

# IN A DIFFERENT VOICE

## EXPLORING GENDERED PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES IN CAMBRIDGE



**Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries**

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### Introduction

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The notion that what is good for a man is equally good for a woman has permeated the thinking and informed the actions of decision makers virtually since the beginning of time. Increasingly, however, society is coming to realize that the presumption of sameness is not only inaccurate (after all, we ascribe very different roles and relative power to the sexes), but also ill-advised (in health promotion, for instance, it has been found that programs fail women if gender is overlooked<sup>1</sup>).

Gender-based analysis takes into account the diversity of women and men. As a policy-making tool “gender-based analysis is a process that assesses the differential impact of proposed and/or existing policies, programs and legislation on women and men. It makes it possible for policy to be undertaken with an appreciation of gender differences, of the nature of relationships between women and men and of their different social realities, life expectations and economic circumstances. It is a tool for understanding social processes and for responding with informed and equitable options”<sup>2</sup>.

By applying a gender ‘lens’ to community survey data the first section of this paper offers insights into how gender shapes the perceptions of Cambridge residents. In the second section, factors that work to facilitate or impede women’s participation in municipal processes are identified and strategies for increasing their involvement in decision-making are proposed. The final section of this paper provides resources for those interested in learning more about this topic.

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### Methodology

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Data for this analysis came from Phase I of *Moving Forward Together (MFT)*, a community research and engagement process intended to identify community priorities. A key data gathering tool was a survey distributed via Canada Post to 44,980 households in Cambridge and North Dumfries in April 2005. An on-line version of the survey was also available on the *MFT* web site. The 36 survey questions were divided into four sections: community identity, community strengths, community challenges, and demographic information.

In this paper we focus our attention on question #6 (“What are some of the strengths or assets of Cambridge?”) and question #17 (“What are some of the challenges or issues in Cambridge?”). Analysis involved compiling the qualitative responses to each question into a large list, disaggregating the comments by sex, and then organizing the information into groups of related responses using the principles of content analysis.

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### Results of Analysis

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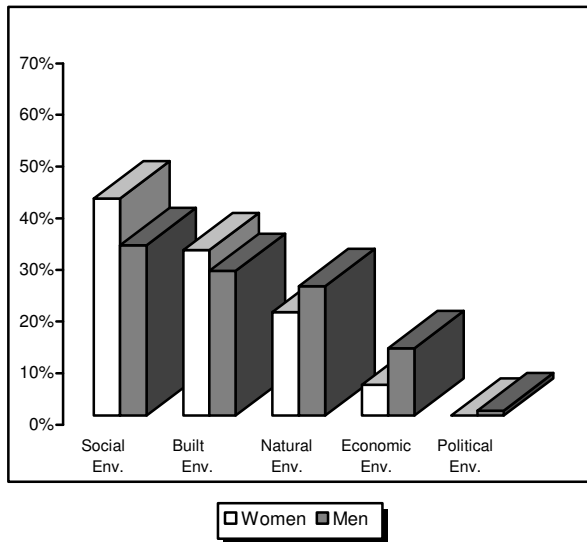
A total of 2,459 surveys were completed and returned by residents of Cambridge. When the demographic information was analysed, the following profile of respondents emerged:

- Respondents were primarily women (64%).
- 38% of the women and 47% of the men were long-term residents (had lived in Cambridge over 20 years).

- 28% of the women and 23% of the men were relatively new to the community (had lived in Cambridge less than 6 years).
- The majority of women were under 50 years of age while the majority of men were 50 years of age or older.
- The most common household type was couples with children. More men were part of a couple with no children. More women reported being single parents.
- More men were working full-time. More women worked part-time or not at all.
- 12% of the women and 17% of the men considered themselves part of an ethnic or cultural group.

## COMMUNITY STRENGTHS

Figure 1: Community Strengths by Theme Area



Survey respondents were asked to share their thoughts on what they considered to be community strengths or assets. Approximately 3,600 comments were made covering a wide range of topics. We compiled a master list of comments which we then separated into five theme areas: social environment, built environment, natural environment, economic environment, and political environment. A grouping of comments by theme area appears in Figure 1.

The results of our analysis are shown in Table 1. Upon reviewing this data we found that overall, women and men had very similar perceptions of community strengths and assets. Among the strengths most frequently mentioned were Cambridge’s “small town feel” and friendly people, the variety of shops and malls found here, and our central location in relation to larger urban centres.

Table 1: Results of Gender Analysis of Strengths

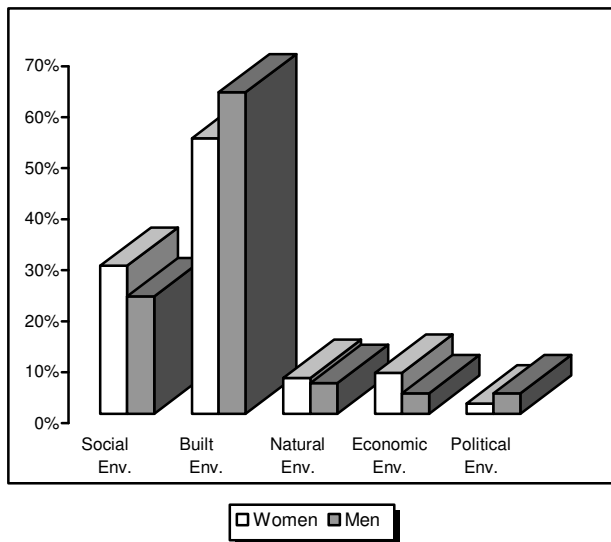
|                       |  | F    | M    |
|-----------------------|--|------|------|
| Social Environment    | ▪ Small town feel/friendly people                            | 16%  | 15%  |
|                       | ▪ Recreation and leisure opportunities                       | 10%  | 8%   |
|                       | ▪ Low crime rates  | 5%   | 2%   |
|                       | ▪ Vibrant arts and culture community                         | 4%   | 2%   |
|                       | ▪ Health programs/medical care                               | 2%   | 3%   |
|                       | ▪ Family-oriented activities                                 | 2%   | 0%   |
|                       | ▪ Social programs/services                                   | 2%   | 1%   |
|                       | ▪ Cultural diversity   | 1%   | 2%   |
| Built Environment     | ▪ Shops/malls  | 13%  | 12%  |
|                       | ▪ Green spaces/parks   | 6%   | 4%   |
|                       | ▪ Heritage buildings   | 5%   | 3%   |
|                       | ▪ Schools  | 4%   | 3%   |
|                       | ▪ Distinct core areas  | 2%   | 2%   |
|                       | ▪ Public transit system                                      | 1%   | 2%   |
|                       | ▪ Churches   | 1%   | 1%   |
| ▪ Traffic flow        | 0%   | 1%   |      |
| Natural Environment   | ▪ Geographic location  | 11%  | 16%  |
|                       | ▪ Physical characteristics including land, forests, rivers   | 6%   | 7%   |
|                       | ▪ Clean air/water  | 3%   | 2%   |
| Economic Environment  | ▪ Job opportunities  | 4%   | 9%   |
|                       | ▪ Diverse business/diverse economy                           | 1%   | 3%   |
|                       | ▪ Affordable housing   | 1%   | 1%   |
| Political Environment | ▪ Sound governance and accountability at the municipal level | 0%   | 1%   |
| Total Comments        |  | 100% | 100% |

## COMMUNITY CHALLENGES

Survey respondents were also asked for feedback regarding community challenges. Approximately 2700 comments were made, again covering a wide

range of topics. We compiled a master list of comments and then separated them into the five theme areas of built environment, social environment, natural environment, economic environment, and political environment. We found similarities, but also some interesting differences between women and men. A grouping of responses by theme area is presented in Figure 2. Major topics under each theme are listed in Table 2 and discussed below.

Figure 2: Community Challenges by Theme Area



**Land Use, Transportation, and the Built Environment.** The City of Cambridge has experienced significant population growth in recent years, and under the province’s proposed plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, this growth is expected to continue. According to the analysis, survey respondents felt that issues around land use, transportation and the built environment will pose the greatest challenge for the future.

Women and men both noted that the city’s infrastructure is not keeping pace with new development. There were many comments related to traffic congestion and the

**“Cambridge has become too ‘vehicle’ oriented, with absolutely no regard for those of us without”**  
*-female survey respondent*

need to build and maintain a growing network of roadways. Alternate forms of transportation such as bike paths and common usage trails are not currently part of the transportation network; consequently, anyone who can’t drive suffers greatly reduced mobility.

Census data tells us that two-thirds of the Cambridge residents using public transit to get to work are women<sup>3</sup>. A recurring comment among female survey respondents was that bus routes are inconvenient and do not link well with their daily needs. The lack of late night bus service and the reduced Sunday schedule impact workers whose jobs have non-traditional hours. For some, access to social and recreational activities was limited due to the lack of accessible bus service. An important message emerging from this feedback is that women want public transit services shaped to fit with their lives.

**“Are we Galt, Preston and Hespeler, or are we Cambridge?”**  
*-female survey respondent*

With the amalgamation of Galt, Preston, and Hespeler in 1973, the City of Cambridge

was left with three distinct downtown core areas. In this survey, more than 30 years later, respondents of both sexes remarked on the continued lack of a central focus. Not only are the three core areas not physically well linked, respondents noted that residents’ loyalties often remain with the original founding communities.

Urban revitalization was another concern. With the exodus of retail to the Hwy. 24/Hespeler Road Commercial District, the core areas have suffered a decline. Men and women alike felt that the community would benefit from physical improvements to the original downtown cores.

**Social Environment.** Within this theme area health care was the issue of greatest concern for both men and women. Survey respondents listed a broad range of challenges facing health care in this

**Table 2: Results of Gender Analysis of Challenges**

|                       |  | F  | M   |
|-----------------------|--|--|---|
| Social Environment    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Health care</li> <li>▪ Crime and violence</li> <li>▪ Alcohol and illegal drug use</li> <li>▪ Issues of youth and ageing</li> <li>▪ Family problems</li> <li>▪ Racial and ethnic relations</li> </ul>  | <p>10%</p> <p>8%</p> <p>5%</p> <p>4%</p> <p>1%</p> <p>1%</p>           | <p>10%</p> <p>7%</p> <p>4%</p> <p>1%</p> <p>0%</p> <p>1%</p>            |
| Built Environment     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Transportation and mobility</li> <li>▪ Multiple core areas</li> <li>▪ Ageing infrastructure</li> <li>▪ Managing growth</li> <li>▪ Unightly buildings or areas of land</li> <li>▪ School boundary issues</li> <li>▪ Access to shopping, community, and recreation centres</li> </ul> | <p>25%</p> <p>7%</p> <p>6%</p> <p>6%</p> <p>5%</p> <p>3%</p> <p>2%</p> | <p>29%</p> <p>6%</p> <p>13%</p> <p>7%</p> <p>4%</p> <p>3%</p> <p>1%</p> |
| Natural Environment   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Preserving water quality</li> <li>▪ Preserving air quality</li> </ul>   | <p>4%</p> <p>3%</p>  | <p>3%</p> <p>3%</p>   |
| Economic Environment  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Housing diversity</li> <li>▪ Quality of work and type of job</li> </ul>   | <p>5%</p> <p>3%</p>  | <p>2%</p> <p>2%</p>   |
| Political Environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Governance and accountability at the municipal level</li> </ul>   | <p>2%</p>  | <p>4%</p>   |
| Total Comments        |  | 100%   | 100%  |

community. These include everything from a shortage of family physicians to lengthy emergency room wait times to difficulties accessing specialized medical services.

***“I have lived here five years and still can’t find a doctor”***  
*-female survey respondent*

Although statistics show that the cities and townships of Waterloo Region

are among the safest in Ontario, many statements identified crime and violence as an important community issue. There were fears that the crime rate will grow as the population increases. Men and women both expressed dissatisfaction with the current level of police presence. Of the women who

commented on this issue, one in ten indicated they felt unsafe on the streets after dark.

Slightly more women than men identified the use of alcohol and recreational drugs as a significant community issue. Marijuana and crack cocaine were reported to be the drugs most prevalent in this area.

A number of women commented on a range of issues related to youth, ageing, and the family. Specific comments included: the need for additional child care spaces, the need to engage youth in meaningful leisure activities, and the need to promote a better understanding of seniors’ issues (e.g. their desire to stay in their own homes for as long as possible).

**Natural Environment.** While the environmental impact of industrial and residential growth was a concern for both men and women, it was slightly more so for women. Maintaining water quality and air quality were high priorities for survey respondents.

**Economic Environment.** The data show that more women commented on the economic environment than did men. These comments were typically about limited job opportunities and the need for better paying jobs. This may seem surprising in light of Cambridge’s strong economic growth over the past decade;

however, it is worth noting that not everyone has shared equally in this

***“[There are] not enough jobs for young women. Not everyone wants to work in fast food or be a secretary”***  
*-female survey respondent*

prosperity. In fact, a significant income gap exists between men and women (according to 2001 census figures, women working full-year full-time in Cambridge earned only 64% of the income earned by men<sup>4</sup>).

This group of challenges also addressed the need for diversity in housing options. A greater proportion

of women considered it a priority to develop affordable housing for low-income earners and the unemployed.

**Political Environment.** This was by far the smallest theme area, representing only 2% of all comments from women and 4% of all comments from men. The majority of these comments related to government performance, and specifically to dissatisfaction with the value received for property taxes paid.

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## Discussion

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Two overarching observations came out of this analysis, and both have important implications for policy development and program planning.

***Women and men have similar, but also very different, experiences and priorities.***

We found that even though men and women commented on similar issues (transportation, housing, access to employment, etc.), their views reflected different life experiences.

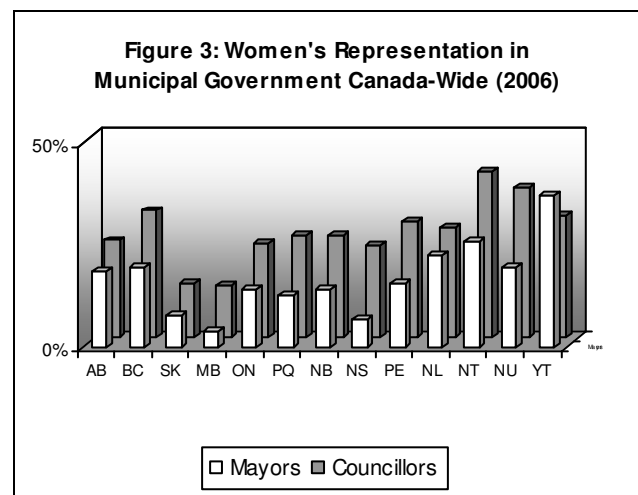
Developing policy that takes account of gender considerations is an important step toward equality between women and men, but it requires specialized tools and knowledge. Experience shows that when building the capacity of governmental or non-governmental organizations to promote gender equality, attention needs to be given to the following areas:

- *“skills of policy analysts and planners* – skills and experience in assessment of policy options and programme impacts by gender...
- *data and information systems supporting decision-making* – the ability of existing data systems to generate the gender-disaggregated data required...
- *consultation mechanisms* – development of processes for consultation with the public that include women’s organizations and deliberately seek to ensure that the views of women as well as men are expressed about policy priorities and choices...

- *research* – capacity to undertake or commission empirical or policy research on gender equality issues relevant to the institution’s mandate.”<sup>5</sup>

***Both women and men are interested in their community and have a desire to make it a better place to live.***

While men and women both contribute to their community in substantive and meaningful ways, women are not well represented at senior decision-making levels. Municipal government is a case in point. Despite the fact that women make up 51 percent of Cambridge’s total population, they occupy only 28 percent of the seats on City Council. At 31 percent, representation on Regional Council is not much better.



This situation is by no means unique. Women are underrepresented in local government in every Canadian province and territory. As shown in Figure 3, the percentage of women in local government seats ranges from a high of 38.5 percent in the Northwest Territories to a low of 11 percent in Manitoba.<sup>6</sup>

This underrepresentation of women is problematic. It means that women’s voices are not being heard and that the needs and interests of fully half the population are not being addressed in municipal decision-making processes.

## **TAKING HINTS FROM RESEARCH**

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In order to effectively promote women's participation in decision-making, it is necessary to understand the factors that impede it. In a recent exploratory study, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) launched a series of consultations that sought the perspectives of municipal governments, women's organizations, and more than 600 women in half a dozen communities across the country. The key findings, published in a document titled *Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Decision Making*, are briefly summarized below.

### **Reasons Women Participate**

Women involved in this research gave the following reasons for participating in municipal decision-making processes:

- "As a quest for information...
- To contribute ideas and opinions and to influence decision-makers...
- As a supporter or candidate in municipal politics...
- To share their information and expertise...
- To act as role models for their children and in their communities...
- To make change in their communities."<sup>7</sup>

### **Barriers to Participation**

The barriers to participation most frequently mentioned were:

- "Lack of time and energy due to the competing responsibilities of home, family, work and, for some women, sheer survival;
- Practical obstacles such as the timing of meetings, their inaccessibility for disabled women, transportation issues, lack of childcare, lack of money;
- Lack of information about municipal processes and services, and/or information that is full of technical language and jargon;

- The complexity and formality of the system is often combined with intimidating space or requirements for presentations;
- Lack of faith that women can make a difference and frustration with political systems;
- A sense that their voices are unheard;
- Sexism;
- Racism;
- Language barriers;
- Barriers for young women (e.g. no role models, input not sought out or valued)."<sup>8</sup>

### **Role of Municipalities in Effecting Change**

Women's organizations and FCM committee members saw a role for municipal governments and elected women in supporting the inclusion of women in municipal processes:

- "Leadership by municipal councillors, and especially by women councillors, [facilitates] the emergence of new ideas and practices that are more democratic and participatory."<sup>9</sup>
- "Elected women have a role as mentors and coaches to increase women's participation in municipal processes;
- Elected women have a role to support the development and creation of local advisory committees;
- Elected women have a role to raise the awareness of women in their communities about the importance of their participation."<sup>10</sup>

**Good practice example:**

***"City council created the Conseil des Montrealaises on May 18, 2004... These dynamic women come from many different horizons and through their expertise, they contribute to the advancement of debates and decisions that affect women in Montreal."***

<http://ville.montreal.qc.ca>

### **How Women's Organizations Can Help**

Representatives from women's organizations identified the following ways in which they could support increased participation:

- “Getting information to women;
- Advocacy at the municipal level;
- Making women’s participation in municipal processes a priority for women’s organizations;
- Building partnerships with municipal government – opportunities to improve the lives of women in

**Good practice example:**

***A Campaign School held in Cambridge prior to the 2006 municipal elections provided women with practical information on a variety of topics such as the roles within a campaign team, finances, legal rules, balancing family and public life, and more***

[www.womenstories.com](http://www.womenstories.com)

their communities;

- Developing linkages between FCM and national women’s organizations;
- Investing in women’s leadership;
- Developing networks of support for women in

government;

- Taking responsibility to learn more about municipal government;
- Organizing training and information sessions for women on municipal government structures, and processes and voting;
- Inviting municipal councillors to community events, to meet women and learn about the organization.”<sup>11</sup>

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## Conclusion

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In many respects this analysis confirms what common sense tells us. That men and women hold different perceptions of community issues and challenges is not surprising given our different roles and life experiences.

“The most important gender equality issue related to [government] is the capacity to formulate policies and deliver programmes that (1) recognize and respond to the different situation and needs of women and men and (2) work toward narrowing inequalities.”<sup>12</sup> The information presented here

suggests that the goal of full inclusion of women is desirable yet elusive. It is important to understand that women face numerous barriers, both systemic and psychological, as they strive to increase their political presence. Promoting women’s full participation in local governance is everyone’s responsibility and in everyone’s best interest. Most fundamentally, gender equality is a human right. It is our hope that this paper will serve to inform, educate, and inspire to action the widest possible audience – from community residents, to women’s groups, to officials and managers of municipal and regional government.

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## Tools and Resources

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The following tools and resources are provided for those who would like to learn more about this topic.

### ***Status of Women Canada Web Site***

<http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca>

This federal government agency promotes gender equality and the full participation of women in the economic, social, cultural, and political life of the country.

### ***Gender-based Analysis: A Guide for Policy-Making***

[http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/cgi-bin/printview.pl?file=/pubs/gbguide/gbguide\\_e.htm](http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/cgi-bin/printview.pl?file=/pubs/gbguide/gbguide_e.htm)

This document developed by Status of Women Canada outlines a step-by-step process for gender analysis.

### ***Federation of Municipalities Web Site***

<http://www.fcm.ca>

FCM supports increased gender equality in municipal processes through various initiatives and publications.

### ***How Woman-Friendly is Your City?***

<http://www.fcm.ca/english/policy/friendly.pdf>

A simple rating sheet developed to help answer the question “How advanced is your city in terms of gender equality?”

### ***Increasing Women’s Participation in Municipal Decision-Making (Report)***

<http://www.fcm.ca/english/policy/increase.pdf>

The full report of a 2003 FCM project to increase women's participation in municipal consultation processes.

**Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Decision-Making (Resource Kit)**

<http://www.fcm.ca/english/policy/toolkit.pdf>

An accompanying document to the above report that contains a compilation of information on international tools and processes.

**Getting to 30% by 2026**

<http://www.fcm.ca/english/policy/wreport.pdf>

This community mobilization tool contains concrete, specific activities for municipal councils wishing to involve more women.

**Equal Voice/A Voix Egales Web Site**

<http://www.equalvoice.ca>

A national, multipartisan, volunteer organization committed to raising awareness of the underrepresentation of women in Canadian politics.

**Getting to the Gate**

<http://gettingtothegate.com>

This free online campaign school from Equal Voice was designed to assist women interested in getting into politics.

**Canadian Women Voters Congress Web Site**

<http://www.canadianwomenvoterscongress.org>

This nonpartisan, grass roots organization is dedicated to encouraging all Canadian women to become strong, effective voices at all levels of government.

**One Woman One Vote Web Site**

<http://www.onewomanonevote.org>

The purpose of this initiative from YWCA Edmonton is to encourage women to vote.

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## Our Next Steps

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The Social Planning Council will forward copies of this paper to appropriate governing, policy and funding bodies for use in their planning and programming decisions. These include:

- The City of Cambridge
  - Mayor and City Council
  - Community Services
  - Planning Services
  - Consultative Committees

- The Regional Municipality of Waterloo
  - Regional Council
  - Planning, Housing and Community Services
  - Social Services
  - Transportation and Environmental Services
  - Waterloo Regional Police
- as well as local associations, service clubs, and advocacy groups with an interest in women's economic, political and employment conditions

<sup>1</sup> Thurston, W.E. and O'Connor, M. (1996). Health promotion for women: A Canadian perspective. *Canada-U.S.A Women's Health Forum Commissioned Papers*. Abstract [online]. Retrieved from Health Canada web site: [http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/pubs/women-femmes/can-usa/can-abstract-resume\\_7\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/pubs/women-femmes/can-usa/can-abstract-resume_7_e.html)

<sup>2</sup> Status of Women Canada. (1998). *Gender-based Analysis: A Guide for Policy-Making (revised edition)*. Retrieved from: [http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/cgi-bin/printview.pl?file=/pubs/gbguide/gbguide\\_e.html](http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/cgi-bin/printview.pl?file=/pubs/gbguide/gbguide_e.html)

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada. (2001). *Community Profiles*. Retrieved from: <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/profil01/CP01/Index.ctm?Lang=E>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Schalkwyk, J. and Woroniuk, B. (1999, July). Gender Equality & Public Administration: In Brief. Gatineau, Quebec: Canadian International Development Agency. Retrieved from:

[http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/INET/IMAGES.NSF/vLUImages/Policy/\\$file/CEEadministration.pdf](http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/INET/IMAGES.NSF/vLUImages/Policy/$file/CEEadministration.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Federation of Canadian Municipalities. (2006). Getting to 30% by 2026. Retrieved from:

<http://www.fcm.ca/english/policy/wreport.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Federation of Canadian Municipalities. (2004). *Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Decision Making*, pp.34-35. Retrieved from: <http://www.fcm.ca/english/policy/increase.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.30.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.41.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.42.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp.42-43.

<sup>12</sup> Schalkwyk, J. and Woroniuk, B., op. cit.

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