

# ***Taking Women Into Account:***

**What is needed to create an inclusive, women-friendly  
Ottawa that respects diversity?**

## **Community Survey Results April 2004**

**City for All Women Initiative (CAWI)  
Initiative; une ville pour toutes les femmes (IVTF)**

*"It is one thing to see women as users of services and another to see  
them as designers of services."* Survey participant

**Funded by Status of Women Canada**

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On behalf of the City for All Women Initiative (CAWI)  
Initiative; une ville pour toutes les femmes (IVTF)

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Background**

The City for All Women Initiative (CAWI) Initiative; une ville pour toutes les femmes (IVTF) is a one-year research project funded by Status of Women Canada. It is a follow-up to a previous project, “Women’s Access to Municipal Services in Ottawa”, in which city staff and women’s organizations worked in partnership to propose improvements in women’s access to services and employment. The current project seeks to work in partnership to identify decision-making practices that are inclusive, women-friendly and respectful of diversity.

As a first step, this survey was conducted in order to listen to the experiences and concerns of the full-diversity of women across the City. A total of 29 women’s organizations and community organizations serving women participated. Utilizing this baseline data, the project plans to work with community groups and the city staff to take the following steps.

- Look at current practices and ways of operating in the city government.
- Learn from what has worked in other cities in Canada and globally.
- Identify gender-inclusive strategies and ways of ensuring their implementation.

### **Research Methodology**

An interview guide was designed to capture the experience of the full-diversity of women in relation to the decision-making and planning practices of the City of Ottawa. (See Appendix 1) Participants identified facilitators and barriers to making their voices heard, experiences of discrimination and suggestions for what is needed to enable full and equal participation.

An attempt was made to select organizations representative of the full-diversity of women in the City. (See Appendix 2) Most interviews were with an individual representing an organization or a community while one-third were with a group of staff and/or women served by the organization. In total 112 women participated in the survey and, later, in a community meeting to review findings, contributing a total of 214 in-kind hours to the project. The project wishes to thank them, as well as City staff with whom we have met to date, for the contribution of their time and expertise.

## Key Barriers

- ❑ As the **City does not collect gender-disaggregated data**<sup>1</sup>, it is difficult for women's organizations to demonstrate ways in which City practices, budgeting and funding affect women and men differently in specific populations.
- ❑ **Women need specific supports** to be involved due to demands on their time as caregivers, isolation, experiences of violence and tendency to defer to men in decision-making.
- ❑ **Women in equity-seeking groups** face even greater challenges in having their voices heard (Visible minority, immigrant, francophone, physically/mentally challenged, youth, elderly, low-income, GLBT<sup>2</sup>, criminalized, rural).
- ❑ **Women's organizations are doing more with less funding**, which makes it more difficult for staff to have the time or resources to provide supports for women to become involved in influencing decision-making.
- ❑ When visible minority and aboriginal women **see only white women and men** as city managers and Councillors, they doubt they can influence decisions.
- ❑ A few women's organizations have developed expertise in lobbying City Hall, but **most organizations lack understanding of the municipal system and how to influence it.**
- ❑ **Public consultations are often intimidating and not flexible enough** to accommodate women's schedules and support needs.
- ❑ Many women's organizations **question their perspectives are valued and have found influencing the City requires a lot of work for few results.**
- ❑ Some Councillors and city staff are responsive to the needs of particular communities of women, but others are **not responsive, hold stereotypes and lack sensitivity** to the particular issues diverse women face.
- ❑ There have been **some positive experiences in working in partnership** with the City to solve problems (advisory committees and task forces), however in some partnerships, **men will predominate unless the City helps to create equal space for women.**

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<sup>1</sup> Gender disaggregated data are statistics that distinguish between women and men.

<sup>2</sup> Gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered.

## **Conclusion**

Women have a significant contribution to make to the City of Ottawa as they bring the experience as mothers, volunteers, workers and community members. Women from equity-seeking groups or groups at-risk have specific perspectives to bring in creating a more inclusive Ottawa. It is in applying practices that are inclusive of the full-diversity of women and men that the quality of life in Ottawa can improve.

Some women have had positive experiences in which their perspectives were taken into account in the planning and decision-making of the City. This has been especially true for those women and organizations that understand how the municipal system works and ways of influencing it. However, for most women and women's organizations, especially those representing marginalized groups of women, there is an experience of exclusion and not being heard. Any strategies must take into account specific ways of promoting inclusion of these equity-seeking groups.

The participants in this study made many specific suggestions as to what is needed to create an inclusive and women-friendly Ottawa. Through them all, there was a central idea that what is required is a shift in thinking, one that distinguishes between the interests and needs of diverse women and men. Achieving this may require sensitivity training, as well as new practices. The experiences and ideas included here will serve as a starting point for working collaboratively with city staff to identify current practices or initiatives that can be strengthened so as to promote equal participation.

As one survey participant said:

*We will know we will have succeeded when a woman,  
who is the most marginalized amongst us, can pick up  
the phone, express her views and be heard*

## Summary of Findings

### Taking Women Into Account

#### Barriers

As the **City does not collect gender-disaggregated data**, it is difficult for women's organizations to demonstrate ways in which City practices, budgeting and funding affect women and men differently in specific populations.

#### Why Gender Matters

Though departments within the City have, at times, been successful at taking women-specific needs into account, participants expressed concern the City of Ottawa does not systematically use a gender lens in planning and evaluating services. They stated several reasons as to why taking gender into account is important:

- Using a gender lens or gender analysis would enable the City to ensure it is serving the needs of both women and men.
- Women in at-risk groups have needs that differ from the men in the same at-risk group (Example: homeless women have more issues of safety).
- Poverty is the biggest social determinant of health and poverty is increasingly feminized.
- Women tend to have specific needs that differ from men's needs:
  - Women face specific obstacles to training and employment.
  - Women are the majority of seniors.
  - Women are more likely to be victims of violence.
  - As family caregivers, women rely upon city services more.
  - As services are cut, women are more likely to increase the amount of unpaid and volunteer work they do.

As the city does not collect gender-disaggregated data, it is difficult to track these differences between women and men. Which, in turn, makes it difficult to evaluate a service or practice of the city. This leads to a feeling of helplessness on the part of women and community groups.

At the same time, it was noted that diverse women have contributions to make to the quality of life in Ottawa when given the opportunity to participate equally with diverse men. Here is a sample of contributions that women named:

- Women's organizations have knowledge about the population with whom they work and insights into preventing social problems.
- Mothers bring daily-lived experience in linking the needs of family and community.

- Immigrant women bring a wealth of skills and commitment to cross-cultural understanding.

*“I know my mother is strong as she travelled from the other side of the world and raised six children.”*

- Senior women bring years of experience and a concern for younger generations.
- Francophone women have learned what it means to fight for one’s rights and accessibility.

### **What more is needed :**

- Create a women’s position with clout at City Hall.
- Collect gender disaggregated data in order to measure the need for and impact of specific services and city practices.
- Hold a forum each year to focus on the status of the full-diversity of women in the City.

## **Getting Involved**

### **Barriers**

**Women need specific supports** to be involved due to demands on their time as caregivers, isolation, experiences of violence and tendency to defer to men in decision-making.

**Women in equity-seeking groups** face even greater challenges in having their voices heard (Visible minority, immigrant, francophone, physically/mentally challenged, youth, elderly, low-income, GLBT, criminalized, rural).

**Women’s organizations are doing more with less funding**, which makes it more difficult for staff to have the time or resources to provide supports for women to become involved in influencing decision-making.

### **What has helped and hindered?**

For many women, City Hall is far away, both physically (especially for rural women), and culturally; and in terms of their priorities of meeting the every day needs of themselves and their families. They question the influence they can have.

It is for this reason that women are most likely to become involved politically when they see that the issues being addressed are one’s critical to the well-being of themselves, their family and their community. Multi-cultural outreach workers

and community developers have provided a bridge for marginalized women to engage with the City on these issues.

Community organizations have provided support that has made it more possible for diverse women to engage with the City. When funding has permitted, they have provided women with needed supports (childcare, transportation, food money) to attend city forums. They have helped women to feel empowered to speak out by helping them to prepare and present their point of view.

The municipal government has contributed to diverse women becoming involved in decision making through funding women-specific services and networks.

- Support groups, home visits and language-specific help lines reduce isolation and educate women about their rights and responsibilities.
- Programs that address sexual and physical violence against women enable women to feel safer and begin to take control of their lives, so as to be able to become active citizens.
- Gender-specific programs which recognize that women and men in marginalized groups have different needs have played a critical role. (i.e. women-specific programs for the homeless, criminalized, new Canadians, aboriginal, francophone)

However, with cuts to funding, there is a growing concern that funding for women-specific services is no longer a priority (as reflected in the changes to United Way funding criteria). This means fewer supports are available to enable the full-diversity of women to meet their own needs and those of their families, which makes it even harder for women to be involved in the community, let alone influence City Hall.

### **What more is needed?**

- Ensure adequate funding and staffing of community/women's organizations so they can provide support and political education to diverse women.
- Identify sources for core funding so staff of women's organizations can be paid for the work they do and not spend valuable staff time chasing the funding sources.
- Use gender budgeting tools to assess needs of diverse groups of women and men.



## Seeing Ourselves as Decision Makers

### **Barriers**

**When visible minority and aboriginal women see only white women and men as city managers and Councillors, they doubt they can influence decisions.**

### **What has helped and hindered?**

The fact that a few women are on City Council (6 of 21 councillors) and hold positions as managers has meant there are some role models for women. This has been important because there is still the perception that politicians are the experts and the experts are the “men in suits”. Though women are often leaders at the community level, many women will still defer to men when it comes to decision-making and planning.

The presence of some visible minority women as front line workers has made it possible for visible minority women to be better understood and trust the system. This, in turn, makes it easier for diverse women to become involved in the wider community. Seeing women from the same ethno-cultural group with decision-making power is also affirming for women who may experience cultural or familial conflict as they begin to assert their opinions.

But as one aboriginal woman said, noting the lack of aboriginal people in positions of decision-making,

*“The whole system is exclusive”.*

Since the City does not collect data as to the number of people from equity-seeking groups in positions of leadership, a statistical analysis is not possible. However, the perception is that men fill more positions of decision-making, especially in some departments and bodies, while the women in such positions are usually white, middle-class, heterosexual and able-bodied. As one Somali woman said,

*“Somali women are in the City Hall, but cleaning the floors”.*

However, a word of caution was expressed. It is not only the presence of women and equity-seeking groups with decision-making authority that matters. It is the sensitivity with which all leaders, regardless of gender, are inclusive of women and all equity-seeking groups. To do this requires a sensitivity and shift in thinking. One participant spoke from her experience as a visible-minority woman:

*We think when we get more diversity around the table, it will be reflected in the decision-made, but the thinking is still mainstream,  
We have to be prepared to change the way we think.*

### **What more is needed?**

- Conduct an employee survey to determine the percentage of women and men from equity-seeking groups (physically challenged, aboriginal, visible minorities, francophone and GLBT) noting who is in management positions.
- Elect more women Councillors, especially aboriginal and visible minority women.
- Employ more women as city managers, especially aboriginal and visible minority women.
- Distribute notification of vacancies widely so more diverse women apply.
- Monitor the practices of committees and task forces to ensure **they** are inclusive of equity-seeking groups.

## **Understanding the Political System**

### **Barriers**

A few women's organizations have developed expertise in lobbying City Hall, but **most organizations lack understanding of the municipal system and how to influence it.**

### **What has helped and hindered?**

Community organizations, at times working in partnership with the City of Ottawa, have provided education about the municipal system. In support groups, ESL classes and workshops, women receive some education about their rights and responsibilities. This is of particular importance to immigrant women who may come from countries that lack democracy so they fear and distrust government.

Some women and community organizations have become very effective in helping their members to engage effectively with the municipal system:

- CUPE Local 2204 has developed lobby materials for childcare workers that are easily understood and friendly for people lobbying for the first time.
- Networks that bring together the interests of several groups (Ex. RCCEVAW, Alliance to End Homelessness) have been effective in keeping groups informed and determining a course of action.
- Ottawa Council of Women is able to engage women working on issues at different levels of government as they work at the municipal, provincial, national and international.

However, many organizations interviewed did not know the different decision-making and advisory bodies in the City of Ottawa. It is a minority of women and organizations who are confident in lobbying. As a director of one women's organization said,

*“A few women and organizations develop skills in relating to City Hall, but when they leave, there is a big vacuum.”*

The City of Ottawa web site makes it easier for women with access to Internet to stay informed as they can obtain information in their homes. Likewise, several groups talked about how useful it is to receive e-mail notifications of City meetings and consultations. However, not all women have Internet access so the city needs to further develop a variety of mediums.

Women interviewed noted other limitations to keeping informed. Notifications of meetings often arrive too late to prepare. Information about meetings and how the city works is either hidden or non-existent on the web site. Visually impaired women are unable to use the web site unless they have a voice recognition computer and even then have difficulty reading PDF files. When seeking information by phone, some reported finding the operator not sufficiently informed.

### **What more is needed?**

- Develop accessible, multi-lingual educational materials that clarify which level of government is responsible for which service, how the municipal government works and how to influence it.  
In the development of those materials:
  - Draw upon the expertise of women/community groups.
  - Adapt the mediums of communication for diverse populations of women (e.g. rural, francophone mothers).
  - Address fears and lack of trust of government.
- Create opportunities for individual women or organizations with experience in advocacy to mentor those with less experience.
- Develop more effective ways of making information widely accessible:
  - Use multi-media approaches so as to reach people with different abilities and access.
  - Give notice of meetings with adequate lead-time so as to provide community groups with adequate time to prepare.
  - Improve City web site so that schedules of meetings and information on how the City works is easily accessible.

## Influencing Decision-Makers

### Barriers

**Public consultations are often intimidating and not flexible enough to accommodate women's schedules and support needs.**

Many women's organizations **question their perspectives are valued and have found influencing the City requires a lot of work for few results.**

Some Councillors and city staff are responsive to the needs of particular communities of women, but others are **not responsive, hold stereotypes and lack sensitivity** to the particular issues diverse women face.

### What has helped and hindered?

Some women/community organizations reported Councillors responded to their requests, visiting their organization, attending events and addressing issues of concern. Other organizations, in particular those led by aboriginal or visible minority women, were very discouraged as they found Councillors did not respond to their requests or follow through on commitments-made to address an issue. These women expressed feeling a great divide between City Council and the community.

On occasion, the city has taken several measures to make community consultations more accessible to the full-diversity of women.

- Consultations held in the community have made it easier to participate and less intimidating for women, especially women living on low-income.
- Allowing two or more people to share a presentation has made it easier for women to speak for the first time, as one speaker supports the other.
- Focus groups have been valuable ways of engaging women directly on a given issue.

Indeed, most groups referred to presenting at City Hall as intimidating and far away for most women. The lack of flexibility in the agenda and scheduling of speakers does not take into account the demands on many women's time to attend to family needs. Limited time at the microphone makes it harder for women with disabilities or speaking a second language to participate.

Others doubted whether their views were being considered. As one community worker indicated,

*When women participate in a consultation and feel they have been heard, they are more likely to speak again. If they feel they have not been heard, they may never come forward again.*

Some noted not being consulted on issues key to their work or funding. Some noted not seeing their views expressed in final reports. Others had the experience of being consulted after decisions were already made. Racism and stereotypes were noted as barriers to being heard.

It was noted that some city staff are responsive, but often do not have the power to act or time to share information with others. In many cases, organizations do not have human contact with city staff. There is only a paper trail for funding purposes, which is particularly alienating to marginalized communities. Some staff hold stereotypes about women of colour, lesbian, aboriginal, low-income and criminalized women.

### **What more is needed?**

- In seeking diverse women's opinions on a given issue:
  - Hold consultations or focus groups in the community whenever possible (including rural areas).
  - Increase opportunities for face-to-face contact with municipal leaders, especially for marginalized communities.
  - Draw upon the expertise of women's groups.
  - Schedule the estimated time when people will speak, so as to enable women and men with family responsibilities to plan their time.
  - Provide multiple ways for people to provide input and feedback (e-mail, phone, meetings at community level).
  
- Provide sensitivity training for City staff so as to enhance a gender analysis and address racism and stereotypes of specific groups. Utilize the expertise of women and community groups. (Ex: Elizabeth Fry's knowledge of criminalized women)
  
- Create opportunities for community people to work with the municipal government to lobby other levels of government.

## **Joint Problem-Solving**

### **Barrier**

There have been **some positive experiences in working in partnership** with the City to solve problems (advisory committees and task forces), however in some partnerships, **men will predominate unless the City helps to create equal space for women.**

### **What has helped and hindered?**

Diverse women have had positive experiences of having their voices heard when they participated in working groups or task forces with the City (ex. Police Race Relations, Homelessness Initiative, Poverty Task Force, Women's Access, Allocations Committee, Barrier Elimination Plan Project, Youth Cabinet). WISE (Women's Initiatives for Safe Environments) has worked successfully with city departments in addressing safety issues raised by communities.

Some felt that the Advisory Committees are an important step in citizen engagement for both women and men. However, there was concern as to amount of impact they are able to have in decision-making. Women were pleased to know that the Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee has women as part of its mandate, but there was concern that gender issues may be lost given the breadth of their mandate.

Many expressed concern that City Council approves recommendations that are not implemented. Many feared that this report would just sit on a shelf. Of particular concern were the recommendations approved in the Women's Access to Municipal Services project (the precursor to this project). They stressed the need to monitor their implementation, especially following the cuts in the 2004 budget.

### **What more is needed?**

- Develop strategies for attracting women from diversity groups to committees and task forces.
- Set policy of gender balance on committees, as on some committees men will predominate unless municipality is pro-active.
- Monitor the implementation of the recommendations from the Women's Access to Municipal Services Project.
- Establish an Advisory Committee on Women or utilize another mechanisms, such as the Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee, to ensure that a gender lens is applied in city practices.

## Appendix 1: Interview Guide

### **City for All Women Initiative (CAWI)** **Initiative; une ville pour toutes les femmes (IVTF)**

### **Interview Guide for Women's Organizations**

#### **1. Information about the Organization**

- Name of Organization
- Name Interviewee
- Position
- Contact Information
- Your organization's mandate
- Please describe the community you serve or represent:  
Ethno-cultural communities (estimate %):  
Languages (estimated %):  
Gender (estimate %)
- What are the keys concerns of the women you serve/ represent?  
(For mixed gender groups, do men and women experience this differently)

#### **2. Addressing Key Concerns**

- Have women in your organization had an occasion to bring these issues of concern to the attention of the Municipal government? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
- If yes, what successes have you had?
- If your organization and the women you represent have not engaged with the City, why not?

#### **3. Experiences with municipal processes**

- \_\_\_ Public Consultation  
At City Hall \_\_\_\_\_ In the Community \_\_\_\_\_  
Did you attend \_\_\_\_, present \_\_\_\_, or submit written statement \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Standing Committee Meeting at City Hall  
Did you attend \_\_\_\_, present \_\_\_\_\_, or submit written statement \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Participated in an Advisory Committee of City Council  
Were you a member \_\_\_\_, did you present \_\_\_\_\_ written statement \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Attended a City Council meeting
- \_\_\_ Met with a City Councilor  
In the community \_\_\_\_\_, At City Hall \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Attended All-candidates forum prior to election.
- \_\_\_ Supported a candidate for City Council.
- \_\_\_ Organized phone calling/faxing or e-mailing to a Councilor's Office
- \_\_\_ Received e-mails from a Councilor's office
- \_\_\_ Networked with other community groups to bring an issue to the attention of local politicians.
- \_\_\_ Raised public awareness so as to influence politicians (via. Newspaper articles, protests, public forums, etc).
- \_\_\_ Participated in an on-going partnership with the City (taskforce, working group, advisory committee, etc)

**4. Blocks to Engaging with the City**

What limits your organization, and the women you serve/represent, from participating in these municipal processes?

**5. Discrimination**

- Is discrimination against the women you serve/represent a barrier to their engaging with the city? (racism, language barriers, financial, sexism, cultural insensitivities, etc.) Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_
- If yes, how have you experienced this?

**6. Helps to Women's full-participation in decision-making and planning**

- In what ways has the City been effective in enabling women and organizations to influence decision-making and planning?
- What more could the City do to help women to be heard?

**7. Partnerships**

- Has your organization had the experience of working in partnership with municipal government to address a concern?
- If yes, what was that partnership? Was the partnership successful? Why or why not?

**8. Women's Contribution**

- What strengths or contributions do your organization and/or the women you serve/represent have to bring to good decision-making and planning in the City of Ottawa?

**9. What do you think would be critical to the success of this initiative?**



## **Appendix 2: Participating Organizations**

- ❑ Better Beginnings Community House
- ❑ CALACS, Centre francophone d'aide et de lutte contre les agressions a caractère sexuel d'Ottawa
- ❑ Carlington Community Health Centre
- ❑ Centre Espoir Sophie
- ❑ Centre de ressources communautaires de Cumberland  
Groupe de parents de Vars
- ❑ Centre de ressources communautaires de la Basse-Ville  
Groupe de jeux pour enfants de 0-6 ans  
Soutien communautaire à l'emploi
- ❑ Childcare Workers, CUPE Local 2204
- ❑ Cornerstone House
- ❑ Debra Dynes Community House
- ❑ Disabled Persons Community Resources
- ❑ Immigrant Women's Services Ottawa
- ❑ Elizabeth Fry Society of Ottawa
- ❑ LAZO, Latin American Women's Organization
- ❑ Minwaashin Lodge, Aboriginal Women's Support Centre
- ❑ OCISO Women's Program
- ❑ Ottawa Council of Women
- ❑ Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre
- ❑ Ottawa Senior's Action Network
- ❑ Ottawa Somali Women's Organization
- ❑ Ottawa Women's Training and Employment Network
- ❑ Regional Coordinating Committee to End Violence Against Women
- ❑ Somali Women's Support Line
- ❑ TAPP, The Antipoverty Project
- ❑ Syrian Arab Association
- ❑ The Well, women's drop-in centre
- ❑ WISE, Women Initiatives for Safer Environments
- ❑ Young Women's Shelter, Youth Services Bureau