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An examination of gender differences in social and democratic values in Canada

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An examination of gender differences in social and democratic values in Canada

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Overview of the study

This study uses the 2020 General Social Survey on Social Identity to provide insights into gender differences in personal agreement with the social and democratic values of human rights, respect for the law, gender equality, linguistic duality, ethnocultural diversity and respect for Indigenous cultures.

- In 2020, women were more likely than men to greatly agree with almost every social and democratic value measured by the survey, except linguistic duality. Gender differences were largest for respecting Indigenous cultures (73% for women versus 63% for men), ethnocultural diversity (71% versus 62%) and gender equality (84% versus 77%).
- Younger women and women with higher levels of education were most likely to agree with the values of gender equality, ethnocultural diversity and respect for Indigenous cultures. For both women and men, the proportions who greatly agreed with specific values decreased with age, with the notable exception of respect for the law, which consistently increased with age, along with linguistic duality, which somewhat increased.
- Women living in rural areas were less likely than their counterparts in urban areas to greatly agree with the values of ethnocultural diversity (59% versus 73%, respectively) and respect for Indigenous cultures (64% versus 75%). This could be due to differences in the demographic profile of urban and rural areas, including variations in age composition.
- Among immigrants, gender differences in agreement with ethnocultural diversity and respect for Indigenous cultures were smaller, with no gender difference in agreement with gender equality.
- Respect for Indigenous cultures was highly valued by both Indigenous men and women, more so than the non-Indigenous population.

Introduction

It is generally agreed that a sense of belonging to a family, neighbourhood, cultural group or country can have a positive impact on subjective well-being,¹ including feelings of hopefulness² and overall quality of life. The need to belong is an inherent human requirement. This sense of belonging is directly linked to social identity—a normative belief system or a set of commonly held values, beliefs and expectations.³ On a societal level, this sense of belonging and normative belief system can have implications for social cohesion, connectedness and civic engagement.⁴ Indeed, the importance of social and democratic values in advancing social cohesion may be especially pronounced today, given the growing pace of demographic change in Canada.

The set of values shared by most people in a society can evolve over time. For example, recent social movements advocating for gender equality and Indigenous rights, as well as the possible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including views related public health measures, may have reshaped perspectives on social identity and adherence to some values among diverse groups.⁵

For the first time, the General Social Survey on Social Identity collected information on people's agreement with values that are often seen as shared by Canadians. These values include human rights, respect for the law, gender equality,⁶ English and French as Canada's official languages, ethnic and cultural diversity, and respect for Indigenous (First Nations, Métis or Inuit) cultures.

Using these data, this study builds upon previous work that have focused on perceptions of social and democratic values⁷ by shifting the focus to the extent that

people living in Canada personally agree with these specific values. Specific attention is given to gender⁸ differences in personal agreement. In particular, this study investigates any differences between men and women in their personal agreement with a set of social and democratic values, and how the interaction of gender with other characteristics such as age, education, geography, immigrant status and Indigenous identity may influence personal agreement.

This study complements a recently published snapshot of pride in achievements by various groups⁹ and contributes to a better understanding of normative belief systems across genders and diverse backgrounds in Canada.

In Canada, women are more likely than men to agree with every social and democratic value, especially values on gender equality, ethnocultural diversity and respect for Indigenous cultures

The majority of people aged 15 and older in Canada¹⁰ agreed with the values of human rights (86%), gender equality (81%) and respect for the law (80%) (Table 1).¹¹ To a lesser extent, most people also greatly agreed with the values of respect for Indigenous cultures¹² (68%) and ethnocultural diversity¹³ (67%).

The value with the lowest likelihood of personal agreement was linguistic duality—the value of “English and French as Canada's official languages.” Just over half of people (55%) reported that they greatly agreed with linguistic duality, with no significant gender difference.

Of note, a significant difference is observed when considering the official languages spoken.¹⁴

Specifically, a larger proportion of both men and women who could speak only French (77%) or who could speak both English and French (77%) agreed with linguistic duality to a great extent, compared with those who could converse only in English (44%). Reflecting this pattern, Quebec (80%) had the highest proportion of men and women who greatly agreed with linguistic duality, compared with those in the Atlantic region (55%), Ontario (51%), the Prairie region (43%) and British Columbia (39%).

The greatest gender differences were seen for three specific values (Chart 1). Specifically, women were more likely than men to agree with the values of respect for Indigenous cultures (73% versus 63%, respectively), ethnocultural diversity (71% versus 62%) and gender equality (84% versus 77%).

Younger women are most likely to greatly agree with values of gender equality, ethnocultural diversity and respect for Indigenous cultures

The greater likelihood for women to agree with specific values was seen across all age groups. However, the gender gap was most pronounced in the youngest age group. For example, 82% of young women aged 15 to 34 years greatly agreed with respect for Indigenous cultures, compared with 67% of young men (Chart 2). Similar differences were seen for agreement with ethnocultural diversity (82% for women versus 70% for men) and gender equality (90% versus 80%).

For both women and men, the proportions who greatly agreed with specific values decreased with age, with the notable exception of respect for the law, which consistently increased with age, along with linguistic duality, which somewhat increased.

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Table 1
Proportion of population agreeing to a great extent with selected social and democratic values, by gender and personal characteristics, 2020

Characteristics	Human rights	Respect for the law	Gender equality	Linguistic duality	Ethnocultural diversity	Respect for Indigenous cultures
	percentage					
Canada						
Total	86	80	81	55	67	68
Men	84	79	77	54	62	63
Women	87*	82*	84*	55	71*	73*
Age						
15 to 34 years (ref.)						
Total	89	68	85	52	76	74
Men	87	67	80	52	70	67
Women	92*	69	90*	51	82*	82*
35 to 64 years						
Total	86 [‡]	84 [‡]	80 [‡]	56 [‡]	66 [‡]	68 [‡]
Men	85	83 [†]	77	54	62 [†]	64
Women	87 [†]	86 ^{*†}	83 ^{*†}	57 [†]	69 ^{*†}	71 ^{*†}
65 years and older						
Total	80 [‡]	89 [‡]	77 [‡]	57 [‡]	55 [‡]	60 [‡]
Men	78 [†]	86 [†]	74 [†]	55	50 [†]	53 [†]
Women	82 ^{*†}	91 ^{*†}	79 ^{*†}	59 [†]	60 ^{*†}	66 ^{*†}
Educational attainment						
High school or less (ref.)						
Total	82	76	77	53	62	66
Men	81	73	73	52	58	61
Women	83	79*	80*	54	66*	70*
Trades, college or university certificate						
Total	85 [‡]	83 [‡]	80 [‡]	55	62	67
Men	84	81 [†]	76	55	57	62
Women	86	85 ^{*†}	84 ^{*†}	56	67*	71*
Bachelor's degree or higher						
Total	91 [‡]	83 [‡]	87 [‡]	55	76 [‡]	72 [‡]
Men	88 [†]	83 [†]	83 [†]	55	71 [†]	66
Women	93 ^{*†}	82 [†]	90 ^{*†}	56	80 ^{*†}	78 ^{*†}
Area						
Urban (ref.)						
Total	86	80	81	55	69	70
Men	85	78	78	54	64	64
Women	88*	82*	85*	56	73*	75*
Rural						
Total	82 [‡]	82	78 [‡]	55	56 [‡]	61 [‡]
Men	79 [†]	80	73 [†]	55	53 [†]	59 [†]
Women	84 ^{*†}	85	83*	55	59 ^{*†}	64 [†]
Immigrant status						
Immigrant						
Total	86	87 [‡]	80	58 [‡]	77 [‡]	74 [‡]
Men	86 [†]	87 [†]	79	57 [†]	75 [†]	72 [†]
Women	86	86 [†]	81 [†]	58	80 ^{*†}	77 ^{*†}
Non-immigrant (ref.)						
Total	86	78	81	54	63	66
Men	83	75	77	53	58	60
Women	87*	81*	85*	55	68*	72*

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Table 1
Proportion of population agreeing to a great extent with selected social and democratic values, by gender and personal characteristics, 2020

Characteristics	Human rights	Respect for the law	Gender equality	Linguistic duality	Ethnocultural diversity	Respect for Indigenous cultures
	percentage					
Racialized						
Racialized population						
Total	86	84 [‡]	80	56	82 [‡]	75 [‡]
Men	86	84 [†]	78	55	80 [†]	73 [†]
Women	87	84	82	57	85 ^{**}	78 ^{**†}
Non-racialized, non-Indigenous (ref.)						
Total	86	79	81	54	61	65
Men	84	78	77	54	57	59
Women	87 [*]	81 [*]	85 [*]	55	66 [*]	71 [*]
Indigenous identity						
Indigenous						
Total	84	71 [‡]	77	50	62	84 [‡]
Men	79	60 [†]	71	49	51 [†]	78 [†]
Women	88	80 [*]	83 [*]	52	71 [*]	90 ^{**†}
Non-Indigenous (ref.)						
Total	86	81	81	55	67	68
Men	84	79	78	54	63	63
Women	87 [*]	82 [*]	84 [*]	56	71 [*]	73 [*]

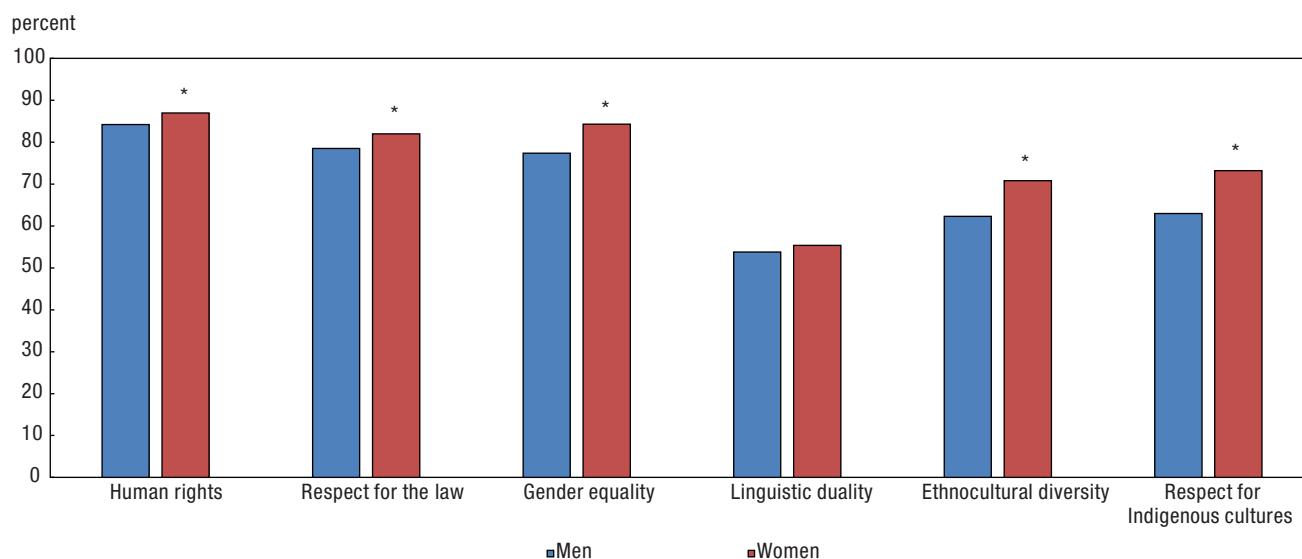
* significantly different from men ($p < 0.01$)

[‡] significantly different from reference category (ref.) ($p < 0.01$), for estimates in the "Total" category only

[†] significantly different from reference category (ref.) ($p < 0.01$), for estimates in the "Men" and "Women" categories

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey – Social Identity, 2020.

Chart 1
Proportion of people who greatly agreed with selected social and democratic values, by gender, 2020

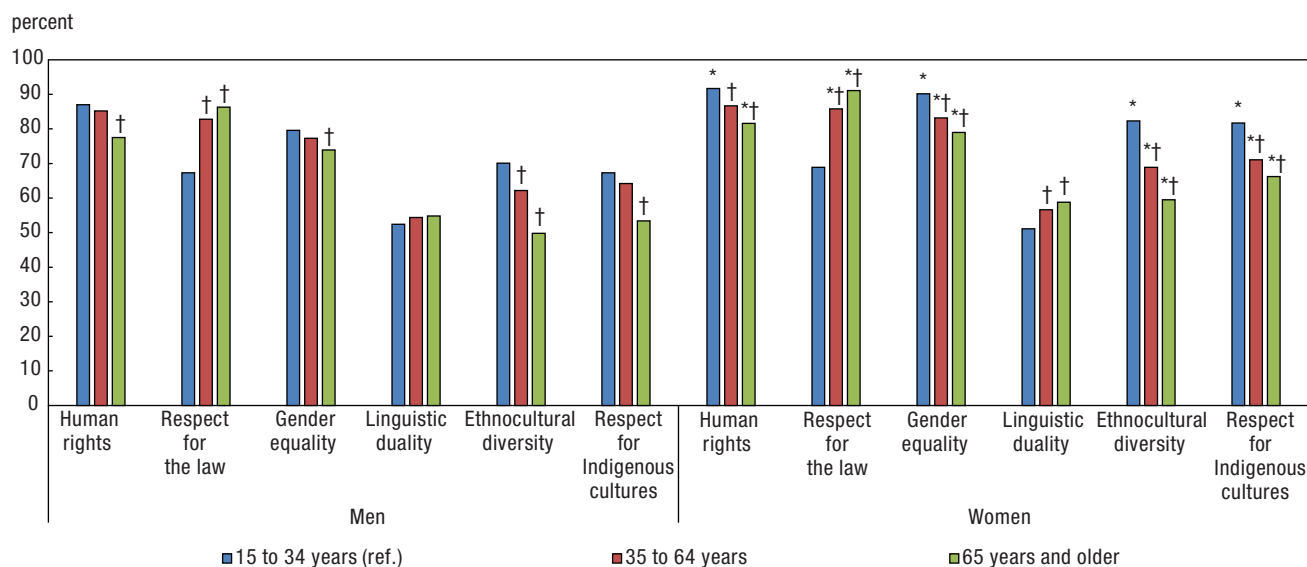


* significantly different from men ($p < 0.01$)

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey – Social Identity, 2020.

Chart 2

Proportion of people who greatly agreed with selected social and democratic values, by gender and age, 2020



* significantly different from men (p < 0.01)
 † significantly different from reference category (ref.) of the same gender (p < 0.01)
 Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey – Social Identity, 2020.

Women with higher educational attainment are the most likely to greatly agree with gender equality, ethnocultural diversity and respect for Indigenous cultures

Both men and women with higher educational attainment were more likely to agree to a great extent with most values. For example, almost 9 in 10 (87%) of those with a bachelor’s degree or higher greatly agreed with gender equality, compared with about 8 in 10 among those with a trades, college or university certificate (80%) or a high school diploma or below (77%) (Table 1).

Among those with similar educational attainments, gender differences remained—higher proportions of women than men greatly agreed with social and democratic values, particularly gender equality, ethnocultural diversity and respect

for Indigenous cultures. Specifically, women were more likely than men to agree with gender equality to a great extent, whether they had a bachelor’s degree or higher (90% versus 83%, respectively); a trades, college or university certificate (84% versus 76%); or a high school diploma or less (80% versus 73%) (Chart 3). Also, gender gaps remained narrow across educational levels for those who greatly agreed with ethnocultural diversity or respect for Indigenous cultures.

Gender differences in agreement with values are less pronounced in rural areas than in urban areas

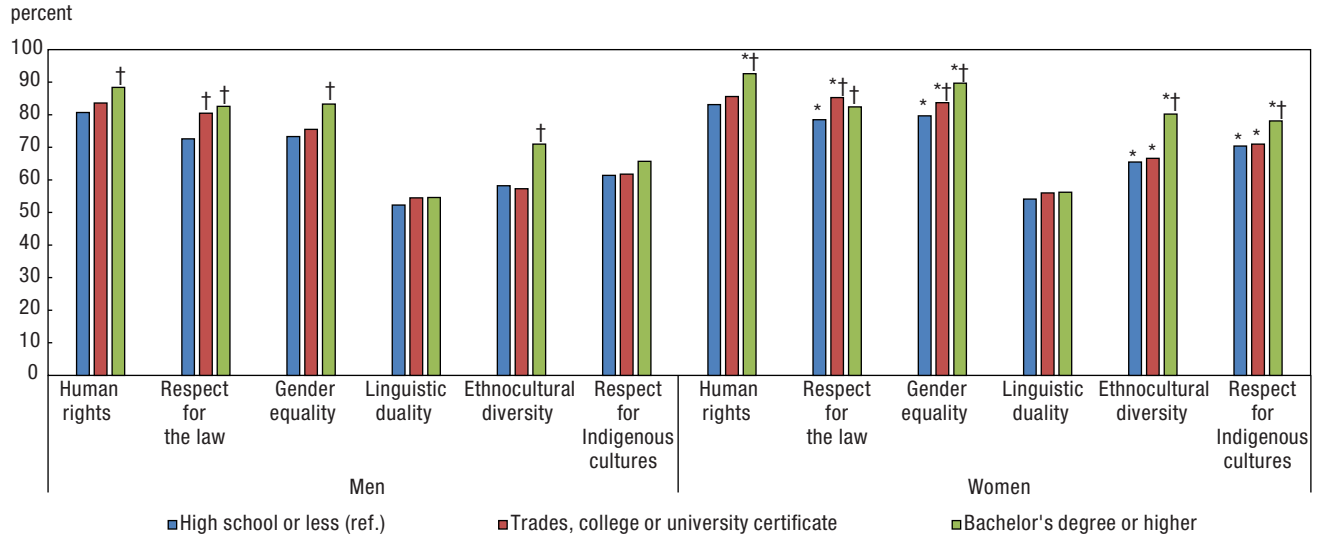
Personal agreement with social and democratic values differed between urban and rural areas of Canada, with those living in urban areas being more likely to agree with every value - except linguistic duality where

there was no difference. For women, the greatest difference between urban and rural women was the extent to which they greatly agreed with ethnocultural diversity (73% versus 59%, respectively), followed by respect for Indigenous cultures (75% versus 64%)¹⁵ (Chart 4). This could be due to differences in the demographic profile of urban and rural areas, including variations in age composition.

However, gender differences in rural areas somewhat mirrored the overall patterns. For three of the six values, the likelihood of personal agreement was higher for women than men. These included the values of gender equality (83% versus 73%, respectively), ethnocultural diversity (59% versus 53%) and human rights (84% versus 79%). There was no gender difference in rural areas for linguistic duality, respect for Indigenous cultures or respect for the law.

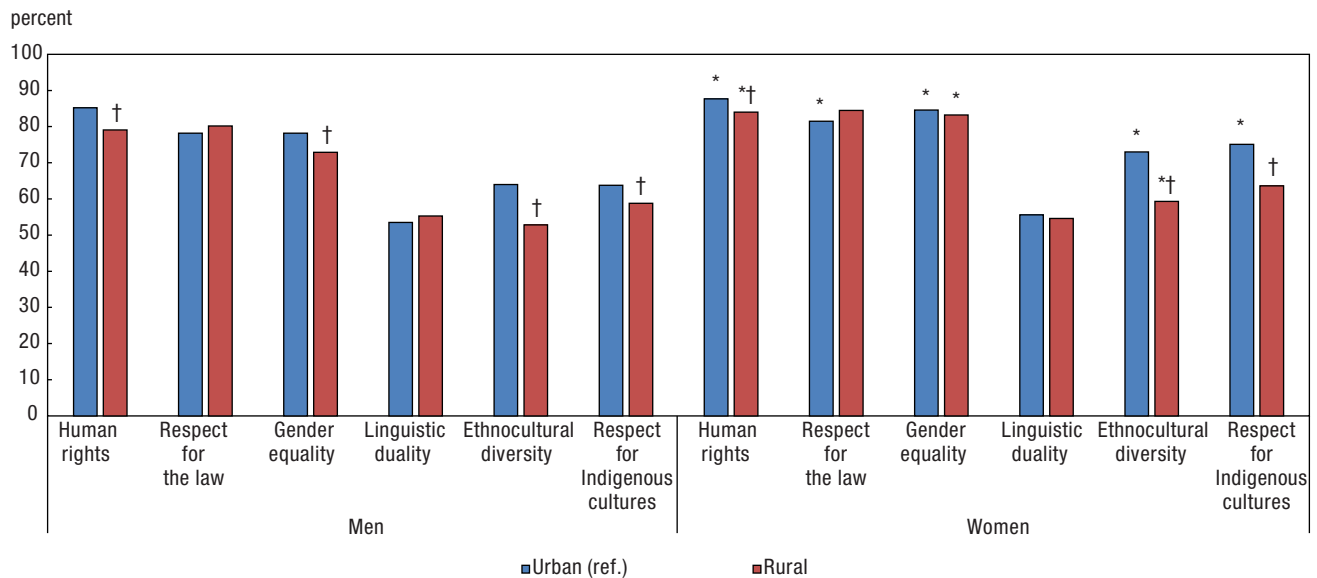
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Chart 3
Proportion of people who greatly agreed with selected social and democratic values, by gender and educational attainment, 2020



* significantly different from men ($p < 0.01$)
 † significantly different from reference category (ref.) of the same gender ($p < 0.01$)
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey – Social Identity, 2020.

Chart 4
Proportion of people who greatly agreed with selected social and democratic values, by gender and area, 2020



* significantly different from men ($p < 0.01$)
 † significantly different from reference category (ref.) of the same gender ($p < 0.01$)
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey – Social Identity, 2020.

Gender differences in urban areas¹⁶ were more evident, as women were consistently more likely than men to agree with specific values. The only exception was linguistic duality, where urban women and men agreed to the same extent.

Immigrant women and men equally likely to agree with gender equality

Compared with the Canadian-born population, immigrants¹⁷ tended to be much more likely to agree with certain values. For instance, 77% of immigrants greatly agreed with the value of ethnocultural diversity, compared with 63% of Canadian-born people (Table 1). Differences were also marked for respect for the law (87% versus 78%, respectively), and respect for Indigenous cultures (74% versus 66%).

Immigrants' greater likelihood of agreeing with values was even more obvious among recent immigrants than those who arrived in Canada before 2011. For example, 83% of recent immigrants, who tend to be younger on average, greatly agreed with the value of ethnocultural diversity, compared with 74% among longer-term immigrants. The same pattern can be seen for respect for Indigenous cultures, with 81% of recent immigrants agreeing to a great extent, compared with 71% of other immigrants.

The variations between immigrants and the Canadian-born population could be seen for both women and men. While immigrant women and Canadian-born women tended to agree with some values, immigrant women were more likely to greatly value ethnocultural diversity and respect for Indigenous cultures. For men, the greatest differences between immigrant and

Canadian-born populations were also observed for ethnocultural diversity (75% versus 58%, respectively), followed by respect for the law (87% versus 75%) and respect for Indigenous cultures (72% versus 60%).

Also, among the immigrant population, there were fewer gender differences. There were no gender gaps between men and women in agreement with respect for the law (87% versus 86%, respectively) and gender equality (79% versus 81%). However, immigrant women were more likely than their male counterparts to greatly agree with ethnocultural diversity (80% versus 75%, respectively) and respect for Indigenous cultures (77% versus 72%).

Gender gaps in agreement with values are lower among racialized population

Racialized¹⁸ and non-racialized, non-Indigenous people living in Canada somewhat differed in their personal agreement. While racialized Canadians were as likely to agree with the values of human rights, gender equality, and linguistic duality, they were more likely to value respect for the law, ethnocultural diversity and respect for Indigenous cultures. The higher agreement with respect for the law was only seen for racialized men, while the elevated levels of agreement with the ethnocultural diversity and Indigenous cultures was seen for both racialized men and women.

For example, a greater proportion of racialized women (85%) reported agreeing to a great extent with ethnocultural diversity, compared with non-racialized, non-Indigenous women (66%) (Table 1). Also, four in five racialized men (80%) agreed

to a great extent with ethnocultural diversity, compared with 57% of non-racialized, non-Indigenous men.

As with the immigrant population, gender differences were less pronounced among racialized populations than non-racialized, non-Indigenous populations in Canada.

Respect for Indigenous cultures is highly valued by First Nations people, Inuit and Métis

Respect for Indigenous cultures, encompassing the unique histories, languages, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs of diverse Indigenous groups, was highly valued by both Indigenous men and women, more so than the non-Indigenous population. Among Indigenous women, 9 out of 10 (90%) greatly agreed with the value, compared with 7 in 10 (73%) among non-Indigenous women (Table 1). The difference was less pronounced for men, but still present. In 2020, 78% of Indigenous men greatly agreed with the value of respecting Indigenous cultures, compared to 63% of non-Indigenous men.

For other values, the level of agreement was similar between Indigenous women and non-Indigenous women. For men, however, a different story emerged. Indigenous men were less likely than their non-Indigenous counterparts to greatly agree with some values, notably the values of respect for the law (60% versus 79%) and ethnocultural diversity (51% versus 63%).

Indigenous men's lower level of personal agreement to these values, particularly the value of respecting the law, could be directly tied to differences in their everyday lived experiences, combined with the history of colonization and its

devastating effects on Indigenous people. For example, compared to those who are neither Indigenous people nor racialized, Indigenous people, particularly Indigenous men, have greater contacts with police (more often for non-criminal matters) and more negative interactions with police.¹⁹ For example, among people who experienced some form of discrimination, Indigenous people were five times as likely than non-Indigenous people to say it occurred during interactions with police.²⁰ Additionally, Indigenous people were overall less confident in police than their non-Indigenous counterparts (52% versus 22%).

Conclusion

This study examined gender differences in personal agreement with certain values related to social identity in Canada. It also looked at whether agreement with these values varied by other characteristics, such as age, education, geography, Indigenous identity, immigrant status and ethnocultural characteristics.

Results indicate that, compared with men, women were consistently more likely to personally agree with the proposed social and democratic values, with the only exception being linguistic duality, which was on par with men. The gender divide was greatest for the values of gender equality, ethnocultural diversity and respect for Indigenous cultures. Agreement with values was even more likely for certain groups of women. For instance, young women, women with higher educational attainment and women living in urban areas were most likely to greatly agree with values. Meanwhile, gender gaps were smallest among the rural population, immigrants and the racialized population in Canada.

Given that questions on personal agreement were asked for the first time in the 2020 General Social Survey on Social Identity, few studies are available to draw comparisons. As a result, further research is needed to expand on the existing body of work on perceptions of values to elucidate possible reasons

for gender disparities or lack thereof. For example, why does agreement with all social and democratic values decrease with age for both women and men, with the exception of respect for the law? Will this age-related pattern continue over time, or are the patterns more reflective of generational values that persist throughout the life course? Why are women more likely to agree with social and democratic values?

These types of fundamental questions are important, as normative beliefs can have implications beyond the individual. The set of values defines Canada's social identity, with links to social cohesion, integration and civic engagement.

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Data sources, methods and definitions

This study used data from the 2020 General Social Survey on Social Identity (GSS). It is a cross-sectional survey, and the target population is all non-institutionalized people and non-residents of First Nations reserves aged 15 years or older, living in the 10 provinces of Canada. Data were collected from August 17, 2020, to February 7, 2021.²¹

The study provided descriptive statistics of gender gaps among the population aged 15 years and older in the Canadian provinces who personally agreed with the values. To measure personal agreement with values, the survey asked respondents, "To what extent do you personally agree with the following values?" The values listed were human rights, respect for the law, gender equality, English and French as Canada's official languages, ethnic and cultural diversity, and respect

for Indigenous (First Nations, Métis or Inuit) culture. The response categories were to a great extent, to a moderate extent, to a small extent or not at all. This study examined the respondents who agreed with the values to a great extent.

These statistics were also disaggregated by age, geography, education, immigrant status, racialized population and Indigenous identity. In this document, the concept of "racialized group" is based and derived directly from the concept of "visible minority" in the census. The Employment Equity Act defines visible minorities as "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour." It consists mainly of the following groups: South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Arab, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean and Japanese.

Notes

1. See Allen et al., 2021.
2. See Statistics Canada, 2022.
3. See Brower, 2021.
4. See Ellemers, 2020; Scott et al., 2006; and Tajfel and Turner, 1979.
5. See Canadian Heritage, 2021; and Statistics Canada, 2020.
6. Gender equality means that diverse groups of women, men and non-binary people are able to participate fully in all spheres of Canadian life, contributing to an inclusive and democratic society.
7. See Sinha, 2015; and Schimmele et al., 2023.
8. The “Gender2” variable was used for gender disaggregation in this study. Given that the non-binary population is small, data aggregation is necessary to protect the confidentiality of responses provided by respondents. Most information from the 2020 General Social Survey on Social Identity is disseminated using a two-category gender variable. In these cases, people in the category “non-binary person” are distributed in the other two gender categories ([Statistics Canada](#)).
9. See Statistics Canada, 2021a.
10. In this study, population in Canada refers to those who live in the provinces. It is because the target population of the survey was restricted to the ten provinces in Canada.
11. The response categories were to a great extent, to a moderate extent, to a small extent or not at all. This study examined only the respondents who agreed with the values to a great extent. Please refer to “Data sources and methods” for more information.
12. “Respect for Indigenous cultures” is used in this study to refer to the value of “respect for Indigenous (First Nations, Métis or Inuit) culture,” as measured by the 2020 General Social Survey on Social Identity. No definition of “Indigenous culture” was provided to the respondents.
13. “Ethnocultural diversity” is used in this study to refer to the value of “ethnic and cultural diversity,” as measured by the 2020 General Social Survey on Social Identity.
14. The respondents were asked whether they could “speak English or French well enough to conduct a conversation” ([Statistics Canada](#)).
15. A lower proportion of rural men than their urban counterparts greatly agreed with ethnocultural diversity (53% versus 64%, respectively), gender equality (73% versus 78%) and respect for Indigenous cultures (59% versus 64%), but these gaps were smaller than those between rural and urban women.
16. An urban area was defined as having a population of at least 1,000 and a density of 400 or more people per square kilometre. All territory outside an urban area was defined as rural. Together, urban and rural areas covered the entire nation ([Statistics Canada](#)).
17. “Immigrants” refers to landed immigrants, who have been granted the right to live in Canada permanently by immigration authorities ([Statistics Canada](#)).
18. The concept of racialized population is measured with the “visible minority” variable in this release. “Visible minority” refers to whether a person belongs to one of the visible minority groups defined by the *Employment Equity Act*. The *Employment Equity Act* defines visible minorities as “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” ([Statistics Canada](#)).
19. Cotter, A. 2022.
20. Cotter, A. 2022.
21. For more information about the General Social Survey on Social Identity methodology and questionnaires, please refer to the Statistics Canada [website](#).

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