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The Burden of Inclusion: The Case of Saron Gebresellassi and Women of Colour in Municipal Politics

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**The Burden of Inclusion: The Case of Saron Gebresellassi and Women of Colour in
Municipal Politics**

“Political parties cherry-pick candidates and the gates get locked. But then along comes a locksmith like me and disrupts things.”¹

Nowadays, diversity in politics is a popular topic. Substantial media and academic attention have been given to the concept of diversity, namely the participation of migrants and minorities within Canadian politics. Diversity has been championed as a tool to promote greater diversity of thought and experience, to allow for the construction of a more meaningful citizenship, to empower marginalized groups, as well as to respond effectively to emerging and persistent social issues. Most importantly, greater diversity has been hailed as the harbinger of progressive law, rendering it a critical issue of our time.

Considerable efforts have been made on the federal and provincial level specifically to address diversity. For example, in 2015, the federal Cabinet of Ministers achieved gender parity for the first time under the Trudeau administration.² Despite such achievements, the importance of inclusion on the local level has been neglected.³ In fact, local elections, even in the most diverse cities of Canada, still produce extremely homogenous councils. Most councils in Canadian municipalities are predominantly white and mostly male. Women, racialized

¹ Steven Paikin, “Where are they now? Checking in with 2018 Toronto mayoral candidate Saron Gebresellassi”, *TVOntario* (20 November 2018), online: <<https://www.tvo.org/article/where-are-they-now-checking-in-with-2018-toronto-mayoral-candidate-saron-gebresellassi>>.

² UNESCO, “The Role of Municipalities in Advancing Women’s Equity in Canada”, by Megan Brooks (Ottawa: November 2018) at 16.

³ Karen Bird, “The Local Diversity Gap: Assessing the Scope and Causes of Visible Minority Under-Representation in Municipal Elections,” online (2011) Pathways to Prosperity: Canada at 2 <<http://p2pcanada.ca/library/the-local-diversity-gap-assessing-the-scope-and-causes-of-visible-minority-under-representation-in-municipal-elections/>>.

minorities, Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ individuals continue to be underrepresented.⁴

While there is some discussion about the representation of women in municipal government, there is even less dialogue about the inclusion of women of colour in local arenas. Indigenous, racialized, and immigrant women are underrepresented at all levels of the government.⁵ In Canada, there are few projects and initiatives being conducted at the municipal level to encourage the participation of women of colour. Two such projects are the City for All Women Initiative (CAWI) and the Diverse Voices Toolkit. CAWI is an initiative which brings together five municipalities to develop a guide for advancing equity and inclusion with an intersectional lens.⁶ Similarly, Diverse Voices is a resource issued by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) with tools, practices, and initiatives to help increase the representation of women of diverse backgrounds in municipalities.⁷ Despite these projects, little else is being done on the issue of representation for women of colour at the local level.

As a result of the minimal efforts specifically targeting the inclusion of women of colour in local government, much of the burden of such work falls onto the shoulders of women of colour themselves. In other words, the system of municipal governance places upon women of colour the burden of performing the necessary labour to be included and represented within the local political sphere. Even after performing the required political labour, women of colour are still denied access to such spaces as a result of persistent and constant barriers. By using the

⁴ Erin Tolley, "Lack of council diversity puts municipalities at risk", *Policy Options Politiques* (30 October 2018), online: <<https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/october-2018/lack-of-council-diversity-puts-municipalities-at-risk/>>.

⁵ Federation of Canadian Municipalities, *Diverse Voices: Tools and Practices to Support all Women* at 5.

⁶ *Supra* note 2 at 19.

⁷ *Supra* note 5.

frameworks of anti-racist feminism and intersectionality, this paper will analyze the barriers faced by women of colour in the duration of their municipal campaign. Specifically, this paper will analyze the 2018 campaign of Toronto mayoral candidate, Saron Gebresellassi, and provide an analysis of her struggles with the following barriers: lack of public and media recognition, lack of financial resources, and the refusal to recognize her leadership. In so doing, this paper will demonstrate that women of colour continue to face barriers in the local political arena as a result of their identity yet are expected to futilely assert themselves in such spaces.

Anti-Racist Feminism

“I think it’s important that there’s a perspective that’s more authentic”⁸

In *Anti-Racist Feminism: Critical Race and Gender Studies*, Agnes Calliste and George J. Sefa Dei elaborate on the concept of anti-racist feminism. Of the subject, they write, “The individual is a multiple self with no single dimensional identity.”⁹ In understanding the intersection of racial and gender oppression, anti-racism feminism proposes that socio-political systems can operate within multiple oppressions at the same time and can retain multiple agendas at the center. By offering an analysis of the intersection of interlocking oppressions, anti-racist feminism hopes to address the politics of social transformation in a meaningful way.¹⁰

⁸ Samantha Edwards, “Toronto Election 2018: Mayoral hopeful Saron Gebresellassi is the antidote to the status quo”, *Now Toronto* (17 October 2018), online: <<https://nowtoronto.com/news/toronto-election-saron-gebresellassi-mayor/>>.

⁹ Agnes Calliste and George J Sefa Dei, “Introduction” in Agnes Calliste and George J Sefa Dei eds, *Anti-Racist Feminism: Critical Race and Gender Studies* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2000) at 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid* at 12.

Anti-racist feminism identifies race and gender as social identities which frame the construction of social difference. By identifying this social difference, anti-racist feminist aims to analyze the power relations informing social dynamics which either encourage or discourage societal participation.¹¹ As such, a dialogue is located within the reality of women's lives that exists at the intersection of race, gender, and class. Therefore, anti-racist feminism stresses the importance of critically reading the multiple voices of women of colour.¹²

Similarly situated to anti-racist feminism is critical race feminism (CRF), which articulates many of the same arguments as the latter. Critical race feminism speaks to the active efforts of oppressive systems such as the patriarchy and white supremacy to subordinate women of colour.¹³ It claims that feminism is white-themed while civil rights are geared toward men of colour. Critical race feminism declares that the experiences of women of colour are unique and do not simply amount to a combination of the worlds of men of colour and white women.¹⁴

In her collection "Critical Race Feminism," Adrien Katherine Wing posits that women of colour are at the bottom of society.¹⁵ She asserts that women of colour have failed to be successfully integrated into the mainstream of economic, political, social, or educational life. This is primarily because society continues to prioritize the concerns of heterosexual white males who are the standard of "Normality, Neutrality, Objectivity, and the Truth."¹⁶ Thus, critical race feminism serves as a tool to emphasize the legal concerns of women of colour.

¹¹ *Ibid* at 11

¹² *Ibid* at 15.

¹³ Adrien Katherine Wing, "Introduction" in Adrien Katherine Wing ed, *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2003) at xiv.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ *Supra* note 13 at 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

Both these frameworks borrow heavily from Kimberle Crenshaw's work on intersectionality. Her theory of intersectionality challenged the dominant mode of how social power is organized. She argues that feminist and racial movements ignore or conflate intragroup differences. In other words, feminist efforts and anti-racial efforts detail issues and experiences which they assume are mutually exclusive.¹⁷ Instead, Crenshaw proposes that racism and sexism intersect in the lives of real people, namely women of colour, in discernable and distinguished ways. As such, essentializing the experiences of people of colour or women marginalizes the identities of women of colour.¹⁸

Anti-racist feminism, CRF, and intersectionality all speak to the uniqueness of the experiences of being and the oppression suffered by women of colour. All three identify a shortcoming on the part of feminist and anti-racist movements alone to tackle issues and problems facing women of colour. They also recognize that gender and race intersect in the lives of women of colour in a real way which cannot be described as a culmination of racism and sexism. Finally, they acknowledge that women of colour continue to be marginalized despite feminist and anti-racist movements.

¹⁷ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour" (1991) 43:6 *Stanford L Rev* 1241 at 1242.

¹⁸ *Ibid* at 1289.

Women of Colour in Municipal Government

“When I win, I will bring something very unconventional to the table.”¹⁹

The inclusion of women from diverse backgrounds is becoming increasingly important as municipal government is becoming increasingly relevant to law and society. Indeed, municipal politics have been accused of being “too white and too male.”²⁰ White males continue to be put up as candidates while women and ethnic minorities are often ignored in politics. Thus, municipal politics and, by extension, municipal law largely remain the domain of white men.

An intersectional approach to inclusion serves to inform and strengthen the governing system in various ways.²¹ Representations of women from minority backgrounds ensure that important voices and opinions are not excluded from the electoral process. Such representation could also change the culture of politics in a positive way, add diverse perspectives to the decision-making process, shed light on legal issues experienced by diverse communities, strengthen the progressive aspects of current laws, and provide more role models to encourage further diversity. Moreover, merely the visibility of a diversity of women in local politics would be an important symbolic lesson for future generations.²²

Yet, women of colour face various barriers when it comes to securing positions in the municipal government. In 2018, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) surveyed 250 women across all diversities to assess barriers faced by women using an intersectional analysis.

¹⁹ *Supra* note 1.

²⁰ CBC Radio, “Are Canadian municipal politics too white and too male?”, *CBC* (5 November 2014), online: <<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/the180/diversity-in-civic-politics-voice-overs-by-candidates-corporate-sponsorship-in-schools-1.2868794/are-canadian-municipal-politics-too-white-and-too-male-1.2868785>>.

²¹ *Supra* note 5 at 17.

²² House of Commons, Standing Committee on the Status of Women, *Elect Her: A Roadmap for Improving the Representation of Women in Canadian Politics* (April 2019) at 42 (Chair: Karen Vecchio).

The barriers included a lack of information, leadership training, practical support, resources, tools, working relationships, inclusive policies, and practices. Marginalized women were further faced with systemic discrimination as a barrier to participation, such as racism, xenophobia, bigotry, and more. Further barriers included lack of women’s involvement in the municipal consultation processes, intimidation against women of colour running for local government, as well as the perception of municipal politics functioning as an “old boys club.”²³

It is also important to note that the collection of intersectional data on the inclusion of women of colour in government is still a developing field. In fact, Recommendation number eleven of “Elect Her: A Roadmap for Improving the Representation of Women in Canadian Politics” by the Standing Committee on the Status of Women demands that the government of Canada make changes to allow the collection of intersectional data on candidates in nomination races, including data on gender identity. Specifically, the Standing Committee on the Status of Women heard evidence on the proposition that section 476.1(1) of the *Canada Elections Act*²⁴ be amended to require the collection of intersectional data from all participants, including gender identity, race, indigeneity, and more.²⁵ Therefore, the true nature and extent of the barriers faced by women of colour when it comes to inclusion in local government remain evasive.

²³ *Supra* note 5 at 11.

²⁴ *Canada Elections Act*, SC 2000, c 9, s 476.1(1).

²⁵ *Ibid* note 22 at 56.

The Case of Saron Gebresellassi

“I’m a fighter, so I don’t fold easily.”²⁶

On the 22nd of October in 2018, the city of Toronto held their most recent municipal elections in which the incumbent mayor John Tory was reelected as mayor. This marked an end to a 10-month campaign trail for him in which he defeated runner-up Jennifer Keesmaat and 33 other candidates.²⁷ Amongst those 33 candidates was Saron Gebresellassi, who placed fourth in the race.

Gebresellassi came to Canada with her parents in 1989 as a refugee from Eritrea after the Eritrean civil war. She grew up in the northwest end of Toronto in community housing. After attaining a Bachelor of Arts and a Master’s Degree, she studied law at the University of Ottawa and went on to establish her own human rights firm based in Toronto.²⁸ She has since worked on a few high-profile civil rights, police brutality, and human rights cases.²⁹ Her work includes a one million dollar lawsuit against Starbucks Canada for assault as well as a lawsuit against the Toronto Police Services Board for illegally raiding a black woman’s home. She has also served as legal counsel to Black Lives Matter Toronto and is generally regarded as a champion for social justice in Toronto.³⁰ She is a staunch activist and community leader who believes in equality, human rights, women’s rights, anti-racial, organizing and more.

²⁶ Daniel Fish, “How Saron Gebresellassi practices law and activism at the same time”, *Precedent Magazine* (30 May 2017), online: <<https://lawandstyle.ca/law/best-practices-how-saron-gebresellassi-practises-law-and-activism-at-the-same-time/>>.

²⁷ “Toronto election results 2018”, *Global News*, online: <<https://globalnews.ca/news/4582296/toronto-election-results-2018/>>.

²⁸ *Supra* note 26.

²⁹ *Supra* note 1.

³⁰ *Supra* note 8.

In 2018, Gebresellassi declared her bid to run for mayor of the city of Toronto. She ran on a progressive platform with six key tenants (“the six for the 6ix”), which included the right to housing, right to fair allocation of city resources, right to employment outside the downtown core, right to mental health and accessibility, right to transit, and right to diversity in city politics and hiring.³¹ Her campaign focused on affordable housing, free public transit, less policing, and more jobs for the youth – arguably the most progressive platform in the mayoral race.³² She fiercely criticized both John Tory and Jennifer Keesmaat, the two frontrunners of the elections. Gebresellassi particularly highlighted that both candidates failed to recognize the urgency of the housing crisis in Toronto. Instead, Gebresellassi promised 20, 000 new affordable units over four years and aimed have inclusionary zoning provisions that would require developers to include 30% affordable units per new building.³³

On the issue of policing, Gebresellassi criticized Tory’s decision to add 200 more police officers to combat gun violence during the campaign. She instead proposed a preventative approach which would create 1000 new jobs as well as introduce social programming for the youth. Gebresellassi claimed that this would address the root cause of gun violence amongst³⁴ the youth, which is poverty.³⁵ Moreover, Gebresellassi’s platform included a promise of free

³¹ Phillip Dwight Morgan, “Saron Gebresellassi: ‘We are absolutely capable of getting more votes than John Tory and Jennifer Keesmaat’”, *Rabble* (12 September 2018), online: <<https://rabble.ca/news/2018/09/saron-gebresellassi-we-are-absolutely-capable-getting-more-votes-john-tory-and-jennifer>>.

³² *Supra* note 8.

³³ *Supra* note 1.

³⁴ *Supra* note 8.

³⁵ *Supra* note 1.

transit, as she believes transportation should be a human right.³⁶ Her campaign boasted to be the antidote to the status quo.

Gebresellassi lost her bid to the mayor's seat and placed fourth with 15, 000 votes while John Tory won with 479, 659 votes. The runner-up was Jennifer Keesmaat with 178, 193 votes, followed by Faith Goldy with 25, 667 votes. Had she won, Gebresellassi would have not only been the first woman of colour to hold the position, but also the first person of colour. She would also have been only the third woman ever to serve as mayor.

Women Win Toronto

“The only way to get more women running is to trample over the gatekeepers”³⁷

Saron Gebresellassi is a participant of Women Win Toronto, an initiative dedicated to preparing women from all backgrounds to run and win in the 2018 Toronto municipal election. The initiative, which was organized and facilitated by a group of diverse women, started as a result of dissatisfaction with the previous city council. At the time, of the forty-five elected officials, just six councilors were racialized and only one was a woman of colour. The organizers noticed that there were no black, Indigenous, trans, or disabled women on the Toronto city council and sought to rectify this. Their belief was that to build a fair and equitable city, political leaders are needed that represent the diverse needs of all residents in the city of Toronto. Thus, Women Win Toronto ambitiously aimed to increase representations of racialized, Indigenous,

³⁶ Jackie Rosen, “Mayoral Candidates Talk Free Transit, Jobs in Debate at U of T Scarborough”, *NewsTalk 1010* (26 September 2018), online: < <https://www.iheartradio.ca/newstalk-1010/news/mayoral-candidates-talk-free-transit-jobs-in-debate-at-u-of-t-scarborough-1.8463678>>.

³⁷ *Supra* note 1.

queer, disabled, and gender-diverse women (including trans and gender non-conforming individuals) in the 2018 Toronto municipal elections.

In 2017, they launched their first ever training program for women of diverse backgrounds. The program included a series of workshops and training sessions that walked the participants, including Gebresellassi, through many aspects of running and winning campaigns. These included crafting a narrative, building campaign teams, leading fundraising initiatives, engaging stakeholders, handling media and communications, managing data, as well as taking care of health and wellness on the campaign trail. Training was led by former candidates and campaign managers who volunteered to mount this initiative. The class of 2017-2018 included fourteen participants who came from many different backgrounds. The alumni include current NDP MPPs Jill Andrew and Suze Morrison along with Saron Gebresellassi.³⁸

As is evident, Gebresellassi's campaign was a product of a community-driven, concentrated effort to raise the representation of diverse women, including women of colour. This stands in contrast with the frontrunners of the mayoral race, Tory and Keesmaat, who both come from certain levels of privilege. As Gebresellassi has stated, "John [Tory] comes from a lot of wealth and Jennifer [Keesmaat] is also a very wealthy city bureaucrat."³⁹ Conversely, Gebresellassi lacked many of the same resources and privileges and therefore, needed the support of an organization such as Women Win Toronto to launch her political career. Yet, despite commendable efforts, Gebresellassi's campaign suffered through many issues before ultimately failing to win her the mayoral seat.

³⁸ "Women Win Toronto" (website), online: < <http://womenwinto.ca/about/>>.

³⁹ *Supra* note 8.

Public and Media Recognition

“Would a Nobel Peace Prize be enough for you? Or an Order of Canada?”⁴⁰

One of the main issues with Gebresellassi’s campaign was the lack of name recognition. Despite serving her community for years, Gebresellassi lacked the political network and established careers enjoyed by the likes of Tory and Keesmaat. Tory has run for mayor three times, in 2003, 2014 and then again in 2018. He was born into a privileged and well-established family. His grandfather founded one of the largest law firms in Canada and his father served as president of an investment company. Tory holds a law degree from Osgoode Hall and served as a CEO of Rogers Media.⁴¹ Similarly, Keesmaat has served as the planner for the city of Toronto for five years. She has also served as the CEO of Creative Housing.⁴² Both have held positions in business and municipal arenas for many years before deciding to run for city mayor.

With such high-profile candidates, the media coverage for the mayoral campaigns focused heavily on the Tory-Keesmaat race.⁴³ Invitations to mayoral debates and events often went to Tory and Keesmaat.⁴⁴ Both also received the endorsements of influential names and groups, including CEOs, actors, and ministers.⁴⁵ Thus, Tory and Keesmaat were quickly established as first tier candidates in the local elections. Furthermore, Gebresellassi was challenging an incumbent candidate in Tory, who had already served a term as mayor of Toronto

⁴⁰ *Supra* note 8.

⁴¹ Nicki Thomas, “John Tory”, *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (18 October 2016), online: <<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/john-tory>>.

⁴² Colin Perkel, “Mayoral Candidate Jennifer Keesmaat looks to stand up for Toronto amid council cuts”, *Global News* (22 August 2018), online: <<https://globalnews.ca/news/4402270/jennifer-keesmaat-mayor-toronto-election/>>.

⁴³ *Supra* note 31.

⁴⁴ *Supra* note 1.

⁴⁵ Julia Knope, “Tory vs. Keesmaat: The high-profile endorsements fueling the mayoral election this year”, *CBC* (7 October 2018), online: <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/election-endorsements-tory-keesmaat-mayor-1.4850197>>.

from 2014 to 2018, and therefore held a significant advantage over the rest of the candidates. Incumbent candidates, such as Tory, are likely to receive greater financial resources, support, and visibility during their campaigns.⁴⁶ Conversely, Gebresellassi's career had been focused on community work, social justice, and activism, activities that are often removed (or rather, kept apart) from the upper echelons of business and politics. Her campaign drew little media attention. Therefore, Gebresellassi's political network and name recognition were not as strong as the more privileged candidates running for mayor.

The media played a significant role in the unfolding of the municipal elections. Since voters do not experience politics directly but only rely on the news media's representations, attracting media coverage becomes integral for any campaign.⁴⁷ Because of their name recognition and political networks, Tory and Keesmaat drew significant media coverage and became the subject of countless news headlines. Gebresellassi, on the other hand, was not focused on to the same degree. Frustrated of the phenomenon, Gebresellassi even asked "Would a Nobel Peace Prize be enough for you? Or an Order of Canada?"⁴⁸ Here, it is evident that a social difference exists between Gebresellassi and the frontrunner candidates. Because of a lack of political network, name recognition, media coverage, as well as an incumbency disadvantage, Gebresellassi's campaign suffered. In this manner, the social difference between Gebresellassi and her opponents maintained a barrier against local inclusivity.

⁴⁶ *Supra* note 22 at 57.

⁴⁷ Kim Fridkin Kahn, "The Distorted Mirror: Press Coverage of Women Candidates for Statewide Office" (1994) 56:1 *The Journal of Politics* 154 at 154.

⁴⁸ *Supra* note 8.

Finding Financial Resources

“The path to victory is very clear from my perspective.”⁴⁹

Finances is one of the determining elements in the municipal electoral process. Political donations and the regulation of electoral finance plays a key role in the outcome of democratic elections. Because of an absence of political parties on the local level, municipal elections are candidate-centered campaigns. As such, candidates are responsible for raising elections funds which in turn influences voter knowledge and exposure.⁵⁰

With regard to the 2018 Toronto mayoral elections, the frontrunning candidates enjoyed a financial advantage. The Tory campaign received more than 5000 donations which totaled \$2,700,707.57 of which \$2,622,694.63 was spent.⁵¹ This substantial amount of funding is most likely due to Tory’s incumbency since such a position carries with it a monetary advantage.⁵² As for Keesmaat, no official list of donors was released by her campaign. Nonetheless, she raised \$598,557.99 in total and spent \$593,281.61 on her campaign.⁵³ In comparison, Gebresellasi’s campaign only brought in \$57,733.90 yet she spent \$68,199.60 on her run, resulting in a \$10,465.70 deficit.⁵⁴ Fundraising for her campaign was referred to as “non-existent,”⁵⁵ putting Gebresellasi at a financial disadvantage, especially when compared to the millions of dollars raised by her competitors.

⁴⁹ *Supra* note 31.

⁵⁰ Lisa Young and Sam Austin, “Political Finance in City Elections: Toronto and Calgary Compared” (2008) 2:3 *The Can Political Science Rev* 88 at 88.

⁵¹ Ministry of Municipal Affairs, Financial Statement – Auditor’s Report, “Candidate - Form 4” (28 March 2019).

⁵² *Supra* note 50 at 91.

⁵³ Ministry of Municipal Affairs, Financial Statement – Auditor’s Report, “Candidate - Form 4” (26 March 2019).

⁵⁴ Ministry of Municipal Affairs, Financial Statement – Auditor’s Report, “Candidate - Form 4” (17 April 2019).

⁵⁵ *Supra* note 1.

This is especially problematic as securing financing for an election campaign can be more cumbersome for women and women of colour than for men. Male candidates often raise more money than women and men donate more money to male candidates. Therefore, the financial competition in municipal elections can be difficult for women, especially for black women, in light of the gender wage gap. It is a further issue that women often need to spend 10% higher on political campaigns than men. This is arguably related to the robust media strategies required to unseat male incumbents.⁵⁶ As a result of these reasons, the finances for Gebresellassi's campaign were scarce and posed a difficult challenge.

Perception of Political Leadership

“I know that a lot of people don't know my name, but I've been in politics for 15 years now”⁵⁷

As a black woman from a refugee family, Gebresellassi was often referred to as a fringe candidate in the 2018 mayoral race in Toronto.⁵⁸ Her leadership was questioned as a result of her “fringe” identity and policies in the predominantly white and male space of municipal politics. One explanation for the overwhelming maleness in municipal politics is that women are less likely than men to be seen as leaders. In addition, women of colour are even less likely to be acknowledged as leaders. While leadership is not inherently masculine, the concept of leadership is often equated with masculine traits. Furthermore, race, ethnicity, age, income, health, and

⁵⁶ *Supra* note 22 at 59.

⁵⁷ Courtney Shea, “Q&A: Saron Gebresellassi, the lawyer who wants to beat Tory and Keesmaat to the mayoralty”, *Toronto Life* (22 October 2018), online: <<https://torontolife.com/city/toronto-politics/qa-saron-gebresellassi-lawyer-wants-beat-tory-keesmaat-mayoralty/>>.

⁵⁸ Steven Paikin, “Where are they now? Checking in with 2018 Toronto mayoral candidate Knia Singh”, *TVOntario* (22 November 2018), online: <<https://www.tvo.org/article/where-are-they-now-checking-in-with-2018-toronto-mayoral-candidate-knia-singh>>.

sexual orientation are all factors that affect how their leadership is recognized and affirmed.⁵⁹ Therefore, women of colour entering municipal politics have a harder task ahead of them than their white or male counterparts at being recognized as proficient leaders.

Although Gebresellassi has been a community leader for years and has described her career as political, her leadership was not recognized as political. Women in general tend to spend more time on local and civic issues or volunteering for the community than men as they perceive these activities to be important. However, their community leadership is not recognized as political in a formal sense, but simply as community work. Of her political work, Gebresellassi has said “For all intents and purposes, I’ve been working as a city councilor without the title for 15 years now.”⁶⁰ Despite this assertion, Gebresellassi was not recognized as a formidable candidate in the mayoral race.

Perhaps a telling sign of this phenomenon is that Faith Goldy, a white supremacist and far-right nationalist, received 10,000 more votes than Gebresellassi.⁶¹ In a city which boasts of multiculturalism and which hosts a population where 51% of its residents identify as racialized,⁶² the fact that a white supremacist can gain significantly more votes than a community-oriented woman of colour is greatly suspect. Of this, Gebresellassi has stated, “It hurts Toronto’s reputation to see a neo-Nazi sympathizer do so well.”⁶³ Indeed, it does not bode well for women of colour that a white supremacist can be recognized as a legitimate local leader before a

⁵⁹ The American Association of University Women, *Barriers and Bias: The Status of Women in Leadership* (Washington DC, 2016) at 5.

⁶⁰ *Supra* note 8.

⁶¹ *Supra* note 27.

⁶² Julia Whalen, “Census 2016: More than half of Torontonians identify as visible minorities”, *CBC* (25 October 2017), online: < <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/census-visible-minorities-1.4371018>>.

⁶³ *Supra* note 1.

qualified candidate such as Gebresellassi can. It is clear that the patriarchy and white supremacy continue to subordinate women of colour even at the level of municipal elections.

Nevertheless, Gebresellassi remains hopeful that women of colour can be accepted as leaders, even over incumbent white males with ample political power. She frequently cites Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as an inspiration. Ocasio-Cortez, a Puerto-Rican Latina, defeated 10-term incumbent Joe Crowley to become the US Representative for New York's 14th congressional district seat in 2019.⁶⁴ Gebresellassi looks to Ocasio-Cortez as an example of a progressive woman of colour who is celebrated in American politics today. As such, she continues to reattempt a career in politics, running to secure the New Democratic Party (NDP) nomination for her riding in 2019⁶⁵ and having hopes of running for mayor again in 2022.⁶⁶

Despite her hopefulness, discrimination against her persists. Since the 2018 mayoral race, Gebresellassi also failed to secure the NDP nomination for her riding of Parkdale-High Park for the 2019 federal election. When two hundred and twenty-eight African immigrants arrived to cast a vote for Gebresellassi at the NDP nomination party, they were denied the chance to vote. The winner of that nomination secured two hundred and fifty-five votes. Gebresellassi obtained eighty-five votes but would have been victorious by fifty-eight votes had her supporters been allowed to vote. She has since launched a human rights complaint against the NDP for improperly excluding her supporters.⁶⁷ Hence, despite the consistent attempts of one qualified black woman, the political landscape refuses to grant her public office.

⁶⁴ Shane Goldmacher and Jonathan Martin, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Defeats Joseph Crowley in Major Democratic House Upset", *The New York Times* (26 June 2018), online: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/26/nyregion/joseph-crowley-ocasio-cortez-democratic-primary.html>>.

⁶⁵ *Supra* note 1.

⁶⁶ *Supra* note 8.

⁶⁷ Deidre Olsen, "More election fallout for NDP in Parkdale-High Park", *Now Magazine* (30 October 2019), online: <<https://nowtoronto.com/news/canada-election-ndp-parkdale-high-park/>>.

Conclusions

“One hundred percent, I will run again.”⁶⁸

As can be seen from the case of Saron Gebresellassi, women of colour face multiple persistent and widespread barriers when it comes to representation in municipal government. Many of these barriers are compounded as a result of the racial and gendered dimensions of their identities. It is because of the social difference between women of colour and their white and male counterparts that these barriers are persisting and sustained. Hence, a few different conclusions can be surmised from this case.

Firstly, the diversity dialogue is still fairly new in the municipal sphere, even in diverse cities such as Toronto. While federal and provincial governments have been tackling this issue, municipalities are still far behind in mounting any meaningful change. Most of the effort in diversifying the municipal arena has come from women of diverse backgrounds, who have taken it upon themselves to fix the diversity gap in local government. Initiatives like Women Win Toronto and even Gebresellassi’s campaign itself have inspired women of colour to run and win municipal elections.

Secondly, the barriers faced by women of colour are uniquely discernable from those faced by white women or men of colour. It is specifically because of Gebresellassi’s identity as a woman of colour that she faces exclusion from public and media recognition, financial disadvantages in running her campaign, and hesitancy in recognizing her leadership qualifications. Therefore, the barriers faced by women of colour like Gebresellassi require

⁶⁸ *Supra* note 1.

discernable solutions. Furthermore, these solutions need to utilize the anti-racist feminism and intersectional frameworks if they are to be successful.

Lastly, despite the tireless efforts of women of colour like Gebresellasi, securing representation in government is still evasive. This is because women of colour continue to face barriers that their male and white counterparts do not face, including challenges with public and media recognition, financial resources, as well as the refusal to acknowledge their leadership. Despite coming from a concentrated effort to get women of colour into municipal politics and being very qualified to serve as mayor, Gebresellasi continues to be excluded from the local arena.

Fortunately, the solutions to such problems are readily available. Various existing resources make important policy recommendations which tackle the lack of representation of women or people of colour. Such policy recommendations can easily be tailored to also address the lack of representation of women of colour in municipal politics. What is required is for municipalities to actively apply an intersectional lens and use a framework which utilizes anti-racist feminism when implementing such policy recommendations.

Some recommendations which can be utilized to increase the inclusion of women of colour in municipal politics include: increasing the collection of intersectional data on women's participation in municipal politics; developing public education campaigns with the goal to positively shift how women of colour are perceived in municipal politics; increasing the funding of organizations and projects that support women of colour entering local politics; providing information, training, and resources for women of colour to run for local office; establish mentorship networks specific to women of colour in municipal government to facilitate

professional growth; and mandating the implementation of an intersectional lens to all women's or diversity committees that exist (if any) within the purview of local government.

Such initiatives must be mounted through coordinated intra-municipal efforts, as progress which only benefits a limited number of women of colour in a few localities will not go far enough to address such deeply entrenched issues. Furthermore, women of colour must be consulted and integrated into the process which seeks to include them. Efforts which do not confer with the very group they aim to reach are likely to be misguided. Lastly, such initiatives of inclusivity must see past the dimensions of just race and gender, as an intersectional lens reaches beyond these elements. Endeavors to increase representation must also aim to include dimensions of Indigeneity, queerness, gender-diversity, and more. Only through such robust and targeted efforts on behalf of municipalities will the burden of representation finally shift from the shoulders of women of colour, like Saron Gebresellassi, and rightfully become the responsibility of the system that continues to exclude them.