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# Advancing Women's Political Participation

*Americas Consultation  
on Gender Equality  
& Political Empowerment*

*May 16, 2017  
Mexico City, Mexico*

# Background Information

Even though gender equality and women's empowerment are currently at the heart of the global agenda, the road ahead is still long and challenging. While international human rights mechanisms provide a valid framework to advance the protection of women and to reduce the gaps for inequality, more efforts are needed. The realm of politics has been considered as one of the most challenging spheres of the public life for women to enter and their participation in parliament is crucial for fair representation of women in society.

In this light, it is only timely to focus on an alternative policy agenda to address the root causes of inequality, including looking at the intersectionality of multiple inequalities and processes of discrimination. In addition, it is fundamental that the efforts and the core instruments from the regional organizations, including conventions, resolutions, legal instruments and programmatic agendas move beyond the identification of the causes and impediments towards the achievement of gender equality, but to the design and systematic implementation of gender responsive measures/mechanisms to guarantee equality and prevent gender based discrimination.

The Community of Democracies, from the moment of its inception in 2000, has been actively supporting activities and projects dedicated to women's empowerment and gender equality. The Warsaw Declaration, the founding document of the Community of Democracies, underlines that "Informed participation by all elements of society, men and women, in a country's economic and political life, including by persons belonging to minority groups, is fundamental to a vibrant and durable democracy." Democracy should transform power relations between men and women in such a manner that gender equality is promoted in terms of inclusiveness, participation, representativeness and accountability of democratic processes and institutions. The universal principle of equality and non-discrimination between women and men forms one of the major global commitments in the pursuit of gender equality in democracy building.

To support women's participation in politics, the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies (PSCD) implemented the project on "Advancing Women's Political Participation", funded by the Republic of Korea and organized in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and International IDEA. Through dialogue, the project provided an opportunity for participants from all over the world to discuss and compare the challenges and successes that women face in politics and look for ways to propel the idea of women's political participation forward. It consisted of five regional consultations organized in 2016-2017 in Strasbourg (France), Johannesburg (South Africa), Tunis (Tunisia), Bali (Indonesia) and Mexico City (Mexico).

The Regional Consultations on Gender Equality and Political Empowerment of Women served as platforms created to enhance a multilateral dialogue regarding the challenges and opportunities in the implementation of the legal frameworks, as well as the exchange of best practices to take specific actions to address the main issues related to the advancement of Gender Equality and the Political Participation of Women.

The project aims to produce a global and regional policy recommendations and contribute to the policy guidebook based on input collected from the five regional consultations. The guidebook is a part of the Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD) and provides recommendations on how to efficiently advance women's political participation.

# Introduction

The Americas Consultation brought together current and former practicing politicians and representatives from international, regional, and civil society organizations active in the region to discuss gender equality and women's political empowerment, examine case studies, exchange best practices, and produce a set of recommendations for furthering women's engagement in politics in the Americas.

This report consists of three sections of relevant experiences and lessons learned on gender equality and the political empowerment of women: 1) challenges to be overcome in the region; 2) existing tools and mechanisms; and 3) best practices and recommendations on how to effectively advance gender equality and women's political participation.

As a result of social and economic development, along with the enactment of quota and parity laws, women's participation in Latin American politics has grown over the past several decades. However, these developments have not always been accompanied by human rights advancements and economic prosperity. Many countries in the region continue to suffer from alleged human rights abuses, government corruption, ineffective judicial systems, and high levels of violent crime. With regards to women's political empowerment, men greatly outnumber women at the top of the pyramid of decision-making positions, stemming from ongoing gender inequalities within political parties as well as patriarchal structures in society.

Despite these challenges, the region has seen major advances in women's political participation. There have been 10 female heads of state or government in the Americas over the last 10 years, and in terms of the number of women in parliamentary positions, the region has made great strides. There has also been a steady increase in the number of women in parliament, rising from 12.7% in 1995 to 28.1% in 2017 (higher than the current world average of 23.3%).

Several countries with the highest percentage of women in the lower or single house of parliament are located in the Americas, with four countries ranking in the top 10 and six in the top 20: Bolivia (53.1%), Cuba (48.9%), Nicaragua (45.7%), Mexico (42.6%), Ecuador (41.6%), and Argentina (38.9%). In addition, four other countries have attained the 30% female political representation level advised by the Beijing Platform for Action (BPA): Costa Rica (35.1%), El Salvador (32.1%), Guyana (31.9%), and Trinidad and Tobago (31.0%).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, however, fifteen countries in the Americas have yet to achieve even 20% female representation in the lower or single house of parliament, primarily in the Caribbean but also countries like the United States (19.1%) and Brazil (10.7%).<sup>2</sup>

Many of these gains can be attributed to the widespread introduction of affirmative action mechanisms. Almost all countries in Latin America have implemented some form of quota geared toward enhancing women's political participation on electoral lists, whether at the national or the political party level. Moreover, six countries – Bolivia, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Venezuela – have approved parity laws. Not all quota regulations have been equally effective, however, and for the most part, gender quota laws have focused solely on women's access to the legislative branch.

The 2016 Global Gender Gap Index, which measures progress on gender equality in economic participation, education, political participation, and health, reveals that North America has a remaining gender gap of 28% – one of two regions in the world where the gap is less than 30%, with Western Europe being the other. Latin America and the Caribbean, in contrast, have a remaining gender gap of 30%, tied with Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Within Latin America and the Caribbean, Nicaragua is the highest ranked in the Index at tenth, with 11 other countries ranked in the top 50: Bolivia (23), Cuba (27), Barbados (28), Costa Rica (32), Argentina (33), Bahamas (37), Colombia (39), Ecuador (40), Jamaica (42), Trinidad and Tobago (44), and Panama (47). In North America, Canada and the United States are ranked 35 and 45, respectively.

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<sup>1</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2017. Women in National Parliaments. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union.

<sup>2</sup> The United States of America (19.1%), Colombia (18.7%), Panama (18.3%), Jamaica (17.5%), Barbados (16.7%), St. Lucia (16.7%), Chile (15.8%), Paraguay (13.8%), St. Kitts and Nevis (13.3%), Bahamas (13.2%), St. Vincent and the Grenadines (13.0%), Guatemala (12.7%), Antigua and Barbuda (11.1%), Brazil (10.7%), and Haiti (2.6%).

# PART I: Challenges to be overcome to advance women's political participation

Participants in the Consultation were in agreement that while there has been great progress in women's political participation in the region, several hurdles and barriers continue to inhibit women's involvement in the political arena.

**First**, 16 countries in Latin America have enacted quota laws,<sup>3</sup> but the effects of these quotas vary widely. In addition, various political parties have voluntarily introduced quota provisions. In both instances, quotas apply to the share of candidates, not the proportion of women elected. In countries where enforcement of quotas is weak or absent, political parties often comply with quotas in the most minimal way permissible by law. Major gains in women's representation have occurred following the intervention of national electoral courts, which have tended to apply stricter interpretations of the law than attempted by political parties. Policy design and features of the electoral system also play a key role in shaping quota impact.

**Second**, there are clear gender-based inequalities in the organization and structures of political parties. Studies have shown that while women make up approximately half of party membership, women's participation in decision-making spaces is limited, and the number of female candidates for office is significantly outnumbered by male candidates.<sup>4</sup> Many political parties lack the commitment and political will to promote and enforce gender equality, demonstrating low compliance with quotas or parity measures for internal positions, and many continue to exclude women from decision-making circles.

**Third**, while there has been progress in women's political participation in the region at the national level, the local level paints a very different picture. Women are underrepresented in municipal politics, particularly in executive positions, although the exact extent is unknown due to lack of information on women's participation in local politics in Latin American. Apart from some isolated case studies, little is therefore known about women's access to and conditions of participation in local government.

**Fourth**, despite major increases in women's political representation, gender stereotypes continue to hinder women's participation in politics. One troubling manifestation of this resistance is the growing attention being paid across the region to violence and harassment against female politicians, particularly – although by no means exclusively – at the local level. Rising awareness of this problem has motivated politicians and activists to mobilize for reforms to criminalize political violence and harassment for reasons of gender, such as a law passed in Bolivia in 2012 and bills currently proposed in at least five other Latin American countries.

**Finally**, men enjoy an advantage over women in terms of both political financing and media coverage. Data from Brazil and Peru, for example, suggests that male candidates receive on average three times more resources than female candidates. In addition, men tend to have more personal resources, as well as greater access to the male-dominated networks that can provide funding for political campaigns. Media coverage is also far from gender equal. One study from Latin America found that press coverage during election campaigns was heavily centred on male candidates, with only 30% of on-air time focused on women.

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<sup>3</sup> Argentina (1991), Mexico (1996), Paraguay (1996), Bolivia (1997), Brazil (1997), Costa Rica (1997), Ecuador (1997), Panama (1997), Peru (1997), Dominican Republic (1997), Venezuela (1998), Colombia (1999), Honduras (2000), Uruguay (2009), Chile (2015), and Venezuela (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Partidos políticos y paridad: Una mirada subregional a América Central, República Dominicana y México. International IDEA and Bando Interamericano de Desarrollo (BID), 2015.

# PART II: Existing mechanisms to advance women's political participation

Attendees of the Consultation discussed existing mechanisms at the local, regional, and international levels that could improve women's political participation and gender equality in the Americas, as well as some of the shortcomings of these mechanisms.

## International Treaties, Charters, and Declarations

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly, is an international bill of rights for women and a legally binding instrument obliging states to promote gender equality. At present, there are 189 states parties, making CEDAW an important tool for national and international advocates of gender equality. The United States, notably, is the only country in the Americas that has not ratified the Convention.

Article 7 specifically addresses the elimination of gender discrimination in political and public life, stating:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
- To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;
- To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

In 1997, the CEDAW Committee issued General Recommendation No. 23 to elaborate on Article 7, making a stronger case for “temporary special measures” (for example, gender quotas) to achieve equality of participation. The Recommendation states that the “formal removal of barriers and the introduction of temporary special measures to encourage the equal participation of both men and women in the public life of their societies are essential prerequisites to true equality in political life.” It also notes that states parties, political parties, and public officials should actively encourage women's full and effective participation, together with all other sectors of society.

The Beijing Platform for Action, signed unanimously by all UN member states at the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, lists Women in Power and Decision-Making among its twelve Strategic Objectives. Under this Objective, states commit to take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making, as well as to increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership. Paragraph 190a calls on governments to:

Commit themselves to establishing the goal of gender balance in governmental bodies and committees, as well as in public administrative entities, and in the judiciary, including, inter alia, setting specific targets and implementing measures to substantially increase the number of women with a view to achieving equal representation of women and men, if necessary through positive action, in all governmental and public administration positions.

### **Paragraph 191, in turns, urges political parties to:**

- Consider examining party structures and procedures to remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women;
- Consider developing initiatives that allow women to participate fully in all internal policy-making structures and appointive and electoral nominating processes;
- Consider incorporating gender issues in their political agenda, taking measures to ensure that women can participate in the leadership of political parties on an equal basis with men.

The Sustainable Development Goals, adopted at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in New York in 2015, enumerate Gender Equality as Goal 5. The 2030 Agenda situates women’s rights within human rights and development frames, explaining that “ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, but it also crucial to accelerating sustainable development.”

Goal 5 includes among its targets to:

- Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life;
- Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

## Regional Organizations

The Inter-American Commission of Women (known as CIM, its Spanish acronym) of the Organization of American States (OAS) was the first intergovernmental organization in the world dedicated to women’s rights. It played a key role in promoting women’s suffrage across the Americas through the 1948 Inter-American Convention on the Granting of Political Rights to Women, which also called on member states to guarantee women’s right to vote and to be elected to political office. CIM was also involved in drafting the 1994 Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (Belém do Pará), which has been monitored since 2004 via the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI) of the OAS. Reflecting its focus on combating violence in both the public and private spheres, Article 4 of the Convention reiterates women’s “right to have equal access to the public service of her country and to take part in the conduct of public affairs, including decision-making,” while Article 5 recognizes that violence may prevent and nullify the exercise of this right, which regional and international instruments on human rights may be relied upon to protect.

In 2015, states parties to the Belém do Pará Convention, together with the competent authorities of MESECVI, issued a Declaration on Political Harassment and Violence against Women which noted that political parity could not be achieved by quotas alone, but rather, requires a comprehensive approach that on the one hand, ensures equal access of women and men to all government institutions and political organizations and, on the other hand, ensures that the conditions for exercising that access are free of discrimination and violence against women at all levels and in all arenas of political life.

It calls on numerous actors – including governments, political parties, and the media –to take concrete steps to collect statistics and devise interventions to tackle political violence and harassment. To support national legislative initiatives across the region, since 2016 CIM has organized a series of workshops and meetings across the region to elaborate a Model Law on Political Violence against Women.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC; Spanish acronym: CEPAL), one of the five UN regional commissions, has organized a series of regional conferences on women since 1977. In 2007, the 10th Regional Conference approved the Quito Consensus, in which countries agreed to adopt all necessary affirmative action measures and mechanisms, including legislative reforms and budgetary measures, to ensure the full participation of women in public office, with a view to achieving gender parity in the state (executive, legislative, and judicial branches) and representative bodies at the national and local levels.

The Quito Consensus calls upon countries to develop electoral policies, as well as address work-family conflicts and gender stereotypes as obstacles to women’s full participation. The document also rejects violence as a barrier to gender parity, which “women’s autonomy and their full participation in decision-making.”

In 2016, delegates to ECLAC’s 13th Regional Conference approved the Montevideo Strategy to achieve gender equality in the region by 2030 – closely tied to the UN’s 2030 Agenda. The ten implementation pillars focus on normative frameworks; institutions; popular and citizen participation; state capacity-building and strengthening; financing for gender equality; communication; technology; cooperation; information systems; and monitoring, evaluation, and accountability. The Montevideo Strategy states that true democratization is conditional upon achieving parity in the distribution of power, both in a quantitative and in a qualitative sense. Under the state capacity-building pillar, the Strategy calls on governments to “Design specific training processes to build the leadership capacities of women of all ages in order to achieve parity-based participation in decision-making roles and, in particular, in senior management, executive and technical positions.”

# PART III: Recommendations on how to effectively advance women's political participation

During the Consultation, examples of best practices on how to effectively increase women's political participation were shared by organizations and activists working in the Americas region.

Some best practices include:

- UNDP, UN Women and International IDEA are currently developing a Mechanism to Promote Women's Political Participation in Latin America and the Caribbean (ATENEA). This initiative is designed to generate dialogue among national actors and achieve political parity through the creation of a national and regional political parity index that will measure progress toward parity along eight dimensions using 40 different indicators;
- The Peruvian chapter of the Women's Democracy Network, the Women's Peruvian Parliamentary Caucus (MMPP), was created in 2006 by female members of the National Congress, and works to provide a gender perspective on issues such as education, employment, access to justice, and defense of human rights. One of the few multi-party caucuses within the Peruvian Congress the MMPP seeks to develop and pass legislation regarding women's rights and gender equality;
- The National Institute of Women (INMUJERES) is a state agency in Mexico that is responsible for implementing the national policy on gender equality. INMUJERES works to end violence and discrimination against women, ensure gender equality in government agencies, provide women with equal opportunities to participate in politics and the economy, and enable women to fully exercise their rights;
- The 50/50 Parity is Now campaign in Bolivia worked toward governmental enforcement of the country's gender quota law, which was limited in its effectiveness due to lack of commitment to their application. The resulting parity reform succeeded in achieving 53% female representation in the Chamber of Representatives and 46% in the Senate. The campaign also sought to prepare a policy agenda for women to promote and guarantee the political, economic, and social rights of women.<sup>5</sup>

The Consultation discussed some of the possible solutions and direction that governments, civil society, and regional organizations should take in order to promote gender equality and women's political participation. Attendees produced the following set of recommendations:

**First**, political parties should be at the center of any strategy to promote women's political empowerment, given their central role in candidate selection and policy development. Parties have historically favored men in promoting their candidacies and providing access to leadership positions. Establishing and enforcing quota laws within political parties is a first step in providing women a more equitable opportunity to enter the political realm. However, a cultural shift is also required in order to transform these highly gendered institutions. Cooperation from male political and party leaders will be essential in eliminating these barriers.

**Second**, quota laws must be strengthened and their requirements made more specific, such that parties are unable to, to exploit loopholes in their design, for example by placing women in secondary or alternative positions on ballots. In addition to policy reform, experiences across the region suggest that electoral bodies – particularly electoral courts – can improve incentives for compliance and impose sanctions for non-compliance in order to ensure the effective implementation of parity standards or quotas at both the national and local levels. In addition, quota laws should be extended to all realms of the political sphere: legislative, executive, and judicial.

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<sup>5</sup> “Women's Political Participation in Latin America: Some Progress and Many Challenges.” International IDEA (2017). <http://www.idea.int/es/node/281326>

**Third**, while quotas laws have resulted in more women entering the political arena, legislation alone is not enough – cultural change is also required. Moving from quota laws to parity laws can help promote this cultural transformation. While quotas focus on the possibility of women being elected by mandating a certain share of female candidates, parity implies equal participation of women and men to all state institutions (legislative, executive, and judicial) at all levels of government (national and local).<sup>6</sup> Recognizing and addressing violence and harassment faced by female politicians is also crucial.

**Fourth**, targeted campaigns and programs should be developed to promote the leadership of young women, support the training of female candidates for office, and build alliances among key stakeholders, including politicians, civil society actors, and international and regional organizations. Furthermore, dedicated campaigns should also be conducted in rural areas in order to raise awareness among local populations as to the importance of women’s political participation.

**Fifth**, stakeholders should do more to promote women’s political participation at the local level. Such efforts should ensure that they work to incorporate women who experience multiple forms of disadvantage including indigenous women.

**Sixth**, more work needs to be done to address problems with political financing and media coverage. Gender parity criteria should be applied to develop and strengthen regulations regarding the use of state resources to support the political campaigns of women and men, including access to airtime and other forms of press coverage. Specific funds might also be established to support women’s campaigns.

**Seventh**, local politics should take greater priority in efforts to promote women’s political participation. Systemic evidence needs to be collected to better understand the barriers encountered by women that prevent them from participating in local politics, taking into account different types of municipalities (rural, semi-urban, and urban), different electoral systems, and different income conditions.

**Eighth**, parliaments should consider introducing laws on political violence and harassment against women. Such legislation would impose sanctions on perpetrators and their accomplices guaranteeing women’s right to participate in politics. Raising broader awareness of this phenomenon will also be important for deterring future violence and harassment.

**Finally**, regional organizations should play a greater role in promoting gender equality and empowering women’s political participation. To ensure state compliance with women’s rights treaties, regional organizations should mobilize their mandates to pressure governments to complement with their treaty obligations – as well as to fulfil any commitments made in regional declarations. Regional organizations can also facilitate the exchange of best practices across countries, as well as provide crucial technical expertise to governments, politicians, and civil society groups seeking to promote women’s political participation.

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<sup>6</sup> Organization of American States. <http://www.oas.org/en/cim/parity.asp>.



# Conclusion

Promoting women's political participation is not just about women's rights – it also entails deepening democracy. Cultural attitudes, institutionalized biases, threats of violence, lack of political will, and a host of other factors continue to impede gender equality between men and women in the Americas – not only in politics, but also in society as a whole. For continued, effective advancement of women's political participation, actors at multiple levels – international and regional organizations, activists, and politicians – must work together to change the norms and practices that current hinder gender equality, and thus true democracy.



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## Community of Democracies

The Community of Democracies is an intergovernmental organization that drives the global democratic agenda through common action. Since its establishment in 2000, the Community has brought the world's democracies together to advance and promote the democratic principles and standards enshrined in the Warsaw Declaration Toward a Community of Democracies that was signed by 106 countries.

Building on the Warsaw Declaration, the Community's founding document that 106 countries signed in 2000, the Community of Democracies seeks to support democratic transition and consolidation worldwide by:

- Assisting societies in the development and strengthening of democratic institutions and values;
- Identifying, alerting and responding, consistent with the UN Charter and the Warsaw Declaration to threats to democracy so as to assist states to remain on the path to democracy;
- Supporting and defending civil society in all countries;
- Advancing broad-based participation in democratic governance;
- Giving a voice to those working peacefully for democracy in all countries.



## The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) / Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD)

Since its inception in 1995, International IDEA has made significant contributions to the body of available knowledge and applicable policy options for promoting democratic participation and representation of women in decision-making processes. Through its global and regional programmes, IDEA supports political reform processes, awareness raising and capacity building on institutionalizing gender equality and women's empowerment in electoral and constitution-building processes, and within political parties. The Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD) was launched in April 2011 by seven Regional Organizations and International IDEA at the headquarters of the Organization of American States (OAS). Its primary objective is to offer and facilitate a platform for regional organizations to exchange as peers' knowledge and experiences in the application of democratic principles.

To date, eight regional organizations are participating in the IRDD and these include the African Union (AU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Council of Europe (CoE), the European Union (EU), the League of Arab States (LAS), the OAS, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). International IDEA acts as the facilitator of the IRDD and functions as its dedicated secretariat through the Inter-Regional Democracy Resource Centre.



## United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

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UNDP works in nearly 170 countries and territories, helping to achieve the eradication of poverty, and the reduction of inequalities and exclusion. We help countries to develop policies, leadership skills, partnering abilities, institutional capabilities and build resilience in order to sustain development results. UNDP is working to strengthen new frameworks for development through integrated approach to supporting inclusive political processes in supporting and strengthening the capacities of political processes and institutions in order to improve citizen participation, voice and accountability.

The advancement of women's equal participation and decision-making in political processes and institutions is one of the key priorities for UNDP across a variety of development contexts including stable, conflict/post conflict and transitional settings.



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## Contact Us

Al. Ujazdowskie 41

00-540 Warsaw, Poland

Tel. +48 22 375 90 00

Fax. +48 22 319 56 28

E-mail: [info@community-democracies.org](mailto:info@community-democracies.org)

Website: [community-democracies.org](http://community-democracies.org)

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