

## **Engagement in the National Council of Women of Canada: An Analytical Perspective**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Description of the National Council of Women of Canada .....</b>	<b>2-4</b>
<b>History of the Council .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Size of the NCWC .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Membership in the NCWC .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Type of Groups and Constituents .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Political Activities and Objectives of the National Council of Women of Canada .....</b>	<b>4-5</b>
<b>Demands the NCWC Makes .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Target of their Efforts .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Promotion Objectives of the NCWC .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Recommendation for the Council: Improving Public Opinion .....</b>	<b>5-12</b>
<b>Education Through Postsecondary School Systems .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Enhanced Media Platforms .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>14-16</b>

## **Description of the National Council of Women of Canada**

### **History of the Council**

The National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC) is a non-governmental organization that was created on October 27, 1893, in the city of Toronto (Sylvester, 2016). At its beginning, a meeting composed of 1,500 women was conducted at the Horticultural Pavilion (Sylvester, 2016). The meeting was led by the former president of the International Council of Women (ICW), Lady Ishbel Aberdeen (Sylvester, 2016). Aberdeen formed the NCWC and became the very first president of the council.

This organization was created with effort to giving Canadian women a voice in society. Specifically, the group's initiative aims at allowing women to become active in both social and moral reforms (Kinahan, 2008, p. 9). In working towards these reforms, concerns were addressed by NCWC with respect to the enfranchisement of women as they were seen as able to exert political influence without political power (Kinahan, 2008, p. 6). As suggested by Dahl, fewer opportunities for dispute would occur in a nation that allows both universal suffrage and a repressive government (Dahl, 1971, p. 5). The Famous Five, all members of the Council also successfully advocated in the Person's Case for declaration of women as person's under the Charter in 1929 (NCWC, 2017). The NCWC also focused on the poor working conditions of women. Historically, the Council consisted of white, middle-class, married women who worked within the home (Roy and Griffiths, 1995, p. 325). Despite this socio-economic status, the council was committed to fighting for the rights of working-class women (Roy and Griffiths, 1995, p. 325). The council worked for equal hours between men and women, as well as equal pay (Roy and Griffiths, 1995, p. 325).

### **Size of the NCWC**

The NCWC is an umbrella organization, composed of both local councils and national groups (Kinahan, 2007, p. 162). In 1900, the NCWC had a total of seven National associations, including the Dominion Women's Enfranchisement Association and the Women's Art Association (Kinahan, 2007, p. 162). The Council also consisted of twenty-one local councils throughout Canada (Kinahan, 2007, p. 162). The NCWC continues to encompass these local, provincial and national councils. In addition to having three types of councils, the group allows for federation with like-minded organizations referred to as a Nationally Organized Society (NCWC, 2017).

### **Membership in the NCWC**

The NCWC is inclusive in its membership and engagement allowing any Canadian or organization to join. Due to the numerous opportunities available, a precise number of members is not accounted for. Nonetheless, the first step to joining the NCWC is to become a member of a local council or study group in close proximity focusing on local women's issues (NCWC, 2017). The NCWC allows for individuals to also become members at the national level (NCWC, 2017).

### **Type of Group and Constituents**

The NCWC is classified as a pressure group. Although similar to an interest group, a pressure group has a political objective and is a link between state actors and the policy community (Perrella, 2017). Formally, this type of organized political group is defined as "an organized group that does not put up candidates for election, but seeks to influence government policy or legislation" (Trueman, 2017). This type of group focuses on the interests of improving the conditions of women, families, and communities (NCWC, 2017). In specific, their interests

revolve around a variety of topics including Aboriginal women, children and family, environment, and health care (NCWC, 2017).

### **Political Activities and Objectives of the National Council of Women of Canada**

#### **Demands the NCWC Makes**

One of the challenges facing the contemporary federal government is how to adapt to the democratic process to different interest or demands (Dalton, 2014, p .127). There are several policy issues that the NCWC has brought forth to the federal government. Through this effort of agenda-setting, issues are raised from simply being a social or private issue to one that is public with possibility for government action (Howlett & Ramesh, 2002, p. 93). The NCWC pressures the government of Canada to ratify and implement policies that address the inequalities encountered by women and girls in Canada. A component of our political system is the quality of the government being completely responsive to all its citizens (Dahl, 1971, p. 2). The NCWC focuses on a variety of intersectional policy issues that impact women such as International Trade Agreements (NCWC, 2017). These intersectional issues can be classified as spillover policy windows, where similar issues are influenced and brought into an already existing policy window (Howlett & Ramesh, 2002, p. 105). The demands made by the NCWC address encompassing and intersectional issues that expand beyond the borders of Canada as international concerns spark an interest to ensure advocacy takes place. These demands range from issues such as gender inequality that is reflective in the areas of the workplace, mental health, sexual abuse, and same-sex marriage (NCWC, 2017).

#### **Target of their Efforts**

The NCWC targets their efforts toward influencing government policy through direct government correspondence. According to Guy Peters, pressure groups constitute as members of

an important social or political institutions who have the capacity to influence the shape of public policy (Peters, 1977, p. 198). The Council annually prepares and submits a written brief to the federal government based on approved policy (NCWC, 2017). The Annual Index shows all approved NCWC Policy suggestions from 1967 to 2017, such as Gender as an Identifiable Group in the Criminal Code, Daycare for Working Mothers, Sexual Abuse of Children and Older women and Discriminatory employment policies (NCWC, 2017). The scrutinization of existing policies allows for the revamping of current policies that do not address the encompassing issues faced by women.

### **Promotion of the Objectives of the NCWC**

There are a variety of outlets that the NCWC uses to promote its activities such as newsletters sent out four times a year, annual meetings and mass email correspondence (NCWC, 2017). Every year the United Nations conducts a Women's Conference, which allows for international women's groups to collectively discuss projects that will allow for female empowerment and progression within society (Sandra Cohen-Rose, personal communication, 2017). However, due to a lack of funding only 15 women are able to attend this conference on behalf of the NCWC. The Council also promotes its objectives through an annual youth booth at the Canadian Exhibition Center in an effort to mobilize more members, yet there has been a very scarce response (Sandra Cohen-Rose, personal communication, 2017).

### **Recommendation for the Council: Improving Public Opinion**

After analyzing the National Council of Women of Canada, we have concluded that the organization needs to improve its engagement with the public. The group should consider increasing knowledge, specifically among a young demographic in an effort to change the perspective of advocating for women's rights. In order to make these necessary improvements,

we recommend that the Council pursue efforts to increase public opinion surrounding the group and women's rights in entirety. Public opinion can be increased through education nationally within the postsecondary school system and an improved social media presence and platform. We believe that these targeted efforts by the Council will gain a broader attentive public and increased membership to ensure stabilization for the future success of the group.

### **Education through Postsecondary School Systems**

In a survey conducted by IPSOS in March of 2017, seven in ten Canadians agree that there is still inequality socially, politically, or economically for women in Canada (Scotti, 2017). Although significant improvements have been made, issues with respect to women's rights are still prevalent. To increase awareness on these existing inequalities, the NCWC should consider having representatives from its 12 local and 6 provincial councils deliver presentations in university and college classrooms and on campuses to educate a younger demographic.

According to Robert Dahl, values identify what people perceive as important goals for society and the political system (Dalton, 2014, p. 87). When the National Council of Women of Canada was founded in 1893, the goals for society amongst women revolved around issues of oppression. These issues pertaining to women's rights at the outset of the Council were arguably more substantial than presently. Ronald Inglehart's scarcity hypothesis explains that individuals place a higher worth on something that is difficult to obtain (Dalton, 2014, p. 89). When the supply of a value meets its demand, people begin to take the supply for granted and change their focus to other values that remain scarce (Dalton, 2014, p. 89). As the demands for women's suffrage and the decision of the Person's case gave Canadian women increased identity, there has since been a lack of demanding interest by younger generations in engaging with the values of the NCWC. Yet, as Sean Simpson, the Vice-President of IPSOS explains, there is still more

equality for women that is to be achieved (Scotti, 2017). It is important to educate a young demographic on these continuing issues of inequality in order to enhance their perceptions of its importance politically and societally. Subsequently, this younger generation is urged to shift their attention toward postmaterial goals (Dahl, 2014, p. 97). Postmaterialists initiate efforts into a new set of issues, including gender equality, which has often been overlooked (Dahl, 2014, p. 100). The NCWC can take advantage of an increasing postmaterialist generation by reinforcing issues pertaining to women's rights.

In efforts toward changing public opinion, knowledge is something that can be manipulated and adjusted (Perrella, 2017). Patrick Fournier is the author of *The Uninformed Canadian Voter*. Although his argument is with regard specifically to political knowledge, he identifies three determinants of this information: opportunity, ability, and motivation (Fournier, 2002, p. 98). We believe that opportunity can be provided to a younger demographic through the NCWC engaging and presenting its objectives and membership opportunities in a classroom setting. Fournier also highlights that the average success rate of women is 10 percentage points lower than men's on political knowledge in a distribution survey conducted (Fournier, 2002, p. 99). It is important for the NCWC to explain their successful and ongoing political efforts with the sub-government. This can ensure adequate knowledge to students that can advance their ability and desire to volunteer with the Council. Civic engagement is more likely among those with a higher level of education and according to Statistics Canada, 78% of Canadians with a university degree were members or participants of a group (Turcotte, 2015, p.7). This further develops our suggestion that knowledge through the school system of the NCWC can help broaden the groups attentive public as these young constituents enter into post-graduate work. Compared to the past, young people enter universities in much larger numbers, they have more



free time and are exposed to a broader current of ideas that has produced many more “conscious constituents” (Tarrow, 2011 p 134). The idea that university campuses derive an increase in “conscious constituents” suggests that there is a greater ability under Fournier’s model for knowledge pertaining to the NCWC. Consequently, this knowledge can only be attained if these young people are exposed to it.

In a secondary hypothesis provided by Inglehart, the priority of values reflects the conditions that occurred during one’s years before reaching adult life, but can change through exposure to new experiences (Dahl, 2014, p. 89). People make decisions through the arrangement of values based on their personal importance (Dahl, 2014, p. 89). In formulating presentations within university and college campuses, the narrative that the NCWC will need to incorporate must highlight values and concerns of university students. As learned, efficacy is the extent to which an individual thinks that they can make a difference (Perrella, 2017). People must believe that they can influence the government and become active if the value is sufficiently important to them. Realizing this potential to influence the government can happen by the Council providing knowledge on past successes in pushing policy as well as future potential to impact policy as a member.

In the National Council of Women of Canada, membership is open to “any Canadian person or organization whose work is national in scope and whose aims are in harmony with those of NCWC” (NCWC, 2017). It is important for the NCWC to highlight and promote this not well-known inclusivity in membership if they choose to provide education on their efforts to younger constituents.

## **Enhanced Media Platforms**

The NCWC openly admits facing difficulties with older women forming the majority of their group membership. This concern was relayed to our group in a telephone conversation with President of the NCWC, Sandra Cohen-Rose. This problem poses a threat to the future of the organization due to there being scarce young representation. The organization incorporates a motto which strongly believes in “Intergenerational Leadership”, however, the NCWC struggles to attract a younger demographic of women (Lochan Lal & Volatabu, 2017). We suggest that to further broaden public opinion, the NCWC should enhance their media platforms to reach a greater attentive public of young women.

The method of participation our group utilized in order to confirm the NCWC’s absence in the media was direct contacting. Direct contacting, as a high information activity, requires significant motivation by a collective group of individuals and indicates an engaged citizenry (Dalton, 2014, p. 49). Although this reference is in the context of contacting public officials, it nonetheless is relevant as the representative contacted is the president of the organization. Through this method, we have expanded the potential influence of the public by expressing support for the organization (Dalton, 2014, p. 49). The recruitment obstacle expressed by the council’s president concerns the organization’s absence of social media platforms to expand their social framework. It is said that political participation varies by age and with specific reference to young people, engagement comes second to pre-existing concerns such as school, dating, and beginning a career (Dalton, 2014, p. 64). This poses an even greater challenge to the organization to mobilize young women. Our group proposes that to combat this, the organization must utilize the Internet as it is considered an instrument of political activism, especially among the young (Dalton, 2014, p. 58).

The Internet has developed a new way for people to carry on traditional political activities such as joining a pressure group (Dalton, 2014, p. 57). Virtual communications also allow individuals to connect with others to collect and share information assisting in their attempts to influence the political process (Dalton, 2014, p. 57). It is further contended that through transmitting information to millions of people across airwaves, movements can encourage some to mirror their example and recognize their claims (Tarrow, 2011, p. 134). This emphasizes that the media thus contributes to the success of movements which can translate in promoting the objectives of a pressure group. According to Statistics Canada, young Canadians are proven to use different forms of media compared to their older counterparts to obtain information (Statistics Canada, 2016, p. 5). The results of this social survey can be found in our appendices. This graph demonstrates that 77 percent of 15 to 34-year-olds used the Internet to follow news and current affairs, compared with 36 percent of people 55 years and older (Statistics Canada, 2016, p. 5). It is further asserted that the Internet has notable potential in bringing together like-minded people in a community (Dalton, 2014, p. 76). Considering this statistic and the fact that the Internet mobilizes individuals to pursue political action, the NCWC should utilize the Internet, specifically through social media platforms, to reach a younger demographic.

Where Internet activism is more frequent among the young than older people, there are also significant signs that suggest it builds on the civic voluntarism model (Dalton, 2014, p. 76). Under the civic voluntarism model, people become more inclined to participate because they want to which requires a form of influence to stimulate activity (Dalton, 2014, p. 64). It is evident that the NCWC faces constraints to recruitment. These constraints are in the areas of awareness and a perceived weakness where the group faces a lack of social media presence

(Perrella, 2017). We urge that in order for the organization to convert this perceived weakness into successful engagement, the organization must publicize their cause and objectives via social media platforms. This is predicted to evolve into a perceived strength that will have a long-term positive effect on the group. Social media platforms must be applied appropriately as it is found that when used, the Internet has opened up new windows of possibility to movement groups which requires a calculated vision and the appropriate skills to use it effectively (Tarrow, 2011, p. 138).

To accomplish this objective, the NCWC should consider framing issue opinions with respect to women's rights via Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram. This could include policy objectives undergone by the NCWC, including abortion and birth control legislation, sexual assault legislation, harassment in the workplace, and reduction of federal government debt. Issue opinions represent the conversion of broad value orientations into fixed political concerns (Dalton, 2014, p. 105). We believe that the broad value orientation of gender inequality can be translated into issue opinions on social media platforms that can create effective means of engagement. Efforts to cognitively mobilize young women to engage in the organization based on issue opinions may occur where issue opinions are more changeable and diverse than broad value orientations (Dalton, 2014, p. 106). The framing of issue opinions via social media platforms will attempt to reinstate the fairly firm consensus that exists on the matter of women's rights, which proved to be a highly isolated and even unrecognized issue a few decades ago (Dalton, 2014, p. 106).

The NCWC currently has a website and Facebook page that only has 788 followers and 823 likes. We recommend that the NCWC utilizes platforms such as Snapchat, specifically the discovery page to promote the group's efforts. The organization should also create a Twitter and

Instagram page as well as a hashtag. In doing this, the NCWC will make their content more discoverable. The use of the hashtag in turn will allow for the spread of awareness of the NCWC. When movements draw on existing social networks, organizations can mobilize supporters rapidly (Tarrow, 2011, p. 132). By enhancing these media campaigns, it is predicted that the NCWC will initiate stronger and consistent media attention that will provide a source of development for the group.

### **Conclusion**

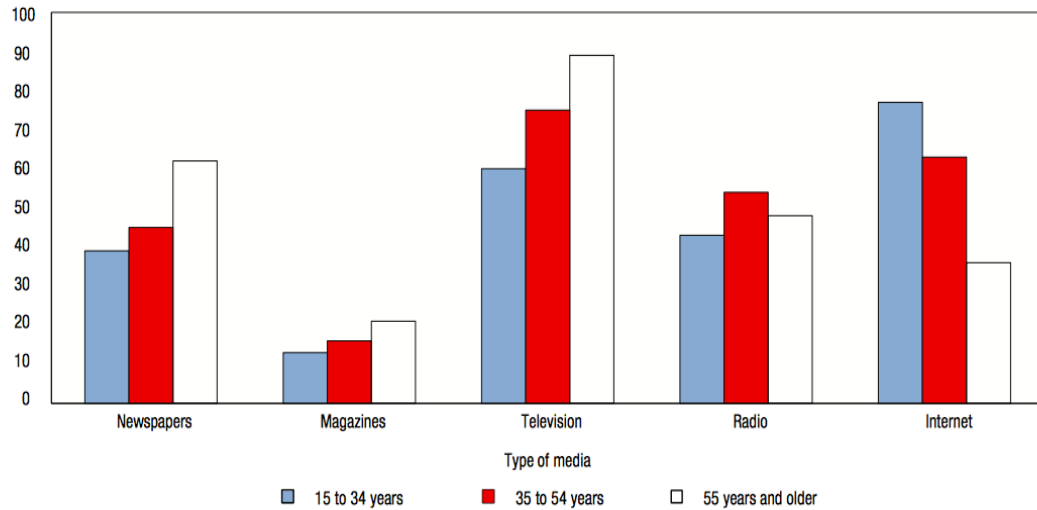
While the NCWC has successfully advocated for the rights of women, children, and families since its emergence, the Council continues to face constraints in recruiting members. These recruitment constraints pertain specifically toward a lack of young engagement within the organization. In order to counteract and broaden the attentive public, the group needs to focus their efforts toward increasing public opinion. Although this may be a difficult task, we recommend that the organization provide educational presentations in postsecondary institutions and the enhancement of their media and social media platforms to engage a young demographic.

## Appendix

The use of media to follow news and current affairs

**Chart 4**  
**Type of media used to follow news and current affairs,<sup>1</sup> by age group, 2013**

percentage



1. People who follow news and current affairs rarely, several times a month, several times a week or daily.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey.

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