



Cartagena, Bolivia

# Representing women in Latin America



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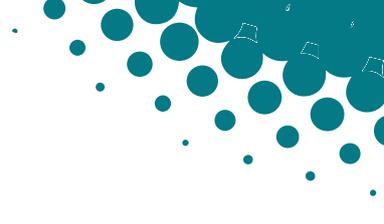


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## About the series

This report is the first to be published in a series of reports called 'Representing Women'. This series builds upon a 2020 report *Women Political Leaders: The Impact of Gender on Democracy*, published by the King's Global Institute for Women's Leadership with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. This report presented a global overview of the literature on women's political leadership, but it pointed to major regional variations in the issues facing women in politics, and was limited to work published in English. The *Representing Women* series aims to address these issues and to provide overviews of the academic literature and the organisational knowledge about the representation of women in different world regions. The aim is to produce an accessible report that might be of use to scholars, students and advocates.



# Foreword

Since 1991, when Argentina adopted a 30-percent quota law for women candidates, Latin America has led the vanguard of increasing women’s political representation. I first wrote about Latin America’s ‘quota wave’ in 2006, in a working paper for the Center of Iberian and Latin American Studies at the University of California, San Diego. I tackled a seeming paradox: political elites were—at the time—mostly men, so why did they vote for gender quotas? The answer lay in the quota laws’ design: the quota laws passed in the 1990s were weak, riddled with loopholes. Party elites capitalized on appearing to support gender equality, while binding themselves to nominate very few women in practice.

Progress, it seemed, would unfold only under considerable constraints. Political elites also counted on numerous other ways to prevent women from actually exercising power. Quota adoption only widened the number of battles that women party members and women legislators fought: they needed quota laws to be both enforced and strengthened, but they also sought equitable access to campaign funding, positions on important committees, and myriad other opportunities to advance their political careers. Summarizing the consequences of elites’ resistance to women’s political inclusion back in 2006, I argued, ‘Tweaking one aspect of political institutions in order to resolve gender imbalances merely causes the problem of exclusion/discrimination to manifest itself in other aspects of political life.... The marginalization of women appears as an intractable problem when viewed across the political system as whole’.<sup>1</sup>

Now in 2024, I have been asked to reflect on this stellar report from the King’s Global Institute for Women’s Leadership. This report lays out how Latin American women are well represented in politics. By December 2023, ten Latin American countries had exchanged their gender quota laws for gender parity laws. For a significant number of countries, gender parity applies beyond the legislative branch, to the executive and judicial branches and to political institutions at the subnational level. Women hold 36.8 percent of seats in the region’s national legislatures and 33.6 percent of ministerial appointments. Mexico will surely elect its first woman president in June 2024, as all the major players have nominated women candidates. Can it still be said that women’s marginalization is an intractable political problem?

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<sup>1</sup> Piscopo, 2006, p. 9.



My answer is ‘no’ – but also ‘yes’. Like all academics, I will reframe the question: what do we mean by political inclusion? If we look merely at the numbers, the problem of women’s marginalization within political institutions looks, if not solved, at least significantly reduced. Women are included in parties, in legislatures, and in the executive branch: women may not enjoy gender parity in all institutions or in all countries, but their political presence has increased dramatically since the 1990s and the early 2000s.

Even more impressive is how women themselves sustained the momentum for increasing their own access to power. I conducted my first fieldwork in Argentina in 2005 and in Mexico in 2009. Back then, no one mentioned ‘gender parity’ as an objective. The stories told by women political elites—the stories that informed my early academic research—focused on men elites’ resistance to not merely 30-percent quotas, but to women’s political participation in general. My interviewees described the battles fought to enforce the quota laws, to close the loopholes, and to eliminate other injustices, such as women’s exclusion from party, committee, and chamber leadership roles. Every advance—like requiring parties to allocate specified portions of their funds to train women leaders—emerged only after intense lobbying and high-stakes negotiations at party conferences and in legislative committees. Even in 2011, I imagine that, if a visitor from the future had said, ‘in ten years’ time, Mexico will adopt a constitutional reform mandating gender parity in every government branch at the federal, state, and municipal levels’, my interlocutors would have shaken their heads. Such an achievement seemed unimaginable.

Yet, slowly but surely, the battles *were* won and more spaces *were* conquered. As I anticipated in 2006, each tweak did open up a new site of resistance; but as the subsequent years and now decades showed, women overcame that challenge, too. Take Mexico’s adoption of parity in everything. The 2021 reform followed the 2019 adoption of gender parity for the federal and state congresses. As Lorena Vázquez Correa and I recount, the women senators wanted the constitutional amendment to enumerate the governorships. They faced stiff opposition from their male colleagues.<sup>2</sup> They were again asked, ‘what more do you women want?’ The answer was that they wanted it all—and they eventually prevailed. When the women senators were forced to drop the governorships in exchange for their male colleagues’ votes, the federal electoral institute—which had long supported women elites in their quest to strengthen quota laws—imposed parity in the governorships via an administrative rule.

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<sup>2</sup> Piscopo & Vázquez Correa, 2023.



These victories speak to Latin American women's remarkable grit and resilience. Their tenacity has traversed generations: the authors of the first wave of quota laws have mostly retired, passing the baton to new cohorts of women leaders. By now, I have completed hundreds of interviews with Latin American women across multiple countries, but some snippets play in mind like I heard them yesterday. In one refrain, I hear a Mexican congresswoman whom I interviewed in 2015. She said, 'When we are no longer in the right positions, we know that other women are, and the women after us will look for ways to advance'.<sup>3</sup> Gender quotas were not the end, but the beginning, and time has shown that women's political marginalization is far from inevitable and far from intractable.

Of course, if we look beyond numbers, there are significant caveats and challenges. Women's political representation is but one measure of countries' progress towards gender equality. To a certain extent, attaining women's inclusion is fairly straightforward: when government bodies like Mexico's federal electoral institute have the will and the capacity to enforce quota laws, political parties can be made to comply. Party leaders will follow the formal rules, no matter their private views about women and women's appropriate roles. The measures associated with changing people's inner attitudes, then, are more difficult to address. This disparity explains why Latin America can have such impressively high numbers of women in office alongside such distressingly high rates of violence against women. Why Nicaragua and El Salvador have large proportions of women legislators but the region's most restrictive laws on abortion. And why decision-making bodies like Chile's 2021-2022 constitutional convention can have gender parity, but still receive reports from women delegates about gender-based harassment.

So while women's political marginalization is not an intractable problem, gender-based exclusion and discrimination persist. Gender inequality continues to manifest itself in political life. These challenges are well-documented in this King's Global Institute for Women's Leadership report. First, women political elites still face an uneven playing field, whether it is access to campaign funds, media coverage, speaking opportunities, leadership roles, or even just respect. Another snippet that my mind plays over and over comes from Chile. One of the most prominent woman delegates from the first constitutional convention described how, when she was delivering a plenary speech, a male colleague snapped a photo of her image as it appeared on the convention's video display. He tweeted the photo with the caption, 'why aren't they showing the football

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<sup>3</sup> Piscopo & Vázquez Correa, 2023, p. 18



game?’<sup>4</sup> This anecdote stays with me because the behaviour is casually yet brutally cruel. Women leaders are still mocked, diminished, and silenced, kept from the ‘old boys’ clubs’ that dominate politics even as more and more women enter.

Second, the playing field is also uneven among women. Indigenous women and Afro-descendant women are underrepresented relative to Hispanic-descendant women. Minoritized women face compounding barriers when they contemplate political careers, especially given Latin American countries’ histories of intertwining gender and racial disadvantage. Indeed, prominent minority women leaders receive so many death threats that they require around-the-clock security, like Francia Márquez, the first Afro-descendant woman to become vice president of Colombia, and Elisa Loncón, the Mapuche linguist who presided over Chile’s constitutional convention. At the same time, minority men also remain underrepresented in Latin American politics. Gender is not the sole axis of political marginalization and the absence of racially and ethnically diverse politicians is not just a problem associated with electing women. Political equality among men and women depends on unravelling barriers related to race and ethnicity, but also sexuality, disability, socioeconomic status, and other sites of disadvantage.

Third, democratic backsliding endangers the past decades’ recent gains. Autocrats worldwide reject gender equality, as feminist projects work against authoritarians’ twin missions to eliminate popular dissent and to restore traditional family structures. Once elected, authoritarian-minded leaders frequently remove women from elected and appointed office and walk back the previous decades’ hard-fought victories. In Argentina, voters handed the presidency to Javier Milei, a right-wing libertarian who immediately eliminated the cabinet-level ministry of Women, Gender, and Diversity. In these same elections, despite gender parity, women’s legislative representation decreased. Yet autocrats do promote women’s political representation when doing so distracts from their misdeeds and burnishes their images: as this report highlights, by the end of 2023, two of the three Latin American countries with gender parity legislatures were non-democracies (Nicaragua and Cuba). We know little about whether and how women in autocratic regimes work behind-the-scenes to exercise influence, but we do know that authoritarian countries have poor track records when it comes to protecting human rights and women’s rights.

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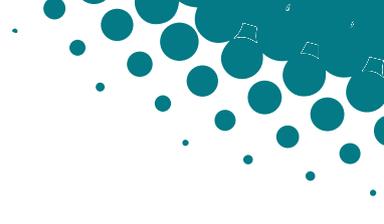
<sup>4</sup> Piscopo & Suárez Cao, 2024, p. 16.



Experts predict that the next years will test democracy's resilience. They will also test gender equality. In 2024, I am considerably more optimistic about countries' ability to make and sustain progress on women's political representation than I was in 2006. Yet the challenges seem great, as everyday resistance has become intertwined with political authoritarianism and misogynistic retrenchment. Latin American women must maintain their forward momentum while also ensuring that their exercise of power remains unconstrained by anti-democratic forces. This road will not be easy, but I have no doubt that Latin America's courageous, inspiring, and tenacious women leaders are up to the task.

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# Introduction

Latin America has a substantial presence of women in parliament, ranking as the region with the highest percentage of female legislators in the world.<sup>5</sup> According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, 36.8 percent of Latin American legislators are women, surpassing the global average of 26.7 percent.<sup>6</sup> This change has come about in the last 30 years. As recently as 1997, the percentage of women in the lower (or single) houses of parliament was a mere 13 percent, a figure that has nearly tripled since then.<sup>7</sup> This remarkable increase has taken place within a context where women and women's movements have been prominently visible in the region's relatively recent democratic transitions – they have played pivotal roles as protagonists in electoral reform processes and as advocates for gender quotas.

In comparison to Latin America, other regions show varying percentages of women legislators. In Europe, 31.4 percent of seats are held by women, while in Asia, they hold 21.6 percent of seats, and in the Middle East their representation is only 18.1 percent in Parliament. Notably, there are differences within the same continent: in Sub-Saharan Africa, women hold 27.2 percent of the seats, whereas in North Africa, it is only 17.1 percent.<sup>8</sup> Latin America itself shows significant variations in women's representation across countries, as it will be further explored in the next section.

A substantial academic literature highlights the importance of multiple factors in increasing the political representation of women in Latin America. Societal changes, such as increases in women's education and employment levels and the improvement of attitudes towards women and gender equality, have contributed to improved presence of women in leadership positions. Additionally, the introduction of new electoral rules, such as proportional representation, and the

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<sup>5</sup> We use the following definition by Torres Martínez (2016): Latin America is a noun that includes the territory of the American continent from Tierra de Fuego in Chile and Argentina in the South up until Bravo River in the border between Mexico and the US. Socially and politically, the concept references the countries in the continent that are different to the countries from North America, being politically autonomous and culturally different. It is also a group of countries where a Latin or romance language is spoken, normally Spanish or Portuguese. That is, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

<sup>6</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, October 2023, calculated for Latin America by GIWL.

<sup>7</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, data from 1 January 1997 and October 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, October 2023.



spread of democratic institutions have played crucial roles in this progress. However, key to their increased representation are well-designed quota laws, with placement mandates, that emphasise gender representation on ballots, and a strong enforcement of the rules (with sanctions for non-compliance).<sup>9</sup>

Feminist research in a variety of countries suggest that once elected, women have included gender-related concerns in the political agenda by sponsoring and co-sponsoring more legislation, have used their committee positions to advocate for women's rights, have higher rates of participation in floor debates on women's issues, and have spoken with a distinctive voice on these issues.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the presence of women in politics is related to an increased satisfaction of citizens with democracy, and an increased interest in politics by women.<sup>11</sup> Research from Latin America also suggests that women legislators are more likely than their male colleagues to advocate for women's rights and place higher priority than male legislators on sponsoring women's issue bills.<sup>12</sup>

This report explores the political representation of women in Latin America and provides an overview of the academic literature on the presence of women in formal political institutions. It examines the barriers that women face in terms of policymaking, their access to leadership positions, and their effects on political representation more generally. Overall, it brings evidence from international organisations – the Inter-Parliamentary Union, ECLAC and UN Women – along with the academic literature to address three key questions about women's political representation: Where are the women? Who are the women? And what has been the impact of representing women? More importantly, we also consider what the main obstacles and opportunities are for the representation of women.

In the first section women's presence in public office is described. We analyse 19 Latin American countries to detail the positions women hold in all levels of government. Next, an intersectional lens is used to identify which women are being represented. The third section explores the

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<sup>9</sup> Schwindt-Bayer & Senk, 2020, p. 392; Caminotti & Freidenberg, 2018; Freidenberg, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Swers, 2002; Dodson, 2006; Tamerius, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Schwindt-Bayer & Senk, 2020, p. 392.

<sup>12</sup> Grossi & Miguel 2001; Htun, Piscopo & Bergen 2014; Sacchet 2005, 2007; Schwindt-Bayer 2003; Piscopo 2020; Barnes, 2012; Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006, 2010; Taylor-Robinson & Heath, 2003.



difference that women in public office make. The final section examines the barriers and opportunities for the representation of women.

We find that the increased representation of women in legislatures is mostly due to gender quotas. However, while gender quotas have certainly brought about profound changes in some countries in terms of increased presence of women in office, informal and often invisible cultural practices still demand careful attention and action, as these remain important barriers for women fully participating in decision-making. Male-dominated political, economic, and social settings pressing economic realities, the institutional political context, and structural issues, such as poverty and violence, continue to hinder women in positions of power.

# Key findings

## Where are the women?

### Members of Parliament:<sup>13</sup>

- 36.8 percent in lower/single chamber (as of 1st October 2023).
- 34.1 percent in upper chamber.
- 22.2 percent as speakers of parliament.

### Local government:<sup>14</sup>

- 15.4 percent of mayors.
- 32.7 percent of councilmembers are women.

### Federal government

- Ministers: 33.6 percent<sup>15</sup>.
- Vice Presidents: 7 vice presidents out of 19 countries.
- Presidents: 2 out of 19 countries, Dina Boluarte (Peru) and Xiomara Castro de Zelaya (Honduras)

## Who are the women?

- The representation of women varies by class, race and ethnicity. It is skewed in favour of educated, lighter skinned and white women.
- Indigenous peoples represent around 10 percent of Latin American's population<sup>16</sup> and the presence of women from indigenous communities is low.<sup>17</sup>
- While one in four Latin Americans self-identify as Afrodescendants,<sup>18</sup> only about 0.1 percent of women parliamentarians in the region are of African descent.<sup>19</sup>

## Impact of representing women

- Adoption of gender quotas and parity laws.
- Legalising abortion in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay.
- Changing views and norms around women as leaders.
- Tackling violence against women and girls.

## Obstacles to women's representation

- Violence against women in politics.
- Political culture and practices reflect the norms of traditional masculinity.
- Once in office women representatives are marginalised.
- Socioeconomic disadvantages.
- Underrepresentation of women from different backgrounds in terms of race, sexuality, and class.
- Backlash.

## Opportunities for women's representation

- Quota systems are prevalent in the region.
- Active formal and informal women's groups and networks.

<sup>13</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, October 2023.

<sup>14</sup> ECLAC/CEPAL, 2023b. Retrieved from: <https://oig.cepal.org/en/node/2175>.

<sup>15</sup> IPU and UN Women, 2023. Women in Politics 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2023-03/women-in-politics-2023>.

<sup>16</sup> ECLAC/CEPAL and FILAC, 2020, p. 153-154.

<sup>17</sup> This data is not collected regularly across the region, so we do not have a clear idea of the average.

<sup>18</sup> Freire et al., 2018, p. 18. Afrodescendants account for 24 percent of Latin America's population, with their distribution varying across the region. Over 91 percent are concentrated in Brazil and Venezuela, while 7 percent are from Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, and Mexico.

<sup>19</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 22.

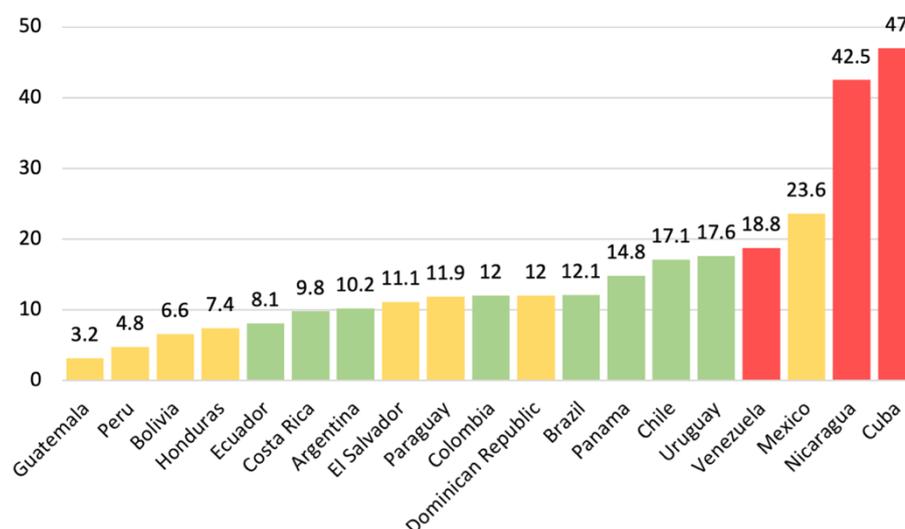
# Where are the women?

Since the 1980s, descriptive political representation of women in Latin America has continuously increased, alongside the democratic transitions that most countries in the region have experienced.<sup>20</sup> The greatest success is in national legislatures, where there has been a sustained increase of women's presence. In 2023 an average of 36.8 percent of representatives in national legislatures in Latin America were women, whereas the numbers of women in other areas of government continues to be low.<sup>21</sup>

## Women in local government

Overall, across local government in Latin America, 15.4 percent of mayors and 32.7 percent of councilmembers are women. The percentage of mayors has not increased substantially in recent years, the growth recorded was 0.13 points. In contrast, the presence of women in local councils has steadily risen. In 2019, for the first time the regional average of elected female councilmembers surpassed 30 percent.<sup>22</sup>

Figure 1. Percentage of women mayors by country.<sup>23</sup> Colour indicates the 'Freedom Ranking': green = free, yellow = partially free, red = not free.<sup>24</sup>



<sup>20</sup> Schwindt-Bayer & Senk, 2020, p. 391.

<sup>21</sup> IPU, October 2023 (calculated for Latin America by GIWL)

<sup>22</sup> ECLAC/CEPAL, 2023b. Data from December 2021. Retrieved from: <https://oig.cepal.org/en/node/2175>.

<sup>23</sup> ECLAC/CEPAL, 2021, December 2021. Retrieved from: <https://oig.cepal.org/en/indicators/elected-mayors-who-are-female>.

<sup>24</sup> Freedom House, November 2023.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of women elected mayors in the Latin American region. Information has been added to show the Freedom House ranking of these countries, with red indicating 'not free', yellow as 'partially free' and green as 'free'. It is important to note that there are fewer women in executive office, particularly at the subnational level where very few women have been elected as mayors and governors.<sup>25</sup> In sixteen out of nineteen countries less than 20 percent of mayors are women. Nicaragua and Cuba, non-democratic countries, represent the exceptions with more than 40 percent of mayors being women.

Figure 2. The proportion of elected local council seats held by women.<sup>26</sup> Colour indicates the 'Freedom Ranking': green = free, yellow = partially free, red = not free.<sup>27</sup>

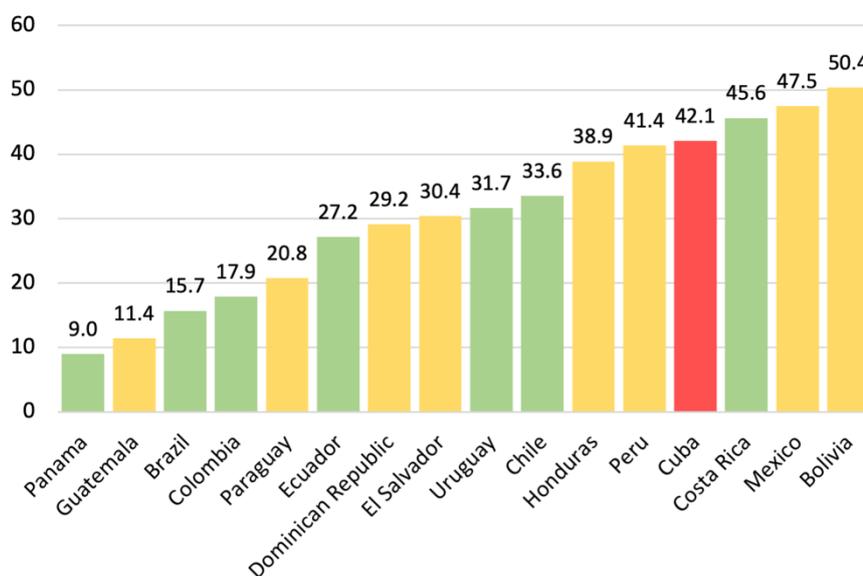


Figure 2 shows the percentage of women elected to local councils. Peru, Cuba, Costa Rica, and Mexico have achieved a high percentage of women in elected councils (above 40 percent), while only Bolivia achieved parity in local government. Panama, Guatemala, and Brazil have the lowest percentages of women in local government, with 15 percent or less.

These low numbers suggests that there is still work to be done to overcome the issues which prevent women holding positions of power in local governments, both in legislative and executive elected roles.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, in executive elections, parties tend to support and finance those they consider to be the strongest candidates in terms of political and social capital to run for office.

<sup>25</sup> Htun, 2016, p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres (2023). *Global Data on Women's Political Participation*. Women in Local Government, June 2023. Retrieved from: <https://localgov.unwomen.org/data>

<sup>27</sup> Freedom House, November 2023.

<sup>28</sup> UN Woman/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 18.



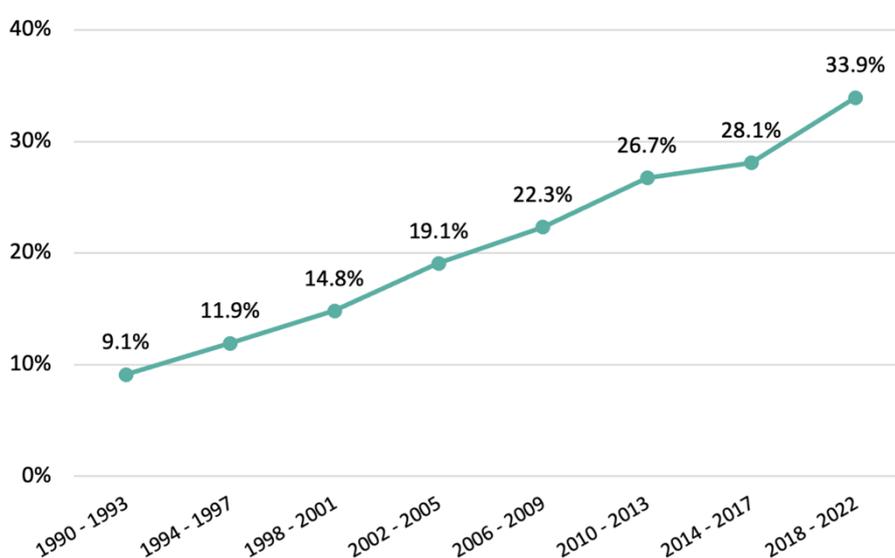
These tend to be male candidates, which demonstrates a lack of support for female candidates.<sup>29</sup> These positions are considered valuable to politicians and political parties due to the importance of controlling local budgets, for example.

## Women in congress

In Latin America, women's representation in parliament is greater than in local government and has increased over time, but it is still far from parity. The region has one of the highest proportions of female representation in parliament and was a pioneer in the adoption of gender quotas. However, according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), it will take more than 40 years for gender parity to be achieved in national parliaments in Latin American and the Caribbean.<sup>30</sup>

The percentage of female representatives in lower/single chambers in the region increased from 9.1 percent in the early nineties to 26.7 percent in the early 2010s and rose to 36.8 percent in 2023. Figure 3 shows the average proportion of women in parliament in Latin America from early 1990s to 2022.

Figure 3. Average proportion of women elected for the Lower House of Parliament or Single House across Latin America (1990 – 2022)<sup>31</sup>



<sup>29</sup> Sacchet, 2020; Htun & Piscopo, 2014, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> ECLAC/CEPAL, 2023b, p. 5. Retrieved from: <https://oig.cepal.org/en/node/2175>.

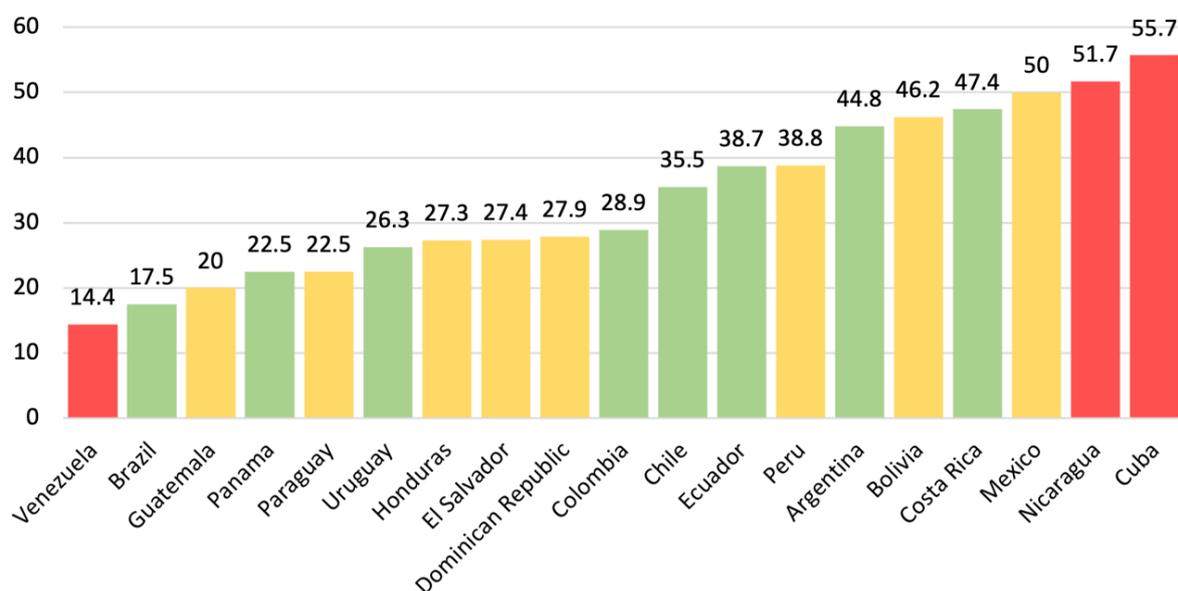
<sup>31</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, data on elections from 1990 to 2022, average proportion calculated by GIWL. Retrieved from: <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=10&year=2023> and <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif-arc.htm>.



The region is home to six of the countries with the greatest proportion of women in parliament in the global top twenty.<sup>32</sup> Three Latin American countries achieved gender parity after their latest elections (out of five, globally): Mexico (50 percent), Nicaragua (51.7 percent), and Cuba (55.7 percent). While ten out of nineteen countries have reported less than 30 percent.

Figure 4 shows the current percentage of women in the lower houses of parliament (or single chambers) in the Latin American region, and Figure 5 shows the percentage of women in the upper houses of parliament. Information has been added to show the Freedom House ranking of these countries, with red indicating ‘not free’, yellow as ‘partially free’ and green as ‘free’.

Figure 4. Percentage of women in the lower house of parliament or single parliament across Latin America.<sup>33</sup> Colour indicates the ‘Freedom Ranking’: green = free, yellow = partially free, red = not free.<sup>34</sup>



As shown above, Latin America has witnessed a rapid increase in the representation of women in parliament over the last few decades. Free and democratic countries such as Argentina and Costa Rica have one of the highest percentages of women in parliament, approaching parity. However, the two highest-scoring, Nicaragua and Cuba, are non-democratic. This implies that having a high percentage of women in parliament does not necessarily guarantee effective representation of

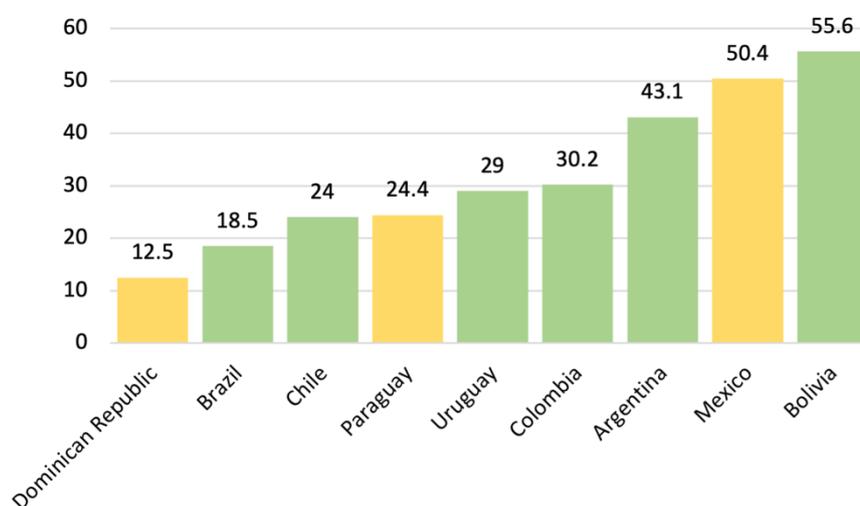
<sup>32</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, October 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, October 2023. The data presented was retrieved from the IPU database in October 2023. The exceptions are Ecuador, whose latest available data is from August 2023 due to early elections held at the end of that month, and Venezuela, which had elections in December 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Freedom House, November 2023.

women’s needs and ambitions in all cases. Consequently, parliamentary representation in these countries may not translate into significant changes in the law.

*Figure 5. Percentage of women in the upper house of parliament across Latin America.<sup>35</sup> Colour indicates the ‘Freedom Ranking’: green = free, yellow = partially free, red = not free.*



Women represent an average of 34.1 percent of seats in upper houses of parliament. As shown in Figure 5, in Argentina more than 40 percent of the seats are held by women. Gender parity was achieved in Mexico and Bolivia, indicating that the presence of women in the upper house is higher than the representation found in the lower houses (or single chambers) of these countries. By contrast, in the Dominican Republic and in Brazil women account hold less than 20 percent of the seats in the upper house.

Moreover, in Latin America there are few women who hold positions as speakers of Parliament, representing only 22.2 percent of the region’s chambers. In Argentina and Mexico, both speakers in the lower and upper houses are women, whereas there is one in Guatemala and Uruguay, and none in the rest of the countries.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, October 2023.

<sup>36</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, October 2023.

The introduction of gender quotas explains much of the jump in numbers of women in parliaments in Latin America over the past decades. Figure 6 shows that Argentina was the first country to introduce gender quotas in 1991, and how over the following thirty years they have been introduced more broadly.

Over time there has been a shift away from the introduction of simple quota laws towards the advocacy for gender parity, where the expectation is that there should be parity in numbers of men and women in the electoral lists, parliaments, and beyond, as an expression of democracy itself.<sup>37</sup> This can be seen in Figure 6 as from 2005 the quotas increasingly stipulate that 50 percent of candidates should be women. Currently, Guatemala is the only country that has not adopted gender quotas.

For more information on this topic, access [The impact of women in politics section](#).

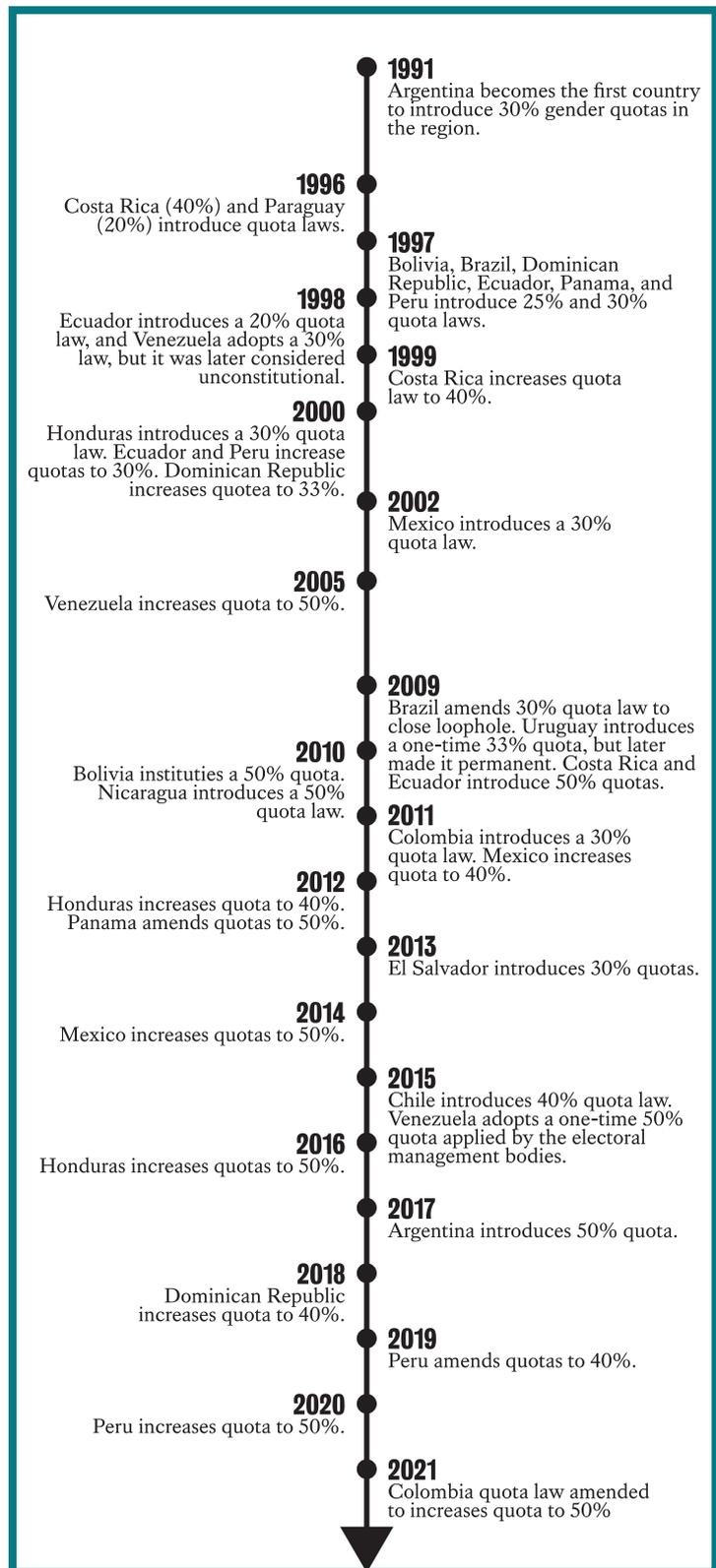


Figure 6. A timeline of the introduction of gender quota laws across Latin America.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Piscopo, 2015; Piscopo & Correa, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Observatorio de Reformas Políticas en América Latina (1978-2023). Ciudad de México: Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas (IIJ-UNAM) y Washington, D.C.: Secretaría para el Fortalecimiento de la Democracia de

# Women in cabinet

According to the ECLAC, the region has experienced a substantial increase in the participation of women in executive cabinets, from an average of 10 percent in 2000s<sup>39</sup> to an average of 28.7 percent in 2023.<sup>40</sup> Across the region, women are more likely to be assigned responsibilities related to social issues, while ministries of economics, foreign affairs and defence remain male-dominated. This suggests gender biases in ministerial appointments, despite women often being more qualified for these positions than men.<sup>41</sup>

Some countries stand out for their diverse cabinets. In March 2022, Chile's presidential cabinet became the first in the country's history to have more women than men (14 to 10). Additionally, in 2023, Chilean women ministers assumed leadership roles in traditionally masculinised portfolios such as the interior, defence, mining, and science, technology, knowledge and innovation.<sup>42</sup> Nicaragua (10 to 6) followed a similar trajectory, with a women-dominated cabinet in January 2023, and Colombia (9 to 9) has a parity cabinet. Peru, Costa Rica and Mexico also have a high proportion of women ministers, above 40 percent.<sup>43</sup> The countries with the lowest female participation in their presidential cabinets are the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Bolivia and Uruguay, with less than 15 percent of women ministers.

Cabinet appointments typically depend on political will. The absence of gender parity mechanisms at this level in most countries results in the fluctuation of women's presence as political party fortunes change. By 2021, only Mexico had established the principle of parity in cabinet appointments, while Colombia and Panama have introduced 30 percent quotas.<sup>44</sup>

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la Organización de los Estados Americanos. Elaboración a cargo de Flavia Freidenberg y Ximena Molina. Revisión a cargo de Carlos Guadarrama. Fecha de revisión: 11 de enero de 2023. Fecha de publicación: 17 de enero de 2023. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3wtiCyh>.

<sup>39</sup> The date shown refers to South America, not Latin America as a whole. Htun, 2016, p. 27.

<sup>40</sup> ECLAC/CEPAL, 2023a. Data from September 2023. <https://oig.cepal.org/en/indicators/executive-power-percentage-women-ministerial-cabinet-positions>

<sup>41</sup> Reyes-Housholder, 2016; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.17163/uni.n39.2023.02>

<sup>42</sup> In March 2023, after a series of ministerial reforms conducted by President Gabriel Boric, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Antonia Urrejola, was replaced by Alberto van Klaveren Stork. From 14 women in 2022, there are now 13 women serving as ministers in Chile. Chile's Government, October 2023.

<https://www.gob.cl/instituciones/#ministeries>.

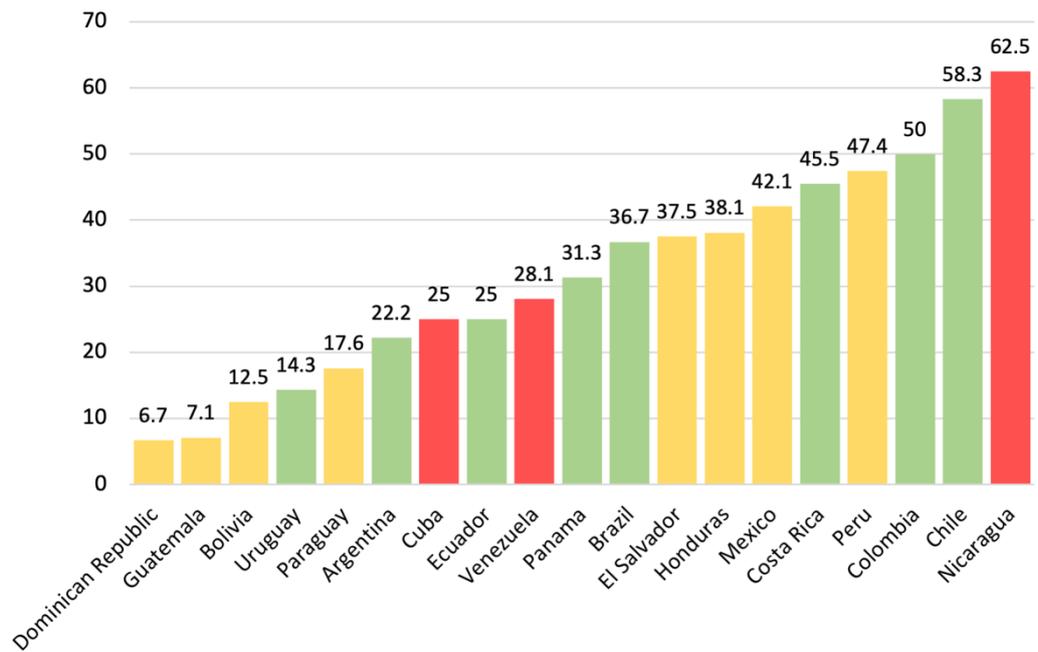
<sup>43</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women (2023). Women in Politics: 2023.

<https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2023-03/women-in-politics-2023>.

<sup>44</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2021a.



Figure 7. Percentage of women cabinet ministers (as of 1st January, 2023)<sup>45</sup>



## Women presidents

Twelve women have held the office of president in the region.<sup>46</sup> The first female presidents, Violeta Chamorro in Nicaragua (1990 – 1994) and Mireya Moscoso in Panama (1999 – 2004) were elected in the 1990s. In 2014 the region was home to a third of the world’s female presidents, when four women served as presidents at the same time: Michelle Bachelet (2006 – 2010 and 2014 – 2018) in Chile; Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007 – 2011 and 2011 – 2015) in Argentina; Laura Chinchilla (2010 – 2014) in Costa Rica; and Dilma Rousseff (2011 – 2015 and 2015 – 2016) in Brazil<sup>47</sup>.

At the time of writing there are only two: Honduras’s President Xiomara Castro Sarmiento and Peru’s President Dina Boluarte. The region now has six female Vice-Presidents: Victoria Villarruel (Argentina); Francia Márquez (Colombia); Raquel Peña (Dominican Republic); Rosario Murillo (Nicaragua); Beatriz Argimón (Uruguay) and Delcy Rodríguez (Venezuela).

<sup>45</sup> It includes Cabinet members who head Ministries. IPU and UN Women (2023). Women in Politics: 2023. <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2023-03/women-in-politics-2023>.

<sup>46</sup> There were two women presidents elected during the 1990s, four during the 2010s, and two were elected in 2022. Additionally, four held positions as interim presidents due to the dismissal or death of the elected president: María Estela M. de Perón (1974 – 1976) in Argentina; Lidia Gueiler Tejada (1979 – 1980) in Bolivia; Rosalía Arteaga (1997-1997) in Ecuador; and Jaenine Añez (2019 – 2020) in Bolivia.

<sup>47</sup> Reyes-Housholder & Thomas, 2021, p. 334.



# Who are the women?

While women in Latin America are entering public office in record numbers, not *all* women are equally represented in government. This is problematic as women do not necessarily have a common interest, as they represent a heterogeneous group in terms of race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, party affiliation, socio-economic status, and other cleavages. As scholar Mala Htun explains:

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“ Most of the women who occupy decision making positions are fair-skinned and Spanish speaking. Members of intersectionally disadvantaged sub-groups – particularly Afrodescendant and indigenous women – are scarce. Though their numbers are growing, few have gained access to elected office, which is conspicuous in light of growing awareness of the racial and ethnic heterogeneity of the region.<sup>48</sup> ”

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This is mostly due to pre-existing structural forms of discrimination based on ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, and migratory status, that affect the political rights of women.<sup>49</sup> Entry into politics often intensifies discrimination and includes additional barriers related to the costs of campaigning, intensive workload, and stereotypes surrounding leadership (for more information, see the section on **Obstacles for women’s political representation**).

Historically in Latin America, Afrodescendants and indigenous peoples were excluded from full citizenship and political rights. Since the 1980s, these groups have been demanding increased access to political participation. Until the 1990s, their presence in formal spaces of political power was almost non-existent, with very few exceptions. While some women from these groups have become important political leaders, overall, indigenous people remain largely excluded from political decision making. Although legal discrimination has been reformed over time, the effects are still felt today. Overt discrimination persists, alongside inequalities in income and education, where society continues to prioritise whiteness and maleness.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Htun, 2014, p. 118. Note that Htun (2016) uses the term Afrodescendant to refer to people not currently living in Africa or born there, but with ancestors originating from that continent.

<sup>49</sup> UN Woman/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 20.

<sup>50</sup> Htun, 2016, p. 20.

# Indigenous Women Leaders

## Bolivia

- Tomasa Yarhui Jacomé, indigenous Minister of Rural Affairs (2002) and Vice-Presidential candidate in 2014;
- Silvia Lazarte, President of the Constitutive Assembly (2006 – 2008) which was responsible for writing Bolivia's new constitution.

## Brazil

- Joênia Wapichana, the first indigenous Congresswoman (2018 – 2022) and currently President of the National Indigenous People Foundation (FUNAI);
- Sônia Guajajara, Congresswoman (elected in 2022) and Minister of Indigenous Peoples;
- Célia Xakriabá, Juliana Cardoso, and Silvia Waiãpi, Congresswomen elected in 2022.

## Chile

- Emilia Nuyado Ancapichún, the first indigenous Congresswoman in Chile, elected in 2017.

## Ecuador

- Nina Pacari, indigenous Congresswoman (1998 – 2002) and Foreign Minister in 2003.

## Guatemala

- Rosalina Tuyuc, Congresswoman (1996 -2000)
- Otila Lux de Coti, Minister of Culture (2000 – 2004) and Congresswoman (2008 – 2012).

## Mexico

- Cirila Sánchez Mendoza, the first indigenous woman to become legislator in the local congress of the state of Oaxaca (1983-1986);
- Clementina Marta Dekker Gómez, Irma Juan Carlos, and Manuela del Carmen Obrador Narváez were elected Congresswomen in 2018, and the latter two were re-elected in 2021 (Source: INE, 2018).
- Xochitl Gálvez Ruiz, former mayor of Miguel Hidalgo, in the Mexico City (2015 – 2018), Senator elected in 2018, and current presidential candidate from the coalition Frente Amplio por México – FAM (Broad Front for Mexico).



Indigenous populations comprise approximately 58 million people, representing around 10 percent of the region's population, yet this proportion varies significantly between countries.<sup>51</sup> There are more than 800 indigenous peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean, with the majority found in Guatemala and Bolivia, where they make up more than 40 percent of the population, and in Peru and Mexico, where they represent around 20 percent of the population.<sup>52</sup> Despite being strongly active and mobilised, these groups have been marginalised from formal politics, and have only recently begun to hold positions of power. Over the past two decades, Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela have established a fixed number of seats in national or subnational legislatures for indigenous peoples. Peru has adopted a quota at the subnational level that requires a minimum of 15 percent of candidates from native communities and indigenous peoples on the electoral ballots for regional and municipal elections.<sup>53</sup>

Bolivia represents the most successful case in Latin America. The constitution adopted in 2009 recognised the rights of indigenous peoples and granted them 7 reserved seats, comprising 5 percent of the total seats in Congress. The country has reached a high degree of indigenous parliamentary representation with 32 percent, although more than 41.5 percent of its population is of indigenous descent. Additionally, a parity mechanism was adopted to overcome the systematic underrepresentation of women.<sup>54</sup> Guatemala follows closely, with 12 percent parliamentary representation and over 43.6 percent of the population being indigenous, but there are no gender quotas in place. In the remaining countries the indigenous parliamentary proportion is still low.<sup>55</sup> Recognising that historically most of the quota seats have been held by indigenous men, Mexico designed mechanisms for the 2021 elections to ensure the equal inclusion of indigenous women and indigenous men.<sup>56</sup> They reserved 21 uninominal electoral districts and nine districts of proportional representation for indigenous candidates. Of the 21 uninominal districts 13 women were elected.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> ECLAC/CEPAL and FILAC, 2020, p. 152.

<sup>52</sup> ECLAC/CEPAL and FILAC, 2020, p. 153-154.

<sup>53</sup> Fuentes & Sánchez, 2018; Paredes & Došek, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Htun & Ossa, 2013, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2015, p. 88-89.

<sup>56</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> Observatorio de Participación Política de las Mujeres en Mexico. Proceso Electoral Federal 2020-2021. Retrieved from: <https://observatorio.inmujeres.gob.mx/mvc/view/public/index.html?q=MTIw>

Afrodescendants account for 24 percent of Latin America's population, or one in every four, with their distribution varying across the region. Over 91 percent are concentrated in Brazil and Venezuela, while 7 percent are from Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, and Mexico.<sup>58</sup> It is estimated that there are up to 150 million women of African descent in Latin America. The percentage of the population which is of African descent ranges from 10 percent in Central America to 50 percent in Brazil and the Caribbean. However, only about 0.1 percent of women parliamentarians in the region are of African descent.<sup>59</sup>

Many countries lack systematic and periodic official data, not only in terms of disaggregation by sex, but also classifications based on intersectional criteria.<sup>60</sup> In 2014, when Brazil's electoral court began including questions about race for candidates running for office, it became the first country in the region to collect such information about elected officials.<sup>61</sup> Data from Brazil evidence that, despite more than half of the population being of African descent, they are historically underrepresented in Congress. In the 2022 elections, only 29 of the 91 women elected were Afrodescendant, which represents 31.9 percent of the total number of women elected, and twice as much as in previous elections; and indigenous women represent only 4.4 percent (or 4 women).<sup>62</sup> These data show that there are groups at a greater disadvantage than others because the intersection of racial and gender discrimination generates a critical situation for

## Afrodescendant Women Leaders

### Brazil

- Anielle Franco, Minister of Racial Equality, as of 2023
- Margareth Menezes, Minister of Culture
- Marina Silva, Minister of Environment and Climate Change

### Colombia

- Francia Márquez, Vice President elected in 2022

### Costa Rica

- Epsy Campbell Barr, Vice President (2018 – 2022)

<sup>58</sup> Freire et al., 2018, p. 18.

<sup>59</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 22.

<sup>60</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 20. Statistical data on race and ethnicity has been historically scarce, especially for Afrodescendants. More countries have collected data on indigeneity and by 2010, almost all countries in Latin America attempted to survey the size of the indigenous population. Furthermore, there is a significant variation on the criteria to gather such data, in turn producing different estimates on the size of indigenous and Afrodescendant groups (Htun, 2016, p. 24-25).

<sup>61</sup> Htun, 2016, p. 24; Campos & Machado, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Tribunal Superior Eleitoral (TSE), 2022. Retrieved from: <https://sig.tse.jus.br/ords/dwapr/r/seai/sig-eleicao-resultados/pain%C3%A9is-de-resultados>.

Afrodescendant and indigenous women – who are often marginalized in power structures within political parties and are less well financed than their white and male counterparts.<sup>63</sup>

Information about the political participation of young women, women with disabilities and women from the LGBTQ+ community in public office is even more scarce.<sup>64</sup>

The lack of data on these issues prevents governments from promoting gender equality and addressing the underrepresentation of women.

While data on sexuality and gender identity is scarce, there are some prominent women from the LGBTQ+ community that have made a symbolic impact by breaking a double glass ceiling. Although there is no official data in Brazil, a report by ANTRA shows that, in the 2022 elections, there were 69 transgender women running for office.<sup>65</sup> Five were elected – two to the lower house and three to the state assemblies. These cases have brought attention to the lack of consideration for intersectionality and have helped normalise diversity in political participation.

## LGBTQ+ Women Leaders

### Argentina

- Mara Pérez Reynoso became the first transgender woman activist to be appointed as the National Coordinator of Diversity in 2010
- Alba Rueda, a transgender woman appointed Undersecretary of Diversity Policies in 2019

### Brazil

- Symmy Larrat, the first transgender woman to be appointed as National Secretary for the Rights of LGBTQ+ people in 2023
- Erika Hilton and Duda Salabert, the first transgender women elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 2022
- Fátima Bezerra, a lesbian woman re-elected Governor of Rio Grande do Norte in 2022

### Colombia

- Claudia López, a lesbian woman elected Mayor of Bogotá in 2019

### Mexico

- Salma Luévano and María Clemente García were the first transgender women legislators elected (2021)

<sup>63</sup> Sacchet, 2020; Llanos & Roza, 2018.

<sup>64</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 23.

<sup>65</sup> Associação Nacional de Transsexuais e Travestis (Antra). Candidaturas Trans em 2022 (Brasil), 2022.



Finally, in terms of class and representation, while over 80 percent of citizens in the region are working class, they are only 10 per cent of Latin American legislators. Latin American democracies as other democracies all over the world are disproportionately run by the wealthy elites.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Lupu, 2015, p. 229.



# The impact of women in politics

Women now make up around a third of representatives in Latin America, but what changes have they brought? This section aims to assess the impact that this influx of women has had on politics in the region. Has having more women in positions of power meant that women have been better represented in terms of the policy that is produced? While scholarly attention has focused on explaining how women get elected, less attention has been given to the consequences of women's election. This emerging body of research in the region merits more attention, to better understand the nature of female representation in the region.<sup>67</sup>

In the scholarship, increasing women's representation has been justified as a means of achieving fairness in politics, given that they make up half of the population. It is also seen as essential for outcomes, as women share their experiences and perspectives when they are in office.<sup>68</sup> The presence of more women in parliament is suggested to bring changes in policymaking, public opinion, and in legislature as a workplace. Together these changes have led to the promotion of policies that advances women's rights more broadly. Legislation on gender equality and violence against women are a few examples of topics that have received support across the political spectrum.<sup>69</sup> Additionally, studies show that women legislators face obstacles when proposing bills related to women's rights.<sup>70</sup> This section looks at how women have been key in advocating for political rights, institutional reforms, and advancing women's policy agenda.

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<sup>67</sup> Schwindt-Bayer, 2014, p. 28.

<sup>68</sup> O'Brien & Piscopo, 2019, p. 53.

<sup>69</sup> Hinojosa, Carle & Woodall, 2018; O'Brien & Piscopo, 2019, p. 53.

<sup>70</sup> Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008.



# Women's political rights and institutional reforms

Institutional reforms may produce new ways of doing and knowing that evolve with time. In this regard, long-term investment is necessary for changes to become more likely to occur. While formal institutional changes, such as gender quotas and the creation of women's policy agencies, are important advances in the promotion of gender equality, they are not sufficient in themselves for effect change.<sup>71</sup> These institutional reforms are both the subject of women's political advocacy, but they also should provide opportunities for more gender equal policymaking in the future.

## Gender quotas and affirmative action

Women have advocated for reforms in political institutions to enable their equal participation alongside men. In doing so, they have successfully advocated for approval of gender quota laws for women through electoral or constitutional reforms.<sup>72</sup>

The term gender quota may refer to different mechanisms for including women, such as legislated candidate quotas, measures passed by national parliaments requiring that all parties nominate a certain percentage of women, or reserved seats for women where a set percentage or number of seats in the legislature are set aside for women, or even voluntary party quotas, adopted by political parties themselves.<sup>73</sup>

During the 1980s and 1990s, women from social movements and legislators drew attention to the importance of gender quotas.<sup>74</sup> In Argentina, two bills were presented simultaneously in both houses of congress by women legislators from parties across different political spectrums. This meant that the campaign for gender quotas was led and promoted by a multi-party coalition of women legislators, as well as the feminist movement.<sup>75</sup> The engagement in a cross-party mobilization gave them bargaining power to negotiate their demands, and Argentina became the

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<sup>71</sup> Piscopo & Thomas, 2017, p. 84.

<sup>72</sup> Piscopo, Thomas, Siavelis & Hinojosa, 2023, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Dahlerup et al., 2013. Available at: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas-database/quotas>

<sup>74</sup> Htun, 2016, p. 52.

<sup>75</sup> Caminotti, 2014, p. 10.



first country in the world to adopt legislative gender quotas. The United Nations' Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, provided the spotlight needed to help women win long-sought reform. In the late 1990s, several countries adopted gender quotas region-wide.<sup>76</sup>

Similarly, in Uruguay, women have been advocating for gender quotas since the post-dictatorship period. Legislators attempted to pass a quota bill in 1988, and over the following 20 years, several initiatives were presented in congress. Unfortunately, none of them obtained the two-thirds majority necessary for approval.<sup>77</sup> More than twenty years later, in 2009, the first quota law was finally approved. However, it was slightly different from the original bills, as it was designated only as a transitional measure adopted for the 2014 elections. In 2016, despite the unsuccessful campaign for a parity law, women succeeded in establishing gender quotas as a permanent mechanism in elections. This mirrors Peru's situation, where women's lobbying and campaigning led to the implementation of gender parity for the 2021 elections. The initially approved bill had outlined a gradual implementation of gender parity, with the goal set for 2031.<sup>78</sup> In Mexico, women legislators' advocacy not only helped close loopholes in gender quota legislation – through the action of the federal electoral court, which ruled that gender quotas must be applied with no exceptions – but also led to the reform of legislation, culminating in the adoption of gender parity in 2014 and the expansion of gender parity for all levels and branches of government in 2019.<sup>79</sup> Another example can be found in Bolivia, where women and indigenous movements advocated for gender parity due to the underrepresentation of women in congress. They successfully achieved diversity in terms of gender, class, and ethnic origins among women elected to public office.<sup>80</sup>

Women legislators have proven to be the greatest advocates for gender quotas, even though not all of them support the measure. In Chile, under pressure from feminists and legislators in a cross-party coalition, and with strong support from President Michelle Bachelet, a quota law was adopted alongside a broader electoral system reform in 2015. Moreover, quotas laws can go beyond the legislature, impacting other key aspects of the state's functioning. For instance, in Chile gender parity was implemented for the 2020-2023 constitutional process, applying to the

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<sup>76</sup> Baldez, 2004.

<sup>77</sup> Johnson, 2018, p. 176.

<sup>78</sup> Piscopo, 2020, p. 81.

<sup>79</sup> Piscopo & Correa, 2023, p. 15.

<sup>80</sup> Rousseau, 2019, p. 402.



elected delegates and experts selected by congress.<sup>81</sup> In May 2023, a new constituent assembly was elected to oversee a new version of the constitution. Despite achieving gender equality (25 women and 25 men), the reservations for indigenous peoples decreased from 11 percent in the first convention (17 of 155) to 2 percent (1 of 50) in the second convention, and the indigenous representative in the assembly was a man, not a woman. Gender parity in the constituent assembly sets an important precedent and has contributed to the enhancement of democracy, but should not come at the cost of losing other forms of diversity.<sup>82</sup>

In Brazil, legislators, along with NGOs, have been lobbying for the approval of affirmative financing measures in favour of women and Afrodescendants. This is in response to the unequal financial support they receive compared to white men and white women during election campaigns.<sup>83</sup> In 2023, they collaborated in opposition to a bill proposing amnesty for political parties. These actions aim to prevent parties from receiving amnesty when they fail to comply with the mandated financing percentage required by law.<sup>84</sup>

## Gender equality plans

Many Latin American states have gender equality plans, and the region shares common aims through these initiatives. These gender equality plans have been produced in response to pressures from both domestic women's rights movements and international organisations. Although they are often initiated by the executive branch, women legislators frequently play a crucial role in their establishment. This underscores the importance of having more women in legislatures as well as in ministries.<sup>85</sup> National gender equality plans began to take shape during the 1990s, influenced by the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), and expanded during the 2000s, becoming a cornerstone in the field of gender policies in Latin America.<sup>86</sup> Despite the regional trend, Argentina and Cuba differ in their approach. They do not have national gender equality plans; instead, they rely on sectoral plans in areas such as education and health, which encompass policies and actions aimed at addressing gender inequalities.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Piscopo, Thomas, Siavelis & Hinojosa, 2023.

<sup>82</sup> UN Woman/ONU Mujeres, 2021, p. 36.

<sup>83</sup> Sacchet, 2020 ; Sacchet, Speck, 2012.

<sup>84</sup> Marques, 2023.

<sup>85</sup> Benavente & Valdés, 2014, p. 16.

<sup>86</sup> Benavente & Valdés, 2014, p. 21.

<sup>87</sup> Benavente & Valdés, 2014, p. 19.



Equality plans serve as both technical and political instruments in policy planning, paving the way for the development of gender institutionalization. They articulate objectives of gender equality, establish priorities, and design and implement public policies. Beyond their technical aspects, these plans manifest the state's commitment to gender equality, serving as a guiding framework for the operation of public policies. Moreover, these plans indicate the issues that have entered the agenda, the formal commitment levels of different government sectors, and the depth of the sought-after changes. Ultimately, these plans are also regarded as instruments for gaining more legitimacy in incorporating a gender perspective into the state apparatus.<sup>88</sup> The key to the impact of these plans lies in the implementation process and how it is monitored, determining the extent of their effectiveness.

The allocation of budgetary resources to address inequality serves as an indicator of the priority given by a government to such issues. In the post-pandemic context of economic deceleration and fiscal adjustments, many countries in Latin America are progressively reducing budgets for gender equality policies. This threatens programs aimed at eradicating poverty and violence against women, as well as the allocation of increased resources to sectoral policies addressing gender inequalities.<sup>89</sup>

## Latin American women's policy agenda

What women want and the changes that they make as political representatives are highly related to context. There is no single global 'women's' policy agenda. Data from an IPSOS survey in 2022 (Figure 8) shows that the issues of sexual harassment, sexual violence, and physical violence are the top priorities for women in the Latin American region.

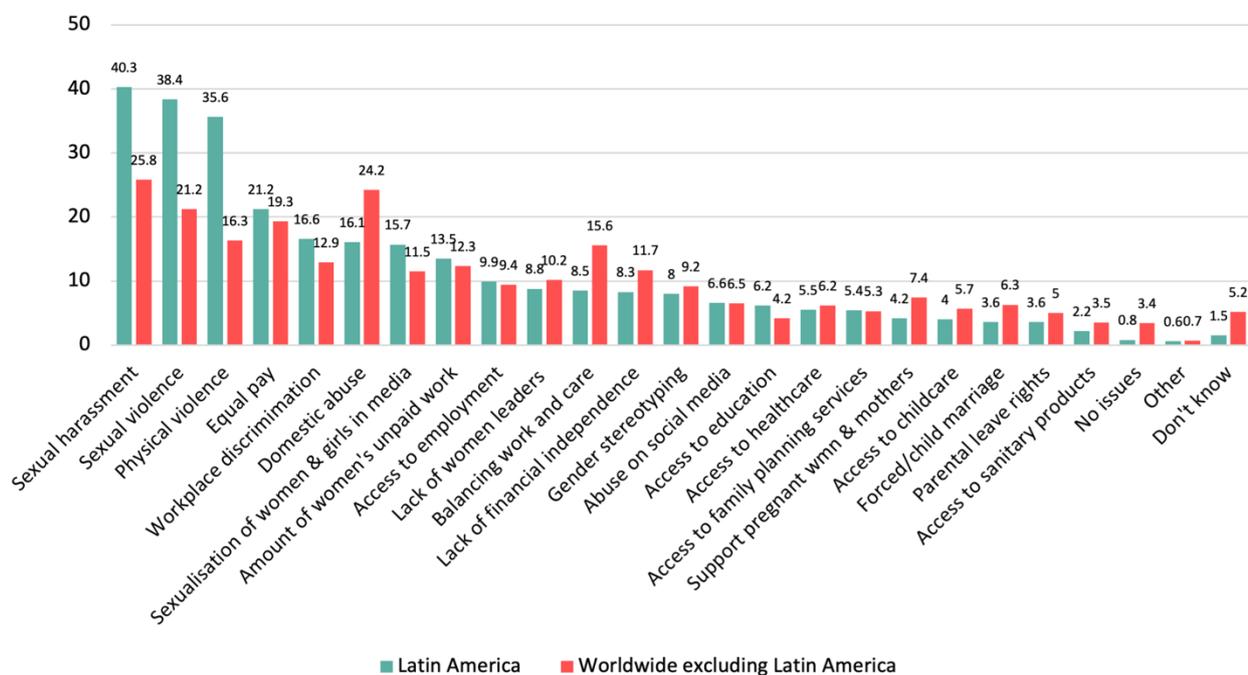
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<sup>88</sup> Benavente & Valdés, 2014, p. 22.

<sup>89</sup> Benavente & Valdés, 2014, p. 55.



Figure 8. Chart showing the percentage of respondents to an IPSOS survey (2022) who chose a particular issue as one of the most important facing women and girls, in Latin America (here Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru) versus the rest of the world.<sup>90</sup>



Latin American women have pushed for change across different policy areas.<sup>91</sup> However, there is a greater rate of change for some types of policies (for example violence against women and quotas) over others (such as abortion and gay marriage) in the region. Doctrinal policies like abortion are very difficult to change because they provoke political opposition from right-wing legislators and religious groups, which draws a clear distinction between them and left-wing women legislators.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, policies such as parental leave and day care can bring opposition of business lobbies and fiscal conservatives.<sup>93</sup>

Research on Brazil shows that, of all gender-related bills deliberated over a 20-year period, the three most common themes seen both in terms of bill introduction and bill enactment were:

<sup>90</sup> IPSOS and International Women's Day (2022). Retrieved from: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/giwl/assets/international-women's-day-survey-2022-%E2%80%93-careers-and-childcare.pdf>

<sup>91</sup> Htun, 2002.

<sup>92</sup> Htun 2001; Baldez 2004; Beall & Barnes, 2020.

<sup>93</sup> Htun & Weldon, 2010.

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1. Economic equality and employment benefits, which included bills on maternity leave, employment discrimination and the rights of domestic workers.
  2. Violence against women and girls' bills received the most international pressure and were highly supported by the women's caucus.
  3. Bills on women's health (that do not include reproductive rights) did not tend to depend on party ideology and were the type of bill that men representatives supported the most when it came to voting.<sup>94</sup>

The scholarship shows that women representatives have played a key role in legislating in these areas.<sup>95</sup>

## Violence against women and girls

Scholars have shown that in the case of violence against women, international organisations have joined forces with local activist groups in Latin America to pressure for change.<sup>96</sup> They managed to make the link between violence against women and the broader context of human rights violations.<sup>97</sup> Latin American human rights activists used these economically developing new democracies' desire for international legitimacy to promote their cause. Working within the framework of the Organisation of American States they developed the Inter-American Convention on Violence Against Women (Belém do Pará Convention).<sup>98</sup> While the Belém do Pará Convention led to an important wave of national-level reforms in violence against women laws in the 2000s, it has not proven sufficient to address current issues, as evidenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and movements such as #NiUnaMenos (Not One Less).

During the COVID-19 lockdown there was a registered rise in emergency calls regarding domestic violence across the region. In 2022, according to ECLAC/CEPAL, at least 4,050 women were victims of femicide in 26 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. Of the 19 Latin American countries, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Uruguay have the

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<sup>94</sup> Ribas, 2016.

<sup>95</sup> Schwindt-Bayer, 2006.

<sup>96</sup> Baldez, 2004; Htun, 2001; Keck & Sikkink 1998; Krook, 2009.

<sup>97</sup> Weldon, 2002.

<sup>98</sup> Htun & Weldon, 2007, p. 18-19.



highest rates. The lowest rates were registered in Colombia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Chile, and Cuba.<sup>99</sup> Since 2015 women around the region have held massive protests on the streets with the slogans #NiUnaMás (Not One (Woman) More) #NiUnaMenos (Not One Less) and #VivasNosQueremos (We (Women) Want to Live), achieving a high degree of visibility, and increasing the attention given to gender violence, which had previously been normalised and silenced. In turn, this has led to victims of sexual abuse and harassment mobilising to demand punishment for perpetrators, pushing for major institutional changes in settings such as universities, journalism, entertainment, sports, and politics. In some countries, this has led to government action prioritising tackling violence against and harassment of women, through allocating more resources, creating more emergency centres and training law enforcement.<sup>100</sup>

In the past three decades, Latin American countries have signed agreements on norms and standards – regional and international – to address violence against women and girls.<sup>101</sup> These have created a baseline that enabled the development of laws, policies, and national action plans. In addition, thirteen countries adopt measures that sanction violence against women in politics.<sup>102</sup>

In 2014, Brazil implemented a national law that earmarked part of the budget for the execution of programs and laws targeting gendered violence, along with funds to promote issues of importance to women. By 2016, as a result of women’s activism, 94 percent of the countries in the region had adopted some type of national action plan where the gender-based killing of women was reclassified as a form of aggravated homicide. Additionally, by 2018, approximately 40 percent of the countries in the region had enacted laws addressing various forms of violence against women, both in the private and public spheres.<sup>103</sup>

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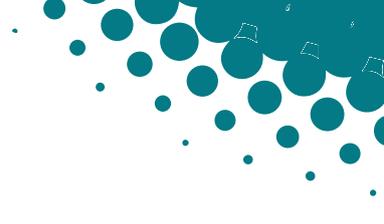
<sup>99</sup> ECLAC/CEPAL, 2023c.

<sup>100</sup> UN Woman/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 35.

<sup>101</sup> All Latin American countries, with the exception of Cuba, have ratified the Convention of Belém do Pará, an Inter-American regional instrument that seeks to prevent, sanction and eradicate violence against women. This convention reaffirms that violence against women is a human rights violation. State members recognise the diversity of forms of violence and the possible perpetrators in the public and private spheres, including violence exercised against women due action or lack of action by the state (Essayag, 2018, p. 113).

<sup>102</sup> ECLAC/CEPAL, 2023b, p. 7.

<sup>103</sup> Essayag, 2018, p. 110; ECLAC/CEPAL, 2023c, p. 2.



## Economic equality

We can see in Figure 8 that after violence and harassment against women, the IPSOS data shows that economic rights are the secondary priority for women in the region. Women in various countries within the region are demanding an end to the gender wage gap under slogans such as #YoParo (I Strike), #NosotrasParamos (We Strike), and #UnDíaSinNosotras (One Day Without Us) around March 8, aiming to increase participation in trade unions, better rights for domestic workers, and other informal sector workers.<sup>104</sup>

## Sexual and reproductive rights

While changes regarding reproductive rights are challenging due to the potential backlash from the church and conservative groups, a mobilisation effort known as the ‘green tide’ has emerged. This movement, led by activists and feminists committed to women’s rights, focuses on sexual and reproductive rights, particularly the debate on voluntary termination of pregnancy. The alliance between activists and legislators has resulted in legislative reforms in countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. In Colombia and Mexico, the effort has manifested through judicial reforms.<sup>105</sup> These massive movements have led to the ground breaking legalisation of abortion in Uruguay (2012), and, more recently, in Chile (2017), Argentina (2020), Colombia (2022), and several states in Mexico (2007-2022).<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> UN Woman/ONU Mujeres, 2021, p. 36.

<sup>105</sup> Htun 2001; Baldez 2004.

<sup>106</sup> Htun & Piscopo, 2014; Smyth, 2023.



# Opportunities and obstacles

How and where women are represented in Latin America depend on the broader context. The introduction of gender quotas, women's caucuses, and the connections between women legislators and the wider women's movement, both at grassroots and in international organisations, have provided women with increased opportunities for representation. However, there are still major constraints. The obstacles women face manifest in the form of violence, political structures, societal expectations, and differential access to resources. This section explores both the factors that enhance and those that hinder the political representation of women in Latin America.

## Opportunities for women's political representation

### Gender quotas

Quotas have been widely introduced in Latin America with the intention of helping women overcome the structural barriers to their representation. Researchers and activists concur that properly designed and enforced gender quotas remain the most effective way to increase women's numerical presence in Latin American legislatures.<sup>107</sup> Whilst their adoption in almost all countries in the region may have been driven more by a desire to prove the countries' democratic credentials than by a commitment to women's representation, their use has helped strengthen women's access to elections and boosted the numbers of women in politics.<sup>108</sup>

Candidate quotas have become the norm in Latin America.<sup>109</sup> In early 1990s, Argentina was the only country that had a gender quota law in place. Largely due to the work of women activists and legislators, boosted by international pressure, quotas have been adopted and thresholds increased across Latin America since the introduction of Argentina's gender law in 1991, which initiated a bandwagon or 'diffusion' effect across the region.<sup>110</sup> In 1995, the signing of the

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<sup>107</sup> Piscopo, 2015 p.27; Hinojosa, 2021, p. 8.

<sup>108</sup> Hinojosa, 2021, p. 9; Towns, 2012.

<sup>109</sup> Hinojosa, 2021, p. 9.

<sup>110</sup> Piatti-Crocker, 2019, p. 44.



Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) recommended the adoption of specific targets and measures to encourage political parties to integrate women into leadership positions. This added to the momentum for the implementation and expansion of quotas.<sup>111</sup> Most commonly, reforms increased initial thresholds set at 20 or 30 percent to 50 percent as the lower thresholds were deemed insufficient. Reforms also strengthened implementation by requiring the rank-ordered placement of candidates on closed electoral lists, establishing enforcement mechanisms, and eliminating loopholes often exploited by political parties – such as placing female candidates at the lowest list positions and replacing female nominees with male contenders.<sup>112</sup>

By the end of the 1990s, twelve out of nineteen countries Latin American countries had adopted gender quotas, with thresholds ranging from 20 to 40 percent. By 2015, sixteen governments had approved national laws requiring political parties to nominate a minimum number of women as candidates for public office.<sup>113</sup>

More recently, ten out of 19 Latin American countries have adopted gender parity, which requires alternation between male and female candidates in legislative elections, a 50/50 representation on candidate lists, and gender balance in public positions.<sup>114</sup> Gender parity for elected office has been implemented in Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Peru.<sup>115</sup> At the subnational legislative level there are quotas and parity laws in 11 countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, and Uruguay. Guatemala is the only country lacking a quota law for elections.<sup>116</sup>

For quotas to be effective, the design of the law matters, and sanctions and enforcement are critical. Parity law reforms have introduced innovations such as placement mandates, which include “vertical parity” applied to the alternation between women and men in party lists, and “horizontal parity”, referring to the alternation of women and men in the first position across all

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<sup>111</sup> Htun, 2016, p. 53-54; Piscopo, 2015, p. 38.

<sup>112</sup> Piscopo, 2015, p. 34; Sacchet, 2018.

<sup>113</sup> Htun, 2016.

<sup>114</sup> Piscopo, 2015, p. 33.

<sup>115</sup> Piscopo & Correa, 2023. In Venezuela, the gender parity applied to the 2015 elections was a temporary measure implemented by electoral authorities.

<sup>116</sup> Piscopo, 2020.



lists. Horizontal parity is adopted in Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Mexico<sup>117</sup>. The type of the required alternation in the lists can vary across countries, impacting parity effectiveness (e.g. Honduras and Ecuador).<sup>118</sup>

The combination of parity and placement mandates has had a positive impact on electing women, as evidenced in Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Nicaragua – all of which have adopted both measures. As shown in Figure 4, between 44 and 52 percent of those elected to their lower or single chamber of congress in these countries are women. Honduras and Panama, both operating with open-list systems and no placement mandates, elect 27 percent and 22 percent women, respectively. Brazil, with a 30 percent quota, weak enforcement, open lists, and the fact that parties can nominate more candidates than the number of available seats, ranks last in the region at 17.5 percent. It is surpassed only by Venezuela, which has a representation of 14.4 percent.

Since the adoption of gender quotas in the region, some countries have expanded the application of gender quotas for executive roles. Ecuador and Peru have implemented gender parity for presidential and vice-presidential candidates. Ecuador and Mexico require parity for elected or appointed positions in executive and judicial offices, while Bolivia applies it only for judicial posts. In the case of Mexico, all appointed and elected positions at all levels must be evenly distributed between women and men, a concept referred to as “parity in everything”.<sup>119</sup> Costa Rica has a 50 percent quota for one of the two vice-presidential positions, and Peru has gender parity for both president and vice-president. At the subnational executive level, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Peru adopt parity for mayors and deputy mayors. Peru also requires gender parity for governor and vice-governor. Colombia has a 30% quota for public administration positions.<sup>120</sup>

Gender quotas have an important symbolic effect in raising awareness of gender inequalities in politics and creating space for women to work as legislators. The presence of more women

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<sup>117</sup> Piscopo & Correa, 2023, p. 11.

<sup>118</sup> Correa & Chaves, 2020. In Honduras, until 2020, in some districts, the alternation rule could start from the 3rd to the 5th position on the party lists, allowing men to be placed in the top positions. In districts with higher magnitude – where more than 20 MPs are elected -, the alternation was required starting from the 5th position. This legislation was later amended in 2020 to implement a 1:1 alternation. However, the parity principle can still be applied during primary elections, thereby potentially weakening its effectiveness.

<sup>119</sup> Piscopo & Correa, 2023, p. 2.

<sup>120</sup> Piscopo & Correa, 2023, p. 12.



legislators has an enabling effect on changing society's perception that women can be as good politicians as men, thereby promoting greater political engagement among women.<sup>121</sup>

## Women's caucuses and equality committees

Women representatives in legislatures have played an important role in creating women's caucuses and establishing or modifying legislative equality committees, providing a foundation for the advocacy of women's rights. These institutions offer a space for discussing, debating, and developing policies. Others have formed gender equality observatories comprised of academics, legislators, and activists, which work to monitor state compliance with gender equality laws. The interplay of women's caucuses and legislative committees addressing women's issues can form a 'sweet spot' for the substantive representation of women.<sup>122</sup> By 2015, seven Latin American countries had women's caucuses, exhibiting significant variations in terms of organisation and resources.<sup>123</sup> These institutions can amplify the efforts of women representatives. For instance, even when the number of female legislators is below 30 percent, joint formal and informal collective spaces permit the promotion of women's rights initiatives.<sup>124</sup>

There are inevitably challenges to working within the legislature for promoting women's interests. A key issue is the lack of consensus among women legislators, partly due to the party system and their respective ideological platforms.<sup>125</sup> In some cases, such as in Brazil, congresswomen have historically used most parties' indifference over gender issues to build coalitions between themselves and across political sectors.<sup>126</sup> Despite competitiveness and differences in ideology, female representatives have tried to come together and at the state level, a collective action for women's citizenship and empowerment has been put in practice.<sup>127</sup> They have been responsible for lobbying, setting the agenda, voting together as a group, and pushing for change over the years. However, even this group has become polarised when there have been large electoral wins by the far-right such as after the 2018 election in Brazil.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> O'Brien & Piscopo, 2019, p. 53.

<sup>122</sup> Gustà & Madera, 2017, p. 89; Piscopo, 2020.

<sup>123</sup> Piscopo, 2020, p. 87.

<sup>124</sup> Gustà & Madera, 2017, p. 90.

<sup>125</sup> Gustà & Madera, 2017, p. 101.

<sup>126</sup> Macaulay, 2006.

<sup>127</sup> Rodrigues, 2004, p. 214.

<sup>128</sup> Negreiros Persson, 2021.



These caucuses and committees make an impact beyond the legislature. From within such spaces and structures connections can be made and maintained that advance joint actions with extra-parliamentary actors and women's advocates. In using committees and caucuses, women legislators are taking advantage of established organizational settings to connect and interact with different actors, in a context that may not be entirely open to these issues. Through these networks and in connection with the executive, they are able to create areas of knowledge, shared definitions of public problems and promote formal commitments on women's rights with key political players.<sup>129</sup>

## Connecting to feminist movements and international organisations

Women political representatives' ability to bring about change is enhanced when they form part of a wider movement. Women in politics provide a focal point for the multi-level networks that link legal, regional, and global actors capable of collaborating on specific issues. In Latin America, UN agencies such as UN Women, UNDP, and ECLAC play a key role in articulating collaborative efforts by actively supporting the legislatures in the countries they observe. They achieve this by providing and exchanging ideas and material resources, facilitating meetings with different actors, and granting legitimacy to the process.<sup>130</sup> Further, these agencies fund and train local activists, exert pressure on governments, raise awareness of the rights recognised by the treaties, and share ideas and resources across countries.<sup>131</sup> When representatives in congress, civil society, and international organisations work together, advocating, lobbying and campaigning collectively, they are more effective at mobilising for gender equality initiatives.

Movements promoting the eradication of violence against women, the removal of discriminatory legislation, and the advancement of more favourable electoral rules for women often concentrate on legislative advocacy, making the national legislature a focal point for mobilisation. One regional manifestation of this advocacy is the creation of the feminist network, Comité de America Latina y el Caribe para la Defensa de los Derechos de la Mujer (CLADEM, Latin America and the Caribbean Committee for the Defence of the Rights of Women). Its purpose is to monitor

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<sup>129</sup> Gustà & Madera, 2017, p. 97-98.

<sup>130</sup> Gustà & Madera, 2017, p. 100-101.

<sup>131</sup> Risse-Kappan, 1994; Keck & Sikkink, 1998.



government compliance with international standards on women's rights and to present reports to the Committee overseeing the implementation of CEDAW.<sup>132</sup> Other examples can be found in Mexico, both at the national and subnational levels. At the subnational level, the Women's Parliaments initiative was established, comprising 66 women congresswomen from the Congress of Mexico City. At the national level, the first Parliament for Indigenous Women was formed in 2022.<sup>133</sup>

## Women's policy agencies

Women's policy agencies have the potential to alter the relationship between women and the state, serving as significant channels for women's representation and participation.<sup>134</sup> In Latin American representative democracies, executive branch resources, such as national women's machinery, have been utilized to promote rights when legislative avenues are closed.<sup>135</sup>

## Obstacles for women's political representation

Since the democratic transitions in Latin America in the 1980s, women have increasingly made inroads into the formal political sphere. However, numerous obstacles persist for the political representation of women.<sup>136</sup> While laws have changed, patriarchal political culture remains intact in all countries. Women face several obstacles, including shouldering greater care responsibilities, less access to campaign funds, and gender-based harassment and violence. In Latin America, as in other regions, formal changes to the rules governing both executives and legislatures often face resistance from informal practices that preserve male dominance. These informal practices contribute to the marginalisation of women's voices and issues, depriving women of authority and resources. Ultimately, formal changes in institutions mark the beginning, the evolution of informal

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<sup>132</sup> For Latin America, CEDAW is an important instrument. The region was one of the fastest ones to ratify the Convention and initiate the process of removing discriminatory legislation and reform accordingly (Gustà & Madera, 2017, p. 91-2).

<sup>133</sup> Both initiatives are available at: <https://congresocdmx.gob.mx/comsoc-instalan-tercer-parlamento-mujeres-congreso-cdmx-2212-1.html> and <https://www.gob.mx/inmujeres/es/articulos/senado-mexicano-instala-primer-parlamento-de-mujeres-indigenas?idiom=es>

<sup>134</sup> Mazur, 2005, p. 3.

<sup>135</sup> Friedman 2009, p. 430.

<sup>136</sup> Piscopo & Thomas, 2017, p. 69.



norms within institutions will determine whether formal reforms achieve their objectives of social justice.<sup>137</sup>

Despite quota legislation, women still encounter obstacles in accessing public office. Norms, culture, and socioeconomic factors can at times mitigate or undermine the advantages that formal rules, such as quotas, provide.<sup>138</sup> Further reforms are necessary, including changes to campaign and party finance rules, as well as implementation of laws against political violence. Gendered socialisation practices that discourage women's political participation may contribute to unequal education and employment opportunities, limiting women's access to financial resources and influential political networks. These factors, among others, hinder women's ability to reach the top tiers of political life.<sup>139</sup>

In terms of the substantive representation of women, policy outcomes are not solely a product of legislators' preferences.<sup>140</sup> Aspects of the institutional context, such as the ideological composition of Congress, party discipline, executive-legislative relations, party leadership, the configuration of interest groups, and the level of media and public attention to the issues, can influence both legislator behaviour and policy outcomes.<sup>141</sup> Formal and informal institutions, networks, connections, and rules can impact legislators' ability to move from bill introduction to bill passage.

## Violence against women in politics

Violence directed against women in politics is a form of gender-based violence and has been identified as a significant problem affecting women's formal political participation in Latin America.<sup>142</sup> More than 80 percent of women legislators worldwide have experienced violence, particularly psychological violence.<sup>143</sup> Some women are more exposed to this type of violence than others, including human rights defenders, young, indigenous people, LGBTQ+ members, those belonging to opposition parties, minority groups, and those with dissenting views.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Piscopo & Thomas, 2017, p. 83-84.

<sup>138</sup> Schwindt-Bayer & Senk, 2020, p. 396.

<sup>139</sup> Schwindt-Bayer & Senk, 2020, p. 396.

<sup>140</sup> Weldon, 2002.

<sup>141</sup> Franceschet, 2011.

<sup>142</sup> Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2016, p. 151; UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2021b, p. 5.

<sup>143</sup> IPU, 2016, p. 3

<sup>144</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p.30.



Violence against women in politics takes many forms. It extends beyond physical violence to include symbolic violence, whereby women become the targets of judgements based on stereotypes; economic violence, depriving women of the financial resources they are entitled to as result of their political activities; and cyberbullying and intimidation in social media.<sup>145</sup> Most countries in the region, except Bolivia and Mexico, lack official statistics on political violence against women. In many countries, violence originates within political parties and parliaments themselves, especially during the candidate selection and nomination process. Many of these institutions lack the mechanisms for reporting incidents, investigation protocols, and sanctions, resulting in many cases remaining invisible and unpunished.<sup>146</sup>

Reports show a high incidence of political violence directed at women in the region. A report from Argentina identified that 8 out of 10 women in politics in the country were affected. Psychological violence, primarily perpetrated by men, is the most frequent type of violence. The origin of the violence often stems from individuals in their social networks and from fellow party members, including those from other parties.<sup>147</sup> A 2019 study in Bolivia revealed that 75 percent of the women deputies and senators of the Plurinational Legislative Assembly had been victims of political violence. In a broader context of electoral and cartel violence, not limited to gender-related incidents, both men and women face physical attacks and fatalities. In Mexico, in 2018, 106 women politicians, candidates or pre-candidates were attacked, and 16 women were murdered. However, it is noteworthy that men are typically more targeted than women.<sup>148</sup> In Peru, in the regional and municipal elections of 2018, 4 out of 10 candidates suffered political harassment or violence. In Colombia, 6 out of 10 women in the country experienced violence in the exercise of their rights as politicians. One report found that in Brazil, from January 2016 to September 2020, there were nine cases of murder or attempted murder of women representatives or women candidates.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 30.

<sup>146</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 31.

<sup>147</sup> Equipo Latinoamericano de Justicia y Género (ELA), 2018, p. 18. 'Violencia política contra las mujeres. Experiencias en primera persona'. Buenos Aires: ELA. Available at: <https://ela.org.ar/publicaciones-documentos/violencia-politica-contra-las-mujeres-en-argentina-experiencias-en-primera-persona/>.

<sup>148</sup> Hernandez Huerta, 2020.

<sup>149</sup> Terra de Direitos and Justiça Global (2020). 'Violência política e eleitoral no brasil: panorama das violações de direitos humanos de 2016 a 2020'. Available at: <https://terradedireitos.org.br/violencia-politica-e-eleitoral-no-brasil/2020/>.



There has been some action to address this violence. In 1994 the Inter-American Convention of Belém do Pará increased the visibility of the violence women suffer in all spheres and the need for governments to tackle the less visible gendered violence within the political and institutional systems.<sup>150</sup> Further, since 2017, many countries have endorsed the Inter-American model law on political violence against women which sets out the responsibilities and requirements of different bodies to prevent and punish violence against women in public life.<sup>151</sup> Bolivia was the first Latin American country to enact specific laws on harassment and political violence against women in 2012.<sup>152</sup> Honduras and Costa Rica have presented initiatives in congress. Other countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Panama, Paraguay and Uruguay have incorporated political violence against women as a criterion in broader laws tackling gendered violence. In 2016, Mexico adopted a Protocol of Interstate Action to address cases of gender-based political violence, and in 2020, several laws were reformed with the purpose of addressing such violence. In 2021, Peru approved a law to criminalise harassment against women in politics, and Brazil approved a law to tackle violence against women in politics, which also alters several Brazilian electoral laws. Finally, several countries have adopted protocols with gender perspective to address cases of violence and harassment in legislatures, including Argentina, Chile, El Salvador and Mexico.<sup>153</sup>

## Gendered perceptions of political participation and leadership

Women continue to face judgment and scrutiny regarding their ability to contribute to the political process, as well as scrutiny of their physical appearance, personal life, and age. Biased perceptions of women's capacity and potential can lead them to exclude themselves from public office, as prevailing social practices reinforce self-limiting perceptions that create a “cement ceiling”. Leadership criteria and attributes traditionally associated with masculinity – such as strength, rationality, ambition, competitiveness – are highly valued in men but not necessarily in women. Consequently, women find themselves compelled to adopt uncomfortable roles constructed exclusively from a male perspective.<sup>154</sup> Two examples of female leaders who faced such challenges are Cristina Kirchner and Dilma Rousseff. Both experienced political violence

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<sup>150</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres and OEA/CIM, 2020, p. 6; Bandeira & Almeida, 2015, p. 505.

<sup>151</sup> UNDP/PNUD and UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2017; UN Women/ONU Mujeres/OEA /CIM, 2020, p. 6-7.

<sup>152</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres and OEA/CIM, 2020, p. 6.

<sup>153</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres and OEA/CIM, 2020, p. 11.

<sup>154</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 26.



attacks and were targeted by newspapers that criticized not only their policies but also their personal lives.

## Care responsibilities

Women in Latin America – as in much of the rest of the world – bear the greater burden of unpaid care responsibilities, dedicating twice as much time to domestic work and care activities than men.<sup>155</sup> Care-related responsibilities include looking after children, disabled individuals, those with illness, and the elderly, and are still perceived as primarily women’s responsibilities. Despite the societal value of this work, it remains invisible, undervalued, and neglected in the design of economic and social policies in Latin America, especially due to an unfair sexual division of labour. Recently, women have been significantly affected during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of economic autonomy, as care activities intensified in public and private spheres.

The role of “natural caregivers” that society assigns to women and girls generates an excessive work burden, undermining their rights and presenting a major obstacle to gender equality and women’s autonomy. This restriction affects their possibilities, time, and means to participate in public life.<sup>156</sup> Public policies are not being designed to address the socialisation of care and domestic activities, and it affects how women can dedicate themselves to political activities or run for elected roles. This challenge becomes even more dramatic during the electoral process, when more time is required to build a campaign, and women often must work double or even triple shifts. This is also the reality of many legislators who struggle to balance life and work due to exhausting workload and late voting hours. Figure 9 illustrates the average time spent on unpaid work in Latin America.

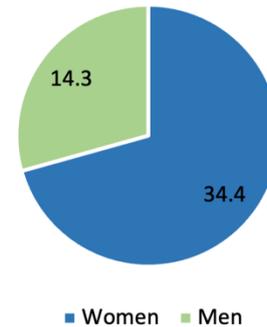
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<sup>155</sup> ECLAC/CEPAL, 2022.

<sup>156</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 25-26.

Figure 9. Average time spent on unpaid work of the population aged 15 or over in Latin America (Average hours per week)<sup>157</sup>

Unpaid work (average hours per week)



## Discriminatory practices against indigenous and Afrodescendant women

Indigenous and Afrodescendant women face distinctive obstacles when attempting to enter and work effectively within the electoral and legislative arenas.<sup>158</sup> They confront triple discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, and class.<sup>159</sup> Indigenous and Afrodescendant populations often grapple with higher levels of poverty, lower education levels, and wages. Additionally, they face unequal access to education and healthcare, making it less likely for them to possess the resources needed for political involvement. Furthermore, there is a lack of genuine political interest from political parties in indigenous participation, coupled with a lack of commitment from these parties to ensure the full engagement of women.<sup>160</sup>

Indigenous women frequently face the threat of losing their lands due to internal armed conflicts, environmental degradation, exploitation, government indifference, as well as forced migration in the pursuit of jobs, human trafficking, and sexual violence. The political participation of indigenous women may contribute to destabilising their already precarious economic conditions, which are often challenging in most cases. However, discrimination can sometimes act as a trigger for political action, particularly at the local level.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> ECLAC/CEPAL, 2023d, average calculated by GIWL. Retrieved from: <https://oig.cepal.org/en/indicators/total-work-time>.

<sup>158</sup> Goodnow, Madrid & Moser, 2019, p. 345.

<sup>159</sup> Ketterer, 2011, p. 252.

<sup>160</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2015, p. 88.

<sup>161</sup> Ketterer, 2011, p. 251-253.



Afrodescendant women also tend to be underrepresented in political office. Nevertheless, those in office are taking initiatives to tackle their disadvantage and exclusion, introducing new issues to national political agendas. They compel others to adopt an intersectional perspective, serving as a reminder of a diverse society and thereby enhancing democratic representation and governance in the region's legislatures.<sup>162</sup>

Violence against women in politics is often directed more at women from indigenous or afrodescendant populations. Despite increased representation resulting from parity measures, indigenous women have experienced a surge in violence, hindering their performance in public office. This includes refusals to allocate resources or implement their initiatives.<sup>163</sup> A report on Afrodescendant women candidates in the 2020 elections in Brazil revealed that 78 percent of them suffered online violence, 42 percent were victims of physical violence or intimidation, and 13 percent received death threats during the campaign period.<sup>164</sup>

## Political financing

Money is often a barrier to women's entry into formal politics. Women encounter greater challenges in accessing funds, primarily because they tend to have less money than men to begin with. Additionally, they have less access to the same wealthy networks as men. This difficulty is further exacerbated by unfair fund allocation conditions and the necessity for intermediaries to secure campaign financing instead of direct allocation. Corruption, for instance, can significantly limit women's access to campaign funds. Greater transparency in political campaign financing would have a positive impact in the participation of women in politics.<sup>165</sup> Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama have laws that require parties to allocate their budget to train women to enter politics.<sup>166</sup>

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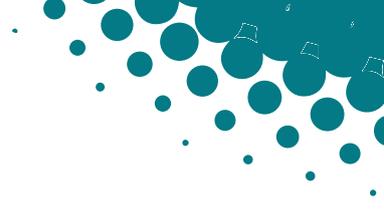
<sup>162</sup> Htun, 2014, p. 120.

<sup>163</sup> UN Woman/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 33.

<sup>164</sup> Instituto Marielle Franco, 2020. "Political Violence Against Black Women" (A Violência política contra mulheres negras). Available at: <https://www.violenciapolitica.org/2020>.

<sup>165</sup> UN Woman/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 27-28.

<sup>166</sup> Piscopo, 2020, p. 88.



## Political parties

While many countries in Latin America formally adopt principles of equality and non-discrimination, in most cases, this rhetoric has not effectively translated into party policies that promote women's participation, leadership, and access to decision-making, leaving the male-dominated status quo unchanged. Available data suggest that women may account, on average, for between 40 and 60 percent of political parties' membership. However, the average number of women in party executive committees ranges from 17.3 to 33.3 percent. Six Latin American countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras and Panama) have regulated gender parity in party leadership positions.<sup>167</sup> More women in positions of power within political parties can be a powerful strategy to encourage more women to run for elections and, consequentially, have more women legislators.

Research has shown that membership in the ruling party can provide women representatives with more opportunities to gain leadership positions within committees and to act on their priorities. In this way, the ideology of the presidential party is important, as it can create a more or less gender-friendly environment.<sup>168</sup>

## Marginalisation in office

The literature on women's political representation in legislatures in Latin America indicates that once in office, women tend to be marginalised.<sup>169</sup> This marginalisation comes from the prevalence of male-dominated values, norms, and networks. Women are often excluded and marginalised, guided or driven into more traditionally female arenas.<sup>170</sup> They rarely hold leadership positions and tend to be clustered in the legislatures' less prestigious committees, which deal with social issues such as social policy, culture, education, environment, and housing. This is the case in 11 out of 17 Latin American countries<sup>171</sup>. They do not serve as chairs of committees traditionally considered to be in men's domain, such as those related to the economy or defence. This is significant because the position, networks, and influence of representatives can either amplify or

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<sup>167</sup> UN Women/ONU Mujeres, 2021a, p. 24-25.

<sup>168</sup> Kittilson, 2006; Sacchet, 2007; Waylen, 2003.

<sup>169</sup> Htun and Piscopo, 2014; Heath, Schwindt-Bayer & Taylor-Robinson, 2005; Miguel, 2012; Schwindt-Bayer & Senk, 2020, p. 393.

<sup>170</sup> Schwindt-Bayer, 2010, p. 6.

<sup>171</sup> Hernández-Gutiérrez, Cárdenas-Arguedas & Cortés-Hernández, 2023, p. 51.



constrain the likelihood of their policy preferences becoming law.<sup>172</sup> Until legislatures in Latin America afford women legislators the power and space they need, women's representation will remain incomplete.<sup>173</sup>

## The role of the executive and electoral courts

The ability of women representatives to achieve their goals depends on the openness of the institution, with powerful participants such as the executive playing a key role. On one hand, executive dominance can be an obstacle for legislators outside the majority block. On the other hand, it can potentially be an advantage if the executive and the presidential party are sympathetic to the cause of women. Control of the executive branch matters because, the administration has an advantage in setting the agenda, shaping policy, and determining whether bills passed by congress become law.<sup>174</sup> The executive can pursue its preferences in the legislative process through different powers, such as initiating legislation, vetoing legislation wholly or in parts, and through their relationship with party leaders.<sup>175</sup>

Electoral courts (and in some countries, the judiciary) play an important role in Latin America. Examples can be found in Brazil, where fake candidates ("laranjas") were presented in the ballots during the 2014 general election without their knowledge or agreement to run for office, and parties were sanctioned by the Superior Electoral Court. In Mexico, women were appointed to run in unwinnable districts and in the case of "Las Juanitas", in 2009, elected women had to renounce their seats in favour of their replacements (who were men). The electoral tribunal ruled that both candidates and their substitutes should be women – as a way to prevent parties from breaking the quota law again. These are a few examples of how the electoral courts helped enforce gender quotas.<sup>176</sup>

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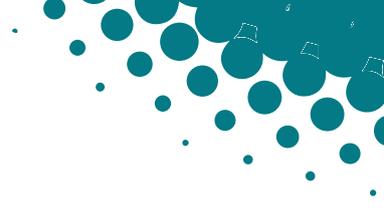
<sup>172</sup> Swers, 2002, p. 10-11.

<sup>173</sup> Schwandt-Bayer, 2010, p. 2-6.

<sup>174</sup> Dodson, 2006, p. 42.

<sup>175</sup> Pereira & Mueller, 2004, p. 23-38.

<sup>176</sup> Ramos & Silva, 2020; Freidenberg, 2018.



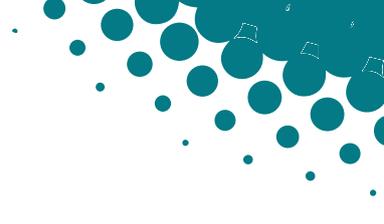
## Regime types

The relationship between regime type, the level of democracy, and women's access to political positions have been the subject of numerous studies, yielding various outcomes. In democratic systems, the electoral system plays a crucial mediating role in women's representation.<sup>177</sup> Among countries where more than 40 percent of the congress comprises women, falling within the range of parity, some are democratic, such as Argentina and Costa Rica, while Bolivia and Mexico are classified as partially free, according to the Freedom House. Notably, regimes adhering to leftist ideologies are more likely to appoint women to high office. However, in non-democratic countries, the regime type significantly influences opportunities for women. Despite this, in non-democratic regimes, women may achieve high levels of legislative representation without gaining substantial political power.<sup>178</sup> As illustrated in Figure 4, countries with the highest percentage of women in lower house or single chamber are Cuba and Nicaragua, both authoritarian regimes.

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<sup>177</sup> Stockemer, 2015.

<sup>178</sup> Reynolds, 1999.



# Conclusion

The introduction of quotas in Latin America over the past few decades has dramatically increased women's participation in formal political institutions. In the region as a whole, around a third of legislators are women. The implementation and diffusion of gender quotas have helped increase women's political representation in Latin America, and gender quotas have been expanded to different levels of government. Well-designed gender quotas work to improve women's representation, whereas weak gender quotas have little to no effect on female representation in Congress.

While some countries have achieved gender parity in legislative chambers, others are still struggling to have more women in office. However, the increase in the representation of women has not benefited all women equally. As with men, certain groups are over-represented while others face much greater barriers to entry into politics. Indigenous and Afrodescendant women face both racism and sexism and are particularly underrepresented, while those from privileged backgrounds, white and/or Spanish descent, are much better represented.

Nonetheless, while the descriptive representation has improved significantly, the substantive representation of women has faced even greater barriers. In common with other countries, women in power continue to be marginalised. Further, the structures within which they work, from the obligation to toe the party line to the absence of democracy and the power of the executive in certain states, have meant that they have not been able to push the women's agenda as effectively as they had hoped.

The prevalence of violence and violence against women in politics in the region speaks to some of the societal factors which limit women and prevent them from aspiring to enter institutional politics. The strengthening of legislation that prohibits abortion also draws attention to the lack of reproductive rights in countries such as the Dominican Republic, Honduras and Nicaragua where abortions are not allowed. Abortion in El Salvador is criminalized in all circumstances, even if it is a high-risk pregnancy, and women who have spontaneous miscarriages face legal prosecution.

Networks of women working with and supported by international organisations, together with grassroots movements, have been the most effective at bringing legislative change and visibility to



issues around violence against women, and women's economic and political rights. Even so, the presence of women in the legislature has allowed them to play an important role in bringing issues into the formal political sphere, creating spaces for women from which they can bring about change.

Whether the rapid increase in women's descriptive representation can translate into their substantive representation – or whether progress stalls or backslides in the current economic climate – remains to be seen. Experiences from Latin America have shown that national and local governments play an important role in tackling violence against women. Further research must be done to address issues related to violence against women politicians and female candidates, and to explore the substantive representation of women and the roles women play within political parties and in parliaments.

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