

Ontario Human  
Rights Commission

Office of the Chief Commissioner

180 Dundas Street West, 8<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Toronto ON M7A 2R9  
Tel.: (416) 314-4537  
Fax.: (416) 314-7752

Commission ontarienne  
des droits de la personne

Cabinet du commissaire en chef

180, rue Dundas ouest, 8<sup>e</sup> étage  
Toronto ON M7A 2R9  
Tél. : (416) 314-4537  
Téléf. : (416) 314-7752



February 20, 2015

VIA EMAIL: [registry@ohchr.org](mailto:registry@ohchr.org)

Nathalie Prouvez, Chief  
Rule of Law and Democracy Section  
Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights  
United Nations  
Palais des Nations  
CH-1211, Geneva 10  
Switzerland

Dear Ms Prouvez,

**Re: UN OHCHR study on equal participation in political and public affairs**

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into your study on the right to participation in political and public affairs, as enshrined in article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and in other international human rights treaties.

For your information, the OHRC wrote to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in October 2011 to provide comment on the OHCHR Thematic study on participation of persons with disabilities in political and public life in accordance with Article 29 of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Some of the challenges persons with disabilities face regarding the right to vote and be elected include: inaccessible facilities used for constituency offices and campaign events; inaccessible print and website communications and meetings; insufficient and inadequate accessible voting equipment; disability-related expenses not claimable or reimbursable for candidates with disabilities under election legislation.

Regarding equal access to public service, some of the barriers for persons with disabilities include: lack of descriptive audio for people with vision disability for live/video parliamentary proceedings; lack of sign language or descriptive text and audio for critical content on websites and public consultations; or tribunal or court proceedings that in some cases fail to accommodate the needs of parties or their litigants.

Our letter outlined the steps we had taken prior to that point including raising concerns before a legislative standing committee reviewing the Election Statute Law Amendment Act. It also points to other external resources such as site accessibility standards for polling stations as well as guides for accessible political campaigns, party offices and all candidates meetings. For more detail, you can review our letter available on your website<sup>1</sup> as well as on ours.<sup>2</sup>

We have since provided additional input to Elections Ontario<sup>3</sup> and to Toronto City Council<sup>4</sup> on their initiatives looking at implementing internet and telephone voting to improve accessibility for electors with disabilities and others.

Regarding participation in the conduct of public affairs: In our experience this can happen best at the local level. Several years back, the OHRC helped develop and launch the Canadian Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination (CCMARD), in partnership with the Canadian Commission for UNESCO and others. Under this initiative, 62 municipal governments across Canada have signed the CCMARD declaration, which includes a commitment to involve citizens by giving them a voice in anti-racism initiatives and decision-making.<sup>5</sup> For example, the City of Windsor (Ontario), a CCMARD member, established a Diversity Committee, whose voting members include one city councilor, four volunteer citizens and four representatives of community agencies, institutions or organizations that bring forward concerns from the larger stakeholder population.<sup>6</sup>

For persons with disabilities, the Ontario Government has legislated participation in municipal affairs in regards to municipal governments' obligations under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. Section 29 of that Act requires the council of every municipality having a population of not less than 10,000 to establish an accessibility advisory committee. The majority of the members of the committee shall be persons with disabilities. Duties of the committee include advising the council about the requirements and implementation of accessibility standards and the preparation of accessibility reports and other such matters.<sup>7</sup> Section 31 of the Act also establishes the Accessibility Standards Advisory Council at the provincial level with similar representation and duties.

This legislative approach has been an important mechanism to guarantee the participation of persons with disabilities in helping to direct government policy through the development and implementation of accessibility standards, which are adopted into regulation under that Act.

I would like to draw your attention to another interesting initiative that is underway dealing with barriers faced by women in corporations. In October 2014, the securities regulatory authority in Ontario along with those in several other provinces and territories in Canada announced changes to their regime for disclosure of corporate governance practices, provided all necessary Ministerial approvals are obtained. The changes will require disclosure of the representation of women on boards of directors and in senior management, which in turn is expected to encourage greater representation.<sup>8</sup>

On a more grassroots level, there are a number of groups such as Women in Toronto Politics<sup>9</sup> and the Toronto Women's City Alliance,<sup>10</sup> to name a few, that are working towards increasing the participation of women in political and public life.

Other institutions, like the Law Society of Upper Canada, have initiatives underway examining themselves and their profession on equity issues including underrepresentation, disadvantage and discrimination experienced by racialized members.<sup>11</sup>

The OHRC continues to be involved in similar institutional change initiatives. For example, one of our partnership projects is helping to make it easier for Aboriginal Peoples' perspectives to come forward in all aspects of correctional services' work.<sup>12</sup> We continue to work with the Ontario Public Service centrally as well as a number of policing services across the province examining issues including underrepresentation of historically disadvantaged groups.

This is just a sampling of issues, ideas and initiatives dealing with equitable participation in political and public affairs happening in Ontario Canada. I hope this information is helpful to your study and we look forward to reading your report.

Yours truly,



Barbara Hall, B.A, LL.B, Ph.D (hon.)  
Chief Commissioner

Copy David Langtry  
Acting Chief Commissioner, Canadian Human Rights Commission  
President, Canadian Association of Statutory Human Rights Agencies

Hon. Madeleine Meilleur  
Attorney General of Ontario

<sup>1</sup> [www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/PoliticalParticipation/NHRIs/OntarioHRC.doc](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/PoliticalParticipation/NHRIs/OntarioHRC.doc)

<sup>2</sup> [www.ohrc.on.ca/en/re-ohchr-thematic-study-participation-persons-disabilities-political-and-public-life](http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/re-ohchr-thematic-study-participation-persons-disabilities-political-and-public-life)

<sup>3</sup> [www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news\\_centre/alternative-voting-methods-%E2%80%93-ohrc-letter-elections-ontario](http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/alternative-voting-methods-%E2%80%93-ohrc-letter-elections-ontario)

<sup>4</sup> [www.ohrc.on.ca/en/re-2014-municipal-election-internet-voting-service-persons-disabilities](http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/re-2014-municipal-election-internet-voting-service-persons-disabilities)

<sup>5</sup> <http://unesco.ca/home-accueil/ccmard-ccmrd>

<sup>6</sup> [www.citywindsor.ca/cityhall/committeesofcouncil/advisory-committees/diversity-committee/Pages/Diversity-Committee.aspx](http://www.citywindsor.ca/cityhall/committeesofcouncil/advisory-committees/diversity-committee/Pages/Diversity-Committee.aspx)

<sup>7</sup> [www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws\\_statutes\\_05a11\\_e.htm](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_05a11_e.htm)

<sup>8</sup> [www.osc.gov.on.ca/en/NewsEvents\\_nr\\_20141015\\_csa-regarding-disclosure-of-women.htm](http://www.osc.gov.on.ca/en/NewsEvents_nr_20141015_csa-regarding-disclosure-of-women.htm)

<sup>9</sup> [www.witopoli.com](http://www.witopoli.com)

<sup>10</sup> [www.twca.ca](http://www.twca.ca)

<sup>11</sup> [www.lsuc.on.ca/racialized-licensees/](http://www.lsuc.on.ca/racialized-licensees/)

<sup>12</sup> [www.ohrc.on.ca/en/annual-report-2013-2014-ohrc-today/organizational-change-page](http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/annual-report-2013-2014-ohrc-today/organizational-change-page)