



ONTARIO NONPROFIT NETWORK

# Women's Voices on Working in Ontario's Francophone Nonprofits



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Methodology	2
<b>Women’s Experiences</b>	3
Feeling of usefulness and ability to contribute to society	3
Sense of Belonging to the Francophone Community	3
Limited in their actions by policies and mandates	4
Heavy leadership responsibilities for women	4
Increased workload because they are women	4
Varied benefits across organizations	5
Little job mobility across sectors and little opportunity for advancement	6
Lack of financial security	6
Discrimination – sexism and racism	7
The “pandemic” factor	7
<b>Perception of the Sector</b>	9
Problems caused by the funding structure of Francophone nonprofits	9
Devaluation of the sector and sub-sectors - link to feminization	10
The Francophone factor	11
The place of racialized women and men	11
<b>Needs in terms of Decent Work</b>	12
What workers need	12
What organizations need	13

## INTRODUCTION

In partnership with Association des francophones du Nord-Ouest de l'Ontario (AFNOO) and Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario (L'AFO), the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) is expanding the decent work for women movement with Francophone non-profits.

To date, ONN's decent work for women movement has largely been focused on Anglophone nonprofits and their context. While Francophone workers and nonprofits have somewhat been part of ONN's various decent work for women movement building efforts, key communication messages, reports, and resources are not French-language adapted (both translated and adapted for Francophone context). For this reason, many Francophone nonprofits and their workers may not be able to engage with the movement. ONN has also identified a gap in Francophone voices within its network.

The purpose of expanding the decent work for women movement with Francophone nonprofits is to French-language adapt decent work for women communications, reports, and resources in the short-term. In doing so, the decent work for women movement will grow to include voices that are more diverse. In the long-term, ONN hopes to build relationships with Francophone nonprofits and workers to engage in coordinated policy advocacy for the sector. When nonprofits organize and align their policy and advocacy work, the sector has more clout and is better able to achieve its goals.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to learn about women's experiences in the Francophone nonprofit sector as well as to test, confirm, and adapt existing key messages, materials, and resources, ONN and its partners organized consultations with women working in Francophone nonprofits. AFNOO and L'AFO helped identify participants from across the province for two distinct focus groups: one representing senior leaders and middle management and one representing frontline workers.

Efforts were made to ensure that the groups were as diverse as possible in terms of race, ethnicity, subsectors of the economy, geographical region and types of positions (for frontline workers). The following is a breakdown of participants by region and by subsector :

REGION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Northwest	7 (2 organizations with a provincial mandate)
Ottawa	12 (6 organizations with a provincial mandate)
South	3
North and Northeast	5

SUBSECTOR	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Economic Development	4
Community Development	3
Political representation	3
Immigration and Integration of new immigrants	4
Health and mental health	4
Violence against women	2
Parenting and early childhood	3
Youth	2
Women	2
Social entrepreneurship and the cooperative sector	1
Education	2
Employability	3
Arts/Culture	2

Two rounds of consultations were held with each focus group, in the form of 2-hour group videoconference meetings : a first round on decent work discussions and a second round on the adaptation of certain existing tools. The meetings were facilitated by external consultants based on a facilitation guide with a flexible series of questions meant to stimulate discussion. Indeed, facilitation was meant to be agile in order to follow the women in the relating of their experiences, which are at the heart of the consultation process.

It is important to note that the participants represent a relatively small group of women (27 in total). This report does not claim to be a statistically significant study, but rather a faithful portrait of the key experiences brought forward by the participants. It strives to remain faithful to their exact words, hence the extensive use of quotes from the women themselves.

## WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

### Feeling of usefulness and ability to contribute to society

The participants are unanimous: it is the feeling of being useful and contributing to society that led them to work in the sector. Some started as volunteers, others worked in the sector during their studies. They feel more useful here than in the private sector. They also find self-fulfillment and the sense of working towards a mission. For one of the leaders, her passion to help others develop their full potential led her to the nonprofit sector.

Participants also found that working in nonprofits provided a lot of room for creativity. Working with passion is essential for them. If their perspective is not always valued in the private sector, it is much more valued in nonprofits.

***"You start out by defending a cause, and people, then you end up getting attached and staying."***

***"I like the proximity of the organizational chart: I can talk with senior management, reviewing important documents is not a 10-tiered process, and creativity and proactivity are encouraged."***

### Sense of Belonging to the Francophone Community

Attachment to the Francophone community plays a big role in the participants' connection to their jobs. Working for a Francophone nonprofit allows them to work in their native tongue, to gain a broader vision of the Francophone community and to work towards improving the quality of services to Francophones, a priority for them.

***“As a feminist and francophone, getting involved in this service aligned with my values.”***

***“A positive aspect of Francophone nonprofits is the possibility of working in French! This advantage is rare in a linguistic minority context and is an asset of our work.”***

### Limited in their actions by policies and mandates

Participants, particularly frontline workers, are frustrated by what they describe as “slow action.” Proactive by nature, they sometimes feel bound and muzzled by government policies or the limiting mandates of their organizations. They do not always see the impact of their actions, which is frustrating. Limitations are perceived as burdensome and an impediment to innovation.

***“Different opportunities come up but we have to check with the agency, which will say no since they don't fall within our mandate.”***

***“Indeed, limitations and slowness take their toll on organizations!”***

***“Sometimes you start a project and a year later you haven't made any progress.”***

### Heavy leadership responsibilities for women

Due to a small recruitment pool, Francophone nonprofit leaders sometimes find themselves catapulted into their role or pushed there by their colleagues. Given the small size of the Francophone community, these same colleagues are sometimes also their friends, which complicates relationships. Women leaders face many challenges in their leadership position and feel great pressure to perform. They carry a heavy sense of responsibility to the organization, which forces some to stay in their jobs when they would have liked to leave, as well as having to deal with staff and volunteer turnover (including on the Board). These women sometimes feel overqualified for the jobs they are offered. Their identity as women also plays a role in the demands, reactions and political positions they take, whether on a personal or professional/organizational level. The workload, the cumulation of positions and the psychological challenge of the task can lead to burnout.

***“There are disproportionate expectations for women compared to men. We are not allowed to make mistakes.”***

***“What will happen to the center if I leave?”***

***“Since I was the only person capable of doing this job, I had to continue. It is also complicated during maternity leave if a qualified person can't be found to replace me.”***

## Increased workload because they are women

For both managers and frontline employees, the workload is so heavy that it cannot always be completed. This leads to burnout and a sense of powerlessness and injustice. Participants feel that the workload constraint weighs much more heavily on women than on men in the nonprofit sector.

Women feel a lot of guilt when they take a sick day, even if they are dealing with mental health issues, exhaustion or migraines. The 'overtime culture', commonplace in the nonprofit sector, is very discouraging for young women who are ready to start a family or who need to manage one.

In addition, positions in the sector tend to be gendered - for example, women will manage communications, while men will manage fundraising. Some additional tasks, such as managing administration and human relations, fall to women even though these tasks are not in their job description.

***"I had to continue working during my maternity leave. My passion was telling me it was okay, but my 'mommy heart' was breaking."***

***"Women are often more committed, and end up with an extra workload because they don't always know how to say 'no'."***

***"I wonder if I would be able to manage my job with children. I ask myself 'would I be able to do this on maternity leave?'"***

***"We call each other 'folunteers'\* because we work so much, and often for nothing."***

\*A play on words between "folly" and "volunteers". In French the word is of feminine gender, applying to women in particular.

## Varied benefits across organizations

For the majority of participants, despite the heavy workload, working in the nonprofit sector brings well-being, joy and the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives in a flexible, family-friendly environment. Salaries are considered lower than in other sectors of the economy, but flexible working conditions (time off, work-life balance) and annual bonuses can help.

However, the provision of tangible benefits - such as pension funds and maternity leave top-ups - varies greatly from one organization to another. Smaller organizations often find it more difficult to afford group insurance because premiums are higher for a staff

made up mostly of women with families. Some organizations offer benefits through association affiliation; others do not offer benefits at all.

Leaders noted that the absence of benefits (or the presence of minimal benefits) in the sector is a major difference from the municipal/government environment, for example, and makes it more difficult to recruit and retain staff, particularly women. As women are increasingly the primary breadwinners in the home, the pressure is high for them to keep a job that pays well and provides insurance.

***“I get paid well, but I don't have insurance or benefits. When you're a mom of four, it's hard.”***

***“I work 35 hours/week and have no benefits. With a family of three girls to manage, it's exhausting.”***

***“My Board recognizes potential burnout, and that's reassuring. It gives a person more confidence in a leadership position. The Board also decided to allocate a budget for professional development (a little small, but doable).”***

### **Little job mobility across sectors and little opportunity for advancement**

Participants found it difficult to make the transition from the nonprofit sector to the private sector, especially for women, more subject to critical comments about their work. The packages offered are less attractive than if they were men, or even women from the private sector. This creates barriers to their career path.

Within the nonprofit sector itself, there are few, if any, opportunities for advancement. Often energy is spent on justifying the very existence of a position, so asking for a promotion is secondary. The participants do not have a career plan and feel frustrated by this. Frontline workers also describe a rotation of management personnel, meaning that positions are always held by the same people, which prevents their own progress.

As for the women leaders, they feel they have little horizontal job mobility due to the limited number of Francophone organizations, particularly in remote regions.

However, participants recognize the importance of seeking training that allows them to improve their skills even if they remain in the same position. With recognized training and credentials, organizations can then seek additional funding for their positions.



***“Employers in the nonprofit sector will always play on emotion to say no to their female employees' promotions and requests for pay raises, which doesn't work with men.”***

***“When we want to move up, the same cliques will apply and get the jobs.”***

***“The lack of advancement would make me leave – after my contract I think I'll leave.”***

***“I will use the training that is offered to me by my organization even if I think I will leave somewhere else. I will have developed my skills and expertise at their expense.”***

### Lack of financial security

Given the low salaries and/or job insecurity due to the lack of stable funding, women working in Francophone nonprofits do not feel financially secure. Some women who have dedicated their lives to the nonprofit sector find themselves in a vulnerable situation when they retire because they do not have a pension fund, for example. One participant, early in her career, had to take an additional part-time job to ensure financial stability.

The women interviewed felt undercompensated for their work because of the perception that they had no choice in taking these jobs in the nonprofit sector - especially women with families, who needed flexibility.

***“I made the choice to be the provider in my family, but it is a bit of a burden in the nonprofit sector.”***

***“As a woman, you are never financially secure. You find yourself in unstable situations because the sector depends on cheap labor, which means women and immigrants.”***

***“In trying to help others, you become a victim of financial abuse.”***

### Discrimination – sexism and racism

The participants' experiences of sexism remain vague and are related to the difficulty of accessing certain positions and the feminization of certain tasks (that is, the attribution of certain tasks to women rather than men because they require what are considered 'feminine' skills). For some organizations, however, women hold management positions.

In terms of racial discrimination, racialized women were often confronted with discriminatory comments, frequently motivated by ignorance, which does not reduce their negative impact. Participants also decried a certain amount of opportunism when racialized women were singled out to promote the organization's image. Instances of

religious discrimination were also shared. Religiously or ethnically diverse women feel that they have more to prove in their jobs than white women.

***“With my name, people think I'm Black. They look reassured when they see I am not Black.”***

***“They say, 'But you don't wear a hijab? So you're not really a Muslim?’”***

***“Most of the time, people think that those who come from Black Africa cannot speak or write in French. That does not fall under the umbrella of ignorance. Today, we have the resources to learn, there are no more excuses.”***

***“I think I was hired because I am Black and the position was immigration related.”***

### The “pandemic” factor

Participants felt that the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic (lockdown and distance working) had a greater impact on women than on men. They had to take care of children while maintaining their regular workloads. Some are single parents, which exacerbates the problem. Women leaders have had the added task of managing teams also facing personal challenges.

***“During the pandemic, women - and racialized women - played a central role. Maintenance workers, for example, were on the front lines but did not receive pay raises while doctors and nurses did. Women's work needs to be valued more.”***

***“During the first lockdown, I found myself working with a two and a half year old child. I was no longer working 37 hours a week, but 50 hours a week! My child was in front of the TV all day for the first time. These are not moments I can make up for.”***

***“Working from home added to inequities. My things were well balanced before, but now I find myself managing more household tasks.”***

***“The mental health of female employees is valued, but not that of managers. During the pandemic, it was hard to manage all of that.”***

## PERCEPTION OF THE SECTOR

### Problems caused by the funding structure of Francophone nonprofits

Both leaders and frontline workers recognize that the very structure of the sector's funding - project-based, annual - is at the root of many of the sector's problems. They

never know if projects or funding will be renewed. Some of the benefits that organizations might qualify for are denied because of the funding model.

This problem is seen as even greater in Francophone nonprofits. The funding of organizations working in minority language communities is very dependent on 'fads' and on political decisions, which leads to a lack of stability in core or project funding. This also creates some competition between organizations in the sector.

***“When the government gives money, it does not ask itself about the future. It creates precarity in the medium and long term, because we don't know what will happen to us in 5 years when our projects end.”***

***“We can also compare our constant need for grants to prostitution; we put aside our values and mandates to receive money.”***

***“We're always jumping on other organizations' mandates to get funding - it's really sad because it's an unhealthy competition.”***

***“Some organizations have been around for years, but overnight they could become obsolete in someone's eyes. Will our grants be renewed? You never know.”***

### Devaluation of the sector and sub-sectors because it is women-majority<sup>1</sup>

Participants feel that nonprofit work is less valued, which translates into less competitive wages, among other things. They see the wage disparity as representative of the gender dominance between the private sector (where men often hold management positions) and the nonprofit sector (predominantly held by women).

Participants also see funding disparities within nonprofit sectors and a devaluation of 'women's' sub-sectors in contrast to 'men's' sub-sectors. Nonprofits dedicated to health or immigration tend to have more men on staff and larger budgets. In comparison, the cultural (Arts) sector provides jobs that are often very precarious, part-time, and employ a majority of women. The violence against women sector in particular suffers from a low status, which penalizes the sector by making it less competitive to fill specific positions.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Feminization' refers to the strong connections that have been proven between the high percentage of women working in the nonprofit sector, particularly Black and immigrant women, who hold jobs concentrated in frontline or entry-level positions, and how the sector is undervalued, underfunded, and underestimated. Because the sector's work is often seen as 'gendered' such as care work, it is perceived through negative gender stereotypes such as dependent, emotional, unintelligent, and unskilled, and thus inferior to traditionally masculine work. This biased view has harmful consequences for the sector, its women workers, and the communities it serves.

The perception of the sector directly influences the issue of recruitment. Participants feel that there is a need to find a way to make nonprofits more attractive to young people (benefits, 35-hour work weeks, attractive salaries), especially to recruit young women.

***"Women are expected to volunteer because, in our society, a woman is expected to be 'caring'."***

***"The grassroots sector is female, but the municipal and economic development ones are male. It's hard to fit in, but positions that require emotional intelligence are going to be held by women longer."***

***"The pay scale is not competitive, which explains the turnover of employees; no one stays more than 2-3 years."***

***"Salaries in NPOs are all low, so I don't feel like I have a different salary than a male colleague."***

### The Francophone factor

Participants believe that Anglophone agencies have better benefits and working conditions because of their different funding structures. Participants deal with the public perception that French-language services are of lower quality, and the under-funding of French-language services reinforces this misconception. Participants also said that it is more difficult to be taken seriously if you do not speak English in Ontario, even if you work for a Francophone nonprofit.

French language services are more expensive and the constant justification of these expenses is exhausting for leaders. It is essential, for example, for abused Francophone women to be served in their preferred language. Being welcomed in a French-language environment breaks their isolation and allows them to be in an environment they know. However, the provincial government, the community and Anglophone partners do not easily recognize this need. French-language services are seen as inferior and often underfunded and marginalized.

The heightened competition between Francophone organizations is frustrating for participants, especially when they all want to work for the well-being of the community. This is partly due to the lack of resources from funders.

The activism aspect (for the defence of language and culture) is also important in Francophone nonprofits. This is sometimes complex to assimilate for certain staff who are not familiar with the 'Franco-Ontarian struggle', especially those from immigrant backgrounds.

***"In the nonprofit sector, there is a disparity between Anglophone and Francophone services and organizations."***

***"Because we are in a minority situation, there is a real pressure among Francophones to perform while Anglophones have the freedom to make mistakes because they are dominant."***

***"Anglophones are more open to innovation, while Francophones focus only on the tasks required. We could do more but we are limited, which is typically Francophone."***

### The place of racialized women and men

Racialized participants found that the nonprofit sector is much more open to migrant women than the private and public sectors, perhaps because of the organizations' need for workers. However, their advancement within these organizations remains difficult. Racialized men in particular rarely obtain permanent positions and are kept in temporary positions. As for leadership positions, they are not accessible to racialized women and men. Participants spoke of a glass ceiling that needs to be shattered to give everyone the opportunity to prove their abilities. Racialized women leaders feel they bear this responsibility even more intensely. Since racialized people are not promoted to the positions they deserve, they are overqualified for the positions given and offered.

Participants also perceive a difference between men and racialized women: for a similar job, a racialized woman will have to prove herself and dedicate herself to her job, which is not necessarily expected of men - racialized or not.

***"CEOs and presidents are always white women. The relationship with the men is different - they have temporary contracts like I do, but they know the salary is negotiable from the start. "***

***"It makes you wonder if immigrant women choose the nonprofit sector, or if the nonprofit sector chooses immigrant women."***

***"When you're an immigrant, you have different perspectives and you want to make a difference. But it's not valued."***

***“Coming from Europe, people often say that my point of view is not legitimate because it is not from here. Immigrants are overeducated, overqualified, but we are not recognized because of the ‘always the same people’\*.”***

***“In general, Black men are going to get temporary positions in organizations. I have yet to meet Black men with permanent positions.”***

\* An expression used a few times by the frontline workers to name what they perceived as ‘always the same people’ in leadership positions.

## NEEDS IN TERMS OF DECENT WORK

### What workers need

When asked about their priority needs in terms of decent work, participants identified several complementary aspects. Some of these relate to concrete conditions such as wage levels equivalent to those of men, social benefits such as RRSPs, and better work-family balance including paid sick leave, vacation time, and flexible work schedules. Since women are often responsible for caring for children and sick family members, these conditions are required to ensure that women have every opportunity to succeed in their jobs. They need flexibility in working hours, but also access to sufficient pension funds to take into account women's increased life expectancy and accrued expenses to meet their families' needs. Decent health benefits are also needed : some workers cannot access health care on a regular basis because workplace benefits are not adequate - especially when wages are low.

Salary remains key for many, especially for frontline workers, as having an income to feed one's family without having to work multiple jobs is crucial. A regular salary, paid on time, is also essential, sometimes threatened by the delay in funding or internal accounting problems. Pay equity between colleagues and between organizations is another important consideration.

Participants are also looking for a safe, healthy and fulfilling work environment. The employee must feel safe in her work, and this work must be equitable between male and female colleagues. Women should be free from harassment and should not have to prove that they are up to the task. Participants seek respect and appreciation for their work.

Frontline workers sometimes see a huge discrepancy between what managers report to the Board in terms of working conditions, and the reality on the ground. They would like to see a more direct link between personnel and the Board to discuss working conditions.

Decent work would be advanced by a greater awareness by women of their rights. Internal policies of organizations, when they are not obsolete, should be better communicated and explained. This would allow all women to defend their rights and advance their working conditions.

***“We have a passion for helping people, but we can't make a living from it today. A good salary is a necessity to live, to support your family.”***

***“There's no need to say 'first woman to do this job' because I think that underestimates women and their abilities. We don't talk about the second and third women.”***

***“Minimum wage is survival. It is not decent.”***

***“Our passion drives us to join this sector, but we also need our efforts to be respected in our workplace. They can give us all the pay they want, but without respect for the human, the worker, we have nothing.”***

***“There is also the issue of moral and sexual harassment at work as well, which is too often trivialized.”***

### What organizations need

In order to improve the working conditions of women, participants believe that organizations need support, especially small organizations that could benefit from the weight, experience and tools of larger organizations. Networking to share practices and tools would be beneficial to all.

Change could be facilitated by building momentum in the sector. Improved working conditions in many organizations would create a ripple effect and make it easier to justify requests and present evidence to boards of directors.

Greater transparency would help to address pay gaps within organizations. Many organizations do not indicate salary ranges in their job postings, which is disadvantageous to women, who are less likely to negotiate salary and benefits. A sectoral analysis on the issue of salaries within Francophone nonprofits could be done or a white paper could be written.

Frontline workers in particular stressed the importance of having transparent mechanisms in place to report incidents or abuses when they feel the organization will not listen. Participants raised the idea of an independent entity, such as an ombudsman of sorts, to allow women to speak out without prejudice and fear of punishment.

It is clear to participants that the core need of organizations is money, particularly annualized funding rather than project-based funding. The sector needs stable funding and a certain change of culture. Leaders also name their responsibility in terms of maximizing their demands when asking for subsidies, in order to ensure salaries and benefits are well covered.

Participants also named as their organizational needs:

- Time to think about innovation;
- A skilled and qualified Francophone workforce;
- A more valued Francophone immigration;
- Support from the leadership (general management) and the board of directors.

***“When I moved to Canada 30 years ago, my first salary was ridiculous, especially when you live in Montreal. I have seen sexism and harassment in the hotel industry, which is unfortunately prone to that. However, the situation has really improved in 20 years, so in another 20 years it will be even better. We must not give up.”***

***“It’s also up to us to convince and educate our Boards on the standards of the nonprofit community.”***

***“I have been working in the nonprofit sector for 23 years and I’m tired. It’s exhausting to be a member of so many committees and networks. Sometimes you realize how little progress has been made and you wonder what is going on.”***

***“I strongly believe in open source, in sharing, so we need to share our resources and information rather than keep them to ourselves. We are also lagging behind in terms of technology, so we have to share what we have.”***

***“Any progress will benefit the Francophone community, so we all stand to gain.”***



## About ONN

ONN is the independent nonprofit network for the 58,000 nonprofits in Ontario, focused on policy, advocacy and services to strengthen Ontario's nonprofit sector as a key pillar of our society and economy.

ONN works to create a public policy environment that allows nonprofits to thrive. We engage our network of diverse nonprofit organizations across Ontario to work together on issues affecting the sector and channel the voices of our network to governments, funders, and other stakeholders.

## Vision

A strong and resilient nonprofit sector. Thriving communities. A dynamic province.

## Mission

To engage, advocate, and lead with – and for – nonprofit and charitable organizations that work for the public benefit in Ontario

## Thank you

We are thankful for the people who made this report possible, including:

- Our Partners [l'Association des francophones du Nord-Ouest de l'Ontario \(AFNOO\)](#) and [l'Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario \(L'AFO\)](#)
- PGF Consultants
- All the francophone women who shared their stories of working in Francophone nonprofits with us

The Decent Work project has been funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE)



Women and Gender  
Equality Canada

Femmes et Égalité  
des genres Canada

Canada

***This work would not be possible without everyone's support and enthusiasm.***