

# 2024 Election: Advancing Equality in New Brunswick

## About the New Brunswick Women's Council

The New Brunswick Women's Council is an independent advisory body for study and consultation on matters of importance, interest, and concern to women and their substantive equality. Its objectives are:

- a) to be an independent body that provides advice to the Minister on matters of importance to women and their substantive equality;
- b) to bring to the attention of government and the public issues of interest and concern to women and their substantive equality;
- c) to include and engage women of diverse identities, experiences and communities, women's groups and society in general;
- d) to be strategic and provide advice on emerging and future issues; and
- e) to represent New Brunswick women.

In delivering on these objectives, the Women's Council may conduct or commission research and publish reports, studies, and recommendations. The Women's Council is directed by an appointed volunteer membership that includes both organizations and individuals. The work is executed by a small staff team.

## 2024 election

During provincial general election periods, public discussion of gender equality is often sorely limited. Only a few issues tend to be discussed and typically only at a surface level. Public discussion also usually gravitates to issues that have historically been viewed as divisive and polarizing—and are likely to be presented this way once again.

This pattern has an impact. It perpetuates the idea that gender equality only needs to be discussed in relation to a few specific issues. It erases the fact that a significant amount of progressive consensus has developed on many gender equality issues.

Election commitments made by parties on gender equality (and the public discussion that they drive) also follow a pattern that can have negative impacts. Commitments tend to present targeted solutions that are based on addressing gender equality issues as if they were standalone and straightforward. Targeted solutions may be helpful on some issues; the problem is that parties, governments, and the public can become overly biased toward these solutions and the “quick wins” they may appear to provide. This approach will only get us so far, as many gender equality issues require expansive, transformative change to mitigate existing harms while also addressing root causes. Simultaneous work on multiple issues is also necessary, as all gender equality issues are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

None of these patterns, ideas, or biases are truly unique to election periods. They may, however, be more pronounced and easier to spot during this time. People may also be more liable to call them out as they feel tension between persistent inequality and democracy. This means that election periods can be an opportunity to disrupt the status quo—and to raise expectations for how much a government will focus on gender equality after the election.

Raising those expectations is important because public policy (meaning: government policies, laws, programs, initiatives, budgets, etc.) is a crucial tool for advancing gender equality. Gender inequality and the other forms of inequality that intersect with it (racism, ableism, poverty, etc.) are not just a matter of bias and discrimination at the personal level; they are embedded in and perpetuated by our systems, structures, and institutions. Because inequality operates at this scale, government has a critical role to play in addressing it through public policy.

Given this, the goal of this brief is to provide New Brunswickers with information and recommendations that they can use to broaden and deepen discussions of equality during the election period and after. This brief provides a list of equality issues that the Women’s Council has worked on in the last decade that still need to be addressed through public policy. It also includes recommendations on how to help ensure public policy is evidence-based, equitable, and effective.

## Issues

### Health care

- Improve access to primary health care. The improvement process should consider that inconsistent access to primary care providers affects some populations more than others. For example, women with disabilities are at heightened risk of experiencing gender-based violence and many have complex health care needs. Given this, it is particularly harmful for disabled women to rely on inconsistent primary care providers instead of a trusted team of consistent providers that knows their history. As people are increasingly connected with primary care providers, these populations should be prioritized.
- Increase access to publicly-funded surgical abortion care. Revise Regulation 84-20 Schedule 2 (a.1) to allow surgical abortions (and related ultrasounds) outside of hospitals to be billed to Medicare. Abortion care through facilities that are operated by regional health authorities must also improve in terms of capacity and regional availability. More information on the history of the regulation is available in [an article](#) on our blog (please note that Clinic 554 has closed since this article was published).
- Strengthen the capacity of the current midwifery demonstration site in Fredericton and make it a permanent facility. Expand midwifery services throughout the province.
- Address Substance Use Disorder (SUD) through evidence- and equity-based public policy. Invest in social infrastructure that addresses the root causes of SUD. Involuntary treatment should not be pursued as public policy. More information is available in our [feedback on the proposed \*Compassionate Intervention Act\*](#).

### 2SLGBTQIA+

- Acknowledge the ongoing discrimination and violence that the 2SLGBTQIA+ community faces and recognize that misinformation, disinformation, and far-right conspiracy theories and agendas are driving much of the current anti-2SLGBTQIA+ backlash. More information is available in our [brief on the rise in organized anti-2SLGBTQIA+ activities in New Brunswick](#) .
- Revise Policy 713 (the Department of Early Education and Childhood Development's policy on sexual orientation and gender identity in schools and school-related activities) to reinstate and strengthen protections for trans students in the public school system. More information on this policy is available in statements from our co-chairs and executive director in [May](#) and [June](#) 2023 as well as our [2023 submission to the Child and Youth Advocate](#).

## **Racism**

- Provide a formal public response to the [Systemic Racism Commissioner's Final Report](#).
- Create and resource structures within the public service with mandates to address systemic racism. The guiding framework must be racial equity and anti-racism. More information on equity work in the public service (i.e., what currently exists and what is needed) is available in our [submission to the Commissioner on Systemic Racism](#).
- Establish respectful working relationships that centre reconciliation with First Nations, First Nation communities, and Indigenous persons in New Brunswick.
- Withdraw the directive prohibiting government employees from making land acknowledgements that affirm that the territories of the Wolastoqiyik, Mi'kmaq, and Peskotomuhkatiyik are unceded and unsurrendered. More information on the harms of this directive is available in our [media release on this issue](#).
- As per calls from Wolastoqey and Mi'kmaq leaders, commission an Indigenous-led public inquiry into systemic racism against Indigenous people in New Brunswick.

## **Early learning and childcare**

- Conduct research into the quality of early learning and childcare in the province to inform further development of the sector. This research examine whether there are differences in quality based on: whether a facility is non-profit or for-profit; the curriculum that is used (English or French); whether children and families are racialized, 2SLGBTQIA+, Indigenous, disabled, etc. or not; regions; whether facilities are urban or rural; and combinations of these factors. More information on why this research is needed is available in our [2022 submission on early learning and childcare in New Brunswick](#).
- Improve early childhood educators' compensation, access to benefits (including health care plans and pensions), and working conditions.

## **Economic security and employment protections**

- Approach poverty reduction as a systemic and structural issue. Identify priority actions to address this issue that are concrete and will create systemic and structural changes via public policy. More information on poverty reduction is available in our [2024 submission to the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation](#).
- Develop a coherent policy rationale and goal for the minimum wage rate. If minimum wage is meant to ensure that people working full-time are not living in poverty, the rate must be a living wage; if minimum wage is not meant to do that, then government must strengthen its social safety nets

accordingly. More information on minimum wage is available in our [2024 submission to the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation](#) and our [submission to the 2022 statutory review of minimum wage](#).

- Legislate pay equity in the private sector.
- Amend the *Employment Standards Act* to provide paid sick time and to increase unpaid sick leave for longer-term illness or injury. More information is available in our [2023 submission on sick leave in the \*Employment Standards Act\*](#).
- Amend the *Employment Standards Act* to provide protections for domestic workers in private homes (specifically those who are not working on an occasional basis). More information is available in our [2016 submission on changing coverage under the \*Employment Standards Act\*](#).

### ***Unpaid caregiving***

- Ensure that strategies to address issues such as poverty, an aging population, and increasing demands on health care systems do not increase the burden of unpaid labour on communities, families, and individuals—labour that will fall disproportionately to women to manage and provide.
- Provide concrete supports to unpaid caregivers. This could involve increased investment in respite services and other support programs as well as money for travel and other costs.

### ***Violence***

- Provide stable, ongoing, adequate core funding to community-based organizations that offer specialized services to victims and survivors of sexual, intimate partner, family, and domestic violence.
- Improve the compensation, access to benefits (including health care plans and pensions), and working conditions of workers in the gender-based violence sector.
- Re-engage with the gender-based violence sector and other relevant stakeholders on the implementation of the [National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence](#). More information on gender-based violence in New Brunswick and the National Action Plan is available in [an article](#) on our blog (please note that New Brunswick's agreement for the plan has been signed since this article was published).

### ***Women in politics***

- Take action on the recommendations from the [Second Report](#) of the Standing Committee on Procedures, Privileges and Legislative Officers on increasing the number of women who serve as Members in the legislative assembly. This work should consider that circumstances have changed since the report was tabled and, as such, some experts may need to be consulted again. A chart breaking down the number of candidates and elected members in provincial general elections since 1982 by sex is [available here](#).

### ***Better decision-making***

- Engage in decision-making, policy development, and budgeting that is not only evidence-based but equity-based. This will require co-creation; access to better disaggregated data; understanding and uplifting the value of qualitative data; developing standards or principles of rigour and ethics for consultations and public engagement; seeking expertise from a variety of sources, including individuals with lived experience, community-based service providers, and researchers. More information on this approach to policy development is available in our [submission to the 2023-2024 pre-budget consultation](#).
- Ensure Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an integral part of policy development. GBA+ is a tool used to assess how specific populations may experience policies, programs, and initiatives differently than others. GBA+ goes beyond sex and gender to consider intersecting factors that shape individuals' experiences, including age, location, race, ethnicity, culture, disability, and language. GBA+ is an essential part of developing public policy that is evidence-based, equitable, and effective. More information on GBA+ is available in our [submission to the 2023-2024 pre-budget consultation](#).
- Commit to co-creation in policymaking. Co-creation means involving the people and communities who are impacted by a situation in the process of identifying the problem, designing the solution(s) to address it, and establishing how the outcomes will be evaluated. It is an approach that is rooted in sharing power and requires those in decision-making positions to adopt a stance of humility. More information is available in our [brief on co-creation](#).
- Account for social deficits and debts with the same attention that fiscal and infrastructure deficits are accounted for. Social deficits are the gap between what people need in terms of services and what is available to them. Like fiscal deficits, social deficits do not simply disappear at the start of a new year; they become debt with interest. The interest looks like problems becoming more entrenched and complex, both in individuals' lives and as public policy issues, the longer that adequate services are missing. More information is available in our [brief on social deficits and debt](#).