

BREAKING *THE* MOLD

A New Approach to Political Leadership and
its Practice Through the Voices of Women
from the Americas



OAS | CIM



MINISTERIO
DE ASUNTOS EXTERIORES, UNIÓN EUROPEA
Y COOPERACIÓN



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Introduction

Alejandra Mora Mora, Executive Secretary of CIM/OAS

Changing the narratives, symbols, and perceptions about political leadership is the objective of this work, which we have titled ***Breaking the Mold: A New Approach to the Concept of Political Leadership and Its Exercise from the Voices of Women in the Americas***. The great added value of this publication is that it has been developed not from a removed or singular position, but from the plural voices of women leaders in the Americas, including indigenous women, Afro-descendant women, young women, rural women, and women with disabilities. They all exercise democratic and transformative leadership in the field of human rights in general, and women's rights in particular. This research took several months of production, both internally, with debates on how to conceptualize "women's political leadership," and externally, through in-depth interviews with more than thirty women leaders, to gain first-hand insights into what it means to "make decisions" in different political-electoral contexts, the lessons that can be drawn from them, the most frequent and recurring obstacles, the adversities they faced, and the strategies they developed to move forward. I would like to give special recognition to these outstanding women for their important contributions to the document we present today.

The CIM presents this work within the framework of the fifty-third General Assembly of the OAS, more than 95 years since its creation. It is a powerful reflection on the challenge to the existing paradigm of political leadership, based on the experiences and voices of women leaders from the Latin American and Caribbean region. Our goal is to make women's leadership visible and, consequently, to value their contributions to democracy. We also aim to contribute to the redefinition of the classical and traditional narratives, the entrenched symbols, and the existing beliefs about how political leadership "should be." And above all, we want this updated definition to allow women who seek to participate in politics to identify with it and to find in political participation the purpose of transforming the reality in which they live and the desire to improve it, making it more equal, free from discrimination, and free from violence. We set out to "break the mold," that is, to question and oppose the widespread notion that women "should not" or "cannot" lead decision-making spaces. Thus, in this research, we start from a premise: the change in the narrative about leadership must happen now; otherwise, we will remain invisible and subordinate for many more years. The CIM has historically advocated the idea that the more women in decision-making there are, the greater the level of democracy there will be. This was the origin of the CIM more than 95 years ago when suffragist leaders demanded the right to vote and influenced the multilateralism that was taking shape at that time to ensure that we were never again spoken about without us being present. We are committed to ensuring that multilateralism continues to drive the transformation of old paradigms that women challenge and that we are committed to changing together.

Chapter 1:

Interrogating Traditional Political Leadership

“When I won the 2010 elections, I became the first female president of Costa Rica. In the early days of my government, I visited schools where I was told about a trend: many girls had run for class president. Over the next four years, a scene often repeated itself wherever I went: girls and young students would tell me that when they grew up, they too would become presidents”.

Laura Chinchilla Miranda¹

Political leadership has always been a topic of interest in the field of politics, especially because it is linked to power and decision-making. Additionally, much of the literature on leadership focuses on certain traits or qualities that individuals with leadership abilities should possess. Thus, throughout history, an image has been constructed of how “decision-makers” should be or what particular characteristics they should have. This evaluation served for a long time as the framework to justify the exclusion of women from decision-making. The sexual division of labor and the roles assigned to men and women were decisive: men in the public (productive) sphere and women in the private-domestic (reproductive) sphere. Following this linear reasoning, women, as caregivers of the family, cannot lead; rather, they are there to obey.

The “law of pleasing” follows this same direction. According to Valcárcel (2015), this “law” is based on the idea that every woman is raised to please, to satisfy others. It demands silence, obedience, and caregiving from women. “Every woman is raised under the law of pleasing, even if she is not aware of it. And every man is aware of it.” In this way, women’s participation in society was very limited, and their goals were related to continuing and remaining in their space: the domestic sphere.

Thus, the interpretation of political leadership, and more specifically, of its leaders (all of them men), dominated the political scene based on masculine stereotypes. The “Great Man Theory” or “Alpha Male Theory” (Nye, 2011) laid the foundations for this belief to be justified through descriptive and prescriptive norms.

The emergence of women in the political-electoral sphere, and their quantitative growth with the passing of gender quota and parity laws, revealed a different reality. Women can also hold

¹ Laura Chinchilla Miranda served as President of Costa Rica from 2010 to 2014. In <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2018/03/05/espanol/opinion/opinion-chinchilla-mujeres-presidentas-america-latina.html>

high executive and representative decision-making positions. Although, it is difficult for them to break through the “glass ceilings” and “glass labyrinths.” Undoubtedly, there are still many obstacles they face today for challenging the traditional model of the sexual division of labor.

Feminism, in its different and complementary forms, has been a great driver of debates and challenges to the masculine vision of power and the management of public affairs. As Román Marugán, P., and Ferri Durá, J. (2017) rightly state, the greatest challenge has always been of a methodological nature when selecting and evaluating which explanatory framework best guides leadership research.

Most theories rely on the construction of leadership based on masculine models, as if it were inherently tied to gender identity.

Therefore, this chapter has several objectives. First, it generally addresses the different classical and traditional definitions of leadership which have been shaped by the rigid perspective of patriarchal culture, and which have been developed and disseminated on political leadership. These definitions have justified the exclusion of women from the public arena. Second, it analyzes how the changes brought about by the increased participation of women have led to a growing questioning of traditional approaches to leadership and who has the conditions or abilities to be a leader. Third, it reclaims the concept of sisterhood leadership as a foundation for advancing a shared agenda for gender equality.

1.1 What is political leadership? A review of definitions and positions

“Political leadership” is a concept that has been defined in many ways over time and has attempted to be explained from various fields of knowledge. It is a polysemic term, with so many definitions, classifications, and typologies developed to describe, frame and understand it that, rather than helping, it complicates its analysis, as well as the attempt to address it empirically.

Thus, the study of leadership (and of those considered leaders) presents itself as an important line of analysis and research, which also has a vast bibliography drawing from various disciplines such as history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, political science, among others. However, despite the significant interest that the subject has generated, there is no consensus on the interpretations of this concept. In other words, the more theoretical production increases, the more complex the notion of leadership becomes, to the point where it seems that there are as many definitions as there are people who have written on the subject (Bass, 1990).

Thus, to shed some light on the scope of leadership, it calls for a general overview of how the analyses and frameworks of the phenomenon have been developed, and how they shape our understanding. As noted by García Velazco, Alonso Pantoja Ospina, and Duque Salazar (2011), in the early 20th century, most writings on leadership revolved around the “Great Man Theory.” This approach emphasized the great men (or “heroes”) that history had produced, and essentially identified the talents and qualities that set them apart from the rest of the population. It was based on the assumption that it was “possible to identify a set number of individual qualities that determine the ability to lead” (Rossel, 2006). Consequently, the result was a long list that analyzed everything from intelligence, skills, and communication abilities to the capacity to make decisions quickly and firmly (Blondel, 1991).

For Carlyle (1907), one of the main thinkers of this school of thought, “the history of the world is nothing more than the history of great men.” The approach to studying leadership was quite deterministic, focusing on individuals and their great attributes. In other words, “to be a leader, one had to be born a leader.” There was no development of methods or actions to evaluate the performance of their deeds. Women had no recognition in this context, as leadership was seen as a distinctly male trait. However, for Herbert Spencer (1986), leaders are a product of the society in which they live. Unlike Carlyle, Spencer believed that leaders are not born with particular characteristics but are shaped by a specific historical context. His theory held that “no one is born a leader,” but rather “great events turn ordinary individuals into leaders.”

For his part, Merriam (1970) wrote that political leaders shared a set of common attributes: unusual sensitivity to the direction of social and industrial trends (with particular reference to political parties), quick and sharp perception of possible courses of action for the community, followed by swift action, the ability to combine groups and make compromises, political diplomacy in ideas, policies, and distribution of positions, ease in personal contacts with a wide variety of types of people, and the ability to strongly express the feelings and interests of large groups of voters. Consistent with this line of analysis, MacIver and Page (1969) considered leadership as the ability to persuade or direct people, and this was an innate skill, independent of the position or function one held.

Thus, studies based on the “Trait Theory of Leadership” were predominant for much of the past century and faced significant challenges in identifying which personal qualities should be possessed by those in leadership positions and which could be understood as general patterns of behavior.

D'Alessandro (2006) argued that behaviorists, or proponents of the approach based on observing individual and collective behaviors, believed it was possible to provide

models for leadership analysis at the macro level. However, it became necessary to incorporate explanatory theories that included social relationships and their functioning, given that people's behavior is influenced by different factors depending on the type of social relationship involved. Thus, for sociologist Max Weber, leadership is a social relationship as it involves at least two people, and it is essential that there be acceptance from those who follow the leader. It is never unilateral. For leadership to exist, there must be recognition or belief. Therefore, leadership is better understood through the characteristics of the society and the relationships and interactions that are generated, rather than through any inherent quality of individuals.

In this way, explanations began to move away from personal qualities to focus instead on their actions (what they do) rather than who or how the leaders are.

The question then is... what does a political leader do? Joseph Nye (2011) stated that "a leader is someone who helps a group of people formulate and achieve common goals." Leadership is not only about "who we are" but also "what we do." For this reason, the functions that leaders perform for human groups consist of creating meaning, setting goals, reinforcing group identity and cohesion, establishing order, and mobilizing collective action.

To explain the phenomenon of leadership, Nye considers it a process with three basic components: leaders, followers, and context. The context refers both to the external environment and the changing situations that may occur within the group, so it is therefore crucial for both the leader and the followers. The leader must be well acquainted with the context in which they operate to adapt their qualities to the specific situations that arise.

Power is a relationship whose strength and scope vary depending on the context. It can be defined as the ability to influence the behavior of others to achieve desired outcomes. Thus, for Nye, For Nye, it is not possible to lead if one lacks power; those who have more power in a relationship are in a better position to bring about change or resist it. Leadership and power go hand in hand, establishing an asymmetrical relationship: "political leadership involves having a certain amount of power, but not the other way around—it is possible to have power (for example, in hierarchical relationships) without being a leader" (Teles, 2012).

According to Nye, there are three basic methods to acquire power: coercion through threats, incentivizing with rewards, or attracting and persuading. This is the idea of "hard power" or "soft power." The former is associated with threats or privileges and is used to make others change their actions, attitudes, or decisions. The latter is the ability to achieve results through incentives and persuasion without needing to exert other forms

of manipulation. Nye emphasizes that effective leadership is one that knows how to use both types of power (soft and hard), which he refers to as “smart power.”

However, it is important to emphasize that leadership, being a relationship of power, is equally conditioned by the contextual framework in which it is situated. For this reason, it is essential for a leader to consider this in order to effectively carry out their role. Contextual intelligence can be defined as the leader’s ability to adapt their objectives to the desires of their followers, taking advantage of the opportunities that the context offers.

But it is also worth asking, why do followers follow a leader? There can be several reasons. At first glance, one might think that they have functional needs for meaning, group identity, cohesion, and order, as well as the ability to work toward a specific goal (Nye: 2011). It is not necessarily the case that followers are submissive people without expectations of growth within the group. According to Nye, followers can be defined by their position of subordination or by their behavior of supporting the desires of the leaders. Therefore, leadership, like power, is a relationship, and followers also have the power (authority) to resist and to want to lead.

Leadership can be understood as a process by which “people with certain motives and purposes mobilize, in competition or conflict with others, institutional, political, or psychological resources to the extent of stimulating, capturing the attention of, and satisfying the motives of the followers” (Burns, 1978: 18). Now, when considering the relationship between leaders and power, there is another theoretical approach that analyzes leadership according to the particular “context” of government systems (Fabbrini, 2009). This approach considers a leader not by their personal characteristics but by the role they fulfill in the formalized system of public authority.

For this author and political scientist, every role is constituted by a combination of opportunities and limitations. Additionally, Fabbrini links leadership in a democracy with an inherently institutional nature. According to Fabbrini, the democratic leader is generally a leader with government responsibilities or a political leader committed to attaining a position in government. For this author, a democracy is solid if it guarantees both i) decision-making and ii) institutional control over those who make decisions. Therefore, studies and analyses of democratic leaders must be conducted on an institutional rather than a personal basis. The author reiterates the need to distinguish between the concepts of “leader” and “leadership.” If the former refers to a person invested with decision-making power, the latter refers to the nature of the decision-making actions carried out by that person.

The leader is an actor; leadership is a relationship – a relationship that is activated to seek a solution to a problem or to initiate some decisions. However, leader and leadership

are obviously associated, and this union arises from a requirement: how to produce a collective good in the face of a plurality of different individual preferences. Thus, whoever assumes the role of leader will have to generate symbolic meaning, not just actions, in order to provide the group with a sense of belonging and also an orientation regarding the direction to be taken in terms of public policies.

This brief overview of how the terms “leadership” and “leader” have been considered allows us to delve into the great absence of women in the formation of leadership theories. It highlights a void in the development of premises that contribute to the idea that leadership is a relational concept, socially constructed and hierarchically gendered. But... what role do women play in leadership analyses?

On the other hand, this review has shown that “leadership” is: a) a term associated with men—both in their qualities and in government positions or decision-making roles, and b) a concept that is of great interest and importance in various political systems because much of its interpretation, and the most widespread one, positions leadership as essential for the survival of institutions and organizations. As Fabbrini states, “leaders are necessary because they are useful.” Those who exercise leadership thus become the executors (leaders) of the actions needed to carry out the common objectives defined as necessary.

Therefore, being a leader implies recognition of their contribution to planning, mobilizing a team that accompanies them (“followers”), and executing actions that positively impact the interests of their group. It also often involves facing obstacles and risks.

1.2 From the “natural” invisibility of women to actions that guarantee their participation and decision-making power.

“Above all, it should be quite obvious that we will not be able to face current challenges if we continue to exclude a large part of the population from leadership and decision-making. No one would advise a coach to play with only half of their team (...) Let's be clear. It is not a lack of interest or ability that is preventing women from participating, it is discrimination.”

Michele Bachelet²

Carole Pateman (1995) explains that this blindness regarding women in public life corresponds to the conventional interpretation of classical political theory texts and all

2 Michelle Bachelet served as President of Chile during two terms (2006-2010 and 2014-2018). In <https://www.ohchr.org/es/2021/03/statement-united-nations-high-commissioner-human-rights-michelle-bachelet-commemorating>

subsequent iterations. In the 17th century, the notion that man or the individual is born in freedom and equality with respect to others—that is, that they are naturally free and equal—was the fundamental basis for political theory. In other words, the idea was that political and social life was subject to the premise of freedom and equality as a birthright. So influential was this notion, that these assumptions continue to be used to support and justify various positions. However, Pateman argues that the terms “man” and “individual” that appear in classical texts, and which are interpreted today in an inclusive-generic sense, were not understood that way at the time.

The author states that classical theorists (with some exceptions) argued that freedom and equality were birthrights of one sex. In this view, only men were born free and equal. Therefore, contract theorists (Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau) constructed sexual difference as a political difference, the difference between the natural freedom of men and the natural subordination of women. This research shows why leadership (and leaders), in terms of characteristics, notions, qualities, and actions, have historically had a male-centered focus in both social and political constructs.

The exclusion of women from political life is related to the concept of gender as a system of social relations that establishes different norms and social practices for men and women. This absence was not due to a deliberate action by women to “self-exclude” from public activity, but rather had (and still has) deeper roots.

Indeed, sexual difference gave rise to social, economic, and political disadvantages rooted in patriarchal culture, where male domination and female subordination were seen as natural. According to Amorós (2005), patriarchy is a system of agreements (a system of domination) among men that ensures their hegemony over women. In other words, it is a system of symbolic and material practices that establishes hierarchies.

This situation fosters an unequal distribution of power in society that influences the opportunities available to each person in all areas of life, including politics. Hence, sex is an important determinant that, combined with others such as class or ethnicity, can exacerbate inequalities and inequities in access to and participation in political life. And, of course, it affects the likelihood of witnessing the development of leadership headed by women.

The recognition of the absence of women in public life, as a result of patriarchal culture, led to international and regional agreements aimed at ending the situation of structural inequality and discrimination. Therefore, there is a broad and extensive legal framework within the universal human rights system and the Inter-American system that recognizes and protects women’s right to participate in and their effective access to political decision-making spaces.

Table 1: International Legal Instruments of Universal and Regional Nature Regulating Women's Political Rights

Universal System	Rights Protected	Articles	Legal Nature ¹
United Nations Charter, 1945	Equality	1, numeral 3	Binding
Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948	Equality	1, 7, 16, 23	Non-binding
	Non-discrimination	2, 7	
	Political participation	21	
Convention on the Political Rights of Women, 1952	Equality	I, II, III	Binding
	Non-discrimination	I, II, III	
	Political participation	I, II, III	
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966	Equality	3, 26	Binding
	Non-discrimination	2, 24, 26	
	Non-discrimination	2, 7i	
Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 1967	Equality	2	Non-binding
	Political participation	4	
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - CEDAW, 1979	Equality	2 to 15	Binding
	Non-discrimination	1	
	Political participation	7	
Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998	Gender scope**	7	Binding
Optional Protocol to CEDAW, 1999	Equality	Preamble	Binding
Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women	Equality	Paragraph 181	Non-binding
Regional System	Rights Protected	Articles	Legal Nature ¹
Charter of the Organization of American States, 1948	Non-discrimination	3. l)	Binding
Inter-American Convention on the Granting of Political Rights to Women, 1948	Equality in politics	1	Binding
American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, 1948	Equality	II	Non-binding
	Non-discrimination	II	
	Political participation	XX	
American Convention on Human Rights, 1969	Equality	1.1, 24	Binding
	Political participation	23	
Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights, 1988	Non-discrimination	3	Binding
Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women, 1994	Gender scope**	1	Binding
Inter-American Democratic Charter, 2001	Non-discrimination	9	Non-binding
	Political participation	28	Non-binding

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) of 1979 constitutes the first comprehensive approach to ensuring equality between men and women. It introduces fundamental mandates to ensure that equality is “real” in practice, and for this, it “calls on governments to legislate” to achieve this goal. It also states that governments are responsible not only for adopting appropriate laws but also for ensuring their effectiveness so that women are not discriminated against (UN Women, 2011:9).

It defines discrimination against women as “any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the purpose or effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil, or any other field” (Article 1). It prohibits such discrimination in all areas of life, including politics, and obliges governments to take special temporary measures, known as affirmative actions, to increase women’s participation in leadership positions.

In the same vein, the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará) of 1994 was an important step in expanding women’s rights. The Convention establishes that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, constitutes a violation of human rights, and is, therefore, an offense to human dignity.

The Convention of Belém do Pará also states that violence against women transcends all sectors of society, regardless of class, race or ethnic group, educational and/or income level, culture, age, or religion. Therefore, its elimination is essential for the development of women, as its existence prevents and nullifies the exercise of their rights. It includes, among others: i) the right to non-discrimination, and ii) the right to be valued and educated, free from stereotyped patterns of behavior and social and cultural practices based on concepts of inferiority or subordination (Article 6). It states in Article 4 that every woman has “the 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.”

The standards promoted by the Convention of Belém do Pará became a very important influence in all subsequent regional debates regarding how to advance the gender equality agenda and how violence against women continues to be an obstacle and a challenge to overcome, even when women participate in politics and have the opportunity to hold leadership positions.

1.3 The Time of Women: More Participation, More Presence, and More Women Leaders

“The moment a woman steps forward and says, ‘I’m running for office’, it begins: the analysis of her face, her body, her voice, her demeanor; the diminishment of her stature, her ideas, her accomplishments, her integrity”.
Hillary Clinton³

The implementation of affirmative actions in electoral legislation aimed to correct the existing gender imbalances in the political sphere. It seeks to compensate—through direct actions—for the existing power asymmetries in access to opportunities and resources between men and women. A society that promotes equality without considering the underlying differences among the groups that compose it (such as social, educational, economic, gender, ethnic, racial diversities, among others) will hardly achieve this goal.

In this situation, ignorance, indifference, or simply the application of neutral rules only maintain and accentuate—voluntarily or involuntarily—more unequal outcomes.

Therefore, the persistence of discrimination against women is a consequence of the absence of state policies. This discrimination was based on the perpetuation of stereotypes and prejudices rooted in a patriarchal culture that hindered women from public and productive activities for centuries. For this reason, even when equality—and more specifically, gender equality—is present in many legal frameworks, this goal loses its realistic meaning when measures are not established to eliminate the persistence and/or deepening of sex-based distinctions, as stated in Article 1 of CEDAW.

In this context, gender quotas were enacted in various Latin American countries to overcome the obstacles that prevented women from entering politics on equal footing with their male peers. These are compensatory and redistributive measures aimed at reversing situations of structural disadvantage. They enable the gradual inclusion of historically marginalized groups into different representative institutions and/or strategic decision-making positions by incorporating minimum gender representation quotas. It is worth noting that the enactment of these laws was the result of long struggles by women’s collectives demanding equality in rights and the exercise of those rights.

Origin: The lack of regulations encouraging greater participation of women within political parties is linked to this issue. Given the limited presence and, in most cases, the

3 Hillary Clinton was the United States Secretary of State from 2009 to 2013 and the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate in 2016. In <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/16/hillary-clinton-theres-a-game-that-keeps-women-in-their-place>

absence of party quotas within political parties, legal quotas were introduced to address this deficiency by requiring political parties to meet a minimum percentage of women on their party lists for general elections.

In which countries? Argentina was the first country in the world to pass a gender quota law in 1991. It was approved with the goal of increasing women's access to representation in the national parliament (first in the Chamber of Deputies, later in the Senate after 2001). This mechanism was later replicated in other Latin American countries such as Mexico (1996), Paraguay (1996), Costa Rica (1996), Bolivia (1997), Brazil (1997), Ecuador (1997), Panama (1997), Peru (1997), the Dominican Republic (1997), Venezuela (1997), Honduras (2000), Guyana (2000), Uruguay (2009), Colombia (2011), Haiti (2011/2012), Nicaragua (2012), El Salvador (2013), and Chile (2015).

Positive effects: Undoubtedly, gender quota laws were the most important political reform aimed at promoting women's political rights in Latin America until parity laws were introduced. There are three main reasons for this: i) it was a measure exclusively designed to address the deficit of women in parliaments, ii) it was geographically extended to eighteen countries between 1991 and 2015, and iii) its implementation has had positive qualitative and quantitative effects (Tula, 2015).

Compared to other institutional strategies incorporated into public policies or developed as specific execution units for women in decision-making bodies, legal quotas were the most effective measure for increasing gender representation. They quickly and significantly increased women's participation in the composition of legislatures in a short period of time. The nomination of women on various electoral lists provided them with greater visibility and normalized their participation outside the private sphere (Archenti and Tula, 2008), breaking down numerous assertions such as "politics is a place for men because it requires strength," "there are no women who want to engage in politics," or "women require more training," etc.

Obstacles: However, the change in the rules for assembling electoral lists was not understood as a process of democratic expansion aimed at promoting equitable spaces within political parties. Instead, the response was defensive, maintaining the status quo in the internal candidate selection processes. The most widespread practice among political parties has been a "bureaucratic and minimalist" interpretation of the gender quota law (Archenti and Tula, 2010). In other words, strict compliance with what the law stipulates—never or almost never resulted in the inclusion of more women than the required minimum—thus turning this minimum percentage floor into a legal maximum ceiling. As a result of this action, a plateau effect emerged in women's access to representative positions, even in countries with more favorable conditions. Additionally,

certain practices within political organizations were used to maintain significant spheres of influence. This includes, for example, the selective inclusion of women who are amenable to their leaders and fall in line to ensure the reproduction and survival of political loyalties. Another such practice is forcing women to resign their positions after being elected so that a male candidate could take their place.

Parity: Since 2008, several Latin American countries have advanced in incorporating gender parity: Ecuador, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Honduras, Argentina, Peru, and Panama. Therefore, nowadays, the focus is no longer on quotas but rather on gender parity and equitable percentages of participation and representation (50% women and 50% men on the lists, alternating sequentially) (CIM, 2013 and 2016). Thinking about gender parity means understanding that these measures can no longer be corrective but must aim for a definitive balance based on the existing social composition. Women represent 50% of society and have historically been excluded from the public sphere. The Quito Consensus of 2007, at the 10th Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, recognized that parity is one of the key drivers of democracies, aimed at achieving equality in the exercise of power, decision-making, participation mechanisms, and social, political, and cultural representation. It constitutes a goal to eradicate the structural exclusion of women.

The real impact of these measures is highlighted when the Americas are recognized as the first region in the world with the highest female participation in its legislative bodies (Unicameral or Lower Chambers) at 34.6% (IPU, 2023).

Table 2: What do we mean when we talk about gender quotas and gender parity?

	Gender Quotas	Gender Parity
Objective	Correct existing inequalities	Transform persistent inequalities in all areas of society. A new social contract between men and women
Strategy	Accelerate women's access to Parliaments. Affirmative actions affect the starting point.	Balance women's access to Parliaments. Affect the endpoint (there is no minimum that can be understood as a ceiling).
Procedures	Minimum percentages of women's representation on electoral lists (20%-45%). The position mandate was not included in all regulations. There is also no sanction for non-compliance.	Equal representation percentages: 50% men and 50% women or the closest rounding in the case of odd lists. Position Mandate: positions are alternated sequentially (1 to 1). Sanctions are applied for non-compliance.
Duration	Temporary Ceases once objectives are met	Permanent
Scope	Limited. Influences the electoral offer.	Extensive. Broad influence. Not just on the electoral party offer
Conditions for Effectiveness	1) Characteristics of each quota law, 2) The electoral system, 3) The culture, with a predominance of old patriarchal structures.	1) The electoral system, 2) The perpetuation of male-led lists.
	In both cases, the type of competition in the party system (fragmented or concentrated) and electoral behavior (vote dispersion or concentration) impact access to representation.	

Source: Tula, M. I. (2018) Gender Parity, Politics, and Institutions: Towards a Parity Democracy. UN Women. Collection of Documents: A Guide for public authorities and decision-makers in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Of course, if it weren't for the patriarchal culture that still prevails in the hemisphere, there would be no need to talk about laws that require the inclusion of women in key decision-making positions or roles. The prevalence of stereotypes and prejudices, harassment and violence, wage gaps, and the need to reconcile the work world with family care tasks are still their main obstacles.

In this regard, Dilma Rousseff, president of Brazil from 2011 to 2016, stated that "(...) there were double standards for men and women. They accused me of being tough and severe; a man would have been considered firm and strong. Or they said I was too emotional and fragile, but a man would have been considered sensitive. I was seen as someone obsessed with work, and a man would have been seen as very hard-working. Very crude words

were also used.”.

D’Adamo, García-Beaudoux, Ferrari, and Slavinsky (2008) explored the perceptions that prevail in public opinion regarding women who run for political office. The results showed that the majority believe there are no differences in leadership styles compared to men, but that women are more concerned with social issues, face greater difficulties, and are more criticized due to the existence of negative prejudices.

Undoubtedly, more women in the political arena and in leadership positions have brought about a significant change in the stereotypes upon which the conditions and requirements to be a ‘leader’ were based.

1.4 Women in Power: The Challenges of Leading Politics with a Gender Perspective

“Women are breaking barriers in politics worldwide. We are opening spaces, our presence brings new discussions, new ways of doing politics, of transforming realities.”

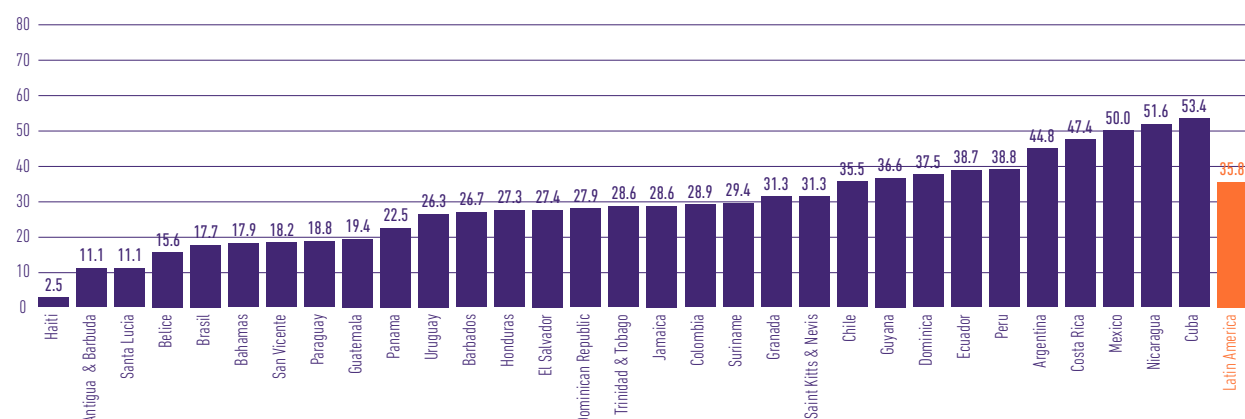
Francia Márquez

Although women still do not access decision-making positions in the same way as their male counterparts, at least the percentage has been increasing over the last 30 years—with variations—in different countries of the region.

A debate that continues is how this quantitative increase in key decision-making positions has translated into an increase in equality policies and actions to change the structural conditions that maintain and perpetuate contexts of discrimination and violence.

The reference to the possibility that women may represent their own interests more than men leads to the consideration of “substantive representation,” a way of addressing representation based on what they “do” and “who” they direct their actions to once they reach strategic decision-making positions. In other words, it is when those in office “succeed in making the interests of the represented responsibly present in the representative bodies” (Pitkin, 1967: 100).

Chart 1: Legislative Power. Percentage of seats held by women in national parliaments.



Source: Gender Equality Observatory, ECLAC. Data updated to 2023.

According to Iris Young (2000), the inclusion of women in deliberation and decision-making processes would allow for the incorporation of silenced social perspectives into public debate. Women share concerns, assumptions, and experiences that serve as a common basis for promoting changes, which Childs (2004) referred to as the “feminization of the legislative agenda.”

However, to promote actions (direct or indirect) that impact the social group of women, it is necessary to view the world with a “gender consciousness.” In other words, understanding that women have not had the same starting point socially, legally, or politically, and that the attainment of these rights (formal equality) took time, effort, and a centuries-long struggle. Incorporating “gender consciousness” allows us to analyze and interpret the world from the perspective of those who have lived in subordination (at the expense of privileged groups). Thus, women share a structural position of social disadvantage. Nevertheless, formal equality (the one in laws) does not fully guarantee equality of opportunities, because starting positions between men and women have been (and continue to be) more advantageous for men. They benefit from a history, tradition, and a patriarchal culture of many years of enjoying rights, which in practice translates into asymmetric gaps or the effect of the “tilted playing field.”

Clearly, women are not a uniform and homogeneous group. Within this group, they present ideological differences, with varying positions and diverse interests. However, their placement within the subordinate social group encourages a shared vision regarding their experiences and issues. Some references to these issues include caregiving tasks, wage disparities compared to men (in many cases for the same work), a higher unemployment rate, street harassment, and gender-based violence, the extreme manifestation of which is femicide.

However, thinking about “objective female interests presupposes a pre-existing homogeneous collective” (Archenti, 2000). According to the author, the broad consensus on certain issues, such as gender-based violence, might lead one to think of a shared interest, but other controversial topics reveal the coexistence of differences within this social group. There are no unanimously shared gender interests, and the predominant interest on each issue results from the correlation of forces in the political and social field.

Moreover, support for certain gender equality-related measures or actions may often encounter limits, depending on how political parties organize their candidate selection processes and how men predominantly dominate the political careers of their leaders. According to Barnes (2018), women would face greater pressure to show loyalty to their political group (maximum party control) if they want to advance in their political careers, or to behave differently by prioritizing individual interests over the substantive interest of representation.

Despite these obstacles, the increased incorporation of women into deliberation and decision-making processes has succeeded in bringing silenced social perspectives into public debate over nearly a century of male hegemony.

1.5 Building Sisterhood Leadership: The Political Leadership of Women in Power

“There is no democracy without feminism. Women, in recognizing and claiming their rights, do so from a position of equality, for democracy (...) female rebellion or resistance arises when there is an ‘awareness’ or ‘consciousness of the contradiction’ between the universal principles of theoretical equality proposed by social organization, and the concrete experiences of inequality between the sexes”.

Julietta Kirkwood⁴

Is there democracy when half of the population does not share equal opportunities to access formal rights? For centuries, this statement was not questioned, nor was it seen as a sign of regression when, in 1995, world governments and parliaments showed that in 109 out of 174 countries, women’s representation was less than 10%⁵. As already noted, the 1990s marked a starting point with the introduction of gender quotas. This was based on the understanding that social democracy is the foundation for promoting the recognition of

⁴ Julieta Kirkwood was a Chilean academic and feminist, considered one of the founders and driving forces of the feminist movement in Chile.

⁵ See, *Women in Parliament 1995-2020*, Inter-Parliamentary Union. Available at: file:///C:/Users/Mar%C3%ACa%20In%C3%A8s/Downloads/2020-women%20in%20parliament_SP-LR.pdf

disadvantaged groups, encouraging economic redistribution, and ensuring real access to positions of representation.

Beyond the definitions of political leadership that have been outlined, it is important to bear in mind that leadership is closely linked to what those in privileged decision-making positions “do.” In this regard, as Medina-Vicent (2019) points out, the feminist leadership model is circular and works from the bottom up, challenging unequal power structures. The author argues that “feminist leadership” challenges and drives structural and systemic change that causes inequality, with different managerial leadership models, as it goes beyond shared decision-making by i) involving collective commitment to critical reflection and ii) enabling the identification of unjust practices and unequal relationships. Therefore, it entails the establishment of a political commitment and the call for collective action in recognizing asymmetrical and unequal contexts.

Politics is understood as a collective practice that members of a community engage in to organize, make decisions, and achieve objectives through agreements. In this way, politics seeks to resolve conflicts peacefully. The inclusion of women—as socially marginalized and excluded groups—remedied several centuries of violent struggles for the attainment of their rights. Moreover, the increased participation of women in decision-making has influenced the reorganization of measures aimed at addressing gender issues. In other words, it has led to a critical review of the differentiated and/or disproportionate impacts of all decisions and proposals made. Specifically, decisions made under this “incomplete representation” have historically harmed women and kept them out of the public sphere.

In this regard, one of the most prominent aspects of women’s participation and access to representation and decision-making positions is their connection to democratic construction processes. It has been said many times, and repeated often, that “More women means more democracy.” Indeed, the late recognition of the great value that women bring to democratic systems was not fully realized until they began occupying significant positions in decision-making.

Therefore, exercising sisterhood leadership implies a strategic alliance among women, aware of the inequalities and discriminations they have suffered and continue to suffer, and who unite to eradicate them collectively (Lagarde, 2009). The Panama Declaration (CIM, 2022) understands that sisterhood leadership involves i) a political arrangement among women around common goals and concrete agendas for gender equality to enhance their empowerment and influence in the world, and ii) an ethical responsibility for women who hold leadership positions.

This revisited notion of leadership aims to work on a roadmap – a path toward gender equality – proposing shared objectives that focus on i) compliance with international

legal frameworks, ii) strengthening inter-party and multi-sectoral alliances with defined intervention strategies, and iii) periodic monitoring of their development.

Chapter 2:

Women Who Break the Mold: Toward Disruptive Leadership

2.1 The Starting Point: Becoming Aware that Change Can Improve Our Lives

As previously noted, this work addresses the absence of women in classical and traditional leadership theories – nothing new compared to what has occurred in other areas of knowledge. In this sense, leadership is a concept historically linked to male power. The extensive and abundant literature developed on the subject highlights that “the history of the world is nothing more than the history of great men.”

It has been reiterated on several occasions that, conceptually, leadership was initially linked to biological determinism, summed up by the phrase “to be a leader, one must be born a leader.” This view emphasizes the “natural” traits and characteristics of a leader. Later, the concept was related to social determinism, summarized by the idea that “no one is born a leader; it is great events that turn ordinary individuals into leaders.” Gradually, the focus shifted from personal qualities to what leaders do—their actions—to the context, and to the followers they have.

Thus, based on the classic conceptualizations of political leadership, we aim to reinterpret it through a gender lens. The new political leadership paradigm is built on the reworking of how leadership has been developed and perceived so far: i) the actions of leaders, ii) the context under which leadership relationships are formed, and iii) the connection between leaders and their followers.

This research focuses on the transformation of traditional leadership, centering on the voices of women in politics. Their firsthand perspectives, without other interpretations beyond what they have lived and, above all, felt. Listening, analyzing, sharing, and making visible the perceptions of these women leads us to rethink leadership from a realistic perspective, one that emphasizes the need to work toward transforming a world that remains deeply unequal.

From this perspective, the CIM’s contribution to the (re)definition of political leadership centers on these three components.

2.2. Component 1: Actions—Leadership Must Be Linked to the Equality Agenda

If leadership is not about who we are, but what we do, the implementation of the equality agenda takes a central place in this new paradigm. This is clearly reflected in the voices of the women interviewed; their agenda is based on issues such as democracy and human rights, the fight against poverty, economic and social rights, bodily autonomy, and the fight against corruption and political control.

How is this agenda built and defined? It is a global agenda that includes the following five general principles, which are described below. We have called them principles because they represent a set of values that must guide the equality agenda. Based on these five principles, women can encourage tactical cooperation agreements to advance the progressive realization of gender equality rights and prevent their regression.

In this way, we believe that i) a commitment is established to work on identifying the problems that continue to generate structural inequality, ii) strategic alliances are agreed upon and coordinated with different sectors that are recognized as allies to provide possible solutions, and iii) spaces for collaboration are led to strengthen the already agreed-upon pacts, where the absence of political will operates as an obstacle. The same problem can have different approaches to overcome it, and, consequently, there should be no excuses for not addressing and overcoming it.

Five Central Pillars of the Gender Equality Agenda

“(…) Different and equal women, accomplices who propose to work, create, and convince, who find and recognize themselves in feminism, to live life with a profoundly liberating sense.”

Marcela Lagarde

All women who hold a decision-making position (whether elected, representative, executive, parliamentary, party-based, or appointed) can carry out their transformative and disruptive leadership. As seen throughout these pages, being a female leader does not necessarily require specific qualities or natural gifts, as much of political theory has suggested.

Women can be great leaders and spokespersons for gender equality if they first recognize their status as a disadvantaged social group. Gender consciousness, therefore, is the basic premise for understanding and analyzing the world from this perspective: one that acknowledges we live in a non-neutral society. Public policies, decisions, laws, and regulations in general, as well as customs and traditions, can reproduce and even widen the gap between men and women.

For this reason, five central pillars are proposed as a framework for working toward

providing the necessary and specific responses to women. These pillars align with the agreements that have been developed according to international, regional, and national standards. They are part of the international and regional legal frameworks that have already been agreed upon in the Americas, which emphasize the importance of ensuring the protection of women's rights by the states. Countries have committed to these frameworks, and they require constant monitoring to assess progress, maintain gains, and address any unexpected or undesired setbacks.

Equality in Decision-Making

Parity Democracy: Parity as a Key Measure

The CIM (Inter-American Commission of Women) has highlighted and promoted the significant progress in the region toward parity democracies, primarily through legislative reforms on parity. According to the Panama Declaration of the CIM, parity is understood as a measure of justice that incorporates three dimensions:

- i. Equal participation in decision-making positions in both the public and private sectors, from the international level to the local level.
- ii. The exercise of political and economic power under equal conditions, meaning free from gender-based discrimination and violence.
- iii. The incorporation of women's rights and gender equality agendas into public policy, ensuring their transversal inclusion in normative frameworks and public policies at the domestic level, with an intergenerational, intercultural, and intersectional (and human rights-based) perspective.

The Declaration also states that the equal participation of women is an essential element of democracy.

Parity, as a key tool for transformation, redefines the concept of power (both public and private), envisioning it as a space that must be shared between men and women as a fundamental premise of universal human equality. In key decision-making positions, parity implies a balanced demographic presence—50% women and 50% men—in line with population censuses. It does not represent an arbitrary percentage.

To think of gender parity is to recognize that measures aimed at guaranteeing gender equality should no longer be corrective but should instead seek the ultimate goal of

balance. Women constitute 50% of society and have historically been excluded from the public sphere. The Quito Consensus of 2007, at the X Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, acknowledges that parity is one of the key drivers of democracies, aiming to achieve equality in the exercise of power, in decision-making, and in mechanisms of social, political, and cultural participation, and it is a goal to eradicate the structural exclusion of women.



Public Policies with a Gender Perspective: Mainstreaming and Affirmative Actions

The Beijing Conference Platform for Action in 1995 established gender mainstreaming in legislation, public policies, programs, and projects. Gender mainstreaming was defined in 1997 by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) as the “process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action.” In other words, it seeks to identify gender inequality and differences across all areas and programs and at all levels of public bodies (legislation, general public policies). Unlike actions and policies focused solely on women, gender mainstreaming measures the differentiated impacts that occur throughout the entire process of developing public policies, making it easier to detect whether they respond to patriarchal mandates, roles, and stereotypes.

Just as mainstreaming allows for monitoring throughout the process and in public policy design procedures, highlighting where and when gender asymmetries arise and identifying those responsible, affirmative actions aim to provide compensatory treatment based on assessments that identify historically excluded and disadvantaged groups. As has been previously described, the formal inclusion of women’s rights did not signal the end of inequality. Cultural variables centered on discrimination continue to operate, which need to be dismantled. The CIM has launched the *Transversalidad+ Strategy* for equality and transformation, which aims to strengthen the leading role of National Women’s Mechanisms in mainstreaming the gender perspective in public policy.

Affirmative actions, as public policy, recognize and make amends to discriminated sectors or social groups in the exercise of their rights. Their application in favor of women does not constitute discrimination against men, as gender does not represent a limitation for men in exercising their rights, and they have never required special equalization measures. Affirmative actions are necessary when it is essential to address the difficulties women face in accessing equal opportunities. Without affirmative actions, there is no equality of opportunity, only formal equality, which does not guarantee equal access to rights as it does for men.

III

Right to Care and Co-Responsability

The Inter-American Model Law on Care (CIM, 2022) views care as part of recovery policies and places it at the forefront of short, medium, and long-term solutions. It represents an investment for the development of countries, as it brings an economic return associated with these policy interventions. In Article 1, it defines care work as the social function that sustains the life of society as a whole and the natural environment in which it operates, based on the essential interdependence and vulnerability of the human condition. It acknowledges that care affects everyone at some point in their life cycle, without distinction.

The challenge is to position care as an economic and fiscal investment that enables women to participate in the workforce, contribute to productive life, and foster economic growth. It is necessary to reduce the disproportionate burden of care work on women and to redistribute it to advance toward the paradigm of social and family co-responsibility in caregiving.

IV

Economic Rights and Reducing Poverty Levels Among Women

The main international legal instrument for the exercise of women's human rights is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In terms of labor, the Convention generally establishes the need to adopt measures to ensure women the right to work, equal employment opportunities, freedom of choice of profession, as well as opportunities for training and promotion; equal pay for work of equal value, and the right to social security.

Within the framework of the CIM's Assemblies of Delegates, the Inter-American agenda on women's economic rights has been reinforced. In line with previous commitments, the Lima Declaration on "Equality and Autonomy in the Exercise of Women's Economic Rights," adopted by the 37th Assembly of Delegates of the CIM (2016), conceptually and politically positions: (i) the need to strengthen the Inter-American legal framework on women's economic rights; and (ii) the importance of reconceptualizing work to make

unpaid and caregiving work in the domestic sphere visible and to promote the social responsibility of caregiving among women, men, the state, and the private sector.

More recently, in the Panama Declaration “Building Bridges for a New Social and Economic Pact Led by Women” (2022), the Ministers committed to promoting the adoption of normative frameworks, legislation, and public policies aimed at addressing caregiving with social co-responsibility, so that women can actively participate in the labor and productive world; and also to facilitate labor insertion and reinsertion, as well as entrepreneurship, for the full exercise of women’s economic rights.

V

Right to a Life Free from Violence

The Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women (commonly known as the Belém do Pará Convention), adopted in 1994, established the legal framework to generate commitments and obligations for states. The Belém do Pará Convention states that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, constitutes a violation of human rights, and is therefore an offense to human dignity. It also points out that violence against women transcends all sectors of society, regardless of class, race or ethnic group, educational level and/or income, culture, age, or religion. Therefore, its elimination is essential for the development of women, as its existence impedes and nullifies the exercise of their rights.

In recognition of violence against women in the political sphere and the need to adapt our definitions and legal instruments to respond more effectively, in 2014 the CIM opened a new area of work to advance the prevention, response, and punishment of violence against women in political life. Within this framework, the Committee of Experts (CEVI) of the Follow-Up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI/CIM) adopted the Inter-American Model Law to prevent, punish, and eradicate violence against women in political life. The Model Law defines this violence as any action, conduct, or omission, carried out directly or through third parties, that, based on gender, causes harm or suffering to one or more women, and that has the purpose or result of undermining or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise of their political rights. Violence against women in political life can include, among others, physical, sexual, psychological, moral, economic, or symbolic violence. In addition to providing the conceptual framework, the Model Law also identifies the responsible bodies and articulates the guidelines for prevention, response, punishment, and reparation. Similarly, in 2019, the CIM published

the Model Protocol for Political Parties to encourage political parties and organizations to create their own internal instruments to prevent and combat violence against women in the political sphere, and to carry out awareness and training activities on this issue.

2.3 Component 2: The Context—Leadership Takes Place in an Environment Marked by Gender Inequality and Exclusion (Which Leads to the Pursuit of Transformation)

Women who are aware of the exclusion they face, and who lead from personal experiences of being excluded, require transformation and find in the equality agenda a path to achieve this change. Men have lived and continue to live from a position of privilege in relation to the subordination of women, and therefore, their objective is to maintain the status quo. Men approach power from a position of privilege, either as a reference group or as beneficiaries, so transformation is not a priority for them in this context.

As long as women's leadership is exercised within a patriarchal culture, the result will continue to be the exclusion of women from politics, something that all the interviewees unanimously affirm. If this is not addressed, the continuation and tolerance of such actions translate into discrimination, political violence, digital violence, lack of political funding, minimal or no support from party leadership, among other forms of discrimination. Most importantly, these women share their strategies of survival and resilience, which demonstrate the power of women carving out space in political power.

Understanding how these women, with different political careers, from various political spaces, who have held leadership positions in the public sphere in several countries in the region, perceive politics as a still-hostile territory is a wake-up call. One of the interviewees stated: "Politics is a male-dominated space, which is why it's harder for women, and this is something we need to know beforehand. This awareness is what first leads us to fight for equality and second, to anticipate survival strategies."

The perspective of these women, who are key political figures, is an essential resource for all other women who want to enter the public sphere. Breaking the mold is not an easy task if attempted individually. Therefore, this proposal suggests that the best way to increase women's leadership is by strengthening collective awareness, aiming to change the historical contexts of male privilege.

2.4 Component 3: Followers—The Relationship Between Leaders and the Collective That Supports Them

Women leaders create a bridge between the beneficiaries of the agenda and the decision-making spaces. Without women in these spaces, this agenda would never be considered. This relationship between female leaders and the collective of women has been essential in establishing the political priorities agenda, as well as in maintaining support during their time in office, especially in times of crisis.

One of the interviewees told us: “The gender agenda has been central to me. I was the first woman elected as senator in my state and the first female mayor of my city. The candidacy I led was made up entirely of women; my government program and actions were focused on the inclusion of women in all areas. I had outstanding female participation in my government. I turned discourse into practice, aiming to guarantee women’s rights.”

Another interviewee declared: “Indigenous women have learned to weave networks worldwide, dialoguing with various sectors: feminist women, Afro-descendants, environmental movements, and these are agendas that have been constantly marginalized... because male leaderships never brought them to the table or didn’t consider them priorities.”

It must be remembered that, for this relationship to work, it is essential to understand that leading a space requires knowing how to exercise power (it’s not enough to hold formal power). To exercise power, you must first assume it. To assume power, you must challenge it. In this way, we argue that to exercise power, you must first **assume and challenge it**.

One interviewee offered a telling insight when asked at what point she felt she transitioned from being a political woman to becoming a leader and role model. She responded: “I started exercising power when I was able to distance myself from the men, when I could say ‘no’ and feel that I was an equal and that I didn’t owe any of them my presence there.”

Challenging power is not easy, as women are raised to be pleasing, with the idea that all women must be taught to satisfy others. This demands silence, obedience, and caretaking from women. Feminism has extensively studied this issue. Challenging power means, among many other things, overcoming the “law of pleasing,” with all the costs that this stance entails. It also means redefining relationships with the group of followers, their support base, and the primary beneficiaries.

2.5 Proposal for Disruptive Political Leadership

1) Valuing the Specialization That Patriarchal Culture Imposes on Women in the Private Sphere in the Public-Political Sphere

Patriarchy involves the segmentation, hierarchy, and specialization of public and private spaces. Women, due to gender roles, occupy the private/domestic sphere and specialize in caregiving, protection, and sustaining life. This specialization stems from patriarchy, giving us a common starting point. The specialization that is so important in the private sphere has the same relevance in the public sphere, because that culture and those skills are also critical for politics, yet they are not present. Moreover, bringing that specialization into politics carries a gender penalty.

What we seek is to redefine, in the public sphere, the capacities and specialization that women have acquired through socialization processes, related to the care of people, the protection of life and the environment, and negotiation, which we have developed in the private sphere. These are values and perspectives that provide leaders with the necessary skills in today's world, characterized by successive crises and a citizenry demanding different responses. This is where we see the path to transforming the public space. It is a profound transformation, based on the experiences women have gained in the private-domestic sphere and redefined in the public sphere. Such transformation is aimed at changing the practices, beliefs, rituals, and symbols of political leadership.

2) Advocating for DISRUPTIVE LEADERSHIP

As we have consistently argued, it is important to achieve a paradigm shift, moving from traditional political leadership to the exercise of disruptive political leadership. This type of leadership stems from the conviction to want to exercise power, to challenge the status quo when it does not benefit women, to advance a transformative agenda based on equality, and to exercise leadership through mediation within a framework of strategic and sisterhood alliances.

This is the leadership that breaks the mold and, therefore, the leadership that makes people uncomfortable.

Chapter 3:

Women Leaders Who Took the Step: Practical Strategies to Promote and Consolidate Disruptive Leaderships.

How Have They Done It?

The CIM has interviewed more than 40 women leaders from the region to glean their experiences in politics. Their leadership accounts share a common characteristic: the defense of the gender equality agenda and women's political rights. Based on their voices, CIM has developed a system of strategies used by these women leaders to overcome various obstacles in the development of their political careers and in the exercise of their roles.

This work has allowed us to confirm that the challenges that democracies face in being inclusive and achieving equal political participation are common throughout the region. The interviews conducted convey this: machismo is a widespread problem. Therefore, the maintenance of discriminatory actions, practices, and behaviors undermines the exercise of women's political rights. Women are still perceived as subordinate, particularly concerning power and its resources. One of the clearest manifestations of this machismo, as agreed upon by the interviewees, is the widespread belief that power is masculine. This discriminatory tradition extends to the monopoly on political positions, and decision-making, and the exclusion of women as equals in the political sphere. They recount how men find ways to avoid sharing decision-making spaces and maintain positions of privilege, along with their corresponding promotions and political career advancements. The gap widens due to the persistence of exclusionary practices in political activity, candidacies, and the use of ridicule and discredit on social media.

In this regard, one of the leaders affirmed that "the problem is not that women are disconnected from power. The issue is that men are not connected to the possibility of women retaining power. Power is something they keep for themselves." Along the same lines, another interviewee stated, "The hardest thing for me has been that masculine configuration of politics, and men are clearly aware of this. There is no conception that all people should be represented in the political space." They also mentioned that "Men believe that political spaces belong to them, and they make women believe they don't have power. We come into these spaces of power without believing that we have power, with the male model of power as the reference."

A legislator remarked, "Women are not allowed to participate, even when we begin to gain experience and fully engage in the political function. Due to the same cultural patterns,

men don't think it's right for us to participate in important commissions of the Legislative Assembly, like the Finance Commission. They go where the economic issues are, and it seems these topics are not for women. Also, in areas that require more media exposure and debate, they place men, and we women are left with those related to the State, family, the elderly—areas that are seen as more social. You encounter all these obstacles when it comes to distributing legislative tasks or commission assignments.”

Another interviewee, in the context of a conversation about the importance of having resources to finance a campaign, said: “You can't run an electoral campaign without money, but that's not the biggest challenge. The biggest challenge for us is being able to insert ourselves into this masculine environment, where men clearly don't want us. It's obvious how much we bother them. If you enter a group of ten men, you're the only woman, and you want to speak, they won't let you, or they'll interrupt you many times. It will be very difficult for them to listen to you. That's why we eventually harden our personalities, because you need to in order to survive.”

For women who face multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion, it's even more difficult. In the words of one of the indigenous women leaders interviewed: “They lower your status, often in subtle ways. Deep down, they're telling you that you won't be able to reach the same role as them and that it doesn't belong to you. You may have reached a certain level, but there's no way you'll reach the next one.” Young women in politics share similar experiences, noting how this sexist structure negatively impacts their political effectiveness: “The dynamics of power within Congress limit women's participation because it's been normalized as a male space, and women are seen as intruders: we're not supposed to be there, we shouldn't speak, we shouldn't ask for the floor or make a decision. Being young only intensified this rejection, and it was very difficult to find allies in Congress”.

The testimonies of the women involved in this research consistently highlight that political parties are misogynistic, and despite the increasing number of women in these parties, the situation hasn't changed enough, which affects women's morale. “Unfortunately, we still have misogynistic parties, even though there are women present. When they see a woman in a position, they automatically associate it with weakness, lack of character, lack of courage. That's what hurts me the most, what bothers me the most, and unfortunately, it's something that doesn't have an immediate solution.” Another interviewee noted: “It's really hard because there's a majority of men making decisions within the party, and our voices just get drowned out.”

They also acknowledge that there have been changes in recent decades, and that the situation is not the same as it was thirty years ago. “There has been much discussion

on this topic, many proposals. Now, even leadership from the LGBTQ+ community is being talked about, and there's a need for them to be included. Now we have Presidents talking about feminist foreign policy, or we see governments formed with gender parity." However, the changes have not been sufficient to transform the rules of power, which remain in the hands of men.

In this sense, this work highlights the frustration of women at being ignored or suspected of lacking the ability or merit to engage in political activity. This systematic devaluation is what compels them to commit to working on the gender equality agenda to transform politics. Promoting the gender equality agenda enables women to access, remain in, and be recognized in politics by asserting their rights. The push must happen, and for that, it requires the will and conviction that change is possible and necessary for improvement. These voices are important to show that exclusion is widespread throughout the region and is not just an individual experience happening to a particular woman. If it's systematic and widespread, the antidote must also be systemic.

A problem can have multiple solutions. It all depends on what objectives are set and what resources are available. It's not just about financial resources (which are very important) but also about knowing actions and strategies based on experiences that have been effective and that help to form a menu of possible strategies to push forward the gender equality agenda.

The objective of this systematization is for the strategies and recommendations provided by the women leaders interviewed to be used as a guide that can serve as a reference. In that sense, this work contributes to filling an important gap: the lack of knowledge about the many role models and leaders who have been working to change traditional cultural patterns. In other words, it makes visible the women who are active in politics in the Latin American and Caribbean region and who share their journeys.

What did the women leaders who made it, do?

3.1 Strategies to Negotiate Their Place as Candidates and Access Political Positions

Women's entry points into politics are highly diverse, as are their trajectories. Contrary to what is widely believed, the interviewees revealed that their entry into political activity did not stem from family connections. They stand out for having started in political, feminist, student, university, social movements, as well as indigenous, environmental, and ecological communities, among others. Moreover, political opportunities for women, like for men, also depend on the political context.

The interviewees emphasize that it is crucial to have clarity before participating, as politics and the competition for power can become very intense and difficult to handle, though not impossible. As one of them notes, the informal rules are often unclear. For this reason, it is necessary to be aware and plan a strategy to consolidate leadership (and avoid an abrupt exit). One interviewee states, “A woman entering politics must be aware that although it is a space that belongs to us, we have to fight for it. We are aware that patriarchy is still widespread. We must enter politics fully aware of the battle we must fight and with pre-made decisions that allow us to stay. I survived thanks to my firm conviction to continue despite everything.” It’s important also not to give up: “I recommend that women don’t get discouraged and participate in politics. They should own an agenda and defend it with confidence. Political parties are still very male-dominated, and I understand that this discourages women, but we must overcome it and join parties because it is essential to be a candidate for an elective position. What matters is seeing that there is a growing number of women leaders fighting for policies that improve people’s lives.”

It is necessary to be clear that politics consists of different groups vying for power. In this context, women don’t simply have to fit into the established dynamic but can lead their own groups and transform the political space. For this, it is important to have the vision to lead: “When the party asked me to be a candidate for the Vice-Mayorship, I said no. I wasn’t going to campaign for someone else. I knew that if I entered a candidacy, it was to lead the ticket. What happens is that sometimes we wait for someone to say, “You are capable, go for it. But no, you have to decide yourself. You shouldn’t wait for someone to invite you to dance. Now you dance alone or with your friends.” Another interviewee shares, “When I ran for Congress, I was clear about which positions were electable and which weren’t. I wasn’t willing to accept the fifth spot.”

The interviewees agree that negotiating candidacies has been one of the most complex and decisive moments in their political careers, and in most cases, these negotiations occur in a hostile environment due to inequality in political and economic resources, which works against women. The lack of support from political parties for women’s candidacies is one of the most frequently mentioned problems. However, the interviewees have developed strategies that have allowed them to overcome these disadvantages, negotiate under more equitable conditions, and achieve better results. Some of these strategies were extrapolated from the interviews and are represented below in the form of paraphrasing and direct quotes from interviewees:

Claiming the added value of being a woman in the political space

- Recognise and own the value of yourself as a woman in politics: The fact that being a woman and having the opportunity to modify traditional patriarchal patterns means something different from “the usual” and carries political value that has contributed to more women reaching government positions. “Creating our leadership from our own consistencies, our own ways of being and acting.” “I encourage young women to deeply understand what they bring to politics as women. They should not try to imitate men. Be authentic and strive to be an example for other women. If you try to be like men, you may discourage other women from aspiring to leadership roles, as they might feel they can never match masculinity”. “Yes, I believe that women and men bring different skills and qualities to the table... and I think (for women) it’s the ability to have that deep empathy, especially for your constituents, to negotiate, to weigh the pros and cons, and rationalize what makes sense.” “The expectations are much higher for women. When a man says something foolish, people just say it was a foolish comment. When a woman makes a mistake, she is immediately disqualified. You can’t make mistakes or slip up. We need to challenge and discuss this, no doubt. But also, on the other hand, I think that being a woman has given me a platform—being a woman already opens up a space for me.”

Learning to negotiate and mastering negotiation techniques and strategies

- Hone your negotiation skills; they are key when aspiring to a political position. “In politics, you always have to negotiate. Negotiation is a tool in this space.”
- Acquire the basic tools and knowledge for negotiation; they are essential and fortunately, can be learned. “Even now that I’m in Congress, I see around me the inability or lack of ability we have because we lack the tools to know how to negotiate. It’s a daily issue.”
- Understand the nature of your barriers in politics and how negotiation can be applied to overcome them. “It’s just about looking around and observing how the informal rules of politics, which exclude us, are developed. Learning not only how they work but also how we can change them by seeking alliances, interacting with other stakeholders, and bringing them into a shared agenda for equality.”

Standing up for yourself when competing for positions, responsibilities, and roles

- Work on self-esteem by building and strengthening your own leadership. Feeling politically strong before entering a negotiation is a very positive way to approach it. “The first thing is that we must hold firm to what we want in the negotiation. We’ve

been conditioned to give in and give in.” “There’s a subjective dimension that also needs to be strengthened, and it’s related to gender. Sometimes we need to strengthen ourselves and tell ourselves that we are capable. We need to quiet that inner voice that sometimes sabotages us, which is tied to the construction of gender roles and stereotypes.” “We need to deconstruct those stereotypes that affect us, that notion that a *woman can’t do it and that a man would do it better*. We must develop our own leadership”. “For me, it has been very valuable to have the ability to look at things knowing that they are not personal—political fights are not personal.”

- Don’t fear those who have always been there—political positions don’t have owners. “No one is doing women a favor. We have to take ownership of politics, of positions; we have to claim them as part of our rights. Sometimes we are still not fully aware that these spaces belong to us.”
- Know your legal rights. “To fight for decision-making positions, it was important to have read the legal frameworks such as statutes, regulations, and others, which allow us to know what can and cannot be done. This helps us avoid being deceived.”

Having a defined plan for negotiation and clear objectives

- Outline a plan to advocate for yourself and negotiate your place in the political party. For any negotiation process, whether for an internal party position or an elected office, it is essential to first go through a planning process. “The key here is how to negotiate and with what to negotiate.” “It’s important to have clarity about what the candidate brings to the party. Answering the following question helps gain that clarity: What do I bring to the negotiation table? It could be grassroots support, popularity, votes, specific knowledge on a particular issue, general knowledge, public speaking and work abilities, etc.” It’s important to know how to market yourself, identify possible scenarios, and negotiate gradually. That means bringing a series of options to the negotiation. “I always start by asking myself: Why is it beneficial for the party to have me on their list?”
- Assess how different negotiation strategies can lead to different outcomes, and consider which ones best align with your objectives and scenario. The plan involves identifying possible scenarios, based on what is possible, what you want or don’t want, and what you are willing to accept or not. “You need to come to the negotiation with pre-prepared scenarios. Within a political party, there are usually internal elections and primaries. It helps me to make a clear analysis of what the advantages and disadvantages are. Once you’re in the negotiation, you have to ensure you don’t end up in empty negotiations, especially ones where your chances of losing are high.

If you enter negotiating aggressively but have little chance of winning, you will come out very weakened.”

- Don’t give up right away—negotiations can have different phases, and unless the chances of losing are too high, you should stay in the negotiation.
- Use political capital to position yourself in other spaces. “I didn’t negotiate my political position because I was already established, but I experienced it in the indigenous movement, where patriarchy prevailed, and only men held visible positions. I told them, look, I’m here by your invitation, but not to do domestic tasks—I’m not going to serve you coffee. I’m going to open the forum. They had no choice but to give me that opportunity, and that’s how I broke the mold.”

Developing political capital in advance, which means building relationships with the party base, civil society alliances, and other women in politics

- Build the support of the party’s grassroots. This support is essential and requires engaging in party activism, accept internal roles, and invest time and dedication in the party. “Certainly, in a political party, you have to build your support internally, within the party structure, among the branches and delegates—those who will vote to approve your candidacy—not just in the constituency where you plan to run, but certainly across all constituencies”. “A mistake I made was not getting deeply involved in the party. I didn’t integrate into the party organically and didn’t fight for the structures. I didn’t want to fight that battle because I thought we were going to build collectively.” “In politics, there are many ranks; you can’t go straight to the front row. It’s important not to want to start in the front row because that can often burn you out. It exposes your weaknesses before you’ve had a chance to overcome them. There are many ranks to climb in politics; you must support other candidates, be part of their teams, and participate in their campaigns. Like everything in life, politics is also a learning process.”
- Build relationships with party leadership. “Don’t be afraid to go and talk to the party leadership because that’s the core vote you need to appeal to. In my country, the leadership of political parties often looks for money. So, if another candidate shows up with more money, they’ll push you aside. But there are other structures within the party that have truly committed people who can open the door for you to reach other influential members of the party.”
- Conduct bilateral negotiations in advance with other political groups within the party, key figures, or other women in the party.

- Form alliances with civil society or other social groups; this provides more backing and potential votes. “Within a party, negotiations require going in with tools, but also with social support”.

Social movements are also an entry point to institutional politics

- Participate in and build the support of social movements. On one hand, joining a political party and becoming organically involved in it is important for negotiation, since being outside the party often means lacking grassroots support or party history to negotiate. On the other hand, for some women, being part of social organizations or movements is highly attractive to a political party due to the political capital and experience they bring. Women’s leadership in political movements, such as those linked to feminism, student and university movements, indigenous rights, or environmental defense, also serves as entry points to institutional politics. “I told them I didn’t have money, but what I did have was a lot of social capital, political capital, built with the people—that’s what I offered them. My contribution was all those votes. Not everything is about money”. “The connections I made with student movements, youth, and the environmental movement (...) were diverse alliances that supported us.” “In my case, my technical background and political-electoral capital are what led me to become a trusted person for the President. I had nearly eighty thousand votes in the last election—leadership like that can’t be overlooked.”

3.2 Strategies for Accessing Political Financing

The Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) has highlighted the issue of inequitable access to campaign financing as one of the major barriers to women’s political participation, particularly when it comes to public funding⁶. The lack of access to state financing for the majority of women presents a significant dilemma for contemporary democracies, one that must be addressed with effective solutions. In the current context, where most countries in the region lack policies to ensure women’s access to political financing, the women interviewed have developed strategies to cover their campaign expenses.

- The interviewees perceive that access to political financing is the main problem women face in politics and one of the major obstacles to their participation. As one of the women leaders interviewed stated, “You can’t run an electoral campaign without money.” Far from diminishing the importance of money in politics, the interviewees recognize that “politics is increasingly a space of intense economic competition”.

6 In this regard, the CIM publication [Where’s the Money for Women’s Electoral Campaigns?](#) (2023) can be consulted.

- In several countries in the region, political parties receive public funds for electoral campaigns. In others, political financing is largely private, meaning both men and women must directly fund their own political campaigns. In any context, it is harder for women to access financing: women generally earn less, have fewer personal resources, savings, properties, and face more difficulties in accessing credit. As one interviewee said, “It really is an extremely difficult issue, it’s one of the major limitations because we don’t get the same support as men.”
- “I went to the same donor as my male colleague, and I received a third of what my colleague got for supporting a particular cause,” states one interviewee. She continued, “And when I asked the donor, ‘What is the fear of supporting women? Why is there much less willingness to financially support female candidates?’ he answered, ‘Because with men, you don’t have to negotiate—you tell them what you want, and they will give it to you. Women weigh the pros and cons of everything: Will this be good for the country? Women want to negotiate their position, and that’s a lot to deal with.’” “I don’t remember a single time I put pen to paper to write to an organization, institution, or company seeking financial support. Not once did people come to offer their support. I was given a certain level of financing, and it wasn’t anything huge because I didn’t want to enter into financial commitments where, once in office, I would be pressured to meet promises or expectations I might not be able to fulfill.”
- Another interviewee spoke about the importance of having family support to face the expenses of an electoral campaign: “If you are going to run for a significant position, you need to build your political project a year in advance, and for that, you need a family economy that covers the costs of that year of planning. An electoral campaign is not a matter of a few weeks, but of many months, during which you may need to stop working, but at the same time, have the ability to support yourself and the people who depend on you.” She added, “That’s why family support, not only financial but for your political project, is essential because it has many implications.”
- For Indigenous women, accessing resources for a campaign can be an even greater obstacle: “Mine was one of the most precarious campaigns of all; we didn’t have resources.” However, this situation forced them to be creative and design alternative strategies to overcome the lack of resources: “That’s where strategy comes in. With a group of young people, we designed a voter mapping to identify the provinces with the largest populations and focus our efforts.” One of the Afro-descendant leaders interviewed shared, “Financing a campaign for Afro-descendants, mestizos—mostly women—is almost impossible. It’s an unequal competition where men have all the experience and greater electoral capacity. Meanwhile, our leadership is new, it didn’t exist before”.

- It is important to highlight the growing involvement of criminal economies in political campaigns and the significant challenge it poses for women to identify contributions from these sources, refuse them, and maintain both their physical and political integrity.
- Lastly, several interviewees mentioned the importance of reducing campaign expenses.
- “We must make politics an activity of ideas and proposals, where fewer financial resources are used through effective control of electoral spending, reducing campaign durations, prohibiting costly activities, limiting private financing, and therefore increasing public funding.”

It's very important to plan the financing of your electoral candidacy, with a strategy that includes sustaining yourself financially before and after the campaign

- Develop a fundraising/donation strategy for the campaign that includes an estimated budget of projected expenses, identifying potential sources of income, and defining the activities to be carried out. “It's like a temporary business you will manage—you need money to pay the accountant, for advertising, a car, gas, etc. There's a whole structure behind an electoral campaign”.
- Consider the financial planning of the campaign holistically, including a strategy that considers both the pre-campaign and post-campaign phases, among others. “I had to go into debt to run as a candidate for Congress. First, I had to quit my job, and then I had to get a personal loan to survive the seven months leading up to the election.” “I can't quit my job. That's what happens to many women as well. I can't quit because then how would my kids eat?”
- Appoint someone within the campaign team responsible for the fundraising process. “The person in charge of fundraising helps me knock on those doors, probably going to those meetings at the bar where I probably can't go because it's a space exclusively for men”.

Contributions from the Political Party

- Demonstrate allegiance to your party where it aligns with your values and agenda. Although the lack of support from political parties does not occur in all cases, it also depends on the political capital the candidate brings. “It's important to understand how parties think. We don't have many women with the political capital that I have. I've come out of several elections with thousands of supporters, so the party has always

supported me with maximum resources and funding. They gave me as much as they gave the men. But I also asked for it—I demanded that the party support me, using every strategy at my disposal. And I've always been there for my political party, handling challenging situations. I may disagree, but I always express my dissent internally, never externalizing my opposing views. The exception is the issue of women and girls, and the party knows and respects my positions on that. It's hard to contradict the party and then expect them to support you.”

- Forge good relationships with party members: Even though parties may have resources for campaigns, these are mostly distributed among men, which is why it's important to become organically involved in the party, carry the party's banner, and do party work. While there may be disagreements or dissatisfaction with the party, if you are in a party and seek to become a candidate, it's important to maintain a good relationship and align with the party because otherwise, it will be very difficult to receive party support. “So, basically, I was able to push the campaign forward by allowing the party machinery to take on its own responsibility”.
- Utilize and/or advocate for affirmative action. Affirmative action measures are necessary to ensure the distribution of public resources within political parties. Brazil and Mexico have such regulations in place⁷.

Financial Support from Family or Close Friends, Savings, and Loans

- Mobilize financial support from familial networks. Family financial support, whether in cash or in-kind, is crucial as it can be very helpful for the campaign but also directly contributes to family responsibilities and upkeep, especially when these depend solely on women. One interviewee mentioned the importance of forming economic support networks in advance of the electoral campaign; this network would consist of family members, friends, collaborators, and people who support the political party, among others.
- Consider how to optimize public and private financing mechanisms to support your campaign: Using savings or taking out loans can also serve the dual purpose of contributing to the campaign and covering family expenses. However, in these cases, women lose their capital or go into debt, with the accompanying negative consequences.

7 Ídem CIM (2023)

Third-party Contributions in Cash and In-kind

- Highlight the work you have done or contributed to, its effectiveness, and the results achieved, when seeking supporters. This demonstrates your credentials and attracts contributions to the electoral campaign.
- Consider in-kind contributions and be creative in identifying those who can make such contributions. “I took advantage of every opportunity to fund my campaign ‘in-kind’; I barely received any money. My advisor and I were very creative in that sense, and the campaign went very well.” “You have to find people who can support you with in-kind resources, for example, someone to print posters or help promote your campaign.”
- Seek private sector support, particularly for larger campaigns. “I never had significant collaboration with businesses; I did have some business support, but it was never decisive in my congressional campaigns. Of course, in the mayoral campaign, which is a larger campaign, if there hadn’t been private financing, there certainly wouldn’t have been any way for me to be elected.”
- Explore less-mainstream financing options such as contributions from social organizations or aligned organized groups.

Grassroots Campaigns/Solidarity Networks

- Mobilize grassroots support. Grassroots campaigns require people more than financial resources. While there are always expenses related to transportation and/or meals, the goal is to reach as many people as possible directly. These must be close supporters or highly committed sympathizers who can effectively spread the necessary information.
- Optimize your networks. The solidarity networks and activities that women build and support are important contributions to political campaigns. “I think one of the strengths we women have is that we weave many solidarity networks because it’s part of our dynamic—we are always building networks of solidarity.”

Holding Public Office Facilitates Financing to Maintain Image and Project Visibility

- Take advantage your available resources whilst in office to further build your public profile. Holding a public office provides conditions that, during the mandate, allow resources to be available for maintaining a public image and projecting oneself through actions and achieved results. This becomes a significant contribution to future

candidacies. “During the mandate, the visibility you have and the need to maintain an image are a big help for re-election.”

For women from historically excluded groups, the challenge is even greater

- Utilize multiple, creative and cost-effective campaign strategies to reach your intended communities. In addition to the previously mentioned strategies, Indigenous women also turn to other tactics, such as conducting bilingual campaigns and promoting them on community radio stations, selling their own crafts or crops to fund their campaigns, and seeking support from Indigenous leaders. “For Indigenous peoples and women, this is the main limitation, and financing is borne by each individual, as there is no external funding. Given this context, the strategy focused on bilingual campaigns and promoting them on community radios that agreed to share the message.”

3.3 Strategies to be Effective in Public Office

For most interviewees, effectiveness in public office is the biggest challenge as a politician, as it is through the public role that they can address the needs of the electorate and fulfill campaign promises. One Indigenous leader with a long and significant political career summarized it like this: “First, understand the reality of the country and its communities to create social awareness, and let that be your main motivation. Second, empower yourself, because when you are empowered, you no longer fear participating. Third, educate yourself, develop political skills. Fourth, don’t get frustrated at the first obstacle—politics is very difficult, and influence is achieved gradually. Lastly, it is important to always stay connected to Mother Earth from a spiritual perspective.”

Thus, efficiency in public office is associated with commitment, vocation, consistency, teamwork, but also with the technical and political knowledge that supports the work being done. This efficiency depends on multiple factors. Below are the strategies shared by the interviewed women leaders for consolidating their leadership through their public roles.

Empowering Yourself

- Recognize that confidence in your own leadership is fundamental in politics. “It’s important to have strong self-esteem, to be sure of what you’re going to do and why you’re there, because if not, politics can be very intimidating, and they can discourage you from continuing”.
- Continually build confidence in your leadership, as an ongoing process. Gaining confidence in your own leadership is an ongoing task that is nurtured and strengthened

every day, and it is key to becoming a better leader. Confidence helps you make better decisions and lead a team to achieve better results. “I gained confidence in my leadership because I was very secure, I was firm, I was certain about what I was doing and why I was doing it.”

- Learn lessons from your experiences – even the challenges. Several of the interviewed women leaders said they found security in the obstacles they had already overcome and, above all, in their political convictions. “I felt fear when speaking, the fear of making a mistake, because it has always been believed that politics is a space designed for men. But then I would remember the challenges we had overcome to get there. It’s about breaking paradigms and leaving a mark. I think that drive for the struggle, to contribute to transformation, gives you the strength to keep going”.
- Act collectively; it is always empowering. “Many women—not all—enter politics with insecurities, feeling that the space doesn’t belong to us. Looking back, I wish I had had more vision, and that more women had joined together to enter politics, rather than feeling privileged because we had been called. It’s a cultural problem—political culture is masculine, but you only understand that with time.”

Understanding the Power Dynamics in the Spaces We Participate In

- Develop an acute knowledge of the various networks and influential actors within and around your spaces. It is necessary to have a good understanding of the networks of influence within political parties and in the spaces in which you participate. “You need to do a good analysis of Congress itself, of the forces at play and how they move. Identify who can be allies, who you can work with, and who you can’t. For example, in the Plenary, you see everyone, so you need to take advantage of that hour before the session starts to talk to people, greet them, and chat. That detailed, personal relationship work is essential because it gives you information. Without information, you can’t do anything.”
- Educate yourself on matters of power, not just on social and political issues. Learning how power works is crucial, and learning from the experience of other women is key.
- Seek in advance to gain an understanding of the challenges and success factors of the office you are vying for. Electoral campaigns have their own strategies and priorities. Once in office, the strategies change, and priorities can shift as well. “If you want to have a political career, I think you have to make a decision that once you take office, a second phase or struggle begins, and it’s a different kind of struggle”.

Identifying Role Models and Mentors

- Build relationships with women (or men) who have experience in politics, who have held the position before, and learn from their experience. This can be very helpful for effectively exercising the role. “It’s necessary to learn from the experience of a deputy that you can take as a reference or get close to someone you trust who can really show you what legislative work is like.” “I realized that my political mentors in my early years were men, but they were men with progressive mindsets, men who believed that women could govern, that women could lead, and that they could even do it better than men”.
- Seek role models and mentors to support your political journey and likewise consider giving back where possible to younger generations of women aspiring to politics. Women have mentioned the lack of role models or figures to inspire them to enter politics. “I believe that, because of my presence in Congress, more young Indigenous women have been encouraged to participate, and it’s beautiful to see that.”

Having a Clear Agenda to Position Yourself Politically Builds Leadership and Specialization, and Opens Access to the Media

Have a concrete agenda to position yourself politically. It is a strategy that several of the interviewees have followed, and it has helped them build their political leadership. “In my first campaign, I didn’t have a clear agenda. I got involved in all the issues I was interested in and learned, but because I didn’t have the experience—it was my first time—I wasn’t very focused. The truth is, most of my training came after I became a deputy, and that helped me develop a clear agenda. I am the anti-corruption deputy. I focus on poverty reduction and the women’s agenda. Of course, there are other topics of interest, for example, I have to engage with issues related to my department because you have to project yourself. But having priority issues has given me a lot of access to the press. They know I dominate those topics, so if there’s a problem related to my issues, they know they can call me, and I’ll have an answer.”

- Enter the political arena with a political agenda that includes two or three goals you want to accomplish within the framework of your role and competencies, and make this agenda public for accountability. This strategy was employed by some of the interviewees; one of them stated, “The first condition is to arrive with a clear agenda. Many issues will come up along the way, but you need to have two or three objectives you want to achieve”.

- Specialize in certain topics and goals you want to achieve; your specialization becomes a point of reference for political groups, the media, and the public, making use of all the opportunities the media provides. Opinions are shared, problems are exposed, and reforms are proposed around these specialized topics through a clear narrative that reaches different audiences. One interviewee noted, “I specialized mainly in anti-corruption issues. Since they know I dominate those topics, if they have a problem, for example, related to corruption, which is also linked to justice and democracy, they know they can call me and I’ll have a response.”
- Define key positions and issues to focus on, building knowledge and recognition for these topics. “So, the issues or projects I led were coherent with my agenda and also connected to an international network, for example, related to ending violence against women in politics”.

Maintaining an “Open Door” Policy with the Groups Represented or Interested in Your Political Agenda

- Carry the demands of the sectors represented, and serve as their voice in decision-making spaces, especially for traditionally excluded groups, is key. “After all, we are here because we bring the banners of the movement, and we bring those banners to defend them here. It’s a constant exchange with the Indigenous movement. I believe that without an organizational force, you can’t do much. I also belonged to an entire international network of Indigenous women”. For another interviewee, the strategy from the beginning was to “Work with civil society depending on the issues we were addressing. For example, for the femicide law, we relied on the women’s movement, and they provided many ideas for this law. Likewise, if we were working on the children’s code or the adoption law, we worked with the children’s movement, or for justice-related issues, with the pro-justice movement. We always collaborated with sectors that had an interest in a particular issue because it’s crucial to consult the affected or benefiting sector”. “I’ve always had a very flexible dynamic with the Indigenous movement, listening, going to work with them, being in the territory, talking, asking questions, and I think that’s how we earned trust”. “I believe territorial work has been very important, having a good relationship with the grassroots of the party in the territory, because, in the end, internal elections rely on having the support of the party members in the department you represent. I did a lot of work in the territory to succeed.”
- Make the most of your position and voice, maximizing the political opportunities the role offers. “We received requests at the Congressional office. For example, the children in schools in the Amazon weren’t receiving meals. So, we would call the responsible

Minister, and the Minister would act. As a congresswoman, I can't build schools, but I can work toward the goals for which I was elected. The Ministers recognized our work because we were effective, and no one ever denied us an appointment".

- Receive and listen to the demands of various sectors and understand their different perspectives.
- Develop good relationships with stakeholders, where possible. This can help the work to flow more smoothly and reach consensus.
- Maintain political relations with communities by, inter alia, clearly communicating the responsibilities of the role to generate appropriate political expectations within the community that supports you. In this regard, one of the interviewed Indigenous leaders mentioned: "We need to provide political education to the public. There's a lot of confusion about the competencies of the different branches of government, and there's a risk that people will say, *'Our representative was there, but didn't do anything,'* because legislative work isn't about tangible policies or public works. People might be left with the impression that you didn't do anything because the school wasn't built."

Fostering or Seeking Continuous Dialogue, Negotiating, and Learning to Make Agreements

- Engage in constructive dialogue and negotiation between different voices and opinions on important issues in order to advance topics or achieve objectives. "Beyond convincing your colleagues that what you're proposing is your contribution, the strategy is to be open to talking with everyone, continuously managing the things you're aiming for."
- Keep communication channels open, in the context of dialogue and negotiation. "We had many talks and dialogues to move things forward. So, a strategy is to talk to everyone—I didn't fight with anyone. We had many discussions, but we never fought with anyone. There are political differences, but you need to talk to everyone because when it comes to moving issues forward in Congress, you need a majority of votes, and you don't have that on your own."
- Learn to negotiate and reach political agreements through exchanges. "You see how others also negotiate on issues of interest to them, and you learn to negotiate the topics you want to push forward—in my case, the women's agenda".
- Hone your ability to distinguish which battles are worth fighting.

Political Training for the Role and Training for Political Action

- Educate yourself and understand the different technical aspects of the public office to be held, and be cognizant of topics that are important for the role, including the functions of political institutions. One interviewee noted, “In my country, there are significant limitations, and there is no access to education. But to participate in politics, it is important to prepare, to understand public policies, to know the government plans, the budget—you have to get training.”
- Know the roadmap for achieving public policy from the position you hold. “One wise decision was to develop, together with my team, the necessary roadmap to get a law approved, from identifying the problem, formulation, validation, then presenting the bill, negotiating, and going through all the necessary steps until it was approved. We knew exactly where we were at every stage”.
- Learn the particular skills of political action, appreciating that everything is learned through practice and through developing political skills. “I’m a lawyer by profession. At first, I thought like a lawyer and not like a politician. I believe most women are quite empirical. Then there are many things women, especially women in politics, need to deconstruct—how to organize a campaign, how to communicate. I felt responsible for answering everything asked of me, and that overwhelmed me. In the CIM/OAS Electoral Candidate Course, I learned that it doesn’t work that way.” “I think I wasted a lot of time studying; I went to the books, the laws, the way things ‘should’ be, but it didn’t align with the reality of my country. It would have been more useful to know my functions through the experience of someone I trusted, who could show me what the work was really like”.
- Take advantage of opportunities to take on different roles in public office, both for political growth and to be effective in the position. For example, within parliament, the role of a legislator is different from being the chairperson of a committee.
- Recognize the importance of political skills training, promote women’s training schools and/or seek partnerships with institutions that organize such initiatives, like CIM/OAS. “I thought, ‘How can we, as adults, share experiences with younger women?’ So I suggested we create a political school for Mayan women and sought out other Mayan women leaders to establish the school, and we did it.”

Being Prepared for Public Scrutiny

- Be prepared for the reality that participating in politics means you will be subjected to the highest level of public scrutiny, especially in the age of social media. “When you enter politics, you must be prepared for public scrutiny and for the opinions surrounding your performance, whether they are good or bad, appreciated or not”.
- Learn to differentiate when public scrutiny is related to public management and/or duties, and when it is used as a means of discrediting, incorporating private life issues and/or gender-based criticism.

Teamwork

- Know how to delegate and work as a team, recognizing that teamwork can lead to greater efficiency and results. “Good decisions are shown through efficiency and results, and results are the product of teamwork. I didn’t do it alone; I did it as a team.” “I was able to be efficient in the role, primarily because I surrounded myself with a good team committed to the agenda and because we had a clear projection of the direction we aimed for during that period. You need that support, it’s not true that you can do it alone”. “Having a good team is more than 50% of what we can achieve in terms of success.”
- Create and foster a team that shares your vision and commitment, and that is also professional, efficient, and multidisciplinary. This applies whether you are a minister, mayor, councilor, or legislator. For some of the interviewees, it’s also important that part of their team has experience and political vision. “Within my team, there were positions for political advice, communication, and other more administrative and operational roles. We even had someone for public service, because that role is very important, even though it was just one person. We had regular meetings, communication mechanisms, and it was very fluid, which made it effective.” “Working as a team has been very helpful for me. And unlike others who try to build their initial team with family members, I selected people from the political party’s grassroots because they are the ones with experience”.
- Ensure that the team must be clear on the political line and the objectives being pursued. Goal-setting and defining objectives are leader’s job and take time, as does managing the team. “For me, that was another responsibility, in addition to my congressional duties. We built the team so that everyone was focused on achieving the goal, and they understood what I wanted to accomplish. They were very effective and professional. Each one had their own responsibility.”

- Build a team that comprises technical, solid, and capable staff and develop a good working relationship with them; they will provide content on the issues addressed, as well as the speeches or interventions to be made. “What I always tell young women is that they must develop excellent relationships with the technical staff (in government). There is a reason they are called ‘technical experts.’ They are the only people who stay in government service. Ministers come and go, governments come and go. The technical staff are the ones who carry the historical knowledge”.
- Exercise positive and horizontal leadership, recognizing the team’s work and achievements. This is important regardless of one’s individuality and personal style of working in/managing teams.

Reaching leadership and power positions within political organizations, being elected to public office, or becoming a government official is the ultimate goal for the vast majority of women who enter politics, and it requires a lot of work, dedication, and perseverance. This is evident in an interviewee’s statement that “My friends have asked me, ‘When are you going to leave this?’ And I always respond that I’m still here because I believe we can do things better. Certainly, in my country, we can do things better, even as a region. And that means closing the gender gap, having more women in politics, more committed women who understand the agenda, who respect the sacrifices that have been made in the past, women who understand that politics is truly a career, and who can pass the baton to a new generation of women leaders who will continue to advance the cause. I stay for these reasons and because I really want to remain part of a process that brings good results to the largest number of people in my country.”

Building a political career is not just about holding positions. To remain in politics, it is important to build a political career, not just pass through. It is necessary to be aware and clear that when achieving a goal in a political career, such as holding a position of power within the party or being elected to public office, a new phase begins—new challenges, new disputes. For the women interviewed, this subsequent challenge, that is, staying in politics, requires reinforcing certain strategies mentioned previously, as well as defining new strategies related to the goal of remaining and building a political career. We must break the sexist pattern in which men develop political careers while women “just pass through politics.”

Establishing alliances is a requirement for staying in politics, and it must be implemented from day one. An interviewee shares, “My long participation in politics within the Congress of the Republic and my continued presence today— as far as I know, I am the woman who has spent the most time in Congress—has to do with the fact that I never proposed a law on my own; I always accompanied it with the representative sector of that initiative.”

Within the framework of alliances, sisterhood leadership is a useful strategy for surviving in politics. The CIM has established that the fight for equality requires solidarity among women in leadership positions, understanding this as sisterhood leadership, which implies: i) a political arrangement among all women, around common goals and concrete agendas for gender equality, to enhance their empowerment and influence in the world, and ii) an ethical responsibility of women in leadership positions.

Interviewees shared her own insights on this strategy: “Sisterhood leadership is what allowed me to survive in politics; it’s a very hostile space. I formed alliances with other women within the legislative body and with feminist collectives from civil society. That important support from women who backed my decisions was crucial, and it allows you to survive in very difficult situations”. “It’s also important to approach women who think differently—not necessarily because of personal stances but because they remain heavily influenced by patriarchal leaderships. Approaching them so they can listen to you is also part of sisterhood leadership. And, of course, it’s essential to also approach men and present your perspectives to them.” “There are more and more Indigenous women in leadership roles within Indigenous organizations and holding positions in institutional politics, and this is the result of the work we have been doing to achieve equality in politics.”

Rebuilding and being resilient, that is, continuing to envision the future despite great challenges, is key. It also involves seeking new tools, knowledge, and elements to continue, but in a more resolute and strategic way. Being accessible, maintaining contact and connections with voters, party bases, and supporters is essential because, above all, the goal of staying in politics is to be the voice of people in decision-making spaces. “I believe I have worked hard to remain accessible. I always remind myself that I am a servant of the people, and the people are not serving me—I am a servant of the people,” shared one interviewee.

3.4 Strategies for effective decision-making

When holding public office, decision-making on various topics, actions, public policies, and hiring of personnel, among others, is one of the main responsibilities of an elected representative or public official. The quality of their work is largely evaluated based on the decisions they make or fail to make. However, for women, the challenge is even greater, as the decision-making space is traditionally male-dominated, both in its members and its dynamics. To ensure effective decision-making in this context, the interviewees shared some of the strategies they use:

Making informed and well-analyzed decisions

- Make evidence-based decisions that they are informed by accurate, and up-to-date information. “The decisions we make affect people’s lives. We must be very careful not to make them randomly, without the necessary foundation and relevant information to help us decide. This way, when you make a decision, you know it is based on facts, evidence, and the right principles: people will see that you’re doing it for the right reason.”
- Receive inputs, opinions, information, needs, and demands from different sectors of the population, Indigenous communities, or marginalized populations. You cannot simply listen to one person or one sector.
- Seek advice, analyze the information with your team or specialists in the field, and, above all, verify that you are not dealing with *fake news*.

Making politically sound decisions means distinguishing between what you wish would happen and what can reasonably be expected to happen

- Align decisions with the political project presented to voters, that is, essentially the three or four key topics or goals from the campaign that become the political agenda during your term. This is decision-making based on evidence and the needs of the community you represent.
- Ensure that (depending on the political context) the agenda should be regularly reviewed, prioritizing issues based on the current situation, the most sensitive topics that will take more time, and those that require a party stance and will need dialogue and consensus.
- Consider the political impact of decisions, which means objectively looking at possible scenarios and making decisions that come as close as possible to or achieve the desired impact. “You make decisions considering that impact, not based on whether it will please everyone, because in politics you can never please everyone.”

Being aware and preparing for decision-making in a male-dominated environment:

- Be prepared to face questioning, as well as to defend and stand by your decisions when they are not endorsed or are challenged. **Courage is essential when making decisions in a male-dominated environment**, where the majority are men. “I remember speaking with a senior member of Parliament, and he said: *Do you know what your problem is? Women keep seeking validation from their male counterparts. Why do you even care what*

I think about you solidifying your political leadership? Do you think we (men) would ever come to you for that?"

- **Equip yourself with the tools and self-confidence to fight against stereotypes and distrust that exist in political environments and society in general regarding women's decision-making abilities is crucial.** "There's a huge responsibility; it's very delicate, like holding a piece of glass. That's how I felt, and I would tell myself, 'If I make the wrong decision, they will say, *see, that's the consequence of putting a woman in that position*'" "You know you will be judged, and in the face of that, you need a lot of courage". "You might even make decisions that your electorate considers wrong, but never stop deciding because I believe conveying the idea that you don't make decisions is worse."

3.5 Strategies for managing political crises

For the interviewees, crises are inherent to regular political activity. There are also key moments, for example, during a crisis, when one cannot always remain neutral in politics. Therefore, it is important for women to be prepared for crisis management, to have the necessary tools, and, much like in chess, to view crises not just as a single move or specific situation but to see the entire board, the broader context and the various scenarios. "Managing a crisis is not something one knows how to do naturally; it requires training. In today's world, crisis management is an indispensable skill because we live in a world of constant crises."

Additionally, it is essential to recognize that every crisis has two dimensions: communication and operational management, and one must be prepared to lead both. Below are some of the main strategies used by women for crisis management:

Analyzing the Situation and Creating a Coordinated Plan with Other Actors/Institutions:

- **Analyze and assess the situation**, as the first step. This requires having the most updated, accurate, and complete information, directly from the source rather than through intermediaries.
- **Understand that there are different types of crises:** national, city-level, legislative, political crises, or crises related to specific aspects of governance. "Crises can have different natures and require different solutions. A political crisis is not the same as a climate crisis."

- **Analyze possible scenarios, alliances, and ways out of the crisis**, as well as identify the actors involved and their interests, and develop a strategy (depending on the role you play). “When you have a crisis that you know will last long, you must learn how to manage your energy. If you give everything at the beginning, you’ll have nothing left later on. It’s different in a short-term crisis.”
- **Evaluate whether the crisis will be long or short-term**, as this will determine the type of planning required.
- **Have a good team that is used to crises**, that doesn’t panic and stays calm. Create a crisis committee responsible for both communication and the actual crisis management.
- **Be clear on the objectives of each meeting you attend, particularly in a crisis involving political actors**. “You always need to be clear about the goal of a crisis management meeting. If the objective is to vent and make catharsis, we already know that we won’t resolve anything in that meeting. After venting, we can agree that the next meeting will be for proposals”.

Responding/Positioning during a Crisis or Crisis Situation

- **Avoid hasty or “hot” reactions**, as many mistakes are made by reacting too quickly, without analyzing all the elements of the crisis mentioned earlier.
- **Step forward and be present, even if it’s just to give basic or minimal responses, once the necessary actions from the first point have been taken**. Even if you don’t have all the answers, it’s important to show that something is being done. “No matter how difficult it is, you have to face it. When you are a leader, people expect answers, so you can’t remain silent or inactive. For a leader, silence is not an option. Absence is not an option. “You can never be neutral; you must take a position. We listened to what party members thought, what the public was saying, and what their main concerns were, though we tried to stay aligned in our approach to the crisis.” “You need to know beforehand what structures you have in place to respond to crises; what levels of trust and relevance exist regarding crisis management. You bear a significant part of the responsibility for managing the crisis because it directly impacts you.”
- Adopt a listening position in meetings with people affected by the crisis, it’s important to show that you have the support of the people during a crisis. “In crises, I reaffirm my connection with the people. We went through a critical parliamentary period that ended with the closure of Congress, but the people supported it. With this, I’m not saying that the public’s position is *sacred*—some politicians promise anything just to please the people.”

- Never lie to the public because, sooner or later, the truth comes out. It's important to speak the truth but always be proactive in proposing solutions or ways forward. "It's important to speak to people rationally, explain the problem with data, present a concrete plan to overcome the crisis, with a timeline, actions, and the ability to review the schedule with the public. Definitely, don't lie. They might not smile at you in meetings, but they won't throw stones at you either".

Developing Skills for Dialogue, Negotiation, and Emotional Intelligence

- Develop emotional intelligence skills to deal with attacks or pressure situations during a crisis.
- Use emotional intelligence skills to harness calmness in the midst of crisis, empathy, and to enhance your ability to recognize and accept when a mistake has been made.
- Maintain composure throughout the process to lead the team, the media, and the entire crisis management process. "And there's no need to yell, attack, or discredit others. You just need to stand firm in your convictions, and you can still be empathetic and sit at the table to dialogue for as long as necessary."

Understanding Crisis as an Opportunity for Negotiation and Power Dynamics

- Pay attention to the diverse voices in a dialogue and search for consensus with the different groups of people affected and actors involved in both the crisis and its resolution. "You always need to understand where crises originate and identify the bridges that need to be built. You have to assess whether you have the possibility to facilitate or mediate. Active listening is essential during a crisis".
- Use crises as opportunities to hone your skills and specialize in listening, dialogue, and crisis management.
- Crises can also be moments when power dynamics come into play, so it is important to view crises as opportunities to build leadership, position certain issues, and achieve political negotiations and consensus. "Crises are opportunities for political negotiation in favor of issues that normally wouldn't get through but, in a moment of crisis, may have a chance. Building bridges with affected sectors, reaching out to those who are upset. In a crisis, we passed the public access to information law and the nomination commissions law."

Learning from Crises

- Engage in personal reflection and team discussions post-crisis about the management and outcomes of the crisis. Analyze mistakes, what was missing, what wasn't done well or on time; all these elements are fundamental for drawing lessons from the crises experienced.
- Reflect on crises to help redefine priorities and remind us of what is truly important. "After the crisis, there should be space for catharsis and subsequent reflection to extract the lessons learned".

3.6 Strategies for positioning oneself in the media and social networks

Political communication is key in today's politics. This is why it is a crucial skill that women in politics must develop. It involves handling the media, social networks, knowing how to structure and deliver a speech, giving a good interview, and responding with an intelligent counteroffensive, among other things. Media support is indispensable in politics. "You need the support of the media, otherwise, they can destroy you. What keeps a person in office is their popularity, and that popularity is made up of several pillars. A key pillar is the media."

The interviewees emphasize that it is important to develop some or all of these skills before running for office. They share strategies they have used to position themselves in the media and social networks, which are often male-dominated spaces as well.

Knowing how to communicate is key in politics, a skill that, like any other, can be learned.

- **Develop the ability to communicate clearly**, learn to speak in front of a camera, or in front of a journalist during an interview, on the radio, or while making a video. "It's something that can be learned. I think this is one of the biggest challenges for women, especially for my generation, because we were taught to stay quiet, that we didn't have the right to our own voice, and were taught to obey. These are lessons that undermine our leadership. Training that encourages the ability to speak, to practice public speaking, is very important now that there are studies showing that women in parliaments speak less. We need to learn from school that our voice has value". "You need to prepare long before becoming a candidate and practice the different forms of political communication, which is a crucial skill. You can't start this training when you become a candidate; you must learn to speak just as you learn to write and read, well before entering the political frontline".

- Learn to build narratives around the issues or situations you address. It's not just about presenting a fact or sharing data – it's important to build a narrative that's more compelling and tells a story. "Creating a narrative and handling the media is a very important part of holding office. You must take advantage of every media space to position a clear narrative because the media gives you power".

The Importance of Positioning Yourself in the Media and Defining a Strategy to Achieve It

- Understand first the importance of being in the media to positioning ourselves as political leaders. "I believe women are less bold in communication than men, and we need to break this paradigm and be more present in the media. And now, with social media, even more so. I had very little presence on social media, but I've seen how other young women have managed to position themselves well on these platforms, and it's worked out for them. I think knowing how to position yourself can yield very good results, and not using these platforms can lead to poor results."
- Create a communication plan that addresses the priority issues of your agenda. "I had very clear goals for my term, and my media agenda adapted to those goals. I worked with my team to build narratives to position these issues in the media. I decided that for the first two years, I would focus on certain topics, and in the next two years, I would introduce different issues".
- Specialize in certain topics that have public impact and are of interest to the media. "What I did was prepare myself, specialize in certain areas that have public impact and are of interest to both the public and the media. This made the media approach me more and more. I began building stronger relationships with the media by providing them with privileged, important information, which helped me gain visibility. I didn't have money, so I had to make myself known through other means. Strategic alliances with the media and social media are very important because people see, listen, approve, get involved, and support."
- Define the key messages and topics you want to position yourself in or on which you are an expert, as well as topics no one else is discussing but are of interest. "You need to be clear about your topics—what you can be sought out for, what you can focus on so that people know you are a reference on those issues." However, you shouldn't entirely neglect other topics. "I specialized in women's rights, which has an advantage because the media seeks you out when this topic comes up. But it also has a disadvantage, as you get pigeonholed into that topic, and they only reach out to you for that".

- Address topics that will capture media interest to ensure you are present in the media debate. “My advisor told me I needed to engage in the budget debate. I couldn’t just address Indigenous issues, which was my area of expertise. That’s the challenge: you need to get involved in these topics because it’s the only way to access the media.” “Placing issues that are relevant to the current situation works. For example, I chaired the Gender Equality Commission, and we raised the issue of domestic violence involving a congressman, and we received more media attention”.
- Understand that the media relationship is a reciprocal one; the media will cover those who can provide them with relevant information. “They give you coverage, but you provide them with the news. There has to be that reciprocity.”
- Create spaces, platforms and coalitions on specific topics to gain visibility and attracting media attention. “The media almost always sought out men, not women. But in the last term, we managed to form the Women and Gender Equality Commission, and we gained more media presence, which is a crucial factor.”
- Develop meetings or activities with journalists or media directors, whether local or national, to establish contacts and relationships.
- Optimize multiple forms of media. In today’s times, creativity is key to reaching different audiences, and making regular posts (videos, tweets, etc.) on social media is important to create a reference point of information for both the media and the general public.

Having a Communication Person or Team, If Possible

- Have someone in charge or a specialized media team, if possible, that can design a strategy, provide guidance, monitor progress, and handle the actions or activities related to the defined strategy. This team should structure your key messages and figure out how to position them on social media. This role is often that of a *community manager*, who could even be a volunteer carrying out this task. “We always have a team that guides us, tracks progress, and then we jointly decide what is strategic and what is a priority.”
- Consider delegating the Communications/PR role to others to avoid directly facing the attacks that can occur on social media and their effects. “I was heavily attacked on social media when I was a candidate, and after that, I preferred to externalize the management of my social media accounts. Even though I’ve taken several courses on the subject, I still feel that social media intoxicates me, and it’s unclear how they politically impact”.

- Have a team with people specialized in dealing with the media at the national level, bearing in mind that each level of government has its specificities regarding media access. “The relationship with the media at the national level is tougher. At the local level, in regional and municipal areas, you know the journalists, and they know you better—they know what you do and understand your work and limits. This makes it easier. In the House of Representatives, it’s more challenging. It’s important to have specialized people who know the key journalists in the main media outlets so you can establish personal relationships with them.”
- Obtain support from someone who understands how social media platforms work, how to position yourself, and what kind of messages to convey. This strategy is especially advisable if you lack experience with social media. “My communication team is one of the largest; communicating your government actions is very important. Although you shouldn’t publicize everything, there needs to be a strategy. The role of social media has changed a lot, and I’ve adapted. Today, we have a very strong presence on social media”.

Always Being Available for the Media

- Make yourself available for the media at all (or at least most) times, since this is crucial to positioning yourself and becoming a point of reference. “Being available for the media is a rule. It doesn’t matter what day it is or what time it is, I’m there for them.”
- Say no (to the media) if you don’t know the topic. Speaking about something you are not familiar with can lead to a loss of credibility with the media. “In the CIM/OAS Course for Electoral Candidates, they told us to be clear about our agenda, but we don’t need to know everything—that took a lot of pressure off me.” “I had colleagues who wanted to talk about everything, to always be out there talking about daisies, mangos, and chayotes, but you can’t do that because you lose credibility with the media. Don’t talk about what you don’t know because it can be worse.”
- Be mindful of the words, phrases, and ‘off the record’ comments you use, as they can be misinterpreted or used differently. “It’s important to remember that you are never truly ‘off the record’ with a journalist. That doesn’t exist”. “Journalists are not your friends. You should never let your guard down in this regard, but you also shouldn’t be afraid of them”.

Media and Public Opinion Continue to Judge Female Politicians by Their Appearance, Physical Traits, and Clothing Choices. It is necessary to challenge these stereotypes, which harm women's leadership and democracy.

- Develop a personal and communication strategy that includes guidelines on countering sexist media coverage. This is important in our current context where the image, physical appearance, and aesthetics of women are still used as a sexist tool by the media when covering female politicians. "One day, when I was a governor, I cut my hair, and it made all the front pages of the newspapers. I asked my team, 'What's the news here? Why are they exposing me like this? How does this affect my political role? Why do they think they can talk about my body, my clothes, and my hairstyle?' These things are deeply ingrained and normalized, but they are completely unacceptable". "I laugh at the attacks now. At first, it affected me, but it's important to learn how to handle these situations with the media and social networks. I no longer let it affect me because I've learned that behind it is a deeply rooted, violent form of sexism that you shouldn't give any advantage to".

3.7 Strategies to Prevent and Address Discrimination and Violence Against Women in Politics

Political violence and harassment are situations that women in politics constantly face, putting their physical and emotional integrity at risk. It is one of the main reasons women abandon politics. Violence against women in politics is the result of a sexist political system where a woman's participation in politics is seen as transgressing the established norm that politics and the public sphere belong to men. In the words of one interviewee, "That is the most painful thing. In 2017, I was physically assaulted by another candidate, I've been harassed on social media, and now, as vice president of the current board of Congress, but from an opposition party, I've faced reprisals".

For women belonging to groups traditionally excluded from politics, it can be even more challenging: "Indigenous women do not have significant representation in decision-making positions, and simply being there sends a very positive message to the people. Outwardly, it's encouraging, but internally it's much more challenging to confront power dynamics, dispute the narrative, and face racism and discrimination, especially in the media and on social media. It's also due to our agenda, because we raise issues that ignite public debate, for example, when we talk about the internal armed conflict."

Several countries in the region have recently adopted legislation to prevent, eradicate, and punish political violence and harassment against women. However, effective implementation and the protection of women, even in countries with such legislation,

remain a challenge. As the interviewees express, they themselves have had to develop strategies to confront these attacks. The Inter-American Model Law to prevent, punish, and eradicate violence against women in political life (CEVI, 2017) and the Model Protocol for Political Parties on the same subject (CIM, 2019) have been useful tools for advancing in this area.

It's not part of the political game; it's violence: denaturalizing political violence and harassment and learning to recognize it when it occurs

- **Empower yourself and learn about political violence and harassment in its various forms. This is crucial for any woman in politics, including those just starting out in politics.** “Your voice, your decisions, even as a Governor, were somehow given less weight. In many cases, they were distorted or not respected. I made decisions that were overturned at lower levels. I put together a list with a certain consensus, and it was changed along the way. I've faced a lot of political violence. The big difference today is that, first of all, it has a name. It's a problem because it's been named. Back then, I was just seen as an angry colleague. It goes back to what becomes normalized. Today, it's a topic of discussion within political parties.” “Being able to identify violence is fundamental, as it happens to everyone and seems natural, making it hard to recognize. Many women are driven away by this. It's one of the reasons why women don't return to politics. They leave feeling uncomfortable without knowing why. In my experience, it's because of violence in all its forms”. “I stopped attending receptions hosted by Embassies because several ministers would have a couple of drinks and harass the women. This happened to me, and it was worse for younger women. Many times, I regret it because staying away from those spaces meant losing key allies for my issues, such as the Ambassadors of certain countries. It's necessary to act against the sexual harassment exerted by male politicians, which many of them still see as normal.” “What I saw is that leaderships don't want to bear the cost of a sexual harassment complaint against their members. Even when women are determined to report, institutional, formal, and informal mechanisms prevent it. That's very serious”.
- Know the mechanisms for reporting and strategies to respond to this violence, whether within political parties, in the media, or through electoral bodies, as well as the legal frameworks that can be activated in the institutions where the violence occurs. “I was harassed many times, even as recently as 2018, with comments like ‘what nice legs,’ ‘you look great,’ ‘how well you've kept yourself,’ or ‘shall we go out together?’ I never knew how to deal with it. I felt emotionally distressed, which made it harder to know how to respond. I stayed silent, and that was a mistake. I didn't have strategies to confront the harassment, but you need to have them.” “No matter how strong I felt, stubbornly focused on my issues and negotiations to achieve my goals, I wasn't

prepared for those attacks or harassment. I'll never forget the legislator who said, 'you're looking hot.' He thought he was being funny, but I felt awful and didn't have the words to respond. I wasn't prepared for something like that, and I didn't expect those kinds of aggressions. I think it's very important to have strategies to deal with them".

Taking Action Against Political Violence and Harassment: Reporting to the Authorities and Bringing the Issue to Public Opinion to Seek Social Sanction

- **Report this violence to the relevant authorities in each country and context.** Therefore, it's important to be aware of the available mechanisms for filing complaints, especially when there are perceived risks. "I've reported instances where I felt a certain level of risk, like when pictures of my children were circulated, because they know that is a very vulnerable area for women".
- Publicly report political violence through the media or other public spaces; this not only serves to alert others about the violence or harassment but also raises awareness of the issue and encourages public debate. Public denunciation can be effective if it leads to social condemnation of the perpetrator(s). "When the party saw that I was voting differently, they got angry and threw my things in the trash. For me, it was a very strong moment, and I didn't know how to react. My first instinct was to do nothing and act as if it hadn't happened. Two people told me to report it. One was my father, who said I couldn't show weakness and that if I stayed silent, they would do it again. The second was a female journalist who saw what happened and called me that night, saying that if I didn't report it, they'd continue doing it, and it would send a message that it could happen to any woman. I reported it to the board, on social media, and through the media. I held a press conference, not just to ensure it wouldn't happen to me again, but so it wouldn't happen to anyone else. And the party faced harsh backlash on social media, receiving public criticism. Several opinion pieces backed me up, and women's organizations also supported me. I think this is something many women experience, and most of the time, we stay silent. I think it's important to say we cannot remain silent—we must speak up." "It's important to be strong and not internalize the insults and degrading images used against you. Developing a communication strategy is key; don't respond to each message individually, but instead, create a broader strategy for how to address the attacks. "In ideological debates, we can argue fiercely, but we must not engage in personal attacks from a misogynistic standpoint. I live by one principle: I don't insult anyone, and I don't allow anyone to insult me. On social media, I block. If it's serious, I report it". "When I became a Minister, I was hit with a wave of attacks and insults, many of them racist—it was terrible. I told myself, let them tire themselves out, I'll ignore them. But when they're exhausted, I'll give them a global response. I didn't reply to anyone for a while. I'd tell young women that in the face of hatred, discrediting,

misogyny, and all the abuses they might face, to ignore it, but remember it. Because there will come a moment when you can give an intelligent response. I kept a record of all the criticisms and insults published against me. And when the time was right, I worked with my advisors to write a series of articles. We distributed them and sent them to all the embassies, the President of Congress, the President, and the Vice President. But if there's a threat to your physical safety, report it immediately—be very careful with that”.

- **Utilize the blocking and reporting mechanisms on social media platforms.** It is also beneficial to turn to digital feminists for support and accompaniment. “Before I joined the Assembly, I had a previous campaign where I opened my Facebook. I applied filters and worked with a researcher. Words like ‘witch,’ ‘crazy,’ and ‘old’ were censored because it’s common for them to use ‘old’ to discredit us. There are also words related to sexuality like ‘slut’ and ‘whore,’ which I also censored”. “You have to report the attacks on platforms, especially when they target your family. There were situations I reported because I perceived a lot of risk, like when my address was circulated. As for insults, I’ve come to understand that it’s impossible to stop them completely without a societal transformation. So, we need to fight for anti-violence laws and their enforcement.” “I respond with statements, which is more relaxed. I get many attacks and insults, especially on social media—it happens most often there. I respond with official statements or positively, highlighting our government actions and what we’re doing.”
- Consider first the context and who the perpetrator is, when deciding whether to react to an attack. It is different if it happens in physical spaces with people you interact with daily, versus anonymous attacks on social media. “You need the ability to avoid being provoked at all times, but also to respond appropriately to attacks. I don’t believe we should always ignore them or pretend we’re not listening. There are limits that shouldn’t be crossed. When a man attacks a woman and crosses the line from political debate to personal attack—which often happens—it’s necessary to respond to that discrediting”.
- Use your position to lead actions against political harassment of women. “As President of the Women’s Commission in Congress, I took on a spokesperson role, positioning myself, rejecting the attacks, and even issuing recommendations to the Executive. In parliament, we don’t even have a protocol for addressing and sanctioning political harassment. There’s only a committee that can sanction members of parliament, but it doesn’t work because it’s made up of parliamentarians. You can’t be judge and jury at the same time.”
- Report through women’s networks, human rights groups, or collectives that can support and amplify your complaint. Reaching out to women’s organizations that work

on political violence or related issues is always a valid and important route. “In my country, there’s a political violence observatory led by a very prominent feminist. When I was attacked, I called her, and it was a super safe space for me—they really helped me and guided me *on what to do*”. “I owe a lot to women’s collectives that supported me when I was in high-profile positions, where I was heavily exposed and faced a lot of political harassment. So I would notify them, and feminist collectives would quickly release statements, which helped reduce the harassment. Even the Ombudsperson’s office intervened.”

Forming Alliances with Other Women for Support and Strength During Attacks

- Create groups comprising female politicians across various institutions who have experienced political violence and harassment, with a view to sharing experiences and offering support to one another. “This has been difficult, particularly for me, as I now serve as a member of the opposition in the National Assembly and House of Representatives. There are only two female representatives, and my colleague simply refuses to attend the National Assembly due to the very personal attacks she’s faced. She doesn’t show up, and that’s been tough and painful. When I see women being attacked, I speak out because I believe we cannot accept that as normal or acceptable.”
- Build networks of solidarity and support, regardless of political party or ideology. “The strategy is also to find allies to support each other and push back against harassment together, which has given us good results”.

Developing an Intelligent Counteroffensive When Responding to Attacks

- Respond within the context of ideas and political debate. “Exercising a woman’s mandate requires persistence, focus on what you want and represent, and the ability not to be provoked at all times, while also being able to respond appropriately.”
- Use respectful language, avoiding lowering yourself to the attackers’ level, whether responding verbally or in writing.
- Don’t fall into the trap of being provoked and responding to each attack individually.
- Remain strong in the face of attacks and avoid internalizing insults, images, or other abuses.

Promoting the Approval of Relevant Legislation and Ensuring Its Effective Implementation

- Form alliances with other women, both from your party and across the political spectrum, are key to promoting relevant legislation or ensuring its effective implementation. “If all women united to stop personalized attacks, it would be a big step because, in the end, we all suffer from them”.
- Call upon political parties and state institutions put in place regulations to prevent, eradicate, and sanction violence against women, as much of the political violence occurs within these organizations.
- Having proper regulations is as important as ensuring that authorities have the resources and capacity to enforce them. “When there are protocols to address this kind of violence, authorities often don’t know what to do”. “I was physically attacked and went to the police. I waited for three hours because they didn’t know how to handle it, and because the person who attacked me held an important, well-known position, so they were afraid”.
- Advocate for justice institutions, electoral bodies, political parties, civil society organizations, and the government to provide training for women to ensure they have access to justice in cases of political violence. “The first step is training women to recognize violence, the second is teaching them how to report it. Many women don’t know where to go or how to report. Providing those tools and training is fundamental—teaching what to do when facing violence and how to build support networks.”
- Harness the support of women’s groups or organizations to build pressure for the approval or implementation of these laws.

You Don’t Always Have to Respond to Attacks: For Some Women, Ignoring Political Violence and Harassment is the Strategy

- **Ignore political attacks or harassment in certain cases or situations.** Sometimes the best strategy is to shift the focus to more important matters and demonstrate seriousness. “When they made comments like that to me, I would change the subject and ask them about initiatives to make it clear that I was there to discuss serious issues.”
- **Refrain from responding to attacks, not giving them importance, and not taking them personally,** as a way of protecting yourself. “On social media, someone wrote, ‘How

is she going to write the Constitution if she's blind?' I decided not to say anything and waited to see what would happen. Within an hour, the post was flooded with comments from people telling that person how wrong it was to say such a thing. I didn't need to say a word. People were absolutely convinced that blindness wasn't an obstacle and that my preparation and the issues I addressed were more than valid for me to be an electoral candidate".

3.8 Strategies for Managing Emotions

The interviewees agree that politics is a more hostile environment for women. It is a male-dominated space where various forms of violence and political harassment are often experienced, directly affecting the emotions of the women who are victims of these situations. Additionally, the job involves frustrations, anger, moments of tension, and more. All of this can be emotionally exhausting and have a negative impact on family life, health, and especially on work performance and effectiveness. As one young leader put it, "I wish I had known beforehand that I would be entering spaces of conflict, aggressive spaces, where I wouldn't be welcomed or wanted, and that I would need tools to mentally prepare for these things."

At the same time, politics has an emotional component: "Politics is a rational activity that demands rationality at all times to achieve your goals. But it is also full of emotions; without them, you can't reach those goals." While time, experience, and empowerment help in managing emotions and becoming aware of the responsibility of holding public office, the interviewees share some strategies they use for emotional management.

Politics is competitive; no one said otherwise

- Acquire the tools of emotional control and regulation. Politics is tough, and even more so for women, so building your self-management toolkit is essential. "You have to develop thick skin or, better yet, armor. You need to toughen up and coat yourself in oil so that the criticisms slide off. We can't fall into the role of victims. If you face serious political harassment, you must report it. And if you hold a position of authority, use it every day." "In the end, you learn that the legislative floor is a stage performance, so you have to be very prudent and self-controlled. You can't let your inner Tasmanian Devil come out."

Having Trustworthy Groups or Individuals for Support Outside of Political Spaces

- Have support systems outside of politics – friendships, family, and close individuals you can talk to, cry with, and vent to. "At first, it was very hard for me personally, in

terms of self-esteem, security, and confidence, issues that all women in politics face. The insecurity comes because it's a male-dominated space where you feel like you don't belong, shouldn't speak, ask for things, or make decisions. And they make you feel that way, as if it's their space and you're taking it from them. Having a support group to guide you helps a lot because everything feels distorted. You speak, and everyone tells you it's not right, and you even start to question yourself." "You need to find a safe space to cry. If you want to cry, just do it in the shower, in bed. Call two or three friends and say, 'Listen, I just want to cry, let it all out.' Because crying, I think, is healthy. It doesn't just clear your vision but also your emotions. You'll have disappointments, of course, and sometimes it's not any particular problem—it's just that you're exhausted to the bone".

- Ensure that your support groups or individuals are trustworthy, providing a safe space, as they become the network that holds you up during the toughest times.

Having a Group of Allies and Mentors within Political Spaces

- Have a group of allies and mentors who can advise and support you on political matters. "It really helped me to have groups of friends and political allies who encouraged me, helped me, and listened to me during the hardest times".
- Connect with groups of women or female mentors who have held similar positions and experienced similar situations are very helpful because they understand and have gone through the same emotions. "I had a group of thirty-five advisors in a chat, a group of thirty-five women who accompanied me throughout my four years in Congress. That's the role I gave them: advisors. I didn't work alone; I had the chat. I'd consult them, or they'd give me comments. If I was attacked, I didn't care—they helped me, sent me documents, information, they supported me. We'd meet in person once a month to analyze and exchange ideas. For example, we made lists of regressive laws, which we later publicized. We also opened a space for women officials, which was never public, to advance women's rights in the state. It didn't last long, but it was very important."

Staying Calm in the Face of Adversaries

- Discern when and where it is safe and appropriate to express different emotions. Before showing weakness or breaking down in public—whether in front of other politicians, journalists, or others—leave the space and find a private place to vent, cry, or scream. "My position has always been that perception becomes reality in politics, so I've had to dig very deep sometimes to avoid reacting in public when I'm attacked or when I feel like I can't keep control or composure in dealing with a particular situation. I go home

and vent. Sometimes, I just cry because it's very different for men than it is for women".

Managing Stress and Emotions

- Manage stress through exercise, meditation, relaxation, spirituality, or through whatever other practices that help you personally to release emotions and tension. "The Greeks said that those who cannot govern themselves cannot govern others. So, I believe that to seek positions of power where you will make decisions that impact many lives, you must work a lot on yourself." "Over time, I've learned that there are other things you also need to work on, like managing stress, exercising, eating well, and trying to find moments of peace. These are basic things we often forget, and it's important to build those habits to be well with yourself".
- Seek the help of a professional through psychological therapy is another way to work through emotions.
- Connect with ancestral spirituality, Mother Earth, or nature is a way to manage emotions and energies. This strategy particularly resonates with Indigenous women. "I always recommend connecting with Mayan spirituality and Mother Earth. When we are connected, emotions are controlled, and we act with more intelligence and strength."

3.9 Strategies to Reconcile a Political Career with Private Life

One of the most complex challenges for women entering politics is balancing politics with family life. The interviewees agree that it is not easy for women to find a balance between family responsibilities and a political career. In the world of politics, reconciling these roles can be difficult due to political dynamics and activities, last-minute events, constant calls and messages, long hours, weekend activities, and intense electoral campaigns.

The excessive time and workload involved in caring for the family and home, as well as the so-called "mental load," primarily fall on women. This is a significant obstacle to the development of their political careers and conversely affords many advantages to men. For a man, it is much easier because, socially, they are not responsible for family tasks, allowing their availability and time to be almost entirely dedicated to politics, whereas this is not the case for women, putting them at a clear disadvantage.

As one interviewee said, "I think we live in a time—I at least experienced this—where women's participation in politics was almost a total sacrifice, like entering public life meant completely detaching from your personal life and existence. Competing with men means this: men don't have families; they have women who take care of their families.

Men have it all, and this is one of the major obstacles for women in politics.” Another interviewee with a long political career said, “I started my participation in 1997, in a conservative political context, and it was as if they were telling us: if you want to do politics, go ahead, but you don’t have the right to be a wife, you don’t have the right to be a mother, because if not, go take care of your children. Or they would ask, ‘Who is taking care of your children?’ But they never asked these questions to the men in the room. It’s the refusal to accept that women have the right to live their lives fully, to be wives, mothers, but also to do politics and work. And I think it’s still like that today.”

In this situation, many women must dedicate more and more time to politics, often at the expense of time with their family, in order to advance in their political careers. While this can have significant positive consequences for one’s political career, it is not what the women leaders interviewed recommend: “I tried to balance both, but it was very difficult. I tried to spend time with my family, at least some weekends, but it was tough. I had to travel to different parts of the country, party meetings were held on weekends, and my oversight work had to be done when there were no meetings in Congress. But it’s important to know that women have the right to have a family and to pursue a political career. I believe it’s a mistake to give yourself completely to politics and neglect your family, because that’s where you recharge, where you get support and strength to keep going.”

For women, due to sexism, the “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” adage often applies, especially when it comes to family and relationships. One leader remarked: “During the campaign, not having children was actually a problem—it was something people criticized. Some of my fellow Indigenous citizens said, *‘But she’s so young, she doesn’t even have a family’*”.

Below are some strategies that women use to, as much as possible, reconcile their political careers with family responsibilities. As one interviewee pointed out: “I did the best I could at the time, and I’m not sure if I’ve come to terms with that, but I did it. And I encourage women, particularly those who are mothers or have caregiving responsibilities, not to be too hard on themselves. The reason men don’t have these problems is because, at a societal level, women have always been raised to be caregivers. And there’s no expectation that men have to do what we do.”

Organizing Life, the Day, the Week Around Different Roles

- Separate family and political spaces and learn to prioritize what’s truly important in each one. “When I was a minister and deputy, I didn’t handle Ministry or Deputy-related matters on Saturdays and Sundays. Those days were for my family. However, from

Monday to Friday, my family didn't exist because I was fully immersed in work". "When I go home, I don't read anything related to government. I'm on my phone, watch TV, laugh, and don't do any work until the next day. On weekends, I try to spend at least one day at home to clean, do laundry, and go shopping—just like everyone else. I'm human, so I've done my best to manage my political and domestic life."

- Use a schedule and learn to say "no"; this is especially important because political hours can be long or irregular.
- Rely on a team that allows you to delegate tasks, manage the schedule, and handle certain matters is essential.
- Plan family or couple time in advance, and unless a major crisis arises, these times should be respected.
- Due to Gender Roles, Having a Partner Who Supports a Woman's Political Career is Crucial When Sharing a Project (And This Doesn't Happen Often)
- Be mindful of the added stress and negative effects of an unsupportive partner. It's common for women in high political positions to be divorced or single, unlike men. "My partner couldn't handle the attacks the press and the more fundamentalist public opinion subjected me to. His friends mocked me at the bar. In the end, he left me for another woman who called him *my king*". "I was a party official, and when I'd get home at ten at night, he'd say those weren't hours for a married woman to be out. By the time I became a deputy, I had already ended that relationship with a partner who controlled me. That helped me grow politically."
- Seek a partner who supports a woman's political career. "My partner is someone who strongly believes in equality. When I told him about the possibility of entering politics, he didn't see it as a problem and was aware that if I took on a role, he would have to take care of our young children. In this country, that's like winning the lottery".

Identifying Ways to Redistribute Family and Household Responsibilities

- Have a support network—whether it be other family members or trusted individuals—for childcare or household tasks. Politics demands a great deal of time and dedication, so such network proves to be crucial. "I have five sisters and my mother. They would take turns coming to the house, and sometimes my daughters would stay with an aunt. So, it was always manageable because I have a very, very strong support network."

- Divide responsibilities with your spouse or partner, if possible. This can be one of the biggest challenges for many women.

Developing Strategies to Manage Guilt

- Learn how to manage guilt and any feelings of resentment that may arise from neglecting or not attending to your children or partner. “I was an absent mother, and my kids were asking for attention. I remember one time, my son said to me, ‘You know, Aunt Rose takes us to school, picks us up, takes us to games. She does everything. I think we should start calling her mom and call you Aunt Joanne.’ That was hard, very hard. These are examples of how guilt can make you lose sight of your goals, but life is about perspective, and if you can put things in perspective and talk about these issues with your kids or whoever in your family feels neglected—your partner, whoever—it helps manage the guilt.” “It’s difficult for a woman, with all the conservative baggage she carries, to feel like she’s not fulfilling 100% as a mother, and that’s a burden you carry on top of everything else”.
- Work continuously, both individually and with your family and partner, to deconstruct gender stereotypes and build a more equitable view of women’s and men’s roles in society.
- Engage in ongoing dialogue with your family. Explaining and discussing what political work entails, how each family member feels about the situation, etc., helps create understanding.

The Family’s Fear That Something Bad Might Happen

When starting in politics, family members may not understand or may have fears or doubts about the risks involved, both to physical and emotional well-being. In some contexts, political participation means facing powerful figures or even organized crime.

- Talk with the family so they understand your motivations for entering politics and the mechanisms and support systems in place for protection. “Because you’re standing up and calling out corruption directly. It may seem easy, but when you’re face-to-face, you’re addressing organized crime. There are always certain risks involved in saying just a few words, which can lead to bigger consequences. So, yes, it’s been difficult for my family to understand, but they’ve finally supported me.”

Chapter 4:

Final Reflections

Women can vote and be voted for thanks to the struggles led by the pioneers, starting with the suffragists who demonstrated great courage to change the course of active political rights. Following them, women fought to become candidates under equal conditions as their male counterparts. **Gender quotas were initially introduced, followed by parity, to balance decision-making roles.**

Today, **inequality persists largely in the cultural realm** (and there is still much to improve in the legal framework). It is within traditions, practices, and values that patriarchy remains strongly ingrained. This is often due to personal conviction but also out of disinterest or ignorance. **Dismantling this obsolete paradigm, which sustains a privileged sector while subordinating others, requires awareness of the situation and a commitment to change.** The goal is to create a life of equality and freedom—free from discrimination and violence.

The journey toward change is neither easy nor short; it is filled with progress and setbacks. However, the shared experiences of female leaders across the region offer hope. They demonstrate that women have been brave enough to engage in politics and have learned the informal codes under which **sexism and discrimination remain common practice.**

Here are some of the reflections and challenges that were highlighted:

- **To pass laws and adopt policies that promote equality, the alliance among women is key.** This strategy has proven to be the most effective: political achievements are always collective, and gender issues are no exception. That is why the main strategies to advance the equality agenda involve forming alliances among women around specific issues. It doesn't matter if they belong to different political spaces; what is important is recognizing that shared interests exist in the aspects women want to change—such as ending femicides, regulating a care agenda, and ensuring equal representation in decision-making positions, among many others. The interviewees agreed that these new ways of doing politics among women strengthen self-esteem and increase their sense of empowerment. The shared experience of doing politics in a context marked by sexism must not only lead to recognition but also to action through mutual support to transform and democratize it.
- **The increased openness of democracies in the region to women's political participation has been driven by quota laws and parity laws. These regulations have allowed**

greater access for women to government positions, particularly through parity laws.

Regarding rule changes, one of the female leaders interviewed noted, “Demanding women’s rights meant incorporating a gender perspective that wasn’t present before.”

- **Women collectively advance the gender agenda (sisterhood leadership).** Developing strategies and planning activities requires time and dedication. “Defending the gender agenda should be a natural commitment for women in politics. It also gives you a sharper focus on reality, helping you look at societal problems more carefully. But I also think it shouldn’t be our only agenda.” “Male leaders never made women’s issues a priority; they used to tell us that we shouldn’t divide the rights of the people, that we need to uphold collective rights, and that women are dividing rights, which are indivisible. That’s when women put a stop to it. We said that women have both individual and collective rights as part of the people. From a young age, I learned from Indigenous women leaders who built this understanding.” “As the feminist movement gained progressive strength, I started thinking in legal terms, noticing problems in certain laws, and I said to myself, I need to validate my voice, not only in politics but also in the law. And it seemed to me that this was a complementary way of contributing.” “The gender agenda has been central to me. I was the first woman elected as a senator in my state and the first female mayor of my city. The candidacy I led was composed entirely of women, and my government program and actions focused on including women in all spheres. I had significant participation from women in government. This was always based on both a discourse and practice aimed at defending women’s rights.”
- **It is important to understand that the gender agenda doesn’t just benefit women—it balances the public and private (or domestic) spheres.** One of the biggest challenges is to create public policies that promote progress toward a gender-balanced democracy, moving beyond the roles and stereotypes that have excluded women from various aspects of life. Supporting the political leadership of other women is also a key component of the gender agenda. “Within my political party, what I like is working with women, contributing to the growth of other women. When other women progress, you also feel like you are progressing, because you can’t do it alone.”
- Defending certain gender agenda topics, particularly sexual and reproductive rights and the rights of the LGTBIQ community, continues to have a high cost in the region. One interviewee shared: “There was a day when, during the homily in many churches in my country, they prayed that I would never have children because I defended the right to voluntary abortion.” “Having an agenda consistent with human rights comes at a very high price, both in terms of public opinion and personal relationships. You get demonized for advancing certain human rights agendas, particularly those related to women’s sexual and reproductive rights and the rights of LGTBI+ communities”.

This publication makes it clear that leadership is not an innate trait, nor is it tied to a specific biology. Anyone who wants to engage in public affairs can become a leader and carry forward a work agenda. In the case of women, for that leadership to be truly transformative, it must involve a commitment to promoting the equality agenda with solidarity among women (sorority).

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