

Women's Political Participation in Latin America

The 2013 UN MDG report shows that while globally, gender parity has almost been achieved in primary education, only 2 of 130 countries have reached this goal in all three levels of education. It also shows that women are employed in some 40 percent of paid non-agricultural jobs, but their work tends to be badly paid with little social protection. This is accompanied by persistent inequality in decision-making in the home, in the public sector and at the top levels of government, which means women do not participate in a real or effective way in the decisions that affect their lives.

At the end of 2013 the share of women in parliaments worldwide was just over 20 percent. From 2000 to 2013, progress was greatest in Northern Africa, where it increased from 3 percent to 17 percent; South Asia where it rose from 7 percent to 18.5 percent and the Caucasus and Central Asia where it went from 7 percent to 17.7 percent. Latin America and the Caribbean came nearest to the 30 percent target with 24.5 percent, putting it ahead of the developed world, where it averaged 23.8 percent.

A look at this progress as a whole suggests that the use of quantitative indicators themselves may be hampering further progress in this and other decision making spaces in the State and private spheres, and contributes very little to the struggle for equality. While some countries used the MDG targets to set minimal goals, these have gradually become established as a maximum and thus amount to a new glass ceiling for women.

Latin America and the Caribbean is the region where progress is the greatest, as evidenced by the current presidencies of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, Cristina Fernández

in Argentina and Michelle Bachelet in Chile, while the governments of Jamaica and Trinidad-Tobago are headed by Portia Simpson-Miller and Kamla Persad-Bissessar. Since 1991, 14 countries have implemented affirmative measures in the form of quota laws, designed to foster greater equality in the distribution of elective and representative positions. Although the results of these laws have rarely come up to expectations and their effectiveness has varied in different institutional and socio-cultural contexts and different political climates, they constituted the first step in the struggle to establish parity.

However, in terms of gender parity, only a few countries in Latin America have implemented regulations geared to achieve this. Venezuela was the first, starting in 2005, followed by Ecuador and Bolivia in 2008 and 2009 and a 2009 electoral code in Costa Rica established parity both on ballot papers and in the internal structure of political parties.

In Bolivia, which has had a 30 percent quota for women in national and municipal elections since 1999, the proportion of women in the lower house increased from 3 percent in 1985 to 18 percent in 2002, and then, due to a 2004 law making it compulsory for 50 percent of candidates on party lists to be women, climbed to 23 percent in the 2009 elections. In the upper house, women's participation went from 0 percent in 1985 to 15 percent in 2002, and then to 47 percent in 2009. This increase is reflected at other levels such as municipal councils (where the proportion of women is now 43%), department councils (28%), the Judicial Body (43%), the Supreme Electoral Court (43%), and the cabinet of ministers (35%). However, the proportion of women is still very low in the main executive

positions in the country like department governors (0%), mayors (7%) and the presidency and vice presidency (0%).

Yet even though women's share of public positions has increased greatly, full parity has not been achieved, owing largely to the winner-take-all electoral system, and to the political parties' manoeuvres to evade the terms of parity legislation. In the last analysis this resistance is based on discriminatory social norms that underlie candidate selection procedures and guide voters to support male candidates, particularly for higher executive office.

Throughout Latin America, factors such as *presidentialism*, *caudillismo* (the big boss culture), cronyism and party heritage work to ensure that increases in political representation do not translate into real decision making power. This is partly due to the fact that women's presence is symbolic only as they are subordinate to male leadership but is also used as a way to legitimize male dominance. In some cases, women who exercise power in patriarchal and authoritarian ways do accede to decision making spaces.

This suggests that the new development framework indicators should not merely aim at establishing quantitative parity but also be geared to tackling the barriers that the political culture has raised against women's effective participation. This should include far reaching reforms in political institutions, political culture and in how power is exercised.

The phenomenon of political harassment, a recurring manifestation of the structural violence against women that restricts their participation in the public sphere, while not new, has come increasingly to the surface in recent years as more women, aided

by quotas and parity policies, have moved into public representative spaces. Political harassment can be defined as a collection of acts of pressure, persecution, harrasing or threats committed against women or their families with the aim of reducing, suspending, impeding or restricting the functions inherent in their position, or inducing or forcing them to act or refrain from acting in the discharge of their functions or exercise of their rights.

While countries such as Costa Rica and Peru are discussing measures to tackle this problem, Bolivia is the only country in the region that has promulgated a specific law against political violence and harassment (Law 243 of May 2012). This law, which came about thanks to the efforts of the Association of Councillors of Bolivia (ACOBOL) and other civil society organizations, establishes a range of legal or administrative procedures to process and punish offenders, depending on the acts committed, and thus makes harassment and political violence new legal offences. However, two years after the law came into force and even after two female councillors were killed apparently for reporting acts of corruption in their municipalities, only one case has been resolved out of the 154 that were reported in 2013.

The law is weak in that it does not provide mechanisms to protect the person who reports harassment and/or political violence cases, and because it lacks legal

dispositions to provide effective access to justice. It also requires greater conceptual precision so as to be able to cover women in the sphere of social, union and neighbourhood organizations, and in peasant or indigenous peoples institutions. This is particularly important where there are dense social networks because these have great capacity to mobilize, which is essential for exerting influence in the political system. Social mobilization has become a relatively stable characteristic of the political culture and a way to understand and live “democracy” in the region.

These social organizations are spaces where social demands can be aggregated and from which people can make the transition into public and political life. However, they are also where women may first experience harassment and political violence. In them, discrimination is perpetuated and “socialized” in social representations of the ideal of “man” and “woman,” which have hardly been questioned in either rural or urban settings. Sex stereotypes often relegated women to secondary functions, which distances them from decision making and can cut short their careers in positions of responsibility.

Thus a new global framework for equity in participation should establish clear indicators that register rules and policies to prevent and punish acts of violence and political harassment against women in the broadly defined public realm, and should

cover not only spaces of State representation but also civil society and grassroots organizations. In line with this, there need to be more demanding and specific indicators, geared not just to the promulgation of legal regulations in pursuit of parity but also to transforming discriminatory social norms and practices of the *caudillo*-related political culture. The indicators should include for example the amount of financial and institutional resources allocated to ensuring effective implementation of the regulations, and should also cover education and training for participation and the prevention of violence against women in all its forms and in all spaces.

As long as women are kept away from decision making about key aspects of their lives, their presence is merely symbolic and they are assimilated into the patriarchal mind-set or hounded with political harassment, inadequate decision making structures and policies will continue to prevail. Unless they take account of women’s socio-cultural contexts or particular vision of the world and the exercise of power, these policies will negatively influence other aspects of life such as health, education and working conditions. ■