

Women still facing 'electoral glass ceiling'

By Corinne Lutter
Examiner staff

Women may make up 50 per cent of the country's population, but on average, less than one-quarter of people in public office are female.

Janet Buckmaster hopes voters buck that trend when they head to the polls in upcoming municipal and provincial elections.

Buckmaster is the coordinator of One Woman One Vote, a non-partisan initiative of the Edmonton YWCA which encourages women to get involved in the political process, either by voting, running for office or working on other women's election campaigns.

The goal is to give women a stronger voice.

"Our focus is to encourage women to become active participants in shaping the public agenda," says Buckmaster. "If we make up 50 per cent of the population, what might Edmonton look like if we got every eligible women out to vote? Policies might look a lot different."

Things may have changed from four or five decades ago, but there's still a lot of progress to be made.

On the municipal level, there are only three women on city council out of 13 seats. The most women on council was in 1989, when six councillors and the mayor, Jan Reimer, were elected. But only two women were elected in 1995 and 1998, and three in 2001.

Two out of nine trustees on the public school board are women, while the Catholic school board is a rarity with four of seven trustees female.

Provincially, there are only 17 female MLAs in 83 ridings and federally, 65 out of 308 seats in the House of Commons are held by women.



Photo by Walter Tychnowicz

Janet Buckmaster
coordinator of the **Edmonton**
One Woman One Vote at her
office on **124 Street**.

"We're really stuck. We call this an electoral glass ceiling," says University of Alberta political science professor Linda Trimble. "We're stuck at 20 per cent and it's not going to budge unless there are some changes."

Specific barriers keep women from voting and from running for public office.

Women with a lower education, with children under 18, or those who are not well established in their community, for example, are less likely to cast a ballot.

Raising money to run a campaign is also a factor for women looking to run for office.

A serious candidate for city council will typically spend \$20,000 to \$25,000, while a mayoral campaign could cost upwards of \$250,000, says Buckmaster.

"(Women) tend not to travel in spheres of great money, like the old-boys network," she says.

And, women don't often donate money to support other women's campaigns.

"Women aren't used to making financial contributions to campaigns for other women, and I don't think understand the benefit of doing it – what the investment is," says Buckmaster.

At the provincial and federal level, parties simply don't recruit as many women candidates as they do men, says Trimble, co-author of *Still Counting: Women in Politics Across Canada*.

"Parties are the gatekeepers to political office and they have a lot of influence," says Trimble. "It's up to political parties and party leaders and the people who go out finding candidates to identify women and say 'I want you to run and I'm going to help you.'"

And, because women don't see a lot of other women in political office, they often don't even consider the possibility of running, she says.

"It's my sense that men volunteer, but women need to be talked into it. They see themselves traditionally as the helpers, the volunteers, the workers, but not the candidate," says Trimble.

Research also shows women tend to start in politics later in life, after their children are grown.

"They have less time in the ranks and it's very hard to move up the ladder," says Buckmaster.

Edmonton city councillor Janice Melnychuk says it's hard for women who are working and raising a family to get politically involved.

"For me, it did not become a possibility until my kids were in junior high," says Melnychuk, who was an active community volunteer who helped out on other candidates' election campaigns before deciding to take a shot at public school board.

She served two terms on the board before running for city council in 2001, winning a seat in Ward 3.

In February, Melnychuk attended a Women's Political Action Forum, where women in office were invited to share their experiences and advice with would-be female candidates.

"Women who are in politics need to be reaching out and saying, very proactively to other women, 'Here's what you need to do. Phone me, ask me. I'll give you advice,'" says Melnychuk.

While women are slowly becoming equal economic partners with their husbands and gaining ground in the business world, political equality is still elusive, she says.

"There are a variety of issues that women are keenly interested in and our voices should be at the decision-making tables in this country," says Melnychuk.

Edmonton Catholic School trustee Janice Sarich agrees balancing family life and politics can be a bit tricky.

"Politics isn't very women-friendly. Because of the balance and the struggle with family life, it may not be for all," says Sarich, whose children were in elementary school and junior high when she was first elected as a trustee three years ago.

Sarich also participated in the Women's Political Action Forum, hoping to inspire other women to throw their hat in the ring.

"I think there are some really dynamic women who would do a fabulous job," says Sarich.

But, even women who don't want to run for office can help improve the election statistics for women.

"Join a campaign, support other women and see what it's all about," says Sarich.

Jean Woodrow, who served three terms as a trustee for Edmonton Public Schools, hopes women have a stronger voice on the board after the Oct. 18 municipal election. She's stepping down in Ward E.

"I really feel that a more balanced board provides a better focus, because we all have different perspectives. It's amazing, I think, how men and women do see things differently," says Woodrow.

For more information about how to get involved in the political process, visit www.onewomanonevote.org.

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