

WOMEN IN POLITICS SPEED NETWORKING WORKSHOP

**Wednesday, April 24, 2019; 6:45 pm
FINAL REPORT**

The Advocacy Committee of the Orillia Chapter of the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW Orillia) held a workshop on Women in Politics at the Orillia Secondary School on April 24th, 2019. Kim Fedderson, former Principal of Lakehead University, Orillia Campus, moderated the event.

Seven women with experience in federal, provincial, and municipal politics were invited to take part: Simcoe North MPP Jill Dunlop, City of Orillia Councillor Pat Hehn, former provincial and federal Green Party candidate Valerie Powell, former Chippewas of Rama First Nations Chief Sharon Stinson Henry, former federal Liberal Party candidate Liz Riley, Severn Township Councillor Sarah Valiquette-Thompson, and former provincial NDP candidate Elizabeth Van Houtte.

Why is balanced representation important?

Each of the Women in Politics was asked to introduce herself and state why balanced representation is important. Their introductions included the following points:

Women in politics can do the following:

- Show a strong concern for social issues and improved health care
- Help decrease the adversarial tone frequently found in politics
- Create a shift in tone to one of greater collaboration
- Support the inclusiveness of underrepresented groups
- Serve as a model for gender equality in children
- Bring a different perspective and a different set of priorities such as highlighting family issues and cultural initiatives
- Emphasize women's issues, family violence concerns, and the specific area of violence against indigenous women
- Reflect the fundamentals of democracy through balanced and equal representation
- Serve as a role-model to others as natural caregivers

- Demonstrate an ability to balance political and family life reflective of all women balancing these roles in the workforce
- Mentor other women seeking political careers in order to further promote balanced representation
- Support policy changes to political parties to better reflect a diverse society

For the Speed Networking portion of the evening, public participants sat at one of seven tables while the invited speakers circulated every ten minutes to discuss barriers, solutions, and implementation. The following is a summary of the table discussions:

Barriers to achieving balanced representation

- 1) The distance from home and amount of travel required were viewed as significant obstacles for women with families, particularly if running for office at the federal level.
- 2) The high cost of running for office presented a challenge. It was noted that men seem to do better at raising money since they have more networking opportunities in the business world. Additionally, there is a need to support yourself while running a campaign.
- 3) The negative comments on social media were mentioned as a significant deterrent to women who are considering running for office. There is a perception that women tend to be targeted more on social media than men. Bullying by adults through social media is difficult because you can't defend yourself.
- 4) It is believed that sexism is a barrier to entering politics as women seem to be judged differently and more harshly than men. For example, women in the public eye are often judged by their appearance and the public seems to feel free to say any negative comment about a person in public office. In addition, women may be judged more harshly for holding public office when they have children.
- 5) The parliamentary system of selecting a candidate can be adversarial and may not appeal to all women.
- 6) There is a huge time commitment both in running a campaign and being a devoted elected representative. In addition, with the advent of social media and the internet, the demands of a job in politics now occur on a 24-hour basis. A woman may feel conflicted leaving children at home to attend meetings at night.
- 7) For voters, there may be a fear of change in having women run things.
- 8) Girls are not encouraged to be leaders, and therefore, may lack self-confidence.
- 9) Women may be considered as bitches if they express strong opinions; or women may be considered the weaker candidate.
- 10) Media coverage of meetings can be very difficult for women to handle.
- 11) Some men consider women to be too emotional (not trying to generalize but it can be a sentiment) and not be willing to vote for them.

- 12) There is limited information to specifically support women seeking political office.
- 13) Affordable child care/elder care could be a major barrier for women.

Solutions to Achieving Balanced Representation

Education:

- Educate all young people about gender equality. Incorporate this early into the school curriculum. Ensure that teaching materials promote gender equality and do not possess views that are detrimental to women.
- Civics courses should begin at the grade school level and continued into high school. Under-representation of women in politics should be examined.
- Educational and career options available to young women must be free of assumptions that are gender biased.
- The curriculum for all grades needs to inform students of our history, judicial and parliamentary systems.
- School systems should continue to encourage public speaking in order to promote confidence.
- Schools can encourage students to work at a constituency office. Young people need opportunities to be involved in politics. Students should also know that they can apply to work as a Page at Queen's Park.
- Educational and social supports can increase confidence in young women. Female students should be encouraged to assume leadership roles.
- Acknowledge the contributions of young role models like 16-year-old Swedish environmentalist Greta Thunberg who addressed the 2018 United Nations Climate Change Conference.

Public Awareness:

- Launch a public awareness campaign explaining the amount of money needed to run a political campaign at various levels and ways to fundraise.
- Challenge a biased status quo at all levels, including the most basic situations such as women still paying more for dry cleaning and hair cuts.
- Point out misogynistic acts and statements (i.e. women receive comments on how they dress, speak and act in public while men do not.)

Action Steps for Women:

- In order to obtain more support and to assist with fundraising when running for office, women must increase their networking. This can be achieved through volunteer work, including sitting on Boards and working in a local riding office.
- Women should be approached and encouraged to run for office.
- Becoming knowledgeable and having expertise in specific areas will increase confidence. Learn how government works and make your opinion known. Become attached to a platform.
- Women should be clear about their own values which will help them attach to a political party. If a person believes in the party's values, it will be easier to run for office.
- Participate in mentorship programs
- Focus on community programs for young children and families.

The Role of Social Media:

- The extent that negativity and misinformation on social media are threatening our democracy must be recognized and acknowledged.
- Women in public office must learn to handle negative comments on social media by ignoring them. A response to negative attacks gives the author more power.
- Remain positive and limit access to the media. Highlight what is happening in your constituency. Used correctly, social media can be a tool to reach young women.

The Role of Political Parties and Government:

- All levels of governments should consider how to make the job more family friendly. (eg. the Ontario Legislature doesn't sit on a Friday.) Offering child care is an important component.
- People entering public office should be provided with information about setting healthy boundaries and self-care.
- Political parties should offer support groups, organize networking opportunities, and run campaign training programs. Groups can be established for women to support one another.
- Focus training on immigrant populations
- Due to the high cost of running for office, consideration should be given to the implementation of a policy that provides candidates with an income supplement during a campaign – similar to maternity leave.

Implementation Strategies:

- Various levels of government should consider implementing proportional representation which is used in many countries.
- Create a hashtag for young women that communicates and reinforces the belief in equality.
- Run a series of lectures on what it is like to be on council, or serve as an elected official, and how to launch a campaign. This should occur many months before an election.
- If interested in running for politics planning can start as early as three to four years before the next election in order to join groups and be more involved in a community
- Have political parties participate in recruitment fairs, allowing students to learn about opportunities to volunteer. Information Orillia could be the catalyst.
- Encourage students to volunteer in committee work municipally.
- Being in politics is a full-time job. There is a need to make sure the salary reflects the time involved.
- Women can work to educate voters that it is possible to be a mother and run for office.
- Young women need reminding that they must not accept anything less than equality.
- Women interested in running for office can highlight the perspective that they bring forward such as concerns about violence against women, reproductive rights, programming for children and families and health care. They also bring a less adversarial tone.
- Parents can discipline children so that they learn consequences of their decision making, thereby developing a “thicker skin” and accepting criticism.

- In summary, women can do the following:
 - Be involved and vote
 - Vote for policies that reflect gender equity
 - Urge young women to volunteer for a political party
 - Develop a network of supporters
 - Meet with elected politicians
 - Attend political events and forums
 - Encourage women to run for office
 - Encourage young women to volunteer
 - Serve as mentor or role model
 - Join a large women’s group like CFUW

Next Steps: Through the distribution of this report CFUW Orillia is seeking suggestions for future events and actions which can be taken to support women who are interested in seeking a career in politics.