

# Policy Briefing Note: Maternity and Parental Leave Policy for City Councillors in Northwestern British Columbia<sup>1</sup>

Spring, 2022

## Introduction

The lack of maternity and parental leave policies available to many city councillors acts as a significant barrier to women's political participation within municipal institutions. This briefing note explores the nature of this issue, before offering examples of policies that municipalities have adopted to mitigate this barrier and improve levels of diverse representation.<sup>2</sup>

Women remain underrepresented at all levels of Canadian and First Nations government. Despite making up over 50% of the population, as of 2021, women fill just 30% of the seats in the house of commons, while representing 35% of provincial parliament seats and 15% of provincial and territorial first ministers.<sup>i</sup> Within First Nations band councils, women account for 27% of councillors and 19% Chief positions.<sup>ii</sup> In Canadian municipalities, women occupy only 28% of councillors' seats and 18% of mayoral positions.<sup>iii</sup> Increasing women's representation in government is crucial to ensuring the democratic legitimacy of public institutions, providing access to new ideas, and representing the wishes of a populace which overwhelmingly supports the idea of increased diversity within Canadian government.<sup>iv</sup>

Statistics gathered from the Canadian Municipal Elections Database show that when women compete in municipal elections, they are on average six percent more likely to be elected than men.<sup>v</sup> This finding is supported by a wide body of scholarship which highlights the disconnect between the support women receive from the electorate, and the lack of support that is provided by municipalities themselves.<sup>vi</sup> To attract and retain higher numbers of candidates who identify as women, municipalities must work to minimize institutional barriers to women's participation in the political process.

## Nature of Maternity and Parental Leave Policies

A substantial barrier to women's participation in municipal politics, identified through many studies and consultations, is the lack of maternity and parental leave available to many city councillors across the country. Many Canadian municipalities, including most throughout British Columbia, do not provide any form of standardized parental leave to members of their

---

<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> 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.

city councils. Instead, repeated absences from council proceedings can result in reprimand or dismissal, with exceptions being granted only on an ad hoc basis. This gap in policy leads to the exclusion of a large group of individuals who may be serving as the primary caregiver of a young child, a group that is disproportionately made up of women.<sup>vii</sup> It can also lead to sitting councillors who are women deciding to transition away from politics, a factor which hurts further efforts to increase diverse participation in local government.<sup>viii</sup>

In their recommendations designed to increase women's participation in local politics, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) highlights the development of adequate maternity and parental leave policies for city councillors as an important step towards achieving this goal. This position is echoed in similar reports produced by the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities, the City for All Women Initiative, and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO. In their recommendations, these reports call for the development of maternity and parental leave policies in cooperation with women so that the policies better reflect women's lived realities. This includes making sure that these policies are inclusive, and do not act as an additional barrier to participation and/or source of stigma.<sup>ix</sup>

While mandates in provinces such as Ontario<sup>x</sup> and Nova Scotia<sup>xi</sup> have already led to the province-wide adoption of parental leave policies within municipalities, the government of British Columbia has yet to institute such a requirement by amendment of the *Community Charter*. However, this has not stopped city councils throughout the province from developing and passing their own legislation with the hopes of creating more equitable and inclusive spaces for political participation. In addition to the maternity and parental leave policy that has long been accessible to members of Vancouver's city council, there are several policies from smaller municipalities that can serve as valuable templates for local governments throughout northwestern British Columbia.

## Model Policies

The first policy worthy of attention is the Council Maternity and Parental Leave policy adopted by the District of Squamish in 2019. Providing councillors with up to six months of paid parental/maternity leave, this policy applies to any individual who is pregnant, giving birth, or adopting a child. It also extends to any co-parents or partners who may be involved in the process, regardless of their family status or gender. Importantly, this policy places no restrictions on the professional capacity of councillors who engage it, allowing them to continue to participate in council affairs at any time throughout their period of leave. This ensures that taking a maternity/parental leave does not constitute a barrier to participation in and of itself, a concern that has been noted regarding previous applications of similar policies.<sup>xii</sup> This policy also makes sure to set clear guidelines regarding the rights of councillors who take a leave to retain any relevant appointments and/or designations upon their return. This ensures that parents who choose to use this policy do not lose their ability to act as sources of influence within municipal political institutions.<sup>xiii</sup>

The second initiative to draw attention to is the Council Maternity and Parental Leave policy enacted by the District of North Saanich in 2021. This policy explicitly highlights the gap in the current *Community Charter*, noting that it does not contemplate a situation where councillors would need to take a leave for parental reasons. It provides individuals with four months of paid leave, which can be taken by any councillor who “[becomes] a natural or adoptive parent; or a person who is in a relationship of some permanence with the natural or adoptive parent of the child and intends to treat the child as their own”.<sup>xiv</sup> Following this initial period of paid leave, councillors can take an additional 61 weeks of unpaid leave within a designated time frame following the birth/adoption of their child. This policy provides similar protections and guarantees to the one enacted by the District of Squamish, as it allows for councillors to continue exercising all rights and privileges of the office, as well as preserving all active memberships and appointments.<sup>xv</sup>

In addition to these examples, there are parental leave policies in development in several additional British Columbia municipalities such as Kamloops and New Westminster.<sup>xvi</sup> This illustrates the growing enthusiasm for the development of these policies across the province, and the need for more local governments to follow suit in the pursuit of eliminating barriers to women’s participation. Municipalities are making small but important moves towards creating more inclusive structures. Maternity and parental leave policies are an important part of these efforts.

## Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> Library of Parliament, *Women in the Parliament of Canada: 100 Years of Representation*, *Parliament of Canada*, (2021, December 1); Caroline Andrew et al., *Electing a diverse Canada: the representation of immigrants, minorities, and women* (UBC Press: 2008).
- <sup>ii</sup> 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).
- <sup>iii</sup> Federation of Canadian Municipalities, *Diverse Voices: Tools and Practices to Support all Women*, (2018): 6-7.
- <sup>iv</sup> 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.
- <sup>v</sup> 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.
- <sup>vi</sup> Semra Sevi, Vincent Arel-Bundock & André Blais, “Do Women Get Fewer Votes? No.” *Canadian journal of political science* 52, no. 1 (2019): 201–210; FCM, *Diverse Tools*, (2018): 7-10; J. H. Black & L. Erickson, “Women candidates and voter bias: do women politicians need to be better?” *Electoral Studies* 22, no. 1 (2003): 94-96.
- <sup>vii</sup> Statistics Canada, “Portrait of children’s family life in Canada in 2016,” *Government of Canada*, (2017).
- <sup>viii</sup> Federation of Canadian Municipalities, *Run, Win and Lead: Towards Parity in Canadian Municipal Politics*, (2021): 8-13; Meghan Brooks, “The Role of Municipalities in Advancing Women’s Equity in Canada,” *Canadian Commission for UNESCO*, (2018): 15-16.
- <sup>ix</sup> FCM, *Diverse Tools*, (2018): 8-13; Meghan Brooks, “The Role of Municipalities in Advancing Women’s Equity in Canada,” *Canadian Commission for UNESCO*, (2018): 12; City for All Women Initiative, *Advancing Equity and Inclusion: A Guide for Municipalities*, (2015); Elizabeth Haggart & Kristel vom Scheidt, “Untapped resources: women and municipal government in Nova Scotia,” *Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities*, (2013); Iñaki Garcia-Blanco & Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, “The Discursive Construction of Women Politicians in the European Press,” *Feminist Media Studies* 12, no. 3 (2011): 433-434.
- <sup>x</sup> Government of Ontario, *Municipal Act, 2001*, c. 25, 270.1 (2022).
- <sup>xi</sup> Government of Nova Scotia, Bill No. 60, *Municipal Government Act (amended)*, c. 18, 16A (2017).
- <sup>xii</sup> Sarah Duffy, Patrick van Esch, and Murooj Yousef. “Increasing Parental Leave Uptake: A Systems Social Marketing Approach.” *Australasian marketing journal* 28, no. 2 (2020): 110–118; Iñaki Garcia-Blanco & Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, “The Discursive Construction of Women Politicians in the European Press,” *Feminist Media Studies* 12, no. 3 (2011): 433-434
- <sup>xiii</sup> District of Squamish, *Council Maternity and Parental Leave Policy*, (2019).
- <sup>xiv</sup> District of North Saanich, *COUNCIL MATERNITY & PARENTAL LEAVE*, (2021): 1.
- <sup>xv</sup> District of North Saanich, *COUNCIL MATERNITY & PARENTAL LEAVE*, (2021): 2-3.

<sup>xvi</sup> Theresa McManus, New West to consider maternity and parental leave for council members, *New Westminster Record*, (2022, February 1).

## References

- Andrew, Biles, J., Siemiatycki, M., & Tolley, E. (2008). *Electing a diverse Canada: The representation of immigrants, minorities, and women*. UBC Press.
- Black, & Erickson, L. (2003). Women candidates and voter bias: Do women politicians need to be better? *Electoral Studies*, 22(1), 81–100. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-3794\(01\)00028-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-3794(01)00028-2)
- Bohman. (2006). Deliberative Democracy and the Epistemic Benefits of Diversity. *Episteme*, 3(3), 175–191. <https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2006.3.3.175>
- Brooks, M. (2018). The Role of Municipalities in Advancing Women’s Equity in Canada. *Canadian Commission for UNESCO*.
- City for All Women Initiative. (2015). *Advancing Equity and Inclusion: A Guide for Municipalities*. [https://www.cawi-ivtf.org/sites/default/files/publications/advancing-equity-inclusion-web\\_0.pdf](https://www.cawi-ivtf.org/sites/default/files/publications/advancing-equity-inclusion-web_0.pdf)
- District of North Saanich. (2021). *COUNCIL MATERNITY & PARENTAL LEAVE*. <https://www.rdos.bc.ca/assets/BOARD/Board-Correspondence/2021/12Dec/20211217parental-leave.pdf?>
- District of Squamish. (2019). *Council Maternity and Parental Leave Policy*. <https://squamish.civicweb.net/filepro/documents/88525?preview=171519>
- Duffy, van Esch, P., & Yousef, M. (2020). Increasing parental leave uptake: A systems social marketing approach. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 28(2), 110–118. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ausmj.2020.01.007>
- Federation of Canadian Municipalities. (2021). *Run, Win and Lead: Towards Parity in Canadian Municipal Politics*. <https://data.fcm.ca/documents/tools/wilg/run-win-and-lead-toward-parity-in-municipal-politics-wilg.pdf>
- Federation of Canadian Municipalities. (2018). *Diverse Voices: Tools and Practices to Support all Women*. <https://fcm.ca/sites/default/files/documents/resources/tool/diverse-voices-tools-and-practices-wilg.pdf>
- Garcia-Blanco, & Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2012). The Discursive Construction of Women Politicians in the European Press. *Feminist Media Studies*, 12(3), 422–441. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2011.615636>
- Government of Nova Scotia. (2017). *Bill No. 60, Municipal Government Act (amended)*. c. 18, 16A. [https://nslegislature.ca/legc/bills/63rd\\_1st/1st\\_read/b060.htm](https://nslegislature.ca/legc/bills/63rd_1st/1st_read/b060.htm)
- Government of Ontario. (2022). *Municipal Act, 2001*. C. 25, 270 (1). <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/01m25>
- Haggart, & Vom Scheidt, K. (2013). *Untapped resources women and municipal government in Nova Scotia : final report of the women in local government project*. Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities.
- Library of Parliament. (2021, December 1). Women in the Parliament of Canada: 100 Years of Representation. *Parliament of Canada*. Retrieved from <https://hillnotes.ca/2021/12/01>
- Lucas, Merrill, R., Blidook, K., Breux, S., Conrad, L., Eidelman, G., Koop, R., Marciano, D., Taylor, Z., & Vallette, S. (2021). Women’s Municipal Electoral Performance: An Introduction to the Canadian Municipal Elections Database. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 54(1), 125–133. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000842392000102X>
- McManus, T. (2022, February 1). New West to consider maternity and parental leave for council members. *New Westminster Record*. Retrieved from <https://www.newwestrecord.ca/local-news/>

Sevi, Arel-Bundock, V., & Blais, A. (2019). Do Women Get Fewer Votes? No. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 52(1), 201–210.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423918000495>

Statistics Canada. (2021). 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*, Catalogue no. 11-001-X.

Statistics Canada. (2017). Portrait of children's family life in Canada in 2016. *Government of Canada*, Catalogue no. 98-200-X.