

Status of Women Canada

Discussion Paper on Approaches to Consultation

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A. Introduction

Purpose of this Discussion Paper

Status of Women Canada (SWC) is establishing a formal consultation framework with its constituents, based on mutual respect and understanding of our respective roles, and the context in which we work.

Consultation is important for proactive planning and development by government. It provides the Secretary of State (Status of Women) with direct access to the ideas and concerns of Canadian women, thereby giving her an important tool for lobbying her Cabinet colleagues on public policy issues affecting women.

In 1996, Status of Women Canada undertook a series of consultation meetings with constituents across Canada, seeking advice on various aspects of the agency's work. One of the results of that process was a commitment to develop a Discussion Paper in consultation with women's organizations and other groups committed to women's equality, on types of formal and informal consultation approaches, frequency and resource implications of future consultations.

In keeping with that commitment, Status of Women Canada has prepared this Discussion Paper to gather the views of women's organizations and other groups and individuals on various possible methods of consultation. A small task group of representatives from women's and other equality-seeking organizations met with Status of Women Canada officials to provide feedback on the preliminary version of this paper, and to generate additional ideas and suggestions, many of which have been incorporated into this Discussion Paper.

We are now interested in your comments and suggestions on when and how you think Status of Women Canada should consult, the most effective methods of consulting with organizations such as yours, and other suggestions you might have about how we can improve our consultation work.

In particular, we are interested in your answers to the following questions:

1. Are the guiding principles suggested in this paper appropriate? Are the ones listed the most fundamental? Do they apply to all consultation situations? Are any missing? Would you suggest any changes to these?

2. Are the proposed purposes of consultation the main ones that you see for Status of Women Canada? Are there any missing? Any that are unnecessary or inappropriate?
3. Do the consultation formats described here cover all the basic options? Are there any missing? Any you would delete?
4. Is the description of each consultation method accurate? Does it fairly represent the range of possibilities, the advantages and disadvantages, etc.? What would you add, change or delete?
5. Are you in general agreement with the approaches outlined in this Discussion Paper?

Status of Women Canada

Status of Women Canada is the federal government agency working to advance women's equality. By contributing to the overall physical, economic and social well-being of women, their families and their communities, Status of Women Canada is committed to promoting greater equality for women in Canada.

Within the Government of Canada, Status of Women Canada is responsible for policy coordination/analysis, research, funding and technical assistance, consultations and communications activities related to the promotion of women's equality. It provides leadership, expertise and strategic advice to the Secretary of State (Status of Women), and to federal government departments and agencies on issues affecting women. Gender Based Analysis integrates gender equality concerns into all federal government legislation, policies and initiatives. Another key program, the Policy Research Fund, supports research on long-term and urgent policy issues. Status of Women Canada also works in collaboration with provincial and territorial governments to address issues of concern to women in Canada.

Status of Women Canada's Women's Program has a network of regional representatives which maintains regular contact with women's and other equality-seeking organizations across the country. The Program also provides financial and technical assistance to support community-based action.

Status of Women Canada also works with many organizations in the non-governmental, voluntary, and private sector. It encourages key sectors, such as industry, education, justice and health authorities, to incorporate women's equality into their decision-making structures, policies and programs. It has also assisted organizations and businesses in developing programs that promote issues relating to women's equality.

In promoting women's equality globally, Status of Women Canada works collaboratively with international organizations, such as the United Nations, the Commonwealth and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation initiative (APEC). Status of Women Canada also keeps Canadians informed of equality initiatives and women's achievements.

B. Our Vision of Consultation

Definition of Consultation

There are many different possible definitions of consultation, many different approaches, and various assumptions which underlie each approach.

This paper addresses official consultation by Status of Women Canada with its constituents, in which the agency formally requests views or participation from groups, either at a meeting or through written input. In addition to this official consultation, there will continue to be informal discussions and exchanges between Status of Women Canada staff and individuals within women's and other organizations. Status of Women Canada staff, in the course of their regular duties, will also sometimes ask individuals or organizations for specific information or input.

For Status of Women Canada, a definition of official consultation includes the following:

- a) Consultation takes place before a decision is made, and before Status of Women Canada proceeds to further action on the issue.
- b) Consultation is a two-way communication process, in which all parties listen and contribute views, information and ideas. Status of Women Canada will communicate back to participants about what happened with their views, and constituents may also choose to share their own follow-up to the discussions.
- c) Consultation leads to action. It is an opportunity for genuine and respectful listening, in which Status of Women Canada is committed to acting on the views heard. This does not necessarily mean that every suggestion made in a consultation is implemented, but that input will always be taken into account.
- d) Consultation is part of the ongoing relationship between Status of Women Canada and its constituents, in which mutual trust and understanding is built up over time, through a continuing process of discussions, decisions, and follow-through.

With whom would Status of Women Canada consult?

Status of Women Canada believes that the key players in advancing women's equality are women's and other equality-seeking organizations and governments at all levels. At the same time, the agency believes that achieving women's equality involves all sectors of society, such as educational institutions, private business, the justice system, the labour movement, the media and religious groups, as well as individual women and men.

Most consultation relationships will be with women's organizations, and other equality-seeking organizations and individuals working actively to advance women's equality.

Status of Women Canada will also exchange views with other sectors to advance women's equality in all spheres of Canadian life.

Status of Women Canada recognizes that women are not a homogeneous group, and that they face many different realities as a result of age, race, class, national and ethnic origin, sexual orientation, mental and physical ability, region, language and religion. Equality can only be achieved by acknowledging and respecting this diversity, and consultations by Status of Women Canada will seek a diverse participation of women.

Purposes of Consultation

There are four main purposes for which Status of Women Canada will initiate consultations with its constituents:

- a) to seek input on policies, programs, legislation and the future directions of Status of Women Canada, before these are determined;
- b) to explore new ideas and emerging issues, to help define issues and questions, or to understand how an issue is affecting women's lives;
- c) to develop strategies on questions or issues of mutual concern to Status of Women Canada and constituents;
- d) to evaluate programs, policy or functions of Status of Women Canada.

An additional purpose underlying all of these is to work towards a mutually beneficial relationship with the organizations and individuals who share a commitment to women's equality.

Guiding Principles

Each time consultation is undertaken, the approaches will be tailored to the purpose and desired outcomes, the constituents involved, and the available time and resources. However, certain guiding principles will be followed in all Status of Women Canada consultations.

Transparency

1. Objectives of the consultation will be communicated at the outset.
2. Consultations parameters will be clearly identified before consultation begins.
3. The steps in the consultation process, and where the consultation fits in the overall decision-making on the issue(s) involved, will be explained to participants at the outset.

Accountability

4. Status of Women Canada will communicate back to participants about what was heard and how it was used. This may include a summary of the advice received, and an indication of how it will be fed into the decision-making process. In cases where the final decision can be publicly released, participants will also be informed of the final outcome.
5. Participants will be asked to evaluate each consultation exercise, after its conclusion.

Mutual Respect

6. Consultations will be conducted in a climate of mutual respect.
7. The consultation method used will be adapted to the intended participants, the purpose of consultation, and the available resources.
8. Consultation will not always lead to consensus, but should lead to a better understanding of participants' positions.
9. The consultation methods used will respect the differing roles of Status of Women Canada and constituents, and the operating constraints of each.

Diversity and Accessibility

10. Diverse groups and individuals will be consulted.
11. Status of Women Canada will remove as many barriers to participation in consultations as possible. This will include using plain language, and may include using alternative formats and media, providing financial support where needed (e.g. transportation, childcare), making information available in languages beyond French and English, simultaneous interpretation, choosing locations that are accessible and appropriate to the participants, and other measures.

Commitment

12. Status of Women Canada is committed to consultation with constituents as an integral part of the agency's work.
13. Status of Women Canada will maintain an ongoing relationship with constituents, through regular communication, consultation and feedback.

Constraints

Cost: Every form of consultation incurs costs (time, money or both) for Status of Women Canada and for the participants. In choosing the appropriate method of consultation, costs will be weighted against the intended purpose and outcome. Status of Women Canada will consider the cost to participants of participating in the consultation process.

Time: Status of Women Canada frequently operates within tight timelines in preparing policy advice or making operational decisions. Participants need time to adequately consider the issues, consult with their own membership and networks, and prepare a response. There is often a trade-off between the time available before a decision is made, and the time needed by participants to provide the best input.

Knowledge and Information: Unequal access to information, or inaccurate assumptions about the knowledge base of participants can seriously limit the effectiveness of a consultation. In an effort to equalize this access, Status of Women Canada will provide common background information to all participants.

Annual Consultation Plan

Status of Women Canada intends to produce and circulate to constituents an annual consultation plan, setting out the major consultations anticipated over the next year. We will attempt to be responsive to emerging and identified needs, while balancing the time and resources available for consultation. The annual plan will alert constituents to opportunities to make their views known on certain issues.

C. Consultation Methods

Choosing a Consultation Method

The number of possible consultation methods and formats is almost infinite, from face-to-face meetings, to written input, to electronic means. For each situation, a different format would tend to be more appropriate, depending on the purpose of the consultation, the participants, the time available, and various other factors.

We have combined the vast range of possible consultation formats into the five basic methods that we think are most applicable for our work. Each of these can be adapted in different ways, to create numerous variations and versions.

The five basic consultation methods are briefly described below, along with the major advantages and disadvantages of each, conditions under which it works best, and when this method should be used. (Note: in this section, the abbreviation SWC refers to Status of Women Canada)

1. Large scale face-to-face consultations

Description:

- Anywhere from about 25 people up to about two hundred people meet face-to-face in one location.
- Often a conference format: can include private deliberations, plenaries and small group discussions, using a combination of presentations, question-and-answer sessions, discussion, report back.
- Many other possible formats, depending on the purpose and participants (e.g. video conferences can be used to link groups of people in different communities across Canada)
- National or regional in scope.

Advantages:

- moderately large number of groups and individuals can provide input
- provides for interaction/ discussion with SWC and among participants, which allows ideas to evolve more quickly
- very transparent: everyone sees and hears the input

Disadvantages:

- tends to be very expensive
- question of who is invited is often quite sensitive
- who is invited shapes the outcome
- long lead time is required for SWC, and, if substantive input is expected, for participants
- high risk, in that specific issues or groups can overtake the agenda
- discussion can very easily remain at a superficial level

Works best when:

- the agenda meets the needs of both SWC and participants, and participants get some immediate benefit from being involved
- there is excellent process design and facilitation: the dynamics of such sessions can easily get off-track, or become divisive
- there is good background information and preparation, so that the discussion can get to the "real issues"
- there is an effective mix of participants: a diversity of opinions and backgrounds, but common objectives

When to use it:

- For all types of consultation purposes, however, it tends to be more effective for addressing broad issues and questions, rather than more specialized and technical ones.
- When a broad range of input is important.

2. Small group consultations

Description:

- Anywhere from 3 to about 25 people meet face-to-face.
- Variations can include: one-time session, an ad hoc working group, round table, teleconferences, video conferences, etc. Teleconferences are a possibility for very small groups, but present a number of impediments (e.g. translation), and may be best for working groups or information-sharing.
- Tends to be focused on a specific issue, sector or region.
- National or regional in scope.

Advantages:

- excellent interaction among participants, and with SWC, enables in-depth discussion of an issue
- can involve specific participants with specific expertise
- minimal lead time is needed, both for SWC (logistics are relatively simple) and for participants (they are already expert in the area)
- minimal lead time is needed

Disadvantages:

- restricted participation does not permit a broad cross-section of input
- selection of participants is sometimes sensitive, or difficult, given the limited number of potential invitees
- may be tendency to involve "the same people as always" or "experts", which tends to exclude new points of view

Works best when:

- there is a clear, specific purpose requiring particular expertise or background
- participants have approximately equal levels of expertise
- participants bring a range of opinions and backgrounds
- there is good background information and preparation, so that the group can get to work quickly
- there is good chairing/facilitation
- combined with another method (e.g. circulating a brief questionnaire to a larger number of groups or conducting a quick telephone survey) to validate the results.

When to use it:

- For all types of consultation purposes
- When broad-based input is less important
- When the issue is urgent, and time is limited
- When the expertise needed is available within a limited group of participants

3. Discussion paper with written input

Description:

- SWC prepares a background paper, which is circulated widely to a large number of groups and individuals
- Interested participants respond in writing: letters, briefs, or, if SWC provides a questionnaire format, a completed response form.
- In some cases (e.g. evaluation of SWC program or service), it is helpful to ensure confidentiality of responses to encourage frank views from participants.
- This is usually used for input at a national level.

Advantages:

- allows in-depth consideration of an issue by participants
- wide participation is possible) enabling a broad range of views
- participants are largely self-selected, rather than invited by SWC
- inexpensive
- easy to compile responses, if questionnaire format is used

Disadvantages:

- requires considerable lead time, both by SWC (to prepare the document and await responses) and by participants (to prepare responses)
- not interactive, either with SWC or among participants, which does not permit clarification of, or building on, the points raised
- tends to duplicate effort among participants: many different groups prepare substantially similar input
- accessibility can be severely limited by language (e.g. is it in plain writing? available in languages beyond French and English?). The written format excludes cultures not based on the written word
- overly complex questions can intimidate the participants, or lead to distorted answers

Works best when:

- the background paper is simple, accessible and brief
- written material respects intended audience (language, content, format, etc.)
- a short questionnaire or key questions to answer are provided and participants have at least two months to respond supplemented with other methods

When to use it:

- when there is considerable lead time available
- when limited funds are available
- when wide input or participation is desirable
- when questions are well defined

4. Brief questionnaire

Description:

- SWC prepares a very short update on a specific matter (e.g. 1 or 2 pages), plus a brief questionnaire to solicit input on the issue.
- A questionnaire is circulated widely to a large number of groups and individuals. Interested participants complete the questionnaire.
- This is usually used for input at a national level.

Advantages:

- quick response time
- very focused: does not require as much effort by participants
- wide participation possible
- participants self-select instead of being invited by SWC
- inexpensive
- can be repeated every 2 or 3 years, to see trends in views of groups

Disadvantages:

- not interactive, which makes it difficult to clarify the responses, or build on them
- tends not to solicit in-depth responses
- very dependent on the quality of the questionnaire and background information which will influence results

Works best when:

- the issue is current or of wide concern
- the topic is focused and specific
- the background information and accompanying questionnaire are clear and simple

When to use it:

- When the issue is specific
- When the issue can be accurately described briefly, and meaningful input can be received with a few questions
- When a broad range of input is needed
- When time is short

5. Internet Discussions

Description:

- SWC sets up a discussion on a specific question or issue.
- SWC outlines background information on the topic and asks some key questions.
- Any interested group or individual with access to the Internet can contribute their thoughts and ideas.
- This is usually used for input at a national level, in the sense that anyone across Canada (and internationally) can have access to it.

Advantages:

- wide participation possible, within the limits of access to the Internet
- participants self-select, rather than being chosen by SWC
- interactive: participants can exchange with each other, and SWC can probe further if a response is unclear or particularly interesting
- rapid response time
- inexpensive, for both SWC and participants
- easy to update and add information; participants can also refer others to information sources on the Internet

Works best when:

- the background information and questions are clear and simple
- there is sufficient time for some interaction and evolution of the discussion, for ideas to build (minimum two weeks)
- discussion site has been widely promoted

Disadvantages:

- participation is limited to those with access to the Internet (equipment, connecting lines, skills to use it, subscription to Internet, etc.) and who are aware of the discussion site
- responses may tend to be more informal and brief, rather than in-depth and more considered
- may include responses from participants not normally part of SWC's constituency (perhaps this is also an advantage?)
- accessibility also limited by language (plain language, availability in French, English and other languages, etc.)
- anonymity of responses limits accountability and transparency of participation
- requires promotion of the site

When to use it:

- when exploring new ideas
- when there is a specific question or issue
- when informal responses are appropriate
- as a supplement to other more tested and more accessible methods
- for working groups or working sessions rather than broad-based consultations

D. Next Steps

Status of Women Canada's goal is to develop the most effective consultation relationships possible within our operating constraints. We see this as essential to performing our mandate and responsibilities well, and ask for your input and advice to assist us.

Please provide your comments on the approaches set out in this Discussion Paper, or on any other aspect of how you suggest Status of Women Canada should consult with groups. You may wish to use the discussion questions at the beginning of this paper to assist you in preparing your response.

Confidentiality

Responses are being sent to a third party, for reasons of confidentiality. Please indicate on your response whether:

- you wish your comments to remain anonymous, or
- you wish to make the complete text of your response available to Status of Women Canada, or to be available for follow-up discussions if there are any questions of clarification on points raised in your paper. If you choose this option, **please ensure you provide** your name, address, telephone, fax number and e-mail address.

In either case, it would be helpful to know the following information about your organization:

1. national, provincial, regional or local in scope
2. principal mandate or field of work
3. approximate number of members

Status of Women Canada will review a summary of all comments received. The final paper, which is planned to be completed this fall, will present the formal commitments of the agency about how we will undertake consultation in the future. This will be a public document, and will be sent to all those who provided input in response to this Discussion Paper.

Please send your comments by November 14, 1997:

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Thank you for your time and your views