

The political involvement of Indigenous women in Quebec

Summary of results

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Research team



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Laboratory's website

<https://www.uqat.ca/recherche/laboratoire-de-recherche-sur-les-enjeux-relatifs-aux-femmes-autochtones-mikwatisiw/>

Master's thesis link : <https://depositum.uqat.ca/id/eprint/1364>

Research report link : https://portail.uqat.ca/prf/fr/Suzy-Basile/Documents/Research_report_Political_involvement_Indigenous_women_May_2022.pdf



Genesis and objectives of the research

This research is a response to a need expressed several times by Indigenous women themselves during consultations conducted by the Research Laboratory in Indigenous Women's Issues - Mikwatisiw since its creation in 2017 and comes from the suggestion of several women chiefs of Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador (AFNQL). The research project also received a letter of support from the AFNQL Council of Elected Women and was approved by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Humans of the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue in August 2020.

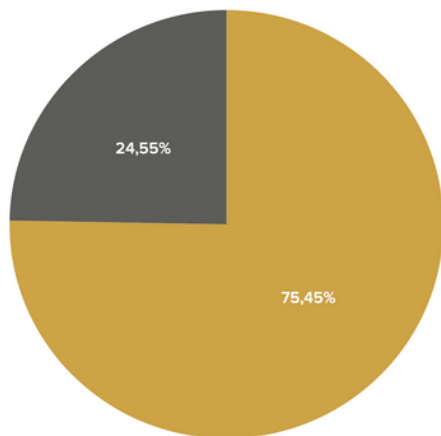
Although Indigenous women did not obtain the right to vote or hold political office in band councils until 1951, this does not mean that they did not have other forms of participation in the governance of their community or Nation before that year. Women's contribution was essential and was present in other spheres that were not directly associated with political power, such as education, crafts or social services. However, in the context of this research, we have focused our attention on this key date in the political history of Indigenous women and their involvement in the official political bodies imposed by the *Indian Act*.

This research aimed to document the past and present political involvement of Indigenous women in Quebec, to provide a portrait of their leadership and to highlight their issues and challenges. In total, 20 interviews were conducted with elected or formerly elected Indigenous women who are from several First Nations in Quebec. We conducted a literature search to learn about the place of Indigenous women in traditional governance and the impact of colonization on their role. We consulted previous research about the political involvement of Indigenous women in Canada. We also called upon some of the participants in this research as well as the AFNQL Secretariat and the ministry Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada to obtain documents about contemporary political involvement of Indigenous women in Quebec. The communication with the ministry was complicated and we had to resort to the *Access to Information Act* (ATIA) to acquire the requested documents.

Some data

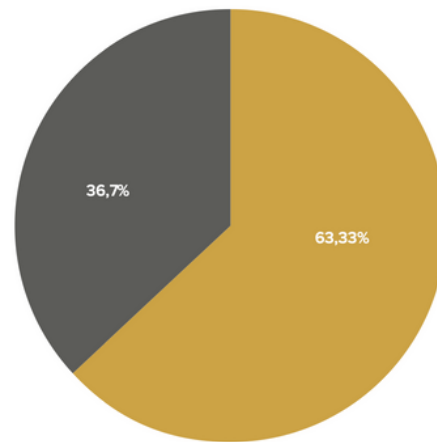
To date, in Canada, slightly more than a third of the Council positions are held by women in First Nations communities. The proportion of women chiefs is lower than that of women councillors, with women accounting for about one in four in Canada (RCAANC, 2021).

Chiefs (Canada)



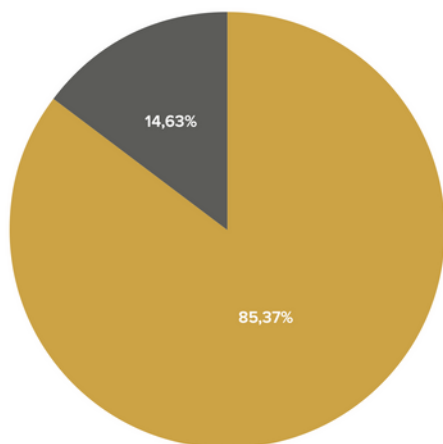
■ Women ■ Men

Councillors (Canada)



■ Women ■ Men

Chiefs (Quebec)



■ Women ■ Men

In Quebec, the distribution of women as councillors is the same as in Canada, at approximately 37%. However, for the position of chief, the representation of women is approximately 10% lower than in Canada (RCAANC, 2021).

The journey towards politics

The determining factors that brought women into politics are the appeals from their community members as well as from their family members. In addition, a quarter of the participants indicated that it was women who had approached them. This indicates that even though women are less represented on band councils, they participate politically in their own way by exerting an influence on the candidacies. For most participants, they made the leap into politics after having worked in different fields and being involved into their community for many years. The strength of their professional background gives them the legitimacy and the expertise to bring about the political solutions. Several women indicated that their success in the political arena was due in part to having the support of their spouse, their family and being mentored by former elected officials. Also, the fact that the elected women of Quebec have set up a body, the AFNQL Council of Elected Women, allows them to discuss their own issues. This seems to be a factor in consolidating the link and solidarity between elected women, therefore facilitating their political involvement. To this day, only two communities : Unamen Shipu and Ekuanitshit, have amended their election code to implement mandatory parity among elected officials.

« It was women who approached me to become chief, several of them said "Come on". So, eventually I said OK. » (FP18)*

« I also think you need to be approached by elders, in my opinion. It's important to have elders on your side. » (FP1)

« Also, what you realize when you're a manager or a sector director, you kind of have decision-making power or influence over your sector, but where the decisions are really made is at the board level. That's where you can have influence on directions and decisions. » (FP4)

« Women, when they are chiefs, it's all equal, it's like a big exchange, it's fun. They have exchanges and it helps the unity of women. [...] No one is more than the other, even if she comes from a small community or a large community, it has no impact. That's what I liked about the exchanges with the elected women. » (FP19)

*Participants are identified by the letters "FP", which are the initials of "female politician" in English, followed by a sequential number

The leadership of women

Women's leadership differs from men's in that they are empathetic, willing to ask for help, and eager to listen and collaborate. Participants also defined their leadership as very proactive. They stand out for their perseverance and resilience in the face of criticism from members of their community. They are committed to serving their community, making decisions for the well-being of future generations, and making social issues as much a priority as other issues. The participants declared that women and men do not have the same responsibilities nor the same relationship with the territory. That's why, in their opinion, women should be better consulted on territorial issues. The participants in our research insist that social, territorial and economic issues are interdependent and interrelated. The political vision of elected women can therefore be described as holistic. Their leadership enables them to drive improvements in community well-being, social progress and political change. They asserted that the skills of men and women are complementary and consequently, a balance in the representation of women and men on band councils is necessary in order to move towards a harmonious and representative governance of all the issues and of all members of communities.

« I always say, "I'm going to look out for future generations. [...] because I will always work in my heart for the children, for my community. I always think about the seven future generations. [...] But all this is part of the thinking process of women, whereas a man is day to day. » (FP10)

« Les femmes [...] veulent discuter plus longtemps, [...] elles veulent avoir un consensus général dans le groupe, s'assurer que les besoins de chacun soient satisfaits. » (FP11)

« For example, I was the only woman to present [first name]'s project to the council, but there was some reluctance. They didn't say no outright, but they didn't feel like starting something like that, but I said, "It's necessary. I had to be more assertive to get [the project] moving. » (FP14)

« I really hope to see more women chiefs, more women councillors. We need that balance at the table, at all levels. » (FP5)



Challenges specific to the political function

The main challenges cited by the participants in this research are the heavy workload that the political function requires and which can be even heavier in the case of communities where there is no policy for the remuneration of elected officials, the difficulties of consensus between the communities within the framework of negotiations with the provincial and federal governments or with private companies; the overly restrictive and inadequate framework of the political system imposed by the *Indian Act*, which can lead to conflicts between families, challenges to the election code and a slowing down of the advancement of community projects. Participants also explained that, in general, elected officials are also often targeted by defamatory accusations and that their children can be bullied at school or in the community because of the political decisions of their parents. They also mentioned the one-sided nature of the relationship between Indigenous communities and the federal and provincial governments, as well as a lack of understanding and consideration of Indigenous issues. The distance between communities, and the many languages spoken are also a logistical challenge. Finally, the women reminded of the discrimination and racial stigmatisation they suffer in the context of their political functions or in general in their daily lives.

« Whether it's Legault or someone else, [...] they don't want to hear, they don't want to understand, they don't want to share, [...] they turn a deaf ear. For having met with premiers for years, [...] federal and provincial, they don't listen to anything! » (FP3)

« I have a hard time with the system imposed by Indian Affairs, you always have to stick to rules set by the government, the agreements and the funding. That just allows you to keep your head above water, and then you always have to look for ways to make your societal plans happen. » (FP2)

« If as an elected official you made a decision that other people don't like, it's your kids in school that are paying the price or it's your kids in their community life that are suffering the consequences. » (FP13)

« Here, politics is a violent business. Yes, it has not been easy in terms of relations with other councils and other elected officials. In addition, there have been issues that [...] have divided [...]. There are also always people who gravitate towards their personal interests. » (FP15)

« They (the police) would stop me, and they would say: "Your license is not valid". I said: "Of course my license is valid". And then they would tow me away. That's profiling. » (FP10)



Challenges specific to women

Women face a number of challenges such as the organizational difficulties of political office and family responsibilities. Participants also reported being a minority in political circles and having difficulty getting elected. They are still confronted with sexist discrimination. They tell us that their skills are more easily questioned than those of men, that less importance is given to their words or their concerns and that some male politicians still seem to think that women are not as legitimate as they are in politics. As well, several explanations emerged during the interviews to explain the lack of female representation in the management of land issues. Some participants stated that it was a consequence of colonial policies that excluded women from these decision-making processes and others also spoke of a certain reluctance on the part of Indigenous men to allow them to take charge of this issue. Participants also deplored the lack of representation of Indigenous women in discussions involving Indigenous political leaders and elected federal and provincial politicians. Participants also testified that they had been intimidated or harassed in their political roles. This could be because they were women or because of political rivalries. They also said that their children and immediate family could be intimidated because of their political office.

« It seems that it's still men who don't trust women in politics, even though there are many female and male candidates. In the last elections, there were many women candidates and only two were elected against four male councillors. [...] men don't believe enough in women, they are still the ones who want to take the reins of power. » (FP1)

« During my mandate there, I was trying very hard to promote women's rights, but you know, when you only work with guys, there's a little bit of mockery: 'Ah [her] and women...' » (FP8)

« It was a man [...], he told me: "If you don't stop fighting against drugs, something will happen to you". I said, "Okay, go tell the person who sent you that he's a coward, he could have told me personally and I'm not afraid of that," but deep down I was scared to death. » (FP12)

