

# GENDER REPRESENTATION AND GOVERNANCE IN NIAGARA

## INTRODUCTION

Women make up the majority of the population in Niagara, yet this is not reflected in the number of women on municipal councils or advisory committees and boards. This disparity matters because the discussions taking place and the policy decisions being made can best help everyone in the community when those at the decision-making table truly reflect the diversity of its population (Hunter, 2019; Brooks, 2018; Status of Women Canada, 2019; Gender Results Framework, 2020).

Our research begins with the supposition that the choices made by a government are in many ways a function of who is making those choices. The absence of women at the decision-making table can lead to a policy “blindness” towards both priorities and outcomes. It can impact Niagara’s choices of actions, investments, and ultimately whose needs are prioritized and whose remain unmet. This policy brief examines one aspect of this issue by documenting the gender composition of Niagara’s municipal government councils, advisory committees and local boards.

We recognize the shortcomings of an analysis that simplifies the dimensions of identity including the binary classification of gender and the importance of other dimensions of identity (also known as intersectionality) among those being race, class, age, sexual orientation, culture, disability, and education. However, our research is meant to be the beginning of a conversation about equity and its role in creating forums where policies can be recommended and implemented that positively impact on vibrant, liveable and sustainable communities. The brief focuses on gender as a starting point.

Much work has been focused on the interdependence of gender and social and economic wellbeing. For example, Nancy Fraser has written extensively on the importance of gender and policy decisions, private division of labour, income distribution, health outcomes and ecological sustainability. Fraser identifies three main dimensions to consider in a gender-based analysis: recognition (the formal legitimization of needs in institutions), redistribution (equity in access to resources and opportunity) and representation (ensuring equity in decision-making). This policy brief takes up Fraser’s thesis and applies it – using a working assumption that representation (ensuring equity in decision-making) can facilitate the two other objectives of recognition and redistribution. Our research focusses on one element of Fraser’s thesis: representation, as applied to the local government level in Niagara, looking at the number of women who are represented in both elected office and on appointed advisory committees and local boards. This analysis is meant to provide a starting point for a discussion on gender representation in Niagara’s official forums of public decision-making.

First, we provide information about the representation of women in Niagara’s local politics, followed by a review of the literature that tries to explain why women are not equally represented in public office and why it is important that their participation increase. We end with some suggestions about how Niagara can attract more women to the political sphere, thereby fostering conditions for a more inclusive community and better decisions and investments.

## THE NUMBERS

In early 2020, the Canadian Municipal Barometer (CMB) project showed that women made up just 31.49 per cent of elected municipal positions in Canada. However, women comprise 50.9 per cent of the population. The Toronto Star followed up on the research and found that just 12 per cent (53 of 441 municipalities with a population of more than 9,000) had councils in which women equalled or outnumbered men. Some 21 per cent of municipalities had a female mayor, and those tended to be in small towns (Ogilvie, 2020).

The Niagara Community Observatory (NCO) did a similar environmental scan of Niagara municipalities in December 2019 but expanded the analysis to include community advisory committees and municipal boards. Council standing committees were not included in the analysis as they are comprised solely of councillors, and therefore are a function of who was elected to council in the first place. The NCO went to each of Niagara's 13 municipal websites to create a database of their respective advisory committees, boards, and listed members. Where municipalities did not have this information posted online, the town clerks were contacted, and the information was provided.<sup>1</sup>

### *What are community advisory committees and municipal boards?*

Community advisory committees are established by town councils on specific areas of interest to provide recommendations and advice to council and staff on matters that relate to its stated purpose. They have no decision-making authority. They are generally comprised of appointed local citizens of varied backgrounds, though they will also include councillors as stipulated by council. These committees serve concurrently with the council term (Ontario, 2018). While they do not have decision-making authority, we feel it is important for this research to acknowledge that they do provide ongoing citizen input and the opportunity for participation in local governance separate and apart from running in an election. That is, advisory committees play a role in guiding local government's actions and decisions. Local boards are also established by the municipality to deliver local services, such as the library. Their responsibilities and relationship to council can vary. While they do not have broad decision-making authority, they can have the ability to make operational decisions within their scope. (Ontario 2018).

<sup>1</sup> We cannot guarantee that this is an exhaustive list. However, we are confident in our findings due to the large sample size. Gender was determined by the first name of the committee member. Where names were gender neutral, we used Internet sources to determine gender. We could not identify the gender of eight committee members.

### Results

According to the 2016 Census, women account for 51.6 per cent of Niagara's population; however, our research found that of the 126 elected positions in Niagara, 27 per cent were held by women. When we looked at the 1,220 advisory committee and local board positions filled, that number jumped to 45.1 per cent. We found that women were more likely to participate in local governance through these community advisory committees and local boards, which also happen to be unpaid, instead of elected positions on council.

## Niagara Snapshot

Total Niagara Region Population:  
**447,890** (2016 Census)



Female Population

**51.6 per cent**



Male Population

**48.4 per cent**

**13**

**Municipal Councils**

**2**

**Female mayors**

Lincoln, Niagara-on-the-Lake

**126**

**Elected council positions  
across Niagara**

**34** Female mayor/councillors  
(27 per cent)

**92** Male mayor/councillors  
(73 per cent)

**TABLE 1: POPULATION**

MUNICIPALITY	POPULATION	FEMALE	%	MALE	%
Niagara Region	447,890	230,970	51.6	216,920	48.4
Fort Erie	133,110	69,620	52.3	63,490	47.7
Grimsby	27,315	14,000	51.3	13,315	48.7
Lincoln	23,790	12,185	51.2	11,600	48.8
Niagara Falls	88,070	45,540	51.7	42,530	48.3
NOTL	17,510	8,940	51	8,575	49
Pelham	17,110	8,725	51	8,385	49
Port Colborne	18,305	9,440	51.6	8,870	48.4
St. Catharines	133,110	69,620	52.3	63,490	47.7
Thorold	18,800	9,420	50.1	9,380	49.9
Wainfleet	6,370	3,130	49.1	3,245	50.9
Welland	52,290	27,010	51.6	25,285	48.4
West Lincoln	14,500	7,210	49.7	7,295	50.3

**TABLE 2: COUNCIL**

MUNICIPALITY	COUNCILLORS	FEMALE	MALE
Niagara Region	20 + 12 mayors	8	24
Fort Erie	7	3	4
Grimsby	9	2	7
Lincoln	9	3	6
Niagara Falls	9	2	7
NOTL	9	3	6
Pelham	7	2	5
Port Colborne	9	2	7
St. Catharines	13	3	10
Thorold	9	2	7
Wainfleet	5	2	3
Welland	13	3	10
West Lincoln	7	1	6

*Note: When calculating proportion of men and women, the mayors are counted only once, under their respective municipalities.*

# Committee Participation

We counted **147** community advisory committees or boards across Niagara. Those committees and boards were comprised of **1,220** members.

Note: there are people who sit on more than one committee and they are counted for each position they hold; we eliminated from these calculations any members whose gender we could not readily identify.

**547** Female committee members  
(45.1 per cent)

**665** Male committee members  
(54.9 per cent)

**8** Undetermined  
(gender-neutral name)

TABLE 3: COMMITTEES AND BOARDS

MUNICIPALITY	COMMITTEES	POSITIONS	FEMALE (%)	MALE (%)
Niagara Region	9	87	30 (34.5)	57 (65.5)
Fort Erie*	19	172	89 (52.4)	81 (47.6)
Grimsby*	7	65	38 (59.4)	26 (40.6)
Lincoln	4	36	14 (38.9)	22 (61.1)
Niagara Falls*	9	92	43 (47.3)	48 (52.7)
NOTL*	18	138	38 (27.7)	99 (72.3)
Pelham	11	77	36 (46.8)	41 (53.2)
Port Colborne	13	95	43 (45.3)	52 (54.7)
St. Catharines*	20	168	82 (49.1)	85 (50.9)
Thorold*	14	116	39 (34.2)	75 (65.8)
Wainfleet	3	22	13 (59.1)	9 (40.9)
Welland	14	109	50 (45.9)	59 (54.1)
West Lincoln	6	43	32 (74.4)	11 (25.6)

\*Numbers were gathered as of December 2019. Municipalities had at least one committee member with gender-neutral name that could not be determined (therefore the sum of men and women will not add up to the total number of positions). In Welland, property standards/dog control were treated as one committee as they had the exact same members, same with adjustment/revision.

From our calculations in Table 3, women were more likely to participate in local governance through town committees and boards. In four municipalities, they filled the majority of committee positions, with West Lincoln leading the way with 32 women sitting on community committees (74.4 per cent of available positions) compared to 11 men (25.6 per cent). Compared to council numbers, only in Niagara-on-the-Lake were there proportionally fewer women on committees and boards than on elected council – 33 per cent of council spots were taken by women, including mayor, while only 27.7 per cent of its committee/board seats were filled by women. This was also noteworthy as NOTL has 18 committees and 138 committee positions to fill, so there were ample opportunities for women to participate.

In which subject areas do women participate? Let's look at Fort Erie as an example – its split between men and women on committees and boards almost mirrors its population count and it also has one of the higher number of committees and boards, therefore the most opportunity for participation.

In Fort Erie, women dominated (held more than two-thirds of the seats) on committees with the following areas of focus: housing, seniors, culture, communities-in-bloom awards, Crystal Beach beautification, Ridgeway BIA. Women held only one seat on each of the following committees: adjustment, gaming, and property standards. Zero women were on the town's transit committee, as of December 2019.

In West Lincoln, with the highest proportion of women participating on committees, it is the library board and age-friendly committee driving those numbers. As of December 2019, there were no men on either committee – all eight library committee members and all 13 age-friendly committee members were women (we understand there are two men who sit as guests in the age-friendly committee).

In NOTL, which had the lowest proportion of women on its many committees, women dominated the communities-in-bloom committee (six of 10 members) and community wellness (six of nine members). There were no women on the municipal accommodation tax committee at the time of our review, only one on the urban design committee, one on transportation and three of 13 spots on the safety committee.

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

**Based on our analysis, we found that:**

- **women are not equitably represented on Niagara's elected councils when compared to their proportion of the population**
- **women are more likely to participate in advisory**

**committees and municipal boards; though overall still not representative of their proportion of the population**

- **women tend to participate in social-policy-related advisory committees and boards**

**This suggests that in Niagara, women do participate in local government but are more likely to do so through appointed committees and boards rather than through elected positions.** Further research in Niagara is needed to understand both why numbers are lower in general and why participation on committees and boards is greater than participation in elected positions.

The next part of this brief provides some highlights from the Canadian and global literature that seeks to answer some of these questions around women's participation as elected officials. We have not found discussion of their role in non-elected positions so this is an area that would benefit from further review. First, we explore the literature regarding some potential explanations behind women's unequal participation in elected office. Second, we examine the literature to ask why women's equal participation matters. Lastly, we draw on our research and the literature to discuss some of the potential relationships between women in governance and social policy.

## WHY DON'T MORE WOMEN RUN FOR OFFICE?

A discussion about gender inequity is incomplete without attention to normative expectations; the literature reveals that unequal representation is facilitated by pragmatic barriers, ideological beliefs and misogyny.

*There is still no equal access to the political agenda, nor is there an equal capacity to raise the political support necessary for gendered issues and interests to be translated into (well-implemented) laws and policies. This is largely explained by the fact that the political representation of women takes place in settings that are not designed to serve that purpose (Celis and Lovenduski, 2018, p. 150).*

Women are underrepresented at all levels of Canadian politics – the Ontario legislature is comprised of 39.5 per cent women MPPs and Canada's parliament is 26 per cent women. Research over the past 20 years has determined there are several barriers that may contribute to this problem: working conditions such as long hours, unpredictable schedules and the toll on work-life balance in which family responsibilities may suffer; costs in both money and time spent on the campaign trail accompanied by the perceived difficulty in fundraising; gender-based media scrutiny and social media harassment; lack of political confidence; and a lack of recruitment efforts (Canada, 2018; Thomas, 2013, 2019; Wagner, 2019; OECD, 2014).

While some of these barriers are not necessarily exclusive to women candidates, research notes that in general it is more likely that women experience a lack of political confidence, particularly in terms of ability to adequately fundraise, deal with media, and navigate the nomination and campaign processes (Thomas, 2013, 2019). Former federal cabinet minister and Conservative Party of Canada interim leader Rona Ambrose mentioned specifically this lack of confidence for women -- as opposed to men who “jump right in” -- as a reason she and Laureen Harper launched CPC’s She Leads initiative to attract more small-c women candidates (Thomas, 2019; Cryderman, 2018).

There have been some initiatives to address these barriers as well as the perception of barriers. “Campaign schools” and leadership programs, run by political parties as well as non-partisan groups, are geared towards attracting more women candidates (Thomas, 2013, 2019). It has also been found that riding associations with women presidents, and ridings with search committees are more likely to recruit women candidates. One other suggestion in the literature is that success breeds success; as more women become successful politicians, other women will become interested in running (OECD, 2014; Thomas, 2019).

*This shows how ethos matters. If women observe how politics remains closed to them, no amount of resources or individual interventions will make them want to participate more in politics (Thomas, 2019).*

If those same barriers exist to a lesser degree at the municipal level, our own numbers do not bear that out. The percentage of Niagara’s local politicians that are women (27 per cent) is consistent with the 26 per cent of women members of federal parliament, and far short of the almost 40 per cent of women that make up Ontario’s provincial parliament. Tolley’s 2011 research found that, in fact, women had greater success at the higher levels of government.

Another barrier discussed in the literature is that women are perceived as less likely to be interested or knowledgeable about politics than men, however that depends on one’s definition of “politics” (Thomas, 2013; Stolle and Gidengil, 2010).

The federal government’s Status of Women Study on Barriers Facing Women in Politics (2019) heard evidence that in national surveys women described themselves as being less interested in politics yet had higher rates of voter turnout. While women were less likely to join a political party or attend a public meeting than men, they were more likely to boycott a product for ethical reasons or join a school group or community association (p. 24). Stolle and Gidengil (2010) claim that while men show

a preponderance for who’s who in politics, women have greater awareness of government services and benefits, particularly in health policy.

Our research on the gender make-up of committees and boards would seem to support the argument that while women may not be represented in the politics of governance, they are still interested in governance. One observation from the data is that they also tend to participate more in arenas of health and social policy.

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Why does equitable representation matter? First, a caveat: Intersectionality tells us that women should not be considered a homogenous group. Because women’s political ideologies vary along a spectrum, the greater participation of women in politics doesn’t necessarily mean entirely “transforming the political agenda” (Miranda, 2005) – as in, having women leaders is no guarantee of a change in policy outcomes. However, global research has found a positive relationship between women’s participation in public life and improvements to general societal equality including addressing poverty, education, health, and family life (World Economic Forum, 2017; OECD, 2014). This same research also finds a correlation between women’s political leadership and wider economic participation.

Canadian research finds decision-making behavior can change depending on the gender composition of the group (Thomas, 2013). Former provincial cabinet minister Mitzi Hunter, who was also the first person of colour to serve as Ontario’s Minister of Education, puts it succinctly:

*Policymakers cannot guarantee the making of well rounded decisions that help everyone if these decisions do not come out of groups just as diverse as the population they have been elected represent ... When marginalized groups hold seats at the decision-making table, different discussions arise. (Hunter, 2019)*

One example she gives is “period poverty”, an issue now addressed by the City of Toronto through its funding of menstrual products at city shelters and priority community centres, in large part due to the efforts of women city councillors. Also, as the first POC to be education minister, Hunter cites the 2017 introduction under her watch of Ontario’s Education Equity Action Plan. “Women bring a different lens to politics and policy,” she concludes.

Writing women out of the messaging of public policy is also a concern. In childcare policy, for example, Goodyear-Grant and Wallace (2019) are concerned that while there is a clear link between affordable childcare and women's income levels, their equality at work and at home; that perspective does not often make it into the policy narrative. Rather, the discussion focuses on affordability for middle-class and working-class families. This narrative has been disrupted, however, by the pandemic as the discussion has shifted to the economic importance of getting women back to work and how domestic labour (childcare, elder care, and household chores) serve as barriers.

## WOMEN AND SOCIAL POLICY

Our findings show that women in Niagara appear more likely to participate on committees and boards geared towards social issues such as seniors, health, housing, and culture. We cannot say conclusively why this happens, although as previously indicated, research has shown women generally have greater political knowledge in terms of government services and benefits, particularly in health policy, and are more likely than men to participate in community groups.

Global research supports the notion that women's participation in politics leads to more focus on social outcomes. More women in cabinet, at a global level, has a positive impact on health spending. The greater the share of women parliamentarians, at a global level, the greater the impact on poverty reduction. Women are "more likely to advocate for changes that promote the interests of women, children and families and support public welfare in areas such as health care and education," (OECD, 2014, p. 26).

## NEXT STEPS

While women in Niagara are more likely to participate in governance through appointed advisory committees and local boards, as opposed to elected office, their numbers still fall short when compared to their share of the population. While there has been much research, both globally and in Canada, delving into the electoral problem of representation and how to fix it, we have not been able to find studies that look at overall participation in government which would include community advisory committees and local boards.

Our brief has summarized some of the barriers to participation in elected positions that have been noted in the literature: long hours, financial costs, difficulty navigating the system, discomfort with media scrutiny and misogynistic social media attacks, among others. We can assume that not all of these barriers exist when it

comes to participation at the committee or board level, and that leads to a greater number of women.

**The question then for future research would be: what factors account for the lower representation of women in forums of governance in local/regional municipalities in general, and Niagara in particular?**

The good news is that there are steps that can be taken – and that have already begun – to improve the numbers.

When it comes to attracting more women to run for office, the "Seat at the Table" initiative run through the City of St. Catharines and the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce is a prime example of the training and capacity-building suggested in much of the literature (European Partnership for Democracy, 2019; Thomas, 2019; OECD, 2014). This six-month women's mentorship program which ended in June includes partnering successful applicants with women city councillors, monthly workshops, and overall an up-front view of how local government works. It is funded through a Women and Gender Equality Canada grant offered through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities with a goal of attracting women – especially those in under-represented communities – to politics.

We recommend that local stakeholders review this initiative once its initial run is complete, not only to see its strengths and challenges, but also as a means of expanding it across Niagara.

The Niagara Region's 2019 decision to join the Canadian Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities (CIM), as well as its creation of a Women's Committee, is a positive step towards shining a light on how more women can be brought into the political process, and therefore make decision-making more inclusive at least from a gender perspective. CIM is a regional coalition under UNESCO's International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities. It recognizes the role of cities in addressing social issues through equity and inclusion. Niagara Region's pre-COVID-19 plan was to hire a person to begin identifying needs, resources, and areas of focus. This has been put on hold, but we hope that our policy brief can provide an initial snapshot of representation – a starting point — for the Region and its Women's Committee on the participation of women in the local political sphere. In the meantime, we recommend the Region undertake a gender-based-plus analysis in all its policy recommendations. As well, Council should revisit efforts to create a citizen committee to address questions of citizen engagement and the attraction of diversified election candidates.

There are some very basic logistical reasons deterring women from participation: in particular the long hours required, often after traditional business hours when children are not in school and childcare centres are closed. Even at the committee level, these meetings are generally held in the evenings when children are home, and research continues to show that women bear the greater responsibility of care and household responsibilities. While we recognize that scheduling conflicts are challenging, we suggest that local governments find creative ways to engage women. Perhaps once a committee has been appointed, members can be consulted as to the best days and times, and then go a step further and be willing to switch up days and times as necessary (as “every third Tuesday of the month” may not be doable if that night is already booked with family responsibilities). In recent months, people have grown more comfortable with online meetings and a hybrid version – those who cannot make it in-person but can electronically – might work. We make this suggestion as a means of beginning a discussion on how to mitigate this particular barrier.

We recommend that all advisory committees and local boards across Niagara should strive for gender equity. Our analysis of committee/board participation shows that there are many instances where either women or men are notably underrepresented. As advisory committees and local boards are appointed, this should be the first place where municipalities introduce gender-equity policies – identify the committees where one gender dominates and take decisive action to recruit equitably. Gender quota systems have been used in many countries, either as candidate quotas or seat quotas (OECD, 2014, p. 36-47) for elections. The literature shows that when governing

bodies make this formal commitment to gender equity, they have better outcomes for civic engagement in politics (OECD, 2014; Okome, 2015). As such, it is important to note the role of civic groups, such as Niagara Women in Politics, in proactive recruitment of women to run in municipal elections. These groups encourage qualified women to run for office but must also ensure that female candidates are supported through connections to adequate financing and mentor support to help navigate the system, including media training. We suggest that equity initiatives should also look at recruiting people from other underrepresented communities.

Finally, we recommend that all councillors and members on advisory committees and local boards take the free Gender-Based Analysis Plus online course provided by the Status of Women Canada. It is a foundational exercise for leaders that examines the relevance of intersectionality, specifically the impact of personal bias and perspective, in decision-making.

Keeping in mind our opening premise that gender representation impacts policy decision-making, the gender composition of Niagara’s governing bodies at the electoral level, appointed advisory committees and local boards, demonstrates that there’s room for improvement. The recommendations in this policy brief draw on potential remedies found in the literature, which tells us that the more women participate in local government, the more other women are attracted to also participate. Our goal for this brief has been to lay out the empirical data on local representation, discuss the challenges and the possible remedies to move Niagara the next step forward.



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The Niagara Community Observatory is a public-policy think-tank working in partnership with the Niagara community to foster, produce and disseminate research on current and emerging issues. An electronic copy of this policy brief can be found on our website at [www.brocku.ca/nco](http://www.brocku.ca/nco)

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