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A Feminist Approach to Supporting International Democracy: Canada's Contribution

Gabrielle Bardall, Ph.D.

Gender Advisor, International Foundation for Electoral Systems
Research Fellow, Centre for International Policy Studies, University of Ottawa

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The time is now for Canada to step forward to defend democratic values worldwide. The steady decline in democracy, proliferation of semi-authoritarian states and rise of foreign autocratic promotion and domestic right-wing populist movements across the globe threaten the international human rights system upon which democracy is grounded.

Of the many foreign policy tools at Canada's disposal, supporting democracy abroad is one of the least costly and most effective contributions the country can make to resist bad actors, uphold global values, protect national security and invest in a more peaceful, prosperous world. Canada has a unique role to play in cultivating democracies, particularly given the important – yet frequently overlooked and misunderstood – link between democracy and gender equality. Inclusive democratic governance – and the peace and public welfare it facilitates – generates healthier societies, is more effective in responding to climate change, promotes prosperous trading partners, and builds a more secure world.

Feminism – i.e., the advocacy of gender equality and women's empowerment – is a basic Canadian value shared across all parties and uniting Canadians. A feminist approach to democracy assistance is critical to respond to current geopolitical challenges, including democratic stagnation, recurrent conflict and resurgent authoritarianism. As a historic leader in this space, as well as in other important areas of inclusive governance such as climate change, conflict resolution and religious tolerance, Canada can shape a fresh approach to democracy assistance that elevates core human rights. Canadian experience with the political inclusion of indigenous peoples and multiculturalism are also valuable in constructing a new vision of democracy assistance.

This testimony offers an interpretation of what a feminist approach to democracy assistance may look like in practice. I emphasize the importance of diversity and intersectional inclusion in measuring democracy and argue that gender equality and women's empowerment should be meaningfully incorporated into notions of electoral integrity, representation and electoral legal standards. Support for democracy abroad should emphasize ending impunity for violence against women in politics and look to multiple forms of and spaces for representation. The structures and mechanisms of providing this support should mirror these values as well.

Defining Democracy Assistance

Although democracy promotion may encompass a broad range of actions, from diplomacy to military intervention, here it is interpreted to concern only those noncoercive activities undertaken with the explicit intent to “foster democratic opening in a nondemocratic country or to further a democratic transition in a country that has experienced democratic opening.”¹ The actors of democracy promotion include multilateral, bilateral, quasi-state and nonstate actors. Specific activities may include: electoral assistance and observation; political party support; constitutional and legal advising; support for the rule of law and justice sector; parliamentary strengthening; decentralization processes, federalism and local government support; civic and voter education; security sector support and reform; and assistance to trade unions and independent media.²

The phrase “supporting inclusive governance” reflects democratic values projected across any given political system. This comprises the inclusion of diverse and representative voices from any society or population, and particularly those most commonly excluded: people living in poverty, women, indigenous populations, persons with disabilities, youth and ethnic and religious minorities.³

Why Does the World Need a Vision of Democracy Anchored in Feminism?

Democracy is a core Canadian value and a bedrock of peace and prosperity. Others have outlined many of the alarming threats to democracy today and made compelling arguments for renewed Canadian engagement. But a critical aspect of the democratic equation that is profoundly impacted by the rise of

authoritarianism and to which Canada is uniquely placed to respond is the issue of gender. Gender equality and women's political empowerment, the focus of United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal 5, have not been consistently well-served by traditional approaches to democracy assistance and are seriously and newly threatened by the current environment.

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 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. Incumbent parties that face fewer threats to their legislative majority are more likely to make space for women candidates. In contrast, opposition parties face fierce competition for fewer seats, resulting in a crowding-out effect for women and potential candidates from other marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities or persons with disabilities. For example, authoritarian states like Burundi and Rwanda have strikingly high numbers of ruling party women in Parliament, while simultaneously demonstrating shocking repression of critical feminist voices and deep marginalization of opposition party women.

Where this effect continues over time, structural imbalances between experienced ruling party women and "outsider" opposition women can emerge. 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 also 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.⁴ 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 ascendency.⁵ Foreign election-meddling and disinformation campaigns actively promote sexism and gender violence, as forthcoming research in Ukraine from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems illustrates.⁶⁷

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.⁸

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.

A Distinctly Canadian Approach to Democracy and Development

Although the term “feminist” only made its appearance in Canadian foreign policy under the current government, gender equality and women’s empowerment are bedrocks of Canadian values and have been at the heart of Canadian foreign policy for decades. Canada adopted Women in Development (WID) guidelines as far back as 1976 and has had a WID policy since 1984. WID was identified as a priority theme for Canada’s Official Development Assistance program beginning in 1995, when Canada’s Federal Plan – a response to the Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, China – set a course to affirm “Canada’s international leadership role in promoting gender equality globally,” recognizing that “[t]he promotion of gender equality — as a human rights, social justice and development issue — is an important part of Canada’s foreign and aid policies. It is based on a belief that equal rights for women are an essential and inherent component of progress on overall human rights and democratic development; and that sustainable and equitable development will only be achieved if women are able to participate as equal partners and decision makers in the sustainable development of their societies.”⁹ Indeed, feminism has long been embedded across Canadian policy and is one of the true nonpartisan values uniting Canadians.

Part of a Bigger Picture: Inclusion and Diversity at the Heart of Canada's Democracy Vision

Heeding the call of UN Sustainable Development Goal 16, to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels,” requires a broad vision, including and going beyond the feminist issues just described. In addition to its legacy of supporting women’s rights, Canada brings distinct strengths to this area of international aid, including historical and institutional factors (experience with multiculturalism; world-renowned electoral administration; parliamentary and federal institutions; and leadership in negotiation and conflict mediation) and social and cultural advantages (global trust and respect as a democratic middle-power, as well as highly experienced democracy and governance professionals). Canadian experience and vision offer unique contributions to multiple areas of democratic inclusion beyond feminism, including indigenous rights, gender and climate change, conflict resolution and social tolerance.

Indigenous Rights and Political Inclusion

Long overlooked and peppered with a history of injustice and failure, the rights of indigenous peoples are an emerging area in the body of international rights and practice.¹⁰ Canada’s indigenous peoples and other Canadian advocates of indigenous rights may contribute to supporting inclusive governance for indigenous peoples abroad by furthering all articles of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (A/RES/61/295), and specifically those articles reflecting issues of governance, notably:

- Supporting the rights and institutions empowering indigenous peoples to “participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions.” (Article 18)
- Assisting procedures to enable and ensure that “States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.” (Article 19)
- Defining approaches to maintain and strengthen distinct political, legal and cultural institutions while retaining the right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the life of the State and to identify State mechanisms for redress. (Article 5)
- Assist States to “establish and implement, in conjunction with indigenous peoples concerned, a fair, independent, impartial, open and transparent process, giving due recognition to indigenous peoples’ laws, traditions, customs and land tenure systems, to recognize and adjudicate the rights of indigenous peoples pertaining to their lands, territories and resources, including those which were traditionally owned or otherwise occupied or used. Indigenous peoples shall have the right to participate in this process.” (Article 26)

Gender and Climate Change

Women frequently experience higher risks and greater burdens from climate change in situations of poverty, and their unequal participation in decision-making processes compound inequalities and can prevent them from contributing to climate-related planning, policymaking and implementation.¹¹ Research demonstrates that recognizing the important contributions of women as decision-makers and experts across sectors and at all levels can lead to successful, long-term solutions to climate change.¹² Canada’s leadership in this area is notable, including playing a significant role in the negotiations to adopt a gender action plan at the 2017 UN Climate Change Conference to support women’s meaningful participation in negotiations and strengthen gender-responsive policy development under the UN

Framework Convention on Climate Change. Under the Trudeau government, Canada has linked its \$2.65 billion climate commitment to women's empowerment and gender equality, in alignment with its international assistance policy. In advancing a renewed commitment to democracy, these links can be more closely drawn.

Democracy Support in Deeply Divided Societies

Security is the most important precondition for democracy. Canada's commitment to peacekeeping and peace building should include support from conflict through democratic transition processes. Deeply divided societies require time to heal from legacies of mistrust. Canadian democracy assistance would benefit from lessons learned from its historic engagement in peace building, including:

- Drawing on deep sociological approaches to understand the historical roots of conflict;
- Emphasizing national dialogues and ownership in defining new institutions, laws and policies that address conflicted topics;
- Recognizing and adapting to widely varying capacity between divided states (e.g. Afghanistan versus Somalia); and
- Recognizing that time is critical in healing deep divisions. Targeted, small scale initiatives, niche focuses, and managed expectations are important when working in these states.

Promoting Tolerance in a Sectarian Age

Promoting tolerance in a sectarian age is more important than ever because religious divides are a pronounced and growing form of conflictual division in many parts of the world. Lessons for peace and democracy start with tolerance and the respect for diversity of religious opinions. Democracy is rooted in civility, respect for dissenting views and acceptance of political defeat.

In some cases, religious extremism is a byproduct of poverty and failed state services. In Pakistan, for example, families often send their children to religious schools in the absence of more moderate public education.¹³ A notable challenge to promoting inclusion are states such as Saudi Arabia, which actively finances imams with intolerant messages. Programmatically, states with secular traditions often struggle to work with faith-based organizations and to understand faith-based peace.¹⁴ In any circumstance, it is extremely difficult to find openings to promote tolerance in contexts of deep, faith-based divisions.

As recognized by Global Affairs Canada (GAC), Canada has made the promotion of pluralism and inclusion, as well as the recognition of and respect for diversity, a priority. GAC works to enhance the international promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief. This is a core contribution to an inclusive approach to international support for democracy.

In sum, alongside feminist values, these factors are vital to a renewed commitment to democracy in the world and are areas where Canada's distinct experience, values and vision can provide important contributions.

Recommendations to the Committee: Implementing a Feminist Approach to Democracy Assistance

While only one of the many important reasons Canada must renew its engagement in democracy assistance, feminism is a vital issue that Canada is uniquely positioned to advance. Political inclusiveness is a basic component of development, peace and justice and offers a proven return on investment. Gender equality in political leadership results in lower levels of state corruption;¹⁵ greater emphasis on conflict resolution and socioeconomic policy; and improvements in the lives of women, children and other traditionally marginalized groups.¹⁶ Further, promoting gender equality and women's

empowerment as integral parts of democracy is strategic to combating emerging authoritarian tendencies.

The time has come for an integrated feminist approach to democracy. 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.

When shaping Canada's feminist approach to democracy assistance, the committee should consider:

- **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"¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² 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.

Conclusion

Canada is called to support inclusive governance in UN Sustainable Development Goal 16 and can play an essential role in protecting and advancing democracy abroad. By renewing its commitment, Canada may reevaluate the fundamentals of how to defend and advance democracy. This means recognizing that electoral integrity does not exist where the rule of law is not applied to protect and defend all citizens equally. That there can be no gender exceptions to the hierarchy of law. Democratization remains incomplete where half the population is subject to discrimination and political violence in all its forms. Until violence against women in politics is systematically addressed, many electoral processes remain at risk of reproducing the patriarchal structures that exclude and silence women's voices. Adapting a feminist approach to democracy and democracy assistance is vital to overcoming this fundamental human rights challenge.

About Dr. Gabrielle Bardall

Gabrielle Bardall holds a Ph.D. in comparative democratization from the University of Montreal, and degrees from McGill University and the Paris Institute of Political Studies. As an electoral assistance specialist, she has worked in more than 40 countries with international organizations including the UN Development Programme, UN Women, the UN Department of Peacekeeping Affairs, International Foundation for Electoral Systems, Democracy Reporting International, the Carter Center and others on elections, democracy and women's political empowerment. She was awarded a Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation scholarship for her doctoral work and convened the workshop "Canada's Role in International Democracy Promotion" in 2016. She is an alumna of the Women's Campaign School at Yale University and the American Political Science Association Congressional Fellowship program. Her writing appears in various Canadian, U.S. and international newspapers, policy sites and academic journals. Bardall is currently IFES' gender advisor and a research fellow at the University of Ottawa's Centre for International Policy Studies.

About IFES: "A Vote for Every Voice"

For over thirty years, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) – a U.S.-based nonpartisan nonprofit – has worked in over 145 countries to support citizens' right to participate in free and fair elections. Credible elections are the cornerstone of a healthy democracy and enable all persons to exercise their basic human right to have a say in how they are governed.

Currently, IFES works in over 30 countries to strengthen democratic processes across the electoral cycle. Our core service lines include the long-term capacity building of election commissions, the broadening of citizen participation and inclusion, the empowerment of marginalized groups and research and surveys that inform our work and further the democracy, rights and governance discipline.

IFES believes that democracy is rooted on the equal and empowered inclusion of women and men in the governance of their countries. Based on international human rights standards, best practices and cutting-edge research, IFES promotes political participation, justice and equal rights for women and men around the world. We believe in integrating an intersectional feminist perspective across all our democracy and elections assistance work, planning and measuring our programs in terms of their transformational impact on gendered power dynamics. We work to support current and future women leaders, encourage and assist male champions of women's rights, and address important barriers to women's political participation, such as violence against women in politics and the gender dimensions of political finance.

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