Winter, 2021). Diverse municipal councils can later translate into diversity at the federal and provincial levels, and therefore more adequate representation, as political careers are nurtured and people move to other levels of government. The retention of women and gender minorities in local politics is therefore also important in shifting broader government agendas towards inclusivity over time.

WHAT IS TOXIC MASCULINITY?

In Canada, colonization has helped to foster dominant perspectives of manhood that can cause harm to men, women, and non-binary people in an emphasis on violence, control, and dominance (Innes & Anderson, 2015). This is often referred to as "toxic masculinity." According to Salam (2019), toxic masculinity can be understood as a series of beliefs, behaviours, and values that prioritize:

- suppressing emotions or masking distress
- maintaining an appearance of hardness
- violence as an indicator of power.

Toxic masculinity teaches young boys "that they can't express emotion openly; that they have to be tough all the time; that anything other than that makes them 'feminine' or weak" (Salam, 2019). As a cultural value, toxic masculinity plays a central role in fostering violence against women and gender minorities.

Toxic masculinity is also not exclusive to men. For example, it can play out in 2SLGBTQIA+ communities as harmful responses to oppression that shows up as intimate partner violence or in replicating toxic values (Martinez, 2019). Addressing the abuse of women and gender minorities in politics requires awareness, education, and work to actively counter toxic masculinity. It also requires direct action by those who strive to be allies.

For more information on anti-oppression frameworks, toxic masculinity, and positive role modeling for young men see Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence (2018) or Appendix F: List of Resources.

In a recent Canadian press survey regarding the experiences of women MPs (Smith, 2018):

- "Nearly 58 per cent of respondents said they had personally been the target of one or more forms of sexual misconduct while in office, including inappropriate or unwanted remarks, gestures or text messages of a sexual nature."
- Three MPs reported that they "were victims of sexual assault" and four reported they "were the targets of sexual harassment, defined in the survey as insistent and repeated sexual advances."
- "Nearly half of respondents—47 per cent—said they were subjected to inappropriate comments on social media."

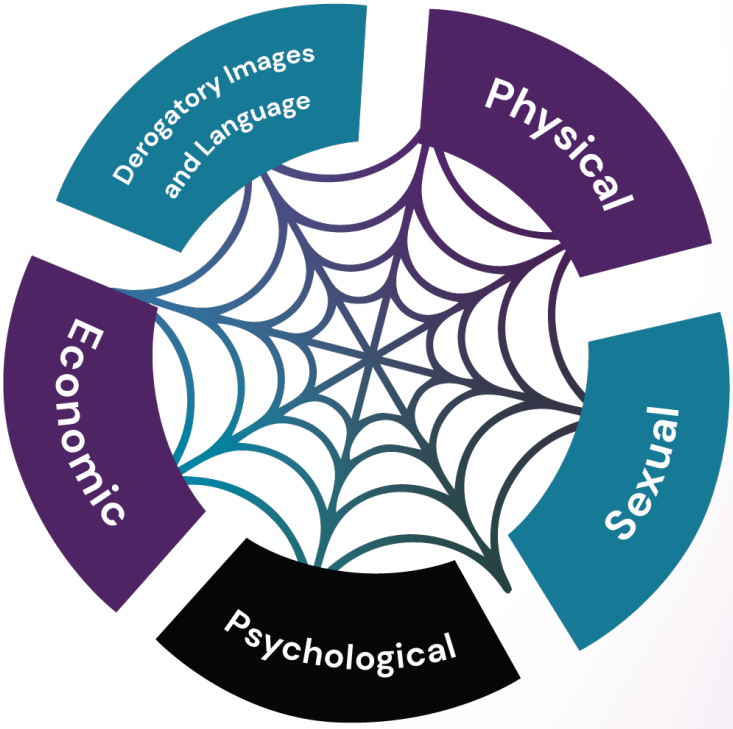
Of the total number of women MPs holding political office at the time (89), 42.7% participated in the study (Smith, 2018).

Many women experiencing abuse feel pressured to remain silent about their experiences, lack allies in their work environment, and navigate harassment and sexual misconduct on a daily basis (Krook, 2020; Rose, 2021). Researchers Mona Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín discuss the scope of the issue for women specifically in politics internationally; they write that "violence against women in politics is increasingly recognized around the world as a significant barrier to women's political participation, following a troubling rise in reports of assault, intimidation, and abuse" (2020, p. 740).

Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2020) indicate multiple forms of violence that women and gender minorities can experience in public office, including derogatory images and language as well as physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence. These forms of violence are not discrete; rather, they reinforce and uphold one another in complex ways. The authors define them as follows (Krook and Restrepo Sanín, 2020, p. 743–744):

1. Derogatory images and language: using negative language and images to objectify, delegitimize, and degrade an individual.
2. Physical violence: physical assault.
3. Sexual violence: sexual assault and unwanted advances.
4. Psychological violence: making threats of rape, murder, physical assault, or other kinds of harm against an individual (or their loved ones) which are designed to instil psychological terror.
5. Economic violence: withholding economic resources to reduce an individual's capacity to perform their political responsibilities, destroying property, denying or controlling someone's access to financial resources, or attempts to undermine a person's livelihood.

Figure 6: Multiple Forms of Violence[24]



24 Fair Vote Canada (2018).

CASE STUDY:
Climate Minister Catherine McKenna Responds to "Climate Barbie" Moniker by Rebel Media

In 2017, Rebel Media characterized Environment Minister Catherine McKenna as "Climate Barbie" in articles and on social media (Canadian Press, 2017), a dismissive term designed to delegitimize McKenna and reorient focus on her appearance. Women and gender minorities in public office endure a disproportionate focus on their hair, clothing, make-up, and appearance compared to cisgender men. In McKenna's case, she fought back at a press conference in Vancouver. Addressing Rebel Media reporter Christopher Wilson, she said:

> I would just like a commitment that you will not call me names. That you won't talk about the colour of my hair, that you won't make fun of me, and the reason I ask you not to do this is because I have two daughters. There are lots of girls that want to get into politics and it is completely unacceptable that you do this. (McKenna qtd. in Zimonjic, 2017)

CASE STUDY:
Green Party Candidate for Prince Edward Island Derrick Biso and the Politics of Clothing Choice

2SLGBTQIA+ candidates face multiple barriers, including hate crimes, harassment, and tensions between the personal cost of visibility and the need for a public profile when running for local office (Tremblay, 2019). Candidates also deal with assumptions about their identities based on stereotypes and can experience pressure to conform in order to secure a seat in local government (Tremblay, 2019). Derrick Biso, who identifies as genderqueer, ran for Prince Edward Island's Green Party in the 2015 election (Wagner, 2019). Of their experience, Biso says:

> I never wore a dress as a candidate, and that really bothered me. That was a negotiation I had to make. I didn't think maybe it was the time [to express my queerness in such a way]. I didn't feel exactly comfortable. As someone who is genderqueer and who feels much more comfortable in feminine attire, having to dress more masculine in order to be more well accepted, to pass for people, to be accepted as someone who is legitimate and who is valued and who is knowledgeable and who is powerful and who is worthy, that's difficult. Every day was a greater struggle because of that. (Biso qtd. in Wagner, 2019, p. 269)

CASE STUDY:
City Councillor Natalie Joly (St. Albert, Alberta)

In 2022, Natalie Joly, a prominent city councillor in St. Albert, Alberta, and the Executive Director of ElderCare Edmonton, reached her limit. In a public post, she identified her repeated experiences with toxic masculinity in the workplace. In the post, Joly (2022a) wrote:

> When I call out toxic behaviour in a workplace context, the most common response I receive is that toxic behaviour is part of life as a public servant and that anyone in public service must have "thick skin."
>
> When another politician I'd just met, about 20 years my senior, joked that I should take my shirt off in a room full of regional politicians? I was told that he's a good guy, just sometimes makes comments like that and that I shouldn't let it bother me.
>
> When I expressed frustration that a politician in another level of government was clearly lying, I was received with curious surprise because "that's how you get things done sometimes."
>
> And when I overheard older politicians chuckling about MILFs on Pornhub during a break at a meeting with both elected officials and administrative staff present? I was told boys will be boys, and that it's not a big deal.

Joly has also commented on limited perceptions of her as a woman. In another post, she wrote:

> It has been common to encounter people that struggle to understand that someone who looks like me could hold my position. I often experience looks of confusion when I describe my job, and more often than not, people assume I'm a social-work type of councillor [sic]. At conferences where spouses attend, my partner (a cis man) is mistaken for the elected official of our pair. (Joly, 2022b)

Despite the challenges, Joly has continued to strategically use her position to advocate for inclusive change, including the adoption of bans on conversion therapy (Omstead, 2019) and the removal of names that are associated with the violence of the residential school system from public buildings and monuments in St. Albert, Alberta (Lachacz, 2021).

Challenging toxic masculinity and a dominant culture that permits the abuse of women and gender minorities in public office requires educational initiatives, effective media guidelines, and action on the part of allies. More broadly, the literature suggests that:

1. Organizations, including municipalities, can adopt robust mechanisms for accountability, role modeling, peer supports, allyship, proactive prevention of all forms of violence (Employment & Social Development Canada, 2019), and anti-oppression training (The Feminist Campaign School, 2022).
2. Federal and provincial governments can pass legislation to more effectively address harassment, abuse, and hate speech (Di Meco & Brechenmacher, 2020).
3. Journalists and popular media outlets can adopt media guidelines to promote more accurate reporting, reduce the abuse of women and gender minorities, and elevate democratic practices (Council of Europe, 2009; Di Meco & Brechenmacher, 2020; National News Media Council, n. d.).
4. Social media companies can establish policies to counter hate speech and harassment (Di Meco & Brechenmacher, 2020).

Removing Institutional Barriers

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (2018, p. 13) and the Canadian Commission for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Brooks, 2018, p. 12) state the need for effective parental leave policies to support the equitable participation of women in local politics. Few provinces in Canada mandate parental leave for municipal councillors, although Ontario and Nova Scotia have made recent gains in this regard by introducing related provincial legislation (Klaassen, et al., 2022).

In BC, the districts of Squamish and North Saanich have adopted paid parental leave policies for councillors while allowing for ongoing local governance activities over the course of their leave (Klaassen, et al., 2022). The City of New Westminster also recently adopted a parental leave policy, citing ongoing calls for “the Local Government Act and Community Charter to provide maternal/parental leave to councillors” (McManus, 2022). These policies seek to address the issue that the Community Charter (2003) currently disqualifies councillors who are absent from council meetings for “a period of 60 consecutive days” or “4 consecutive regularly scheduled council meetings.”

In Alberta, local governments such as those of Banff (Ellis, 2022) and Edmonton (Gibson, 2018) have adopted parental leave policies in an effort to create more inclusive work environments. Effective parental leave measures make local governments more democratic and more open to officials with family responsibilities as well as opening up a wider demographic array of potential candidates.

Robust parental leave measures represent just one example of institutional changes that can support more inclusive municipal councils. Others point to the socio-economic barriers that women and other systemically oppressed groups face when they aren’t paid a full-time wage for their labour.

Economist Harry Kitchen writes, “there is a credible argument to be made that making council positions full time with a credible salary would help the issue with diversity” (qtd. in Winter, 2021). In Canada, it is a commonly stated fact that women earn 89¢ for every dollar that men make, but in fact “the gender pay gap is worse for those who face multiple barriers, including racialized women, Indigenous women, and women with disabilities” (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2022). 2SLGBTQIA+ Canadians also earn significantly less than heterosexual men, a gap “most likely explained by discrimination—whether that be purposeful or through unconscious bias” (Alberta Living Wage Network, 2022). In midsized and smaller communities, where local government roles are technically part-time, councillors often find themselves with a full-time workload (Winter, 2021). This impacts the kinds of candidates that can run for local office—effectively restricting the opportunity to those who can afford to work full-time for part-time pay. Economic inequalities also shape the ability of candidates to run campaigns, which can be expensive. More broadly, women and gender minorities do not have the same access to income and campaign resources that men do, and “these issues persist all the more in jurisdictions with lax or no campaign finance regulations” (Thomas, 2013, p. 228).

Across Canada, the average municipal councillor rate of pay is low. For example, a study by the Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario (2018) found that most municipal councillors in Ontario—Canada’s most populous province—earn less than $40,000.00 a year (p. 4). In BC, the inequalities between districts are pronounced. In 2022, 15 of BC’s 16 highest paid mayors were found in the Lower Mainland (with a top salary of $183,365.00 for Coquitlam’s Richard Stewart), while most other communities see local elected officials earning significantly less (McElroy, 2022). For example, Castlegar city councillor Sue Heaton reports an annual income of $16,000.00 a year, working on average 20 hours a week for a total wage of $16.67 an hour (McElroy, 2022). Shifting the conditions of work, while attending to the realities of socio-economic class and privilege, can help realize more effective forms of democracy. In addition, availability of childcare (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2018), eldercare (Niedra, 2022), flexible employment options for people with disabilities (Waltz & Schippers, 2021), and adequate infrastructure and support (Broadbent & McIsaac, 2016) can enhance the working conditions of local government officials and advance the democratization of public office.

Retention

International research suggests a direct connection between the levels of abuse, harassment, and violence women experience and their retention rates in political roles (House of Commons, Women and Equity Committee, 2022). Researchers have also documented the “incumbency effect,” whereby those successfully elected to public office are much more likely to sit in public office again.

According to Schwindt-Bayer (2005, p. 227), “higher retention rates” often “lead to fewer women winning office after controlling for socioeconomic factors, gender quotas, and electoral rules,” which points to the benefits of term limits. “Although not designed to promote the election of women,” term limits can benefit women (Schwindt-Bayer, 2005, p. 227) and other systemically oppressed groups. Statistics demonstrate the incumbency effect in municipal elections in Canada, with higher election rates (34%) for incumbents re-running for election (Lucas et al., 2021, p. 131).

The incumbency effect is “a key barrier to women’s political participation”; however, this is complicated at the provincial and federal level as researchers point out that parties often run women in hostile ridings (Thomas, 2013, p. 229). For example, in the 2008 and 2011 federal elections, just 19% of women incumbents ran in their own party’s stronghold. The remaining women faced political campaigns in hostile electoral regions (Thomas & Bodet, 2013, p. 162). According to researchers Melanee Thomas and Marc Bodet, “this helps explain why women’s political representation remains stalled in Canada” (2013, p. 163).

Retention and support for candidates from systemically oppressed communities after they are elected is also an important consideration. From parental leave to anti-oppression training and equal pay for equal work, many of the remedies explored in this review of related literature contribute to higher retention rates and are recommended by Employment and Social Development Canada (2019).

More broadly, an effective cultural shift supporting women and gender minorities to run for local office (and remain in local office) requires legislative support in terms of crafting laws, revising institutional practices, and creating policies that uplift systemically oppressed groups. Communities of women and gender minorities have also worked to establish mutual support networks through campaign schools (which can help with recruitment and retention) as well as formal and informal programs of mentorship.

Ausma Malik, who is the first hijab-wearing woman elected to public office in Canada, is currently a Toronto city councillor and a mentor and campaigner for women in politics. She says:

> Among the 22 elected [school] trustees [in Toronto], more than 50 per cent are women, there are a range of ages, professions and incomes, people from the LGBTQ community, as well as a diversity of racial identity and heritage. I have seen what we gain: we make better, richer, more innovative and courageous decisions, and create more opportunities for people to succeed. (Malik qtd. in Vyas, 2018; clarifications in square brackets ours.)

The links between the recruitment and retention of diverse leaders, better decision-making, and greater innovation are clear (Vyas, 2018). We all have something to gain from more representative local governments.

Part 3 of this report addresses key findings from our study, including in-depth qualitative interviews, surveys, and focus groups conducted with women and gender minorities occupying elected roles in municipal and regional governments across British Columbia and Alberta.

PART 3: KEY FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS, SURVEYS, AND FOCUS GROUPS

Part 3 of this report provides an examination of primary research findings from the study's interviews, surveys, and focus groups conducted between April 2022 and May 2023. In total, 107 elected local government officials identifying as either women or gender minorities participated in the study's survey from across BC and Alberta. Fifty-three participants agreed to in-depth qualitative interviews regarding their experiences holding public office. We also held focus groups to develop solutions to inequitable representation, with 12 participants from across both provinces. Critically, respondents report ongoing challenges for women and gender minorities occupying public office in BC and Alberta, including a lack of institutional support, ongoing harassment, and structural barriers. The following section surfaces key themes from the project's interviews, surveys, and focus groups and lays the groundwork for the solutions offered in Part 4 of this report.

Demographics and Social Inequalities

Diverse IBPOC Participant Experiences

The demographics of our study participants reflect the ongoing need for more equitable representation in local government, as documented in previous research (FCM, 2021) and highlighted in the Inequitable Representation section in Part 2 of this report, Contextualizing Our Research: A Review of the Literature. Most participants in this study were older white women, indicating an ongoing disconnect between political representation and the demographic profile of the Canadian population. Of the 107 survey responses, white people represented 93% of respondents in BC and 93% of respondents in Alberta; project interviews documented similar demographic profiles, with white people representing just over 80% of respondents. Common demographic responses included terms such as, "Caucasian" or "white" coupled with "French," "German," "Scottish" or "Irish." Table 3 details the demographics of study participants, including a more detailed breakdown of demographic information about IBPOC participants.

To centre the experiences of IBPOC participants, we begin by focusing on their responses. Many of these responses highlighted the intersectional nature of their experiences and the distinct forms of discrimination they face in their roles as elected officials:

> I think it's often the intersection of gender and race, like it's not just pure racism.

> Women of colour are often like they are obligated to do the work because no one else is doing it… which can cause a lot of harm to people, which is why I'm very glad for studies like this.

> I can't build out and [ask] my fellow tribe members to be interested in sitting in this spot, [it] doesn't feel welcoming.
>
> When I was researching about running for office, I talked to other women of colour candidates and who have that experience and who kind of warned me about that. Just that you just know that you're going to have to work twice as hard or three times as hard as a white woman to garner that respect. And I knew that and I prepared myself.

Table 3: IBPOC Identification

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	BC interview participants (n = 35)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)	Alberta interview participants (n = 18)
Basic demographics				
Indigenous identification	0%	3%	5%	6%
Black identification	0%	3%	0%	0%
Identification as a person of colour	7%	11%	2%	11%
White identification	93%	83%	93%	83%

Many women and gender minorities described a sense that their presence on council disrupted the status quo, making it difficult to do their work. They also commented that their families were attacked because of their work. One Indigenous participant said:

> I've seen a lot of people turn to drink; they have unfortunately left. Men seem to thrive on that for some reason [making other people look foolish]. People don't second my motions. They attack you; they attack your kids that are in school, they attack your grandchildren. So you ask why people don't run the second time? Those may be some of the reasons.

Others felt tokenized, such as one participant who self-identified as part of the IBPOC community and said, "I do work predominantly with white men… I'm like a token, it took a while to figure that out." Still others consistently had their motions rejected or were shut out of professional development opportunities. Critically, IBPOC participants shared difficult experiences with racism, including racial profiling by their own municipal staff while working late at night at city hall. One participant described negative experiences with other council members and the public after raising the issue of ongoing acts of racism in her community:

> I was, you know, quite surprised by the reaction of town Council. “I don’t appreciate you painting us as a racist city” and “I know that you didn’t intend to do that, but then that’s what the media was saying.” Stuff like that. Well, I’ve been bullied. This is by an old white man... he says “I’ve been bullied too” without understanding that racism is completely different... There were months where I wouldn’t, well, go out without my dog. My husband said, “Well don’t go out, don’t walk the dog.” The police gave us some suggestions on how we should make our home more secure because there were threats.

Indigenous respondents noted the need for more support for Indigenous women occupying public office and highlighted their own experiences with colonial stereotypes and a lack of support. One participant noted that other councillors sometimes responded to them with assumptions about “what a First Nations person should be” with little regard for their actual perspective as a municipal leader and member of council.

In the response from Black participants, narratives emerged about the power of representation and community support, in addition to explicit experiences of anti-Black racism. One participant described an experience connecting with another Black family in her role:

> I identify as Black… I turned to the side [in a public space] and was surprised to see a Black family: a man, his Black wife, and their Black baby... I went over to them to say hello. We introduced ourselves, and began talking about the baby, and I asked, “So are you visiting here?” [They said] “We know your name... that’s why we’re moving here.” And so, when you ask me, “Do you think you’re making a difference?” Well, at least to that family.

Participants identifying as people of colour—for example, those who identified as Chinese Canadian, Japanese Canadian, mixed-race, and South Asian—were by far the largest contingent of racialized participants in this study. This reflects that while all racialized women and gender minorities are underrepresented within local governments, Black and Indigenous people are even more significantly underrepresented.

There was a pronounced gap in terms of women and gender minorities who were immigrants and refugees, although participants from those demographics highlighted the value these experiences brought to their role in municipal government:

> I’ve had that experience as an immigrant child growing up when I didn’t speak English, you know where I had to try to fit in or “blend in.” It’s a very unique experience I think many people can relate to in the immigrant population.

One Latinx participant explored the tensions associated with their experience as "white-passing":

> It's like making me into this sort of shapeshifter person who's like not really in any one specific demographic… I feel guilty because [racism is] not directed at me, but it's told to me because I'm white passing about people who are not. I feel my experience would be different if I took after my dad and not my mom. White privilege is alive and well.

IBPOC participants' comments highlight the importance for collecting disaggregated data so that both researchers and policymakers can ensure that intersecting identity factors are considered in solution-making.

Disabilities and Ableism

Approximately 10% of respondents in our surveys in BC and Alberta reported having a disability. During the one-on-one interviews, which offered a more intimate reporting environment, just over 20% of respondents in BC and Alberta reported having a disability, which is much closer to the national average (Statistics Canada, 2018). One participant pointed out, "there's a lot of ableism and privilege that is required to run for office and that needs to be broken down."

Barriers and stigma emerged as a theme. For example, during the project interviews, many participants expressed that they did not have a disability according to the definition the interviewer provided, only to go on to describe having one. Disclosed disability rates are shown in Table 4 and the interview participants percentage has been adjusted to reflect the number of people who disclosed having disabilities to interviewers. Multiple participants noted that if the public or council knew that they had a disability they would question the respondent's ability to hold public office, even though they were able to manage effectively in their roles. This finding highlights the powerful role of stigma in experiences of public office and the realities faced by people with disabilities and various accessibility needs.

Table 4: Disability

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	BC interview participants (n = 35)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)	Alberta interview participants (n = 18)
Basic demographics				
Has a disability	9%	23%	10%	22%
Doesn't have a disability	84%	71%	90%	78%
Unsure about disability status	7%	3%	0%	0%
No answer regarding disability status	0%	3%	0%	0%

As documented in Table 5: Physical Accessibility and Accommodation Requests, survey participants in BC and Alberta also reported difficulties with physical accommodations and accommodation requests. Several mentioned the difficulties associated with having an "invisible" disability. One survey participant specified "[my disability is] invisible, but ever present." Interview participants' experiences with disability and accommodation are captured in the qualitative data.

Table 5: Physical Accessibility and Accommodation Requests

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)
Is the physical space accessible?		
The space is physically inaccessible for my mobility	2%	17%
The ergonomics are difficult for me	7%	0%
It is difficult to adequately hear or see during meetings	9%	0%
Other	38%	37%
No answer	44%	46%
Have you had challenges asking for accommodations?		
Yes	11%	8%
No	80%	92%
Unsure	0%	0%
No answer	9%	0%

As shown in Table 6: Refusal of Accommodations, 7% of BC survey participants and 3% of Alberta survey participants noted that they were refused accommodation for their disabilities by their own council members. In BC, another 2% (and 3% in Alberta) reported accommodation refusals by city or district staff. Such incidents reflect ongoing barriers for people with disabilities and various accessibility needs.

Table 6: Refusal of Reasonable Accommodations

	By council colleagues		By city or district staff	
	BC survey	Alberta survey	BC survey	Alberta survey
Yes	7%	3%	2%	3%
No	82%	95%	94%	90%
Unsure	4%	2%	2%	0%
No answer	7%	0%	2%	7%

Gender Minorities and 2SLGBTQIA+ Discrimination

In BC, just 4% of survey respondents and 3% of interview participants identified as a gender minority. In the Alberta survey and interview responses, not a single individual self-identified as being a gender minority, which indicates a significant demographic gap given that Alberta is home to the fourth highest population of transgender and non-binary people in Canada (Franklin, 2022).

Table 7: Women and Gender Minorities

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	BC interview participants (n = 35)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)	Alberta interview participants (n = 18)
Women	96%	97%	100%	100%
Gender minority members	4%	3%	0%	0%

While gender minorities made up only a small proportion of participants (for historical factors affecting this make-up, see 2SLGBTQIA+ Communities and Public Office in Canada in Part 2: Contextualizing Our Research: A Review of the Literature), narratives did emerge of their experiences and others identifying within the spectrum of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. One elected official, already dealing with intersecting experiences of exclusion as a woman and person of colour, noted, "I am queer, and I feel like there are identities that aren't visible… [and] if I were to ever tell people… I feel like it would give me less credibility where I'm already fighting for credibility."

Several councillors who viewed themselves as advocates for 2SLGBTQIA+ communities reported witnessing discrimination within the council or receiving threats from the public because of their advocacy. One councillor reported receiving "aggressive and violent" threats after advocating for transgender rights, an issue flagged as a flashpoint for harassment and abuse.

Age, Retirement, Young Families, and Access to Pay and Benefits

Studies indicate that many municipal councils in Canada are largely occupied by white men in their sixties (for example, see Deska, 2016), and this also emerged as a key theme in project interviews. For example, when asked if they would recommend that others run for public office, one interview participant explained:

> Who is not white and not an older man? Pardon my being super blunt, but just like, that's the main demographic that is local government. It's shifting, I know that, and I recognize there are more women than there used to be, but we need more diverse perspectives in there. So, yes, I am encouraging everyone [to run].

Intersecting exclusions encompassing both age and gender were pronounced. One interview participant, an older woman who had served multiple terms, noted the challenges faced not only by younger women, but also by gay men: “To be young on council is a strike against you, to be young and male on council is not so bad, but to be young and female on council or to be a young gay male on council is nightmarish, I mean, I’ve seen that.”

In this study, interviews documented that approximately 60% of women and gender minorities holding public office were under the age of 50, with rates closer to 55% in BC compared to Alberta. These figures indicate that even in councils where most councillors fit demographic trends that favour older white men, women and gender minorities were often younger than their colleagues. This fact is incongruent with the evidence pointing to ways in which these roles are unaccommodating of younger people, such as lack of full-time pay, challenges pairing the role with caregiving responsibilities, and lack of pension. We could speculate that this is connected to the idea of substantive representation and that people who are marginalized by systems—because of gender, race, age, disability, class, or other factors—potentially have the most to gain by advocating for people like themselves and are therefore willing to expose themselves to potential harm by taking up these roles. Further research could illuminate whether these speculative motivations are in fact correct.

Age emerged as a key theme, with younger women and gender minorities expressing their frustration with an institutional framework better suited to retirees. One BC interview participant said, “My council is largely retired.” A retiree who participated in the study noted,

> I have not had any constraints on the amount of time that I can spend doing this because I’m not balancing it against a day job and I’m in a very privileged position in that way because, you know, I have my pension.

Participants highlighted the need for childcare, pensions, benefits, and full-time pay structures to support the needs of younger councillors. One interview participant said,

> In order for us to have a diversity of people who are elected and represent us, then it needs to be a primary income for someone and for them to be able to live off of this as a job.

Another said, “It’s considered a part-time job, but it’s not a part-time job.” Along similar lines, a survey participant wrote, “Some folks couldn’t afford to leave other work to take council work.” These observations are echoed in Part 2 of this report, Contextualizing Our Research: A Review of the Literature.

Table 8: Compensation and Benefits provides a snapshot of our participants' experiences of compensation and benefits. Just 2% of survey respondents in BC and 11% of survey respondents in Alberta reported that compensation for their work on council was enough to cover living expenses. Others reported that their role in public office negatively impacted other work or job searches, with numbers as high as 56% in BC and 23% in Alberta.

Table 8: Compensation and Benefits

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)
Finds compensation adequate for work		
Yes	27%	48%
No	73%	43%
Unsure	0%	7%
No answer	0%	2%
If compensation is inadequate, why? (Check all that apply)		
Personal stress associated with job	47%	21%
Number of meetings	58%	26%
Number of community events expected to attend	42%	28%
Amount of responsibility associated with job	58%	29%
Extra committee work or projects taken on based on your priorities	51%	31%
The volume of reading and prep work	51%	37%
Other	22%	2%
Is compensation enough to cover living expenses? (Check only one)		
Yes, only source of income	2%	11%
Yes [because] has other sources of income	11%	14%
No, has other sources of income	85%	73%
No, doesn't have other sources of income	2%	2%
Unsure	0%	0%
No answer	0%	0%
Benefits are adequate		
Yes	44%	66%
No	47%	26%
Unsure	9%	6%
No answer	0%	2%

Many participants with young families said that the adoption of Zoom for council meetings over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic made it easier for them to deal with coordinating childcare. One interview participant said, “It means that I don’t have to pay for childcare, because I can stay home, and they can be at home while I’m in meetings.”

Several women elected to public office shared experiences of discrimination associated with having children. One elected official recounted:

> I am currently pregnant and currently worried about announcing that and my biggest fear is the vitriol and negativity that will come toward me. I saw it happen with a previous council member that she wasn’t showing up for her work when she took [leave] after having a baby.

Another said:

> I got an attack email about how unprofessional I was for bringing my kids—it was hurtful. I have to weigh the risk of bringing my kids, which isn’t always safe, or not attending.

Several elected officials in BC and Alberta in their thirties and forties who had children reported they were told by residents during campaigning that they shouldn’t be running for council; rather, they should focus on their families. An interview respondent said, “The mayor told me when she was door knocking that one of the houses she went to was like, how are you going to take care of your children if you get into politics?” Yet another respondent said:

> That experience was actually quite central to my story of running, and so I would door knock with my baby strapped to myself, you know, or bring her to a lot of community meetings. I’ve had some really interesting experiences about societal tolerance of young mothers with the stroller and participating in public discourse. I wrote a lot about that. I also got lots of feedback from more older people, including senior women who would tell me, “Well, I don’t think you know what you’re doing if you’re campaigning with a baby. I don’t think you know what it takes to be a councillor. So I appreciate your intent, but I won’t be supporting you for whatever reason.”

Table 9: Relationship Status and Children

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)
Relationship status and children		
In a relationship	80%	72%
Single	20%	28%
Has children	71%	78%
No children	29%	22%
Single parent	11%	11%

Clearly gendered assumptions, from both within and outside of council, continue to shape the experiences of women and gender minorities running for public office. A lack of institutional supports such as childcare and adequate pay, pension, and benefits also impact who can run.

Self-Identification as a Feminist

Participants in this study were asked questions about their experiences of feminist identity. Marked differences were evident between the BC and Alberta portions of the study. In BC, 87% of women and gender minorities identified as feminists. In Alberta, just 60% of participants indicated that they identified as feminists. BC survey respondents were also more likely to identify sexism as having significantly impacted their role, even though in Alberta much higher rates of councillor-on-councillor sexual harassment were documented (see Table 13: Sexual and Verbal Harassment and Threats).

Researchers note that gender-based jokes can be "particularly problematic" since they appear "lighthearted and not serious," making sexism more difficult to confront (Beedie School of Business, n. d.). Studies also indicate that jokes can illuminate the subtler ways sexism is perpetuated in organizations and how social inequalities may be resisted or internalized (Alonso & O'Neill, 2022). For these reasons, the research team decided to include an example of a gender-based joke in the study's survey to gauge respondents' awareness of the breadth of sexism and oppression. Just 50% of Alberta survey respondents reported that the gender-based joke was offensive, while nearly 75% of BC respondents reported it was offensive (see Table 10: Feminist Identification).

Table 10: Feminist Identification

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)
On a scale of one to ten, how has sexism impacted your role? (1= Not at all / 10 = Frequently)		
1	13%	31%
2	7%	13%
3	16%	11%
4	9%	6%
5	4%	11%
6	4%	7%
7	11%	11%
8	16%	3%
9	7%	5%
10	13%	2%
No answer	0%	0%
Do you consider the following joke offensive? (Q: Is Google female or male? A: Female, because it doesn't let you finish a sentence before making a suggestion.)		
Yes	73%	50%
No	25%	47%
No answer	2%	3%
Would you describe yourself as a feminist?		
Yes	87%	60%
No	13%	39%
Unsure	0%	0%
No answer	0%	1%

Rural vs. Urban Experiences

Regionally, 73% of survey participants from Alberta reported that they held office in rural areas of the province. In BC the rates were much closer to a 50/50 split between rural and urban ridings (see Table 11: Rural vs. Urban Identification). A large percentage of Alberta survey respondents were from smaller municipalities with 74% representing constituencies less than 10,000 people. However, Alberta interviewees were more skewed towards larger municipalities. In BC, the interviewees and survey participants were more dispersed in terms of constituency sized served. This is notable because larger municipalities are likely to be more diverse than smaller towns and villages.

Table 11: Rural vs. Urban Identification

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)
Rural	53%	73%
Urban	47%	27%

Table 12: Constituency Size

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	BC interview participants (n = 35)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)	Alberta interview participants (n = 18)
Fewer than 5,000 people	38%	17%	50%	5%
5,000-10,000	13%	14%	24%	22%
10,000-25,000	11%	6%	10%	17%
25,000-50,000	9%	14%	3%	22%
50,000-100,000	16%	37%	7%	6%
100,000-500,000	11%	9%	0%	6%
More than 500,000	2%	3%	6%	22%

Rural councillors and mayors commonly expressed a sense of social isolation in their role, compared to more robust networks of mutual support identified by women and gender minorities in larger Canadian cities. One focus group participant suggested: “Formalizing support options [for] systemically oppressed groups, I find that really interesting and I could see that it would make a big difference because you want to be able to talk to people who know what you are going through.”

Resources also emerged as a key theme, with many councillors from smaller communities describing resource-strapped environments and staffing concerns. “Our staff also had some real capacity issues,” one interview participant said.

A Closer Look at Experiences of Discrimination

Women and gender minorities participating in this study reported violent physical threats, the destruction of private property, and constituents waiting outside their offices at night or following them in vehicles. Others endured racist slurs from both the public and their own council members. These experiences sometimes required that they engage the help of local law enforcement agencies or take-home security measures. For many, experiencing harassment and abuse severely impacted their day-to-day life and sense of safety, security, and wellbeing. For others it represented the end of any political aspirations or dreams of running for elected office again. One interview participant said, "I don't know. I don't know if I'll be alive, the bullying! I'm not even 18 months in. If I don't make any progress by the end of this year, I'll consider whether or not I should run [again]." Another said, "It is just absolutely as deeply toxic as anything I've ever experienced in my life and anyone else would run for the hills."

Sexual Assault, Sexual and Verbal Harassment, and Threats

Content warning: sexual assault. Some readers may want to skip to the subtler forms of discrimination subsection in this section of the report.

Multiple women participating in this study reported being sexually assaulted by other council members, a fact that prompted the research team to revise the research protocol and provide trauma-informed support. The stories of two publicly reported sexual assaults (FortSaskOnline, 2022; Harris, 2021; Town of Gibbons, 2022) are provided here as examples of the kinds of stories the research team heard over the course of the project. From the participants' perspectives, many perpetrators appeared to relish their role and the power they enjoyed as council members or mayors—power which served to protect them from the accountability that leaders in other professions might encounter more readily.

The first example is from a publicly posted letter of complaint by Amanda Harris, a councillor in Gibbons, Alberta (2021):

> On 24 November 2021 I arrived at the office approximately 4:30 pm to participate in Council photos prior to our regular Council meeting. Upon entering Chambers, I asked Councillor Darren McCann to join me in the shared Council office as I had a question for him and I wanted to ask away from any activity as to not disrupt anyone. Councillor McCann followed me in and was standing approximately 1'–18' away from me. During our conversation, he proceeded to take hold of my bra straps (approximately at my collar bone level) and lift them up, which in turn, also lifted both of my breasts. He then said "there, you were a little crooked, I fixed them for you. Don't you bend over when you put your bra on and shake those babies in there?"
>
> As we were in the middle of a Council function, I did not say anything to Councillor McCann immediately because I did not want to draw attention away from our original reason for being there.

> I contacted Mayor Dan Deck on Friday 26 November 2021 and reported the incident. He suggested that both of us meet with CAO Farrell O'Malley the following Monday.
>
> I met with CAO O'Malley and Mayor Dan Deck on Monday 29 November 2021 at 1030am and disclosed the incident in detail.
>
> I will add that this is not the first time I have encountered inappropriate behaviour from Councillor McCann. However, this is the first time he has physically touched me.

Councillor Darren McCann later resigned (FortSaskOnline, 2022), but not before other women came forward. The following is an excerpt of an emailed statement from Rebecca Balanko, a councillor for the Town of Morinville, Alberta; the statement was later made part of a publicly available council meeting package.

> On October 28th, 2021, at our Regional Council Orientation held within Morinville at our MCCC the following incident transpired… As I exited my vehicle, I heard my name hollered from across the parking lot. At that time, I noticed Councillor Darren McCann, Town of Gibbons making his way over. As Darren and I have known one another in a professional capacity for four years, he came over and immediately hugged me, my back to my open doored vehicle. He made an enthusiastic reference to my significant weight loss, made some noises that made me uncomfortable and slid his right hand down my back, grabbing my left buttocks, squeezing it and immediately commenting "you know I mean nothing by this," at which point I responded, "can you say that to me without your hand on my ass?" Within a few seconds, Councillor Joanne Williams, Town of Redwater, walked up and Darren backed off. Joanne put herself in-between the two of us, I felt she knew what had just transpired and we walked into our Cultural Centre together. I immediately found and sat with my Council members and steered clear of Darren for the rest of the day. Within weeks, I had a call from Councillor Amber Harris, sharing her own recent interaction with Darren McCann and opted to share my own experience. I proceeded to inform her that, although I didn't feel I was in danger, I felt shame, I felt violated and knew he was aware he had crossed a line. I also shared at that time that I had been warned about Darren when first elected in 2017. I had been told by a female Councillor at the time to watch myself with him, he was labeled as "creepy and grabby." What a horrific warning to hear as a new female Council member!

Research participants provided numerous responses regarding experiences of sexual and verbal harassment and threats from the public, other council members, and city or district staff (see Table 13). For instance, 10% of respondents in the Alberta survey portion of the study reported sexual harassment from their own council members. These findings indicate that women and gender minorities occupying public office experience multiple forms of systemic violence. Some of our participants' comments included:

> I got death threats.
>
> [They] sent me private messages that were really inappropriate.
>
> It was a culture of retaliation.
>
> It's like women are never believed.
>
> I think it's important to say that we're just so blatantly lacking in any sort of workplace protection.

Table 13: Sexual and Verbal Harassment and Threats

	Perpetrated by the general public		Perpetrated by council colleagues		Perpetrated by city or district staff	
	BC survey (n = 45)	Alberta survey (n = 62)	BC survey (n = 45)	Alberta survey (n = 62)	BC survey (n = 45)	Alberta survey (n = 62)
Sexual harrassment						
Yes	9%	8%	7%	10%	2%	3%
No	89%	84%	80%	87%	94%	89%
Unsure	0%	5%	4%	3%	2%	2%
No answer	2%	3%	9%	0%	2%	6%
Verbal harassment						
Yes	47%	34%	31%	23%	11%	10%
No	53%	57%	56%	76%	87%	82%
Unsure	0%	3%	9%	1%	0%	5%
No answer	0%	6%	4%	0%	2%	3%
Threats						
Yes	31%	14%	13%	10%	7%	5%
No	65%	81%	80%	85%	89%	87%
Unsure	2%	2%	5%	2%	0%	5%
No answer	2%	3%	2%	3%	4%	3%

It is important to emphasize the cumulative power of these statistics. For example, the combined experiences of sexual harassment from multiple sources (the public, colleagues, and staff) reveal startlingly high rates of sexual harassment and help clarify that women and gender minorities holding public office are in a high-risk environment for sexual assault.

Online Harassment

Participants in both BC and Alberta reported high rates of online harassment from the public. One focus group participant said,

> It's quite well known that women are treated differently in the job [and] women don't want to enter these positions because of online harassment correspondence that's bullying and aggressive and like I know there's been discussions about regulating the Internet around hate speech.

Participants reported misogynistic and racist language, such as one who said, "The volume of racist emails that are sent to all council are gross and disgusting." Another participant said, "[I've seen councillors] just get torn apart on Twitter." A participant reported that "Constituents send me shirtless photos," and others also reported threats of physical violence.

The numbers reflect these stories. Overwhelmingly, elected officials dealt with threatening emails, Facebook and Twitter posts, and online smear campaigns, with 53% of BC survey respondents and 36% of Alberta survey respondents reporting online abuse from the public.

Table 14: Online Harassment

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)
Online harassment (from the general public)		
Yes	53%	36%
No	47%	58%
Unsure	0%	3%
No answer	0%	3%

COVID-19 public health measures, and the identification of municipal councils as targets for the anti-masking and anti-vaccine movement, were also a key theme. After sharing concerns about threats and physical safety, one participant said, "[It] brought out a lot of those, uh, like, trucker convoys and there's been a lot more of that, like emails and social media stuff." There were also reports of doxing, meaning the posting of councillors' personal information online with malicious intent, which raised significant safety concerns for some participants. Another participant said, "[they attack you] either because you're a woman or like diminishing you as a woman or [you are] sexualized… there is definitely a lot of talk about people not running again because of the harassment that they experienced." While these experiences existed prior to the pandemic, it is clear that the pandemic and resulting health measures exacerbated the situation.

Subtler Forms of Systemic Discrimination

Systemic discrimination can be more subtle than sexual and verbal harassment and threats. For example, being subjected to microaggressions, shut out of meetings, or denied professional development opportunities all represent damaging forms of discrimination. One interview participant explained how microaggressions can work:

> As a council, we are being attacked way more than previous councils because of these identities. I've never seen this level of visceral ... it's little comments. I haven't cried in council, but others have and then get called out for having cried and get called unprofessional.

Women and gender minorities participating in this study reported more tacit forms of discrimination that were difficult to cope with, especially within the context of codes of conduct and harassment policies that already failed to be effective within the context of more explicit examples of abuse. Some called for additional training as a countermeasure, such as a focus group participant who said, "I think having anti-racism training would be really helpful for a lot of people as there's so much unconscious bias in our thinking and decisions."

Survey responses indicated that women and gender minorities serving in elected official were subjected to ongoing and insidious harassment in the form of demeaning comments, lack of opportunities, and lack of support. In BC, more patronizing or demeaning comments came from council colleagues, whereas in Alberta, members of the general public were more often the perpetrators.

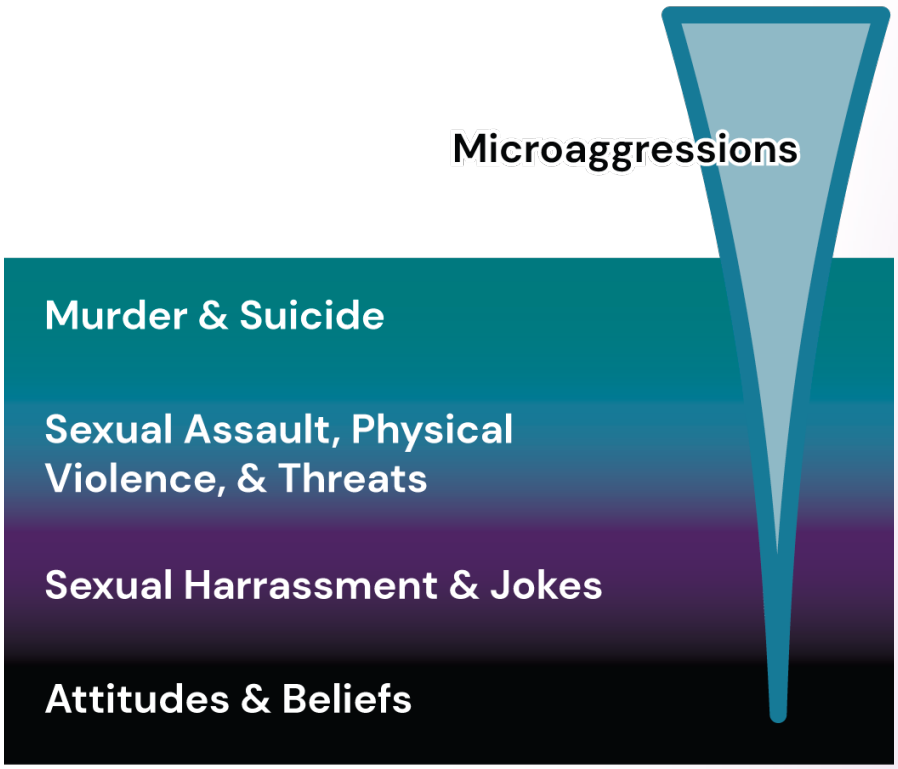
Table 15: Experiences of More Subtle Forms of Discrimination

	Perpetrated by the general public		Perpetrated by council colleagues		Perpetrated by city or district staff	
	BC survey	Alberta survey	BC survey	Alberta survey	BC survey	Alberta survey
Comments that were patronizing or demeaning						
Yes	58%	52%	69%	45%	20%	16%
No	38%	45%	27%	50%	76%	79%
Unsure	4%	2%	2%	5%	4%	2%
No answer	0%	1%	2%	0%	0%	3%
Lack of support (motions, projects, etc.)						
Yes	27%	15%	40%	29%	24%	15%
No	62%	80%	45%	64%	65%	79%
Unsure	9%	2%	11%	7%	7%	3%
No answer	2%	3%	4%	0%	4%	3%
Lack of support (emotional, personal)						
Yes	38%	20%	40%	26%	27%	8%
No	53%	74%	46%	66%	66%	84%
Unsure	7%	3%	7%	8%	7%	3%
No answer	2%	3%	7%	0%	0%	5%
Being treated differently than colleagues						
Yes	36%	29%	40%	34%	24%	13%
No	53%	68%	51%	58%	65%	84%
Unsure	11%	0%	7%	8%	9%	0%
No answer	0%	3%	2%	0%	2%	3%
Being overlooked for appointment to boards or committees						
Yes	9%	10%	25%	24%	9%	2%
No	78%	84%	62%	73%	80%	87%
Unsure	11%	1%	9%	3%	9%	6%
No answer	2%	5%	4%	0%	2%	5%

Not being acknowledged for your work						
Yes	31%	24%	38%	19%	18%	13%
No	56%	68%	53%	79%	78%	79%
Unsure	11%	3%	2%	2%	2%	5%
No answer	2%	5%	7%	0%	2%	3%
Having your ideas or contributions actively dismissed and devalued						
Yes	n/a	n/a	33%	16%	22%	10%
No	n/a	n/a	51%	74%	60%	80%
Unsure	n/a	n/a	11%	10%	16%	7%
No answer	n/a	n/a	5%	0%	2%	3%

As well, while on their own they may be subtle, attitudes and beliefs can uphold more overt forms of violence (Erickson-Schroth, 2014), as illustrated in Fig. 7. Forms of discrimination are intersecting and related, which indicates the need to effectively support women and members of gender minorities who are experiencing multiple forms of abuse (Erickson-Schroth, 2014).

Figure 7: Upholding Violence and Multiple Forms of Abuse



The Study Becomes a Target

During the course of this study, dozens of self-identified men elected officials harassed the research team in the form of both phone calls and ineligible survey responses filled with mockery and abuse. In Alberta, out of 104 responses from elected officials, 39 were from ineligible men. Many responded with hostility to the study's research questions ("There is only two genders, I'm male"), proceeded to critique the study itself ("You're [sic] questions are leading"), and went on to describe the discrimination they felt even when they identified as white, non-disabled, and not a woman or gender minority. This reproduction of the toxic masculinity women and gender minorities reportedly experience at their council tables was reproduced when the project manager received phone calls and emails from angry men who are municipal councillors in Alberta who were calling to challenge and mock the study as well as the research team.

Of the ineligible men who completed the survey, very few acknowledged that the study wasn't designed for their participation. One wrote, "I don't believe my experiences are what you are trying to capture here," indicating genuine confusion with the parameters of the project. The numbers of ineligible participants who responded to the study in Alberta far exceeded those in BC. This suggests a that in Alberta, there is both lack of understanding and open hostility towards addressing systemic discrimination. This is especially troubling because the people who had access to the survey are policy-makers, meaning their lack of understanding or refusal to address oppression will be reflected in their decision-making at their respective council tables. In both BC and Alberta, ineligible participants filled out the surveys and were removed from the study's final analysis as is standard practice with research studies. However, the vitriol directed at a research project simply asking about women and gender minorities' experiences is symptomatic of the larger issue highlighted in this paper.

Lack of awareness about systemic barriers

In Alberta, women facing barriers as elected officials also often individualized their experiences, citing personal issues or a sense of isolation in their experiences. However, this was not the case for all Alberta interviews, as several women did step forward to share their experiences of harassment and sexual abuse, sometimes at the hands of other council members, with a clear awareness of systemic barriers.

It is notable that the people in charge of policy-making often lacked awareness of the way systemic factors impacted individual experiences. It is also important to note that people with considerable systemic power as elected officials felt unwilling or unable to come forward with the abuse they were experiencing.

Reporting and Accountability

Deficiencies with reporting and accountability, ineffective codes of conduct, and symbolic mediation processes that privilege abusers all emerged as key themes in the project interviews and surveys. "We're in this terrible grey area of no support and nowhere to go," is how one interview participant put it. Another one said, "It's quite a trick to even enact your code of conduct." And another said, "I see how some people, you know, didn't even read it [the code of conduct], didn't even sign it [and] don't even care, you know I feel unsafe."

A lack of effective skills and training in terms of dealing with allegations of abuse, along with limited understandings of racism, colonization, and factors such as ableism and transphobia, also impacted the ability of mayors, chief administrative officers and others involved in mediation or code-of-conduct issues to effectively engage with women and gender minorities who were experiencing abuse. One participant said, "I don't feel safe… [the code of conduct] was weaponized against me." Another described a "garbage process":

> [You] file a complaint, get an email back, and they copy and paste your complaint to the person you've complained about… [We're] working on a motion to review this process because it's ineffective…[You] can't make a complaint on behalf of someone who has been bullied into silence… [The] process protects the offender not the victim.

Just 11% of survey participants in BC and 18% of survey participants in Alberta reported that in the case of inappropriate treatment from colleagues or staff, a clearly articulated process was in place with an external person or organization. This indicates the need for independent oversight and standardized accountability processes.

Given this disjointed approach to accountability, a participant explained, "I really like the idea of trying to standardize some of the processes across municipalities." Another said, "Certainly, we're going down the road of establishing an Integrity Commissioner [in BC], which I think will be helpful, because [otherwise] there tends to be a potential for conflict of interest within the chair, and the Chief Administrative Officer." Integrity commissioners could take on the role of accepting and investigating complaints at an arm's length from elected councils.

Approximately 20% of respondents in BC and Alberta reported that conflict resolution and harassment reporting processes were "inadequate," while just 4% of respondents in BC and 14% of respondents in Alberta reported that such processes were fair and adequate (see Table 16).

Table 16: Reporting and Accountability

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)
When you experience unfavourable treatment from colleagues or staff, what are your options for reporting and resolving the issue? (Check only one option.)		
We have a clearly articulated process with an external person or organization.	11%	18%
We can raise issues with the mayor, chair, city manager, or chief administrative officer (or similar).	56%	71%
I think we might, but I'm not familiar with it.	4%	5%
I do not know if we have a process.	7%	1%
We don't have a process.	20%	2%
No answer	2%	3%
If a process has been identified in the question above, have you ever used it and was it fair?		
I haven't used it.	42%	60%
Yes, but it was inadequate.	25%	18%
Yes, it was fair and adequate.	4%	14%
No answer	29%	8%

Legally mandated confidentiality posed by in-camera council sessions was identified as a key barrier to stopping the abuse of women, gender minorities, and members of other systemically oppressed groups holding public office. Because legal frameworks don't differentiate between the confidentiality of the content of in-camera meetings versus the conduct of councillors during those meetings, respondents pointed out that these frameworks encouraged bad behaviour and blocked their efforts to report instances of harassment, racism, and other forms of inappropriate behaviour. One participant said, "[It will be good to shine] some light into how problematic closed meetings can be."

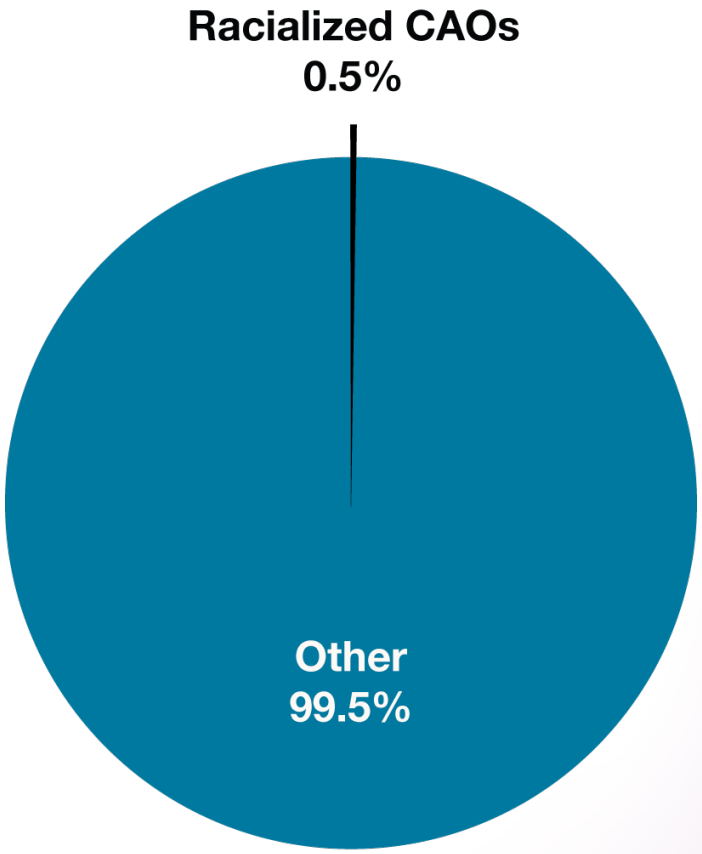
The Trouble with CAOs: A Lack of Diversity and Training

In local government, chief administrative officers (CAOs) serve multiple functions. They liaise between municipal staff and elected officials, manage relationships with outside community partners, and maintain an executive memory of municipal operations and functions. Their tenure tends to be longer than that of elected officials, who are subject to election cycles. Critically, CAOs provide guidance on plans, finances, policies, legal requirements, and more. When council members are in conflict with one another, or face harassment and abuse from the public, CAOs are often involved in complaints processes in varying capacities depending on the province or territory. Although a CAO may be just one person, they can also hold considerable political power, with councils greatly dependent on the quality of their guidance, expertise, and governance abilities (Giesbrecht, 2020).

Participants in this study who reported experiences of abuse and harassment said they experienced a lack of action or support from CAOs when the incidents were disclosed. A 2021 study addressing the relationship between CAOs and council members from across Canada also found a lack of accountability, reporting "repeated code of conduct violations" and "workplace harassment complaints and findings against councillors" that did "not result in any change to behaviours" (Mitchell, 2021, pp. 61–62).

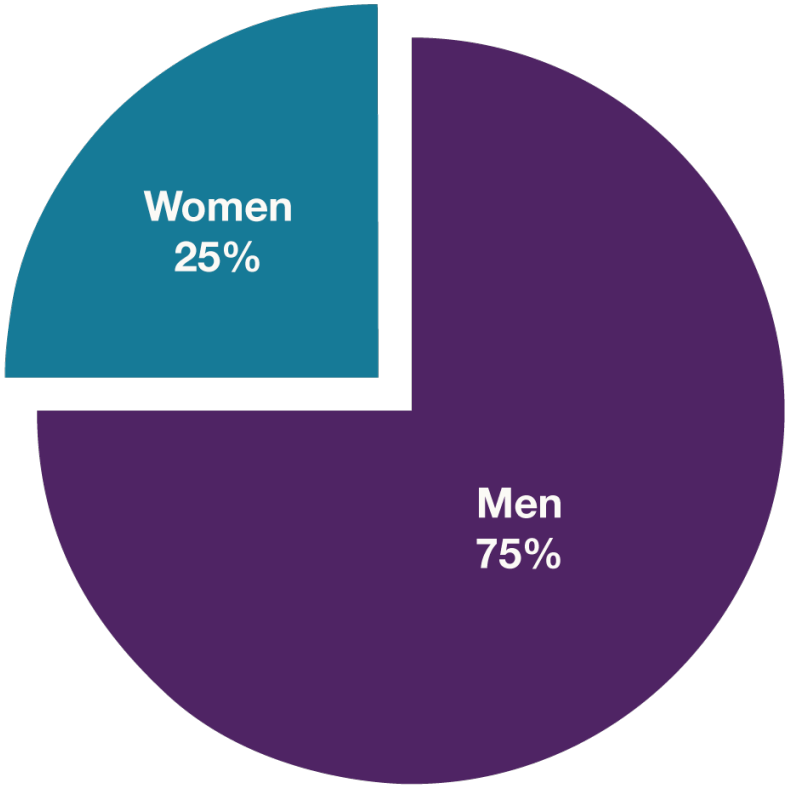
While this study is focused on ways to support diverse representation in local elected roles, it also highlights the need to diversify and adequately train CAOs to deal with conduct standards, abuse, harassment, and ways of undoing manifestations of toxic masculinity, racism, white supremacy, ableism, colonization, and transphobia within their purview. Across both rural and urban communities, studies addressing the demographics of CAOs in Canada point to the predominance of older white men, many close to the age of retirement (O'Flynn & Mau, 2014; Szarka, 2017), a situation that indicates the need to train the next generation of CAOs and to employ more diverse recruitment strategies in hiring campaigns in order to reflect demographics that are more in line with Canada's diverse population. Figures 8 and 9 illustrate the demographics of CAOs in Canada.

Figure 8: Approximate Percentage of Racialized CAOs in Canada, 2014[25]



25 O'Flynn & Mau, 2014, p. 157.

Figure 9: Approximate Percentage of CAOs Who Are Women in Canada, 2014[25]



Meaningful allyship and more equitable representation in municipal roles—including those of council members, CAOs, and others—are important steps forward in building more democratic and accountable structures in local government. Robust support from associated legislation is critical, including laws that properly mandate and enforce codes of conduct. Anti-oppression training is also essential in developing a culture in local government that uplifts systemically oppressed groups and puts a stop to abuse.

Retention and Experiences of Public Office

Deciding to run for office for the first time is a big decision. However, participants made that decision without the full awareness of the what experiences they could expect in serving on a local government table. After one successful run for office, their experiences, successes, and challenges while in office inform their decision on whether to reoffer for additional terms. If women and gender minorities decide not to run for re-election, any gains in representation can be lost in future elections. For this reason, retention is an important consideration of this study.

26 O'Flynn & Mau, 2014, p. 157. Note: statistics are missing for non-binary CAOs, an absence to which this report draws attention.

Retention

Survey and interview participants from BC and Alberta largely reported that they were serving their first term, with the exception of Alberta interviews, where most participants reported serving their second term. Half of Alberta survey participants reported that they planned to run again in the next election, while just 27% of BC survey participants reported that they planned to run again. These trends were reversed in the interviews, with 57% of BC interviewees reporting that they would run for another term. (See Table 17.)

Table 17: Retention

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	BC interview participants (n = 35)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)	Alberta interview participants (n = 18)
Number of terms served				
1	62%	60%	56%	33%
2	20%	20%	26%	56%
3	9%	6%	5%	11%
4	9%	8%	3%	0%
5+	0%	6%	10%	0%
Running again in the next election				
Yes	27%	57%	50%	33%
No	27%	23%	13%	11%
Unsure	46%	14%	37%	56%
No answer	0%	6%	0%	0%

The surveys surfaced multiple reasons why participants decided not to run again. Tellingly, the most common reasons for not re-offering for public office included that the role was “detrimental to health and wellbeing,” that officials experienced “bullying and harassment,” and that “the pay and benefits do not reflect the amount of work.” (See Table 18.)

Table 18: Issues Impacting Decision Not to Run in the Next Election

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)
Issues impacting decision not to re-offer for public office (Check all that apply.)		
Not making enough of an impact	13%	8%
Inadequate support, such as training, assistance, etc.	7%	0%
The pay and benefits do not reflect the amount of work	22%	16%
The way meetings are structured makes participation difficult	2%	3%
Decisions are made outside of the formal process and don't include me	20%	6%
Inadequate childcare	7%	3%
Lack of on-site childcare	4%	2%
Lack of parental leave	4%	2%
Other goals	20%	18%
Doesn't fit lifestyle	13%	10%
Bullying and harassment	22%	7%
Detrimental to health and wellbeing	36%	2%
Compromises values	9%	5%
Other	31%	16%
Unsure	0%	0%
No answer	44%	47%

When queried about running for other levels of government, few participants reported they would do so "very soon" (0% in BC, 1% in AB), while 4% of BC respondents and 5% of AB respondents reported that they would run for other levels of government in the future. By far most respondents indicated that they probably would not run or that they never would run. (See Table 19.)

Table 19: Plans to Run for Other Levels of Government

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)
Are you planning to run for another level of government? (Check only one.)		
Yes, very soon	0%	1%
Yes, but in the future	4%	5%
Considering it in the future	16%	26%
Probably not	56%	45%
No, never	24%	21%
No answer	0%	2%

Support from Colleagues and Sense of Impact and Gratification

While this study shines a light on discrimination, research findings also indicate that in the Alberta survey portion of the study, most participants felt that in general colleagues and staff had been supportive in helping them reach their political goals with regard to the respondents' areas of focus, motions, and work. A much higher percentage of participants in Alberta also reported that they felt like their work was making a difference compared to respondents in BC (see Table 20).

Table 20: Experiences of Collegial Support and Impact

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)
In general, do you feel colleagues and staff have been supportive in reaching your political goals with regard to your areas of focus, motions, and work?		
Yes	47%	68%
No	15%	3%
Unsure	0%	0%
Mixed support	38%	29%
No answer	0%	0%
Overall, do you feel your work is making a difference? (Check only one.)		
Yes, definitely	25%	48%
Yes, some of it	40%	42%
Sometimes	29%	8%
Rarely	4%	2%
It doesn't feel like I'm able to make a difference in this work	2%	0%
Unsure	0%	0%
No answer	0%	0%

Echoing their experiences of having an impact in their role, Alberta participants also reported a much higher sense of reward in their role compared to participants in BC. In fact, over 50% of Alberta participants felt their work was very rewarding, while just 27% of BC participants reported the same (see Table 21).

Table 21: Experiences of Gratification in Role

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)
Have you found the work of serving as a mayor, councillor, or regional representative rewarding? (Check only one.)		
Yes, very rewarding	27%	56%
Somewhat rewarding	24%	15%
A mix of rewarding and frustrating	42%	26%
Somewhat frustrating	0%	3%
Very frustrating	7%	0%
No answer	0%	0%

Only 5% of survey participants felt they were able to make all the changes they had initially hoped to make when they ran for public office. A greater proportion reported that they had success with much of or some of their goals. When questioned about barriers to making change most reported that there were not enough staff or financial resources. (See Table 22.)

Table 22: Making Change

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)
Were you able to make changes or do the specific work that was your reason for running for office?		
Yes, all of it	5%	5%
Much of it I've been able to work on or change	33%	32%
Some of it I've been able to work on or change	49%	53%
A very limited amount	9%	10%
No, I haven't been able to do the work I ran for office for or make the changes I wanted to make	4%	0%
No answer	0%	0%
If you were unable, or if you made a limited number of the changes described above, was it for the following reasons? (Check only one option.)		
Not the right jurisdiction or the issues are in a different level of government	16%	8%
Not enough support from colleagues	22%	8%
Not enough staff or financial resources	22%	23%
No support from other levels of government or stakeholders	2%	19%
No answer	38%	42%

Logistics

In terms of workload, nearly 20% of BC survey respondents reported an overwhelming workload, while just 2% of Alberta survey respondents reported the same. Alberta survey respondents also appeared to enjoy easier meeting coordination compared to BC participants. For example, nearly 90% of survey respondents in Alberta reported that meeting times worked for them while 76% of BC respondents reported similar experiences. (See Table 23.)

Table 23: Meeting Times and Workload

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)
In general, do meeting times work for you?		
Yes	76%	89%
No	22%	5%
Unsure	2%	6%
No answer	0%	0%
How do you find your workload? (Check only one.)		
Overwhelming	18%	2%
A lot but manageable	53%	63%
Reasonable	27%	29%
Easy to manage with other responsibilities	2%	6%
No answer	0%	0%

Beyond meeting logistics, very few elected officials participating in this study reported that the job was exactly what they expected. Most reported a mix of surprises and elements that met their initial expectations (see Table 24), a situation that points to the need to provide better orientation processes to support elected officials.

Table 24: Expectations

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)
How did serving in this role meet your expectations of what the job would be? (Check only one.)		
The job is exactly what I expected.	4%	10%
It was mostly what I expected.	31%	40%
It was a mix of what I expected and some surprises.	56%	45%
It was different than what I expected it to be.	9%	5%

Part 4 of this report provides recommendations for change. Rooted in feedback provided by participants along with the project's literature review, we provide recommendations addressing adverse working conditions, ineffective mechanisms for accountability, hate crimes and harassment, and structural barriers to the retention of women and gender minorities in local elected roles.

PART 4: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from this project's literature review, surveys, interviews, and focus groups, Part 4 of this report provides focused recommendations for increasing the participation and retention of women and gender minorities in local municipal elected roles in Canada. Some of these recommendations are targeted at local governments themselves. These include actions such as changing hiring requirements for CAOs. Other recommendations should be implemented by provincial convening groups such as the Union of BC Municipalities and Alberta Municipalities. Yet others, such as introducing a provincial integrity commissioner, need to be implemented by the provinces.

It is important to note that many municipal councillors will be unlikely to change systems that serve them personally. This is especially true for those councillors who took it upon themselves to harass the research team: it is highly unlikely that those who dispute the need for changes will initiate or vote in favour of those types of changes.

Critically, this study documents pronounced gaps in support for women and gender minorities occupying public office, stories of abuse and harassment, and structural barriers to participation in municipal politics. More specifically, this study highlights four main groups of issues:

1. Structural barriers to equitable participation, including challenges with pay rates, benefits, pensions, childcare, and supports for people with disabilities and various accessibility needs.

Low pay, full-time work for part-time pay, and a lack of consistent access to benefits, pensions, childcare, and parental leave demonstrate the ways local elected roles are effectively structured for affluent, older retirees, a demographic that has continued to occupy public office. Little support is available for those with young families or those negotiating earlier parts of their careers amidst increasing costs of living. Ageism emerged as a key theme, in addition to a lack of flexibility for people with disabilities and various accessibility needs. Rigid structures historically adopted for the participation of older, middle-class white men remain, blocking the democratic participation of other groups that more aptly reflect Canada's diversity in the 21st century. Unless these barriers are addressed, there is little hope for diversifying public office in truly effective and meaningful ways.

2. Adverse working conditions, including experiences of sexual harassment and abuse perpetrated by other council members.

Women and gender minorities in municipal elected roles occupy a toxic arena where abuse has been normalized. Furthermore, on many councils, gender barriers hold strong, locating women and gender minorities as outsiders. As described in Part 3 of this report, multiple participants reported disturbing accounts of councillor-on-councillor sexual assault and harassment, prompting the research team to adopt trauma-informed methods. These research findings demonstrate an urgency to make visible the diverse forms of harm that women and gender minorities experience in public office so that solutions can be developed and democratic processes upheld.

3. Ineffective mechanisms for accountability and oversight, limiting the prevention of harassment and abuse and the development of meaningful processes to hold perpetrators accountable.

Participants in this study who did report abuse and harassment encountered walls of bureaucracy that made addressing the behaviour difficult. Some experienced re-victimization as they navigated the process. Participants reported working in a grey zone, with merely symbolic codes of conduct and little accountability or legal oversight. Furthermore, officials who were tasked with reviewing councillor experiences of abuse and harassment had little training regarding systemic violence, racism, ableism, transphobia, or colonization, thereby setting processes up for failure. These findings indicate the need for more robust mechanisms of accountability in addition to anti-oppression training and the demographic diversification of other roles in municipal office, including chief administrative officers, staff, and those charged with conducting investigations.

4. Hate crimes, harassment, and racism experienced by women and gender minorities in municipal elected roles.

Participants reported property crime, the need for police protection, hate crimes, doxing, threats, acts of violence, and intimidation from the public. The frequency of these incidents was exacerbated by the political polarization that rose during the pandemic. These experiences forced many racialized women and gender minorities to work double duty as they fought to protect their own wellbeing while simultaneously taking on demanding municipal roles in public office. Participants shared that these experiences can profoundly impact retention in municipal elected roles as elected officials weigh concerns for safety against their participation in public office.

The following recommendations, based on key findings from this study's interviews, surveys, and focus groups, draw attention to the multiple levels of engagement required to stop harm, promote retention, and address ongoing inequalities.

1. Remove institutional barriers.

a. Provide childcare so that councillors with young families can participate in local politics.
b. Provide pensions and benefits to recruit and retain diverse members of council.
c. Provide full-time pay for full-time work to recruit and retain diverse members of council.
d. Provide training for new members of council to better equip them for their roles (see point 2c. for additional educational recommendations).
e. Develop and clearly communicate accommodation processes for people with disabilities and various accessibility needs.

2. Develop accountability mechanisms.

a. Standardize clear accountability processes across each province. For example, enhanced protections for women and gender minorities across the province, legally mandated codes of conduct with ties to greater independent oversight, greater accountability, increased penalties for violating codes of conduct, and legal recourse to address systemic violence.
b. Establish a dedicated Provincial Integrity Commissioner for Local Government in each province. More specifically, we recommend that a Provincial Integrity Commissioner for Local Government should:
    iii. Provide anti-oppression education for local leaders to help them become more attuned to structural inequalities that block democracy (for more information, see Ethical Oversight in Part 2: Contextualizing Our Research).
    iii. Enforce codes of conduct “by investigating alleged breaches.”
    iii. Advise “individual local government elected officials on how to meet standards of conduct.”
    iii. Educate local government elected officials on issues of ethics, integrity, and personal conduct (Capital Regional District, 2017).
    iii. Impose legal sanctions in the case of misconduct and abuse, including the removal of councillors or mayors and the implementation of financial penalties. This could help remedy the lack of meaningful accountability.
a. Provide local councillors with education about rights and recourse to address abuse.
b. Develop laws that differentiate between the content of closed meetings and information on the conduct of councillors during closed meetings. This would help prevent the weaponization of in-camera protocol against women, members of gender minorities, and members of other systemically oppressed groups. Racist, sexist, colonial, ableist, and transphobic behaviour has gone unchallenged due to protections offered to perpetrators by this lack of differentiation.

3. Stop the normalization of abuse.

a. Establish whistleblower protections.
b. Provide formal support options for members of systemically oppressed groups who are occupying public office.
c. Name abuse. Elected officials who experienced violence, abuse, hate crimes, and sexual harassment who came forward in this report were often silenced by others, which amplified the harm. For this reason, it is important for allies to name abuse when it occurs and to offer educated allyship by enrolling in anti-oppression and bystander training in order to enact solidarity in a meaningful way.

4. Counter tokenism and develop meaningful representation and associated democratic practices.

a. Prioritize the collection of intersectional and disaggregated data about elected officials, including information on how many elected representatives identify as IBPOC, as women or gender minorities, as members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, and as people with disabilities.
b. Adopt term limits. Term limits have been shown to increase the participation of members of systemically oppressed groups in public office.
c. Hire chief administrative officers (CAOs) who have meaningful awareness and engagement with systemic inequalities and who have taken anti-oppression training, or provide anti-oppression training to extend their practice.
d. Diversify CAO recruitment and hiring tactics to encourage more participation of women, gender minorities, and members of other systemically oppressed groups.
e. Expand high school curricula on civic politics, local government, and the importance of democratic practices to encourage the next generation of diverse young leaders to run for public office.
f. Adopt proportional representation, an approach to democratic processes that has been linked to more meaningful representation and political diversity.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Survey Questions

Appendix B: Individual Interview Questions

Appendix C: Quick Overview of Research Participant Demographic Profiles

Appendix D: Lessons Learned for Other Research Teams

Appendix E: Focus Group Themes

Appendix F: List of Resources

Appendix A: Survey Questions

SECTION 1: DEMOGRAPHICS AND BACKGROUND

1. What is your gender? Examples: cisgender woman, transgender woman, transgender man, gender non-conforming person, non-binary person, Two-Spirit person, other.*

[short answer text]

2. Do you identify as someone with a disability? Disability means any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication, or sensory impairment, or a functional limitation, whether permanent, temporary, or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person's full and equal participation in society.

Tick all that apply.

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

3. If you answered yes to the previous question, please tell us more about how you identify with disability. For example, a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication, or sensory impairment, or a functional limitation, whether permanent, temporary, or episodic in nature.

[short answer text]

4. Do you identify as:

- Indigenous
- Black
- Person of colour
- None of the above

5. If you answered yes to the question above, please tell us how you identify. Examples: Japanese, Haisla, Black, mixed-race Chinese, Métis, etc.

[short answer text]

6. How large is your municipality or regional district?

Mark only one.

- Fewer than 5,000 people
- 5,000-10,000 people
- 10,000-25,000 people
- 25,000-50,000 people
- 50,000-100,000 people
- 100,000-500,000 people
- More than 500,000 people

7. Would you describe your municipality as urban or rural?

Mark only one.

- Rural
- Urban

8. How many terms have you served in your current position?

Mark only one.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5+

9. Are you planning to run again in the next municipal election?

Mark only one.

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

10. If you answered “no” or “unsure” to question 9, what issue is most impacting your decision to not re-offer for this public office again?

Tick all that apply.

- I don’t think I’m making enough impact.
- I don’t have adequate support, such as training, assistance, and so on.
- The pay and benefits aren’t adequate for the amount of work.
- The way meetings are structured make it difficult for me to actively participate. Decisions are made outside the formal process and don’t include me.
- Inadequate childcare.
- Lack of on-site childcare.
- Lack of parental leave.
- I have other goals I’m pursuing.
- It doesn’t fit with my life/lifestyle.
- I’ve experienced bullying or harassment.
- The job is detrimental to my health and wellbeing.
- I have to compromise too much of my values and identity to continue.
- Other: [short answer text]

11. On a scale of one to 10, how has sexism impacted your role as an elected official?

Mark only one.

[This end of the scale, not at all]

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

[This end of the scale, frequently]

12. Do you consider the following joke offensive or inappropriate? Q: Is Google male or female? A: Female, because it doesn't let you finish a sentence before making a suggestion.

Mark only one.

Yes
No

13. Would you describe yourself as a feminist?

Mark only one.

Yes
No

SECTION 2: LOGISTICS

14. In general, do meeting times work for you? This includes council meetings, task forces, regional and inter-jurisdictional meetings.

Mark only one.

Yes
No
N/A
Unsure

15. Do you find the compensation adequate for the amount of work?

Mark only one.

Yes
No
N/A
Unsure

16. If no, why not?

Tick all that apply.

Personal stress associated with job.
Amount of meetings.
Number of community events expected to attend.
Amount of responsibility associated with job.
Extra committee work or projects you've taken on based on your priorities.
The volume of readings and prep work.
Other: [short answer text]

17. Is the compensation enough to cover your living expenses?

Mark only one.

Yes, and this is my only source of income.
Yes, and I have other sources of income.
No, but I have other sources of income.
No, and I don't have other sources of income.

18. Are the benefits (life insurance, extended medical, and so on) adequate to meet your needs?

Mark only one.

Yes
No
Unsure

19. If you have other paid employment or are seeking or have sought other paid employment during your time on council, has your role in municipal government impacted that position or job search?

Mark only one.

It has positively impacted my other work/job search.
It hasn't had an impact.
I'm not aware of any impact, but it's possible.
It has negatively impacted my other work/job search.

20. If your role in government has negatively impacted your position or job search, please tell us about that.

[short answer text]

21. Does your role impact any caregiving responsibilities you may have?

Mark only one.

Yes
No
Unsure

22. Is there anything you'd like to tell us about how your role impacts caregiving responsibilities?

[short answer text]

23. How do you find the amount of work?

Mark only one.

Overwhelming.
A lot but manageable.
Reasonable.
Easy to manage with other responsibilities.

24. Is the physical space accessible for you? This could include council chambers and any offices or meeting spaces provided by the municipality or regional district.

Tick all that apply.

The space is physically inaccessible for my mobility.
The ergonomics are difficult for me.
It is difficult to adequately hear or see during meetings.
Other: [short answer text]

25. Have you had challenges asking for accommodations (for mobility, pain, mental health, etc.)?

Mark only one.

Yes
No

26. Is there anything you would like to tell us about how your interactions with physical spaces have been? Examples: Could you request a change of venue? Could you ask to meet virtually, or access accommodations?

[short answer text]

27. Is there anything else you want to tell us related to the logistics of the job?

[short answer text]

SECTION 3: CULTURE

Some questions in this section may be triggering as they deal with sensitive topics related to sexual harassment and discrimination based on race, disability, and other factors.

28. Have you experienced discrimination from municipal colleagues because of your gender, race, disability, or other factors?

Tick all that apply.

	Yes	No	Unsure
Comments that were patronizing or demeaning			
Lack of support (motions, projects, etc.)			
Lack of support (emotional, personal)			
Refusal of reasonable accommodations			
Sexual harassment			
Verbal harassment			
Being treated differently than colleagues			
Being overlooked for appointments to boards or committees			
Having your ideas or contributions actively dismissed and devalued			
Not being acknowledged for your work			
Threats			
Other (please explain in question 29)			

29. (Optional) Please tell us more about your experiences of discrimination from municipal colleagues.

[Short answer text]

30. Have you experienced discrimination from city or district staff in your municipality associated with your job because of your gender, race, disability, or other factors?

Tick all that apply.

	Yes	No	Unsure
Comments that were patronizing or demeaning			
Lack of support (motions, projects, etc.)			
Lack of support (emotional, personal)			
Staff being defiant or not following directions or recommendations provided			
Refusal of reasonable accommodations			
Sexual harassment			
Verbal harassment			
Being treated differently			
Being overlooked for appointments to boards or committees			
Having your ideas or contributions actively dismissed and devalued			
Not being acknowledged for your work			
Threats			
Other (please explain in question 31)			

31. (Optional) Please tell us more about your experiences of discrimination from city or district staff based on your gender, race, disability, and other factors related to your identity.

[Short answer text]

32. Have you experienced discrimination from the public because of your gender, race, disability, or other factors (beyond what may be considered average for a municipal politician)?

Tick all that apply.

	Yes	No	Unsure
Comments that were patronizing or demeaning			
Lack of support (motions, projects, etc.)			
Lack of support (emotional, personal)			
Sexual harassment			
Verbal harassment			
Being treated differently			
Being overlooked for appointments to boards or committees			
Not being acknowledged for your work			
Threats			
Online harassment			
Other (please explain in question 33)			

33. (Optional) Please tell us more about your experiences of discrimination from the public based on your gender, race, disability, and other factors.

[Short answer text]

34. In general, have your colleagues and staff been supportive in helping you reach your political goals with regards to areas of focus, motions, and work?

Mark only one.

Yes
No
Unsure
Mixed support

35. Overall, do you feel like your work as an elected official is making a difference?

Mark only one.

Yes, definitely.
Yes, some of it.
Sometimes.
Rarely.
It doesn't feel like I'm able to make a difference in this work.
Unsure.

36. When you experience inappropriate treatment from colleagues or staff, what are your options for reporting and resolving the issue?

Mark only one.

- We have a clearly articulated process with an external person or organization.
- We can raise issues with the mayor, chair, city manager, chief administrative officer, or similar.
- I think we might, but I'm not familiar with it.
- I do not know if we have a process.
- We don't have a process.

37. If you identified a process in question 37, have you ever used that process and was it fair and adequate?

Mark only one.

- I haven't used it.
- Yes, but it was inadequate.
- Yes, it was fair and adequate.

38. If you have a process to lodge a complaint and have it resolved, please describe it here.

[short answer text]

SECTION 4: POWER, JURISDICTION, AND INFLUENCE

39. Have you been able to make the changes or do the specific work that was your reason for running for office?

Mark only one.

- Yes, all of it.
- I've been able to work on or change much of it.
- I've been able to work on or change some of it.
- A very limited amount.
- No, I haven't been able to do the work I ran for office for or make the changes I wanted to make.

40. If you haven't been able to make changes or have only been able to make a very limited amount, was it because of any of the following reasons?

Mark only one.

- Not the right jurisdiction, or the issues are in a different level of government.
- Not enough support from colleagues.
- Not enough staff or financial resources.
- No support from other levels of government or stakeholders.

41. Are you planning to run for another level of government?

Mark only one.

- Yes, very soon.
- Yes, but in the future.
- Considering it in the future.
- Probably not.
- No, never.

42. If you answered yes to question 41, why are you planning to run for another level of government?

[short answer text]

43. Have you found the work of serving as a mayor, councillor, or regional representative rewarding?

Mark only one.

- Yes, very rewarding.
- Somewhat rewarding.
- A mix of rewarding and frustrating.
- Somewhat frustrating.
- Very frustrating.

44. How did serving in this role meet your expectations of what you thought the job would be?

Mark only one.

- The job is exactly what I expected.
- It was mostly what I expected.
- It was a mix of what I expected and some surprises.
- It was different than what I expected it to be.

45. How did serving in this role surprise or disappoint you?

[short answer text]

Appendix B: Individual Interview Questions

Interviewer name:

Interview participant name:

Date of interview:

1. Gender

2. Race or ethnicity

2. Disability

4. Municipality or region

5. Municipality or regional district size

6. Number of terms served

7. Position on council—mayor, councillor, etc.

8. Age range

Mark only one.

19–29
30–39
40–49
50–59
60–69
70–79
80–89
90–99

9. Relationship status (single, married, common-law, other) and children (Y/N)

10. Tell me about your entry into municipal politics. What drove you to run?

11. How does the job work for you? Does it work with your schedule (including other work and caregiving responsibilities)? Are the hours manageable?

12. If you identify as someone with a disability, is your municipality accommodating of your disability?

13. When you were first elected, what was your experience like? Did you feel welcomed and supported by colleagues and city staff?

14. Have you experienced bullying or any kind of harassment from colleagues, staff, consultants, or the public? Tell us about that. Was it connected to your gender, race, disability, etc.?

15. Have you experienced sexist or gendered comments from colleagues, staff, consultants, or the public?

16. Have you experienced discrimination, harassment, or other non-overt forms of racism from colleagues, staff, consultants, or the public?

17. Does your district or municipality have any processes to resolve bullying or harassment? Do you think they're effective, trustworthy, etc.?

18. What are some things that may have made you feel safer, more supported in your position?

19. Is there another elected person that provides support to you? If so, are they from your municipality or a different one? What is their position? Do they have more experience than you? How do they support you?

20. Would you recommend serving in local government to other folks in your community?

21. Do you find this work meaningful? Do you feel like you're making a difference?

22. Was the role what you expected it to be before you ran? How has it met your expectations or been different?

23. What issues have you been most active on during your time in local government?

24. What strategies have you employed to successfully get your issues or work through?

25. What barriers have you faced trying to champion ideas or issues?

26. What makes your job easier? What makes your job more difficult?

27. What resources or supports are missing or do you wish would exist to improve your experience?

28. Are you planning to run for another term? What's most impacting that decision?

29. What else should be studied in the future?

As we close this, we'd like to invite you to participate in the final stage of this process. Part of our project is to identify solutions to the barriers to help keep progressive women in elected roles. Would you be interested in attending a discussion group to source and vet ideas that can be included in our final report?

Mark only one.

Yes
No
Maybe
Other: [short answer text]

Appendix C: Overview of Participant Demographic Profiles

Women and Gender Minorities

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	BC interview participants (n = 35)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)	Alberta interview participants (n = 18)
Basic demographics				
Women	96%	97%	100%	100%
Members of gender minorities	4%	3%	0%	0%

IBPOC Identification

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	BC interview participants (n = 35)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)	Alberta interview participants (n = 18)
Basic demographics				
Black	0%	3%	0%	0%
Indigenous	0%	3%	5%	6%
Person of colour	7%	11%	2%	11%
White	93%	83%	93%	83%

Disability

	BC survey participants (n = 45)	BC interview participants (n = 35)	Alberta survey participants (n = 62)	Alberta interview participants (n = 18)
Basic demographics				
Has a disability	9%	23%	10%	22%
Doesn't have a disability	84%	71%	90%	78%
Unsure about disability status	7%	3%	0%	0%
No answer regarding disability status	0%	3%	0%	0%

Appendix D: Lessons Learned for Other Research Teams[27]

1. Building in supports for research participants disclosing abuse, sexual assaults, violence, and threats

- Remain open to revising the research process to best support participants.
- Provide participants with a list of related resources.
- Remain attentive to triggers.
- While giving voice to inequalities provides a sense of relief and justice for some, for others it can be re-traumatizing. Others may experience mixed emotions. There is no one way to respond. Be mindful of differing responses to research questions and respond accordingly.
- Create space for reflection, debriefing, and emotion. In focus groups, this can look like one-on-one breakout sessions; in interviews it can include stopping the interview, allowing the participant to take time to cry if they need to, and reviewing local resources with the participant. Be aware of your limitations as a researcher and the associated training required to provide more robust mental health support. For example, Registered Clinical Counsellors often have the tools and training to support participants who require more direct support. Having one available for the research team and participants can be useful in projects addressing violence. Consulting with mental health professionals regarding research protocol can also be useful.
- Honour participants' stories by taking action to prevent further harm.

2. Holding researcher check-ins

- Conventional approaches to research don't just objectify research participants as objects of inquiry; they also objectify researchers as instruments of inquiry. Provide opportunities to check in with the research team regarding traumatic content and experiences of witnessing.

3. Using the study to elevate networks of support

- Research projects can serve as powerful locations of network-building for participants who are fighting inequalities.

4. The personal is political: Team composition and topics of study

- Don't assume research team members have an objective relationship to the topic of study. Proceed with team discussions accordingly. For example, avoid adopting "us vs. them" language or discussing poverty, ability, racism, sexism, transphobia, or colonization in dehumanizing ways. Contrary to conventional approaches to research, on-the-ground experience can be beneficial to the development of more relevant research questions, surveys, and tools.
- Trauma-informed approaches to research aren't just beneficial to research participants; they can also better support research team members who bring related lived experience.

27 Adapted from educational materials and workshop content produced by the Shift Research Collective, 2023. **https://www.shiftresearchcollective.ca/**

5. Utilizing audits

- Project audits conducted by Indigenous communities, disability accessibility specialists, and others can create more effective projects.
- Anti-oppression approaches to research also emphasize ongoing reflection and work, not a static endpoint. For example, there will always be more work to do in building accessible spaces or approaching the work of anti-racism.

6. Addressing the need for intersectional research and disaggregated data: Making visible the invisible

- Conventional approaches to research flatten identity and ignore intersectional experiences of privilege and oppression. New legislation in Canada (such as BC's Anti-Racism Data Act, 2022) even calls for more robust research in this area to better support service delivery, programs, social policy, and healthcare.
- Coupling participant narratives with statistics; paying attention to nuance, complexity, and contradiction; taking anti-oppressive approaches to research; and providing detailed statistical categories (where relevant) can all help fight the flattening of research participant identity, creating more relevant and meaningful data in efforts to fight social inequalities.

7. Providing supports for readers

- In-text trigger warnings with "skip to" page references allow readers to decide whether they choose to read reports of sexual assaults provided in the study.
- Research reports offered in multiple formats increase accessibility for people with disabilities and various accessibility needs.
- For research addressing violence, abuse, and sexual assault, provide a list of resources at the end of the report for readers. Although this list may not be exhaustive, resources can be useful for some readers who are grappling with the emotional toll of the research content.

8. Encouraging those with more privilege to do the work

- Individuals from systemically oppressed communities often are the ones to take on education and tactics for addressing abuse. Provide resources for allies looking to do better.

Appendix E: Focus Group Themes

For this project, focus groups explored solutions to inequitable representation in local politics and the retention of women and gender minorities in elected roles. More broadly, four key themes were explored, including:

1. **Removing institutional barriers**

2. **Addressing tokenism and developing meaningful representation and more democratic practices**

3. **Solutions to the normalization of abuse**

4. **The development of accountability mechanisms**

More specifically, focus groups addressed:

- More equitable pay
- Benefits
- Childcare
- Accommodations for people with disabilities and various accessibility needs
- Ways to address a lack of individual and institutional awareness of oppression (racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and colonization)
- The need for disaggregated data and modern anti-oppression analysis and education
- The value of term limits in addressing the diversity gap
- The value of proportional representation in addressing the diversity gap
- Workplace protections
- Solutions to problems with conduct processes and closed meetings
- Ways to address a toxic culture, i.e., “tough it out” or “have thick skin”
- Ways to counter the belief that elected women and gender minorities should endure abuse
- Ways to address limited (known) processes for recourse from abuse from staff, other councillors, and the public
- Formal supports for women and members of gender minorities
- Accountability processes and the need for standardization
- Solutions to challenges associated with chief administrative officers (CAOs), including a lack of diversity and understandings of systemic inequalities

Appendix F: List of Resources

Gender-based violence is violence that is committed against someone based on their gender identity, gender expression, or perceived gender. Violence often increases during emergencies and times of economic hardship. Listed below are key resources available to support individuals experiencing violence in Alberta and British Columbia.

General resources are also provided at the end of this document, including resources to help calm the body and mind for those experiencing painful memories associated with the content of this report and resources for allies looking to offer more effective solidarity with systemically oppressed groups.

ALBERTA RESOURCES

Ambulance, Fire and Police
Call: 911 (24/7)
Always call 911 in an emergency.

211 Alberta
Call: 211 (24/7, 170+ languages)
Text: 211
Online chat: https://ab.211.ca/how-we-help/contact/ (24/7, English only)
If you are unsure who to call or what service you need, this information and referral line will help you determine what you need and will connect you to the appropriate social, health, or government service, including an appropriate crisis support line.

Alberta's One Line for Sexual Violence
Call: 1-866-403-8000 (toll-free, 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. daily, 170+ languages)
Online chat: https://aasas.ca/contact-us/ (appears to be English only)
This hotline can help if you have experienced any form of sexual violence and need crisis support or if you need help finding sexual assault support services in Alberta.

Local Sexual Assault Services
Website: https://aasas.ca/get-support/
This site can help if you have experienced any form of sexual violence and need crisis support or counselling.

Bullying Helpline
Call: 1-888-456-2323 (toll-free, 24/7, 170+ languages)
Call or text: 310-1818
Website: https://www.alberta.ca/bullying-prevention.aspx
Get anonymous help with bullying.

Bullying Helpline Chat
Online chat: http://m2.icarol.com/ConsumerRegistration.aspx?org=2181&pid=11
Get help anonymously 24 hours a day, seven days a week in English.

Victim Services (Victim Support and Court Preparation)
Website: https://www.victimservicesalberta.com/
Email: admin@victimservicesalberta.com
Victim of crime support and court preparation services can be accessed through your local police agency or by phone.

Local Victim Services Units
Website: https://www.alberta.ca/victim-services-units.aspx (appears to be English only)
Services for those who need help with restraining and protection orders or other supports for victims of crime.

Legal Aid Alberta
Call: 1-866-845-3425 (toll-free, 8:15 a.m. to 4:15 p.m., Monday to Friday; appears to be English only)
Website: https://www.legalaid.ab.ca/services/
Provides help with legal issues.

Independent Legal Advice (ILA) for Survivors of Sexual Violence (Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton)
Call: 780-784-2213 or toll-free 1-866-421-1175 (appears to be English only, hours not listed)
Email: legal_advice@efryedmonton.ab.ca
Website: https://www.efrynorthernalberta.com/independent-legal-advice-for-survivors-of-sexual-violence
ILA is open to adults (18+) of any gender who live in Alberta and have experienced sexual violence in Alberta.

Hope for Wellness Help Line
Call: 1-855-242-3310 (24/7, multiple languages; see description note)
Online chat: https://www.hopeforwellness.ca/
Counselling is available for all Indigenous people in English and French, and upon request in Cree, Ojibway, and Inuktitut.

Native Counselling Services of Alberta
Website: https://www.ncsa.ca/
Provides support and help with community resources as well as services for courtwork, housing, and post-correctional services, among others.

Alberta Native Friendship Centres Association
Call: 780-423-3138 (languages, hours not listed)
Website: https://anfca.com/
Provides connection to local community-based friendship centres that provide services and referrals.

Trans Lifeline
Call: 1-877-330-6366 (24/7, English and Spanish)
Website: https://translifeline.org/
A trans-led organization that connects trans people to the community, support, and resources they need to survive and thrive.

2SLGBTQIA+ Support Groups Across Alberta
Website: https://informalberta.ca/public/results/relatedSubjects.do?taxonomyQueryId=5774
Information on 2SLGBTQIA+ support groups across Alberta. While the website is in English, multiple language supports may be available through referred organizations.

Alberta Health Link
Call: 811 (24/7, 240 languages)
Websites:
https://myhealth.alberta.ca/
https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page12630.aspx
Free health-related advice and general health information provided by a nurse.

Mental Health Helpline
Call: 1-877-303-2642 (toll-free, 24/7, interpreters / translators available)
Offers help for Albertans experiencing mental health concerns.

24-hour Distress Line
Call: 403-266-HELP (4357) (24/7, 200+ languages)
Hearing impaired: 403-543-1967
Online chat: https://na0messaging.icarol.com/ConsumerRegistration.aspx?org=2181&pid=1&cc=en-US
Website: https://www.distresscentre.com/need-help/
Confidential, non-judgmental and short-term crisis intervention, emotional support, and resources for people experiencing mental health crisis or distress, including support for family, friends, and caregivers of people in crisis.

Addiction Helpline
Call: 1-866-332-2322 (toll-free, 24/7, appears to be English only)
A confidential service which provides support, information, and referral to services to support people dealing with addictions to alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and problem gambling.

BRITISH COLUMBIA RESOURCES

Ambulance, Fire, and Police
Call: 911 (24/7)
Always call 911 in an emergency.

211 British Columbia
Call: 211
Text: 211
Online chat: https://bc.211.ca/chat (24/7, multiple languages available)
If you are unsure who to call or what service you need, this information and referral line will help you determine what you need and will connect you to the appropriate social, health, or government service, including an appropriate crisis support line.

SALAL Sexual Violence Support Centre
Call: 1-877-392-7583 (24/7 crisis and information line, appears to be English only)
Website: https://www.salalsvsc.ca/get-support/
For crisis support, resources, referrals, and program intakes. Non-binary people are welcome.

Bullying Resources – Province of British Columbia
Website: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/erase/bullying
Resource guide to provincial and national organizations that provide bullying supports.

Victim Link BC
Call or text: 1-800-563-0808 (toll-free, 24/7, 150 languages)
Email: VictimLinkBC@bc211.ca
Website: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/victims-of-crime/victimlinkbc
Provides information and referral services to all victims of crime as well as immediate crisis support to victims of family and sexual violence.

Legal Aid BC
Call: 1-866-577-2525 (hours listed on website, interpreters provided)
Website: https://legalaid.bc.ca/
Provides legal information, advice, and representation to British Columbians.

Hope for Wellness Help Line
Call: 1-855-242-3310 (24/7, multiple languages available; see description note)
Online chat: https://www.hopeforwellness.ca/
Counselling is available for all Indigenous people in English and French, and upon request in Cree, Ojibway, and Inuktitut.

First Nations Health Authority
Website: https://www.fnha.ca/what-we-do
Provides services, programs, and initiatives specific to Indigenous communities in BC.

BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres
Website: https://bcaafc.com/
Resources available on mental health supports, legal assistance, and safe space networks.

Trans Lifeline
Call: 1-877-330-6366 (24/7, English and Spanish)
Website: **https://translifeline.org/**
A trans-led organization that connects trans people to the community, support, and resources they need to survive and thrive.

What's On Queer BC
Website: https://whatsonqueerbc.com/lgbtq-links
Information on 2SLGBTQIA+ resources across BC. While the website is in English, multiple language supports may be available through referred organizations.

British Columbia Health Link
Call: 811 (24/7, over 100 languages)
British Columbians who are deaf and hard of hearing have always had access to HealthLinkBC through a teletypewriter (TTY) relay service by dialing 711.
Website: https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/
Free health-related advice and general health information provided by a nurse.

The Crisis Centre of BC
Call: BC Mental Health Support Line: 310-6789 (toll-free, no area code needed, 140+ languages, 24/7)
Call: Suicide support line, 1-800-SUICIDE: 1-800-784-2433 (toll-free, 140+ languages, 24/7)
Website: https://crisiscentre.bc.ca/
Online chat: https://crisiscentrechat.ca/
Offers help for British Columbians experiencing mental health concerns.

BC Alcohol and Drug Information and Referral Service (ADIRS)
Call: 1-800-663-1441 (toll-free, 24/7)
Information and referral to services.

OTHER MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

Self-soothing exercises provided by Self-Love Rainbow
https://www.selfloverainbow.com/2018/07/distress-tolerance-self-soothing.html

Breathing exercises provided by the Trevor Project
https://www.thetrevorproject.org/breathing-exercise/

20-minute guided meditation provided by Head Space
https://www.headspace.com/meditation

A toolkit that highlights alternative mental health supports created by BIPOC[28] and QTBIPOC[29] communities of colour, for BIPOC and QTBIPOC communities of colour
https://mhanational.org/sites/default/files/BIPOC-MHM-Toolkit-2021_Final_03_0.pdf

FOR ALLIES LOOKING TO DO BETTER

Anti-Racism Toolkit by Stanford University
https://cardinalatwork.stanford.edu/anti-racism-toolkit

Toolkit for "What is White Privilege Really?" by Learning for Social Justice
https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/fall-2018/toolkit-for-what-is-white-privilege-really

Indigenous Ally Toolkit by the Montreal Urban Aboriginal Community Strategy Network
https://www.segalcentre.org/common/sitemedia/201819_Shows/ENG_AllyTookit.pdf

Masculinity, Male Privilege, and Consent Toolkit by Me Too
https://metoomvmt.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/1.5.3_Masculinity-Male-Privilege-Consent-Toolkit_TOOLKIT_V2.pdf

Disability Pride Toolkit and Resource Guide by the National Council on Independent Living
https://ncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/NCIL-Disability-Pride-Toolkit.pdf

LGBTQ2+ Inclusiveness Toolkit by the Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities
https://en.ccunesco.ca/-/media/Files/Unesco/Resources/2019/06/CIMToolkitLGBTQ2PlusInclusiveness.pdf

Transgender and Non-Binary People FAQ by the Human Rights Campaign
https://www.hrc.org/resources/transgender-and-non-binary-faq

Two-Spirit Allyship by the Ontario Federation of Labour
https://ofl.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019.06.20-Two-Spirit-tips-for-practicing-allyship.pdf

28 The resource refers to Black, Indigenous, and people of colour as BIPOC.
29 QT stands for queer and transgender.