

# Active Citizenship for Women in Nova Scotia

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Patricia LeBlanc: Disability Advocate



Ruth Goldbloom, O.C.: Chair of Pier 21



Krista Hanscomb – Aboriginal Student Advisor

## Summary Report

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## The Research Study

**Dr. Patricia Gouthro** led a team of students in the *Graduate Studies in Lifelong Learning* program at Mount Saint Vincent University [**Laurie Allain, Wendy Terris Klaus, and Tara Ward**] through the one year research project. Students assisted in writing the ethics proposal, reviewing documents, doing a web search to determine potential participants, conducting interviews, helping with analysis of the data, and developing poster and conference presentations on the research. The students were given the opportunity to develop valuable, hands-on knowledge and skills that they can take back to their work in the community in the field of lifelong learning.



Senator Jane Cordy



Yvonne Atwell

## Life Histories

Eight women from diverse backgrounds were asked to share their life histories to learn more about their involvement as active citizens in Nova Scotia. Their contributions varied from **Ruth Goldbloom's** involvement in creating Pier 21, a nationally renowned museum that celebrates the contributions of immigrants to Canada, to **Yvonne Atwell's** work with the African Nova Scotian community, to **Debbie Oullette's** campaign for environmental clean-up and government accountability around the Sydney Tar Ponds. These women have different educational backgrounds and life experiences but share a passion for learning connected to social justice. The other five participants include: **Senator Jane Cordy, Krista Hanscomb**, who has worked as an Aboriginal Student Advisor at St. Francis Xavier University, **Leighann Wichman**, who works with the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth Project, **Jean d'Entremont**, an active member of the La Fédération des Femmes, an organization for Acadian and French speaking women, and **Patricia LeBlanc**, who advocates for individuals with disabilities within Nova Scotia.

## Key Informants

Four interviews were conducted with "key informants" – individuals in positions of authority in policy and government sectors who could provide insights into challenges, barriers, and supports that impact on women's abilities to participate as active citizens. The identity of these individuals remains confidential, but their "insider" knowledge provides rich insights into the complexities of promoting active citizenship and participation in governance for women in Nova Scotia.

## The Analysis

By examining policy documents, related literature, and transcripts from the interviews we were able to identify a number of factors that serve as barriers, motivators, and supports that impact upon women's ability to participate as active citizens.

- **Caregiving and domestic labour** – women are still socially assigned primary responsibilities for taking care of children and elderly parents, as well as domestic labour. Women who do not have support either from family or from funding ie. for childcare find it difficult to participate as actively as citizens or in politics.
- **Confidence and self-esteem** – despite being highly capable, women often lack confidence in their abilities and are less assertive about assuming leadership roles. When they do so, their motivation is often to contribute – "what do I have to give?" – rather than personal ambition – "what will I get if I do this?"
- **Discrimination** – played a role in many of the life experiences of the women in this study, as they encountered racism, ableism, homophobia and other forms of prejudice. These challenges also served as motivators for women to work towards social justice.
- **Financial resources** – women are more likely to be poor, which impacts on access to childcare, education, and transportation. Women may not be as well connected for fundraising in politics.
- **Transportation** – in a country and province with wide distances between communities, transportation may be limited by financial constraints, disability, access to a car, and limited public transit.
- **Political literacy** – women often lack information about how to impact on government or policy development, and/or what is required to enter into politics. Men are more likely to be mentored politically and have better access to informal power networks.

## Recommendations

- Women's contributions as active citizens need to be valued and acknowledged to provide significant role models for young women.
- Political literacy needs to be developed through opportunities such as the *Campaign School for Women* hosted at Mount Saint Vincent University that teaches practical skills for success in politics such as how to make a speech or join a political party.
- As long as women and minorities continue to be poorly represented in governments, a commitment needs to be made to work towards greater equity in representation.
- Practical supports, such as funding for childcare and access to transportation need to be provided for women to participate more actively as citizens and within the political arena.
- Policies and practices in politics that discourage women's active participation need to be assessed, such as long evening hours in the House of Assembly that interfere with family life.
- Lifelong learning opportunities within educational systems and the broader community need to be supported to address the topics of active citizenship and governance.

*I think we're powerful and we won't give up. If we have an issue, we're going to stick to it. If we want to protect our children we're going to be there because that's what we're fighting for.* Debbie Oullette



Debbie Oullette



Jean d'Entremont



Leighan Wichman

For more information on this study, including the list of publications as they become available, please go to: [www.lifelonglearningresearch.ca](http://www.lifelonglearningresearch.ca)