

OPERATION BLACK **VOTE**
CANADA

“SEAT AT THE TABLE”



**A CAMPAIGN
TOOLKIT**

**TO SUPPORT
BLACK WOMEN IN
MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS**

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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FEDERATION
OF CANADIAN
MUNICIPALITIES

FÉDÉRATION
CANADIENNE DES
MUNICIPALITÉS

The first time I ran for Cornwall City Council, I met regularly with other women candidates. We sat together in coffee shops to share ideas and compare challenges. Our need for connection and support was bigger than our drive to compete with each other for one of the 10 council seats. We had very different politics, but we were united as minority voices.

When I ran for mayor 12 years later, I surrounded myself with people who shared my vision. I'll forever be grateful that the border town of Cornwall, Ontario, population 48,000, elected me as the first Black woman mayor in Ontario.

I encourage other Black and racialized women to run for office because we need them in these spaces. We need you. If you're reading this toolkit, it's because someone asked you to run. Or you see a need in your community, and you want to help. Or because there's a policy issue that needs your perspective. No matter what brought you here, please know that the road ahead may be difficult, but there are people who will support you every step of the way. This toolkit will help, too.

Within these pages, you'll find helpful advice from the talented folks at Operation Black Vote Canada. I would have benefitted from guidance like this: on managing online harassment, on emotional labour, on tokenism, and so many other things.

Once elected, you'll learn every day. Municipal office is such a good place to build networks and develop expertise in everything from budget management, climate change infrastructure planning, project management, addressing poverty, and building relationships with Indigenous peoples. Running for office can amplify your career – and inspire others. I'll never forget when Jersee, a young black girl living in Cornwall, told me that one day she would run for mayor. That moment meant everything to me.

FOREWORD



Truth be told, nothing about my time in office went as planned: much of my time as mayor was spent managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, before my term was up, I was appointed to the Senate of Canada. Such an incredible honour, but I do miss being the mayor of Cornwall. I miss talking to people about municipal services that impact them daily. I miss building consensus among my council colleagues.

What I've found, though, since my appointment in 2021, is that I have a new platform to reach people like you, in communities across the country. And I've learned that more often than not, women need to be asked to run for office. So, just in case no one has asked you yet:

Your community needs you. Will you run?

Merci, thank you, nia:wen,
The Honourable Bernadette Clement
Senator (Ontario)

SECTION 1.

Current context of **Black women** in campaigns and elected **leadership**

A message from Laura Mae Lindo Member of Provincial Parliament for Kitchener Centre

Know your worth

For many Black women, the experience of being the only Black person in the room when decisions are being made is nothing new. But we don't always reflect on what being in the room sounds, feels, and looks like.

Sometimes it sounds like silence as our suggestions fall flat. In those moments you may wonder if anyone understands what you are trying to say, and you may choose to stay silent next time comments are solicited from those in the room.

Know your worth

Other times it feels like frustration when we hear the same words we just shared being said by another person in the room (often male, often white). In those moments we may wonder why our colleagues could hear our idea shared from someone else's lips, but not from our own. We may once again choose to stay silent, holding important ideas back in order to avoid the anger and rage that comes with feeling ignored. Sometimes we even choose to remain silent because we never want to become that "angry Black woman" stereotype that follows us from room to room, and from meeting to meeting.

Know your worth

And still other times it looks like averted eyes, as people around us try to avoid eye contact as we raise important issues and experiences impacting our communities that they are simply not ready or willing to address – things like racism, homophobia, or ableism come to mind. In those moments you may wonder why you are in that room. You may question why your community entrusted you to be their voice, and you may wonder if it's best to ride it out quietly, making yourself smaller and smaller as the days go by.

That's why I offer you three little words to help guide your journey into politics at any level

Know your worth

Hold onto the words and wisdom of Dr. Maya Angelou who reminds us, "Still I rise." Despite the hardest moments on this journey, in the face of the silence, the frustration, or aversion of your gaze, know your worth and continue to rise. Rise for your community. Rise for your family. Rise for yourself. Because you have every right to be at that table. Hold onto the words and wisdom of Rosemary Brown who reminds us, "Until all of us have made it, none of us have made it." Remember that this journey will be filled with uncertainty and it will challenge your leadership in ways that can make you stronger. Keep yourself focused on ensuring that we all make it – no matter our race, ethnicity, spirituality or religious foundation, no matter our abilities or our income levels. We all deserve to be safe, secure, and surrounded by love.

And hold onto my words as I tell you, "Know your worth." Because you can become the leader upon whose shoulders you stand. And because they did the work, we will get there from here.

CURRENT CONTEXT OF BLACK WOMEN IN CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTED LEADERSHIP

By, **Erin Tolley**

Canada Research Chair in Gender, Race and Inclusive Politics Carleton University

In 1974, Calgary's Virnetta Anderson became the first Black woman elected to a municipal council in Canada. Ten years later, Daurene Lewis was elected mayor of Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, becoming the first Black Canadian woman to take up that role. They blazed trails for Montreal's Kettly Beauregard, Fort Saskatchewan's Ajibola Abitoye, and many other Black Canadian women who have made their mark on municipal politics in Canada.

Research that looks specifically at the municipal level is sparse and research examining Black women's experiences is sparser still, but evidence from other levels of government suggests that politics is anything but a race-neutral venue. Political institutions were designed by and for propertied white men, and although formal restrictions to political participation have largely been removed, research confirms political outcomes are racially differentiated. Whether we look at political donations, media coverage, or candidate nomination, there is ample evidence that the political experiences of racialized Canadians are different than those of their white counterparts (Besco and Tolley 2022; Bird 2016 Tolley 2016, 2019a, 2019b, 2022; Tolley, Besco, et al. 2022).

Even so, local politics is often viewed as an entry point to other electoral offices, with many viewing this level of government as the most accessible to women and racially marginalized candidates. However, this conventional wisdom does not hold when set against the longstanding lack of racial and gender diversity in municipal politics; the road to electoral success is a long one, even at this level of government (Andrew et al. 2008; Davidson et al. 2020; Tolley 2011). Although local politics is smaller in scale and often closer to home, many of the barriers that plague prospective candidates in federal and provincial elections persist at the municipal level, including raising funds, recruiting and organizing volunteers, and putting one's professional and personal aspirations on hold to pursue an elected political position.

Compounding these difficulties is the fact that Black women remain an exception in politics. This leaves prospective candidates with comparatively few examples of how to navigate institutions that were not designed for them. The relative absence of Black women politicians means there are fewer visible role models available to them. The role model gap means that the networks that typically serve as a pipeline to political office may be less accessible to Black women (Dowe 2020). Since many Black women come to electoral politics through community activism and civic engagement rather than through formal political structures, they may also may have fewer opportunities for traditional political mentorship (Dowe 2020 Ford Dowe 2022; Scott et al. 2021). When they do run for office and win, Black women's experiences often highlight how hostile political spaces continue to be. This hostility – both overt and more covert – can be found at the doorstep, in media coverage, and among one's colleagues (Caesar-Chavannes 2021; Tolley, Bosley, et al. 2022). Incivility is now almost a routine part of politics, and while few politicians escape it entirely, a recent study of online toxicity found its intensity and impact are both raced and gendered, with Black and racialized women particularly susceptible to attacks on their identities (Samara Canada 2022).

When Black women run for office, they do so intersectionally, challenging not just a masculinized political culture, but also one that has privileged whiteness (Reingold et al. 2021 Tolley, Lawlor, et al. 2022). Moya Bailey, a professor of communication studies, uses the term “misogynoir” to capture the specific misogyny endured by Black women (Bailey and Trudy 2018)

Candidate toolkits and training programs aimed specifically at Black women are crucial because they are tailored to the nuances of their unique context and experiences (Sanbonmatsu 2015). Such resources can help set a path for electoral success. Candidate training and recruitment programs also help Black women envision politics as a viable option, something they may not have otherwise considered given that networks in formal electoral politics remain predominantly white and male (Cheng and Tavits 2011; Cross and Pruyers 2019; Tolley 2019b).

The election of Black women to politics offers a corrective, not just to the demographic imbalance in Canada’s elected institutions, but also to our vision of what a politician should

look like and who can become one. At the unveiling of her portrait in the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, former First Lady Michelle Obama noted “I’m also thinking about all of the young people – particularly girls and girls of color – who in years ahead will come to this place and they will look up and they will see an image of someone who looks like them hanging on the wall of this great American institution. And I know the kind of impact that will have on their lives because I was one of those girls” (Curry 2018).

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SECTION 2

Challenges on the Campaign Trail



Content Warning: Some of the barriers discussed below include mentions of physical and sexual violence.

LACK OF RESOURCES AND MISOGYNOIR IN FUNDRAISING

FUNDRAISING AND CAPITAL

A colossal barrier to successful campaigning identified by both Black women who campaign and researchers who examine their experiences is limited resources and campaign funding. A report published in 2020 by Open Secrets examining the role that money plays in American elections, particularly as it relates to gender and racial diversity,

revealed that Black women experience challenges with early donors, educators, retirees, and large individual donors generally.¹ Other reports show that while overall fundraising for Black women candidates has increased over the past couple of years, relative to other candidates and compared to white women in particular, Black women raise significantly less money than their counterparts. While more race-based fundraising data is available in the United States, parallels to this reality can be drawn in the Canadian context.² For example, a study conducted by CBC examining the success of white male candidates in Canada across all parties revealed that white men (both incumbents and new candidates) receive 10 percent more funding from their parties and riding associations than other candidates overall. On average, white men candidates received \$68,001 campaign funds, while other candidates received \$61,724 for their campaigns in Canada (Ouellet, Shiab and Gilchrist, 2021).

Total fundraising for political campaigns across all American elections in 2018 in the first three quarters³

- \$81 million was raised by 113 Black women running as election candidates
 - Average per candidate: \$716,814
- \$811 million was raised by 379 white women running as election candidates
 - Average per candidate: \$2,139,842
- \$1.5 billion was raised by 1,000 white men running as election candidates
 - Average per candidate: \$1,500,000

Misogynoir - a term coined by Black feminist Moya Bailey in 2010 to reference the compounded misogyny and anti-Blackness directed towards Black women - clearly permeates across fields. Donors are hesitant to invest in Black women. Still, it is important to look closely at the unique impacts of this kind of inequity in the campaigns and politics because money is key in determining who occupies law-making and policy-shaping spaces. Given that many Black women candidates are highly competent potential representatives, this challenge is clearly a systemic one, and impacts candidates and their constituents. Identity matters in leadership.

While tackling challenges to a successful election, it is important to keep in mind that funding for Black women's campaigns has been trending upwards. Further, more Black women are seeking office across government levels in Canada. To match and support the increased number of candidates, more resources for Black women seeking election, particularly in the area of candidate training, are necessary to ensure an even-playing field during election campaigns which can and will lead to better representation and policy outcomes that reflect diverse perspectives and more equitable outcomes.



Reflection Questions / Actions

What resources do I currently have access to, and what resources do I need to seek access to in order to run a successful campaign?

What will it cost me to campaign?

SUPPORT NETWORKS, VOLUNTEERING, AND MENTORSHIP

A second barrier for Black women seeking election is a lack of important networks, namely: prominent endorsements, volunteers, and mentors who can provide support and guidance throughout the campaign process. These relationships are critical as endorsements from groups including outgoing politicians, political and corporate leaders, and constituents bolster fundraising efforts.

Similarly, gathering a team of volunteers who are willing to put in the labour that campaigning requires is challenging for any candidate, but for Black women who lack the connections and community required to build a team, it can be especially difficult. Despite spearheading the volunteer teams of many competitive candidates across North America, Black women rarely see the same support when they seek to become the candidate in need of a campaign team.⁵

The need to obtain support from external stakeholders extends beyond material gain. Before putting their names forward, candidates need to be believed in. However, Black women are more likely to be deterred from running for office relative to both white women and men, and Black men.⁶ When existing feelings of inadequacy or under-qualification compound with a lack of community support for Black women’s candidacy, Black women can be discouraged from believing in themselves which then impacts their decision to run for office.

LACK OF INTERNAL/PARTY SUPPORT

Lastly, there is also something known as the “recruitment gap,” a phenomenon exclusive to municipal governments in Canada that host political parties but is also more evident in other levels of campaigning where a political party system does exist. While most municipalities across Canada are a non-party system, the province of **Quebec and the City of Vancouver** organize their municipal elections using political parties like the federal, provincial, and territorial electoral system. In the municipal context where political parties do exist, the recruitment gap reflects the process through which gender and racial minorities are typically excluded from party recruitment and nominations as a result of both intentional and unintentional bias at the intersection of gender and race, resulting in systemic discriminatory practices.⁷ While the demographics of municipal governments across Canada are generally diversifying, the recruitment gap still poses a barrier to political involvement for Black women seeking to run for office in areas such as Quebec and Vancouver, and beyond.



Reflection Questions / Actions

- **Who is in my circle that I know I can count on to campaign alongside me?**
- **Who do I admire that I can reach out to? Whose work do I resonate with, and who can serve as a mentor during the campaigning process?**

MISOGYNOIR ONLINE

STEREOTYPING AND MEDIA BIAS

News media outlets play a significant role in shaping public perception of political candidates and creating notions of “electability” amongst voters. Existing research from across North America and the United Kingdom tells us that Black women politicians are frequently framed as “outsiders” in the political space by media outlets, often subjected to identity-based stereotypes that portray negative representations of candidates⁸. Women candidates generally experience uniquely gendered media bias, as news outlets tend to comment on women’s appearance and bodies more frequently than those of their male counterparts⁹. Further, recent studies reveal that dark skin and non-straight hair negatively affect candidate trait evaluations, putting Black women at a double disadvantage relative to their white and/or male competitors¹⁰. Scholars have identified this discriminatory evaluation to the “hypervisibility” of gender and racial minorities in political spaces, who are then subjected to significant scrutiny and surveillance. This might include focusing on candidates’ shortcomings as opposed to their successes, exaggerating details of their personal lives, or depicting racialized candidates as “products of their socio-demographic backgrounds” unsuited for political leadership¹¹. One of the most prevalent stereotypes weaponized against Black women in news media is the “Angry Black Woman” trope, where Black women are seen as hyper-aggressive and hostile leaders¹².

While not a Canadian politician, a notable example of this is current United States Vice President **Kamala Harris**, whose experience of stereotyping by news media has been well documented. Coverage of VP Harris’ campaign heavily focused on her race and gender, often weaponizing the “Angry Black Woman” trope as an attack on her character. On social media, VP Harris also faced sexist and racist vitriol questioning her identity and competency (**TIME’s UP Now, 2020**).

Discriminatory media coverage is representative of a power asymmetry within newsrooms. For example, we see underrepresentation in Canadian media outlets as eight out of ten Canadian newsrooms have zero racial diversity.¹³ This lack of representation is in part responsible for the perpetuation of racial bias and stereotyping in political media coverage, consciously or unconsciously; and consequently, the framing of politicians’ “electability” in the public



Reflection Questions / Actions

- **How strongly do I internalize other people’s perceptions of me?
Who can I turn to when I feel insecure about my “electability?”**
- **How well do I handle criticism?**

A secondary consequence of racist and sexist news media attention is that it may discourage Black women from running at all. Studies have revealed an inverse relationship between gendered media coverage and the presence of women political candidates. Specifically, the more intense the discriminatory coverage, the lower the share of women in politics.¹⁴ Through an intersectional analysis of electability bias, we can deduce that Black women would be distinctly impacted by biased news coverage, and perhaps severely deterred from pursuing a career in politics. The media bias is certainly a barrier for entering into politics.



ONLINE HARASSMENT

Unfortunately, today's social media landscape is also steeped in racism and sexism. While women are 27 times more likely to be harassed online (Akiwowo, 2019),¹⁵ women politicians overall experience a spectrum of digital microaggressions, online violence and harassment directed at Black women candidates and other women of colour in elections across the world is rampant.¹⁶ Black women are 84% more likely to be mentioned in abusive or problematic tweets (Akiwowo, 2019).¹⁷ These attacks range from lobbing racist and sexist slurs and hate speech, to stalking and threats of violence – including death threats – from either fake or anonymous accounts online including accounts using pseudonyms.¹⁸ Online anonymity makes it difficult to trace and address the harassment which may add to feelings of unsafety for candidates and a real sense of injustice. Critiques levied against Black women candidates are rarely about their policy proposals or platform ideas, focusing instead on their identity and appearance.¹⁹ This was the case for the New Democrat MPP for Toronto-St. Paul, **Jill Andrew**, the first Black queer MPP in the Ontario Legislature and in Canada, who reported facing sexist and racist attacks both online and on the campaign trail. These harmful exchanges can not only distract candidates and drain their energy that otherwise could be used for campaigning, but it is also deeply discouraging as they cast a message about who is “electable” and who is not.

The culture of online misogyny frequently goes unchecked. Algorithmic bias embedded in content moderation on social media platforms serves to make some voices louder than others. Machine learning algorithms vet online content, and typically, this moderation process is standardized for each social media platform. In practice, however, these algorithms often fail at identifying hate speech directed toward minority (especially racialized) candidates, and there is a lack of corporate transparency regarding content moderation practices.¹²

Two issues are relevant here:

- 1. Black women are frequently tone policed online and subjected to algorithmic misogyny, and**
- 2. Online harassment directed towards Black women is not addressed with similar speed and severity. This indicates an online power imbalance that can serve as a challenge for Black women candidates and elected officials who are highly visible online.**

While considering these barriers, it is important to keep in mind that social media is still an invaluable venue for political discourse. Marginalized communities and disenfranchised individuals, including young voters continue to find one another online and create meaningful networks of support and activism. Black women do boldly engage on social media platforms both by effectively confronting misogyny online and carving out safe spaces for relationships, dialogue, and recognition.²¹ Amidst the online harassment and violence, Black women continue to resist compartmentalization and reclaim their power by providing nuanced counternarratives to stereotypes, also in these online spaces.



Reflection Questions / Actions

- What boundaries can I set online that would enable me to use social media as a useful tool, rather than a forum for harmful messaging?**
- What do I do when I feel overwhelmed? How easy is it for me to remove myself from distractions online and ground myself in the present?**

CULTURAL BIAS

PUBLIC PERCEPTION ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

Women candidates often face what is called “strategic” or “pragmatic” bias amongst the voting population. This bias results in voters withholding support for candidates whose successful election is perceived as improbable.²² Rather than being rooted in explicit racist or sexist stereotypes or assumptions, strategic bias is contingent on what voters believe other voters think. Endorsing a Black woman candidate might be seen as a “risk” if voters anticipate identity-related barriers to the candidate being successfully elected, and they might venture to support another candidate with similar views whose success feels more likely.²³ Even if not intentional, the result is still discriminatory. This is known as the electability gap, where, from the outset, Black women are viewed as less competitive than other candidates. In Edmonton’s most recent municipal election (2021), while 10 Black candidates ran for office, the most in municipal history, none were elected. Many of the candidates voiced challenges, including Shamir Turner, relating to “credibility, in terms of people thinking it is even possible and viable for [Black people] to be candidates” (Parsons, 2021). In the Canadian context, the “strategic voting” approach is largely ineffective. While voters might attempt to elect politicians with progressive views whose identities still adhere to mainstream depictions of political leaders (white, male, etc.), strategic voting efforts often split support between progressive candidates and facilitate conservative wins.²⁴

On the other hand, other studies reveal that racial minority communities in Canada feel a “racial affinity” with other racialized groups generally. Meaning, racialized voters might feel that they have more similarities with racialized candidates which impacts voting behaviours and patterns.²⁵

Studies on the assumptions voters make about other voters have also revealed telling findings, as observed in an MIT Political Experiment Research Lab survey of 2,000 Americans that examined the concept of electability (Bateson, 2020). The study showed that respondents assumed other Americans (around 47%) would not vote for a woman or Black presidential candidate (Ibid.). This is a bias as it is unfounded and based on erroneous assumptions as public opinion polls show that only 5 to 15 percent of Americans might refuse a candidate because of their race or gender (Ibid.). We know that Black women are electable giving the right supports and resources.

VOTER OUTREACH

As a result of bias against racialized and women candidates, voter outreach can be especially difficult for Black women candidates. Some racialized candidates adapt their voter outreach strategies accordingly, choosing to bring white campaign volunteers to accompany them while door knocking, for example.²⁶ Race-based bias can, in some cases, escalate to harassment. While on the campaign trail, **Mitzie Hunter**, who was elected as Liberal MPP for Scarborough-Guildwood in 2013, found her campaign signs had been vandalized with words like “racist,” “blackface,” and “fascist” (Okwuosa, 2022). A more general challenge associated with voter outreach in Canadian municipal elections is the task of mobilizing local community members. Encouraging Black voters to head to the polls with informed opinions on the policy issues on the ballot requires effective Get Out the Vote strategies. Communities have the power to elect representatives with their best interests in mind, and Black women are often at the forefront of policy innovations intended to serve marginalized communities at large, and Black folks specifically.



Reflection Questions / Actions

- **In what ways do I stand out as a potential candidate? How would voters be able to differentiate my campaign from other ones? Think about the “gap” you fill. What ideas do you offer that have not been proposed before?**
- **Why do I believe I am a competitive candidate? List five unique strengths you bring to the table.**
- **What have I learned from my lived experience as a Black woman that might resonate with other underrepresented communities? Frame your identity as a strength. What do you know/see that “mainstream” candidates might not?**

BALANCING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIVES

CARETAKING RESPONSIBILITIES

The challenge of balancing a political career with familial responsibilities can serve as a barrier for women seeking to launch a campaign. Candidates who serve as the primary caretakers of dependents carry the burden of unpaid care labour in the home in addition to work in public life. Often, it is often women who are tasked with caretaking in the home in adherence to traditional gender roles. As a result, campaigning can be challenging without accessible childcare and caretaking support.

While childcare support subsidies are available for women seeking candidacy with political parties, such as the federal Liberal Party’s [Judy LaMarsh Fund](#), candidates seeking election in municipal jurisdictions do not have access to the same financial support, being predominantly a non-party political system. Overall, pursuing a career in politics is not family-friendly, although there has been significant shifts of women and mothers, including Black women candidates, who are trailblazing a way forward for mothers in politics. For example, **Yvette Ashiri** is a community organizer, public servant, and mother who ran for Ottawa’s 2022 municipal elections in the Orléans South-Navan Ward noted the challenge of balancing campaigning with the back-to-school season as September was at the height of campaigning.



Reflection Questions / Actions

- **Does it make sense for me to run at this time in my life?**
- **What responsibilities will I need to balance once I start campaigning?**
- **What compromises might I have to make once I start campaigning?**
- **What responsibilities can I delegate/share with others in my home and community that would enable me to focus on campaigning?**

CONCLUSION: CHALLENGING “ELECTABILITY” AND POLITICIZED IDENTITIES

Society has so much to gain by having Black women in Canadian politics. Still, barriers to election exist at the individual level, in communities and social circles, and within systems and institutions. Despite these challenges, Black women continue to mobilize their communities and put their names forward as political leaders as they become increasingly visible in municipal elections across the country.

As expressed by Annamie Paul, “more Black politicians will breed more Black politicians” (qtd. in [Medford, 2020](#)). The importance of imagining yourself in the position of a political leader cannot be overstated. While it requires a level of internal motivation, this kind of dream is also made possible through representation and visibility. Black women need to see Black women lead, and Black women need to feel encouraged to run, and supported by the greater community.

Still, the burden of politicized identity (where platform ideas take a backseat to discussions on candidate identity) and the erasure of Black women’s individuality amidst stereotyping and bias can be exhausting. Black women are rarely ever just candidates. They are Black, women candidates - a distinction that can make the prospect of campaigning feel intimidating. We can look at this focus on identity on the campaign trail in two ways. First, it is a problem when candidates are reduced to their backgrounds, or when they are only visible insofar as they are viewed as “other” to mainstream political candidates.

On the other hand, Black women do offer unique and necessary political insight as a result of their lived experiences at the intersection of racial and gendered discrimination. Identity is informative experiencing systemic oppression can shape community members into candidates that are constructively critical and creative about systemic change, passionate about equity, and attuned to the needs of other marginalized groups. While it is difficult to resist internalizing the narrative that Black women are not competitive candidates, it is important to remember that there is no formula or prescribed depiction that makes the perfect candidate. In fact, as a result of Black women's identities being inherently politicized, Black women belong in the political space and take charge of both their narrative and politicization.

Collectively, let's propose a new narrative:

Black women are not only competitive.

Black women are winners.

Black women are not only electable.

Black women are visionary leaders.

BLACK WOMEN AS ELECTED OFFICIALS

As elected officials, when Black women and other minority candidates bring forward anti-racist and gender-sensitive policies, their proposals are sometimes dismissed as niche or irrelevant to everyone in the municipality. The lack of urgency surrounding calls for equity led by Black women politicians not only marginalizes Black women within their workplace but also fails to bring the needs of their constituents to the forefront of political discourse and good governance. In cases like these, it is important that politicians who may not be directly affected by racial and gender inequity take the initiative to champion the efforts of their Black women colleagues. It is also vital that, when committing to anti-racist and gender-sensitive policy work, all government actors work across the limitations of individual policy portfolios to tackle inequities and unequal outcomes in all sectors of public life. This requires a whole-of-government coordination, buy-in and support including material and financial resources in order to be effective.²⁷ Black women cannot be the only political leaders advocating for people who look like them, and all other disenfranchised individuals and populations.



EXCLUDED FROM “MALE-CENTRIC” POLICY PORTFOLIOS

Studies conducted on the kinds of policy portfolios undertaken by officials of different genders show that men are more likely to lead policy development on topics that reinforce traditional masculine stereotypes, like policing, finance, or external relations.²⁸ As a result, it may be challenging for women, Black women in particular, to put themselves forward as leaders in male-dominated policy spaces. Black women can advocate for social programs and be fiscally responsible.

TOKENISM

Tokenism describes a phenomenon wherein marginalized or underrepresented groups are included in a space for primarily symbolic reasons. It operates like virtue signalling as a kind of performative activism. For example, an institution might want to be perceived as more inclusive due to the involvement of an underrepresented group. Examples of tokenism include being singled out or/and asked to speak to a race-related issue for appearance purposes, being introduced as “the new ‘Black Canadian’ council member/advocate”, or being carted around from one event to the next for the photo-op. It offers a meaningless invitation for Black women to participate in politics. One consequence of tokenism is that it only allows Black women space in politics insofar as they “play the game” and “toe the line” so as not to disrupt existing power dynamics or address systemic failures and inequity.²⁹ This is also known as “respectability politics,” where Black women politicians might feel compelled to self-present strategically to adhere to sexist and racist notions of “respectability,” and gain upward mobility within an institution.³⁰

When Black women choose to advocate for change or identify areas of improvement within an institution or policy, they might be subjected to undue criticism, given that their ideas and opinions were never valued in the first place. The opposite of tokenism is substantive equality. This kind of representation centers on advocating for the political interests of a marginalized group, focusing on policy and inequity as opposed to superficial representative diversity.³¹



Reflection Questions / Actions

- Which key stakeholders in municipal government can I identify as allies and supporters of my platform ideas?
- What policy portfolios do I absolutely want to engage with? What are my policy priorities and non-negotiables?
- How can I bring other people who look like me into the spaces I occupy? How can I build community in my role as a candidate to ensure my impact goes beyond performative inclusion?



MENTAL HEALTH AND EXHAUSTION

Overall, there is a lack of existing mental health supports specifically designed to address the needs of racialized communities. There is also a very small number of Black Canadians who access the supports available to them.³² This issue is particularly relevant for Black women who pursue high-stress and labour-intensive positions like serving as an elected representative. Barriers to accessing holistic mental health support for Black women include a lack of representation among mental health care providers, a lack of mental health literacy, including not being able to recognize symptoms of mental illness, and the stigma and misconceptions surrounding mental illness. Caring for yourself in a challenging work environment can be difficult without the structural support systems needed to access important healthcare resources, especially for Black women who are at high risk for mental and emotional stress especially in a political environment.



Reflection Questions / Actions

- **What mental health resources are available to me currently that I can leverage once in office? What resources do I not currently have that I need to seek out in order to prioritize my mental well-being?**

EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Once in office, Black women engage in different kinds of invisible and unpaid labour. Emotional labour is the task of controlling and curating one's emotions and image to interact with others in a particular way.³³ This is often part of operating as a Black woman in white spaces.³⁴

In government, this labour is largely a result of white normativity in public administration and the expectations put on racialized people to perform themselves in ways that might be inauthentic and/or exhausting. This could include code-switching, changing appearances, or silencing themselves to avoid further pushback.

Emotional labour might include feeling the need to overlook microaggressions in the workplace and comments such as "you are so articulate" or "you have such a great English accent!" or, "can I touch your hair? Is it real?" or "but, where are you REALLY from?" in order to not appear "angry" or "difficult." Emotional labour can be expressed through feeling the need to speak in a particular manner such as a sweeter tone, a higher octave, or different colloquialisms to circumvent assumptions that Black women are harsh or angry. It could also mean being asked to consistently speak about your identity or answer for everyone who shares your racial background and/or gender.

Additionally, tropes like the "strong black woman" can make it difficult for Black women to express vulnerability, ask for help, and be transparent about their struggles at work. Again, all of these impede them from expressing themselves authentically. Facing racism and sexism in elected office, which are themselves sources of trauma, while remaining committed to advocating for your community is doubly draining as being an elected official is already a thankless job. Within institutions, systems and organizations that are based on colonialism and are majority white, maintaining your authenticity and integrity as a Black woman can sometimes feel like labour in itself.

Still, Black women continue to show up for one another despite these barriers. By reframing what it means to be "strong" and normalizing reaching out to one another and accessing support, Black women create meaningful relationships in hostile environments even amongst Black women running against one another in the same area.³⁵



Reflection Questions / Actions

- **What boundaries can I set in the workplace to avoid doing unnecessary emotional labour that is not within my job description? What does self-advocacy look like to me?**
- **What topics do I think are unnecessary and draining to debate?**

IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Imposter syndrome is feeling like a fraud in the spaces you occupy even though you deserve to be there. While people from all backgrounds might feel this way at different times, imposter syndrome disproportionately affects women of colour.³⁶ It is important to remember that feeling this way is not your fault as it is a systemic reality induced by systemic inequities and inequalities.

Black and racialized women are more likely to experience imposter syndrome when we are the only person who looks like us in the room, or when we do not see many others from our background succeeding in our field. It is easy to doubt yourself and your merit or feel like an outsider when you do not have many role models and peers doing what you do. However, having already overcome various barriers to being elected in the first place, the reality is that Black women officials do know what they are doing, are qualified and more prepared for the position, and are not in over their heads as all of these are counter-narratives to impostor syndrome.

Symptoms of Imposter Syndrome

- **Feeling like success is impossible**
- **Feeling incompetent despite results that show otherwise**
- **Feeling you are not meeting expectations**
- **Feeling you arrived somewhere by accident or because of luck**
- **Feeling incapable of reproducing past successes**
- **Feeling as though you are starting from square one all the time**
- **Feeling as though praise/compliments you receive are disingenuous**



Reflection Questions / Actions

- **When I look at my track record of overcoming obstacles and my successes, what am I the proudest of myself for? How do I know that I belong as an elected official**

SAFETY



INVASION OF PRIVACY

The invasion of privacy that Black women in elected office are subjected to can appear in two main ways. First, Black women who are tokenized in the workplace might experience a hypervisibility wherein they feel overexposed.³⁷ This could include not only being subjected to increased scrutiny regarding their actions as a politician, but also public scrutiny about their personal lives and pasts. It is difficult to experience what can feel like public entitlement to personal details about yourself, which can detract from the attention that should be given to policy work and advocacy. For example, politician **Annamie Paul's** experience as a Black woman leader of the Green Party of Canada was punctuated with the portrayal of Paul as a “difficult, aggressive, and hostile” leader rather than her work (Eitizaz, 2021).

Secondly, studies show that women political leaders (particularly women of colour) bring their lived experiences to their roles as politicians.³⁸ This can strengthen the outcomes of various policy initiatives by applying an anti-racist and gender-sensitive lens to municipal governance given their understanding of what it means to be marginalized, experience inequities and inequalities, and work towards overcoming these barriers.

Alternatively, bringing in your lived experiences can also make distinguishing between work and other parts of your life and identity challenging. There is a cost to providing the emotional labour of continually discussing and challenging discrimination – it could lead to burnout.³⁹ In this case, Black women politicians should remember that it is not obligatory to always be engaged in discussion about their identity and trauma and that there are ways to effectively advocate for their communities while also drawing professional boundaries.



Reflection Questions / Actions

- What information am I comfortable sharing about myself, and what boundaries will I set to maintain my privacy in the public eye?

NORMALIZATION OF VIOLENCE

The threat of violence – both in and outside the workplace, and online – for Black women politicians is real. The culture of misogynoir within political spaces normalizes both physical, sexual, and psychological violence, which shows up in a few different ways. In the workplace, Black women and other women of colour face the threat of physical and sexual harm. While data on sexual misconduct in municipal government is scarce, a 2018 survey of Canadian women politicians in the federal government found that 58% of them had experienced sexual misconduct and that racialized, 2SLGBTQIA+, and young women are at greater risk of violence.⁴⁰

Outside the workplace, Black women officials face the threat of physical harassment and violence from strangers, and online where Black women are often the target. A 2018 study examining interactions on Reddit found that Canadian women across all parties are frequently the target of gender-based hate, but that queer and racialized politicians received greater abuse overall, especially related to their identities.⁴¹ Former Canadian Liberal Member of Parliament and parliamentary secretary **Celina Caesar-Chavannes** announced her decision to not run in the 2019 election, a decision informed by experiences of hostility and discrimination while in office ([Stone, 2019](#)).

Compared to the kind of harassment received by white and male colleagues, threats toward Black women politicians are often sexualized and veiled in racial stereotypes.⁴² Often, topics that should be limited to policy disagreements and thoughtful critiques of their work escalate into threatening or abusive behaviour.



Reflection Questions / Actions

- **How can I support my peers who have experienced violence?
What does allyship mean to me?**

LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

Perpetrators of violence towards Black women within and outside political institutions frequently act with impunity. While the Canadian House of Commons has a policy on Preventing and Addressing Harassment (2014) and an MP Code of Conduct (2015) for sexual harassment, many municipal administrations have not outlined clear steps forward for victims of sexual harassment seeking justice. Given that systems used to address instances of harm vary across municipalities, it can be difficult for victims to know where to look for support, or how to navigate existing resources.



Reflection Questions / Actions

- **Am I aware of the process through which I can seek accountability and justice in my municipal government in cases of harm?**
- **When do I know I have had enough? What signs can I recognize in my mind, body, and environment that might indicate I should rest and focus on caring for myself?**



CONCLUSION⁴³

Despite having conquered the campaign trail, Black women still face challenges to serving in government that manifest in emotional, mental, physical, and environmental ways. Still, they persist and build community with one another while advocating for their constituents.

While considering these identity-related barriers to governance, it is important to remember that the reason Black women continue to add value to political discourse is because they voice the experiences of communities who are often missing from the discourse and may have never had or had limited access to power. While engaging in politics, conforming to “mainstream” conceptions of political leadership, or silencing yourself in order to avoid critique may seem like self-defence mechanisms but are actually forms of self-betrayal. Black women have important and necessary perspectives. Silence rarely protects anyone from systemic harm.

We need Black women in politics to show up authentically. For this to happen, we need strong, vocal, politically engaged communities behind them – online, in government, and in greater society. Overcoming these barriers is not an individual task. A broken system requires systemic remedies. All of us have a role to play in protecting Black women leaders, and holding our governments accountable when they fail them. We need to normalize Black women in political leadership.

For the Black women thinking of running:

- You have come a long way.
- You are qualified.
- You are on track.
- And you are doing better than you think you are.

- **We need your continued engagement and activism in our cities.**
- **Because only you can do what you can do.**
- **To make equity and equality come alive, and come true.**

The process of completing this report highlighted some key gaps in information that need to be addressed to better understand the barriers that Black women face to seeking municipal office. For example, there is a lack of race-based data across Canadian municipalities and other levels of government that would provide insight into the experiences of Black candidates and representatives. Consider working towards addressing this data gap.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

We recommend a variety of resources available for Black Canadian women seeking election in their municipalities.

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The resources below can be used to better understand the road to equity in Canadian municipalities and to find communities with like-minded change-makers interested in pursuing civic leadership roles.



Toward Parity: Inventory of Strategies

- Resource bank for articles, reports, guidance, templates, and concrete examples of seeking equity in municipal governance spaces

Resource Library for Inclusive Municipal Governance

- Breakdown of the path to gender parity at a municipal level in elections across Canada

Operation Black Vote Canada - 1834 Fellowship

- A nine-month civic leadership and public policy training program for Black youth (ages 18-25) across Canada. The program connects fellows to mentorship and community-building opportunities, offers workshops to build experience and knowledge on the policy-making process, and prepares Fellows for civic leadership roles.

Resource Library for Inclusive Municipal Governance

- OBVC hosts a variety of resources and virtual trainings that enable community leaders to have a better understanding of municipal politics and the campaigning process. These resources include “Seat at the Table,” OBVC Boot Camp, and OBVC’s annual Black Women’s Political Summit.

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS

It can be challenging to navigate barriers to election alone, and there are folks across Canada who are trained to help you handle some of these challenges! You can connect with a mental health practitioner through the resources below:

Black Therapist List Canada

- Database of Black therapists across Canada.

Resource Library for Inclusive Municipal Governance

- A platform featuring podcasts, blogs, an internet support group for Black women seeking community, and a list of Black women therapists!

RESOURCES ADDRESSING IMPOSTER SYNDROME AND INSECURITY

Some readings to return to amidst feelings of insecurity and imposter syndrome:

- [The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action](#), Audre Lorde
- [Cinderella's Stepsisters](#), Toni Morrison
- [The Bridge Poem \(1981\)](#), Donna Kate Rushin
- [Toni Morrison Nobel Prize in Literature Lecture \(1993\)](#)
- [Notes on Feminism](#), Saidiya Hartman
- [won't you celebrate with me](#) Lucille Clifton

Legacies of Black Women in Canadian Politics

- [Trailblazers: Black Women in Canadian Politics](#) (Documentary)

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