

Policy Briefing Note: Childcare Expense Policy for City Councillors in Northwestern British Columbia¹

Spring, 2022

Introduction

The lack of childcare expense policies available to many city councillors acts as a significant barrier to women's political participation within municipal institutions. This policy briefing note explores this issue, before offering examples of policies that municipalities have adopted to mitigate this barrier and improve levels of diverse representation.²

Women continue to be underrepresented at all levels of Canadian government and face a variety of systemic barriers to their meaningful participation. This issue is especially prevalent at the municipal level, where women occupy just 28% of councillors' seats and 18% of mayoral positions.ⁱ Within First Nations band councils, women account for 27% of councillors and 19% Chief positions.ⁱⁱ Increasing levels of women's representation on these stages is incredibly important to ensuring the democratic legitimacy of local and Nation governments, and is beneficial to all constituents and policy makers.ⁱⁱⁱ When women do run for elected office, they not only find success, but often outperform their male counterparts. This is especially true at the municipal level, where women were on average six percent more likely to be elected than men when they made the decision to run.^{iv} To increase women's representation within municipal governments, these institutions need to focus on reducing systemic barriers to women's meaningful participation.

The Nature of Childcare Expense Policies

One barrier to women's participation identified by organizations and scholars is the lack of childcare expense coverage provided to city councillors to support them in carrying out their official duties.^v This policy gap means that in order to attend to their duties, these individuals are forced to either pay out of pocket, or lose the opportunity to participate in a variety of council processes.^{vi} As most primary caregivers of children identify as women, this is an issue that disproportionately impacts women and their ability to participate in local politics.^{vii} Furthermore, this issue has a disproportionate impact on several equity-deserving groups within this demographic, such as newcomers, low-income individuals, and those making up lone parent households.^{viii} As such, municipalities that wish to decrease barriers to diverse

¹ Research conducted by Jon Klaassen (MA Student, University of Guelph) in collaboration with Councillor Lani Gibson (District of Kitimat), Councillor Casda Thomas (Town of Smithers), and Dr. Leah Levac (Associate Professor, University of Guelph).

² A limitation of this report is that large portions of the referenced data reinforce gender binary classifications and/or fail to properly account for the perspectives of non-binary individuals. While non-binary folks may face similar challenges, future research and resulting policy developments should pay increased attention to their experiences so that unique barriers they face can be addressed through meaningful policy responses.

women's participation and representation should investigate how they can go about covering childcare-related expenses through the development of an adequate childcare policy.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) and Canadian Commission for UNESCO both consider the development of childcare policies for city councillors to be an important step towards achieving increased levels of women's participation in local government. According to these organizations, childcare policies should be accessible, provide adequate levels of monetary support, and be developed based on careful consideration of women's lived experiences and the multi-leveled nature of the barriers that they face.^{ix} Policies like the ones proposed here can help to advance the use of a Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) framework in municipal institutions, which can, in turn, increase levels of women's meaningful participation and representation in municipal politics. GBA+ allows for an evaluation of systemic barriers to political participation faced by diverse populations, in addition to the acknowledgement and integration of their perspectives into policy making processes.^x More equitable municipal institutions can be achieved through initiatives such as forming women's advisory committees, conducting active outreach to demographics that have historically been under-represented within municipal institutions, facilitating mandatory GBA+ training for city councillors and staff, and collecting disaggregated data to measure the impacts of these initiatives.^{xi}

Model Policies

An example of a municipality that covers childcare expenses for elected officials while they carry out their official duties is St. Albert, Alberta. In 2021, the City Council of St. Albert revised their "City Council Remuneration and Expense Reimbursement" policy to allow council members to "claim for reasonable out-of-pocket child care expenses that support attendance at Council and Committee meetings".^{xii} Developed in close collaboration with women city councillors and members of the community, this policy serves as an example of how to meaningfully integrate the perspectives of women into municipal policy development, while simultaneously reducing barriers to their participation.

Another example of a municipality that has adopted a comprehensive childcare expense policy is Canmore, Alberta. Serving a population of just over 14,000 people, the municipality of Canmore provides all councillors with reimbursement of up to \$2,000 a year for "reasonable child or family care expenses" that were incurred as result of performing the duties of a councillor, and/or representing the council at an external event. As well as providing clearer direction and guidelines in comparison to the policy from St. Albert, this legislation alludes to further avenues for eliminating barriers to participation with their distinction of "child or family care".^{xiii} As understandings of family and the role of caregivers differ greatly across different cultures, this broad conceptualization and inclusion of "family care" has the potential to reduce barriers to political participation for women across ethnic and cultural lines.^{xiv}

An equally promising development can be seen in the municipality of Sarnia, Ontario, and its council's consideration of a "caregiver" policy. This policy was first proposed by a member of the community who did not feel as if the composition of the city council accurately represented Sarnia. They wished to see greater levels of equity when it came to opportunities for civic engagement. Under this policy, city councillors would be reimbursed for any fees associated with the provision of childcare that was required for them to fulfill their official duties. This would result in the elimination of this important barrier to participation and would allow for the increased participation of women in the municipal political process. Notably, the framework this proposal was based on also discussed the reimbursement of any fees associated with the provision of care for a family member living with a disability. Although representing a separate issue, this prospect offers even more opportunity to reduce barriers to participation and promote diversity within local government.^{xv} Finally, the municipalities of Banff^{xvi} and Okotoks,^{xvii} Alberta have developed similar guidelines for reimbursing the childcare expenses of city councillors under certain circumstances. Municipalities are making small but important moves towards creating more inclusive structures. Childcare expense policies are an important part of these efforts.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Federation of Canadian Municipalities, *Diverse Voices: Tools and Practices to Support all Women*, (2018): 6-7.
- ⁱⁱ Statistics Canada, “Gender Results Framework: Data table on the representation of men and women in First Nations band councils and Chiefs in First Nations communities in Canada, 2019,” *Government of Canada*, (2021).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Elizabeth Haggart & Kristel vom Scheidt, “Untapped resources: women and municipal government in Nova Scotia,” Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities, (2013); James Bohman, “Deliberative Democracy and the Epistemic Benefits of Diversity,” *Episteme* 3, no. 3 (2006): 179-183.
- ^{iv} Lucas et al., Women’s Municipal Electoral Performance: An Introduction to the Canadian Municipal Elections Database, *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 54, (2021): 131-132; Semra Sevi, Vincent Arel-Bundock, & André Blais, “Do Women Get Fewer Votes? No.” *Canadian journal of political science* 52, no. 1 (2019): 201–210.
- ^v Meghan Brooks, “The Role of Municipalities in Advancing Women’s Equity in Canada,” *Canadian Commission for UNESCO*, (2018): 18; FCM, *Diverse Voices*, (2018): 11; Tanis Crosby, “The Participation of Women in Municipal Politics,” *Canadian Issues*, (2005): 32-33.
- ^{vi} Meghan Brooks, “The Role of Municipalities in Advancing Women’s Equity in Canada,” *Canadian Commission for UNESCO*, (2018): 12-13, 18; City for All Women Initiative, *Advancing Equity and Inclusion: A Guide for Municipalities*, (2015): 63-70.
- ^{vii} Statistics Canada, “Portrait of children’s family life in Canada in 2016,” *Government of Canada*, (2017).
- ^{viii} Yiyang Li, “CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING AMONG FEMALE IMMIGRANTS IN CANADA,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 52, no. 1 (2020): 51, 65; FCM, *Diverse Voices*, (2018): 8-11; Allison Harell, “Intersectionality and Gendered Political Behaviour in a Multicultural Canada,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 2 (2017): 499, 505-506.
- ^{ix} Meghan Brooks, “The Role of Municipalities in Advancing Women’s Equity in Canada,” *Canadian Commission for UNESCO*, (2018): 11-13, 19; FCM, *Diverse Voices*, (2018): 8, 13, 33.
- ^x Government of Canada, *Gender-based analysis plus (GBA+)*, (2020).
- ^{xi} Halena Seiferling & Rebecca Bateman, “FINAL REPORT: ‘Action on systemic barriers to women’s participation in local government’,” *Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women* (2020): 100-103.
- ^{xii} City of St. Albert, *City Council Remuneration and Expense Reimbursement*, C- CC-03 (2021).
- ^{xiii} Town of Canmore, *Council Remuneration Policy*, 7.4 (2018).
- ^{xiv} James Georgas, “Family: Variations and Changes Across Cultures,” *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 6, no. 3 (2003): 5-9.
- ^{xv} City of Sarnia, *Sarnia City Council, Delegations: Robert Dickieson - Caregiver Policy*, (2022).
- ^{xvi} Town of Banff, *Policy: Council Remuneration*, C1005-01, 11.5 (2021).
- ^{xvii} Town of Okotoks, *Council Compensation and Expense Reimbursement*, GP-C-2.2 (2022).

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