

A FEMINIST APPROACH TO OPEN GOVERNMENT

Three experts discuss the role of women in making governments more inclusive, responsive and accountable



POSTED BY NIKI WILSON ON APRIL 10, 2019

The **Open Government Partnership** (OGP) is a platform through which almost 100 countries and subnational governments have agreed to make official, measurable commitments to improving government transparency, responsiveness, accountability and inclusion.

Yet despite this progressive agenda, only 25 of the 3,100 total commitments made so far take gender into account. “The OGP is an untapped avenue to address a lot of the political, economic and social disparities that are faced by women and broader gender communities,” says **Allison Merchant**, senior gender advisor with the OGP and **Results for Development**, an international health-and-education NGO.

That’s why IDRC, Results for Development and the OGP have developed the **Feminist Open Government Initiative** (FOGO), which helps promote the creation of gender-aware OGP commitments. FOGO is also tasked with conducting research that demonstrates how gender equality makes governments more responsive to their citizens, and in establishing an international coalition of partners to help drive gender equality in open government processes.

Here, Merchant and her fellow feminist open government advocates **Nnenna Nwakanma**, who is an interim policy director at the World Wide Web Foundation, and **Portia Taylor**, who is a senior policy analyst with the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat and served as part of Canada’s Open Government team, discuss what prevents women from participating in open government, how things can improve and why gender equity in governance is important.

Nnenna Nwakanma (right) and a colleague outside the home of a woman named Fifa (middle) in Dakar, Senegal, in 2018. Fifa, a former associate mayor in Dakar and an advocate for people with disabilities, collaborated in the process that led to Senegal qualifying for the Open Government Partnership. (Photo: Aldi Diassé)

On how current practices limit women’s participation in open government

PT: Government can be seen and experienced as a vault that opens only according to special codes, and when certain people are aligned and given the OK. Open government needs to speak more broadly to women and meet up with their realities. It should be a way of improving the lives of women by showing direct action on the ground on the things that matter to them.

NN: There are social barriers to women participating, because meetings are being held from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., which are the times a woman needs to take care of her children and go to work. If open government programs aren’t reaching women where they live and work, then there’s no way they’re going to participate. Open government initiatives also need to be able to communicate to all women in their own languages. If they don’t, women won’t engage, participate or take ownership.

AM: One factor is that open government practices have not yet been intentionally inclusive. We have some really great partnerships and gender commitments, but they’ve been kind of ad hoc

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and organic. It's been very much about having the right people at the right place at the right time, rather than having an intentional strategy around diversity and inclusion within stakeholder reforms, co-creation processes and implementation.

On how open government and the Open Government Partnership can be more inclusive for women

PT: It takes careful work. Not just because it requires a lot of effort, but because it requires collective effort and the acknowledgement that women are not a monolithic group of people. It's about making sure that women of different sub-groups get honoured and integrated and included in a way that works for them. In my experience, open government is more obscure to people who aren't white. If we want this to be a really reflective endeavour, it must welcome both the participation of people that are non-white, as well as good conversations between people of all ethnicities and cultures.

NN: In Cote D'Ivoire, consultations are happening across the country. When administrators do that — when they go to the people — you get better consultations, better conversations. If you bring that idea down to the subnational level, to the things that really matter to these women, then they'll be engaged.

AM: The OGP is looking for opportunities that have women-specific commitments that also consider where and how gender factors into some of our biggest core thematic areas. For example, we have a num-

ber of extractive industry and natural resources commitments within the OGP, but we don't currently have one that's gender-related. That's a problem. Take water. Globally, women and girls are the primary water collectors for their family. In African countries, women are five times more likely than men to collect drinking water for the household. So to consider a water commitment without consulting women misses out on one of the core communities that's most affected.

On how gender equity improves government

PT: It makes more sense because it more closely aligns with everyday reality. When any group of people are excluded from informing the way a government acts, that government is going to be a little bit warped about understanding how things really are on the ground.

NN: Women in politics are the strongest drivers of feminization. The higher a woman's placement in administration or at the party level or in politics, the more they serve as voices for other women and as role models to encourage other women to engage.

AM: Gender equality in governance can lead to better policymaking and can accelerate social outcomes. For instance, investments in women's educations and health demonstrably improve outcomes for children and households in society. Too often, though, we think of policy and government data as gender neutral. But if we don't think of gender within some of these contexts, it doesn't get factored into public policy — and that makes our policies less effective.

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READING AS THINKING

1. The Open Government Partnership (OGP) supports countries that have made “commitments to improving government transparency, responsiveness, accountability and inclusion”. Describe some characteristics mentioned in the article that make a government transparent, responsive, accountable and inclusive. Include any other characteristics you think an open government should have.

2. How many of the total commitments made by countries worldwide take gender into account? What percentage is that? Why do you think the percentage is so low?

3. According to Portia Taylor, Nnenna Nwakanma and Allison Merchant, what barriers do women face when they attempt to participate in government practices?

4. What do the women from the article suggest would create a government that is more inclusive of women?

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5. Apart from the ways mentioned in the article, what other approaches can you think of that would make governments and political environments more inclusive of women?

6. What arguments do the women from the article have for balancing the number of men and women in government?

THINK-PAIR-SHARE

As a class, watch the [video](#) about Helen Clark explaining the importance of gender equality in open governments. Encourage students to take notes or write down questions that come to mind while watching the video. Suggest to students that they write down one or two things about Clark that they would like to know more about. Allow students the time to research as a class Clark's career and achievements to learn more about the former prime minister of New Zealand.

Think

7. Have students pick a name from the list provided (or another individual of their choice who is not listed) and research answers to the following questions:
- Who is this person?
 - Where is this person from?
 - What is this person's academic background, career or legacy?
 - What obstacles did this person have to overcome during their lifetime?
 - What do you think is this person's most successful achievement?
 - What issues has this person dedicated their career to addressing?
 - What initiatives is this person working on now?

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Pair

Split the class into groups of three to four students. Invite students to discuss within their groups the similarities shared by the people they researched. Suggest that they come up with a team name inspired by the women they researched and have each student write down what they find most inspiring about these women.

Share

Invite each group to present their team name, research findings and the things they found most inspiring about the women they researched with the rest of the class.

ONLINE

- [Information about Helen Clark](#)
- [Gender: Open Government Partnership](#)
- [Canada's 2018-2020 National Action Plan on Open Government](#)
- [Partnership to fund gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in developing countries](#)
- [Gender equality achievements in Canada](#)

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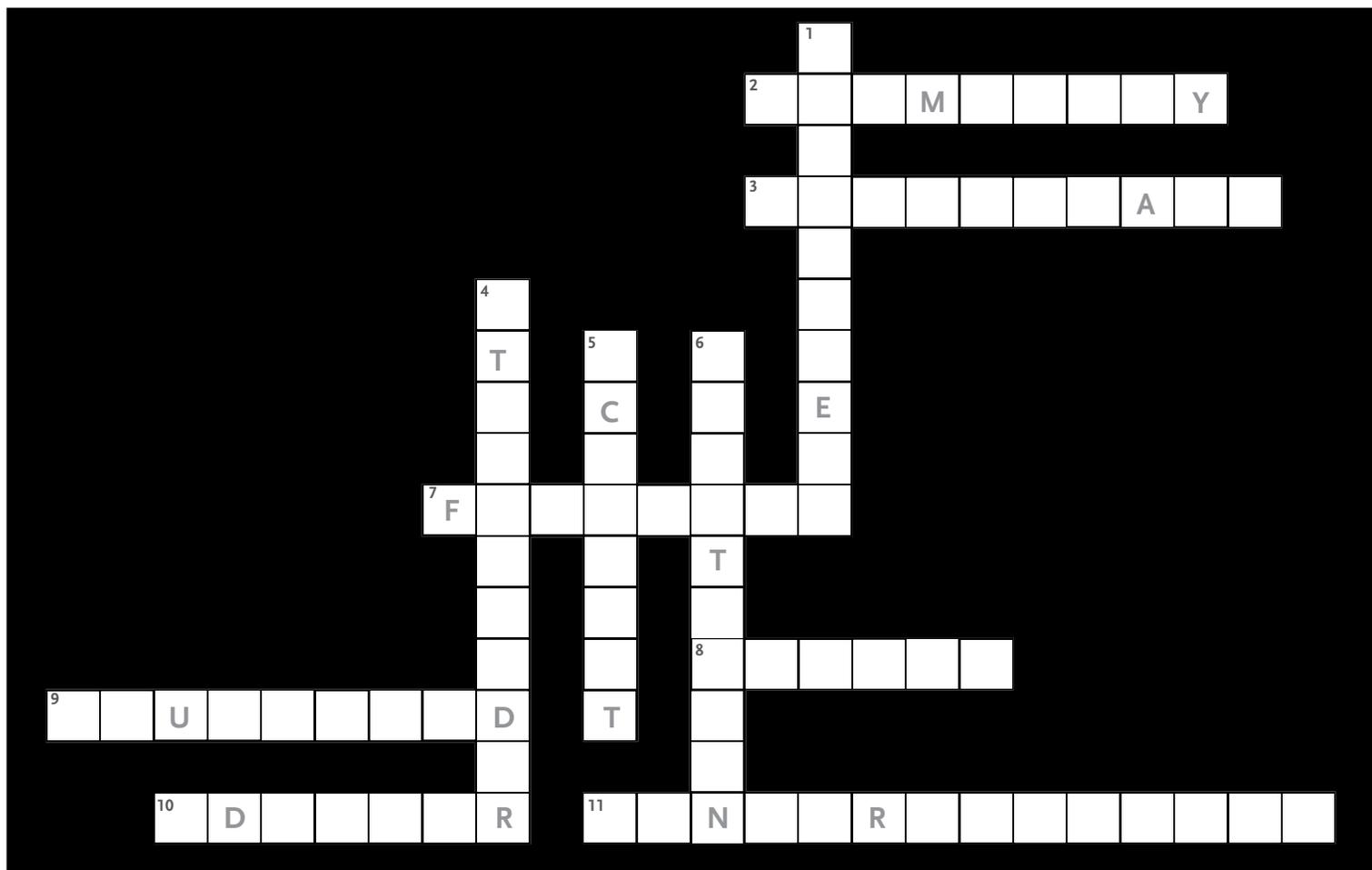
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NOTABLE FEMALE LEADERS

Alice Walker – American author
Ameenah Gurib-Fakim – Mauritian politician and scientist
Angela Merkel – Chancellor of Germany
Arundhati Bhattacharya – Former chairwoman of the State Bank of India
Billie Jean King – Professional American tennis player
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – Nigerian author
Christine Lagarde – French lawyer
Dionne Brand – Canadian poet
Ellen Johnson Sirleaf – Former president of Liberia
Françoise David – Canadian politician
Germaine Greer – Australian author
Helle Thorning-Schmidt – Former prime minister of Denmark
Indra Nooyi – Indian-American business executive
Isabelle Kocher – French businesswoman
J.K. Rowling – British author
Janet Yellen – American economist
Jeannette Corbiere Lavell – Canadian and Anishinaabe community worker
Judy Smith – American lawyer
Léa Clermont-Dion – Canadian author
Loretta Lynch – American lawyer
Malala Yousafzai – Pakistani activist
Mary Barra – CEO of General Motors
Michelle Bachelet – Chilean politician
Michelle Obama – Former First Lady of the United States
Ruth Bader Ginsburg – Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States
Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila – Prime Minister of Namibia
Sheryl Kara Sandberg - American technology executive
Sonia Gandhi – Indian politician
Tsai Ing-Wen – Taiwanese politician
Yoko Ono – Japanese-American artist

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CROSSWORD:

Across

2. A group of people living in the same place
3. A former prime minister of New Zealand
7. A person who supports women's rights and gender equality
8. A person who expresses their opinion of something in a professional capacity
9. A word for a house and its occupants
10. A person who acts as a counsellor or mentor and gives advice on a particular subject
11. A state in which access to rights or opportunities is not affected by gender

Down

1. A system or group of people governing an organized community
4. A person or business that can influence a company or be affected by a company's operations
5. A person who campaigns to bring about social or political change
6. A person whose profession is in politics (i.e., works in government)