

— Episode One in the Gender Equality Series

Gender Equality: The Federal Advantage and Disadvantage

Abstract

In this episode, the first in the gender equality series, the Forum of Federations speaks with experts from Australia, Ethiopia, Switzerland, Canada and Brazil on the impact of federal and decentralized governance on gender equality. The advantages and disadvantages of these systems is explored comparatively to gain an understanding on how gender equality can further be supported in these governance systems.



Speakers

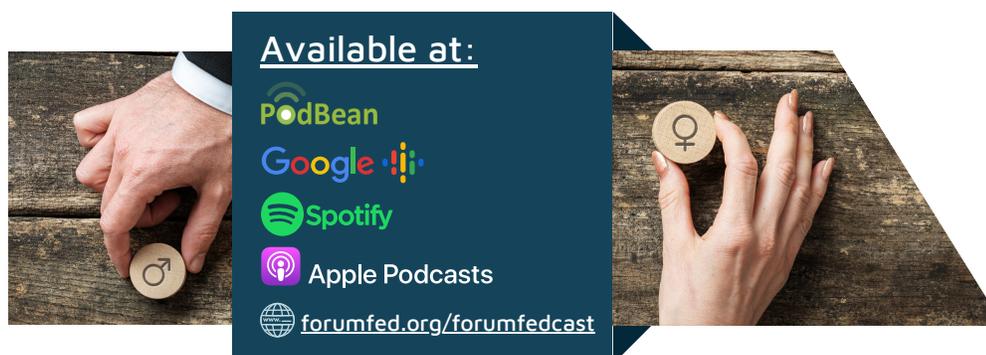
Dr. Christine Forster: Associate Professor and Associate Dean International, University of New South Wales.

Sosena Mulatu: Gender Specialist, Forum of Federations.

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The Federal Advantage and Disadvantage

- 1) Advantages
 - 2) Disadvantages
 - 3) Areas for Improvement and Practices to Continue
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1) Advantages

Federal and decentralized governance systems provide structural factors and opportunities conducive to advancing gender equality. These factors vary from country to country, and as Christine Forster points out, depend on factors both external and internal to governance. However, at a general level, the nature of federal and decentralized systems allows for improvements in gender equality initiatives at the local, sub-national, and national levels.

Multiple Access Points

The multilevel governance structure of federal systems means that women have multiple access points to become involved in the governance process. As Sosena Mulatu explains, this creates favourable conditions and opportunities to promote gender equality by increasing the space available to women to participate in political arenas. These multiple access points can be an advantage not only when it comes to increasing numerical representation but also the ability of women to influence policy. As Ursula Keller points out, women's representation tends to be higher in subnational executives and legislatures than in national ones. This is advantageous when central governments are resistant to gender equality reforms, as change can be pursued at the subnational level.

Opportunities for Policy Transfer

As Christine Forster explains, federal and decentralized systems create opportunities for innovation and experimentation, leading to policy transfer among subnational units and national bodies. These systems enable subnational units to try new policies regarding gender equality, and once implemented, they are often adopted by other units. For example, as Ursula Keller explains, in Switzerland, the process of policy transfer was central for women obtaining the right to vote. Some cantons gave women the right to vote in their own autonomous areas before the right was granted at the national level. This process had a spillover effect into other cantons adopting similar policies.

Local Level Governance

Because governance is closer to local communities in federal systems, this can provide more opportunities for women to participate in local decision-making and help shape the services delivered to them. Christine Forster notes that this closeness might mean that women's needs can be more readily met, and it often makes it easier for them to participate in public office. This is echoed by Sosena Mulatu, who explains there has been evidence of women's involvement contributing to the development of successful education policy at local levels in Ethiopia, which are designed to facilitate improvements and increase equality in the country.

2) Disadvantages

Though federal and decentralized systems provide opportunities for improvements in gender equality, it is crucial to recognize that these governance systems also have disadvantages. Identifying and understanding such disadvantages is essential for transformative change to continue.

Challenges with Multiple Access Points

Though the increase in access to the political arena provided by multi-level governance systems means that women have more opportunities to become involved in governance, there are also downsides to this. As Christine Forster explains, multiple access points in federal and decentralized governance systems also creates greater opportunities for conservative actors to block progressive reforms at different levels. This is particularly of concern in the areas of sexual and reproductive rights.

Challenges Associated with Local Level Governance

Just as with multiple access points, the closeness of governance to local communities in federal and decentralized systems also presents disadvantages. As noted by Christine Forster, these disadvantages are visible in certain contexts in the areas of family law and relationships where powerful elites in different regions of some countries can escape international standards on family law and entrench discriminatory practices against women at the community level.

Challenge of Establishing Uniform Rights and Opportunities for Women and Girls

As Christine Forster notes, the argument exists that federal governance systems lead to fragmentation and inconsistency. This can occur from a lack of ability that central governments may have to introduce country-wide reforms that benefit women and girls because different subnational units have the competencies and power to create their own rules and policies. In some cases, this can hinder the roll out of widespread reform on gender equality issues. For example, as Sosena Mulatu explains, there is a division of authority between national and subnational units in Ethiopia as to how to legislate on family matters. Many states have developed their own family laws that are not in line with federal law and international human rights standards.

3) Areas of Improvement and Practices to Continue

The ability of federal and decentralized systems to continue to support and advance gender equality depends on strengthening current practices and developing new ways to increase women's representation and involvement in political spaces.

Strengthening Legal Frameworks

As Marc Banzet notes, the presence of strong governance frameworks in society can promote gender equality. Continuing to advocate and support the increased protection of women's rights by strengthening the national constitution and continually working with subnational units on areas of concern is crucial. Constitutions that contain equality and non-discrimination provisions to protect gender-specific rights need to be continually reinforced and further entrenched in legal systems.

Continuing to Get More Women into Positions of Political Decision Making

There are common barriers to women's political representation in all federal countries. As Christine Forster explains, these challenges include the double burden women in office face, a lack of confidence and skills, non-supportive communities, and a lack of financial support. Use of mechanisms such as gender quotas at various governance levels to increase women's presence in political decision-making will assist in overall systemic change in terms of gender equality.

— Episode Two in the Gender Equality Series

Gender Equality: Overcoming the “Lipstick Parliament”

Abstract

In this episode, the second in the gender equality series, the Forum of Federations speaks with experts from Australia, Ethiopia, Switzerland, Canada and Brazil on factors impacting women’s political representation and participation in federal countries. Topics discussed include the role of men and boys in fostering gender equality and the relationship between economic empowerment and gender equality.



Speakers

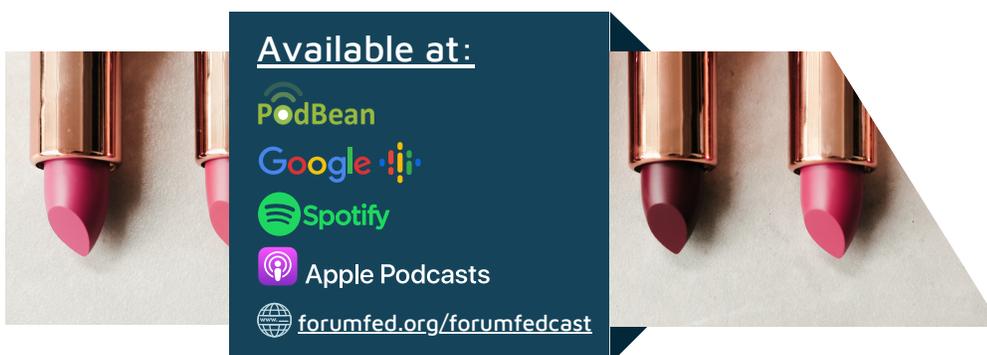
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Overcoming the “Lipstick” Parliament

- 1) Women’s Political Representation and Participation in Federal Systems
 - 2) The Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality
 - 3) Women’s Economic Empowerment and Gender Equality
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1) Political Representation and Participation

Federal and decentralized systems can benefit women both entering and participating in politics. The creation of subnational governance systems leads to more opportunities for women to enter public office and, over time, can lead to greater participation levels. Globally, significant progress has been made in the number of women holding public office, and there has been improvement in women’s participation. However, in the political arena, there remains an important deficit with regard to both the representation and participation of women which hinders progress towards gender equality.

Barriers to Entering Office

There are numerous barriers to women’s political candidacy and election in federal countries. Sosena Mulatu touches on several of these impediments in the Ethiopian context. These include personal discrimination based on gender, capacity gaps, political careers requiring long and inflexible hours, and increased pressures stemming from the double burden many women face. Such challenges are not exclusive to Ethiopia. Additional barriers in other contexts can include a lack of party support and financing available for female candidates and the challenge of building networks and influence in societies that view politics as an exclusively male realm.

Equality Mechanisms Supported by Federal Structures

According to research conducted by Christine Forster, the increased number of elected seats available in federal countries by way of multi-level governance structures does not necessarily in and of itself lead to the greater representation of women. Despite the barriers, federal systems do however create positive environments for introducing other mechanisms, such as gender quotas, that lead to increased representation. For example, in Mexico, gender quotas have been introduced at the national and subnational levels. While each subnational unit controls the quota percentage, there have been cases of policy transfer wherein one subnational unit increased percentages after seeing its neighbours do so. However, as Ilana Trombka notes, it is important to contextualize mechanisms such as gender quotas and recognize that their success depends on multiple country-specific factors. In many cases the introduction of candidate quotas alone does not necessarily mean that the number of women elected will increase.

Participation - Influence and Substantive Representation

As Marc Banzet explains, while having increased numerical representation of women in parliaments is a crucial first step, female politicians must feel that they have a voice and are safe in their work to ensure they are able to effectively influence political decision-making. For women to be active and mainstreamed participants in politics, efforts need to be made to promote women in politics and encourage them leaders in their own right. In Brazil, as Ilana Trombka notes, women’s influence is crucial in ensuring that governance structures are inclusive and representative of the population. To achieve a political system that is truly representative, substantive change must occur within parliament. She suggests that parliaments need to seriously consider what kind of parliament they want to be and how different voices and opinions can be translated into strong policy. Ensuring that female politicians have the capacity and opportunity to be influential actors is crucial to advancing gender equality more broadly within society.

2) The Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality

As aptly stated by Marc Banzet: gender equality is not only a women's issue. Recognizing men and boys as stakeholders and partners in the advancement of gender equality is essential. Substantive, systemic, and continued change in federal and decentralized systems requires the participation and support of men and boys at all levels of governance and community.

Allies

As Ursula Keller explains, men continue to play critical roles as actors who can either support or obstruct efforts at improving gender equality. Given this, to achieve meaningful gender equality, actors seeking to empower women and girls must find ways to work with men and boys in public and private spaces to advocate for the mutual benefits of gender equality. This is essential to ensuring that men and boys have the tools and understanding necessary to support women in gaining their own voices and influence in the political sphere. Canada's approach to gender equality at both a national and international level recognizes the importance of engaging with men and boys throughout the process. Marc Banzet further explains this by stressing that programs and initiatives designed to engage men and boys are crucial for transforming unequal relationships. In this sense, promoting dialogue and community engagement designed to help redefine gender expectations can be both essential and effective. At a governance level in federal countries, having male parliamentarians as allies is important. This is because, as Christine Forster notes, the damage to gender equality initiative that can be caused by fragmentation in decentralized systems, can be limited and mitigated by drawing on the support of male parliamentarians at both the national and subnational level.

3) Women's Economic Empowerment and Gender Equality

Women's economic empowerment is an important area to consider in discussions on gender equality in federal and decentralized states. Economic empowerment occurs before and after women enter the workforce through education, opportunities, and employment rights.

The Importance of Education

Ensuring that women and girls are able and encouraged to pursue education is necessary for securing economic empowerment. Prioritizing education initiatives for women and girls today is essential to ensuring gender equality initiatives in the future will be successful. As noted by Marc Banzet, while education is key to engaging women and reducing poverty worldwide, women and girls remain more likely than boys to have an abrupt end to their education. This problem highlights the necessity of engaging in meaningful action on gender equality and ensuring that governance structures recognize the importance and long-term impact on support the education of women and girls.

Opportunities to Work

Alongside ensuring women and girls are achieving higher levels of education, empowering women in federal systems also must include adequate support in the labour market. Christine Forster believes that having strong and protective employment rights guarding against discrimination, and supporting local initiatives and business through capacity enhancement mechanisms such as financial literacy training, are important to ensuring that women have the tools and space to succeed financially. In certain contexts, Ilana Trombka emphasizes, one way of getting women out of violent circumstances is to enable women to achieve economic independence through work, and thus initiatives such as gender quotas within businesses and markets aimed at the economic empowerment of women are essential in a gender-equal society.

— Episode Three in the Gender Equality Series

Gender Equality: Building a More Equal World

Abstract

In this third and final episode of the gender equality series, the Forum of Federations speaks with experts from Australia, Ethiopia, Switzerland, Canada and Brazil about gender equality and governance in development assistance, and the work being undertaken around the world to empower women and girls. Topics discussed include the relationship between gender equality and development assistance, the approaches and achievement of Canada and Switzerland's work in the area, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global gender equality.



Speakers

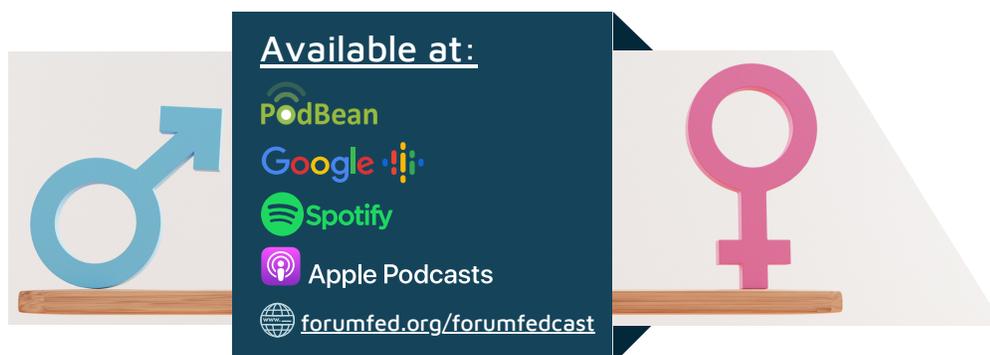
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Achieving a More Equal World

- 1) Gender Equality and Development Assistance Approaches: Canada and Switzerland
- 2) The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Gender Equality
- 3) Most Important Gender Equality and Governance Issues Going Forward

1) Gender Equality and Development Assistance Approaches

The empowerment of women and girls is a priority in development assistance efforts worldwide. Examples of the approaches taken by two federal countries - Canada and Switzerland - demonstrate the variety of options that states can adopt when seeking to implement development assistance using a gender equality lens, as well the importance of embedding this approach in governance functions.

The Gender Equality and Development Assistance Nexus

Ursula Keller explains that because gender equality and development assistance are linked, it is clear that effective, accountable, and inclusive governance is crucial for achieving gender equality. Because high levels of gender inequality are an indicator of weak governance, overcoming this weakness requires looking at both the state of women as individuals and the context and structure they live in. The Swiss development assistance approach to improving governance and gender equality is therefore two-fold, focusing on improving governance institutions to deliver services and educating citizens about their rights. This approach reflects the integrated nature of gender equality and development assistance and aims to both empower citizens and make governments accountable.

Incorporating Gender Equality into Operations and Functions of Governance

The recognition of the intrinsic link between gender equality and development assistance has led donors to support the mainstreaming of gender considerations into policymaking and public sector management. Considering how to make policy gender-responsive by looking at how the public sector works for women and girls is an approach taken by Switzerland and Canada. In the Canadian case, according to Marc Banzet, Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) creates the framework needed to put gender equality at the heart of development assistance efforts. The FIAP ensures that gender equality and women's empowerment are integrated into all aspects of Canada's approach to development assistance. These efforts recognize that women's full participation in governance functions such as leadership and decision-making are fundamental elements of inclusive and sustainable democratic societies. In the Swiss case, Ursula Keller explains that Switzerland sees the strong commitment to gender equality as indispensable to achieving the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and actively mainstreams both gender and governance concerns throughout all 17 SDGs.

On the Ground Translation of Embedded Gender Equality Approaches

Both Canada and Switzerland actively translate their embedded gender equality approaches to development assistance projects globally. As Marc Banzet notes, providing support to civil society organizations is key for Canada. For example, the Government of Canada's partnership with CARE Canada supported a 3-million-dollar project in Mali and Benin to prevent early and forced marriage by organizing and promoting community dialogue in targeted communities. As Ursula Keller explains, the Swiss approach to gender equality and development assistance prioritizes the development of local governance initiatives. For example, Switzerland has implemented local governance programming on gender-responsive budgeting in targeted countries such as Bolivia, Bangladesh, and Kurdistan.

2) The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Gender Equality

As Marc Banzet comments, COVID-19 has not been a gender-neutral crisis. The pandemic has heightened existing gender challenges and created new ones for women and girls worldwide. Dealing with these new and existing threats alongside overall pandemic recovery may prove challenging.

Disproportionate Impact on Women and Girls

Sosena Mulatu explains reports and instances of gender-based violence in Ethiopia have increased up to 30% since the beginning of the pandemic. The unintended consequences of lockdown restrictions have left vulnerable women and girls with little to no access to support and resulted in a loss of independent income. As Marc Banzet and Ursula Keller note, the loss of income generating activities in the informal economy due to pandemic restrictions is a concerning socio-economic threat to women, especially in developing countries where they comprise the majority of workers in these sectors. Given the negative effects the pandemic has had on gender equality, moving forward it is crucial that women are included in decision-making about the pandemic as well as the recovery from the crisis, and are involved to every extent possible in developing solutions.

Pandemic Recovery and Gender Equality Initiatives

Funding opportunities for gender equality programs are an important component in advancing the rights of women and girls in federal and decentralized contexts. However, the strain that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed on public finances can limit progress on gender equality efforts. As noted by Christine Forster, the successful implementation of gender equality initiatives depends on the capacity of local governments to develop and implement these initiatives and policies. The economic strains caused by the pandemic, such as increased debt and competing priorities affecting governance structures, will likely significantly impact public budgets going forward. As Ursula Keller explains, the reduction of budgets at the local level means that services crucial for women and girls will be reduced. In response to this, countries like Canada have re-focused international assistance efforts to respond to COVID-19 in terms of health and in terms of efforts designed to mitigate the impact that the pandemic has had on gender equality.

3) Important Gender Equality Issues Going Forward

Advancing gender equality is a challenge in both federal and non-federal countries. Sizable barriers remain and must continually be addressed in countries providing development assistance and in countries receiving it to foster substantive change globally.

Conflict, Violence, and Polarization

In the context of Ethiopia, Sosena Mulatu believes that the most important gender equality and governance issue in the immediate future will most likely be the presence of post-election conflicts. These situations lead to the breakdown of law and order, ethnic tensions, and violence that disproportionately affects women and girls. These challenges have gender-specific challenges such as gender-based violence and displacement that must be addressed and considered going forward. Similarly, Marc Banzet believes that the most important issue going forward will be protecting women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence. Marc notes that it is within the power of governments and civil society in federal and decentralized countries to address these pressing threats to women and girls through a mixture of legislative action, advocacy, and policy development and implementation. In Ursula Keller's opinion, another pressing challenge for governance and gender equality is the threat posed by political polarization and democratic backsliding. These factors create contexts favourable to governance structures that are not conducive to advancing or sustaining women's rights and gender equality.