


# **The Barriers Project:**

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



Dr. Karen-Marie Elah Perry  
Nadine Nakagawa  
Trudi Goels  
Manjot Bains

A project by **The Feminist Campaign School** with support from **Climate Caucus**  
Funded by **Women and Gender Equality Canada**



This report was written on the territories of the hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ speaking peoples as well as the Sn̓'neim̓əx̓<sup>w</sup> 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.

## ***CONTENT WARNING***

Witnessing descriptions of harassment, bullying, and disrespect can be traumatic as it may cause the witness to reconnect with their own lived experiences. These experiences being brought 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 on our website [LocalRepresentation.ca](https://www.localrepresentation.ca).



## ***ABOUT THE RESEARCH***

The threats, harassment, and physical and sexual abuse reported by women and gender minorities participating in this study reflect high stakes for Canada's democracy. Local elected governments don't reflect a modern workplace in that there is a lack of flexibility in scheduling, time off for caregiving, adequate compensation, and clear consequences for harmful behaviour. These are the leading reasons why progressive women and minorities elected to local governments choose to leave their positions. From April 2022 to May 2023, over 100 local elected officials in British Columbia (BC) and Alberta shared their experiences with the research team. The responses reveal persistent experiences of abuse and harassment as well as systemic barriers to equitable participation in municipal and regional governments.



## **THE FINDINGS**

The study found that women and gender minorities face persistent barriers to participating in elected office in addition to ongoing abuse and harassment by their colleagues, city staff, and the public. Participants shared stories of racial profiling by city and district staff while working late at night in their offices, doxing<sup>1</sup>, hate crimes, physical and sexual abuse, and threats from the public dominated our respondents' experiences of serving in local elected roles.

This is exacerbated by having to balance the high work demands associated with holding public office. This resulted in a double duty for women and gender minorities 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Publishing private information such as addresses and phone numbers on the internet for malicious purposes.



# SOLUTIONS

1. Remove institutional barriers to ensure equitable representation on councils that better reflect the needs of local populations. This includes:
  - a. Providing childcare so that councillors with young families can participate in local politics.
  - b. Providing pensions and benefits to recruit and retain diverse members of council.
  - c. Offering full-time pay for full-time work to recruit and retain diverse members of council.
  - d. Training new members of council to better equip them for their roles.
  - e. Creating and clearly communicating accommodation processes for people with disabilities and various accessibility needs.

**RESPONSIBILITY**

Local governments

**All**

2. Stop the abuse and harassment of women and gender minorities in local elected roles through the development of accountability processes. This includes:
  - a. Standardizing clear accountability processes across the province (in both BC and Alberta)—for example, enhanced protections for women and gender minorities, legally mandated codes of conduct with ties to greater independent oversight, increased penalties for violating codes of conduct, and greater accountability and legal recourse to address systemic violence.
  - b. Establishing a dedicated Provincial Integrity Commissioner for Local Government (BC and Alberta). More specifically, we recommend that a Provincial Integrity Commissioner for Local Government should:
    - i. Provide anti-oppression education<sup>2</sup> for local leaders to become more aware of structural inequalities that block democracy;
    - ii. 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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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 the full report Appendix F: List of Resources.

- c. Providing education to local councillors about their rights and the available options for recourse to address abuse.
- d. Developing laws that differentiate between the content of closed meetings versus the conduct of councillors during closed meetings, to prevent the weaponization of in-camera protocol against women, gender minorities and other systemically oppressed groups (in BC and Alberta). Racist, sexist, colonial, ableist, and transphobic behaviour has gone unchallenged due to protections offered to perpetrators by this lack of differentiation.

<b>RESPONSIBILITY</b>	Local governments	<b>2c</b>
	Union of BC Municipalities & Alberta Municipalities	<b>2c</b>
	Provincial governments	<b>All</b>

3. Stop the normalization of abuse. This includes:
- a. Establishing whistleblower protections.
  - b. Creating formal support options for members of systemically oppressed groups who occupy public office.
  - c. Naming 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 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.

<b>RESPONSIBILITY</b>	Local governments	<b>3a, 3b, 3c</b>
	UBCM & AM	<b>3b, 3c</b>
	Provincial governments	<b>3c</b>

4. Counter tokenism and develop meaningful representation and associated democratic practices. This includes:
- a. Prioritizing the collection of intersectional and disaggregated data about locally elected representatives, including information on IBPOC<sup>3</sup> leaders, gender, 2SLGBTQIA+<sup>4</sup> community members, and disability.

3 Diverse communities representing Indigenous people, Black people, and people of colour. For more information, see the complete report section entitled "IBPOC Representation and Municipal Office" Part 2: Contextualizing Our Research: A Review of the Literature. We centre Indigenous identities first in this acronym.

4 Diverse Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and more communities as represented by the plus. For more information, see in the complete report the section entitled "2SLGBTQIA+ Communities and Public Office in Canada" Part 2: Contextualizing Our Research: A Review of the Literature. We centre Indigenous identities first in this acronym.

- b. Adopting term limits. Term limits have been shown to increase the participation of systemically oppressed groups in public office.
- c. Hiring chief administrative officers (CAOs) who have a meaningful awareness of and engagement with systemic inequalities and who have either undertaken anti-oppression training or are willing to attend such training to extend their practice; provide this training as needed.[AZ6]
- d. Diversifying CAO recruitment and hiring tactics to encourage more participation of women, gender minorities, and other systemically oppressed groups.
- e. Expanding high school curriculum 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. Adopting proportional representation, an approach to democratic processes that has been linked to more meaningful representation and political diversity.



## ***A SYMPTOM OF THE LARGER PROBLEM***

The research project and research team themselves experienced harassment and abuse while undertaking the survey in BC and especially Alberta. Angry men serving on municipal councils 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.



## ***WHAT YOU CAN DO***

Sign onto the solutions presented by visiting [LocalRepresentation.ca](https://LocalRepresentation.ca).

### **If you're a locally elected representative**

1. Bring a motion to your local council for any of the presented solutions.
2. Submit a motion to your local government association or provincial association advocating for the province to take action.
3. Reach out to your local MLA to advocate for more protections for locally elected representatives.
4. Speak up about these issues, especially if you **haven't** been impacted by abuse and harassment. Learn how to enact allyship for your colleagues.
5. Take a course to learn more about how people are impacted by different types of oppression such as colonialism or misogyny.
6. Take a bystander training course.

### **If you're a member of the community**

1. Write a letter to the editor about the problem and solutions.
2. Reach out to your MLA about creating better protections for locally elected representatives.
3. Delegate to your local council about the findings and solutions in this report.

### **If you're a provincially elected representative**

1. Speak to the Minister of Municipal Affairs about the recommendations in this report.
2. Reach out to local elected officials, especially those with vulnerable identities to find out what solutions they would like to see.

## ***MORE INFORMATION***

For more information about this study and the research team and to read the full paper or a plain language version, visit [LocalRepresentation.ca](https://LocalRepresentation.ca).