



There has never been an Indigenous woman elected to the Ontario legislature. There are three Indigenous women running in the upcoming election: Suze Morrison (NDP – Toronto Centre), Ethel LaValley (NDP – Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke) and Karen Kejik (Liberal – Kenora-Rainy River). Each of these candidates has their own reasons for running in the upcoming election. Here are their thoughts on what it means as an Indigenous woman to take on a leadership role.

Suze Morrison (NDP – Toronto Centre)



Suze Morrison identifies as a person with mixed heritage. Her family has a history of involvement with foster care and the child welfare system. Suze didn't grow up in a First Nations community, and as an adult, with her mother, has had to seek out connection to her family story.

“It's been a struggle my adult life, I've struggled with self-identification,” explains Suze, “My identity feels fragile. People want to fit you in a box that's easy to understand. The problem is identity is complicated, and it's hard to reconcile a

complicated history into something that can be shared in your riding. Is she native or not? It's something my campaign staff have to field. I have to prove my identity and who I am, other candidates don't have to deal with that. For those of us in between, who have been lost... so much has been taken from us. I am a non-status First Nations person, with mixed heritage, and I acknowledge my white passing privilege.”

Connection to her identity was found in urban Indigenous spaces. For many like Suze, the urban community has “picked up” the people who have lost their connection to community. That's why poverty reduction and affordable housing is important to her.

“Most of the Indigenous service organizations in Toronto are in this riding, but community can't afford to live near these services anymore. The struggle for affordable housing is astronomical. Indigenous people in an urban context are even more disproportionately affected.”

Taking on a political role has had its own challenges for Suze, who has experienced the same kinds of sexual harassment and gender-based violence that all women in Ontario may have to face at different points in their life.

“I rely on my culture, teachings, and medicines to cope with violence. You can't talk about Indigenous women without acknowledging that as an Indigenous woman, you have to work three times as hard to be taken half as seriously. We need a broader societal shift that inherently values women.”

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Karen Kejik, Shoal Lake 39 First Nation (Liberal – Kenora-Rainy River)



Karen sits as a band councilor for Iskatewizaagegan First Nation. She has sat on the board of directors for the Kenora Sunset VCARS and the Lake of the Woods Business Incentive Corporation. She is her council's lead for education, governance, economic development, and is in her third term as the chair for the Fisheries Advisory Council.

Karen is passionate about many issues—ending violence, housing, homelessness, economic development, opportunities for small business, year-round employment, clean water, affordable living, care for seniors, keeping kids out of child welfare, recruiting doctors, and teachers – she is knowledgeable about how all of these issues require distinct solutions in Northern Ontario.

“Sometimes people in Kenora might want to go to Winnipeg for health services instead of Thunder Bay,” she explains, “so working with other provinces on cross-jurisdiction services is important.”

Karen credits her mother and her grandparents for instilling her with strong values and a strong work ethic. “When I am out campaigning as an Indigenous woman, people see that first,” says Karen, “I am proud of that. I hope people see that I am a strong advocate, and that voters see that I would use that voice for everyone. Like clean water, that is for everyone. I want to work with our neighbours along the river system outside of the riding, because clean water is for all of our lives.”

As an Indigenous women, Karen has had to overcome systemic barriers in her life.

“You have to get in the fight,” she says, “Follow your passion and pursue every experience. Learning about yourself and strengthening your identity is important. Watch what is going on in the news. Align your values with what you are doing.”

For Indigenous women and youth, Karen hopes that they are able to reflect on their successes. “It’s not always easy but there are good people out there who will support you. Manage stress and find mentors who have been through it, who are in your community. Don’t be afraid to volunteer and get involved.”

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Ethel LaValley, Algonquins of Pikwakanagan (NDP – Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke)



Ethel has served as an elected municipal official as reeve in the Township of Airy and as mayor of South Algonquin. She's also served as vice-president of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, was secretary/treasurer of the Ontario Federation of Labour and was the first Indigenous vice-president of the Canadian Labour Congress.

"I am concerned for health care. We need to have the services for seniors, who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect," explains Ethel, "and predominantly, I am passionate about caring for youth, not just in this election but for seven generations."

Ethel encourages all Indigenous people to have a base of support to talk to and encourage each other. Building a network, and relationships, are key to being able to talk about how to move women forward together. "I would like to send a message to my sisters," Ethel told ONWA, "If you want to make change and be a part of change, don't be afraid. Don't sit back and think about it. Get out and make change and get involved. Go for it. The more you learn about what's going on in Ontario, the more you'll grow, the more you will see you that your ideas matter."

Ethel is also aware that she is up against a strong incumbent candidate, "I am not under an illusion that I can and may win. You can't be upset and sit back and not try to make a change. I would be very honoured, and privileged, and very humble, to win."

That's why Ethel is continuing to take on new opportunities to lead, especially to make change for young people, "We need to be able to let our young people pursue what they want without a mountain of debt. It limits so many of the other things they want to be able to achieve before they can make a difference in our communities. There is a path for you to enjoy, and it's important for you to not be indebted when you finish so you can start to build the life you want."

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Indigenous Women in Ontario

The ability of Indigenous women to speak to their own needs and priorities has been consistently undermined – Indigenous women are often deliberately excluded, silenced, and spoken for. Colonialism results in discriminatory pieces of legislation, regulation, policy, and practice that have systemically undermined the safety, aspirations, and work of Indigenous women. That’s why it’s so important that the perspectives and priorities of Indigenous women come from Indigenous women themselves. Through participation in priority setting, and being heard when they speak to their own needs and aspirations, Indigenous women are able to build sustainably empower themselves, their families, and communities socially, and economically.

Participating in the upcoming provincial election is one way that Indigenous women can be engaged on the issues that affect them, but it’s not the only way. Many Indigenous women choose not to vote for personal, political, or cultural reasons – other may be unable to vote. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) Article 5 states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions while retaining their right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the state”. Participation, however, is not limited to voting. It’s important to shift how people are heard on issues that impact their lives beyond the election cycle. Indigenous women are capable of determining how to address their safety, needs, and aspirations.

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