

**Associational Activity as a Route to Public Office: Women in  
Nova Scotia Municipal Politics**

By

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**Canada**

**Associational Activity as a Route to Public Office: Women in  
Nova Scotia Municipal Politics**

By Kristel Lynn vom Scheidt

**Abstract**

This study examines the experiences of seven individual women who have been key players in municipal government in Nova Scotia. Through in-depth, one-on-one interviews I investigated women's participation in voluntary organizations and how these activities and social networks shape women's political actions and provide them with the knowledge and skills necessary to further engage in elected public life. This political knowledge, combined with civic skills, networks and the personal profile women gain while serving as volunteers, makes associational work an ideal training ground for elected office. A feminist analysis of public life has allowed me to explore how women's volunteer work is connected to their decision to seek public office, and the associational paths that lead women to candidacy.

October 1, 2007

# **ASSOCIATIONAL ACTIVITY AS A ROUTE TO PUBLIC OFFICE: WOMEN IN NOVA SCOTIA MUNICIPAL POLITICS**

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## INTRODUCTION

Women of privilege in most western societies were granted suffrage in the early 1900s, although this did not necessarily bring with it the conditions of citizenship. Despite their exclusion from government decision-making bodies and association with formal public office, women made major contributions to politically healthy and sustainable communities. As far back as the 1700s, women's activities have ranged from small literary associations, to large-scale suffragist organizing, and the formation of local women's councils to improve the social conditions of their community.

The context is different today with the removal of formal barriers to women's citizenship women continue this community and associational activity through parent-teacher associations, neighbourhood-watch groups, local school boards, anti-poverty, peace, and environmental groups. Through civic involvement women hone their political skills by negotiating with government officials and decision-makers and by mobilizing their communities to ensure a peaceful and healthy environment in which their families can thrive. Women form the backbone of charitable groups, whether they be religious, educational, class, or race based; those who volunteer their time, skills and knowledge do it out of a desire for social change. Through associational involvement women carve out their own solutions, strategies and visions for a more just and equitable society. Often working in collaboration with formal state structures, women in turn acquire crucial insight into local power and decision-making processes. This political knowledge, combined with civic skills, networks and the personal profile women gain while serving as volunteers, makes associational work an ideal training ground for elected office.

Over the years, historians have produced a rich body of literature documenting the

depth, diversity and significance of women's long-neglected involvement in organizations. As early as 1915 Mary Beard observed the valuable contributions that women make to public life through their volunteer work in civic and social organizations (Beard 1915, 1933, 1946). Sophonisba Breckinridge (1933) also wrote about the diversity and importance of women's organizational activity and how it changed their relationship with the family, state and occupational world. These gender-segregated organizations provided almost the only avenue of women's public involvement. Jeane Kirkpatrick (1974) also explored associational activity in her landmark study of female public office holders. She recognized that women's civic activities in their communities are actually an excellent preparation for electoral politics. These organizational involvements have important consequences for women and for the community. Particularly in Atlantic Canada there has been a high level of women's civic activity, and many scholars have explored this rich history and how it has shaped the communities in which they lived (Neal 1998, George 2000, Fingard and Guildford 2005). This activity permits women to exercise leadership, develop their individual talents, and to learn practical skills for entry into the public worlds - such as giving a speech, running a meeting, keeping the books - and extends their social and communication networks (Burns et al. 2001).

Unfortunately, the political influence and consequences of this work has largely been absent from most academic texts, and as a result, the conceptual framework within which women's civic activity is measured is inadequate. Due to the places, methods and strategies of women's organizing and community work, their accomplishments and involvement in civic life have largely been ignored, labelled 'non-political' (Sapiro 1983), categorized as 'social' or 'interest group' activism, and not seen as valuable

political experience. Falling outside the boundaries of a conventional (male) definition of political activity, women's participation in civic and volunteer organizations has not been sufficiently studied as a motivating route to elected office.

Since the majority of volunteers working for organizations at the local level are women, an appreciation of their civic lives is necessary to assess and recognize the importance of women's distinct political actions. Can a feminist analysis of public life further our understanding of women's volunteer work in the community? More specifically, can a feminist analysis help us explore how women's volunteer work is connected to their decision to seek public office? What are the associational paths that lead women to candidacy?

In light of the existing research on women's experiences in civic associations, I intend to investigate women's participation in voluntary organizations and how these activities and social networks shape women's political actions, and how these groups provide women with the knowledge and skills necessary to further engage in public life. A growing body of research shows that men and women often experience social and civic life quite differently. This indicates a significant need to explore these issues in greater depth (Gigendil et. al, 2003). As a result, I believe a feminist perspective of women's associational activity is needed. By this I mean a women-centred viewpoint that recognizes the patriarchal political and social structures that affect women's lives.

A feminist analysis of women's associational work is expected to yield an account that will reflect the realities of women's lives, value the skills gained through these experiences, and reshape the definitions of political action. It is through a feminist view of public life that I will explore women's associational activity as a route to public office.

This study reports on the results of a research project that examines the experiences of seven individual women who have been key players in municipal government in Nova Scotia. In-depth, one-on-one interviews with seven women produced a rich account of their work in the community before they were elected and explored the factors that prompted them to seek public office. Each individual story provided important insights into their decision to enter public life, as interviewees spoke about the roles they played in their community, the skills and knowledge gained from their associational experiences, and how this work shaped their path into municipal politics.

Prior to conducting this research project I had the experience of working as the research assistant for the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities Women in Local Government project. The goal of the Women in Local Government initiative was to examine how women were participating in municipal government in Nova Scotia (as citizens, staff and councillors), and to recommend strategies to encourage and support greater civic involvement. On the steering committee for this project there were six municipal councillors and one former councillor; it was these women whom I asked to lend their stories for my research. In addition to exploring their associational experiences before their candidacy, I also asked them to comment on their work with the Women in Local Government project.

The structure of the thesis is as follows: Chapter One reviews the past and current research on women's work in the community and specifically the gendered nature of social capital. Chapter Two describes the research methods that I used for this study, providing a background on the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities Women in Local



Government Project including my role as research assistant, and the influence this experience had on the focus of my thesis. Chapter Three and Four contain a detailed account of the research findings, and an analysis of the major themes and patterns that emerged from this data. Final conclusions and reflections of the study are presented in Chapter Five, including directions for future research.

## **CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Women's civic lives, particularly their associational activities as community volunteers, have largely remained off the academic agenda until the last few decades. It was feminist scholars who began to recognize the absence of gender as a theme in political research and tool of analysis that sparked the investigation of women's political behaviours. Until recently, civic activities have not been seen as relevant to the study of women's engagement in public life. Therefore, the extent and importance of women as political actors is just beginning to emerge as a key theme in political theory.

A feminist critique of conventional political theory questions the validity and relevance of the constructed patriarchal foundations of political science, demonstrating that when gender becomes the focus of analysis, the established theoretical terrain is inadequate. A feminist analysis of the women's civic lives not only shows the unique ways that women interact with political world, but also reveals that their associational lives are ripe for theoretical attention.

One of the first scholars to provide an in-depth study of women's associational life was Sophonisba Breckinridge (1933), who explained that civic organizations were the place where women were able to influence community activities, and as a result, much of the civic work they pioneered are now assumed as a public responsibility. In addition she also saw this activity as an important experience for any women interested in a political career.

Carole Pateman (1970) was another scholar to recognize the important ways in which women contribute to public life through their associational activity and to call for a redefinition of 'the political.' Pateman calls for democratic theory to be expanded to

encompass community involvement in order to achieve a truly participatory society. In her view, expanding our notion of participation to include alternative methods of action will affect the context in which we view all political activity. Pateman argues that a major function of all democratic participation is civic education, which allows a person to see and thus act upon the connections between public and private life (1970, 110). A more participatory society will better equip people to respond to politics; and issues of political relevance take on a personal meaning since those involved in their community have more of a stake in its success.

In Canada groundbreaking texts such as those by Thelma McCormack (1975) and Sandra Burt (1986) argue that women have a female design for political living and that they inhabit a different political culture than men, reiterating the importance of making space for analyses of women's political actions from a feminist perspective.

McCormack (1975) believes past research has assumed that women inhabit the same political culture as men, but just experience it differently. She explains that gender differences in political behaviour have been explained as a result of women's social attributes, rather than the political system itself. As an alternate thesis, McCormack proposes that women live in a different political culture than men based on their political socialization, differences in political opportunity structures, accepted gender roles, and the sexist treatment of women in the media. She argues that men not only dominate formal political life, but also interpret it, frequently drawing on masculine language and behaviours (McCormack 1975). Examples of this are combative parliamentary environments, the language used in political commentary, and the acceptance and promotion of aggressive conduct.

Like other subcultures, the political culture of women has its own way of understanding and operating in the political world. If we assume that power and authority are the pillars of public life, then we locate political activity in one or the other. McCormack suggested that classificatory systems derived from a male conception of power distort women's political lives, and as long as the two political cultures remain apart, their pathologies remain unchecked (1975, 26). Also examining this dichotomy, Jean Bethke Elshtain (1974) observed that men are perceived as having two statuses, as both public and as private people, and are judged differently in the two domains. Women, even when they enter public life, are perceived as having only one status and continue to be viewed as 'private' persons. McCormack suggests this discrepancy is not going to change "unless women perceive of political life as a place where they matter" (1975, 13). This depends on either changing the systems that regulate electoral politics, or viewing this area as an extension of women's civic lives. Connecting associational activity to electoral politics is an important way to politically validate women's lives and work in the community.

Reaffirming the existence of women's political culture, Linda Christiansen-Ruffman (1983) states that women's political work is invisible both within and outside of the scholarly community. If women's political activities remain unnoticed by the general public, their political influence will be perceived as unimportant, including their potential as electoral candidates. Christiansen-Ruffman asserts that both theoretically and empirically women's political work has not only been ignored in political thought, but is also largely absent in feminist theory.

Moreover, Christiansen-Ruffman believes that feminist scholarship itself has tended to obscure, rather than define the political area, specifically with the use of dichotomies developed to understand women's position in society (public vs. private). By contrast with other scholars, she believes the continued dichotomous use of private/public thinking has impeded the recognition of women's civic activities as politically significant. Analysis focusing on women's emergence from the private to public sphere often implies unilinear assumptions of continued progress of women's political participation, and an acceptance of a formal, narrow definition of 'the political'. Christiansen-Ruffman (1983) explains that an individualized and institutionalized focus of public action does a disservice to the activities of early feminists. For example, she explains that the names and dates historically associated with women's suffrage mislead us as they mark men's recognition of women's activities, which came after the real political battles. She claims that an exploration of women's political culture is needed to show how women influence community priorities and put issues on the public agenda; as it is these activities which define and shape the community.

Not until Virginia Sapiro's study, *The Political Integration of Women* (1983) was there a thorough examination of how women "fit" into the (male) political world. Sapiro states that the ways we define the values and functions of participation directly affects how we evaluate political activity and the goals we set for it (1983, 84). In this context, Sapiro was the first scholar to identify the disconnect between women's political activity and the standards used for its evaluation. Her research showed that the narrow, universally accepted, male definition of politics was invalid and inapplicable to women's public lives. Thereby, in accordance with male standards, it appeared as if women barely

registered on the political map. Up until this point, scholars had been using data designed for and by men and structured around their activities, thereby keeping women's volunteer work off the radar and not acknowledging it as a possible precursor to public office.

Furthermore, Sapiro (1983) recognizes that the study of politics based on the separation of activity into either the public or private sphere is problematic, as women will not fit into politics if public affairs remains functionally and normatively detached from private life. What is interesting here is that she identifies problems with the public/private divide, but does not challenge it in her research. Sapiro states that the longest and most influential activities in which women have played a major role consist of organizing at the community level. She then argues that these activities cannot be judged as less important or 'political' than electoral participation, but she does not go on to provide a framework in which to examine this activity or understand its connection to electoral participation (Sapiro 1983).

In *Women in the History of Political Thought* (1985), Arlene Saxonhouse states that a politics abstracted from the female results in artificially separating the public from the private world. Saxonhouse (like Christiansen-Ruffman) believes that until we recognize the interdependence of these realms, questions of gender will remain peripheral to political analysis, and we will not be able to adequately explain or describe women's political attitudes and behaviours.

Birte Siim (1988) argues that as long as we continue to ignore much of women's political lives 'from below', politics will continue to be conceptualized narrowly as 'power from above', and the connection between these arenas will be lost. To understand women's civic lives Siim calls for a larger spectrum of activity to be examined. She does

not go as far as to say that women inhabit a separate political culture, but draws attention to the importance of their activities in social movements, trade unions and local associations. She suggests that shifting the focus to these activities will provide a more accurate and deeper picture of women's engagement in and relationship with politics (Siim 1988). The invisibility of and disregard for the actions of women organizing at the grassroots level highlights the importance of examining political experiences from a feminist standpoint.

While research on women in electoral politics has broadened our understanding of women as political actors, it has also narrowed and distorted our view of women's roles in the broader public arena. Marianne Githens (1984) calls for a more comprehensive understanding of the political elite. She argues that by virtue of their leadership roles in a host of organizations and social movements with political goals and objectives, women ought to be included in the political elite. She claims that research focused on women in politics would begin to change if we included these women who have often wielded considerable political power and have affected both legislative and policy outcomes (Githens 1984).

Kathleen Jones and Anna Jonasdottir (1988) believe that gender redefines and enlarges the scope of politics, the practice of citizenship and authority, and the language of political action. They note that a male-defined political analysis works to illuminate and privilege specific activities, while hiding others. A feminist view of politics includes materially and metaphorically conceptualizing the political arena in terms of women's lives, including gender-focused empirical studies of political behaviour. Jones and Jonasdottir highlight the problems with institutionalized norms of political behaviour,

which posits the political agent as an abstract, genderless member of an organized interest group. They claim that a feminist view of politics would incorporate and recognize women as ‘women’ in political activity (Jones and Jonasdottir 1988).

As discussed, political science has been both resistant and ill-equipped to examine and theorize the political orientations, priorities and actions of women’s civic lives. Doug McAdam (1988) reaffirms the notion that women’s activity has been measured against a universal (male) standard, classified as normative and held up as a comparative yardstick. He claims that a traditional academic conception of political experience is grounded in unacknowledged and unexamined assumptions about gender, authority and political life.

Naomi Black (1989) uses the term “social feminism” to describe the activities of women who have developed a political role out of what is perceived as their female identity. She argues that the actions and organizing of social feminists erode the conceptual and practical boundaries that have restricted the scope of women’s public participation. By organizing around issues of particular importance to their lives as women, such as childcare and social services, women alter the nature of what is categorized as political. In addition these groups all have explicitly set out in their goals to educate and organize women for effective political participation. These organizations provide an important means of training and support for women who envision and incite change, and can act as a crucial training ground for entrance into electoral politics.

While associational experiences may be seen as politically relevant by feminist scholars, the largest obstacle is for women themselves to deem their activities valuable training for public life. When Diane Fowlkes (1984) examined women’s conceptions of ‘the political’, she was struck by the frequency with which they saw themselves as



simultaneously extrinsic to formal office holding and intrinsic to being advocates for political change. The women in her research viewed themselves as active agents of politics in their civic lives, but saw electoral politics as happening to, or outside of themselves. Fowlkes argues that the women provide an expanded sense of the political lodged in their social connections and measured by change in their communities, and as a result see themselves as connected to politics in ways that most political scientists have not appreciated (Fowlkes 1984).

In *Getting Things Done* (1988), Jill Vickers explores the traditions of women's informal politics. She notes that throughout history women have been forming groups to 'get things done', usually in and for their communities. She notes that this political activity gives women a sense of being active agents of change with more control of their lives, their families, and communities. Vickers highlights the importance of women's work in the community, but fails to consider the impact these experiences have on preparing women for formal public life.

One example of this type of work is women's experiences on Parent Teacher Associations <sup>1</sup> (PTA). Observed by Robert Dahl (1962), these organizations have long been seen as an important entry point to public life. In this early work Dahl concludes that Parent Teacher Associations act as a recruitment pool for political office for men, but not for women. Virginia Sapiro (1979) explains that this type of sexist research with no analysis or explanation of gender differences was commonplace in Political Science. Although Dahl noted the PTA as an important path to electoral politics, he discounted

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<sup>1</sup> Although the name for this group in Nova Scotia is the Home and School Association, I will use Parent Teacher Association (PTA), as it is the name most widely used in the literature and by the interview participants.

women's presence there as merely a social gathering to deal with private concerns regarding their children. Ironically, Sapiro points out that Dahl attributes men's involvement in the PTA to concerns about their children's education as well. She also shows that male recruitment into electoral politics was based on the acceptance of public life as a man's world.

The fact that women who are successful in electoral politics often have years of experience volunteering in the community (Carroll and Strimling 1983, Darcy et al. 1994) can be seen as an important clue to decoding the routes that lead women to public office (Brodie 1985). A feminist understanding of this activity enables politics to be studied from a perspective that is politically relevant and has historically been absent. If women's lives prior to their candidacy barely register on the male-defined scale of political activity, what have they been doing? There is strong evidence of a women's political culture that operates differently than men's, which can be further illustrated in the experiences that lead women into electoral politics. Activities that do not fit into the accepted framework of 'relevant political experience or training' often obscure the existence and value of women's associational activities. As a result, few discussions frame women's activity in the context of being applicable to electoral politics.

Jeane Kirkpatrick was one of the first scholars to take this dialogue a step further by examining the distinct paths that women take to public office. Her pivotal study *Political Woman* (1974) examined the characteristics of female office holders in the United States through a feminist lens. At that time there were very few women elected to public office, but for those who were successful she examined the factors in their lives that may have contributed to this. Most significant about her research is the fact that she

did not measure women against the male-based political norm but recognized the social realities of their experiences, including the attitudes and values that brought them into public life. Kirkpatrick highlights the important connection between legislators' personal, social and political roles. Profiling their civic activity prior to entering politics, she discovers a clear connection between women's volunteer activity and their decision to enter politics. She explains,

For most, the motives which led them to run for the legislature were the same motives that made them community volunteers: an awareness of public problems needing attention and a feeling of personal responsibility for those problems. Most made the switch from community volunteer to legislative candidate out of the conviction that by working through politics they could more effectively achieve the public goals to which they were committed...[In addition] the community volunteer brings to political candidacy the social and personal resources accumulated in her years of civic service (1974, 62-63).

She goes on to discuss how the confidence, self-esteem, and leadership skills that women gain while volunteering in their community make it easier for them to make the transition to electoral politics. Others have echoed these findings, suggesting that volunteerism serves as a type of political apprenticeship for women who have no specialized professional or educational training (Long and Slemko 1974, Sapiro and Farah 1977).

Studies into electoral recruitment became prevalent in political science literature around the same time as the women in politics literature began to appear, although unfortunately, most of these scholars did not connect the two themes. Although Anthony Long and Brian Slemko's (1974) study of municipal decision-makers did not include any women, they identified the importance of "apprenticeship" roles for aspiring candidates through their prior associational experience (1974, 553). They state,

Many of the external activities of these associations are political in nature, such as lobbying, and their internal activity is often the functional equivalent of a part of political decision-making. Both levels of activity can help to develop requisite political skills in an individual, which are then transferable to elected political office. Involvement in community organizations may allow a potential candidate to become acquainted with persons on city council and, importantly, the opportunity to develop a “feeling” for what is involved at the council level (1974, 554).

They also explain that these organizations can serve as screen/sponsoring agencies by operating informally as a recruitment mechanism. Long and Slemko also found that the local decision-makers believed they were better equipped to contribute something toward city government because of prior community involvement, suggesting that individuals with a high degree of associational activity would have an advantage over those who do not.

Another early scholar making this connection was Sharyne Merritt (1977), who examined the background of both male and female political candidates to investigate characteristics that differentiated the winners and losers. She discovered that male and female candidates obtain politically relevant skills from different sources, and for women, civic volunteerism provides the equivalent to male occupational success. Typically treated as a ‘feminine’, unpaid, and ‘unprofessional’ activity, civic volunteerism provides women with alternative experiences for obtaining relevant political skills. Merritt observed,

Through volunteer activities women became knowledgeable about issues and acquainted with problem solving strategies; they sharpen their verbal and interpersonal skills; and they become known in the community, making connections with influentials and ‘proving themselves’ as competent and serious both to their potential constituents and to themselves (1977, 736).

What is significant in Merritt's findings is that women's political success became connected to their non-elective political involvement, which merits a further discussion of the types of political training that women receive before they are elected. She also explains that, excluded from male friendship networks, women employ a public rather than social route to success by making a name for themselves in the community first (1977, 742).

Further reinforcing the importance of associational activity in her profile of women candidates, Ruth Mandel (1981) classifies such political women as 'joiners.'

[The typical candidate] is concerned with civic affairs and belongs to more community organizations, professional groups, social clubs, and church groups than women in the general population (1981, 26).

She cites women's volunteer work and partisan experience as an important aspect of establishing their credibility as a candidate and a gaining strong base of support. It is from these connections that candidates draw vital campaign volunteers whose interests and concerns they can promote and guard once elected.

The most significant Canadian scholar to recognize the connection between women's civic lives and their success as a candidate for public office was Janine Brodie (1985). She explains that, despite their obvious large numbers, female volunteers comprise one of the least studied and understood sub-cultures of Canadian society and few studies ask whether women politicians attribute their political learning to voluntary group activity (1985, 44-45). She refers to voluntary groups "an important but often overlooked milieu for political learning among would-be female politicians" (1985, 43). As cited in Brodie, Moshe Czudnowski (1975) claims that voluntary associations are an essential stage in the training and selection of political leaders. In her study of female

municipal and legislative candidates, Brodie found that regardless of how women became initiated into politics, they identified groups as the most important agent of political learning. She concludes that groups that operate at the local level serve as potential apprenticeship structures and can channel women into municipal candidacy.

In a recent study of state-level legislators in the United States, women were much more likely than men to report that they became interested in political careers as a result of community involvement or a policy issue which exposed them to political environments (Thomas et al. 2002). Additional studies of local office holders report that women councillors argued they made good politicians precisely because they have ‘other lives outside of council’ and were able to contribute values, skills and contacts gleaned through their work in the community (Mackay 1998).

Research focusing on recruitment of women into politics often does not question the traditional ‘male’ paths into political life (Long and Slemko 1974, Welch 1978). In his comprehensive study of congressional women, Irwin Gertzog (1995) explains that to increase the number of women elected they should simply pursue those vocations whose skills and orientations are valued in a political setting. This is echoed in Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox’s (2001) study of candidate’s political ambition. They use the “pipeline” explanation, claiming that when more women occupy the careers that are most likely to lead to political candidacies, more women will run for office, contest open seats, and face no discrimination at the polls (2001, 26). They identify these “pipeline” professions as secondary school teachers, professors, and lawyers. Kira Sanbonmatsu (2006) states that because women are underrepresented in fields such as law and business, occupational segregation hinders their chance of being successful in elected office. This explanation

works for most political scientists who examine women's lives using the same framework they do for men's and continue to ignore women's civic activities as 'relevant' political experience.

Past studies have shown that women and men office holders tend to have different backgrounds (Carroll and Strimling 1983, Thomas 1994). Therefore, the recruitment of women candidates needs to examine the distinct paths that they take. Other research reveals that women officeholders are more likely than men to have been recruited (McLean 1994) and require encouragement before they are willing to cross the threshold into candidacy (Carroll and Strimling 1983, Squire and Moncrief 1999, Lawless and Fox 2005). Moncrief, Squire and Jewell (2001) found that non-incumbent female candidates were more likely than men to have received encouragement to run from party officials, other elected officials, and community and legislative leaders. As a result they argue, "Much of the burden for recruiting women legislative candidates rests on the party leadership and on groups that are trying to increase the proportion of women in public office" (2001, 118-19). The importance of these findings is that scholars continue to classify women as 'atypical politicians' because they are less likely to plan political careers and fit the self-recruited ambition model of electoral candidacy (Sanbonmatsu 2006).

If the process of politicization is different for men and women, gender differences in the patterns of citizen's lives may account for differences in the utility of various resources for political activity. Schlozman et al. (1994) set out to understand whether the paths to politics are gender specific. They found women often aspire to public office after experiences in voluntary organizations, and that pathways to electoral politics are often

obscured by theoretical models that are not gender specific (1994, 964). As an expanded version of this study, *The Private Roots of Public Action*, Burns et al. (2001) traces the gender differences in political participation as they relate to organizational activity. They admit that data that which allows comparisons between political participation and voluntary activity outside of politics has been non-existent (2001, 57), supporting the need for further investigation on this topic. Burns et al. examine political activities that seek to influence government either directly or indirectly, and recognized that voluntary activity outside these domains intersects with politics in many ways. They state, “Running the PTA fund drive or managing the church soup kitchen can develop skills that are transferable to politics even when the activity itself has nothing to do with politics” (2001, 58) and these institutions can act as a locus for political mobilization, providing women with the opportunity to learn civic skills and exposing them to political cues, messages, and larger social networks. Burns et al. explain that many voluntary associations get involved in politics through influencing policy outcomes and constitute a crucial source of input to public officials about citizen views and preferences. They claim, “involvement in organizations, even those completely outside of politics, operates in several ways to facilitate political participation” (2001, 72-73).

Women’s perceived absence and significance on the political map has led to a limited view of the substance and value of their civic activity in political theory (Rankin 2002, Sapiro 2003). In a review of the existing Canadian literature on women’s unconventional political participation, Pauline Rankin (2002) noted that certain arenas of political activity were being studied more than others, as well as limited comparative work being undertaken within single arenas. For example, within the field of women and



politics the generation of explanations to account for women's political activity remains underdeveloped. As a growing area of academic inquiry, the research and analysis of women and/in politics continues to rise, but most scholars (even feminist theorists) are still using a male-defined framework, and women's community activity remains absent as important political action and as a training and recruiting ground for electoral politics.

Of further significance is the fact that most of the available literature on women's civic lives was written twenty or thirty years ago and the topic of women's voluntary activity has fallen off the current academic agenda. What is missing in this debate today? Over the last few decades the social and economic realities of women as well as the influence and responsibility of the state have shifted. Governments during this time began to reorient their fiscal policies and responsibilities by moving towards a more market oriented, neo-liberal vision. As a result there has been a significant cut in social services, and many responsibilities have been downloaded to the family, municipalities, and local community organizations (Bashevkin 1993, Brodie 1985). These changes have had a huge impact on women, increasing the demands on their time, and subsequently influencing their organizational involvement and opportunities for engagement in electoral politics. For these reasons I believe that now, more than ever, there is a need to analyze the significance of women's civic lives as a precursor to their electoral involvement.

I propose that we are also missing an exploration of how different types of political activity are related. When examining the literature on women's political culture and electoral recruitment it is clear that a feminist analysis of political action will benefit scholars in all fields. Up until this point many political scientists and feminists alike were

analyzing women's political activity as either within, or outside of electoral politics.

Transcending this divide, there has been even less discussion on how women's participation in both of these arenas is connected. By limiting the examination of women's actions to those traditionally defined as political, a large scope of activity remains outside of our academic knowledge. Marianne Githens (2003) argues that scholarship on women and politics needs to explore the interplay among different forms of activity, and particularly the connection between women's recruitment to electoral politics and their participation in social movements or grassroots activism (2003, 40). Furthermore, Louise Carbert (2006) explains, prior work on women's leadership in Atlantic Canada has typically been addressed as one or the other category exclusively: they have either studied civic engagement in voluntary organizations (George 2000, Neal 1998) or interviewed women who hold elected office (Carbert and Black 2003).

Michelle Saint-Germain (1992) found that empirical studies have dominated academic literature and research on women's civic activity is ripe for theoretical attention. What emerges overwhelmingly is that research on women's politics in Canada has been focused mainly on their activities in party politics, elections, and actions to lobby or influence government bodies (Brodie 1985, Vickers, Rankin and Appelle 1993, Arscott and Trimble 1997, Young 2000, Dobrowolsky 2000), and consequently we know vastly more about women's politics oriented toward the state than about those activities that operate at the local level and focus on the well-being of the community.

For most of the 1990s, this topic fell off the agenda and literature about the significance of women's political culture came to a standstill. It was only when mainstream social science re-invigorated the topic of associational activity under the

umbrella of 'social capital' that feminist scholars began to re-visit these outstanding questions.

The most recognized work on social capital is that done by Robert Putnam. In examining how people gain an interest in and knowledge of politics, Putnam (2000) advances the notion that participation in community life increases our level of engagement, trust and reciprocity in society. He suggests that organizations in civil society such as churches, unions, and community groups play a vital role in the production of social capital by integrating people from diverse backgrounds and values, promoting tolerance and cooperation, and thereby contributing to a dense, rich and vibrant social infrastructure. At the root of Putnam's work is the theory that social capital has significant political consequences. He argues that civil society directly promotes social capital, and in turn social capital (the social networks and cultural norms that arise from civil society) facilitates civic participation (Putman 1993). Social capital links the concept of resources and networks, because networks are defined as resources that individuals can draw on. According to Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2003), the networks found in community groups are pivotal in establishing trust, which is seen as cementing the bonds of social life and is the foundation for building communities, civil society, and democratic governance. This, in turn allows political information to spread.

The acclamation that Putnam has received as a social capital theorist resulted in the widespread use of this term, although his work lacks a gendered analysis of social networks and any broader definition of political action. It was this absence that sparked the feminist academic community to question his theories. In many ways social capital creates space for a discussion of the myriad of ways in which women engage in their

communities (Lowndes 2000). However, despite its promise to link informal community-based activities with broader political phenomenon, the social capital debate has often replicated the classic public/private split (Lowndes 2003).

Vivian Lowndes (2003) explains that due to his definition and qualifiers for social capital, Putnam's work gives little or no attention to women's role in creating and maintaining social capital, and has focused disproportionately on male-dominated activities. She claims that, underestimating the work that women do outside of formal political and economic networks, Putnam neglects a wide range of ways that women contribute to their communities. As is often the case in political science (and academic debate more generally), a lack of interest in gender dynamics has tended to produce a male-centric rather than gender-neutral concept within the social capital debate. Also highlighting the absence of women in Putnam's work, Peter Hall (1999) claims that much of the preservation of social capital in Britain in recent years can be attributed to women's increasing participation in civic life (Hall 1999).

Work by the Canada Election Study Team, entitled *Gender, Knowledge and Social Capital* (2003), found that men and women reported similar amounts of social capital. Yet social capital did not have the same capacity to increase women's knowledge and involvement in formal politics as it did for men. This result is based on the differential effect of men's and women's associational membership, although the study does note that to achieve a greater understanding of the importance of these social ties the scope needs to be broadened to include informal networks where more women are.

In his analysis Putnam also neglects the extent to which gender inequalities shape people's civic lives. He devotes little attention to the different social and civic contexts in

which men and women operate, such as uneven distribution of benefits, and access to information and other resources that may accrue from formal and informal social ties. (Gidengil et al. 2003). Virginia Sapiro (2003) argues that focusing on gender offers a good entry point to expanding our understanding of the connection between social capital and politics. She believes it especially crucial to examine the links between politics and social life, in particular the cultural and social roots of political engagement and power. The historical development of political action emphasizes the degree to which politics is a cultural activity embedded in and linked to other social domains.

The advent of Putnam's investigation of social capital has sparked greater interest among feminist scholars to the work of voluntary and community associations affecting women's accumulation and use of social capital. In their recent book *Gender and Social Capital*, Elisabeth Gidengil and Brenda O'Neill (2006) analyze the consequences of inserting gender into the social capital debate. They claim a gendered lens reveals the underdeveloped state of theorizing about the causal mechanisms that link social capital and democratic politics, and in particular the ways in which social inequalities affect both the accumulation and investment of social capital. In this work they identify the importance of gender-differentiated circuits of social capital for understanding women's political engagement.

Women's associational involvements and informal networks clearly represent a two-edged sword: they can simultaneously be a resource that enables women to get ahead politically and a hindrance that holds women back (2006, 380).

Gidengil and O'Neill's findings reveal that the type of social capital may be more important in facilitating political engagement than its quantity for women. They also

point to the ways in which women engage politically and thus raise fundamental questions about the boundaries of politics.

Since “social capital refers to networks of social connection” (Putnam 2000, 117), there needs to be a reinvestigation of which organizations are given social priority in future academic research. For example, the benefits derived from social capital are often determined to some degree by the very definition of the concept. Survey-based measures have typically focused disproportionately on male dominated activities, and therefore what gets counted reflects notions of what is ‘public’, and thus politically relevant (Lowndes 2006). Examining formal rather than informal associations and relying on the public rather than the private elements of networks have rendered research on social capital blind to women’s circles of support and the many ways in which social capital benefits the larger society (Gidengil and O’Neill 2006). In short, social capital directs our attention to the political relevance of interactions that are normally defined beyond the scope of politics, and as result we need to identify the circumstances under which social capital becomes an actual, rather than potential source for democracy (Lowndes 2003).

If women operate in a different civic world than men, attention should be directed to the critical role that their distinctively female social networks play in propelling them into political participation (Sapiro 2003). Traditional conceptions of motherhood have been constructed in a manner that appears to exclude, reduce or constrain women’s access to politics, although evidence exists that women’s associational activity represents a genuinely radical and politicized approach for social change (Black 1989). By paying attention to community organizations, an arena in which women have long been active,

social capital recognizes and give credit to previously ignored activities leading to political engagement (Everitt 2006). Ann Firor Scott claims,

For women...voluntary associations became a place to exercise the public influence otherwise denied then; in a sense they provided an alternative career ladder, one that was open to women when few others were (1991, 177).

Through their associational involvement women are gaining valuable experience and a number of important and useful skills for political life (Carbert 1995 and 2006, Andrew 2006). A long series of studies (Verba et al. 1978) have confirmed the cognitive, social, and organizational skills involved in working with community organizations. Becoming an active member of an interest group typically demands the ability to gather and process information, to communicate and organize events and meetings, and to manage people.

Others explain that organizational involvement permits women to exercise leadership, develop their individual talents, and to learn practical skills for entry into the public world, such as giving a speech, running a meeting, keeping the books, in addition to extending their social networks (Burns et al. 2001, 73-74). Echoing these claims is Darcy et al.'s (1994) study which found activity in volunteer groups is strongly associated with the political success of women candidates. They state that voluntary groups can form the base for developing leadership skills and experience, community visibility, and widespread contacts (1994, 111). Louise Carbert (2006) further elaborates:

Volunteer work is an important element of leadership, in that volunteers invest energy, money, and time in their community when they engage in face-to-face interactions with other people (2006, 37).

Joanna Everitt (2006) concludes that women's activity in community organizations, and the networks they develop as a result of them, have the potential to provide the opportunities to develop the organizational understanding and communication

capabilities necessary for political life. For these reasons, she explains, women who are embedded in social networks developed in community organizations are more psychologically engaged in politics and are more likely to be approached to be politically involved.

As discussed, there has been little scholarly attention paid to the value of women's associational activity in the discipline of political science, specifically as a precursor to elected office. In addition there is diminishing work from feminist scholars examining women's civic lives as important social and political experiences. While reviewing the existing literature in both fields I began to notice that within the 'women and politics' field there is very little work on women at the local level, and furthermore there is even less written on women in the municipal politics literature. In light of these existing gaps I believe my research is timely and significant for scholars of both local government and women and politics, highlighting the need to expand the definition of 'political experience' and better understand the connection between women's civic lives and their decision to run for public office. By investigating women's associational activity from a feminist perspective my research will add to the knowledge of women's training and recruitment into public office and better understand the social dynamic of skills, knowledge and networks that women establish as community leaders.



## **CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODS**

As the research assistant for the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities (UNSM) Women in Local Government Project I also sat on the steering committee and was able to work with six municipal councillors and one former councillor, each from a different part of the province. I worked with these women on the project for approximately nine months and in that time had the privilege of learning with them, learning from them and gaining a richer understanding of their experiences as municipal leaders. These women are highly skilled individuals with decades of political experience among them, and they are integral players in the institutions of local government in Nova Scotia.

While sitting on the steering committee of the Women in Local Government initiative, five of these women were also participants in a focus group for the research section of the project and all contributed in an advisory role. It was during this process that I began to be inspired, energized, and motivated by the leadership and determination that these women displayed.

Recognizing the value and richness of their experiences and interested in learning more about their decision to run for elected office, I asked each to be a participant in my own thesis research. In addition to reflecting on their experiences in the community before seeking elected office, I asked for their reflections on the UNSM's research and their experience as spokespersons for the project. Moreover, due to my past relations with these women I had the advantage of speaking with them more informally during the interview, and as a result they may have been more candid and open with me.

My research consisted of individual, semi-structured interviews with seven members of the UNSM Women in Local Government project steering committee, each of

whom is currently or in the past has been a municipal elected official. This research was reviewed and approved by the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board. Each participant signed an informed consent form explaining the basis of my study and the fact that I was not able to provide strict confidentiality due to the nature of the research and their public profile. Each interview was recorded on audiotape, four conducted over the phone. Each participant completed the full interview; the interviews ranged from 35 minutes to two hours in length.

I chose to conduct research through in-depth individual interviews because each woman is an important player in municipal government in Nova Scotia and their stories merit close and careful attention and analysis. Through the interviews they were able to speak directly to their personal history and experience in the community, and their varied routes to elected office. Questions allowed the participants to expand in some areas as they wished and to contextualize experiences in their own words. This method allowed them to shape the tone and direction of the interview as much as possible while reflecting on their path into politics. The questions provided a background for participants to speak about their memories, past achievements, and challenges, and to examine the factors that prompted them to run for municipal office. Each woman discussed why she became involved in the community initially and the effect this had on her political career. As spokespersons for the UNSM Women in Local Government project, the participants were already comfortable discussing their experiences as municipal politicians, and therefore were more than willing to expand on particular aspects of their careers.

## **2.0 Background and Objectives of the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities Women in Local Government Project**

The Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities is a municipal body created to protect, and serve as an advocate for, municipal units in Nova Scotia. At their Fall 2004 conference a resolution was moved for the Board of Directors to create a steering committee to research how to remove barriers that hinder women's involvement in local government. The resolution passed and a steering committee was formed, to be made up of six municipal elected officials (none from the same municipality), one representative from the Association of Municipal Administrators, one from the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, one from Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, one staff member from Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities, and up to two members at large. This committee was given the task of directing the Women in Local Government project. It was to report to the UNSM membership their findings and recommendations at the Fall 2005 conference.

As stated in their terms of reference, the purpose of this committee was: 1) to identify the opportunities to better involve women as citizens and politicians in municipal government, 2) to recommend measures to involve women in all their diversity in the consultation and engagement activities of municipal government, and 3) to recommend measures for recruiting and retaining women in electoral politics. The Women in Local Government project was to research and prepare a report outlining the issues facing women in municipal politics with recommendations on how to improve participation, prepare an action plan for implementing the suggested recommendations, and design a communications strategy for the project. The goals of the project were for steering

committee participants to be well informed on the issues and recommendations, to garner support from a majority of UNSM members on the recommendations, and ultimately to increase the number of women running as candidates in the 2008 municipal elections to 30 percent.

### **2.1 My Experience as a Research Assistant**

To better understand the context in which my thesis evolved, I will provide a background of my past personal and research experience because many of the ideas and support for my research were prompted by and further reinforced through my experience as a research assistant for the UNSM Women in Local Government project in the summer of 2005. In this role I was able to contribute to steering committee discussions and thus to help shape the direction and focus of the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities' work. Working under the direction of the committee, I designed a survey sent to the Chief Administrative Officers of every municipality in the province and compiled the resultant findings of the study from the responses. I also recorded and analyzed the material collected from six focus groups that were held in different parts of the province, and co-wrote the final report, *Untapped Resources: Women and Municipal Government in Nova Scotia*. My experience in this project directly influenced my understanding of women's involvement in local government as well as motivating me to continue research in this area.

As a requirement for my Community Based Learning course in the joint Master's of Women's Studies program at Saint Mary's University and Mount Saint Vincent University, I began a placement at the Halifax Young Women's Christian Association

(YWCA) in the fall of 2004. It was through this placement that I was able sit on the newly formed steering committee of the Women in Local Government project as a representative of the YWCA.

When I started my placement at the Halifax YWCA that organization had recently released a report, *Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Processes*, based on research in the Halifax Regional Municipality as one of six cities for the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) Strategies for More Inclusive Canadian Communities project. The result of this nation-wide study was a national report, *Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Decision Making: Strategies for More Inclusive Communities*, released in September 2004. This research was devoted to examining municipal consultation practices and policies so that the full diversity of Canadian women would have a meaningful voice in the decisions affecting their daily lives. The report recommends a national strategy to strengthen women's involvement in public participation and bridge the current gender gap in Canadian municipal processes.

As part of my work at the YWCA I was assigned to review and analyze the recommendations coming from this national report in comparison with those from the regional consultations in Halifax, and to put forward strategies that could be undertaken locally to increase women's participation in municipal government. A number of the recommendations from the regional report were presented at a Halifax Regional Municipality Council meeting in October 2004. Unfortunately, these recommendations were not adopted. Council recognized the announcement of the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities Women in Local Government project a few weeks prior and deferred a decision on the YWCA's recommendations until the UNSM completed their research. It

is disappointing to note that as of Fall 2007 Halifax Regional Council has not reconsidered the YWCA's recommendations or similar recommendations from the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities Women in Local Government research.

## **2.2 Methods and Findings of the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities Women in Local Government Project**

Research for the Women in Local Government project included a review of existing research on women's engagement in politics, a self-administered survey of Nova Scotia municipalities, and six focus groups that addressed women's experiences and perspectives on participation in municipal government. Through the project's steering committee, three central questions were identified to direct the research: 1) What is the existing situation with regard to women's participation in municipal decision-making in Nova Scotia? 2) Why do Nova Scotia women not fully participate in municipal decision-making? 3) What needs to happen for more women, and women who represent all Nova Scotians, to become involved in municipal decision-making?

The Women in Local Government survey was developed to establish a picture of women's current participation in municipal government. In order to do this we needed to understand in what capacity women were currently contributing to municipal government in Nova Scotia (as citizens, staff and elected officials), and what each municipality was doing, or failing to do, to encourage and support greater participation from their community. The survey gathered data regarding the number of women and men represented on municipal boards and committees, the gender divide among management and non-management staff, and initiatives to facilitate women's participation in council meetings, board and committee meetings and public consultations in each municipality.

The survey was sent to the chief administrators of Nova Scotia's 55 municipalities and had a 69 percent response rate (38 surveys). According to the responses, women comprise 30 percent of the members of municipal boards and committees in Nova Scotia, and are chairpersons of one quarter of these bodies (this includes both female councillors and volunteers). Of the boards and committees that women sit on, it was found that they were most likely to hold memberships on committees concerned with heritage, recreation and leisure, while men were particularly over-represented on committees dealing with infrastructure, public safety, finance, economic development and land-use planning. The survey also indicates that women make up 29 percent of the management positions in municipalities across the province, and as of September 2005 they comprised only 13 percent of the municipal administrative heads in Nova Scotia, the lowest number in the country. In terms of Human Resource practices, only five percent of the municipalities surveyed offered diversity training for its staff, seven percent offer diversity training for elected officials, and less than a quarter of municipalities had an affirmative action policy for hiring. In efforts to educate and assist elected officials, less than one third of the municipalities offered mentoring programs for newly elected councillors.

There was no municipality in the province that provided affordable or subsidized childcare on-site to assist parents wishing to participate in council meetings, committee meetings and public consultations. Approximately one third of the municipalities advertised for board positions and public consultations at community locations (outside of City Hall, such as libraries, grocery stores, etc.). Forty one percent of communities chose meeting venues (for committee and board meetings, public consultations and council) that were accessible by public transit or made arrangements for transportation of

individuals wishing to attend. Over 85 percent of municipalities chose meeting times outside of dinner hours (5-7 pm). Only six per cent of municipal units keep statistics on citizens that participate in public consultations. To support public education on municipal affairs, 73 per cent of the respondents provided information to the public on current regional projects, upcoming items at council and council decisions, while only 28 percent of the municipalities encouraged their councillors to make connections with and speak to local community organizations and women's groups (Haggart and vom Scheidt: 2005, pgs 45-50).

In addition to the survey, the Women in Local Government project conducted six focus groups with women across the province. Approximately one-third of focus group participants were current municipal councillors, another third were employed in municipal government and the final third consisted of women highly involved in their community and interested in local government. Representative of the urban and rural populations, the women who participated in the focus groups included every decade in age between 20 and 80, a range of life experiences, and perspectives from across the political spectrum. There was some representation from African-Nova Scotian women although no-one identified herself as aboriginal, Acadian, a person with disabilities, or on the basis of sexual orientation. The focus group participants found a great deal of common ground, and most reported that they left with an increased appreciation of the challenges and experiences that influence their ability and interest in participating in local government.

The data gleaned from the focus groups offered a few overarching themes on influences and impediments to women's participation in municipal government decision-



making. The first was a general lack of awareness among the public about the role of municipal government in people's day-to-day lives. Focus group participants expressed the importance of understanding how local government works as the first step to getting involved, noting that women may not be aware of the extent to which municipal decision-making affects their lives until an issue arises that directly affects their family. The focus group participants all echoed the need for more women as role models in formal decision-making as a means to encourage a higher participation rate among all women.

Participants also suggested a variety of complex deterrents to women seeking and holding elected office, including the need to earn a viable income as a politician. This is particularly difficult in rural areas where municipal politics only offers part-time or low-paid employment. Social factors were cited as deterrents to involvement, including difficulty accessing resources such as childcare and transportation, age discrimination, social expectations and socialization patterns of women, and women's lack of experience in political parties and political campaigns. Participants also spoke about cultural factors such as the media scrutiny and treatment of women politicians, and the competitive and combative political culture (Haggart and vom Scheidt 2005). In particular, there were some women who spoke about their preference for working in volunteer organizations rather than in elected office, because it allowed them to publicly lobby for specific interests.

The focus group participants were also asked about the factors that bring women into elected office. Information gathered from this question is what sparked my interest to further investigate the paths women take into politics. The focus group participants compiled a list of factors that bring women into local politics, the most important being

encouragement and support of friends, family, and colleagues, including being directly asked to run. Other factors facilitating participation included personal access to campaign financing, the non-partisan nature of municipal politics, and a belief that they can ‘make a difference’ and effect real and immediate change in their community through local government. It was also revealed during these discussions that a number of focus group participants were actively contributing to organizations and initiatives in their communities as volunteers. A few of the elected women spoke of how the networks they had built and the skills and knowledge they earned during this work were important for their job as politicians, although they did not cite them as directly affecting their candidacy.

When commenting on women as municipal employees, the focus group participants observed that the hiring and employment culture of some municipalities may present significant impediments to women’s advancement. In addition, there was a specific reference to the different treatment women received if they were in clerical positions as opposed to managerial positions. The most significant finding that came out of speaking to municipal staff in focus groups was the importance of a neutral third-party conflict-resolution mechanism to deal with internal human resources problems. This could be an issue particularly in rural communities where the municipal staff are only a few individuals, and if there is a complaint against a manager that person is also responsible for resolving the problem. Currently in Nova Scotia there is no ombudsperson or agency designated to investigate or mitigate human resource problems (Haggart and vom Scheidt 2005). This finding has a direct impact on the employment conditions of municipal staff, and specifically the women who make up the majority of

clerical staff and are more vulnerable to discrimination.

The Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities Women in Local Government project concluded by recognizing that Nova Scotia lags behind Canada and the rest of the world in women's involvement at the local level. It acknowledged that women are a tremendous untapped resource who have much to contribute to municipal government because they are active in their communities and represent an important source of skills, information and knowledge of local issues. The Women in Local Government project concluded that municipal government needs to become more responsive to and inclusive of women and local interests, including strengthening women's participation in all forms of municipal decision-making and everyone must play a role.

### **2.3 Reflections on the Women in Local Government Project**

I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to further explore an area of personal and academic interest as a research assistant for the Women in Local Government project.

During this time, I was able to draw on and test my previous knowledge as well as gain further insight into women's experiences with municipal government (as councillors, staff and community members), including what measures are needed to encourage and support their participation. Working on the Women in Local Government steering committee gave me the opportunity to collaborate with individuals who had an interest and stake in increasing the number of women involved in municipal government.

The insight I gained through my work with the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities helped to shape my thesis topic and focus. This experience allowed me to gain a greater perspective on the lives of women in Nova Scotia who are invested in and

influence their communities through leadership in municipal government and volunteer organizations. Listening to focus groups participants speak about their experiences and perceptions of local government, I recognized a number of patterns that needed further exploration, specifically the connection between the women's associational activity and those that run for local government. When I began to consider the roles these women play in their communities I became increasingly interested in how this work influences their decision to enter public life.

During the time that I spent working for the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities and speaking with focus group participants, other municipal councillors, and the media, I realized what a complex and contentious issue this was. The resolution passed to initiate the Women in Local Government project was based on the need for municipal government in Nova Scotia to be more representative of the population and to have a voice that was more gender-balanced. This project aimed to understand why more women were not involved in municipal decision-making, rather than the reasons that some women were. In *Rural Women's Leadership in Atlantic Canada* (2006) Louise Carbert explains that an absence is not easy to investigate: she states that examining why there are no women on the ballot starts well before the election.

The Women in Local Government project focused on investigating what municipalities could do to encourage more women to participate, but failed to address why women choose other avenues of participation instead. The project also did not take into consideration the routes that women take to arrive in elected politics, and even how this path may be different from that of men. How clear are the paths to public office? What propels one individual rather than another into public life?

To address these issues a number of factors need to be recognized, including local political culture, public attitudes towards women in politics, and the different avenues that are used to recruit women for public life. Recruitment into municipal politics is much less straightforward and transparent than with provincial and federal politics due to its non-partisan nature. This thesis directs attention to the process by which women are recruited into municipal politics through their associational work in the community. Exploring this connection will fill a gap in the academic literature by identifying volunteer work as one of the routes to municipal government for women. However, in order to identify these experiences as valid training for elected office, the work that women do both in the public and private realm must be acknowledged and politically valued. A feminist analysis enables me to uncover the many layers of women's civic lives that drive them to become involved to their community through volunteer organizations and how this work contributes to their decision to enter public office.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANTS ASSOCIATIONAL EXPERIENCE PRIOR TO CANDIDACY**

### **3.0 Sociological Background of Participants**

The lives and experiences of each of the seven women who were gracious enough to share their stories with me form the substantive core of this research. In order to contextualize their interviews, a brief sociological background of these women is in order. All but one woman was elected at the time of the interview. Of those holding office, two were in the position of mayor, two were deputy mayors, and two were councillors. At least half of them have also held positions on the board or committees of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities. Although membership in these organizations is automatic for municipal officials, individuals may also be appointed to various positions on boards and committees and run for executive seats. A few of my interview participants have volunteered their time and skills chairing committees and have held executive positions in these organizations, which are additional responsibilities and signs of prestige and respect. A common trait that the women shared was a well-respected public profile within the networks of municipal administrators, politicians, and the wider community where they lived.

All of the participants were white Nova Scotians and each was deeply embedded in the community that had elected them. If the women had not grown up in this community, they had spent the majority of their adult lives there. The women ranged from approximately 40 to 70 years of age, were of high socio-economic status, and all had children except one. No one identified herself as being a member of a sexual, cultural or religious minority. From the research findings, the women interviewed had between

six months and 20 years of experience working in a volunteer capacity in the community before running for office. The participants' backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge were very diverse and influenced by the region in which they lived in, the age they were elected, and the local political culture. Yet all reported remarkably similar motivations for getting into politics and opinions about the importance of women's participation in local government.

The interview participants represented seven different municipalities from across the province, with three residing in urban centres (Halifax, Dartmouth, and Cape Breton Regional Municipality) and four in rural areas (Town of Shelburne, Town of Windsor, Town of Digby, Town of New Glasgow). Each woman had spent a considerable time in political office, ranging from six to 25 years. Apart from their individual characteristics, each woman was shaped by the characteristics of the communities in which they resided and were elected to represent. Furthermore, the distinctive and sometimes unique features of their community, such as population, local economy, and age demographics, have shaped each participant's experience on council. The following table indicates the population of each of the six municipalities represented by the participants.

<b>Municipality</b>	<b>Population</b>
Halifax Regional Municipality	372,679
Cape Breton Regional Municipality	102,250
Town of New Glasgow	9,455
Town of Windsor	3,709
Town of Digby	2,092
Town of Shelburne	1,879

Source: 2006 Canadian Census

### 3.1 Summary of Interview Questions

The interviews had two sections. During the first part of the interview I asked each participant to reflect on their personal experiences leading up to their decision to run for elected office and their organizational involvement prior to being elected. These questions were aimed at gaining a clearer picture of the women's roles in the community and the knowledge, networks, and skills they achieved as a result. My intention was to record and document their public activities before they were elected and to identify the significance of this experience on the route they took to politics. I asked about their first involvement in electoral politics, what prompted them to get involved in the community, the nature and length of their community involvement, and eventually the reason(s) that prompted them to be a political candidate. I inquired about which organization(s) facilitated their candidacy and if they thought associational activity had the ability to motivate someone to run for public office. I also asked each woman to speak about her role model and specifically if there was anyone who suggested that she run (see Appendix for interview schedule).

The second set of questions dealt with participants' experiences as members of the UNSM Women in Local Government project steering committee. This set of questions asked the participants to reflect on their personal experiences as part of the Women in Local Government initiative, and also their opinion of the research undertaken for the project, the current work being done by the project, and its future directions. Since each participant, except for the woman who was not currently in office, had volunteered to join this project in addition to her regular duties as a councillor or mayor, it may be inferred that each possessed a personal interest in increasing the numbers of women in



politics. However, as my research illustrates, we cannot increase the number of women in politics until we understand what leads them to make this decision in the first place.

### **3.2 Experience in Partisan Politics**

All of the participants in my research have had long and successful political careers at the local level. To investigate the steps leading up to their political careers I asked the women to reflect on their first exposure to and involvement in politics. Five out of seven participants identified themselves as having been members of a political party before they were elected, all of whom had first-hand experience working on a provincial or federal election campaign. Of these women, two were members of the Liberal Party, two were members of the Conservative Party and one was a member of the New Democratic Party. In addition, four of them had been regularly involved in the party as a committee volunteer from six months to 20 years. With the exception of the local school board, none of the women mentioned sitting on any municipal boards or committees or participating in a municipal campaign prior to running.

One participant spoke of her experience in partisan politics as critical to building the knowledge and political skills that paved the way for her for her entrance into municipal government.

Being involved in political parties would've had an influence on that decision [to enter municipal politics]. I had been involved with a provincial party and federal party at some level, volunteering for campaigns and individuals. They definitely offer some important skill sets.

Two of the participants cited involvement in partisan politics from a very young age. One talked about joining the youth wing of a political party in Britain before immigrating to Canada. The other woman commented on helping her parents with work during an

election.

I was about seven years old, my parents were staunch supporters of the NDP and I used to go around and help give out information flyers at doors. And when there was work to be done in the office my mother would take me with her. Of course I wouldn't be doing the office work, but I was there and saw the buzz and things of that nature, and thought it was quite interesting.

The influence of growing up in a political household or developing a public consciousness from a young age brought politics into the everyday lives of these women. These early experiences allowed the participants to recognize that politics can be translated into tangible actions by those who participate.

The fact that three-quarters of research participants were involved in partisan politics as adults prior to being elected signals this experience could have been a contributing factor in their entry into public life. Work on an election campaign may include performing administrative duties, fundraising, scheduling, canvassing with and for the candidate, managing volunteers, or helping with signs/publicity. In addition, committee work within a political party may include recording or communications duties, organizing committee members, chairing meetings, research, and consensus building. The skills and knowledge that this work provides is a good training ground for anyone thinking about becoming a candidate. As a result, active party members not only understand the work behind the scenes during an election, but they also understand the dynamics and organization of partisan politics. In addition, those working on elections are connected to the pulse of the community. They have a better grasp of local issues and of informal structures of power and influence, as well as an understanding of the regional political culture.

Three of the women who had worked on provincial or federal campaigns prior to

being elected cited the importance of this work in increasing their knowledge of elections. One woman stated, "I learned some things about organization and what you would need in place, you need a good [campaign] team and that type of stuff." Another participant became involved in partisan politics through working in an office environment where one of her colleagues ran federally. She remembers,

I got caught in the hype of the whole thing and then later I became involved in being poll chairman in my area and things like that. I became involved as a worker, and then decided to put my own two cents worth in.

The desire to contribute and to have a voice in the political arena is a theme that ran through almost all of the interviews. One participant talked about a workshop she took for campaign managers offered by the Conservative Party; and as a result she went on to manage a friend's campaign for a federal nomination. Because she had the skills and experience of managing someone else's campaign she felt better prepared when she decided to run herself. Participants in the UNSM focus groups reiterated this woman's experience. They noted that female candidates with prior political experience and connections to political parties appeared to have an advantage over those without the contacts and experience that came from running a political campaign (Haggard and vom Scheidt 2005, 16). Gaining a glimpse of how elections work is a way that political parties engage women into further political action (Haggard and vom Scheidt 2005, 22).

These results suggest that involvement in partisan politics gives women the background and knowledge that is necessary to succeed in municipal politics. However, in the interviews, not all participants explicitly cited the value of this experience in developing their political consciousness, or connected these activities to their decision to run. One of the reasons for this may be that the participants saw their partisan

involvement as separate from their work on municipal council where they viewed themselves as neutral political actors. During the interviews the participants were careful to state that they all stepped back from their work in political parties once they were elected municipally.

However, the difference between participants' partisan experiences and their candidacy for municipal council must be recognized in order understand how they influence each other. Working on provincial or federal elections allows individuals to be part of an established structure with access to resources and campaign workers with years of experience, skills and knowledge. The participants who had prior experience in partisan elections could draw on this during their municipal campaign. However, the municipal environment inevitably changes the role of the candidate. The type of work the women had to do as a municipal candidate required them to rely heavily on groups of friends and family to assist them with every aspect of their campaign. One woman who had been involved with partisan politics prior to running for municipal office commented on her knowledge and experience of the two, stating, "...when you run for municipal election you're on your own, its all door-to-door knocking. It's a lot different than a federal or provincial campaign."

In the course of the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities Women in Local Government research, some women in the focus groups commented that the non-partisan nature of municipal politics appealed to them because it allowed them to speak out on particular issues. They liked the relative independence of municipal politics: by not having to tow a party line, they could make decisions based on what they believed was best for their constituents (Haggard and vom Scheidt 2005, 22). Although I did not

specifically ask why they choose the municipal level, my research participants spoke fondly of their experiences in local government and expressed satisfaction for what could be accomplished at the local level.

### **3.3 Other Politically Relevant Experience**

There were two research participants who had no involvement in partisan politics or elections at any level prior to running themselves. One participant stated, “I had no idea [how to run a campaign], I learnt it from a book” when she decided to seek office. Even though these women did not have prior campaign experience their employment and volunteer activities provided valuable lessons and led them to an appreciation for the role of municipal government in their community. Before they ran for council both women gained extensive community experience because of their professions and personal interests.

One participant spoke about how the infrastructure in her neighbourhood needed to be improved. Working with the residents’ association, she realized that municipal council was the avenue to do this.

I was involved with a residents’ association, and at the time we had no water and sewer in the subdivision in which I lived, we were drinking water from the lake and had lots of potholes. So it occurred to me that if I could be a [municipal] representative that I could make a difference.

This woman’s experience with the residents’ association gave her the knowledge of how to make these changes in the city, and her desire to improve the quality of life where she lived led her to consider municipal candidacy. This participant also began teaching classes for Saint John Ambulance and was involved in a Community Health Association, which led to her becoming a spokesperson for poverty and health issues. She explains the

insights gained through these experiences.

That really was a motivational time for me because I began to see not only had I learned from the residents' association, but I began to see how [by] being a part of the political arena you could truly influence how decisions were going to be made.

It was the experience this woman had in community groups that gave her insight into local decision-making structures and what could be accomplished through these avenues.

Another participant recalled her work with social justice organizations.

I was active in the community as a volunteer and I was a member of the Federation of University Women who were active on social policy issues. I was [also] before council as a social worker in both Dartmouth and New Glasgow for various issues, whether it was rezoning issues for developing group homes for the mentally ill, or developing shelters for battered women and children... and I was before council as a parent on various school issues.

It was her job as a social worker that got her involved in other organizations where she gained important political experience and knowledge of municipal government. These experiences gave her a solid foundation on which to build her candidacy.

I interviewed another woman who spoke about having been involved in student politics. This participant, who was the youngest of my sample, cited the importance of this involvement.

When I hit high school I started getting involved in the Student Council and Model Parliament, which I thought was interesting because it basically showed what democracy is and how democracy was formed, and I think that helped me understand the dynamics of civics instead of just talking about it.

These experiences gave this participant a snapshot of public life at a young age. She learned the policies and procedures of the parliamentary system and was able to practice the public speaking and critical thinking skills needed for her eventual entry into politics.

### **3.4 Reasons for Candidacy**

The decision to put your name forward and become a candidate is not an easy one for anyone. Factors affecting the decision to run may include the time constraints of public life, loss of privacy, access to campaign financing, media and public speaking skills, and knowledge of public policy. In addition to these there are a set of factors affecting women disproportionately, which could contribute to and interfere with their decision to enter politics. These include media scrutiny, lack of resources for personal expenses during a campaign (such as business clothes, transportation, and childcare), the aggressive political culture, and lack of support. Past political experience, skills, knowledge and confidence operating in the public realm are positive contributing factors. As I discuss, the paths that women take to electoral politics make up a complex and dynamic story, and their experiences leading up to this decision are an integral part of the discussion. I was particularly interested in the motivations that informed my participants' decision to run. During my interviews I asked each woman to comment on what prompted them to stand for office and if there had been a particular issue or problem they wanted to solve.

### **Giving Back**

One theme that arose as a motivating factor for the women's candidacy was a desire to 'give back' to their community. Most of the participants were already working in a volunteer capacity for local organizations when they decided to run and saw becoming a politician as another way to contribute. One woman noted,

It was my way of participating and giving back to my community. I felt that my community was very good to me, it was a great place to raise my children and there were a lot of recreation programs. There were a lot of opportunities to have a good quality of life, and I felt that as a citizen I

would volunteer some time and become a member of council.

Her associational background enabled this woman to develop strong networks and connections in her community, and as a result had a stake in the community's success.

Another participant had immigrated to Canada without much money when her family was young. She spoke about the prosperity she found in this country and expressed gratitude for all that Nova Scotia had given her. "I always thought I owe this country. I had a good life, and I was wanting to be part of it and live a really full life and give something back." Committing her time as a municipal official allowed this woman to contribute to the community that provided for herself and her family.

Another woman reflected,

Since I've been married I've been heavily involved in community activity, and interestingly enough what tends to happen to people like me is you think that by going into politics that you can solve the problems of the world, make your community a better place and help people. So I guess that was the kind of thing that spurred me on.

The theme of public service was a common motivation to enter politics for the interview participants. Despite their differences, almost all the women had similar motivations for entering public life based on their ideas of what a municipal politician can accomplish. The participants viewed their involvement on council as the best way to serve the people and groups who build the community fabric and maintain the quality of life.

### **Having a Say**

A second thread among factors motivating candidacy was the participants' desire to have a voice in the decisions that were affecting their lives. As engaged citizens before their candidacy, most participants had an awareness and understanding of local issues. As a



result, the decision to become a candidate was another way to bring specific concerns to the public's attention. Once these women understood the structures of power and influence in their communities, they realized that working through the political system was an effective and accessible route for resolving particular issues. They could use their role as municipal politician to contribute to the public discussion and stake out space on the local public agenda. According to the participants, the decision to run was often sparked to action by experiences in their families, careers, or community organizations. For example, one participant recalled,

I was a nurse by profession and I felt that healthcare in general needed to be addressed. Because at that time we were beginning to work on getting a hospital in Dartmouth and I felt that there was an important role to play there and perhaps I could be helpful in that regard. So it occurred to me that if I could be a representative for whatever area in the city, that I could make a difference in that way.

This woman saw she could bring her knowledge and background in healthcare to an arena where this perspective was needed, municipal council. She saw her decision to run for local government as a way she could bring issues concerning health to a larger arena.

Another participant spoke passionately about her involvement in the community around issues of safety and policing in the neighbourhood where she lived. She explained that these experiences were the catalyst for community activism.

I started working in the community because of problems with social reform such as slum landlord housing, prostitution, crime and drugs and how it was affecting my community and the way that I lived. I saw no one else basically standing up and doing anything to even try to remedy the issue. So I started asking questions and prompting people to do things by writing letters to the media and starting a Neighbourhood Watch in my community; mobilizing my community so that they would understand that they're not alone in feelings of fear.

Asserting her voice publicly and garnering support from the neighbours gave this

participant the confidence and political skills necessary for council. A pattern among these stories is that an important issue close to home gave these women a voice, and speaking out to address those issues became the stepping stones along their path to electoral politics. A prevailing theme in almost every woman's story was that a local issue sparked her desire to engage in public life. These issues affected their life or those around them, which propelled them towards candidacy without regard for their own limitations or weaknesses. These women were not driven by ambition for their own political careers, but by a desire to make a difference in people's lives. Most of the women spoke of the fact that when they entered public life they did not see politics as a 'career', but a way to be an influential citizen in their community.

### **Lack of Local Leadership**

A prominent pattern that emerged from most of the interviews was the lack of local leadership in most of the participants' communities. The women decided to put their names forward because they thought they could do a better job than the incumbents. Examining the motivations of first time office holders, Ruth Mandel (1981) found that when women observed the work of their local elected officials, they realized they could bring new ideas and fresh perspective to a tired political establishment.

The participants found an issue that drove them to get involved in the community, they saw inaction on the part of local government officials, and were motivated to expand their political space by becoming a candidate for municipal government. The women often made this decision after observing the activities and decisions of council and realizing they themselves were competent community leaders; local politics became a

realistic and feasible option.

As a social worker and member of various social justice and anti-poverty groups, one woman attended council on a regular basis and did not agree with the attitudes of some of the sitting members.

I recall some of the attitudes, not in my backyard issues and those kinds of things, there was a fear of the unknown. Certainly I thought we needed to make sure that people who were in public life understood the importance of all people being able to enjoy a good quality of life. There wasn't a burning issue that brought me to council but there was certainly a perspective I felt was important for elected office.

Through her experiences working with council as a community activist this participant realized that varying perspectives were needed within municipal government to efficiently govern the community. She saw that certain views were absent from council and realized that she could bring them to the table.

Another woman spoke about her response to an environmental decision made by municipal council that affected her neighbourhood.

At that time we were in the middle of fighting a landfill issue. The County of Cape Breton was trying to site a new landfill area and they were looking at the valley below my home. And a few new residents along with myself, we had formed committees and started a reactive group, an anti-landfill group. Anyway, we were successful.

This experience sparked her to have a public voice, which was an important step along her path to municipal candidacy. Reacting to the priorities set by council, this woman realized she had the ability to affect change and represent the needs of her community.

While working to address issues that fall within municipal jurisdiction on crime and safety, one participant became aware of the lack of local political leadership in her community. She recalls the inaction of her local councillor.

He was very complacent to the point of being absent. Every time there was

a meeting that I went to and put up my hand to ask a question, he would not answer my hand. It became very prominent that he didn't want to answer anything that I had to say.

As a response and desire to have her views heard this participant became a founding and integral member of community groups such as Neighbourhood Watch and the local community council. When speaking of this involvement, she stated,

[It] was the big doorway that led me to this wonderful place. I found out that the person that was representing our area didn't want to be involved in the community council. I had an opinion of course, but it was people in the neighbourhood that prompted me to go down and speak at council.

When this work brought her to City Hall as a spokesperson for these groups, the passion and conviction that she displayed led the mayor, another councillor, and her neighbours to encourage her run in the next election. The connections she made while volunteering in the community prompted this woman to realize her voice should be heard and that she would be a good municipal candidate. She was also specifically encouraged to stand for council.

Another woman recalls her decision to run originated out of the lack of political action on issues of safety in her daughter's school.

I was involved in the PTA at the elementary school and there was an incident, actually a light fell from the ceiling and crashed onto a student's desk. Nobody was hurt, but of course as parents, as the PTA, we got very upset and very militant, actually to the school board, and said, 'this school's not safe', etc.

This participant explained that at the time the incident occurred municipal council managed the district school board, and both bodies had been silent on the issue. The only people responding with concern were herself and the other mothers involved in the Parent Teacher Association. She recalls, "I wasn't afraid of shaking my fists in the face of the school board." The fact that this incident happened in her daughter's classroom incited

this woman to persuade the school board to take notice. As result of her lobbying efforts the section of the school where the accident happened was closed and the Vice Principal, who also happened to be the town councillor for the area, was forced to resign. It was during the ensuing by-election that the members of the Parent Teacher Association suggested she run. "People said to me, 'put your money where your mouth is, you've had a lot to say and you've worked hard on this.'" She was convinced, put her name forward, and later the other candidates withdrew and she won by acclamation.

These examples illustrate that in a situation where there is a lack of local leadership it is relatively easy for women to step forward into this political vacuum. Due to Nova Scotia's smaller population, particularly in the rural areas, it is often harder to find individuals who are interested and would be suitable candidates for municipal government. As a result there is a unique political opportunity for women such as my interview participants, who have the necessary knowledge and experience in the community to make a successful bid for municipal office.

### **Asked to Run**

In *Untapped Resources: Women and Municipal Government in Nova Scotia*, The UNSM found that one of the main factors leading to women's candidacy was the experience of being asked to run as a candidate (Haggart and vom Scheidt 2005). As a clear theme throughout my study, it was the women who had close connections and experience with community organizations who built public profiles and were approached to run by individuals in their networks. In my research all but one participant stated they were asked by family members, friends, colleagues or mentors. Out of the six women who had

been coaxed by others to run, five of these cited family members and colleagues as their main supporters.

As a young adult one woman recalls her father being the first person to suggest she would be a good candidate. She recalls,

He always wanted to run politically, and municipally. And he used to say to me, 'you've got what it takes to be in municipal government and those people down there, they don't know anything and it's time somebody got in there.'

This experience underlies the fact that a lack of local leadership often leads to a political vacuum in the community. For women such as this participant, these conditions provided a reasonable atmosphere for an entrant to politics. This situation becomes a perfect opportunity for women to put their name forward and challenge the incumbents.

For one woman the support to enter politics came from the Canadian Federation of University Women, of which she had been a member. She recalls,

At that time that the Canadian Federation of University Women were trying to encourage more women to enter public life, and they encouraged me to do that. It was the executive and pretty much most of the members of the local branch, all women that I had volunteered with as a member of the association.

This example of direct influence may not have been as common among other participants, but indicates that some organizations are directly invested in their members and view their support as an important responsibility.

For two more women the same experience that originally sparked them to get involved in their community was the stimulus that made others take notice and eventually support their candidacy. In one case the participant stood up to the school board regarding the unsafe conditions in her daughter's school, and as a result was persuaded to run. She recalls, "It was mostly other mothers [on the Parent Teacher Association] who

thought I could do it.” The second woman was working on crime and safety issues in her community, and as a result was approached by a number of people in her neighbourhood who suggested she take her opinions into electoral politics. The first was her employer at the time. She remembers,

He basically said ‘You should run for Alderman, you really should’, and I ignored him. After a while you just start ignoring people when they say stuff like that. I said, ‘I’m not ready’ and then he would drop the subject.

As an active member of her Neighbourhood Watch association this woman took the initiative to speak on behalf of this group at City Hall. Her message was so compelling that she was encouraged to run for council by a number of her friends, neighbours and even the mayor of the city.

[They] were saying, ‘We want her to run, we should get her to run, you should run.’ And I was like, ‘I don’t think so because I’m unemployed, I have no money, I have no experience, and I don’t think I’m ready. And that’s when the mayor looked at me and said, ‘when will you be ready?’ And that was a very open-ended question, which made me think even more.

It was only after she was urged by a number of different people did she seriously consider the idea of putting her name forward in the next municipal election. What I found most compelling about this story is that the participant herself was the last person to realize that she would make a good municipal councillor. In speaking with her, it was evident that she enjoys her job and is energized and motivated by the work she does, but the opportunity to run for local government was not obvious to her until others suggested it.

Another participant cited the influence of a Member of the Nova Scotia Assembly in her decision to run.

Our MLA [for the riding she lived in] encouraged me. He’s the one who put my name forth for the school board, and he helped me make the decision to run for municipal government.

The politician in this situation took a personal interest in this woman's political success. This could be related to her partisan affiliation or simply to the personal connection between these two individuals. What is most significant from this experience is the importance of informal political networks that exist between the political elite and potential electoral candidates in the community. The benefits of these networks can range from name recognition and appointments to public boards and committees to financial campaign contributions. Since women are often connected to different social and professional networks than men, I believe these informal connections are worthy of further investigation. Further research should investigate specifically how these networks can directly affect women's chances of electoral success.

### **Support**

In addition to a desire to contribute to local politics, one of the most important factors behind the candidacy of the research participants was the support they received from their friends, families, and communities. Almost all of the participants indicated that such support was crucial to their decision to run. Most important was, specifically, the integral support of their spouses. One woman told a story about deciding to stand for election after her husband was the one approached to run in the next election.

It was almost a challenge because there were a couple of individuals that had come down to our home, they were trying to convince my husband to run. He was the most inappropriate person to approach. And he just said, 'She would be more equipped to run than I would.' They basically looked at me and said, 'Well, not being rude, but you are female and this community has never had a female councillor.' It was the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cape Breton County Council [that year], and I just sat back at that point and shut my mouth and thought, 'I'm going to do this.'



It was the public encouragement and support of her husband that helped this participant gain the confidence to take on this challenge.

Leading up to her candidacy, another participant recalled the overwhelming support she received from her neighbours and friends in her decision to become a candidate. Encouragement she received from a local public figure and mentor was particularly meaningful to her. She recalls a Member of the Nova Scotia Assembly saying, “If you win, girl, you’re gonna make a difference.” In addition, this participant also remembers the crucial support of her family.

I got a call from my parents on a Friday night saying, ‘We’ve been getting calls from your friends and they want you to run.’ And I said, ‘I’ll have to think about it.’ And they said, ‘Well, we’ve been thinking about it and we would support you if you ran.’ So I took the weekend, and then sat down and started just figuring out what a platform would be and it went on from there.

For this woman the encouragement and support she received from influential people in her life was a major factor in helping to solidify her decision to run.

### **3.5 Role Models and Influential Individuals**

In this study I am focusing on the factors that influence women’s decision to run for local government. I asked the participants to reflect on the influence of specific individuals in their lives leading up to their candidacy, specifically if they had any role models and if anyone had ever suggested that they run.

For role models a few participants cited famous public figures they looked up to and saw as admiral leaders. These figures included Canadian politicians from Pierre Trudeau and Robert Stanfield, to global figures such as Mother Teresa, Pope John Paul and Winston Churchill. There were three women who cited federal politicians whom they

had learned from and been influenced by. One woman stated,

Alexa McDonough had been kind of a role model because I'd seen how well she had done. And when there were issues through school or anywhere throughout my life, we could always call her up and she was always very helpful.

Another woman stated,

I very much admired our Member of Parliament, he was and still is a man of real integrity. I liked his being in the public eye and thought I might like to do that and be important. You know, walk into the room and have people say, 'Oh, look here's so and so.' I thought that it might be neat to be a bit of a celebrity like he was. And he was never short for words, he always had wonderful manners, made people feel that he really wanted to hear what they had to say.

Two participants cited local politicians in their community. One woman stated,

The previous councillor to me, I had a lot of respect for him. He was a real people person, he didn't ask you how much money you had in your pocket, or didn't look at your religious beliefs or your political beliefs, but he helped everybody that he possibly could. I thought, 'Well, I would like to be like that, but better.'

These accounts show that a woman's personal experience with political figures can greatly shape their conception of what politics is and the role of public figures in their communities. All of these women spoke about the public figures in their life who had influenced the way they saw politicians. The participants spoke of people who modelled behaviours, attitudes and characteristics that they believed were important for someone in the public realm. For some role models, it was the qualities that they embodied as politicians which inspired the participants, and for others it was personality characteristics the women admired through watching and working with them. These roles models were significant because they represented the values needed to be successful in electoral politics. For a few of the women their role models were famous individual celebrities whose public profiles they admired, and for other women they were common

individuals similar to themselves who rose the political ranks. This was particularly important for the two participants who looked up to other female politicians, not only because it was an example of what they could achieve, but also because these politicians actively mentored and encouraged them to be leaders in their communities.

### **3.6 Participants' Associational Activity**

During the interviews I asked each participant to comment on the factors that motivated them to consider running for public office. In order to explore how this decision may have been influenced by their associational activity, I asked each woman to give a detailed account of her work in the community up until the time she was elected. For many women these experiences spanned over 30 years of their lives and for others it was as brief a period as a year or two. To gather this information I divided associational activity into nineteen categories and surveyed the participants' experiences based on these groups. These categories were loosely based on those used in the 2006 World Values Survey, revised to correspond better with the Canadian context. In addition, for each category I asked the duration and capacity of their involvement (either as a member, volunteer, or executive position). I did not ask the participants to identify by name the groups in which they were involved in, but to account for each experience with a different organizational category. It is worth noting that the data collected for this question are subject to each woman's interpretation of which category their associational activity falls. In addition it was up to the participants to classify their work they did as the duties of a member, volunteer or executive. In some organizations these roles may have been quite distinct, while in other organizations individuals move fluidly from one role to

another, even working simultaneously in multiple capacities. Therefore the figures displayed are influenced by the nature of different organizations as well as the participants' classification of their associational activity.

The information from this question presents a picture of the organizational background of the participants and insight into the public worlds they inhabited prior to being elected. The results, as displayed in Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3 give us a glimpse into the networks that characterized each woman's organizational involvement prior to entering politics.

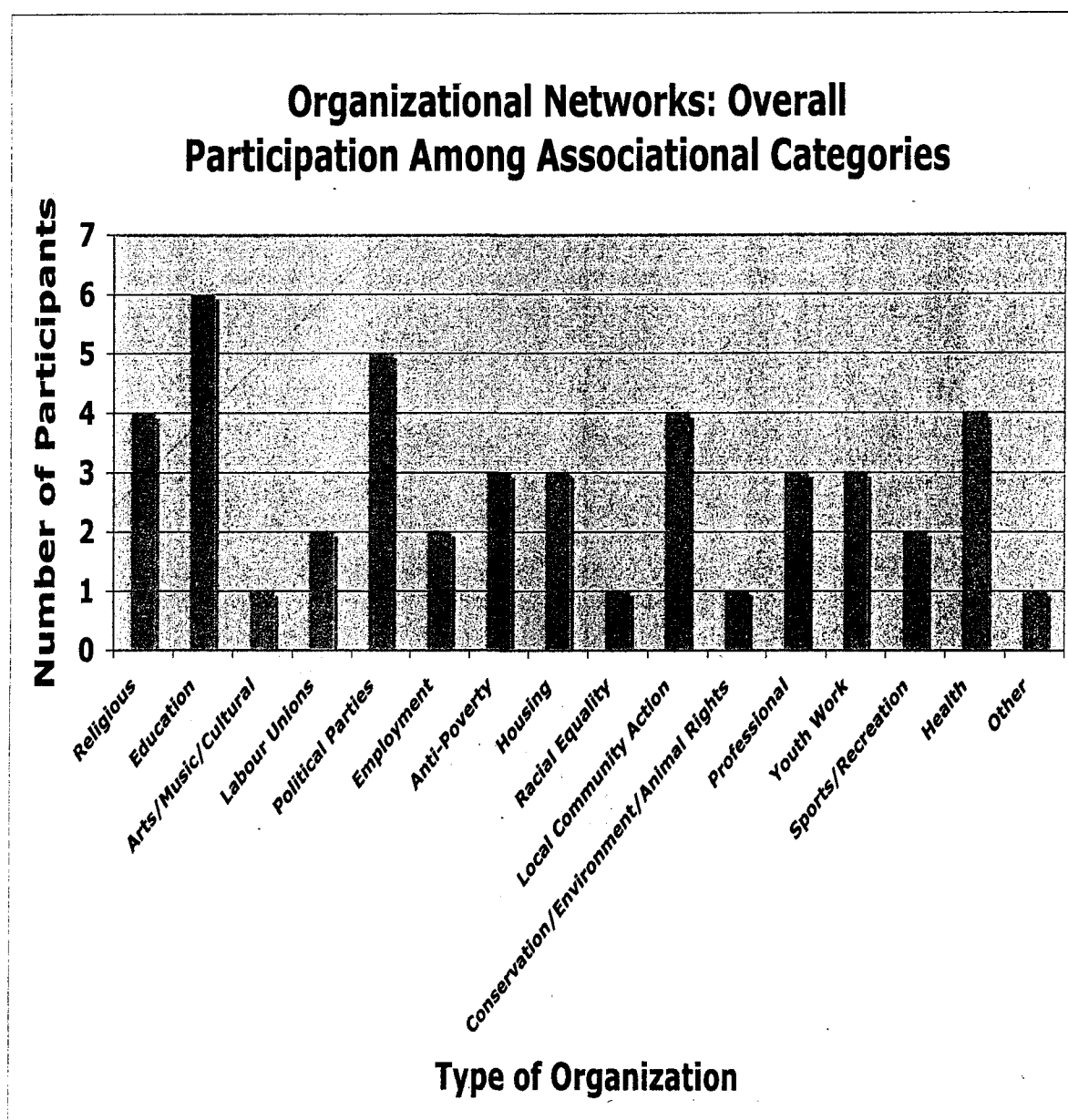
**Organizational Networks: Overall Participation Among Associational Categories****Figure 1**

Figure 1 displays the women's over-all participation in each of the organizational categories, regardless of the capacity of their work. Women reported the highest participation in organizations concerned with education, partisan politics, religion, health and local community action, in each of which at least four participants were engaged. There was no single category in which all seven women reported involvement, although the highest (six participants) was in education associations. The fact that all but one of the women had spent some time working with these groups shows that education and the way local schools were run was a priority in their lives or the lives of their families. Involvement in groups such as Parent Teacher Association shows that participants had the experience of working with an organized group of citizens, often with differing objectives and interests, who must work together to serve the school. As children get older, women often join the decision-making bodies of their schools and tackle issues that will have a direct impact on their education. In some ways this experience is not entirely unlike work on a municipal council, as most of the issues require knowledge and background of the local community. This finding points to education organizations as an experience that was very beneficial to municipal candidacy for the research participants.

Political Parties was the next frequently reported category among the participants, with five women identifying involvement. In addition to the benefits of working behind the scenes for political parties that came through in the previous questions, these figures further reinforce the value of partisan activity to the participants' candidacy. Demonstrating that partisan activity is a factor in municipal candidacy is an important finding, as it adds a different perspective to the American literature which posits local office as a training ground for partisan state or congressional candidacy (Long and

Slemko 1974, Merritt 1977, Carroll and Strimling 1983, Brodie 1985, Carroll 1993, Gertzog 1995, Flammang 1997, Sanbonmatsu 2006).

Categories in which four women reported involvement were religious groups, local community action and organizations concerning health. What is notable is that most of these groups operate at the grassroots level, organizing around issues affecting the community to specific concerns of their members. For example, these women may have been interested in issues of safety and security and joined the Neighbourhood Watch group, or either themselves or someone in their family became affected by cancer and they got involved in the cancer society. In addition, churches continue to be one of the main loci of social organization in many communities, especially rural areas (Glynis 2000).

The types of organizations with the least involvement among the participants (two to three women) were labour unions, employment associations, anti-poverty groups, housing organizations, professional associations, and sports and recreation groups. As shown in Figure 1, these results illustrate the types of groups that were relevant to the participants' lives. None of the women reported involvement in tourism, third world development/human rights organizations, women's groups, peace groups or Rotary, Lions Club and Legion associations, and as a result these categories were omitted from Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3. The reasons for this may lie in the nature of civic life in Nova Scotia. For example, in some areas of the province there may be no organizations that deal with third world development/human rights or peace. In addition, Rotary, Lions Club and Legion associations have only recently changed their mandate to include female members.

## Organizational Networks: Nature of Involvement

Figure 2

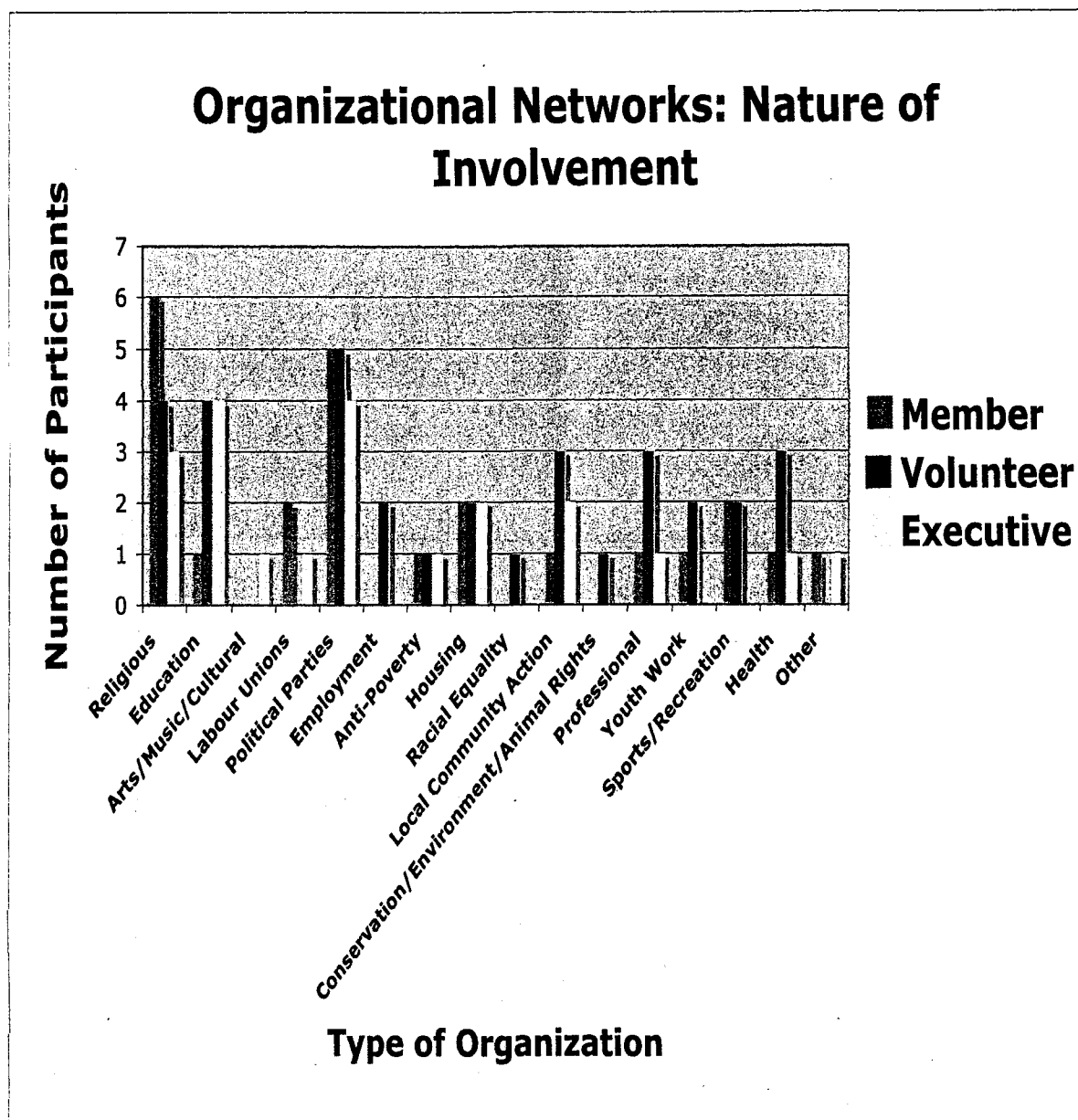




Figure 2 gives an in-depth account of the nature of the participant's associational activity, specifically the type of work they did for each organization. For each associational category they were involved in, I asked if the women were a member, if they held an executive position, or if they were a volunteer. In many instances, the women were involved in more than one capacity within the same organization, which is not reported in the graph. Also, I was not able to account for situations where a participant was involved in more than one organization that fell within the same category.

What can be seen in Figure 2 is a sketch of the type of activities participants devoted their time to among the different organizations. This graph shows that, with two exceptions, there was not a high amount of any one type of participation within a single category. The exception was political parties with five of the women reporting membership and volunteer experience, followed by religious groups with four identifying as members and volunteers in religious groups. Figure 2 also shows that most women involved held executive positions in these two groups. These findings parallel other studies (Burns et al. 2001) and illustrate that experience in both political parties and religious organizations was important to the women interviewed. It also shows that they worked in a leadership capacity for these groups, affecting the skills and knowledge they gained as a result. The involvement with political parties is particularly striking.

Women have long contributed to organizations that work to improve the quality and accessibility of education, and the only other category where four of the seven women reported involvement was in education organizations such as school boards and parent teacher associations. The women in these groups were more likely to hold executive positions and to work as volunteers. This shows that women continue to gain

politically relevant experience and skills in groups that deal with their children's lives.

The next most frequently reported categories in Figure 2 were local community action, professional associations, and health organizations, where three of the women were volunteers. Volunteering for these organizations was more prevalent than working at the executive level or holding a membership. One of the reasons for this may be how these groups are organized and run. Groups such as Neighbourhood Watch usually mobilize on an ad hoc basis responding to specific local concerns, while health associations have more of a need for volunteers during fundraising campaigns, and professional associations may need people the most help to organize conferences or events. Also worth noting is the nature and organizational structure of groups such as labour unions, employment organizations, professional associations, or sports/recreation groups. In these groups people automatically become members as a result of holding a job or a professional license or designation, or because of participating in a sports activity. Sometimes people may not even be aware that they are members of such organizations. As a result, the participants may not have reported membership in these groups in addition to their active involvement in other capacities.

## Organizational Networks: Duration of Involvement

Figure 3

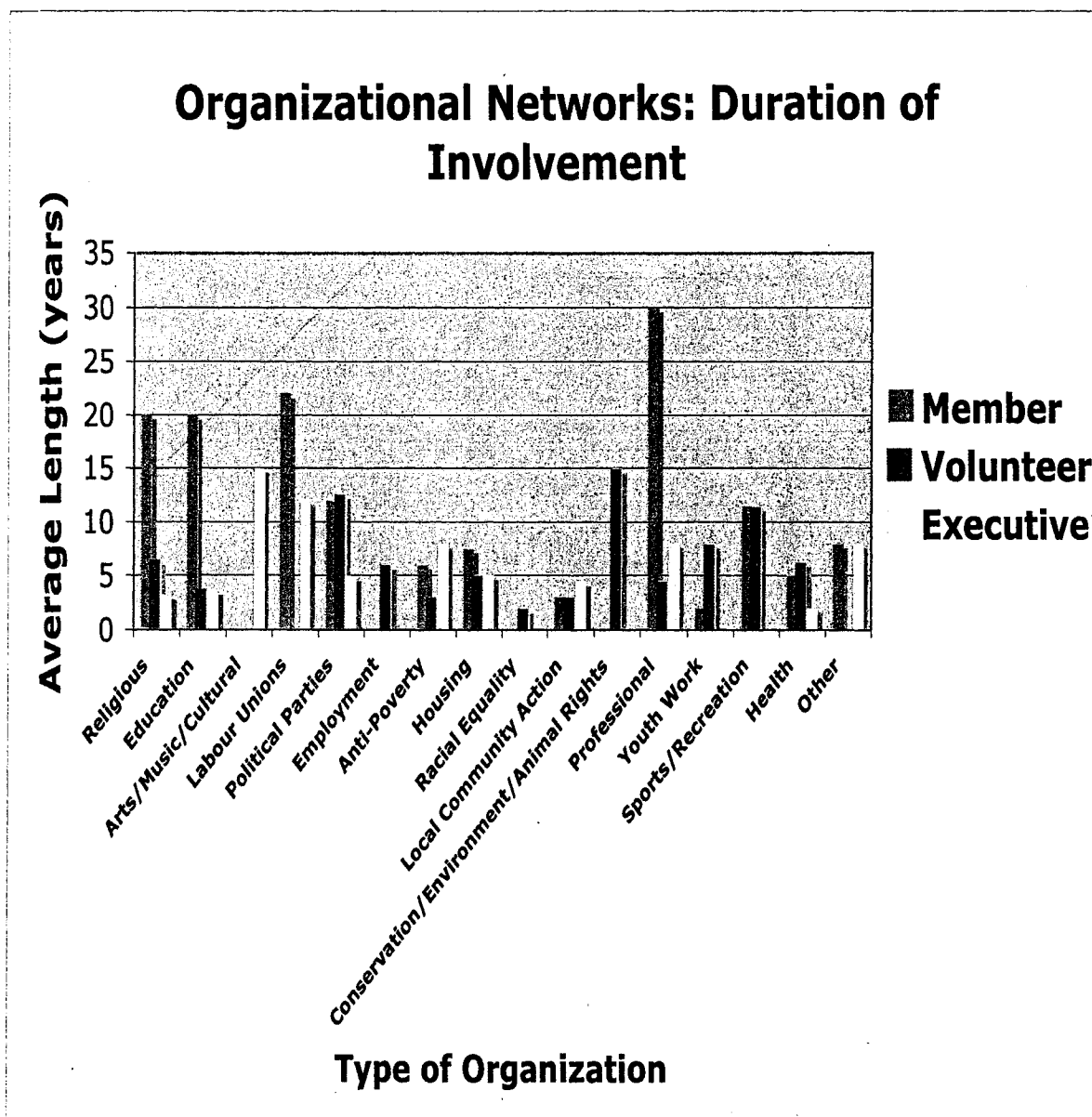


Figure 3 represents the average length of time measured in years during which all participants were involved in various organizations prior to their candidacy. This average number also shows the nature of their participation (member, volunteer, or executive position). Figure 3 represents an alternative representation of the information continued from Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Figure 3 shows that on average interview participants were involved in most organizations for no more than five years. The exception was religious groups, labour unions, education organizations and professional associations, in which the women had been members for a minimum of twenty years. Even though most individuals are members of a church from baptism or confirmation, twenty years may be the length of time when the women identified themselves as active adult members. This length of time also applies to those women who have worked in a profession that entailed associational or union membership. In terms of the participants' involvement in education organizations, twenty years would account for the average time when two children went through the primary and secondary school system. Looking at these same groups in terms of volunteer involvement it is interesting to note that the respondents held executive positions for half their membership. For religious groups, education organizations and professional associations, the women's volunteer and executive involvement was on average below seven years.

The next duration of involvement reported by the participants was ten to fifteen years. This included political parties, arts/music/cultural organizations, conservation/environment/animal rights groups, and sports and recreation groups. Since Figure 3 does not account for the number of women involved, the latter three groups

display the experiences of only one participant per category, which ranged from founding a local environmental group or holding an executive position on a band parents' association, to joining and fundraising for a local sports team. As discussed earlier, five out of seven participants had membership in a political party, and Figure 3 illustrates that volunteer engagement paralleled membership. For the duration of their affiliation with a political party the women were actively involved as volunteers, typically as campaign workers in provincial or federal elections. Yet their commitment to executive positions within the party was half this time, approximately five years. Those groups where women reported approximately five years or less were organizations concerning health, local community action, poverty groups, housing organizations, racial equality groups and local community action. For some of these organizations the participants' length of involvement may be related to a specific campaign (health organizations), a current political issue or situation (local community action or poverty groups), or a personal situation (housing groups).

### **3.7 Motivation for Associational Activity and Connection to Candidacy**

To give further context to the figures in the previous section I asked the participants what prompted them to become involved in the community, specifically if there was a particular policy issue that motivated them, and if this was also a factor in deciding to run for public office. Due to their varied backgrounds and life experiences, each participant cited different reasons for being active in their community, often based on an interest or issue relevant to their personal or professional lives.

One participant cited the need for regional infrastructure and services as her

motivation for volunteering in the community and also the policy issue that drove her to run for municipal council. She states,

It was getting the water and sewer into the community, it was getting the paving done, it was involvement with the schools. We campaigned long and hard as a residents' association to get two schools in our community. So, those were not only issue-driven situations, but also led to tremendous learning, personal growth and development.

It may have been the need for these essential services that motivated her to join the residents' association, but she also identified the value of this experience in the development of her public consciousness. For many of the participants it was not until they began to talk about the details of their associational lives that they recognized these experiences as steps towards their political life.

Another woman became involved with an environmental group in response to a municipal decision to site a landfill in her neighbourhood. This is what sparked her to action.

I felt at the time when they were looking at trying to make the decision they were just trying to find a place to plunk it [the landfill]. They weren't looking at the impact or the types of communities they were going into. They looked at the area out here and they said 'oh, that's a nice wooded area, we can hide it in the woods.' They weren't looking at 25 years from now, the future impact.

It was the long-term effect this decision would have on the local residents that prompted this woman to get involved. She did not mention this as the issue that influenced her to run, although the skills involved in organizing a campaign such as this were good training for her political future.

One women's experience with crime in her neighbourhood provoked her to outrage and then action. She explains,

[It was] Neighbourhood Watch, policing, prostitution, crime. I mean I

used to spend up to nine hours a night sitting outside taking down license plate numbers of guys that were trying to pick up women. And then the police said, 'Thanks for all the stuff, but you're going to have to stop now because we don't have the budget for the fax paper.' That's when I lost it, I said, 'you have someone here or I'm going to the media.' There was an undercover cop on my door the next day.

The lack of response to her concerns prompted this participant to take the initiative and work towards a more sustainable solution to crime with the founding of a Neighbourhood Watch committee in her community. She explained that there was not one single policy issue that motivated her to run, but a combination of factors that needed to be recognized by the local government. These three women saw a need for action in the community and realized that in order to change the situation they had to take the time to get involved. In addition, all of these women were fairly young during these experiences, felt they had a stake in their community, and wanted a say in its future.

Two participants cited personal and family interests as the reason they became involved in their community. One woman stated,

I tended to become involved in different groups because of personal interest. I became interested in the groups that my children were involved in, or in the church that I went to or things like that.

Another women echoed this sentiment.

Most of the organizations I was involved in it was because my kids were, so I supported my kids in whatever they did. If it was baseball, then I would be on the association to help them make sure the right decisions were being made for the kids. My church, I would be approached by leaders of the church wanting me to take on a leading role. And door to door campaigning [for health organizations], it was my way of helping out for a very worthwhile cause. It was wanting to do for my community.

For these women participation in community organizations was an everyday part of life, and their responsibility as a parent and citizen and did not necessarily grow out of a specific policy issue. Organizations they joined were an extension of the interests and

social activities of their family. Because the motivations that influenced their associational activity varied from the other participants, their decision to run for office was not prompted by a particular issue.

There was one woman who said her profession prompted her to get involved in the community and this work is what eventually brought her into municipal politics. Being a social worker gave her a political analysis and the desire to make a difference working for social change at the community level. She states,

My profession was also a major cause for me to get involved in public life. As a professional social worker I was working with clients that I knew all the help in the world that I could give them wasn't going to help them entirely, unless something in their environment changed. And so I got together with others, colleagues in other fields, whether they were in health, whether they were in social services, whether they were in finance, whether they were just active in the community, we identified the issues and worked to bring about change in the community. I did this as a volunteer, but my profession brought the awareness to me, because I knew I wasn't going to be able to help them just by being a social worker.

The perspective she gained through her career allowed her to recognize that public social supports were failing some individuals in her community, and that she had to do more than work within the system. In addition, she took the initiative to pull together people with similar interests, skills and knowledge and work towards a common goal. Her story illustrates the extent to which her associational experiences provided the analysis and skills that could work to prepare her for public life.

Another participant simply spoke about contributing to the decision-making and discourse in certain organizations as what prompted her to get involved in the community. She maintained,

It's kind of my personality to want to have a say. When I got involved with a group I would say, 'that's a silly way to do it' and come up with something better. I've always watched and thought, 'there's a better way



to do this', and not been shy about saying it.

Becoming involved in their communities may have been common sense and a natural part of life for most of these women. Supporting their children's activities, assisting their church and local charities, or joining a group tackling local social and political issues gave these women the skills and knowledge to prepare them for a career in public life. Their candidacy may not have been directly related to the work they did in their associational activities, but these experiences were important contributions on their path to politics.

### **3.8 Participants' Associational Activity that was Influential to Candidacy and Political Success**

As previously discussed, the decision to enter politics is not a straightforward or linear process for any individual. Through their collective stories it is clear that each participant's associational experiences directly or indirectly affected the candidacy. To further explore this relationship I asked the women to comment on which organization(s) they think most facilitated or least facilitated their candidacy and influenced their political career. An important finding that continues to resurface is the importance of prior partisan experience for women's decision to enter local politics.

When the participants began to name the organization(s) they felt were most influential to their political career, the majority reiterated the experiences that initially prompted them become active in their community, and often as a result of these experiences they started to think about public office. One participant spoke about her experience with local community action groups as the experience that paved her road to candidacy, specifically having to work with City Hall and municipal officials. She

recalls,

It helped me because I realized the only way to change the system was to get involved with the system. Because those that were in power weren't listening. I could see big, gaping holes.

Advocating for change on behalf of her community gave this woman a glimpse into how local government operates and a greater understanding of the roles and responsibilities of political representatives. Once this participant had a broader perspective on the work of municipal government, it was easier to envision herself there. Acting as a spokesperson on issues of crime and poverty in her neighbourhood was ideal training ground for her entry into public life.

Another woman who spoke about how her work with a local residents' association and anti-poverty groups was the most influential for her candidacy. She recalls the value of her experience with the residents' association.

It began, I think, with the getting of services, and I learned through that how important it was to work with elected officials to get what you want. Not only to work with them, but to be persistent and never let your guard down.

Working directly with municipal council through the residents' association gave this woman a clearer picture of how political decisions are made, including the roles and influence that individuals councillors have. She also began working with anti-poverty and health groups in a volunteer capacity, and spoke about how this work taught her to become an engaged citizen.

One thing that was terribly instrumental in my moving to the political arena was the social work that I did through the Family Planning Association, and all of the sort of interlinking of organizations that I became involved with as a result of that position. That really was a motivational time for me because I began to see not only had I learned from the residents' association, but I began to see how being part of the political arena you could truly influence how decisions were going to be

made.

As she explains, the most important aspect of this experience was contributing to the political process and being part of the 'political arena.' On the front lines of these organizations, this participant was able to gauge the pulse of her community and be an effective spokesperson. She recalls,

The other key thing is knowing what people were feeling and the only way that you can really know that is by being there, to be down at the grassroots level working it through with them because many of them can't be spokespeople. As a spokesperson I could feel their hurt, their health, or their concerns...it was a tremendous time for me.

Listening to and understanding the needs of those she was representing was an important preparation to public life for this participant. Directly advocating for others through grass roots organizations gave this woman the confidence and motivation to be an effective spokesperson. The collaboration this woman experienced in the community through working on politically sensitive issues such as poverty and health directly facilitated candidacy.

Another participant credited her experience in the labour movement as the most influential on her candidacy. She explains,

The union held regular meetings and it didn't matter whether you were male or female to rise in the ranks and be a spokesperson or representative. It gave me the courage to speak publicly. It's a big deal to go to a conference and go to the mic[rophone] and ask questions, and it taught me to do that. So belonging to that did give me a lot more self confidence so I wasn't afraid of putting my name forward or saying, 'Ok I'll do it', and how to run a meeting, you know with rules of order. So it didn't seem too big a step to be elected to something.

Her involvement in the teachers' union exposed this participant to a formal decision-making body where she learned policies and procedures for formal meetings and gained strong communication skills as a result. She gained experience presenting herself and her

ideas publicly, giving her the confidence to enter electoral politics. She also spoke of her job as a teacher as good practice for politics in terms of being in the spotlight, troubleshooting various problems, and being prepared to direct group discussion for every class every day.

A second participant spoke of her career influencing her political knowledge and skills, which eventually prompted her to consider running for public office. She spoke about her experience working in an office where many of her colleagues chose to run provincially or federally. She recalls,

I think it was going through my work years in a political environment. Not only being caught up in the excitement of fighting or running for something in which you believed, but also the people skills that you pick up because of this, the listening skills. [Also] working with people who were fighting for a cause.

This woman did not credit a particular organization for facilitating her candidacy, but instead the experience of being around politically active individuals who taught and inspired her. As I have discussed, political knowledge that women gain through working on others' elections is very valuable for their political career. Such experience gives women an opportunity to observe the successes and mistakes that were made in other's campaigns, in which they can draw upon during their own candidacy. It also gives them a good taste of what the political environment is like during an election campaign, the types of problems and issues that may arise, and the importance of a reliable campaign team.

The one participant who had experience in the political realm prior to her candidacy cited this, as well as her partisan involvement, as directly influencing her candidacy. She asserts,

The school board was a huge factor and being involved in political parties would've had an influence on that decision making. Those are the two that jump out at me. They all offer some skill sets, but in terms of, 'Well I've been in the band parents for 10 years, I think now I'm ready for politics', no, it didn't happen that way.

This woman followed a common route into politics, with her appointment to school board acting as a springboard into further political involvement at the municipal level. This decision was further facilitated because she had the support and knowledge of working in partisan politics and election campaigns for many years. However, what is notable about this woman's statement is that she identified experiences that did not facilitate her candidacy, indicating that not each associational experience is equally valuable.

### **3.9 Organizations that give Women a Public Profile**

In addition to their own experiences, I asked the participants to broaden the discussion and comment on the types of organizations they think would give women the public profile to be successful in electoral politics. Some participants clearly identified certain groups based on their membership and profile they had in the community, and others did not believe one group was more valuable to women than another as long as they presented an opportunity to have a voice and become a leader. The responses the participants gave to this question were not necessarily based on their own experiences, but often what they observed in their communities.

The most common type of organization reported by the participants as important to women's candidacy was, again, political parties. Four of the seven women cited their partisan affiliation as influential experience for their future candidacy. A few of these women did not have this experience themselves, but recognized how it helped others. It is

interesting here how almost all of the women interviewed, regardless of their own experience in political parties, spoke about its value in preparing women for electoral candidacy. One women claims, “Political party involvement can be a stepping stone, and for women more particularly.” Another women states,

If you work for a political party you get to know the people who are running and you do all the backroom stuff. I think that would give you a lot of knowledge, and you get to know a lot of people too.

The next set of organizations that were mentioned as being important were religious groups. One women claims,

I definitely think that church organizations are a big thing. There are many, many people who get into politics who are active in the church and they get the support of their churches, and that spreads from one church to another.

This comment recognizes the importance of having social networks to draw upon during a political campaign. Since religious organizations usually have a large pool of members, experience in this arena would give women a chance to get their name out to many people and begin shape their public profile. In addition, churches, by their nature, endow a certain brand of respectability and legitimacy to its members. When people are associated with a religious organization, especially in smaller towns, they are publicly perceived to have high moral standards.

Education associations were another group mentioned by participants that would give women the public profile to be successful in electoral politics. One woman says, “To be on the parent teacher group is important and it gives you a sense of what is going on with the teachers and the students.” A second woman echoed this,

If you have children, by all means you should be involved in those associations if your aspirations are to meet people. To be known in your community you need to be involved in your community, and it’s a great

way to do that.

As I discussed earlier, women often join groups related to their children's lives and through these groups have a venue to develop a public voice, and expand their networks.

Another participant cites organizations such as the YWCA as a support for women interested in politics. She believes the YWCA understands what women face entering the political world. She asserts,

If you are someone that would like to run and you have a child, going to the Rotary Club is going to give you as much support as that desk will give you [pointing to an office desk]. You need to have a helping hand, and so I think the YWCA would definitely be that. They understand what is needed when it comes to housing, when it comes to social reform, they know all about it because they are living it and seeing it daily. They understand the meat and potatoes and the root of all the issues that stem from homes.

In this comment she explains that experience with women's organizations would give a potential candidate the social analysis necessary for political life, in addition to personal encouragement and support. This participant notes that women's opportunities are shaped by their family commitments and responsibilities and believes they would have much more support from an organization that recognized this.

An issue brought forth by one participant is that, depending on local political culture, demographics and regionally issues, the types of organizations that would be helpful to women differ for each region. She explains,

I think it depends on where you are. Definitely if you become involved in something that is tourist-related down here (Digby area), it's going to make a difference. Whereas if you're involved in labour, it might not. In different areas it's going to mean different things.

Other participants commented that joining a number of different groups would give women a broad base of knowledge, which would be helpful for public office. One women

explains,

Whether it be a landfill, or whether it be a water issue, or sewer issues or roads, getting involved in those types of things are good background materials because you really see how things work.

Another participant reiterates this,

In the local organizations you find out what is going on, it's the grassroots of your community. It gives you a sense of what is going on and what needs to be done, so you get your finger on the pulse of the community.

Women gain knowledge of issues unique to their community through local groups and stay abreast of current political issues through their associational activity, which also gives them a diverse network of contacts to draw upon in the future. Another woman mentioned that if you establish a good relationship with certain groups they would gain respect for you and be more likely to support you during an election campaign. These experiences also allow women the opportunity to hear what is on the public's mind.

There were several participants who did not name specific organizations, but spoke about groups where women could be publicly recognized for the work they were doing. One woman maintains this should be an important consideration for women thinking about politics,

Anything that would give women a forum to be vocal is important, a committee that would in the forefront so that is was being followed closely by the media. If the media decides its not important enough to report, then all the good work that you're doing is being left by the wayside.

This comment illustrates the interest that this woman has as a councillor in garnering public attention. For potential candidates, carving themselves a place in the public spotlight was expressed in discussions with a few women. One participant declares that women need to become involved in groups that "help you get known for what you stand



for, who you are, and what you do best. And definitely speak up in those associations and let known your views.” She goes on to say,

Somewhere where you are at your best. If you are a lawyer, you go to a lawyers’ association and you know what you are talking about. Or you go to the Chamber of Commerce and perhaps have the opportunity to speak about what it is you’re doing [with your business].

Another participant spoke about organizations where women have an opportunity to display their knowledge and to use that platform to get their ideas out.

If you can make people feel how passionate you are about something in a public forum and display your persuasive talents, it’s easy to bring people on board if they can pick up on your enthusiasm.

This comment recognizes the importance of potential candidates being comfortable in the spotlight, preparing them for a political campaign where will need to convince the public of their knowledge and visions.

Another women believed that the type of organizations women joined was not as important as the contacts made through these experiences. She explained,

They provide a network. You need the volunteers, you need the legwork to get out there and beat the pavement and help organize the campaign. I believe that people will volunteer to help if you if they know you and know what you stand for. And you’ve worked side by side with them, so they know your values, they feel comfortable enough to go door to door with you or say, ‘I’m supporting so-and-so.’

The perspective this participant has is particularly relevant at the local level as opposed to provincial or federal politics where the campaign team often exists through constituency or riding associations. A major factor of success at the municipal level is having the resources and a strong campaign team for organizing behind the scenes.

### 3.10 Associational Activity as a Motivating Factor for Candidacy

As previously discussed, the factors affecting women's decision to enter municipal politics are complex and I have been exploring one aspect of this, the connection between their associational experiences and candidacy. To investigate this relationship further, I asked the participants why volunteer organizations have the ability to motivate someone to run for public office.

One participant explained that some women cannot accomplish the change they want in the community through their associational activity, and political office offers them a stronger public voice. She asserts,

If they see as a volunteer how little of a voice they have, they might think 'Maybe if I had a vote at the table [of municipal council], I could make a difference.' They feel that they don't have the same amount of input. You see it in a lot of people, that they start off in different volunteer organizations and then their next step up is municipal politics.

This recognizes the fact that citizen organizations may be limited in their ability to influence significant political change. She goes on to say, "Yes, I can volunteer my time, but in order for someone to take me seriously and listen to my concerns, I have to be someplace where my voice is heard." In municipal politics women have a venue where their ideas are given greater public value, which can be a motivating factor to make the move into municipal politics.

Another participant explains that associational activity gives women insight into political issues that are on the public's mind, including the type of local leadership people are looking for. She affirms,

[Volunteer organizations] are the closest link to the public, and the populace knows if they like someone or not. And they are going to be the ones that say, 'If you use this in a platform message, or if you use this as a platform issue it will help you get so many bonus points, help you through

the process.’

This comment illustrates the value of the networks that women gain through volunteer organizations. It is often in this environment that individuals get a real sense of the public’s opinion on politics, and it is a perfect venue for women to join in this discussion and get feedback on some of their ideas. Another participant adds,

Public life is about knowing people, knowing issues, knowing what’s going on and you get that from being around people. Your networks are critical, so no matter what the organization it can be very helpful.

Another woman speaks about the influence that some organizations can have on someone’s candidacy.

Volunteer groups take note of people that excel in different areas and talk among themselves. And when elections come up they can decide as a group to put someone forward, and I think they have a tendency to back that person strongly. They have an appreciation for people that work hard.

The power that organizations have in some communities is often taken for granted, especially in rural areas or smaller towns where almost everyone is connected through these networks. If women become well liked and respected in a powerful volunteer organization, this support could be a major motivating factor in their candidacy.

Volunteer organizations also give women a chance to succeed and be recognized as leaders. One participant states,

A lot of times when people are involved in organizations and if they are the type of individual to speak publicly about what’s going on in their associations, they will be recognized as a potential leader. And that in itself may spur someone to run further, for politics or whatever. The opportunity is there if you are able to express yourself publicly so people understand and can relate to you. Someone who can speak knowledgeably about issues will be recognized as a leader.

In addition to the influence that volunteer work has on an individual’s public profile and reputation in the community, one woman spoke about how it changed her perception of

what she could accomplish.

When you are working on a project, things happen to you in the course of all of that that cause you to believe that you can have a real effect on changing situations. And once you're had that taste of being successful with making a difference, making a change, then it becomes, at least it did for me, it was in my gut and that motivated me to go on to other things and I kept thinking, 'This is what I have to do, I have to run, I have to offer.'

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE UNION OF NOVA SCOTIA MUNICIPALITIES WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROJECT**

### **4.0 Participants' Learning Experiences as a Member of the Project**

All of the women that I interviewed served on the steering committee for the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities Women in Local Government project. They all spoke spontaneously about how much they had learned through this experience. In addition, I explicitly asked them if there was anything about the process that particularly surprised them. As advocates for the project in their own municipality and within the membership of the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities, these women were exposed to individual and public attitudes on women in politics. While the steering committee met with approval and encouragement for the most part, some people expressed disagreement with the project's goals. As a result, most of the women were surprised that a project, which they valued as important and necessary, became a contentious and sensitive topic within some of their public and personal networks.

Contributing to their learning experience, the participants were also involved in directing the research and focus of the project. This introduced them to past research on women in politics, which gave the women a context for the project's findings, which they then could compare it with their own experiences in public office.

As a result of their knowledge and their differing political careers, participants had varying learning experiences as members of the Women in Local Government project. One woman particularly mentioned the insights that she gained after attending one of the focus groups. It was only after hearing another woman speak about her

experience as municipal employee that this participant became conscious of the sexism that existed on her own council. She explains,

I learned that we had somebody on staff, a female member who is no longer with us, whom I feel I let down by not being more supportive. She was in a situation where I think she was being undermined because she was female in her position. Not taking a stand on her behalf, I realized that what I was doing to her, or failing to do for her, was the same thing that a male council will fail to do for a sole female member. At times in her tenure I was the only woman on council and she could've used a whole lot more support.

Understanding the experiences of other women, this participant learned that local government could be an unwelcoming place for women on staff. She realized that women who act as municipal administrators often have the same experience as female councillors do when they are in the minority, and more mutual support is needed for women in this environment. A second participant came to a similar conclusion listening to women in the focus groups. She states,

It gave me the understanding that I don't necessarily do the best or the most I can to encourage women to participate [in local government]. And I have realized talking to individuals one-on-one usually works best. I, as a leader, should take on this responsibility. That was probably my biggest learning experience, to realize that I'm probably as guilty as a lot of women are for not carrying women along with you. Now, since that committee, I have tried to be more encouraging and look for any opportunity I can to talk to women about local government.

As a result of her membership on the Women in Local Government committee this participant realized that everyone must do what they can to ensure there are more women in politics, including herself.

Another participant claimed she was surprised that so many women in the focus group had similar experiences to her when they were first elected.

Everybody has a story to share, whether it was being ridiculed or belittled because your opinion doesn't matter or whether you were passed over for

a promotion because of being female. I certainly didn't feel that way going into politics. I had no thoughts of running and saying, 'I'm going into a man's world, what am I doing!?' But I certainly did feel that way after I got in there and was put on all the soft committees. 'You're a woman, let's put you on school board, library and hospital, because you won't have to think too much or anything.' For the police committees and things that had meat to them, it was like 'You? Oh no, go sit down dear.'

Listening to other women's stories, this participant realized that the sexism she experienced for years as the only women on council was a larger, systemic problem that affected women everywhere.

Reflecting on her own political career, there was one participant who was surprised that her entry into politics was similar to that of other women across the province. She explains,

I learned that most women that want to run for public office have a self-esteem problem. We all think we can do something but unless we are supported by somebody, or by a group, or feel that we can actually make a difference or have a positive outcome in an election, then we won't take that chance. We like to play it safe... I was making up every excuse [for not running] except for the fact that 'Maybe you're just scared, maybe you just don't think you can do it.' It's the confidence, that's one thing that holds back a lot of people, and I think the other thing is the fear of the old boys club.

This participant realized that most women do have to be prompted and supported to run before they feel comfortable putting their name forward. This reflection illustrates the importance of confidence as a key factor in women's candidacy. A second participant echoed this observation,

I learned that there is a huge pool of talent out there. But I was surprised to learn that women thirty years after I fell into it still feel like they need to be asked. Still need to hear, 'You can do this.' The mentoring program I think might be a big help.

As discussed previously, the motivation and encouragement that the participants received from their friends and family was a crucial factor in their decision to run.

A third participant felt that the project's findings resonated with her experiences.

The majority of what was brought out in all those focus groups is thoughts that at one point or another have all gone through my head. It wasn't new because I've always been the only female on council. You really have to have a tough skin; it's hard to be in the spotlight and the political culture that we're dealing with is not responsive to women's needs. It's getting better, but I don't know if you'll ever get rid of that old boys' club network.

Recognizing the informal networks that men often have access to was probably the most discouraging insight that this women had. She goes on to say,

I learned more and more at the focus groups, and I [had] thought I was just being paranoid. Because when you look at the old boys' club, every town has one, and they have access to more dollars in elections that we don't have access to.

After a discussion about these exclusionary male networks, this woman began to realize that they are not unique to any community and were a shared experience of many women.

Gaining a glimpse of the political environment today, those participants with the longest political careers observed that municipal government in Nova Scotia has been slow to adapt to the presence of more women. One woman lamented,

[I learned] that things haven't changed a great deal over time, there is still not sufficient women serving in local government. And it brought back an awful lot of old memories and made me realize again the need for more women to become involved in the political system. Because I believe that if we had a 50/50 split [of men and women] things would be very different.

A few of the participants responded directly to some of the findings highlighted in the *Untapped Resources* report. One participant stated the research allowed her to understand better why some women were not involved in politics.

Learning the constraints for women to participate, there were some eye openers for me in terms of what the issues were; like transportation, babysitting, I mean a good majority of the population takes those things for granted.



This participant began to understand how women's access to resources affects their ability to be involved in politics, even if this was not her experience. One woman was surprised that traditional gender roles were still affecting women's lives today. She explained,

I was surprised that things really haven't changed that much in thirty years. Because from the focus groups it was obvious that women still are the homemaker: responsible for the children, responsible for the meals. Even if you say to your husband, 'Tonight is your turn to cook,' you're still responsible to make sure it happens, and it's usually the women who are multi-tasking all the time.

Another woman observed that most of the issues that were revealed throughout the Women and Local Government project reinforced and underlined findings from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities report. She stated,

The messages we heard at all the focus groups were the same messages that they [the Federation of Canadian Municipalities] heard right across Canada. I think there are a lot of challenges [to participation], and they're very similar anywhere. For example women have to multi-task continuously... and that's very difficult, [be]cause you're juggling meetings and schedules. Then there's childcare issues, I was very fortunate, after I got elected my mom became my full time babysitter, and I always had family support. If you don't have family support, it's very, very difficult.

In addition to their reflections on the research, there were a few women who commented on the process of garnering support for the project within the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities membership. One woman said,

I heard several times, 'There's going to be opposition to this.' It was like fear mongering. There was this big speculation that there was going to be a swell of people against us, when actually there was more with us. And I think that has to do with the fact that communication [about the project] got out so they [the membership] could understand what we were trying to do. Those that didn't understand were in fear of their own jobs, not in helping someone. That really surprised me.

Since there was opposition from the beginning to establish the Women in Local Government initiative from within the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities, much of the task of the steering committee was to defend the project and establish a base of support among their colleagues.

A second participant echoed the frustration of having to convince other politicians, especially women, that there are systemic reasons why few women are involved in municipal government. She explains,

The pocket of resistance by other women was a huge eye opener for me. It was hard to understand where they were coming from. They were not accepting that the research done could actually be true. There was unwillingness by women who were in a position of leadership to say, 'Maybe we are missing something here.' They just didn't get it, and that surprised me. I guess I just anticipated 99.9% of the females to embrace this whole-heartedly and say, 'Lets go and fix this!' but it was not there at all. Women who were in leadership positions, the elected officials said, 'Well, I made it on my own.' Well, that's the point; you don't *have* to make it on your own. I mean, I am a leader, but at the same time I do know that not everyone can get there and there's good reasons for that.

As a final observation another women commented on the importance of bringing forward this issue as an important topic of political discussion about politicians and the general population.

I learned that this issue is something that people really weren't paying attention to. Even among the elected people I think it brought forward awareness and from the awareness it brought concern.

#### **4.1 Reflections on Research done by the Women in Local Government Project**

As representatives for the Women in Local Government project in the media, in their communities, and among other politicians, these women became well versed in the issues and research findings on women's participation in municipal government. I asked the

participants if there was any issues they felt had not been covered in the research, anything the project could have done differently, or future directions the committee could take. A few women spoke further about some of the issues touched upon in *Untapped Resources*. Observing women in her community, one participant spoke about a lack of interest in politics.

I really think you can only encourage women to become involved in so many ways. I think in some cases they've got so much else going on in their lives that they just don't want to be bothered with that decision making. Women are so busy with careers, and kids, and meals that they're just not interested. They're not even thinking, 'I wonder if I could?' Probably in this day and age they wouldn't hesitate to become involved, but it just doesn't cross their minds. I don't think there's a whole lot of people out there that are saying, 'I'd love to run for council if someone would only ask me.' I think it doesn't even enter into their consciousness, because there's so many more important things that they're worried about. I really don't think it's fear of not being accepted, or not being smart enough or all the things that we talked about affecting us, I really think that in a lot of cases they're just not interested.

A lack of interest in politics was not a common topic of discussion during the focus groups or steering committee, mainly because everyone that attended was connected to, or already involved in politics.

One participant believed the research should have focused more on the consequences of civics education being removed as a mandatory course in the school curriculum. She explained,

Just knowing how politics works, I don't think it is stressed anymore. And I think that is a real shame, because when you walk into a room of kids and say, 'I'm the councillor for downtown Halifax', they say, 'what's a councillor?' Or people say, 'Politician? You must be crooked!' And I say, 'No, I just do my job like I would at any other place.' I think what it [the Women in Local Government project] needs to do is take that recommendation on education and really push for it.

This participant touches on the importance of receiving a political education and is

referring to a recommendation in *Untapped Resources* to lobby the provincial government for a civics course, which in turn would attract more women into public life. Another participant focuses on the importance of recruiting women for all areas of municipal government. She explains,

A public awareness campaign on how to better involve women as citizens, not just as politicians, was pointed out in the report. We have to encourage them and make them believe in themselves, build up their self-esteem and recognize that their ideas and opinions are very important. We need to identify better opportunities to involve them in education programs that will lead them to decision-making positions, whether it be CAOs, or clerks or administrators.

There was one woman who reflected on the methods and focus of the Women in Local Government Project.

We never asked really successful people, ‘what was the secret of your success?’ or, ‘why have you done so well in your opinion?’ I really want to know from people who have made it. I’m in a situation where I can ask these questions to myself and then bring them to the Women in Local Government project, but I would’ve liked to ask some of the really successful women that I admire. So that’s what I thought we left out, personal stories.

This comment is interesting because it partially addresses the focus of this paper, to look at what brings women into politics, rather than what prevents them from participating. She spoke about the importance of gathering personal stories from women who have been successful in politics in order to focus on the factors that helped them along the way. Another participant recognized that more effort could have been made by the committee to make the focus groups more inclusive. She states,

Maybe we could’ve got a broader cross-section of people. I think we missed a niche in not including more people at the focus groups, or having more focus groups, whatever it took to hear more people.

Focusing on the report’s recommendation for a mentoring program, one

participant talked about the importance of recruiting strong leaders into municipal government. She avows,

The mentoring piece is one that I want to see happen. I'm very concerned about leadership; I'm concerned about getting leaders who connect with people. We need to get people raising the issue of our democratic responsibilities, democratic processes. Politics is very honourable, and it's become dishonourable. It is an honour to be elected by your peers, it is an honour to serve your peers.

By mentoring women, this participant suggests, we are grooming the next generation of political leaders. She recognizes that new leaders, hopefully women, need to be elected to work towards changing the face of politics.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

*“Our understanding of women and politics is directly related to the questions we ask and the way we set about answering them.”*

Gertrude Steuernagel 1987, 12

The existing research on women and politics demonstrates clear recognition of the dearth of women as elected public officials at all levels of government. Although the methods used to tackle this problem by researchers, political organizations, citizen groups and governments themselves have varied, they all have a common goal: to increase the numbers of women in elected office. A wider scope of knowledge now exists in the field of ‘women and politics’, although most studies continue to focus on the factors keeping women out of elected government, rather than on the experiences that have facilitated their success. Kira Sanbonmatsu (2002) explains,

Understanding the factors that lead women to run for office is a neglected area of research...[and] the pre-candidacy stage remains as one of the great unexplored avenues of research (2002, 792).

The recruitment literature has established that women generally take different routes into politics than men, and their decision to do so is more heavily based on family concerns and support mechanisms. Furthermore, the background and prior experience of female candidates do not fit the ‘traditional’ pathways that men have used to enter public life.

In her study *Political Woman*, Jeane Kirkpatrick (1974) asks what kinds of experiences predispose a woman to get involved in politics. She explains,

Behind the decision to become a candidate there is usually a desire to influence events, a belief in the possibility of influencing events, some knowledge of politics and politicians, and some base, or potential base of community support... Yet few people have the motivation to influence public affairs, a sense of personal efficacy, a relatively high level of

political information and skills, and a social identity around which others can rally (1974, 30).

Increasing the number of women elected to public office has been examined from many different perspectives. These include: changes to the political and/or electoral system which could result in a higher number of female representatives, individual incentives by political parties or interest groups to support female candidates, the specific ideological, cultural, social or geographical factors that affect the likelihood of women running and winning a seat. My study has been focused on the latter: examining through a feminist lens women's associational experiences in the community as a route to public life at the municipal level.

To explore this hypothesis I gathered information through individual, in-depth interviews with seven women who are currently, or have in the past served as elected municipal officials in Nova Scotia. By gathering and analysing this data I have been able to present a snapshot of the civic lives of these women, and particularly the type of knowledge and skills they gained through these experiences. Their stories of the people, circumstances and issues that drew them into electoral politics varied greatly, but they all agreed that volunteer work has the ability to motivate someone to enter politics.

In the context of the academic literature and an analysis of seven women's lives before they entered municipal government, I have shown that women's associational activity fosters their political capacity and is a determining factor of their candidacy. In light of this finding I believe our present understanding and definition of public life is insufficient, and as a result narrowly conceives 'political' experience so that it excludes women's civic lives. By contributing to organizations that are vital to the social health of their communities, as I have shown, women's associational activities work to expand the

present definition of politics. I have also shown how women's values and methods of community engagement add to what is defined as politically meaningful activity, which in turn makes those with an active civic life become more 'eligible' for electoral politics. It is these experiences that actually prepare women for public life. Susan Carroll explains,

There are many, many more women in the eligible pool from which candidates are drawn than there are candidates. Women are active in politics in sizable numbers – as party activists, as convention delegates, as staff members for other politicians, as community activists, as leaders in civic and community groups, as members of appointed boards and commissions. Yet, few of these women seek elective public office (1993, 214).

One of the ways this question has been tackled is through the investigation of political ambition. Transformational feminist scholars have critiqued the model of political ambition that had been constructed on male experiences and provided an alternative model based on women's lives. As a result, it has been shown that women tend to see politics as non-partisan public service instead of partisan career advancement. Thus the decision calculus women use to run for public office is different from that of men (Flammang 1997).

Through my research I have shown that as a result of their associational experiences women have developed a great degree of social capital, expanding upon the definitions found in existing social capital theory. The work that women engage in and perform as citizens at the local level results in a more informed and active society where trust and reciprocity contribute to a stronger democracy. The nature of women's civic activities facilitates an awareness of the structures of power and decision-making in their communities, as well as the needs and issues affecting their fellow citizens. Women's unique perspective also includes an awareness of how government structures and actions



can impact the grass roots level, and allows them to acquire a number of important political skills and contacts throughout their community. According to Schlozman et al. (1994), for many voluntary organizations their attempts at influencing policy outcomes constitute a crucial source of input about citizen views and preferences. It is these factors that prepare women for candidacy as an elected official.

Through my findings I also investigate the connection between women's informal political activity and issues of citizenship and representation. With women comprising over half of the Canadian population, I have shown that through their involvement in informal politics women are working to represent themselves and the interests of their community. Furthermore, as political actors they are strengthening the values of Canadian citizenship and helping to build a country that is more equitable, accountable and effective.

### **Women's Motivation for Associational Activity**

*The voluntary associations of civil society occupy a middle ground between government and private households. They draw people out from their own private lives to find a common ground with their neighbours.* (Louise Carbert 1995, 91).

Examining how and why women make the transition from a community volunteer to a political candidate requires an understanding of the factors that initially prompt them to join an organization. What are the conditions that spark someone to take public action on an issue of personal interest? An overarching theme that came through in my study was the desire to make changes in their community regarding issues that affected themselves and their families. In addition to a particular issue, most of the participants felt invested in the organizations and community they were serving. It has also been found that those

who care deeply about some policy issue are more likely to be politically active (Verba et al. 1995), and at the local level in particular, women with a sense of civic pride and responsibility are more likely to seek political office (Carroll and Strimling 1983).

In her research Jeane Kirkpatrick (1974) found that most successful candidates had a strong identification with the community in which they lived (and went on to represent). She found identification with a place came easiest if the individual had a history of living in the area. She explains, “Caring about schools, parks, sewers and local government is closely related to having a stake in the future of a community. So is [electoral] participation” (1974, 30). She goes on to explain that living in environments that are long familiar to them gives women time to learn the informal rules by which people live, to internalize the norms of the community, and to come and know the structures of power. This was particularly true with the women in my study who lived in smaller towns or rural areas. Through a narrative herstory of their associational activity it became clear that the participants were adept at understanding and negotiating the local norms and values, which helped them to address issues and solve problems diplomatically. These women became vital members of their communities through networks and connections they made in both their personal, and professional lives. Acquiring this ‘insider’ information can be crucial to winning the votes of these same community members when a woman is running for election. While having an ‘inside’ view of the community through their associational activity, women also make a name for themselves and win the acceptance and respect of their neighbours and colleagues. In her study of candidates in the United States, Susan Carroll (1994) found the most important

political asset reported by the women was being well known and having a good reputation.

The types of organizations that the interview participants were involved in and the impact that they had on their political success depended largely on what was available to them in their community, including any regionally salient issues or concerns. Kristen Goss and Theda Skocpol (2006) explain that stocks of social capital are shaped not only by individual decisions regarding involvement, but also by the political opportunity structures presented to women. For example, in recent years there has been a shift away from member-based associations with local branches toward staff-led national associations, which affects the avenues of participation available to women.

### **Skills and Knowledge Gained through Associational Activity**

As explained earlier, women who have been heavily involved in volunteer activity often gain an understanding of municipal government and the roles and responsibilities of local elected officials.

In almost every community the most accessible and active organizations deal with local issues. As a result, women with active civic lives become most acquainted with, and therefore aspire to this same level of government. This situation creates an environment that greatly affects the type of women who are being attracted to local politics. There are fewer opportunities for citizens to have direct contact with the day-to-day operations of provincial or federal governments and interact with elected officials. In both provincial and federal legislatures, individuals who gain the greatest political insight are those who work within the public service or for a political party. As a result, the policies and

procedures of these levels of government are not accessible or transparent to organizations and individuals first hand. There may be women exposed to provincial and federal government business, but they are often in secretarial or administrative roles working behind the scenes. Direct input from citizens at the provincial or federal level is only permitted at standing committees. Although women can observe these levels of government in the public galleries, they cannot have direct interaction with the political issues being addressed within the elected assembly. All of these issues directly impact women's exposure to and interaction with politics as citizens, which shapes their knowledge and could ultimately influence their decision to run for public office.

In addition to the importance of direct exposure to politics, my study indicates the skills that women gain from their associational activity are an important factor for success in electoral politics. This topic is peripherally present in the work of other scholars (Kirkpatrick 1974, Merritt 1977, Carroll and Strimling 1983, Brodie 1985, Darcy et al. 1994, O'Neill and Gidengil 2006), but there have been no major studies that directly focus on this connection. According to Schlozman et al. (1994) civic skills, the communication and organizational abilities that allow citizens to use time and money effectively in political life, constitute an important resource for women. Their work also indicates that certain civic skills acquired through associational activity are transferable to the political arena, including letter writing, planning or chairing a meeting and giving a presentation or speech. Through this activity, women are not only enhancing skills relevant to politics, but also increasing their sense of political efficacy to act in the in first place. When we begin to include the crucial skills and knowledge that women acquire as

a result of their civic activities, the candidate “eligibility pool” begins to expand and encompass an entire group of women that would not otherwise be in the picture.

### **Support**

One of the most notable findings that resurfaced throughout my study is the importance of support as a factor in women’s decision to seek elected office. All of the interview participants indicated they were supported and encouraged in one way or another from a variety of sources. They also claimed that this support was a crucial factor in their candidacy. Most important was support from friends and family, specifically a spouse, but there were women who also cited their colleagues at work, local political figures and business elites, as well as fellow members of organizations they were involved in. It is important to remember that this support can come in many different forms, such as financial campaign contributions, personal time and campaigning, or assistance with home and family life, in addition to the organizational endorsements that some women receive from extensive networks and groups publicly committing their electoral support. For many women such support converts their candidacy into more than a personal venture, because in some cases their entire community and social networks are invested in the election as well.

The connections each woman establishes will depend on the local political culture and the personal and family history that the candidate has established in the district. One of the most difficult factors to examine is their connection to informal political networks. These can include community leaders, business owners, members of boards and committees, and influential individuals of the local political elite. These groups identify

women they see as strong candidates for electoral politics, and either approach them to run, or begin to groom them for public life and champion their campaign in their own networks. One of my interview participants cited an example of this, as she was backed for a federal nomination within her political party by an established and well-known political figure in provincial politics. In other studies, politicians have cited a recruiting agent, either a local political leader, group, or caucus, as instrumental to their success (Brodie 1985, Darcy et al 1994, Sanbonmatsu 2006). These same studies have also confirmed that lack of such connections can work against women as political party elites can also act as gatekeepers and disapprove of a women's candidacy, gravely affecting her chances of success. Possibly because the women in this study were elected to local government and did not need party approval for their candidacy, none mentioned their campaign being negatively affected by community elite. Informal connections with political elites may also result in an appointed position on a local board or commission, which is another beneficial political experience for women.

### **Role Models**

After reflecting on the participants' political journey, another factor that resounded in my research findings was the affect that role models had on women's candidacy. Whether they were family, friends, colleagues, members of the political elite, or other community leaders, role models were influential in forming the women's political consciousness. Each participant identified role models whom they admired and found strength in, those who shaped their conception of leadership and public service. Although not all of these

individuals were women, as Ruth Mandel (1981) explains, it is female role models that will have the greatest impact on future candidates.

Women who rise in public life bring other women up too. Each time a woman makes a speech, appears on television, is quoted on newspapers, or greets crowds of voters; the image of women in politics becomes more familiar... Win or lose, the example women are setting for other women is a major factor motivating more candidates each year (1981, 23).

As a number of the participants explained, they were the first women to be elected locally. Because of Atlantic Canada's dismal record of female representation (at both the provincial and federal levels), in most of these communities there were no previous female politicians, and therefore the participants are the only role models. Recognizing this situation, many of the women were cognizant of the role they played in their community and stressed the importance of the mentoring and supporting other women.

### **Connection Between Employment and Candidacy**

The fact that most of the interview participants reported having had professional careers in public service jobs before being elected sheds some light on the connection between employment and candidacy. This study demonstrates that many women credit some of their associational involvement to their workplace and professions. Since verbal and management skills are usually gained through education and occupational experience, a majority of the candidates had acquired these through their employment history. Joanna Everitt (2006) explains that participation in the labour force brings women into contact with others and increases the possibility for discussions about current events and politics. Similarly, work-related activities such as organizing meeting or writing memos help to develop important civic skills that can be transferred to political settings. For a few of the

participants their careers put them in an environment where they had automatic membership in a union or professional association. This often resulted in exposure to meeting rules and procedures, organizing issue-driven campaigns, contributing to workplace policy, and participating in conventions and various decision-making bodies. In addition, Susan Carroll (1994) has shown that most female candidates originate from fields in the public sector. Professions such as social work, nursing and teaching exposed the participants to the social and economic injustices that existed in their communities, and to a network of individuals who often influenced them to be involved in related groups.

### **Partisan Politics and Municipal Candidacy**

The most significant finding that has arisen from my research is the connection between partisan experience and the decision to enter municipal public life, a topic that warrants greater academic investigation. Kathryn Kopinak (1985) asserts that political parties impede women's full participation at other government levels, and there is more data on women's entry into municipal office because of its non-partisan nature. She explains that scholars are attracted to the study of municipal politics because they believe the absence of parties makes it a purer representation of how people govern themselves in their communities (1985, 395). Yet, involvement in a political party proved to be the most influential experience that participants had to prepare them for candidacy at the local level. This is an important result because it supplements much of the recruitment literature, which focus on municipal politics as a political training ground for further partisan activity (Long and Slemko 1974, Merritt 1977, Carroll and Strimling 1983,



Brodie 1985, Carroll 1993, Gertzog 1995, Flammang 1997, Sanbonmatsu 2006). Janine Brodie (1985) explains that political parties are geared to manipulate the electoral process and provide a diversity of apprenticeship positions that are political in nature with influence, prestige and training for legislative candidacy (at either the provincial or federal level). Until now, this training has never been connected to municipal candidacy because most scholars identify municipal office as a separate political realm where party activity is less important due to its non-partisan nature. Municipal office is considered only as the typical point of entry for individuals to move towards partisan candidacy, in a linear, hierarchical path.

Based on the findings in *Untapped Resources* (2005) and those from this study, the connections between women's partisan experience and candidacy are much more fluid, and more important than prior research has recognized. These findings suggest that political activity motivates further involvement in politics at any level. In this light we see that political parties have the direct ability to mobilize women into municipal politics, and although not publicly, those women may carry their partisanship with them. Consequently, municipal politics (in Canada at least) may be more partisan than is usually recognized. One participant expressed dissatisfaction with this situation, as some candidates bring their partisan ideologies or ties with them to council chambers.

I don't like partisan politics at the local level. I have seen voting not necessarily in the best interest of the community but more just because it's in line with the party, particularly if it's a hot issue. It's what happens sometimes, but it's not what municipal government is about.

As Louise Carbert (2006) explores, partisan ties in Atlantic Canada have deep roots in some communities and often intersect with many aspects of people's personal, social and professional lives. As a result, an individual's political affiliation often follows her into

municipal government (albeit not formally). There was one interview participant who spoke about how her party ties affected her candidacy,

When myself and the four other gentleman ran there was several of us who had always worked for the Liberal party. Because living in the country everyone knows what your politics are, maybe some of them just decided they'd like to try a woman for a change.

Particularly in rural areas, party affiliation is often public knowledge, a personal characteristic that is carried at all times and can work for or against anyone considering municipal candidacy.

As evidenced by the participants in this study, past partisan involvement was important to their municipal candidacy because of the contacts it gave them as well as electoral skills and knowledge. As Louise Carbert (2006) found in her study of rural women leaders in Atlantic Canada, there are more than enough women in every community who are qualified and knowledgeable enough to step up to the plate in electoral politics. These women are already leaders in civic affairs, serving on local government board and providing a good deal of work in voluntary organizations (2006, 102-103). But since most of these are employed in the public service or for an organization that receives government funding, they feel that they need to remain neutral and cannot publicly identify with any one political party in fear of their own job security. In addition, the other group of rural women well placed to step into public office are well-known small businesses owners and operators in their community. Yet these women also feel the need to stay publicly neutral in fear of their business being branded with a partisan stripe, and as a result, lose customers. Carbert explains that these unwritten rules, “skims off much of the cream of local talent at the outset of the recruitment process [for women’s candidacy], to the impoverishment of electoral democracy” (2006, 103).

### **Connection between Religious Organizations and Candidacy**

Although not the most widespread among the participants in this study, research has shown that religious organizations tend to have one of the greatest effects on building women's skills and knowledge. For example, women are more likely (than men) to give time to educational, charitable or social activities associated with their church or synagogue (Schlozman et al. 1994). Many scholars have argued that religious institutions are fruitful arenas for the development of civic skills that can be converted into political resources (Verba et al. 1995, Burns et al. 2001, O'Neill 2006). At the same time, women are not a homogeneous group and religion plays a more important role in some women's lives than others. This was no exception in my study, as those who were involved in religious groups spoke of involvement in this as an important aspect of their civic lives and significant to their candidacy.

### **Social Capital and Candidacy**

As I discovered in the Literature Review, the subject of this study bridges much of the feminist and political science theory on participation both outside of and within electoral politics. Striking this topic from both perspectives has been the social capital theory that recognizes women's civic lives.

In the social capital literature gender has become an important factor for a group of feminist scholars. They have recognized that gender shapes how we understand social capital, although almost all studies discuss women as a homogenous group. Recognizing the diversity of women's lives explains how they may use social capital differently. As Joanna Everitt (2006) states, the impact of social capital on women's engagement varies

depending upon their orientation to the public and private worlds. For example, since more women have entered the paid labour force and gained higher levels of education they have adopted more egalitarian gender roles and have growing access to the civic skills necessary to participate actively in the political system. Although women with egalitarian gender role beliefs report more associational memberships, Everitt suggests that social capital is more important to the political orientations of women whose lives are based on the private sphere of home and family. She explains that different types of women are members of different types of organizations and that not all associations are equal in their development of the skills necessary for political engagement and action. According to Vivien Lowndes (2006) women are more likely than men to know and trust their neighbours, have more contact with friends and relatives, and have access to informal sources of social support. As a result, women's social capital appears to be more strongly embedded in neighbourhood-specific networks of informal sociability. Lowndes also explains that research on women's community involvement demonstrates the importance of pre-existing relationships of trust and mutuality. It is shared concerns that motivate self-help and campaign activity, which in turn catalyzes more formal political activity as activists' competence grows.

### **Consequences of more women in electoral politics**

Although the overt legal barriers have fallen away, women, minorities and the poor have not been able to break the political glass ceiling in electoral politics, and as a consequence their voices remain largely unheard in the shaping of policies affecting their lives.

One of the major consequences of understanding what facilitates women's entrance into electoral politics is to begin to change the composition of all decision-making bodies. Studies indicate women are more likely to be interested and participate in politics if there are female candidates on the ballot (Lawless and Fox 2005), and that achieving gender parity would eliminate gender disparity in political activity (Burns et al. 2001). Any research into this topic is politically salient and important since political training and recruitment affects who gets into politics and inevitably shapes the future of any level of government and the policies that influence all aspects of citizens' lives. Since theories of recruitment have been based almost entirely on the experiences of male candidates and office holders (Van Hightower 1977), the scholarship needs to include women's experiences. As Virginia Sapiro (1981) explains, "the role of women in government is shaped by the effects of recruitment procedures and organizational constraints in a political system dominated by patriarchal norms (1981, 712)."

The effectiveness of government in any society depends in large part upon the quality of the leaders who seek office, specifically the personal experiences, political attitudes and abilities that politicians bring to public life (Kazee 1994). Unlike other occupations, there are no standardized, recognized qualifications to be a politician and no specified job description. In turn, the recruitment process can produce many different types of legislators, which can affect the composition and effectiveness of governments and how well they reflect society at large (Norris 1997). When we elect citizens who are part of groups who are not usually represented, we increase the likelihood that perspectives and beliefs shared by group members will be reflected in government decisions. As Irwin Gertzog explains,

A recruitment process which links society and polity more intimately is apt to produce political institutions more sensitive to changing public values and goals and, in the long run, to fashion a more orderly, stable political system (1995, 8).

Consequently, the more we understand about the different routes that women take into politics, the more successful society will be in ultimately changing the composition of public decision-making bodies. As explained by Louise Carbert and Naomi Black (2003), community-level involvement on the part of women in Atlantic Canada is high, but participation in elected office is the lowest in the country. The politicisation of women in this largely rural and economically dependent region is therefore a crucial part of the overall advancement of Canadian women in political leadership (2003, 72).

### **Considerations and Directions of Future Research**

*Women will not achieve electoral parity until we either change the conception of a suitable candidate for public office or significantly alleviate the impact of traditional socializing forces.*

(Richard Fox, Jennifer Lawless and Courtney Feeley 2001, 428)

In the process of evaluating the 'women and politics' research on women's entry into electoral politics, I noticed an interesting trend: almost all of the research that exists is male/female comparative studies. Searching for research specifically on women's behaviours, experiences and perspectives, I found that they almost always were cited in relation to men's. What is problematic about this is that women's activities and decisions are measured and categorized against the male political norm. When there are gender-specific trends that emerge, it is the women's results that deviate from the existing (men's) knowledge used as the political scale. One of the major problems with this

situation is that the social and political factors affecting women's lives continue to be different than those affecting men's.

Moreover, there is much literature that concludes only prior partisan, business, or legal experience to be relevant experience leading up to a bid for electoral office. Other studies have found that political leaders cite a lack of 'qualified' women candidates (Carroll 1994) as the reason for the low number of women elected officials, including in their own recruitment efforts. This literature is framing the pool of 'eligible' candidates from a very narrow background, and as result neglects the majority of women and the variety of other experiences that contribute to an individual's political education. It is for these reasons that my research is important, because there is still so much that we need to learn about how women interact with structures of government decision-making. Such woman-centred research brings questions from feminist theory to political science and begins to enlarge the boundaries of both. It will not be until women's volunteer and community experience are considered valuable political assets that women will be treated equally in the political world. Studies have shown that women are less likely to view themselves as qualified to run and are more concerned with appearing credible in the political environment (Fox 1997, Fox and Lawless 2004). If women more often think they are 'doing' politics, or see their ideas and actions as politically important, then they will be more likely to consider a career in electoral politics. Further research is needed to determine how and women's own perceptions of politics and their civic lives affect their decision to consider a career in politics.

Further research in this area must also continue to investigate the degree to which women are structurally constrained in their ability to tap into certain social networks,

particularly those that are most productive in turning capital into political activity.

Finally, too little is still known about the conversion of social capital into political involvement (Gidengil and O'Neill 2006). An issue that is closely related, but was not explored in my research is the effect of women's informal networks and groups that dictate activity mainly between individuals outside of voluntary associations such as, child minding networks, helping neighbours, caring for seniors that fall outside of the 'public sphere'. This topic has been touched on in some of the social capital literature, but not in relation to its consequences for women's electoral participation. Harell and Evans (2005) claim these informal social networks are overlooked and dismissed for not conforming to the traditional understanding of civic engagement, but have mobilization potential for women, which can make them more interested in politics, creating a situation where they can participate more easily.

Lastly, women's political careers are much shorter than men's and usually at a later stage in their life. As women's roles in the home continue to evolve and men begin to take on a larger proportion of the household management and childcare, will there be a change in the political lives of women? Further research is needed in this area.



## APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Interview Questions: Women's Associational Activity as Path to Public Office

Set One: Personal Experience:

Preamble: In the first five questions I will ask about you to comment on personal experiences leading up to your decision to run for elected office, and your organizational involvement before being elected.

1. How did you first get involved in electoral politics, as a volunteer, as a candidate?
2. Could you think back to the first time you decided to stand for elected office? Do you remember what prompted you to get involved? Was there a specific issue or problem you wanted to solve?
3. What was your associational background prior to being a candidate? What type of organizations were you involved with, in what capacity and for how long? Please refer to the following list to help with your answer.

Associational Category	Name of Organization	Capacity (member, volunteer, executive)	Duration (months, years)
Religious or church organizations			
Education associations			
Arts, music or cultural activities			
Tourism			
Labour unions			
Political parties			
Employment associations			
Anti-Poverty groups			
Housing organizations			
Racial equality			
Local community action			
Third world development or human rights			
Conservation, environment, animal rights groups			
Professional associations			
Youth work (e.g. scouts, guides, etc.)			
Sports or recreation			
Women's groups			
Peace movement			
Voluntary organizations concerned with health			
Rotary/Lions Club/Legion			

4. Which organization(s) most facilitated or least facilitated your candidacy and influenced your political career?
5. Did anyone ever suggest you run for office? Who was that person? What was their relation to you?
6. Apart from that person is there anyone you particularly admired as a role model?
7. Did a particular policy issue motivate you to get involve in the community? Was this also a factor in deciding to run for public office?
8. Based on your experience which organization(s) do you think would give women the public profile to be successful in electoral politics?
9. In your opinion, do you think volunteer organizations have the ability to motivate someone to run for public office, why?

**Set Two: Review of experience with the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities (UNSM) Women and Local Government research**

Preamble: As a member of the steering committee in 2005, I will ask you to comment on your experience and research with the UNSM Women and Local Government Project.

1. Based on your participation in the UNSM Women and Local Government Project as a steering committee member and/or focus group participant, what do you think you learned the most? Is there anything that particularly surprised you?
2. Based on the research done by the Women and Local Government Project, do you think the report left out anything?

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