

FCM Breakfast – June 3rd, 2018
Halifax Convention Centre

Good morning everyone. Bonjour tout le monde

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of this land, and pay respect to their elders both past and present, and extend that respect to other Indigenous people who are here today.

Indigenous women have been leaders on these lands for thousands and thousands of years, and continue to enrich and make significant contributions to our world today.

American Civic leader Valerie Jarrett said; “ When you’re in local government, you are on the ground, and you are looking into the eyes and hearts of the people you are there to serve.

I am truly honoured to be here this morning, with women and men who work tirelessly - giving so much of yourselves, sometimes against incredible odds, to make a difference for your constituents, their families and communities; people who put their trust in you to represent them, keep them safe, and a whole lot more.

And it’s just not “representing” - is it?

You give of yourselves over and over again and you really make a difference for people.

I was walking just up the road the other day, and I saw an interesting sign in the window of a yoga studio. It said “**Don’t you dare dim your light to make others feel comfortable**”.

“Don’t you dare dim your light to make others feel comfortable”.

How fitting is that for a room full of leaders!

We are all leaders here, and I believe as leaders and especially as women leaders, we have an obligation to use our light, our voices, and our leadership positions to influence change.

Never underestimate **your** influence, and use it in a way that eliminates the many inequalities and injustices that we see in our world to make real change happen!

That’s all of our jobs – and I hope you are as proud as I am to be given that all-important task.

We all have so much to share, to teach each other and to learn from each other – just by our own reality and experiences.

But first - We need to celebrate ourselves and acknowledge the difference our work has made, because it really has made a difference.

It's fitting that your theme this year is "*Tools for Tomorrow's Canada*".

Your President's Forum the other day focused on the fact that more and more women are overcoming barriers to leadership.

There have been amazing gains thanks to a concerted effort by the FCM all over Canada. Women are definitely shining their lights – and that's encouraging.

A focus has been to support women candidates, councilors, and to give them the tools that enable women to help build that tomorrow.

That's why it is important that we continue to have conversations like you are having here this weekend in order to explore the "how?"

And it's also important that the men – our brothers, step up to the challenge as well, and I want to thank them for being here this morning, and for being an ongoing part of this important discussion.

How do we find solutions to the problem of underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in all levels of government, unions, business and other organizations?

Sadly, in all of these institutions, we're missing some very important voices where decisions are being made.

It is a true sign of the FCM's commitment to deal with this important issue, and get more women to step up and get elected, because what we know is that -

- Women are desperately under-represented in all governing and decision making bodies in our country, and indeed globally and
- When women become elected and take their place in leadership positions, it makes an incredible difference.

Tools and strategies to address barriers to women's participation are critical.

Barriers like - the lack of role models, which cannot be underestimated when we think about attracting more women to leadership positions.

Female leaders can play an important role as "femtors" to other women who express an interest in running in elections.

Work-life balance and the disproportionate work that women perform in general, can also be a barrier to women's participation in governments, and speaks of broader systemic issues that need to be addressed.

You have talked about some of those issues here this weekend.

Full and equitable participation of women in public life is essential to building and sustaining strong, vibrant democracies.

It's no secret that women are vastly underrepresented at all levels of government, all across the world.

According to the Inter-Parliamentarian Union, women hold 23% of all seats in Parliament/senates globally.

The UN defines 30% as the minimal percentage of women required for government to reflect women's concerns.

Canada is ranked 62nd, and although we are gaining momentum, at this rate, it will take 50 years until women achieve parity.

Well – we don't have 50 years!

Women in Canada represent 18 per cent of mayors and 28 per cent of councillors, for an average of 26 percent.

That means we would have to increase the number of women in municipal government by roughly 100 every year over the next 14 years.

Sadly, although we are 52% of the population, we still face inequality in every facet of our lives; how we are paid, how we access the services we need; how we are treated - at work, at home, in the

streets, in the media; and most importantly - how we are represented in all levels in governments, and in those rooms where decisions are made that directly affect us.

Research by the University of Pittsburg suggested one reason women are less likely to go into politics is because they do not like going through the election process.

The Report says: "It's not so surprising really. Who but the most thick skinned would willingly go through a cycle that so closely scrutinizes female politicians' fashion choices, sexual pasts and maybe even their childcare arrangements", or even if they **should** be entitled to maternity leave?

If women are to play a bigger role in politics, then councils and parliaments should be a place where they are able to work without fear of being treated differently because they are women.

I believe that the #METOO and #TIMESUP movements, and the CLC's #DONEYWAITING campaign, have confirmed what women have known for some time; we will never achieve equality as women, until we eradicate gender based violence.

The extent of that violence and harassment that has been recently exposed might help us better understand why women are

underrepresented in positions of leadership, and power, in government and throughout our society.

But, there has been a shift in the discussion, and women are feeling more emboldened to come forward – all over the world.

If you have heard and seen what is happening in the NL House of Assembly, well make no wonder women aren't stepping into provincial politics.

NL is at the low end of the threshold for women in government @ 25%.

There have been at least 4 recent serious allegations of harassment and bullying by MHA's. It has been toxic, and very public.

Hats off to those courageous women who dared to speak up, because that is very hard to do in that environment.

So many women can still not do that; especially when we realize that the current system of government we have was put in place before women even had the right to vote.

It has been driven by and protected by men for a long time.

And although legislatures should be treated as real workplaces, it has never been that clearly defined.

The real bosses for the members are the constituents, and those constituents are watching and looking for their elected leaders to respond.

Government can become a real leader here, and one that can change the “face” of government going forward.

But, there needs to be political will.

The political will to not just create policies and laws to address what’s happening in government, but a commitment to implement the necessary measures to address the widening inequality in our society that prevents women from participating in the first place.

Governments at all levels need to acknowledge, and make space for more diversity until we have governments that more closely resemble the society it purports to represent and serve.

And understand that the problem is intersectional, covering other factors such as class, race, ethnicity, and ability.

Currently, our municipal governments in NL are made up of 37% female councillors and 21% female mayors – that’s not bad! And we

have some amazing women municipal politicians throughout our province.

But - something amazing happened at our last municipal elections in St. John's where shockingly, we had an all male council.

It was clear that the issues that kept women awake at night were not being addressed in council at all.

This radicalized women to put their names forward, and come together, support each other, share resources, and a platform, build a huge base, and shake things up.

What started as a whisper by a young mom, who was thinking of running, became the beginning of - not just a campaign, but a movement of sorts.

Other women put their names forward to help out on campaigns – or “love teams” as they called them.

Renee Sharpe, iron worker, marshal arts instructor, and bad ass feminist, ran for mayor which totally changed the focus of that campaign putting women's issues right up front, moving people to action.

There were more young people engaged in campaigns than ever before. The energy was contagious. More and more people from all walks of life got caught up in the momentum and jumped in to help.

The labour movement got involved; the women's movement got involved; the local business community joined in.

Many others came forward to volunteer. These women built a base. They broadened their issues. They threw all their money into the one pot. Their support grew. They canvassed together. **They did not compete with each other.** They took the issues on together.

The citizens of St. John's responded. They said they were ready to elect women, and they did!

Maggie Burton, one of St. John's youngest councilors ever, received the most "at large" votes of anyone!!! Debbie Hanlon the third highest,

Hope Jamieson, the young yoga teacher, handily won her Ward against a popular and well-known incumbent.

Deanne Stapleton won in her ward.

Sheilagh O'Leary was elected as deputy mayor and Renee Sharpe, although not elected, ensured that the mayor-elect could articulate the issues she had raised; issues that mattered to women, their families, and their neighbourhoods.

I have a feeling were going to see her again soon.

What a victory! And you know – since then, the issues that are addressed, and the decisions that have been made by the St. John’s City Council have been thorough, thoughtful, inclusive, and have greatly benefited all citizens.

It has made such a difference. Just like you have made a difference.

We can’t let the momentum slow down. We must ensure that we break down the remaining barriers preventing women from reaching their full potential in government at all levels, and in our unions too.

I feel so privileged to be an elected labour leader of a provincial Federation of Labour – representing some 65,000 members who live and work in every community in my province of NL and in every sector of our economy.

Our political work is to advocate for change for all workers.

We have almost 300 communities in NL, so municipal politics, and municipal issues are extremely important to us.

We believe that a true measure of democracy is a society that is inclusive, participatory, committed to political equality, policies and laws that are really “for all people”.

Our vision of a strong economy is one that is fair and equitable, with good jobs for all, quality public services, sustainable communities and a sustainable environment.

That's not too much to ask for is it?

An invaluable lesson I learned from one of my "femtors", Nancy Riche, is that sometimes we have to challenge and change structures in order to get ourselves in there.

We need break down those barriers by working together, boldly, and sometimes loudly, and take our place right where we belong.

We need to **Educate!** We need to **Agitate!** And we need to **Organize!**

And when we do that – we can believe the words of Arundhati Roy, when she says: **“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. And on a quiet day, I can hear her breathing”**.

Thank you