

# *Inclusive and Diverse Leadership in Parliamentary Politics and Beyond*

It's undeniable that there are systemic barriers which prevent certain people from fully participating in society. Inside and outside of parliamentary politics, there has been much discussion and debate about the kinds of barriers women face. In this article, the author explores how a tendency for women to take on caregiving roles for children, and increasingly the elderly, is one such barrier to full participation – particularly for caregivers who are single. She writes that parliamentarians can and should lead by example by finding creative ways to eliminate these barriers in their own organizations and professional development activities.

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There has been a lot of discussion and debate inside and outside parliamentary jurisdictions about addressing the barriers for women to participate in leadership and political roles. There is no shortage of solid, evidence-based reports that objectively analyze the data and stories of women in PEI, across Canada, and around the world to identify what needs to change to create a more inclusive and diverse leadership landscape.

Over and over we hear that the systemic barriers for women's participation are not about ability, interest, or skill. The unpleasant reality is that the barriers are in the wage gap, violence and safety, childcare access, and caregiving roles. In this article, I'd like to focus on this caregiving role and provide an example of how parliamentarians can lead by example to break down this barrier.

Women are more likely than men to be unpaid or underpaid caregivers for children and, increasingly, also for seniors. This means that their participation in formal politics often requires them to either find and/or pay someone else to provide care. Single parents and primary care providers – both women and men – are least likely to have flexibility and options around caregiving roles.



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To allow caregivers full participation in the life of society, government and associated organizations must enact policies that increase supports, not burdens, for caregivers.<sup>1</sup> The PEI government has the opportunity to show leadership in this regard by implementing the suite of changes recommended by the PEI Coalition for Women in Government in its much-referenced 2009 research report ‘Whose Job is it Anyway?’<sup>2</sup>

We must design policies, programs, and services that recognize and respect this reality and are truly inclusive. It takes work to recognize and that move beyond our assumptions, uncover the realities of people’s lives, and find ways to address their needs. Too often this means that we put the burden onto those affected to agitate and advocate for themselves and their peers. Yet, even then, we do not listen when they speak up, acknowledge their story, or explore their experience. Without this commitment and a willingness to change, we will continue to see the underrepresentation of entire groups of professionals who are excluded because of uninformed and incorrect assumptions and resulting omissions.<sup>3</sup>

Let’s look at an example of how being sensitive to the experience of people burdened by systemic barriers can lead to positive change. If a single parent involved in parliamentary politics and leadership wants to attend a professional development opportunity that includes travel, overnight stays, and full days of meetings and panels, what are the barriers to their participation? Should event organizers consider providing a free child care program and appropriate activities for children and/or unaccompanied minors, shared accommodations, and subsidized travel for accompanying minors or support? Should they ensure that all attendees are given the same opportunities to attend key events including informal dinners and networking socials? And, should they consider any additional costs that may be incurred which may be beyond the financial capacity of the attendee?

In my mind, the answer to all of these questions is yes. At the very least, event organizers should recognize that by failing to address these barriers they may unintentionally exclude the very people whose lived experience would give them deep insight into the struggles a significant portion of the population faces. If they don’t make a meaningful effort to

expand the group membership by eliminating barriers to participation, is it surprising that these groups continue to struggle to adequately represent the diversity of the general population?

Writing in the Guardian, Bella DePaulo explains that “single-parent and cohabiting-parent households are just a few of the many contemporary ways of living [and that] creative ways of living will continue to proliferate. Never again will huge swaths of the population follow the nuclear family path or any other predetermined road to the good life. We get to design our own life spaces.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, there continues to be individual and systemic discrimination against single and non-married parents. I believe that a representative parliamentary democracy should reflect the people we serve and the only way to ensure this occurs is to remove significant barriers to full participation in politics for all people.

If every report, anecdote, and excluded participant tells you that the barriers are there and that change is required to remove or mitigate those barriers for true inclusion, then the fact that you are personally inconvenienced by that action or even that you do not believe it to be true does not change the reality that the objective data presents. We have to make a decision as to whether we really want to be inclusive or if we are just saying that because we think we should.

The time for reports, discussion, and debate is long past. The time for meaningful action is right now. After all, it’s 2018.

## Notes

- 1 Prince Edward Island Advisory Council on the Status of Women. *Prince Edward Island Equality Report Card 2018*. (June, 2018). Retrieved July 18, 2018, from PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women: [http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/acsw\\_erc18EN.pdf](http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/acsw_erc18EN.pdf)
- 2 PEI Coalition for Women in Government. (2009). *Whose Job is it Anyway?* Charlottetown: PEI Coalition for Women in Government
- 3 Government of Canada, Status of Women Canada. Retrieved July 18, 2018, from Gender Based Analysis Plus Framework: <https://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/gba-ac/apply-appliquez-en.html>
- 4 Bella DePaulo, “Discrimination against single parents has vast implications for their children,” *The Guardian* (UK), March 15, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/13/discrimination-single-parents-children>