



Global Summit for Democracy 2022 – European Regional Forum

Keynote Speech

By Sabra Bano Wednesday, 8th of June 2022 Budapest, Hungary

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

Herewith, I wish to congratulate The Association of European Election Officials ([ACEEEO](#)) for organizing this event. Thank you, National Electoral Institute of Mexico ([INE](#)), for a timely initiative in facilitating the upcoming Global Democracy Summit and supporting the Pre-Summit Regional Forums. Considering the current challenges faced to democracy and democratic institutions around the world, a Summit for Democracy is a well-timed call to develop a global process for the reflection, debate, and proposal in defense of free and fair elections.

It is a great honor to have been invited to this European Regional Forum by the Association of European Election Officials dedicating this keynote conversation to the gender perspectives on civic education within the scope of feminist electoral approach towards the domain of electoral policy and practice. At this occasion of the inauguration of the European Regional Forum, it is my privilege to introduce the idea of **Feminist Electoral Policy (FEP)** here.

Context

Europe by now is known to have a few feminist governments and the idea of carrying out a feminist foreign policy is at an increase outside Europe as well. The Netherlands, Spain, France, Germany, Luxembourg and Canada, Mexico, and Libya are joining Sweden's pioneering concept, declaring that their domestic and diplomatic policies will place girls and women at the center of their work.

It is at this historic juncture that a feminist assessment of the current electoral policies becomes vital and requires looking into the questions like: what is a feminist policy, does it concern the foreign policy only or does it have a domestic framework as well? How does FEP help shaping a strengthened democracy, does this effect the elections and especially the financing for elections? How important is the role of the electoral officials, experts, and management bodies in contributing to our democracies becoming an acknowledged gender equal institution? Could accomplishment of gender balanced **Election Management Bodies (EMBs)**, **Candidates lists** and **Voter's participation** be prioritized? **Is the quota-based gender parity parliament better than the elected gender-imbalanced legislative body? How far are we yet to establish a fair system of equality in electability?**

I agree that the above-mentioned queries do add to the already enlisted challenges faced to the democracy today. However, I am pleased to draw your attention to those embedded inspiring opportunities out there that an electoral experts' congregation like this may find interesting enough to attend to. I wish to invite your reflection

on the statement that **the feminist perspective on civic education serves as a rescue means as well as a reform instrument.**

Feminist electoral policy or feminist perspectives on elections and electoral system promote a policy of inclusion, equality and intersectionality where no gender dominates, and no gender is subjugated. An example of feminist electoral policy that many countries have adopted in the past few years is gender quotas. Current quota system in some situations has created a gender balanced, or even women-majority parliaments in rather a short period of time. Over the past 20 years, the historical European frontrunners of women's electoral rights (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland) have been overtaken by some countries with parity parliaments, such as Rwanda, Cuba, Nicaragua and the United Arab Emirates.

It is indeed a long overdue measure welcoming a higher number of women parliamentarians. However, this change is proving to be cosmetic considering women rights status, substantive representation of their interests, and gender equality in institutions and places at the local level. In fact, tools such as gender quotas, despite that they can automatically increase the share of women in parliamentary positions, only address the numerical aspect of gender inequality. A **Feminist Electoral Policy** as intended, advocates that the gender quota system must be considered as a short-term measure to increase women's parliamentary representation. In fact, while quotas are a genuine breakthrough towards gender equality attainment, additional tools are needed targeting the general organizational norms, work/life balance, harassment, and professional advancement.

Feminist electoral policy aims at having a fair electoral system that ensures equal access for candidacy, gender balanced representation of EMBs and facilitating of full female vote cast. An effective approach to **feminist electoral policy** can be identified in the development of gender-equal civic education. Civic education is considered a pillar to democracy. In rescuing democracy, the maintenance of its pillars requires application of new methods, thus new perspectives, and innovative practices may help redefining an inclusive Civic Virtue appealing to all citizens.

Civic Education

Democracies function well in proportion to the strength of their social capital related to what some call "civic virtue", which is more powerful when rooted in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. Knowledge of politics, political consciousness and political participation can be seen as the main objectives of civic education in modern democratic societies. Civic skills and civic knowledge result in an increased civic action. It has been shown by research that people who possess civic knowledge are more comfortable and hence more prone to participate in civic life. Effective civic learning does not just serve democratic practices, it also enacts democratic principles. Emphasis on gender equality is an important factor in the process of democratization.

The more people are civically educated and conscious, the more civic virtue is stronger, resulting in a better functioning of democracy. Thus, all sections of society, including men, women, minorities, and marginalized groups and, the institutions must be able to access civic education equally. The citizenship contract recognizes the rights of individuals to be able to equally take part in shaping the society by having awareness of their own political, economic, and social rights, and the rights of others. Furthermore, citizens need to be confident that there are efficient ways of securing their rights and that they can hold institutions and organizations accountable.

Civic equality is an essential democratic norm, where a true democracy is only established when individuals and groups systematically possess equal civic and political power and where some votes and voices do not count more or less than others. **Bridging the civic empowerment gap presents both challenges and opportunities.**

Challenges

Citizens' rights, responsibilities and duties towards society are based on individuals, groups and communities having access to and being represented in national and local government structure, and therefore being able to participate in economic, cultural, and political structures of decision-making fully. Interestingly, these fundamentals of democracy automatically do not guarantee gender equality of democratic institutions.

As known the cultural factors, customary practices, social conventions and attitudes impact the citizens political participation. Traditional values where **less is being done to change the mindset** unfortunately still find men as more adequate to lead politics and the economy. **Poor efforts** to engage individuals and institutions in a meaningful dialogue to challenge and change ideas, beliefs and attitudes toward women in politics **have severe constraints on the number of women running for public office and undertaking civic action**. Considerations that can discourage women or prevent them from getting adequate skills to participate in civic activity are for instance: difficulties in accessing quality education, the adhesion to traditional gender roles that see women as the primary caregivers of the household, and limited work opportunities.

It is evident that the higher rates of women employment coincide with the higher rates of female parliamentarians. For instance, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), in Nordic European countries, women employment rates are the highest in the world, and they have more women in power than anywhere else in Europe. In contrast, in countries where women emancipation is still tainted by social and cultural conventions and where everyday life presents women with a heavy, and usually unequal workload of income generation, food provision, childcare and household work, women are more discouraged from adopting a public role.

The obstacles to women's full realization in political life is not a problem that only affects agrarian or less industrialized communities. They are also present in post-industrial countries such as those in Europe. In the global context, gendered citizenship issues and perspectives encompass social, economic and political institutions, policies and practices. In fact, even in countries where overt discrimination against women is illegal and women's political participation is higher, their civic life engagement is still less than the men. Notably, the number of countries where women's representation in government is above 30% are very few. According to IPU, the average percentage of women in national legislatures around the world is 26.4% (IPU 2022).

Opportunities

Gender equality programming:

As explained, despite increasing attention to advance on gender-equality worldwide, persisting gender gaps in civic and political participation exist globally which potentially also offer opportunities for profound actions **in raising** public awareness about equality in civic activity and its impact, on democracy. Further, designing of a gender-equality specific civic education programing and its deliverance to groups of men, women, youth, and minorities ensure democratic engagement. These approaches must be extended to educate political parties, parliamentarians, and the national institutions to magnify the impact. The informal citizenship education channels like cafeteria, hallways, sports centers, websites, television, religious organizations, neighborhoods, and families, demand to develop programs that go beyond the simple school curricula, and community and youth training engagement.

Innovation Action, Gender Election Observation Mission:

To enhance the scope of civic education sometimes it is important to break away from set rules and practices by designing interesting and engaging innovative tools to observe, assess, report and recommend elections and electability procedures.

The official launch of the **Gender Election Observation Mission (GEOM)** in 2008, introduced a new perspective on international election observation activity. GEOM introduced a women-led, women-managed, and women-reported documentation of elections. While international women experts lead such missions, GEOM partnership prioritizes local women's organisations and networks and builds electoral knowledge capacity by training their organizational cadre. A GEOM with its feminist principle of gender equality particularly promotes gender balanced EMBs, 1:1 male: female ratio at the candidacy list and vote casting facility for all female voters.

Further these pioneering GEOMs are designed as tools to support women's participation in democratic electoral processes and to promote female leadership and gender equality at the decision-making level. Such missions document and denounce any inequality and discrimination against women that might prevent their full political engagement and contribution to the formation of functioning governments.

Electoral GBV

The witnessing of violence at some women polling stations (women by women) in early 2000 has personally motivated me to develop a tool that assesses elections from a gender perspective. GEOM instrument pays particular attention to record and report violence and harassment during an electoral cycle. The term **Electoral Gender Based Violence (Electoral GBV)** is regularly mentioned in GEOM reports and being referred to at some United Nations (UN), international and national forums, in policy documents, and in media release. The GEOM tool contributes to document and report violence against women around elections including online harassment. GEOMs drive and monitor change towards full-potential democracies that respect and represent society at large.

Conclusions

A **Feminist Electoral Policy** principle applies not to foreign policy framework only, but it must also be equally applied as a national policy, prioritized at the domestic level. The European gender equality model requires serious reshaping especially in having gender balance on candidate lists and where needed, at the level of EMBs.

A **Feminist Electoral Policy** instrument delivers to the objectives of equal participatory democracy with a mindset that is capable to manage and control inclusion, diversity and intersectionality in any democratic decision-making, governance, and resource allocation mechanism. Indeed, the global electoral community is the best hope to make democracy a gender-balanced institution delivering free, fair and transparent elections around the world.

Thank you!!

Sabra Bano, Director and [International Gender Champion](#)