



Canadian Study
of Parliament Group

**Gendering the Upper House: Combatting Sexual Harassment in
Canada's Senate in the #MeToo Era**

Tracey Raney

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The events of the #MeToo movement in fall 2017 revealed the prevalence of sexual harassment in workplaces around the world. Canada's Parliament is no exception: politicians and staffers (most of whom are women) have since spoken publicly about their experiences of being sexually harassed or assaulted working in and for this institution.¹ Previous studies have evaluated the House of Commons' response to sexual harassment in politics, but to date no research has been conducted on the Senate's response.² This project aims to fill this gap by examining for the first time how the upper house is seeking to combat the problem of sexual harassment in the #MeToo era.

In March 2019 the Canadian Senate announced its plans to adopt a new policy aimed to prevent Senators, staffers, and employees from being sexually harassed. This policy constitutes a major overhaul from the Senate's existing anti-harassment rules put in place a decade ago, and includes 28 "ambitious but realistic" recommendations to make it a safer workplace for all who work there.³ The purpose of this project is to evaluate the development of these plans from a gendered perspective. **The central research questions are twofold: (1) How has Canada's Senate sought to address the problem of sexual harassment to date; and, (2) How have women/gender concerns been incorporated into these processes?**

Research on the Canadian Senate is timely. Despite the fact that the upper house plays a vital role in the legislative process, most Canadians in fact know very little about it.⁴ Recent studies show that the Senate has been more active in the 42nd Parliament, exercising its powers to amend and delay legislation with greater frequency.⁵ Over the last year the Senate has also reached near gender parity, with 47% (49/105) of its seats currently occupied by women. Given

its more active legislative role and its near gender-equal status, examination of this institution from a gendered perspective is needed.

This study will be grounded in two bodies of literature. The first is that of **Feminist Institutionalism**, an offshoot of earlier institutional theories (*e.g.* Sociological, Rational Choice).⁶ This approach seeks to explain how institutional rules, norms, and behaviours often reflect traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity. It further examines how gendered dynamics are embedded within the daily ‘logic’ of political institutions, with the goal of improving gender equality within them. The project will also build on existing research on the Canadian Senate. The second main literature is that of **Violence Against Women in Politics**, an emerging area of study.⁷ This research shows how violence against women in politics is a serious problem worldwide, and how it is unique from other forms of violence (*e.g.* domestic) because it discourages *women in particular* from being active in the political process. Sexual harassment in politics thus has negative democratic consequences, and is a barrier to women entering into, and staying in, politics. Effective anti-harassment policies are therefore necessary components in building more inclusive, accountable, and legitimate political institutions, especially during the #MeToo era.

The project’s methodology will be two-pronged. First, I will conduct approximately 10 semi-structured interviews with those involved in drafting the Senate’s new policy (*ie.* the Internal Economy, Budgets and Administration sub-committee on Human Resources). Committee members, clerks, and staffers (women and men) will be interviewed, as well as Senators who have spoken out about this issue publicly. Second, I will conduct a gendered content analysis of relevant documents, including earlier policies (*ie.* 1993 and 2009), and

committee hearing transcripts and videos available on the Senate's ParlVU website (<http://senparlvu.parl.gc.ca>).

Throughout I will consider several key factors, including: the number and influence of women Senators, the gendered composition of relevant committees, the emergence of the non-partisan (ISG) group, and on-going discussions on Senate modernization as providing potential policy 'space' for this gendered issue to emerge. The role of the #MeToo movement in spurring action will also be considered. Finally, building on my previous work I will consider how the Senate's anti-harassment plans compare to that of the House of Commons. First indications suggest that the Senate's efforts in this regard are more robust than that of the House's; whether this is in fact the case will be explored. Knowledge dissemination plans would include a publication in a publicly accessible outlet (e.g. the Conversation), presentation at one academic conference to receive feedback from other experts, and one peer-reviewed article targeted at a Canadian audience (e.g. the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*).

Endnotes

¹ Anonymous survey data support this claim. See: The Samara Centre for Democracy. 2018. *The Elephant on the Hill*. <https://www.samaracanada.com/research/parliament-system/elephant-on-the-hill>

² See Collier, C. and T. Raney. 2018. "Canada's Member-to-Member Code of Conduct on Sexual Harassment in the House of Commons: Progress or Regress?" *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 51(4): 795-815.

³ Senate of Canada. "Modernizing the Senate's Anti-Harassment Policy," 37th Report of the Subcommittee on Human Resources, Feb. 2019. https://sencanada.ca/content/sen/committee/421/CIBA/Reports/CIBA_37RPT_E.pdf

⁴ Smith, D.E. 2003. *The Canadian Senate in Bicameral Perspective*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

⁵ Seidle, L. 2018 (Nov. 6). "How to build on the Senate's renewal process." *Policy Options* online: <http://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/november-2018/how-to-build-on-the-senates-renewal-process>; Thomas, P.G. 2018 (Jan. 26). "The 'new' improved Senate." *Policy Options* online:

<http://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/january-2018/the-new-improved-senate/>; Macfarlane, E. 2019 (May 29). "The Renewed Canadian Senate: Organizational Challenges and Relations with the Government." *Institute for Research on Public Policy* <https://irpp.org/research-studies/renewed-canadian-senate-organizational-challenges-relations-government/>

⁶ Mackay, F., M. Kenny and L. Chappell. 2010. "New Institutionalism Through a Gender Lens: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism?" *International Political Science Review* 31(5): 573-588; Chappell, L. and G. Waylen. 2013. "Gender and the Hidden Life of Institutions" *Public Administration* 91(3): 599-615.

⁷ See Krook, M.L. 2017. "Violence Against Women in Politics." *Journal of Democracy* 28(1): 74-88.