

Parenthood and Politics: The factors that shape the experience of women legislators in BC

by
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Abstract

Equitable gender representation in British Columbia's legislature continues to be a challenge. In this study, I build on the existing literature to examine the experience of women politicians in this setting, paying special attention to the impact of motherhood. I use semi-structured interviews with six current women Members of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, along with a sample of relevant news articles, to highlight the most important factors of these experiences. I draw attention to the rise of social media and the changing division of household labour as two important elements that have not been focused on in the existing literature. I also confirm that women continue to have lower levels of political ambition and that political parties play a key role in creating opportunities for them. Furthermore, they still face sexist toxicity in public office.

Keywords: women in politics; sexism in politics; representation; motherhood; Canadian politics; British Columbia

Dedication

To all the strong women who came before me and paved the way for women's involvement in politics and academia, this project would not have been possible without you.

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Introduction

Over a century since the first woman was elected to Canadian political office, gender parity has yet to have been reached in Canada's political institutions. At the federal level, women make up just over thirty percent of all Members of Parliament (MPs), and at the provincial level, in British Columbia, this number raises to just over forty-four percent of Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). In the field of political science, there is a significant amount of literature focused on women in political office and why they remain underrepresented compared to men. In this literature, various factors explain the experience of women as elected representatives; these experiences may help us understand why women are less inclined to seek election and, thus, why they remain underrepresented.

In this study, I examine what factors influence the experience of women legislators in British Columbia (BC). In particular, I look to understand the way motherhood shapes the experience of women in the legislature. While the existing literature is extensive, I uncover how current women legislators in BC experience careers in political office, which is not sufficiently accounted for in the research. My findings indicate the literature does not account for two important factors in the contemporary experience of women legislators. In a positive shift, women legislators, in particular mothers, have benefitted from an overall movement towards more equitable division of household labour and more support from spouses and partners while running for office and working as a legislator. On the negative side, women are experiencing heightened levels of criticism and harassment via social media, including specific types of negative commentary directed towards mothers in political office. This criticism is not only detrimental to women's experience in political office but can also discourage other women from running for office. Beyond identifying these nuances in contemporary the experiences of women MLAs, my study confirms that many factors outlined in the existing literature are still useful to explain the experience of modern women legislators. These factors include a lack of political ambition, the role of political parties, sexism, motherhood and family responsibilities, and the difficulties that accompany the structure of a career in political office.

I conducted a series of six, in-depth semi-structured interviews with women legislators and collected a sample of relevant news articles. My analysis offers a detailed view of the experience of current women legislators. I use qualitative coding methods to analyse these data sources. Using abductive concept coding, I establish five key themes which I use to organize my findings: political ambition and purpose, political party support, toxicity in the Legislature, sexism and gender-based discrimination, and motherhood and care-taking. My findings confirm that women may remain less inclined than men to run for office, but that political parties play a key role in creating opportunities for them. Nonetheless, they still face sexist toxicity in public office. Although, in some ways, the workload associated with parenthood is now more equitably shared, women find themselves at an increased risk of gendered aggression and violence via social media. Given the persistence of sexism, gender parity among our elected officials remains an elusive goal.

Although this study has addressed an important gap in the literature, because of the scope of this study, there are limitations. This project is not able to fully account for the experience of women legislators of colour and those who are members of the LGBTQ2IA+ community. Given the availability of research participants and the lack of diverse representation within the BC Legislature, the sample used for this project is not representative of all those who identify as women in BC. Importantly, this project shares some of the experiences of women in political office in BC and does not seek to generalize across all women legislators. I hope that future studies that are larger and more in-depth will build on my exploratory research.

Understanding the Experience of Women Legislators

Drawing on the previous literature, I establish a theoretical foundation to inform my research. While this project looks specifically at the experience of legislators within BC, I draw on research from the Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, to establish common themes across these contexts. I chose to focus on these three contexts because of their similarities to the British Columbia political system and political culture. I also limited my search to the past twenty years. This literature brings forward the factors that have been previously identified as impacting the experience of women in political office.

Political Ambition

In order to understand the factors that impact the experience of women legislators, it is beneficial to first recognize that women are an underrepresented group in most political systems. Scholars have repeatedly pointed to the root cause of this underrepresentation: a lack of political ambition (Fox & Lawless, 2014; Thomas, 2013). Political ambition, and the political ambition gap, refers to level of willingness to run for political office amongst women and the gap that exists between the ambition levels of men compared to women (Fox & Lawless, 2014). While this is not to say that a lack of political ambition functions on its own as a detriment to gender equity in politics, it is consistently cited as a leading cause.

The political ambition gap is demonstrated as a factor in a 2014 study by Fox and Lawless. In this study of 4,000 high school and college aged people, they found there is a clear gap between the political ambition of men and women. Fox and Lawless point to self-confidence, family life and political socialization as just some the possible explanations for this gap (2014). Other studies echo these findings arguing that this lowered confidence and ambition is most commonly attributed to factors including a lack of political knowledge, a lack of interest in political issues and again lower self-confidence overall (Thomas, 2013, p. 223). These findings demonstrate that this gap is substantial, not just amongst those currently running for office but among those who may be running the future.

While this ambition gap is well documented in the literature, a study by Pruyzers and Blais indicates that its causes are complex (2017). In an experiment testing the effects of stereotypes on the political ambition of women university students, they were unable to conclude if the gap is a result of an exposure to stereotyping amongst young women (Pruyers & Blais, 2017). The research by Pruyzers and Blais not only helps to understand why women remain underrepresented in office but also provides context surrounding the experience of women during their campaigns and once elected, and the barriers they may face.

Political Parties

Political parties are often referred to as the gatekeepers of the election of women politicians (Ashe, 2020; Pruyzers et al. 2017). This is based on the large role political parties play in the candidate selection process. Because of this role, scholars have pointed to political parties as being responsible for upholding the inclusion of straight, white, male politicians while facilitating the exclusion of women, LGBTQ2IA+ and BIPOC individuals (Ashe, 2020; Pruyzers et al., 2017, pp. 226-227). In contrast, efforts by political parties to recruit women and gender-diverse candidates can have a significant impact on the experience of these politicians.

Research suggests that political parties, along with feminist organizations, have the greatest impact on women's participation in Canadian politics (Young, 2006). Findings from Young highlight the role that different political parties have on their candidates and how this can shape women's experience. The NDP, which places much more of an emphasis on having a diverse candidate pool, leads to more successful women candidates (Young, 2006). In contrast, the Conservative Party does not have this as a goal, which is reflected in their levels of women candidates and legislators (Young, 2006). This remains consistent with the current rates of women's representation across political parties in Canada; the NDP has a higher percentage of both women candidates and elected officials in comparison with the Conservative party (House of Commons Canada, 2023). Pruyzers et al. also echoed the argument that that left leaning parties, such as the NDP and BC Green Party in the Canadian context, have a party culture that is more likely to institute gender-inclusive policies, and therefore have more women candidates and representatives (2017).

While much of the literature discusses the role of political parties in the candidacy of women legislators, little research has been done to establish how political parties impact women legislators once elected. The research that has been done indicates that once elected, the experience of women continues to be impacted by their political party. One way this occurs is through their access, or lack thereof, to positions of leadership. While this access, along with the presence of women party leaders, is not the only way that political parties impact the experience of women legislators, it has been shown to increase not only the number of women candidates and elected officials it also leads to greater levels of affirmative action and social justice-oriented policies (O'Brien, 2015, pp.1023-1024).

Voter Bias

Sexism amongst voters impacts experience of women running for political office. However, contrary to the conventional wisdom, the electorate does not tend to react with hostility to women candidates. Using data collected from more than 21,000 candidates in Canadian federal elections, Sevi et al. found that women candidates do not receive significantly less votes than their male counterparts (2019). Although historically there was a disparity, the authors use data from 1920, using more recent data this disparity is negligible (Sevi et al, 2019).

Some scholars suggest however that the lack of voter bias found by some studies is actually disguised by higher levels of qualifications amongst women candidates (Black & Erickson, 2003). However, this research had the same conclusion as previously stated: voter bias does not have a significant impact on the election of women candidates. These findings indicate that the experience of women political candidates is more complex than a lack of popularity amongst women candidates.

Young uses a broader approach to argue that there are four explanations that have the possibility to shape the experience and the underrepresentation of women political candidates: "the role of the electorate, the electoral system, the role of political parties and the party system, and the role of organized feminism" (2006, p. 47). Like Sevi et al. she finds that a lack of votes from the electorate is not a significant contributor to the lack of women in political office. While Young does point out some gendered difference, it does not seem to be a significant factor (2006, pp. 50-51).

Stereotyping

Although sexism amongst voters does not seem to lead to fewer votes earned by women candidates (Sevi et al, 2019), there is clear evidence that women experience a significant amount of stereotyping and biases as both political candidates and elected officials. Bias and stereotyping are shown to be, in some cases, a factor contributing to the underrepresentation of women in politics. They also persistently impact the experience of women politicians (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009).

In the American context, there have been high-profile examples of stereotyping during election campaigns. A study of the campaign coverage in the 2008 US election, found that women experience a diverse set of stereotypes while running for political office (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). Using a set of stereotypes developed in research about professional women more broadly, Carlin and Winfrey argue these categories, sex object, pet, mother, and iron maiden, can be applied to women politicians specifically (2009).

The stereotypes encountered by women candidates encourage them perform their gender in distinct ways. In the case of Hilary Clinton and Sarah Palin, both of these women framed themselves as “candidates who happen to be women” (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009, pp.327). However, even when women attempt to utilize this type of framing, they still tend to receive more coverage focused on their appearance, personality, and family and less on political issues and policy stances (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009, pp.329).

One study by Tolley and Paquet suggests that using a “degendered” campaign has the potential to counteract the stereotyping of women political candidates (2021, p. 46). In the 2017, Quebec mayoral race, Valerie Plante was able to win the election using a strategy that did not focus on her gender. In a “degendered” campaign women politicians specifically frame policies in a gender neutral way and do not appeal to the specific interests of women voters (Tolley & Paquet, 2017, p. 46). While the story of Plante’s ability to overcome gender stereotypes is a positive one, this research reiterates that women politicians have to jump through a specific set of hoops in order to obtain political success.

Motherhood and Family Life

One of the most persistent stereotypes, and subsequent biases, attributed to women political office is centered on the role of women as mothers. Specifically, the idea that motherhood and political leadership are incompatible (Deason, 2015, p. 137). Gendered assumptions that women are selfless and less assertive tend to be amplified when a woman has children (Deason, 2015, p. 137). In addition, mothers also tend to be stereotyped as being overly emotional, again signifying an incompatibility with political office (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009).

Scholars have pointed to a specific type of stereotyping argue that women politicians experience what is referred to as a double bind (Teele et al., 2018). In this context, this concept refers to the expectation for women politicians to be both mothers who are present for household duties but also able to commit to the duties associated with being a legislator. This includes long working hours and the ability to be away from the home for long periods of time. Teele et al. find that this compounded by the strong preference voters have towards women who are married with children (2018, p. 536). Therefore, the double bind also contributes to a negative bias towards women who are childless.

Young and Teele et al. focused their analysis broadly on the experience of women legislators and how it is affected by various factors. Scholarship by Deason et al., McKay, and Campbell and Childs, explicitly examines the role of motherhood and how it impacts these experiences. Deason et al. present the concept of politicized motherhood as a way to describe the emphasis that is placed on motherhood within political discourse (Deason et al., 2015, p. 134). They argue that this has come partially as a result of the overall politicization of family life, particularly in American politics (Deason et al., 2015, pp. 134-135). These scholars go onto argue that politicized motherhood actually functions to further reinforce the double bind that women politicians experience.

It is important to point out that both the double bind and politicized motherhood impact not only women legislators who are parents but also those who are not. The majority of the literature has focused on the category of mother in contrast to non-mother. However, other scholars suggest that this distinction presents a problematic

dichotomy and argue that motherhood is a factor that impacts the political participation and experience of all women, regardless if they have children or not (McKay, 2006). This is caused by societal norms which tend to conflate the categories of women and mothers, even when a woman does not have children (Campbell & Childs, 2017, p. 38). A UK-based study conducted by Campbell and Childs indicated that non-mothers generally have more success in elections than mothers (Campbell & Childs, 2017, p. 29). However, Stalsburg found that non-mothers were perceived more negatively by voters in comparison to those who were mothers (2010). Thomas and Bittner reinforce these findings and point out that women who do not have children are viewed more negatively than women who do (2017, p. 4). Although these findings seem contradictory, they represent the bias that exists against women who do not have children. They also highlight that biases that exist surrounding women's role as a mother have the ability to impact all women.

The role of parenthood and its impact on the lives of legislators not only leads to the stereotyping of women legislators but also impacts their lived experience as a politician. The double bind, as discussed previously, is not only a source of stereotyping but also impacts how women perceive themselves and remains a prominent factor in the experience of women legislators. While the specific language of the double bind is not used by McKay, she makes the argument that family responsibilities create further challenges for women politicians and that these challenges are even more significant than other women in the workforce (McKay, 2011, p. 732). Many women will choose not to even begin a political career because of expectations surrounding their role. In addition, evidence suggests that the challenges that come with being a mother and a politician are lessened when a woman is wealthy, which makes the important argument that a class-based analysis of this issue is important (McKay, 2011, p. 732).

The Structure of Political Careers

Researchers emphasize that women's experiences, in particular those who are also parents, impacted by structural aspects of life in political office. I highlight lack of breast-feeding spaces and long working hours as just two of these factors. Both of which have a potentially negative impact on the experience of legislators who are also mothers (Arneil, 2017; McKay, 2011).

The lack of access to safe and comfortable spaces to breastfeed while working in political office hinders women's political participation. Public breastfeeding is a practice that in itself receives significant public scrutiny, the presence of breastfeeding within political chambers is no different. Due to limited access to spaces for breast-feeding and rules in place against breast-feeding in political chambers, mothers and parents who breastfeed are met with another hurdle in their experience in political office.

The example of Sana Hassainia, a former NDP Member of Parliament, illustrates the difficulty that comes with being a breastfeeding mother while holding political office. Because of a scheduling conflict with her partner, Hassania made the decision to bring her child into the House of Commons for a vote as she has just finished breastfeeding. This led to Hassainia being scrutinized by the Speaker of the House who stated that MPs should only bring children into the House of Commons in the case of emergency (Arneil, 2017, p. 53). This signaled that breastfeeding in public, and in particular while working as a politician, is frowned upon. The sentiment was also echoed by the public, particularly over social media where Hassainia received numerous comments regarding her decision to breastfeed at work. These attitudes from both fellow politicians and the public reinforce the negative perception of breastfeeding in public.

Another significant factor impacting the experience of women legislators is the structure of the working hours for politicians. This structure includes long hours and the expectation to adapt to scheduling that can change abruptly. For example, this can include expectations that politicians will attend parliamentary sessions which can go past midnight (McKay, 2011).

These long and unpredictable working hours, which would be challenging for most people, are specifically difficult for women who are mothers. Nayler argues that that political life has not been configured in a way that is conducive to the responsibility of raising children, especially young children (Nayler, 2019). Women, and specifically mothers, have a much harder time balancing the unpaid labour they are expected to do at home, with the long and unpredictable hours of labour that come with working in politics.

Furthermore, the working hours of politicians not only discourage women from running for office, but they also hinder the success of women who have been elected to

political office. McKay argues that due to long hours, politicians' women may be less inclined to take on cabinet positions which would take up even more time (2011). This argument demonstrates that long-working hours are not only contributing to the lack of women in Canadian politics but also the lack of women in leadership positions.

The challenges mothers face in politics are only exacerbated by the lack of discourse surrounding the negative effects of the working hours for politicians. When politicians, regardless of gender, express a desire for a change in working hours or time-off, they are faced with criticism (Nayler, 2019). Women politicians in particular feel as if they cannot voice their concerns due to fear of losing public support. Without the ability voice their concerns, there is less of opportunity for these conditions to change. Overall, scholars indicate that the nature of a politician's schedule disproportionately affects women.

Building an Abductive Analysis

Conceptual Framework

This study is feminist and critical in nature. It relies on the assumption that gender is a social construct and a source of power and oppression. I aim to uncover how the power dynamics produced by gender shape the experience of women legislators.

To assess my data, I use qualitative research methods. I also take an abductive approach in my research. Abductive research combines both principles of induction and deduction in order to analyse data and form conclusions (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2011). By taking this approach, I draw on the literature already available in the field of gender and political representation, as outlined in my literature review, to establish an initial set of concept codes. I then turn to my primary data sources, interviews and news articles, to see how this pre-existing theory may or may not be applicable in the modern political system while also discovering new insights, revising existing codes and creating new ones. Using this approach, a set of codes that are distilled from both previous literature and primary data sources in conversation with each other.

Data Sources

This project uses two sources of primary research materials: semi-structured interviews and news articles. I conducted six semi-structured interviews with current Members of the Legislative Assembly of BC (MLAs) who identify as women. I chose to limit my interviews to current MLAs in order to get a snapshot of the current experience of women in political office in BC. My data was limited to six interviews due to the availability of research participants¹. After receiving ethics clearance from Simon Fraser University, I emailed all current Members of the Legislative Assembly of BC who identify as women. These interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were conducted between November 2023 and February 2024. In these interviews, I asked participants about their experiences as legislators and how their gender and parental status may

¹ I had originally intended to conduct an intersectional analysis that would include the experiences of those who are racialized and minoritized (Crenshaw, 1989). However, due to availability of research participants, this was not possible; all participants interviewed are white women.

have shaped this experience. Of the six participants, two were members of the BC United Party, two were members of the BC New Democratic Party (NDP), one was a member of the BC Green Party, and one chose to keep their party affiliation confidential. Participants were given the choice to disclose their name and party affiliation; four participants chose to disclose both their name and party affiliation, one participant chose to only disclose their party affiliation, and one participant chose to keep both confidential.

The second source is written news articles. I used a sample of 10 online articles from major Canadian news outlets and BC news outlets: CBC News, the Vancouver Sun, the Times Colonist, the Tyee, Castlegar News, and North Shore News. The articles were published between 2017 and 2024. The chosen articles explicitly discuss the experience of women in political office in BC, including discussions on parenthood and its intersection with a career in politics. To find these articles I used specific combinations of keywords. I had to use several combinations of keywords as each search only yielded one or two relevant articles. The keywords used were: “women”, “female”, “politics”, “politicians”, “motherhood”, “children”, “MLA”, and “BC”. These articles are meant to both supplement and triangulate the findings uncovered in the semi-structured interviews.

Methods

To analyze my primary research materials, both news media articles and interview responses, I used qualitative content analysis in NVivo. The objective of my qualitative content analysis is twofold: to uncover the key factors impacting current women legislators in BC at this point in time and to investigate whether previous literature is able to accurately describe the experience of these legislators.

I used the theoretical framework outlined in my literature review to guide my coding. I conducted two cycles of coding. The first cycle is eclectic coding to evaluate what key concepts and themes emerge. Saldaña describes eclectic coding as a way for a researcher to gather “first-impressions,” as I am doing in this cycle (2013, p. 188). Eclectic coding is also useful when employed across different types of data sources, in this case interviews and news articles (Saldaña, 2013). The second cycle is abductive concept coding based on both findings from the eclectic coding cycle and the existing literature. The utility of second-cycle coding is outlined by Saldaña as a way of

“reorganizing and reanalyzing data” (2013, p. 207). By using an abductive method of research, I was able to go back in forth between my conceptual framework and the primary data materials to establish a set of concepts that are able to accurately uncover the experience of women in political office in British Columbia.

The codes consist of the key factors and experiences that develop an understanding of the experience of women politicians are as follows: “Career Fulfillment”, “Childcare & care-taking”, “Exclusion”, “Gender-based discrimination”, “Household labour”, “Party support”, “Political ambition/lack of political ambition”, “Representation in political office”, “Stereotyping”, “Structural Barrier”, “Social Media”, and “Toxic political culture.” From these codes, I was able to create five broad categories that these codes fall under: political ambition and purpose, political party support, toxicity in the Legislature, sexism and gender-based discrimination, and motherhood and care-taking. These broad categories are used to organize my findings in the analysis section of this study.

Analysing the Contemporary Experience of Women Legislators

In this section, I analyze the findings of my primary research materials: semi-structured interview data and news articles. I examine how these articles compare to previous findings. I also highlight new findings that have not been previously focused on in the literature. I divide the findings into five broad categories based on the key factors explaining the experience of women politicians in BC: political ambition and purpose, political party support, toxicity in the Legislature, sexism and gender-based discrimination, and motherhood and care-taking. These categories have been distilled from the abductive codes as five common themes that the factors impacting women legislatures fall under.

Political Ambition and Purpose

Due to the emphasis placed on political ambition in the literature, I investigate what caused the MLAs interviewed to run for political office. Amongst their responses was a common theme of initial hesitancy. Albeit this hesitancy was not enough to discourage them from ultimately choosing to run for office, it is an important factor to account for. All of the six women MLAs interviewed expressed that a political career was not initially part of their career plan. All of these women also had careers in various fields prior to entering politics. NDP MLA Grace Lore emphasized “It was not my intention to be an elected official. This was not the... I didn't have a route planned out to this and I didn't even think like, well, you know, at some point I'll do that” (MS Teams Interview, 2 Feb. 2024).

Furthermore, the majority of these women were encouraged by others to run before choosing to run for political office themselves. One NDP MLA stated: “I had been encouraged in, you know ... at different times over the course of my career, to consider running for office, provincially and federally... It wasn't something that I had seriously considered” (Zoom Interview, 16 Feb. 2024). Similar sentiments were echoed by fellow MLAs. When Elenore Sturko, a BC United Party MLA, was asked if politics was a potential career path she said “Oh my God, no... I never thought I would do this job” (MS Teams Interview, 17 Nov. 2023). These sentiments emphasize the common belief

across most the literature that women often need to be asked and encouraged to run for office, most likely multiple times. BC United Party MLA Shirley Bond, who has now served in office for over two decades, stated “When I was first asked to run provincially, I actually said no” (Zoom Interview, 26 Jan. 2024). For Bond it took multiple different groups of supporters to finally convince her to run for office. One of the key groups for Bond was her women friends:

The [thing] that helped me in my trajectory was having women friends who, I still remember... literally said to me, you need to run for provincial office. I said, are you kidding me? But no, I never imagined myself as a politician or running for political office. So, having women around me who said, who had faith in me in fact, they had more confidence in me than I did in myself. And I think that is a very critical factor, having people, in my case this was women in particular, who said you got to do this (Zoom Interview, 26 Jan. 2024).

The interview data also suggests that purpose beyond simply being elected is a key factor in increasing women’s political ambition. Sonia Furstenau, the current leader of the BC Green Party emphasized: “when people ask me about running for office, I’m very clear. Like you got to have purpose ... the office should not be the destination” (Zoom Interview, 11 Dec. 2023). Other participants shared a similar belief. The majority of the MLAs interviewed had also worked in explicitly political careers prior to running for office. One MLA described her choice to run as “a natural evolution” (Zoom Interview, 9 Feb. 2024). This demonstrates that having a strong purpose and experience in politically adjacent careers can help to create political ambition amongst women.

While news media focused less on this phenomenon, some findings reiterate the lack of political ambition that many women experience, even those who eventually end up running. When interviewed by CBC for a 2017 article, Jodie Wickens, a former NDP MLA, stated that she had “never aspired to be in politics” (CBC, 2017). Although this lack of political ambition is not enough to deter Wickens from running, nor the participants in this study, there is a clear lack of political ambition amongst many women that persists.

Political Party Support

The findings of this study largely confirm the focus that scholars have placed on the role of political parties in the careers of women legislators. Participants were asked specifically about whether and how their party supports gender equity amongst candidates. All participants expressed that increasing gender equity is important to their party. For those participants who were members of the NDP, a party with a policy in place to institutionalize gender equity, as well as encourage the representation of other marginalized groups, it was clear that this policy was a significant factor in their candidacy and also a source of pride. NDP MLA Grace Lore discussed the role of her party and described that “Provincially... I was asked and encouraged and supported, like 100%” (MS Teams Interview, 2 Feb. 2024). Another NDP MLA said that supporting gender diversity within the party is “part of our DNA” (Zoom Interview, 16 Feb. 2024).

While the two other major parties in BC, the BC Green Party and the BC United Party, do not have specific policies in place related to gender equity amongst candidates, participants interviewed still indicated support from their party as a woman candidate. BC Green Party MLA, and party leader, Sonia Furstenau described that amongst her party, gender diversity and diversity more broadly is of utmost importance. Furstenau went to say that the majority of those elected or in leadership positions within the party are women or members of another marginalized group, she states “Since I've become leader we've really transformed that that arena” (Zoom Interview, 11 Dec. 2023). This aligns with current literature which suggests that left-leaning parties tend to prioritize gender equity amongst candidates.

The literature indicates that left-leaning parties tend to emphasize gender equity more than right-leaning parties. However, those interviewed who were members of the BC United Party, a centre-right party, felt supported by their party. BC United MLA Elenore Sturko shared that her nomination as candidate was a result of support from the party “Our party wants to make sure that we are having a more diverse representation and so instead of having to run the nomination process. I was directly appointed as the candidate” (MS Teams Interview, 17 Nov. 2023). She went to discuss how she was also specifically chosen to be member of legislative working group on parliamentary culture, partially due to her gender and sexuality. Another BC United MLA, Shirley Bond reiterated the importance of gender diversity within her party “I'm really grateful to have a

leader that recognizes the need to increase the diversity of our party, in our party. And so there are very intentional efforts to engage with women, to talk to women about what it involves to be an elected official” (Zoom Interview, 26 Jan. 2024).

News media does not offer any conclusive evidence on the nature of party supportiveness in BC and its impact on women legislators. However, it does demonstrate that there may be differences between the cultures of left-leaning and right-leaning parties in BC in regard to their support of women legislators. One article from the sample, referencing sexist comments made by a BC United Party MLA Jane Thornwaite about NDP MLA Bowinn MA on a Zoom call with fellow party members, indicate that the BC United Party, the BC Liberals at the time of the incident, may have a culture that is more hostile to women in political office (Korte, 2020).

Furthermore, another article from sample of news media references the low levels of women elected as members of the BC United Party (Welsh, 2022). At the time the article was published and still today, the party only has seven women elected. However, the article also points out that many of these women are appointed to significant positions within the caucus (Welsh, 2022). This, along with interview data, indicates that party culture amongst right-leaning parties may be changing and becoming more supportive of women legislators.

Toxicity in the Legislature

While previous literature focuses on the role of legislators, political parties and voters as factors impacting experience of women legislators, the MLAs interviews indicated that one of the significant factors in their own experience is the hostility and toxicity of the Legislature. Participants were not asked directly about this but nearly all participants highlighted it as having a significant impact on their experience.

In discussing the hostility of the political culture, many MLAs cited that the behaviour and rituals associated with the political system are problematic, particularly for women legislators. One MLA described the behaviour that has been normalized during question period, including yelling and heckling, as “triggering” for herself and many other women legislators (Zoom Interview, 9 Feb. 2024). Furthermore, she shared that when women do participate in the toxicity of question period they are targeted for raising their

voices. BC United Party MLA Shirley Bond referred to the toxic political culture as a “culture of combativeness” and said it has the ability to discourage women from running for political office. The toxicity of the legislative environment was confirmed further by former MLA Melanie Mark “The fact is the political environment is cut-throat and dysfunctional.” (Harnett, 2023).

One NDP MLA pointed to the physical space itself as a negative factor in the experience of women legislator and other marginalized groups. She discussed how even as women become more represented as elected officials, the halls of the legislature paint a different picture as they are largely covered in pictures of older white men. She went to say, “I think this is the, that is just one of the ways that the physical environment is, is a bit oppressive in that sense” (Zoom Interview, 16 Feb. 2024). These testimonies point to the Legislature and its toxic political culture as a significant factor negatively impacting the experience of women legislators.

Sexism and Gender-based Discrimination

Gender-based discrimination, and sexism more broadly, still function as significant factors that impact the experience of women politicians both during candidacy and once elected. This was confirmed, by both MLAs interviewed and news media. When asked specifically about their experience with gender-based discrimination, five out of the six MLAs said they had experienced gender-based discrimination during their candidacy and during their time in provincial political office. Additionally, out of the sample of ten articles, seven discussed the sexism or gender-based discrimination that is experienced by women political office.

Many participants indicate that sexism and gender-based discrimination are part of the structure of the political system. BC Green Party MLA Sonia Furstenau “You know, there's, there is just a kind of structural sexism in the, in the political world. And we, women, have to really decide how much they want to participate in a world that is a little bit hostile to say the least” (Zoom Interview, 11 Dec. 2023). Another MLA said that “there is no question that our political system, the structures that it is built on are very rooted in patriarchal notions” (Zoom Interview, 16 Feb. 2024).

A specific type of gender based-discrimination encountered by women politicians is when their role is questioned and demeaned. In both interview data and news media, women say they have been referred to as assistants and ignored in favour of speaking to other men in the room. Shirley Bond, one of the most experienced MLAs in the legislature, discussed this experience. She referred to multiple experiences where she was ignored in a room and her colleagues, who did not have the expertise nor the leadership position she held, would be addressed instead. “We'd be in a stakeholder meeting or a meeting of some sort and, you know, people would make eye contact with a male deputy instead of the female cabinet minister. I would literally have to draw the conversation back to me as the... as the lead decision maker in that particular role” (Zoom Interview, 26 Jan. 2024).

Sexism and gender-based discrimination are complicated and amplified when an individual is faced with multiple forms of oppression. BC United Party MLA, Elenore Sturko, who identifies as a lesbian, says that she has faced homophobia while serving as an elected official. This has ranged from homophobic remarks made on social media to internal party members questioning if she would be the right candidate because of her sexuality.

Participants also highlighted ageism and how it uniquely effects older women in political office. One MLA said “Older women are particularly discriminated against. Older women, and I see this on both sides of the house. Older women are treated in a particular way” (Zoom Interview, 9 Feb. 2024).

In the data gathered from news media, it is clear that women of colour are uniquely impacted by sexism and racism. Melanie Mark, an Indigenous woman and a now retired MLA who was the first Indigenous Cabinet Minister in BC, described the political environment as a “torture chamber” while announcing her departure from her role as MLA (Harnett, 2023). She goes to say that she will not miss the “character assassination” (Harnett, 2023). Her case is just one example of the way Indigenous women, and women of colour more broadly, experience discrimination in political office.

In most of interviews, participants emphasized the significant impact social media, specifically criticism via social media, has on their experience. While news media traditionally has been focused on as a source of issue amongst women politicians,

current MLAs have placed more of an emphasis on the impact of social media on their experience. BC United MLA Elenore Sturko shared her experience with online criticism, “We’re in a really terrible time in terms of people’s attitudes on social media and the types of very personal criticisms people feel emboldened to make to you...that’s really, really difficult” (MS Teams Interview, 17 Nov. 2023). She went on to share how this criticism is specifically intertwined with women’s participation in politics, “We really need to rally around women especially, because I think we’re especially vulnerable to these types of harassment: online cyber harassment, cyber bullying. I think that any woman in her right mind reading some of the comments that I get, if she follows me and is my fan, she would second guess whether she wants to follow in my footsteps or not” (MS Teams Interview, 17 Nov. 2023). Sturko’s insight helps to demonstrate how big of an impact social media can have not on just how a woman experiences political office but also can be a deterrent for women who see this type of rhetoric online.

Findings across news media have reiterated the sentiments of the interviewed MLAs. In an interview with the Castlegar News, Jackie Tegart stated that “Social media has definitely changed everything, and made it tougher” (Welsh, 2022). Another article provided an account of online harassment encountered MLAs Elenore Sturko and Selina Robinson, who were subject to death threats and misogynistic comments. These findings indicate that social media is one of the main factors negatively impacting the experience of women politicians and once that has not been as commonly cited in the previous literature.

Motherhood and Care-taking

Scholars have emphasized the extent to which motherhood and household labour serve as key factors in the experience of women legislators (Deason et al., 2015; McKay, 2011). As anticipated, both the data received from participants, along with news media, confirmed these findings. I asked all interviewees if they had children and how their parental status impacted five of the six MLAs interviewed had biological children and one MLA had step-children. All participants indicated that parenthood impacts women as legislators in some way whether while considering running for office, as political candidates, and as elected officials. In the sample of news media articles, six out of ten articles explicitly referred to the impact that motherhood has on the experience of women legislators.

As candidates, or prospective candidates, interview participants indicated that parenthood was one of the most significant considerations, if not the most significant consideration, when deciding to run for office. When asked specifically about the factors that she considered prior to entering politics, MLA Shirley Bond responded, “My biggest concern in terms of running for office has always been my family” (Zoom Interview, 26 Jan. 2024). MLA Sonia Furstenau shared a similar sentiment citing time away from her family and the “sacrifice” necessary for women, particularly mothers, to make in order to run for office as factors that were discouraging in her choice to enter politics at the provincial level (Zoom Interview, 11 Dec. 2023).

Motherhood continues to be a factor in the experience of legislators once they are elected. NDP MLA Grace Lore, who had young children at the time of running, emphasized that motherhood adds another level of difficulty for women politicians, “Having small kids and being in this work is very challenging” (MS Teams Interview, 2 Feb. 2024). Similar sentiments were echoed by many other participants who observed that their colleagues with younger children has a particular set of women challenges as a result of being both a parent and a politician. One NDP MLA stated, in observing the experience of her peers, “For my colleagues who have young children, man, I don’t know how they do it” (Zoom Interview, 16 Feb. 2024).

Based on the data from both interview participants and news media, it can be seen that motherhood impacts women politicians in two major ways. The first, and more prominent, is through the incompatibility of the demands of motherhood and a career in political life. While this is not to say that a mother cannot also be a legislator, evidence suggests these two roles complicate one another. In order to investigate this incompatibility, participants were asked specifically if they felt that this was the case. All MLAs who had biological children indicated that balancing both roles is difficult. BC United MLA Shirley Bond responded saying “Is it possible? Yes. But it takes sacrifice” (Zoom Interview, 26 Jan. 2024). BC Green Party MLA Sonia Furstenau responded stating “No, I think that the kind of demands of political life are very hard on parenthood, to say the least” (Zoom Interview, 11 Dec. 2023). These findings also remain consistent with the current literature.

The second way that motherhood impacts the experience of women legislators is through stereotyping and discrimination. While I have already noted that sexism and

gender-based discrimination play a key role in the experience of women legislators, mothers receive a specific type of criticism and stereotyping. One that reinforces societal norms and critiques women for being at home with their family and children. BC United MP Elenore Sturko said that she received comments on social media calling her a “terrible parent” for spending time at political events rather than being at home (MS Teams Interview, 17 Nov. 2023). News media also touches on this type of criticism. In one article published by CBC (2017), “Being a Mom and B.C. politician”, the author stated “Societal norms historically dictated women should be at home raising the kids, while dads could go off into the world. And women who do enter politics often face the criticism about their role as parents that their male counterparts never do.” These findings demonstrate that concepts such as the double bind and politicized motherhood, which scholars have used to refer to the experience of women legislators are still salient (Deason et al., 2015; Teele et al., 2018).

While all participants were aware of the significant cost that political life can have as a mother, those who had younger children while running for office and once elected also saw it has a benefit for their family. BC United Party MLA Elenore Sturko saw the involvement of her children in political life as a way of for her children to be more knowledgeable and more engaged in political matters (MS Teams Interview, 17 Nov. 2023). NDP MLA Grace Lore, also felt that her career in politics helped to instill values of community in her children “I think there's a net benefit for my children. My children know who the mayor is. They know what housing's being built in my community. They know why I do this work. We talk about what we owe each other, what we owe our community, and why you have to work hard for your community” (MS Teams Interview, 2 Feb. 2024). These findings demonstrate that while political office has a significant impact on the experience of women in political office, this impact is both positive and negative.

Furthermore, nearly all of the MLAs interviewed also highlighted the role that their partner or spouse plays in their political career, particularly when it comes to parental responsibility. MLAs were not asked directly about the role of their partner, but three participants cited their partner or spouse as significant help to their ability to balance parenthood and a career in politics. NDP MLA Grace Lore summarized this by saying “I will say that this works for me because I have a spouse who is all in, he is all in on politics the career” (MS Teams Interview, 2 Feb. 2024). This was reiterated by BC United Party Shirley Bond who said “I was very lucky to have a supportive spouse. I lost

my husband and a couple of years ago, but he was my partner and supported everything I wanted to do and that made it easier to make the decision [to run]" (Zoom Interview, 26 Jan. 2024).

BC United Party MLA Elenore Sturko found that because she was married to a woman, the strain that working in politics has on her family was lessened "Interestingly being a lesbian in a married lesbian relationship, regardless of which parent goes away for work, their mom is still at home with them. So, it's kind of unique because we don't have that same heteronormal gender roles that people might have in a household" (MS Teams Interview, 17 Nov. 2023). For some participants, the support they received from their spouse included lessening their work hours. Overall, these findings indicate that having a partner to assist in family and household responsibilities helps to mitigate some of the strain parenthood can put on women legislators.

Finally, a finding that previous literature does not account for is the impact of care-taking outside of motherhood and its impact on women legislators. One legislator interviewed, who did not have biological children, discussed her experience with care work outside motherhood. At the time she was elected, she was also a primary caregiver for her mother. In discussing this experience, she stated "One of the real considerations when I ran was the impact on my, on my extended family because my sisters and I were the primary caregivers for my mother" (Zoom Interview, 16 Feb. 2024). Speaking broadly about the care-taking responsibilities that women hold she stated, "I think it can be very, very difficult because our structures are not built to accommodate the caring, the caring role that, all women take on in our, in, in our society. I'd say that that is one of the most profoundly just bedrock challenges that women face" (Zoom Interview, 16 Feb. 2024). Whether it be care-taking responsibilities of young children or aging family members, it can be seen that this role has a significant impact on the experience of women in political office.

Conclusion: More Nuance, Same Sexism

I have used interview data and written news articles to examine the modern experience of women legislators in BC. Using a qualitative, abductive analysis, my findings largely reiterates previous findings in the literature. Women politicians are still heavily impacted by lower levels of political ambition, sexism and gender-based discrimination, the role of their political party, and most significantly, motherhood. Those interviewed indicated that motherhood continues to create significant difficulties for mothers elected to political office.

However, I have also been able to highlight factors that have not been focused on in the literature. Most prominently, the role that social media is playing in the modern experience of women legislators. Data gathered from across interviews and news articles indicate that social media has added an additional obstacle in the lives of modern-day women politicians. While all politicians have the potential to be subject to attacks via social media, my findings indicate that women experience significant levels of sexism and gender-discrimination online.

This study has also provided more nuance to the modern experience of women politicians who are parents. I have highlighted that the role of the non-legislator partner is crucial in the experience of women politicians with children. Participants indicated that support from their partner regarding household labour and childcare enabled them to have been able to run for political office and have a more positive experience once elected. Additionally, I outlined that in the contemporary experience of women legislators, a career in politics can have a positive impact on a family.

Although this study does not offer an exhaustive account of the experiences of all legislators who identify as women in Canada, it offers a fairly detailed snapshot of the experiences of women serving in political office in BC. By having a better understanding of these experiences, it can be better understood why remain less motivated to seek a career in political office and what barriers continue to persist.

Based on the conclusions of this project, it is clear that there is more research to be done in this field. Firstly, it is important that researchers begin to address not only the experience of white, cisgender, women in political office but also the experience of those

who experience multiple forms of oppressions including racialization, sexuality, ability, etc. Additionally, while this study has drawn attention to some of the factors that discourage women from running for political office and that impact their experience negatively, there is still work to be done to address how to mitigate these negative experiences. Without addressing how to mitigate these factors, it is unlikely that women will be able to achieve gender parity in political office.

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