Enabling environments for inclusive leadership
Canadian Women in Local Leadership (CanWILL) case study

"Women might be running now, but how can they thrive and succeed in this environment when it is not set up for them to be their authentic selves? We need mechanisms to change the old ways of doing things. This kind of change requires the individual will of those empowered to make the change coupled with process and behavioural support at the institutional level." -Femmocracy Now team in Moncton, NB

Introduction

Leadership opportunities in the municipal sector are limited for most women, and this experience is compounded for women who hold various dimensions of diversity. Systemic barriers prevent them from entering politics and from remaining in municipal leadership roles. These systemic issues include systematic discrimination, exclusionary policies or practices, and triple-burden responsibilities. Local governments have a responsibility to create empowering and supportive spaces where women can thrive as leaders and decision makers.

CanWILL provided 18 grants to municipalities and their community partners in every province, to promote and increase equitable participation in electoral and civic processes. One type of initiative that emerged from the grants was campaign schools to build knowledge and develop competencies that are needed in municipal leadership. Some municipalities also focused on systemic issues that cannot be addressed through capacity development activities alone. This document highlights a number of initiatives that worked to address structural barriers to inclusive municipal leadership. It was created to provide a resource for other municipalities who may wish to focus on creating more enabling environments for diverse and inclusive leadership.

1. Empowerment through steering committees

To increase the representation and effectiveness of their local projects, Inclusive Community Initiatives (ICI) partners created steering committees made up of community members of diverse identity and experience to oversee the design and development of their initiatives. Hamilton and the YWCA created a steering committee composed of queer and BIPOC young leaders in the community to plan the ICI project activities and paid its members for their participation. More than just oversight mechanisms, steering committees created opportunities for members to build their leadership skills and to network. This offered them a chance to become civically engaged without the financial barriers that can often exclude underrepresented groups from these spaces. It was also a valuable statement about recognizing the importance of remunerating community involvement.
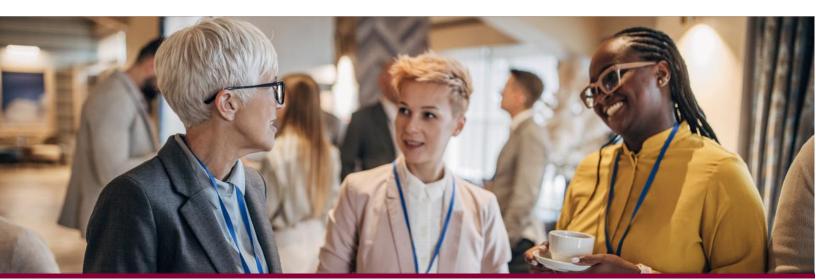
2. Institutional assessments

Sometimes referred to as gender and diversity audits, institutional assessments were conducted to take stock of how municipal structures, operations, and practices impact various groups. Municipalities and their partners led consultative processes with constituencies, municipal experts, staff, and people with lived experience to better understand the challenges and how to address these. One example was Rossland, BC's municipal leadership and diversity project *"Pride and Power"* which focused on LGBTQ2S+ representation. Rigorous research was conducted through a literature review and stakeholder listening and learning sessions with Pride groups and city officials. This resulted in recommendations that Rossland can implement to support diversity and inclusion more substantively through their policies, programs, and practices.

Similarly, Moncton, NB partnered with Femmocracy Now to do a deep dive of their policies and programs and to push for a more substantive commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Drawing on the city's journey toward becoming officially bilingual, Moncton examined its operational and governance tools to reduce or eliminate any systemic bias that inhibits women from participating in municipal structures. The research looked specifically at codes of conduct, human resource policies, and rules of engagement in council.

3. Building professional networks

A lack of social and political connections is frequently listed as one of the main barriers to women, racialized, and gender-diverse people's entry into municipal office. The City of Edmonton, AB and Parity YEG's project helped forge these crucial relationships to foster allyship between different communities. The virtual policy competition and a hybrid mentorship program not only built participants' policy writing skills, but also connected them with city councillors who mentored them while writing the policy brief. The experience was well received by the participants as they learned about local issues and established valuable relationships with the city councillors. Councillors also benefitted from the pairings, gaining a more intersectional understanding of community issues which they intend to incorporate into their work and advocacy as public officials.

4. Re-imagining leadership

Patriarchal notions of leadership have dominated municipal politics in Canada and often evoke the notions of hierarchy, power over others, and competition. This narrow definition of leadership is itself a barrier to women, gender diverse, and BIPOC individuals' entry into politics, as it can be incompatible with many peoples' value systems and ways of life. The "Faces of Leadership" project implemented by the City of Peterborough, ON and the Community Foundation of Greater Peterborough worked with BIPOC and gender-diverse individuals to collectively reimagine leadership. Through research and workshops, the partners and participants reflected on ways to facilitate the entry of equity-deserving groups into this leadership journey, on their own pathways to leadership, and how leaders can be better nurtured and supported.

This project has inspired further initiatives that the city is planning to engage women, BIPOC and gender diverse individuals in local politics. The team is optimistic that the project's impact will be long-lasting. As shared by the ICI partner from the City of Peterborough, "...this is the caliber of work that is really planting seeds to see systemic change eventually happen in the long run".

5. Investing in more inclusive environments

Creating more inclusive municipal environments within which women of all identities can thrive requires that municipalities invest in building their understanding of the exclusionary factors and their capacity to address them. Gender equity and municipal strategies are one essential tool to create an inclusive space. This process usually entails carrying out a Gender Based Analysis+ process to understand the municipality's structures, operations, and practices from an intersectional gender perspective. This research, which can be internally or externally led, then forms the basis of a municipality's gender equity strategy, whether this be standalone or integrated into a broader diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy. More information on the steps involved in this process can be found in our resource [Considerations for developing a gender equity and inclusion municipal strategy](#).

Visit our website to learn about CanWILL.

CanWILL's definition of women includes all individuals who identify as such, including but not limited to trans, non-binary, and gender diverse individuals.

CanWILL is implemented in partnership with FCM's membership, provincial and territorial associations (PTAs), as well as key national partners and local stakeholders. It is funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE).