



## **Gender-Inclusive Democracy Support: A Dialogue on Options for Development Organisations and Policy Makers<sup>1</sup>**

Canada's Feminist Foreign Policy (FIAP) commits to encouraging greater political participation by women and girls, yet feminist approaches to democracy support remain weakly defined and investment in women's political participation and empowerment is (and has historically been) underfunded. The Parliamentary Centre believes that enhanced measures to advance women's political decision-making and support for more inclusive institutions are vital for advancing gender equality and crucial for sustainable change. In order to realize this potential, it is necessary to pinpoint effective actions at the nexus of gender, inclusive governance and development outcomes.

The Parliamentary Centre Dialogue on Gender-Inclusive Democracy Support (November 2020) brought together leading academic and policy experts to identify today's best practices and current gaps in FIAP's approach to feminist democracy support.

### **Key takeaways:**

- **It's time for a feminist definition of feminism in public policy**

The way we define feminism in public policy impacts the resulting policies. The old, neo-liberal "add women and stir" approach is still with us. Although FIAP is light years ahead of what came before, it doesn't articulate a truly feminist vision and, as a result, it falls short in realizing its potential to transform the institutions that sustain the oppression and exclusion of women. Advancing a feminist approach to democracy and governance assistance is a powerful space to make headway on this.

- **Promoting feminism in democracy and governance is about transforming systems and institutions as well as supporting women's leadership**

Empowering women and building their capacity is vital to closing the gap in women's representation in politics, but it doesn't stop there. We need to set goals for integrating and changing decision-making institutions and use the levers of sustainable development to achieve

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<sup>1</sup> The statements here were made by speakers at the event and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Parliamentary Centre or its Board of Directors



results. Feminist democracy assistance is about changing systems – parliaments, election systems, and political parties – not only looking at outcomes. In particular, political parties are often gatekeepers that prevent women’s participation and require a bold and coherent engagement approach.

- **The experience of indigenous women in Canada can inform our international feminist policies**

Despite women’s historic leadership in indigenous history, they are under-represented in territorial government today. Patriarchal traditions in leadership and family care responsibilities are contributing factors. Yet, if you’re trying to change how things are done and increase participation, you have to involve the affected people in how decisions get made. Indigenous activism and advocacy in Canada can inform how to elevate grassroots voices in governance.

- **Investing in grassroots activism is a lever of change, but needs to harmonize with broader strategy**

FIAP revived investment in the strengthening the infrastructure of women’s activism and organization, especially under the Equality Fund, Voices for Change and Women’s Leadership streams. However, overall budgets lines haven’t significantly changed and gender is often tangential to other goals. Furthermore, the Canadian government relies heavily on private sector investment which often can contradict human rights and equality aspects of FIAP.

- **Let’s focus on the kinds of grassroots empowerment that make a difference**

Unless there’s intention and linking to systems of government, grassroots empowerment does not necessarily produce systemic change. Like everyone else, women voters unite around similar sets of ideas and identities that are offered up by patriarchal political parties, so simple voter turnout programs don’t necessarily produce feminist change. Creating networks of women and developing their advocacy techniques creates new relationships and sets of knowledge that can actually change the ways political parties make decisions. Likewise training up interested people to become a candidate is vital, especially since it often takes women a lot longer to agree to be on the ballot than men.

- **Indigenous experience shows the challenges and opportunities for empowering women in politics**

Societies need role models in the positions that we want our children to pursue; it is difficult to envision new paths without seeing people from our communities and indigenous groups in power. Part of grassroots engagement is encouraging girls to believe they have the opportunities. We need to care for our leaders as whole people because the demands on political women pioneers are enormous – for example, we want indigenous women to be participating in the governance process of every community at every level, but they risk burning out because there are so few people doing so much. Mentorship in community development can increase the number of people who are active in their communities, a first step forward in leadership at all levels.

- **The language of feminism must not become a smokescreen for neo-liberal economics**

FIAP has seen more private funding and participation, reflecting a broader shift in the international development paradigm. However, women’s empowerment does not mean turning every woman into an entrepreneur. This outdated vision from the 1970s risks undermining feminist outcomes and instrumentalizing women’s equality and empowerment. A human rights approach and feminist approach to development demands a certain level of accountability which can be problematic with the private sector.

**Recommendations:**

- Systems take multiple years to change and multi-year funding should be made available to reflect this
- Critical analysis and real data matter: lets invest in what works, starting with the grassroots
- Let’s rethink funding structures and normalize women’s participation in politics
- More men need to engage in articulating and implementing feminist policy and stand as allies to promote women’s emerging at the grassroots level
- We need to practice what we preach at home

Speaker	Quote
Nancy Karetak-Lindell	“I am Inuk, so I am one of the residential school survivors that had to learn to live in a different world than my parents and grandparents grew up in - a world of transition. Part of that was to enable us to be able to participate in modern governance that was different than what my ancestors went through. A lot of change has happened in my lifetime. As a child growing up no one would have ever convinced me that I would be able to sit in the



	house of commons later in my life so that's just to show how much change we've gone through as a people in this great country of our's."
Laura Parisi	"My conclusion has been to put in layman's, or laywoman's, terms, has been that the FIAP doesn't actually represent a whole lot of progress in terms of its articulation of feminism when it comes to women's economic empowerment. It's still very meyered in the 70s model of 'women and development' which is usually what I would call the 'add women and stir' model."
Paddy Torsney	"To my way of thinking, you don't get success in health, or education, or sustainable development unless you're changing governance structures, making sure things are integrated, making sure that people who are affected by the decisions are part of the decision-making process. So we need to have women in those driver's seats and we need to have effective civil society and others using those levers that exist through the sustainable development goals to make change."
Nancy Karetak-Lindell	"When I was a Member of Parliament, I would look at some of the programs Canada was doing internationally and always thought 'we should be doing the same international work, these programs in the indigenous communities because we're very similar to the other countries that Canada is helping internationally."
Paddy Torsney	"The joke is: you ask a guy if he's going to run and he says 'sure!' and he goes home and tells his wife and kids that he's about to run. You ask a woman to run and she says 'hmmm... what's involved? What do I have to do? Where's the money? How is this going to be? Let me just check with my kids and my husband. Let me get the house in order' and then they come back and say 'yeah, I'm in.' Sometimes the party still gives the seat to the other guy."
Liam Swiss	"I think the piece that's missing in the FIAP and the approaches that are happening here and what's happening in our domestic politics is the lack of political will to make the institutional systemic changes that are going to help level the field. We can empower women all we want to step up to the plate, but if that plate is inherently discriminatory and systemically pushing women away from it then it's actually a need to change the plate."
Liam Swiss	<b>We need to encourage women to stand up to the plate, but if the plate systemically pushes women away from it, then you need to change the plate</b>



Paddy Tornsey	<b>Women tend to run for office when they feel that it is the next step in fixing an issue. They almost do it out of a sense of obligation. Again generalities aren't great, but men often do it for the power or because they "think they'd be good at it"</b>
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