

Voices of New Brunswick Women

Working Group Report
Submitted to the Minister responsible for Women's Issues
2013

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Voices of New Brunswick Women Working Group	4
Working Group Members	
Participating Members	
Terms of Reference	5
Background	
Preamble	6
Objectives	
Options	7
Appendix	9

Introduction

In April 2011, the Government of New Brunswick, with the objective of achieving administrative efficiencies, decided to eliminate the funding provided to the former Advisory Council on the Status of Women and transfer permanent positions, corresponding staff, and related funding to the Women's Issues Branch.

A number of functions were assumed by the Women's Issues Branch, such as the production of the Equality Profile and the Women Femmes NB newsletter.

As a result of ongoing concern, particularly from women's groups, on the need to ensure women's voices are heard in decision-making processes and government's commitment to continue to work with women to achieve gender equality, Minister Marie-Claude Blais and former Minister Margaret Ann Blaney hosted a Women's Summit - Voices of New Brunswick Women in Fredericton, New Brunswick. The goal of the Summit was to ensure voices of New Brunswick women continue to be heard. Participants were posed a series of questions to generate, gather and share strategies. Reflection and discussions were held at roundtables, ideas explored, and options considered and assessed.

At the Summit, it was recommended that the provincial government continue to work with stakeholders to identify and develop strategies and mechanisms to ensure that the voices of New Brunswick women continue to be heard.

As a result, Justice Minister and Attorney General Marie-Claude Blais, who is also the Minister responsible for Women's Issues, established in the summer of 2012 the Voices of New Brunswick Women Working Group. The Working Group held three meetings and had two sub-working group meetings between September and December 2012.

Co-chaired by Minister Blais and Pam Lynch, Member of the Legislative Assembly for Fredericton-Fort Nashwaak, the Working Group's mandate was to ensure that the voices of New Brunswick women are heard by further developing the ideas and options generated at the Women's Summit to collectively provide options in order to achieve this goal.

Twenty individuals and/or groups were invited to be part of the Working Group.

The deliberations of the Working Group are a key example of women's voices being heard. The Working Group members expressed appreciation for the Minister's participation and the open and frank discussions that marked the process.

Voices of New Brunswick Women Working Group

The Voices of New Brunswick Women Working Group was established with the purpose of providing options to be considered to ensure the voices of New Brunswick women continue to be heard. These options will be provided to the Minister responsible for Women's Issues for consideration.

Working Group Members

Diversity of representation was important when considering composition of the Working Group to ensure a broad range of perspectives and voices would be brought forth and considered. Criteria for selection of members included factors such as linguistic balance, cultural diversity, geographic distribution, diversity of perspectives / backgrounds / experience, and participation in the November 4th or November 5th sessions of the Women's Summit.

Participating Members included

Sarah LeBlanc	Joni Léger
Johanne Perron	Sylvie Morin
Louise Imbeault	Odette Robichaud
Nancy Hartling	Paulette Sonier-Rioux
Joanna Everitt	Cheryl Ward
Juanita Black	Karen Windsor
Brenda Murphy	Madeleine Delaney LeBlanc
Mary Schryer	Huberte Gautreau
Leah Levac	Marie-Thérèse Séguin

Terms of Reference

The Working Group will focus specifically on ensuring voices of New Brunswick women are heard by:

- Reviewing summary and detailed results of the November 4-5, 2011 Women's Summit;
- Developing objectives and a vision for mechanisms on Voices of Women;
- Analyzing options raised at the Voices of Women Summit, develop additional options if applicable, in terms of:
 - the potential impacts and reach of the options;
 - the implementation requirements such as human, financial, technical, communication resources, etc.;
 - the roles and responsibilities of various parties (e.g. government, women's organizations, academic, women, other);
- Identifying and prioritizing Voices of Women options/mechanisms/structure;
- Providing advice on a possible action plan; and
- Submitting a report to the Minister responsible for Women's Issues by December 31, 2012.

Background

The Working Group initiated its work by developing a Preamble expressing why concentrated efforts are still required to ensure the full democratic participation of women in the province despite having achieved these rights through legal instruments such as the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Key themes emerged over the course of the work:

- The concept of an "independent voice" is often described as having the ability to speak fully on issues that matter to women without fear of repercussions; the ability to self-determine the agenda; and the ability to ensure the selection process of representatives be non-partisan (see full definition in appendix);
- The ability to have access to "unbiased" research;
- The ability to develop a good working relationship with government, the Minister responsible for Women's Issues and the Women's Issues Branch while retaining the option to hold closed sessions;
- The recognition that a pragmatic, doable and forward-thinking approach would be preferred; and
- The challenges in the Province's economy, as well as the fiscal and budget realities were identified as key considerations in moving forward.

Preamble

As previously noted, the preamble was developed to establish context by including relevant background, legal references and historical events relating to women's equality in our society and specifically within New Brunswick.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees equality between the sexes.

15. (1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

(2) Subsection (1) does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

28. Notwithstanding anything in this Charter, the rights and freedoms referred to in it are guaranteed equally to male and female persons.

Despite this, New Brunswick women have not yet achieved de facto economic, political or social equality.

As a society, we still hold to the achievement of the vision of this substantive equality and have it as a fundamental goal as the Province cannot achieve its full potential as long as this objective has not been fully realized.

We recognize, as a Working Group, that specific measures are required in order to achieve equality. One of these specific measures relates to the need to have women's voices heard, a situation which is of concern to many since the March 2011 budget decision pertaining to the Advisory Council on the Status of Women. This need to ensure women's voices are heard was clearly identified in the 2011 Voices of Women Summit.

The Working Group is a result of the Summit deliberations. Recognizing the critical role government plays in achieving true equality, the Working Group has focused on ways by which the voices of New Brunswick women can be heard.

Objectives

The following objectives were identified by the Working Group as needing to be met by any model, structure or mechanism to be established:

- To be an independent voice that provides advice to government on matters of importance to women.
- To bring to the attention of government and the public issues of interest and concern to women and women's substantive equality.
- To include and engage women of all walks of life, women's groups and society in general.
- To be strategic and provide advice on emerging and future issues.
- To represent the voice of all New Brunswick women.
- To foster a collaborative relationship with government.

Options

The Working Group developed three different models of a proposed structure. Each of these models contains sub-options in terms of representation and working relationships. Each of the models is deemed to be able to meet the objectives, though may do so in varying degrees.

The three models identified were:

- Voices of NB Women Board
- Voices of NB Women Roundtable
- Voices of NB Women Consensus-building Forum

Regardless of the model, Co-chairs were determined to be the preferred approach related to leadership. This approach is deemed to be more in line with the principles of equality where shared responsibility is fundamental, as well as an opportunity to ensure representation of both official languages. It is suggested that the Co-chairs rotate in alternate years to enhance knowledge retention and ensure knowledge transfer to future Chairs. The Co-chairs would represent the Board or Roundtable by acting as spokespersons or delegating the function to other members. As part of the Consensus-building Forum, the Co-chairs, their members or delegated employees would speak publicly on behalf of the Forum, however, would not speak on behalf of any member organizations represented.

A membership composed of individuals and organizations (membership is defined as having a seat at the decision-making table) is suggested for the Board and Roundtable based on representation by policy areas, diversity (culture, linguistic, region, etc.), as well as organizational representation. This approach would ensure a broad cross-representation of voices to represent New Brunswick women.

Representation by organizations is suggested for the Consensus—building Forum. Based on the larger number of members / representatives inherent in the model, this would allow for more groups to participate and represent the voices of New Brunswick women.

Regardless of the model, government representation would be considered *ex officio*, with no voting rights, and it would have the ability of holding closed sessions as required. It was determined that having government representation would help achieve the objective of fostering a collaborative relationship with government, and be mutually beneficial by sharing information, bringing awareness and providing advice on matters of importance to women.

A condition for participation in all models requires that representatives abide by the guidelines and principles of equality expressed in the objectives and preamble created by the Working Group.

For both the Board and Roundtable, it is suggested nominations of members are put forward by organizations, community, government or self-identification/nomination. Final selection of membership could be made by the structure itself once established (in the interim, the Working Group could be the selection panel) and by the Minister responsible for Women's Issues. In the case where the government nominates a member, the selection would be made jointly.

For the *Consensus-building Forum*, organizations would put forth nominations for consideration.

It is recognized that a relationship protocol should be established to help identify how the structure and government would interact and work together.

This jointly developed relationship protocol would define the components and limits of the collaboration between the structure, the Minister responsible for Women's Issues, and the Women's Issues Branch. Additionally, the protocol would determine frequency of meetings, options for open and closed sessions, communication guidelines, accountability and reporting lines, etc.

It is suggested that all models be accountable to the Minister responsible for Women's Issues, and should include mechanisms for reporting to the Legislative Assembly.

While a detailed work plan would be required for the structure, the activities would include areas such as policy analysis; the provision of advice to government and external stakeholders; accessing, analyzing and disseminating research on areas of interest to women; networking of women's groups, etc. It was agreed that the structure would not be responsible for any ongoing service delivery.

While resources identified as required varied based on model and suggested activities, it was suggested that at least two full-time dedicated staff members would be required. Further discussions identified that staffing may have to increase over time (one or two more) depending on work plans and competency requirements.

Operational resources would be required, including items such as office space; office equipment, furniture and supplies; budgets for travel, translation, research; per diems and honorariums (members), etc., depending on the selected model. The Working Group discussed approaches to achieve cost efficiency and effectiveness. These approaches could include cost-sharing or co-locating with other associations and/or government to save on expenses such as office space, equipment, as well as cost sharing contracted services from an existing organization.

Regardless of approach selected, provisions of official languages, as well as the existing capacity of organizations must be respected.

It is suggested that legislation be considered related to the model selected.

The following table outlines the proposed models identified as suitable options to meet the objectives identified by the Working Group as described above.

Appendix

Objectives

- To be an independent voice that provides advice to government on matters of importance to women.
- To bring to the attention of government and the public issues of interest and concern to women and women's substantive equality.
- To include and engage women of all walks of life, women's groups and society in general.
- To be strategic and provide advice on emerging and future issues.
- To represent the voice of all NB women.
- To foster a collaborative relationship with government.

Autonomy

The concept of an "independent voice" is often described as having the ability to speak fully on issues that matter to women without fear of repercussions; the ability to self-determine the agenda; and the ability to ensure the selection process of representatives be non-partisan. That is:

- A publicly funded independent organization responsible for conducting research and consultations, intervening with the government on behalf of women and increasing awareness regarding women's issues from a non-partisan perspective;
- Separate from government;
- Freedom of expression / right to free speech;
- Freedom to select issues / files to examine (and means);
- Recognized by the government / collaborative (engaging) relationship;
- Considered an important resource.

Appendix

Model		
<p>Voices of NB Women Board Organized body with a formal governance structure and defined mandate and/or focus in an established work plan.</p>	<p>Voices of NB Women Roundtable Members meet regularly with a less formal structure to consult, take positions, discuss and work on defined areas of focus through action plans..</p>	<p>Voices of NB Women Consensus-building group Consisting of members representing areas of interests or concern who share information, support each other's efforts and collaborate and take positions on various areas of focus.</p>
Governance/Leadership		
<p>Co-chairs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • selected considering official language • rotate in alternate years • are the structure's spokesperson or they may delegate to other members or employees 		
<p>Consensus-building Forum – Co-chairs or delegated members or employees are responsible for speaking on behalf of Forum, but will not speak on behalf of represented organizations.</p>		
Membership		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representation by policy area (poverty, child care, etc.) • Representation by diversity (background, linguistic, region, age, etc.) • Representation by organizations • Mixed membership approach 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representation by organizations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government representation ex officio • No voting rights • Option of “closed session” 		
<p>* to hold seat, must be able to abide by objectives, preamble, principles of equality</p>		
Nomination & Selection		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nominated by organization • Self-identification/ nomination • Nominated by community • Nomination by Government <p>Final selection by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the entity • Minister, or • jointly ← 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nominated by organization

Relationship with Minister / WIB

- Accountable to Minister
 - Submit annual report to Legislative Assembly
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- Minister is invited to meetings (closed session option)
 - Seeks and provides input / feedback
 - Develop a bi-directional relationship protocol
 - Co-chairs to work with Minister between meetings

Focus

The structure or entity is not responsible for ongoing direct delivery.

Resources

Staffing:

(A) Director + 1-2 staff

(B) Director + 1-2 staff and 1 FT researcher

Resources:

(C) Operational resources (space, IT, research, programs, translation, travel, supplies, per diems, honorariums, etc.)

(D) Sharing of resources (space, etc.) possibly with:

- WIB
- other groups / organizations
- educational institutions

(E) Contracting of services from groups / organizations (beyond existing resources)

Legislation

- Yes (preferred or required)
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