Francophone and Acadian Women: Central to the
Official Languages Act

Brief presented by the Alliance des femmes de la francophonie canadienne to the
Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages as part of its study on Canadians’
views about modernizing the Official Languages Act

April 9, 2018
Brief prepared by the Alliance des femmes de la francophonie canadienne:
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There is a social cost if the needs of francophone women in minority communities in all their diversity are not taken into account. We must protect them, because they are the resisters of assimilation and the guardians of their linguistic heritage. Their work of transmitting culture and acculturating children within families is a pillar of francophone minority communities.

Lily Crist, President, Alliance des femmes de la francophonie canadienne

Created in 1914, the Alliance des femmes de la francophonie canadienne (AFFC) advocates on behalf of 1.326 million women from Canada’s francophone and Acadian communities. AFFC is dedicated to raising awareness and promoting the role and contribution of francophone women in their community and their right to live fully in French.

AFFC represents 13 member organizations, all dedicated to defending and improving the conditions of francophone and Acadian women in Canada’s provinces and territories. Through consultation and discussion, AFFC works with its member organizations and partners to develop solutions to issues that affect women in the Canadian francophonie.

To ensure the right to live and thrive in French, AFFC places francophone and Acadian at the centre of the Official Languages Act (OLA). The introduction of this Act in 1969 enshrined the bilingual character of our country and recognized the equal status of English and French in federal institutions and in Canadian society.¹

This act reflects the government’s promise to support the development of English and French linguistic minority communities and generally advance the equality of status and use of the English and French languages.² The OLA shows, both nationally and internationally, our government’s respect for minority language communities. This act has made Canada a model of coexistence, respect and openness to other cultures.

Yet the OLA has not kept its promises since its adoption almost 50 years ago. Its many flaws have led us to rethink its implementation and that is why, with a view to giving new momentum to modernizing the OLA, AFFC’s main question is this: how is the OLA contributing to the overarching goal of advancing equality?

I. The role and contribution of francophone and Acadian women in minority-language communities

No one can deny the role and contribution of francophone and Acadian women to the vitality of francophone minority communities. Several academic and community studies

¹ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, Understanding your language rights.
have highlighted the role of francophone and Acadian women in ensuring the survival of French. For example, sociologists Danielle Juteau and Elisabeth Lacelle have shown in their respective research that francophone women “performed the job of transmitting culture or acculturating children within the family. Moreover, women did this work freely and without recognition and said it to be out of love, disregarding the fact that these duties had a very specific function in terms of social relations between the sexes.”

Moreover, Linda Cardinal, Danielle Juteau and McKee-Allain showed in their research that “women and women’s groups were involved in the transmission and transformation of the francophone identity in minority institutions like schools and in community life. Women were given a specific role in ethnic social relations even when this role was performed outside the family.”

By demonstrating the influence of women, especially mothers, in the transmission of language, researchers show that it is important to take into account the reality of francophone women in minority communities because they are the “guardians” of francophone communities in Canada.

II. Gender-Based Analysis plus (GBA+) in the implementation of OLA programs and policies

The Government of Canada has been committed to using Gender-Based Analysis (GBA+) in the development of policies, programs and legislation since 1995. GBA+ is the “process by which a policy, program, initiative or service can be examined for its impacts on various groups of women and men.”

GBA+ is a method of analysis that provides a snapshot that captures the realities of women and men affected by a particular issue at a specific time. The “plus” means that the analysis goes beyond sex (biological differences) and gender (social construction). In addition to sex and gender, GBA+ takes into account all the factors that shape a person’s identity: race, ethnicity, religion, age and physical or intellectual disability.

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4 Ibid., p.13 [Translation].
6 Status of Women Canada, *Government of Canada’s Approach: Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+).*
7 Government of Canada, *Gender-Based Analysis*.
8 Ibid.
This analysis is needed so as to ensure that inequalities are not inadvertently increased and that the different needs, priorities, interests, roles and responsibilities of diverse groups of women and men are being addressed and integrated appropriately.9

Like the OLA, GBA+ applies the principles set out in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Canadian Human Rights Act. In February 2016, the Auditor General of Canada released his fall 2015 report, “Implementing Gender-Based Analysis”, in which he identified the barriers to a rigorous use of GBA+ and called for improvements in its implementation in federal institutions.10 In response to the Auditor General’s report, in April 2016 the Status of Women Canada, Privy Council Office and Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat tabled the Action Plan on Gender-Based Analysis (2016-2020).11 However, there is no guarantee that the measures outlined in the Action Plan (2016-2020) will remove the barriers preventing federal departments and agencies from considering GBA+ when developing, renewing or reviewing proposed policies, programs or legislation.

III. Recommendations

AFFC witnessed the introduction of the Official Languages Act and has seen the challenges with its implementation. In addition to the measures already set out in the Act, AFFC respectfully submits its recommendations for the needed modernization of the Official Languages Act. In this context, to address the flaws in the OLA outlined in the FCFA’s brief entitled “Giving New Momentum to Canada’s Linguistic Duality! For a Modern and Respected Official Languages Act,” the following must be done:

- Integrate GBS+ in the implementation and enforcement of the OLA’s modernization
- Give a central agency responsibility for coordination.
- Make senior officials responsible for enforcing the OLA within their institution
- Clearly define “positive measure”, “substantive equality”, “meaningful consultation” and “active offer”
- Enshrine the principle of “by and for” in the OLA through an obligation to consult francophone minority communities and the creation of joint advisory board
- Include diverse stakeholders and take various identity factors into account

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9 Status of Women Canada. Government of Canada’s Approach: Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+).
10 Status of Women Canada. Introduction to GBA+: The History of GBA+.
11 Ibid.
- Take gender roles into account and create mitigation strategies for the key populations in order to meet their needs

- Leverage the strengths of the different populations

- Ensure accountability mechanisms for transfers to the provinces and territories by requiring them to consult francophone minority communities and ensure respect for language rights

- Introduce measures to monitor the effects of the OLA on francophone and Acadian women in minority communities