



## Context

As Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) is expanded into a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), Global Affairs has put out a call for dialogue submissions. What follows is the Parliamentary Centre's submission to Global Affairs Canada prepared by Parliamentary Centre Associate, Dr. Gabrielle Bardall.

We look forward to the opportunity to expand on the ideas proposed, particularly that support for strengthening democratic institutions is at the centre of a new Feminist Foreign Policy. Reformed institutions are crucial to ensuring the political voice and decision-making power of women and marginalized groups is realized.

The submission represents the views of the author who enjoys the support of the Centre's management. However, it does not constitute an endorsement from the Board of Directors of the Parliamentary Centre.

## Dialogue Submission by Dr. Gabrielle Bardall

The Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) has transformed the way Canada operates as a development assistance partner in profound and important ways by supporting political voice for women and marginalized groups. A Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) can be equally transformative by ensuring that the diplomacy/security, trade and development functions of Global Affairs Canada in Canada coordinate efforts to strengthen and improve the rules-based international order (RBIO).

To be successful, the FFP should be accompanied by a renewed and clear commitment to democracy strengthening support as crucial to effective foreign policy. Though the Scene Setter document includes references to the importance of democratic values and principles, it does not mention the essential need for reformed democratic institutions to ensure real voice and decision-making power for women and marginalized groups.



The RBIO is grounded in four pillars: 1) rules based fair trade, 2) military alliances among like-minded liberal states, 3) multilateral cooperation/international law to solve global problems and 4) the spread of democracy.

This fourth pillar has been the weak link in Canadian foreign policy for over a decade, as the report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development found in June 2019. Furthermore, while democracy has been overlooked in general, the adoption of a feminist approach to international democracy assistance is virtually non-existent. The trickle of democracy support programs that continue to operate under FIAP have taken a piecemeal, ad hoc approach to advancing women's political participation and leadership. Canada has the opportunity to articulate and operationalize a comprehensive Feminist Foreign Policy that prioritizes democracy support in line with the existing FIAP. This is a unique opportunity for Canada to leverage its diplomatic engagement to modernize the RBIO while employing a feminist approach.

Contrary to the phrasing of the prompt questions provided here, a feminist approach to foreign policy is not a simple "numbers game" to increase the representation of diverse groups of women and other underrepresented groups in global bodies, boards, and value chains, etc.

A feminist approach to foreign policy would involve people of all genders working together to advance democratic institutions, processes and values that disrupt patriarchal and male-dominated power structures, enshrine human rights and prioritize gender equality across diverse populations and partisan lines.<sup>1</sup> This can be achieved through a number of reforms and innovations in current approaches to democracy assistance<sup>2</sup>:

- Policies protecting women's rights and participation should no longer be viewed as secondary when determining the quality of democracy. A feminist approach to democracy assistance would work to end the practice of "gender exceptions"

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<sup>1</sup> ibid

<sup>2</sup> ibid

to the hierarchy of law and the measurement of electoral integrity.<sup>3</sup> It would measure electoral processes and quality of democracy outcomes according to feminist principles and support democratic design that enshrines these principles at the highest levels of leadership;

- The current dominant approach to gender analyses in democracy assistance should change from assessing the degree to which women are inserted into patriarchal democratic institutions and processes, to the extent to which those institutions and processes are transformed by feminist principles and feminist actors (male and female). In designing new approaches, a power-analysis approach should be used to identify spaces of change for women's political participation, as well as opportunities where women are proactively engaging to surmount patriarchal constraints.<sup>4</sup> This may reflect engaging with other institutions that most frequently reproduce state-patriarchy, including schools, religious institutions and media, as well as legal discriminations and systems, including electoral system design;
- Feminist approaches must incentivize and hold implementing partners accountable for ensuring gender parity, diversity and inclusion internally, among leadership and staff.<sup>5</sup> To date, no democracy assistance organization has been headed by a woman and senior-level appointments are heavily male-dominated;
- A feminist approach would ensure that democratic transitions are recognized as an integral part of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and incorporated across all applicable policies and programs.<sup>6</sup>
- Such an approach to democracy would prioritize ending impunity for violence against women in conflict situations as well as politics (VAWP), including offline and online. VAWP institutionalizes women's subordinate position in society by

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<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> Bardall, Nov 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Bardall, G. "Recharge Canadian International Development Assistance". Policy Options. August 9, 2019.

<https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/august-2019/recharge-canadian-international-development-assistance/>

<sup>6</sup> Bardall, G & Emily Meyers. "Violence against Women in Politics: A Barrier to Peace and Security" US CSWG-WPS. Policy Brief. May 2018. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/11th-US-CSWG-May-16-2018-Policy-Brief.pdf>



coercively excluding them from state governance, making it the ultimate expression of state patriarchy and a tool of authoritarian advancement;<sup>7</sup>

- Ensure adequate resources and training for implementing feminist policy for implementing agencies and in beneficiary programs.

Failure to integrate a comprehensive feminist approach is no longer a simple shortcoming in foreign policy: it is a liability exploited by bad actors. It is often assumed that democracy and gender equality are inextricably correlated and that all actions that support democratization unfailingly advance women's political participation and empowerment. The reality is much more complex. Three issues in particular impact the relationship between gender and democracy in today's geopolitical space: gaps and shortfalls in mainstream democratization dynamics; manipulation of gender equality by sham democracies; and outright attacks on gender equality as part of autocratic assaults on democracy and human rights.

**Challenges with mainstream democratization practices** are often connected to post-conflict dynamics. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security aims to promote and support women's active and meaningful participation in all formal and informal conflict-prevention and conflict-resolution mechanisms and institutions and mainstream a gender perspective into all peace and security activities and strategies. As challenging as 1325 has been to implement in peacemaking, translating it into the post-conflict space is even more difficult. Even where 1325 successfully brings women into peace processes, once negotiations end and states return to the "business as usual" of elections and institution building, women often drop off the political map and retreat or are pushed to the margins of leadership. State institutions are recaptured by traditional – often male – actors and the basic dynamics underlying the original conflict remain unchanged. This pattern holds true for many post-authoritarian and post-revolution contexts as well. A feminist Canadian approach

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<sup>7</sup> Bardall, G. "Violence, Politics and Gender". *Contentious Politics and Political Violence*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics. Feb. 2018.



to democracy assistance could lead the way in applying the 1325 agenda to democratization processes.

Where women successfully gain a foothold in politics in transitional or semi-democratic states, their progress is often uneven and can result in structural imbalances between experienced ruling party women and “outsider” women. Still more troubling, if women’s political leadership becomes associated with a single political party or an oppressive regime, it can politicize women’s rights and cause serious setbacks for gender equality and women’s empowerment over the long term. A gender-sensitive, Canadian-led vision could elevate descriptive (demographic) and substantive (ideological) diversity as fundamental components of democracy.

### **Gender equality and women’s empowerment are lynchpins of autocratic strategy**

today. Since the post-Cold War rise of democracy, semi-authoritarian states have adopted countless strategies to masquerade as democracies to gain domestic and international legitimacy, including manipulating gender equality policy. As a result, we witness many successful examples of semi-democratic regimes ostensibly advancing women’s political rights, while actually undermining both the democracy and feminist agendas. These autocrats regularly exploit unsophisticated, uncritical and latently sexist Western views on women’s political participation that assume women to be monolithic and interpret “women in politics” as unconditionally synonymous with democracy. Although women’s presence in government positions is vital to advancing political gender equality, autocrats also strategically use quotas, diplomatic and ministerial assignments and participation in international women’s fora to distract from other rights violations and bolster their perceived democratic legitimacy in the international community. A gender-sensitive approach to democracy assistance must recognize and resist these tactics.

Finally, a renewed, feminist commitment to democracy is urgently needed because **global autocrats are increasingly weaponizing gender issues to attack the overall international human rights system at the core of Canadian values.** Across the globe, affronts to women’s rights, feminist values and women in politics are on the rise in the



political discourse and actions of autocratic leaders, with both domestic and foreign targets.

These assaults are sometimes overt, such as in Sri Lanka, India, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Turkey and Pakistan, where authoritarian regimes have attacked women's and minority rights to portray themselves as defenders of majority male-dominated social structures. Violence against women in politics has become increasingly visible and is fed by domestic and foreign authoritarians who capitalize on existing sexist attitudes to exacerbate ongoing political gender violence and other barriers to women's political ascendancy. Foreign election-meddling and disinformation campaigns actively promote sexism and gender violence.

Attacking gender equality and promoting sexism is part of a larger strategy to promote the social values and political climate that facilitate the growth of autocracy – specifically, by feeding social intolerance, fear of change and the sense of insecurity that autocracy thrives on. By undermining the human rights system, this strategy delegitimizes the institutions and structures that both uphold human rights and sanction authoritarian regimes for violating them. Indeed, assaulting women's rights and promoting intolerance serve a dual purpose for authoritarians, by crippling the international bodies created to constrain them and building constituencies supportive of further autocratization.

These complex challenges are the new face of the crisis of democracy in the world today. Understanding the gender dimensions of democracy and autocracy are essential to protecting and advancing human rights. Canada's long history of promoting gender equality across foreign policy and development assistance programs position it to lead democracy assistance into a new era that accounts for these delicate dynamics.

*The time has come for an integrated feminist approach to foreign policy with democracy at its core.* By allowing gender to exist in the hazy margins of democracy criteria, democratic states have too often allowed these values to be captured and instrumentalized. Under Canadian leadership, the international community of democracies can meaningfully integrate feminist principles into their definitions and



measurements of democratic progress. Recommendations to achieve a feminist approach to the democracy pillar of the RIBO:

- **Measuring democracy and political gender equality with intersectional standards that emphasize political pluralism and socioeconomic diversity**

Canada should continue to look beyond the mass of women in politics to the make-up of these women, incorporating indicators of pluralism and diversity across sex-disaggregated statistics and creating new measures of transformative political impact and social change. This includes socioeconomic diversity and the representation of ethnic and religious minorities, persons with disabilities, youth and the LGBTQ2 community. It also means focusing on multi-partisanship in democracy, from multiparty elections to structures of governance that allow for multi-partisan checks and balances. Where multi-partisan politics fail, the foundations of democracy and peace are threatened. It is critical that strategies of inclusive governance address the roots and effects of uneven political playing fields, support multi-partisanship, enhance the capacity of professional political parties and improve publicly available political information. Likewise, technical electoral assistance and professional electoral observation remain core components of assistance to inclusive governance.

- **Achieving and going beyond descriptive representation**

Achieving a “critical mass” of women in elected bodies should remain a focus of aid investment, including supporting the appropriate design of electoral quotas. However, it is also important to look beyond numbers and emphasize the substantive contributions of women in public life. Examples include assistance programs that train and provide mentoring opportunities to women aspirants and candidates, as well as work with women in Parliament and other elected offices to design and advance their policies, establish women’s caucuses, and support constituent outreach. Likewise, civic and voter education activities build awareness and encourage women’s participation as voters. Technical guidance to electoral commissions lowers barriers and obstacles for women’s access to the polls. Advocacy and sensitization measures call on political parties, governments and others to take necessary measures to reach the goals of their national action plans and international commitments for women’s participation in public office. Still other measures support legal reform initiatives to abolish discriminatory



laws and encourage supportive legal frameworks or to reduce violence against women in politics.

- **Ending the double-standard for electoral standards in democratization processes**

An electoral double standard operates in democratization processes today. In practice, some laws often count more than others when it comes to determining how democratic a democracy is, regardless of the hierarchy of law. The trouble is, however, the laws that end up in the second-tier are often those designed to defend women's participation and security in the exercise of their civil and political rights. Recently, Kenya and Haiti, respectively, have annulled national elections and undergone upheaval over electoral irregularities. Yet in both cases, blatant violations of constitutional law were not the issue behind the turmoil — because those violations pertained to the protection of women's space in state institutions. Policies protecting women's rights and participation should no longer be viewed as secondary when determining the quality of democracy. A feminist approach to democracy assistance would work to end the practice of “gender exceptions” to the hierarchy of law and the measurement of electoral integrity.

- **Ending impunity for violence against women in politics**

Democratization remains incomplete where half the population is subject to discrimination and political violence. Violence against women in politics targets women who participate in public or political life, either specifically because they are women or in distinctly gendered ways. It institutionalizes women's subordinate position in society by coercively excluding them from state governance. This unique form of violence terrorizes and degrades its individual victims, undermines democracy by enforcing patriarchal control of democratic institutions and impedes the economic growth potential associated with greater women's political participation. Violence against women in politics is the ultimate expression of the patriarchy and a tool of authoritarian advancement. Until it is systematically addressed, many electoral processes remain at





risk of reproducing patriarchal structures that exclude and silence women's voices and foster authoritarian growth. A feminist approach to democracy assistance would integrate ending this form of violence as a core precept.

- **Moving past patriarchal institutions**

Inserting women into institutions with embedded systems of patriarchy fails to address the roots of exclusion and may reproduce the patriarchal structures that place women in subordinate positions. In designing new approaches, a power-analysis approach should be used to identify spaces of change for women's political participation, as well as opportunities where women are proactively engaging to surmount patriarchal constraints. This may reflect engaging with institutions that most frequently reproduce state-patriarchy, including schools, religious institutions and media, as well as legal discriminations and systems, including electoral system design.

- **Even more than substantive representation in state formation and democratic reform**

Looking even further, foreign aid may engage the broader forms of politics that shape gender inequality and injustice within societies and hinder inclusive political participation. This type of approach would focus on women's political roles during critical moments of state formation and reform, and the role of both formal and informal institutions and spaces, such as village councils, shuras, tribal structures and associations. It would leverage the interests, incentives and ideas of different actors that shape the prospects for political inclusion and the promotion of gender equality within different spaces.

- **Accompanying change**

Women's political participation often follows generational patterns and is currently undergoing a generational shift in many parts of the world — for example, in post-communist countries. Similarly, major legislative changes, such as the introduction of quotas, have varying impacts over time and need to be continually revisited. It is



important to understand changes in the drivers of political participation between generations and over policy lifespans.

- **Looking inward**

Although witnessing important changes in recent years, international democracy assistance as a field of practice is a historically male-dominated profession. In redefining its engagement in this area, Canada should proactively revisit gender balance in the field of practice and hold democracy assistance providers accountable to meeting gender goals both in projects and internal structures.

(NOTE: This submission contains excerpts from the author's testimony to Parliament in 2019. Please refer to the full testimony for more detail:

<https://www.ifes.org/news/ifes-testifies-canadian-parliament-engagement-international-democracy-assistance> )