

# Women's Caucuses and Their Impact on the Political Culture of Latin American



International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics



## Introduction

Despite comprising more than 50 percent of the world's population, women continue to lack access to political leadership opportunities and resources at all levels of government. Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy, but a necessary pre-condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Governance structures which do not result in the equal participation of men and women, or their equal enjoyment of benefits from state interventions are by definition neither inclusive nor democratic.

In 2007, recognizing that over the last century women's gains in the political arena have been slow and inadequate, five international organizations came together to make women's political participation their collective priority and devise a strategy that would scale-up each of the organization's efforts to foster gender equality in politics:

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)  
Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)  
National Democratic Institute (NDI)  
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)  
United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)

The International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics ([www.iKNOWPolitics.org](http://www.iKNOWPolitics.org)) is an online network, jointly supported by the five partner organizations, that aims to increase the participation and effectiveness of women in political life by utilizing a technology-enabled forum to provide access to critical resources and expertise, stimulate dialogue, create knowledge, and share experiences among women in politics.

In just three years, iKNOW Politics has become the leading website on women's political participation. Building on a library of over 5300 resources, iKNOW Politics has captured the combined experience and knowledge of its 92 global experts and 10,000 members from over 150 countries. iKNOW Politics has documented and disseminated the lessons and best practices of women as voters, candidates and elected legislators.

The following is a printed version of one of the most frequently-cited iKNOW Politics knowledge products, based on the combined input from experts and members worldwide. Please visit the iKNOW Politics website to pose a question of your own, contribute to the online discussions, browse the resource library or read additional iKNOW Politics consolidated expert responses, E-discussion summaries, interviews with women leaders, or contact iKNOW Politics at [connect@iknowpolitics.org](mailto:connect@iknowpolitics.org) to get in touch with a staff member in your region of the world. iKNOW Politics is available in **English, French, Spanish and Arabic.**

## Consolidated Response on Women's Caucuses and their Impact on the Political Culture of Latin American Countries

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*This consolidated response is based on research done by the iKNOW Politics team and contributions from the following iKNOW Politics experts: Julie Ballington, Programme Officer for Partnership between Men and Women, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU); Diana Espinosa, Public Dialogue, Democracy-Strengthening Project, Democratic Governance Programme, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Colombia; Niki Johnson, professor, researcher and coordinator of the Politics and Gender Area of the Political Science Department in the School of Social Sciences at the University of the Republic in Montevideo, Uruguay; Beatriz Llanos, consultant on political communication and women's participation in politics; and Jutta Marx researcher on women's political participation.*

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### Question

How has the formation of a women's caucus affected the political culture of your countries?  
What motivated the effort to organise a parliamentary women's caucus?

- Herlinda Villarreal González, Colombia.

### What are multi-party women's caucuses? How are they formed?

Multi-party parliamentary women's caucuses have emerged as a response to the demand for access to public office by a growing number of women, and the need for greater impact and effectiveness after they are elected. They have moved beyond being groups with a series of immediate objectives to become a place where women politicians can identify themselves as representatives of gender interests, in many cases transcending ideological or political identities.

The main objective of the caucuses is to promote a common legislative agenda aimed at the defence of women's rights and oversight of public gender policies. They promote a gender approach within parties and in common working and decision-making bodies (commissions, plenaries, etc.). Through these actions, they work to transform political organisations into friendly spaces that promote women's participation.

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2008, p. 68), of a total of 77 national parliaments for which information is available, nearly half have some type of women's group or caucus in Parliament.

### Why form a Women's Caucus?

Women who are organized into a caucus can serve the same purpose as a "critical mass" of women, even where women do not make up a significant a portion of the legislature.

Caucuses are able to extend influence over several realms simultaneously:

- They impact the government and political process by helping to shape the agenda and by providing information and advocacy
- They impact the constituency by raising awareness about an issue, by acting as a catalyst for communication on certain issues between government and civil society, and by providing information and advocacy
- They act as a watchdog for certain issues by ensuring that concerned individuals and groups are aware when relevant legislation is up for review
- Members of caucuses often become the spokespeople for their issues, thereby streamlining information and raising awareness.

**(Extracts from National Democratic Institute. Women's Caucus Fact Sheet. 2008)**

### Latin American examples

In Latin America, the following examples stand out:

Table 3  
Consensus-building practices among women parliamentarians (by country\*)

Experience	Country
Union of Parliamentary Women of Bolivia (UMPABOL)	Bolivia
Women's Caucus of the Brazilian National Congress	Brazil
Ad-hoc Bicameral Commission for the Defence of Women's Rights	Colombia
Peruvian Parliamentary Women's Caucus (MMPP)	Peru
Bicameral Women's Caucus	Uruguay

Source: International IDEA 2007.

Between 2003 and 2007, there was a Forum of Women Parliamentarians in Ecuador. It was not included in this research because the experience was interrupted when Congress was dissolved by the Constituent Assembly in November 2007

(Llanos & Sample, 2008, p. 50).

Of these, the oldest is the Union of Parliamentary Women of Bolivia (Unión de Mujeres Parlamentarias de Bolivia, UMPABOL), which was formally established in 1996 and officially recognised by the Chamber of Deputies in 1998. It recently (November 2007) sponsored a successful encounter between women legislators and delegates to the Constituent

Assembly, which allowed them to channel Bolivian women's most important demands for inclusion in the text of the new Constitution. (For more information, see the text by Gloria Ardaya in the Annex to Llanos & Sample, 2008; a summary can be found in Llanos & Sample, 2008, p. 49).

Although it is not officially recognised, the Brazilian caucus is also noteworthy. The initial efforts date back to the 1988 Constituent Assembly. There are women's caucuses in each house of Congress, each with a co-ordinator who is elected for one year. They focus on promoting initiatives related to women's issues. Despite women's limited representation in both chambers (9 percent in the Chamber of Deputies and 14.8 percent in the Senate), the caucuses have allowed women to gain ground and visibility. (For more details, see the work of Luis Felipe Miguel, particularly Table 4, summarising good practices, in the Annex to Llanos & Sample, 2008.)

Various analysts agree that one of the most notable recent experiences is that of the Bicameral Women's Caucus (Bancada Bicameral Femenina, BBF) in Uruguay. It began as a women's caucus in the Chamber of Deputies (2000), expanding later to include women in the Senate (2005). One of its most significant accomplishments was the creation of a Gender and Equality Commission in the Chamber of Deputies. This gave women a formal venue for political debate and analysis, enabling them to have a positive influence throughout the parliamentary cycle. (For more information, see the document by Niki Johnson in the Annex to Llanos & Sample, 2008; a summary can be found in Llanos & Sample, 2008, pp. 50-51.)

The other Latin American experiences also offer important lessons. In the case of Peru, it is noteworthy that despite the high percentage of women elected to the current Congress (29.17 percent), their lack of prior experience and the dominant political culture in Parliament make it easy for them to become "invisible" in terms of their demands and specific contributions. This highlighted the need for a Peruvian parliamentary women's caucus.

Beatriz Llanos describes the experience as follows:

*"It is a venue for inter-party dialogue and consensus building that is not part of the Peruvian Parliament's organic structure, and it includes women legislators from all the parliamentary groups who are currently in office, throughout their terms. The purpose is to foster gender equity and equal opportunity to promote development, the strengthening of democracy, good governance and respect for human rights. It has three essential objectives:*

- *To create a forum for sharing ideas and building consensus among women parliamentarians, regardless of their political affiliation*
- *To promote the development of a common agenda for gender equity, equal opportunity, inclusion and other issues of interest that require consensus among the members.*
- *To exchange information about initiatives that require prior consensus building.*

*Like governmental bodies, it has a Plenary Assembly, a Co-ordinating Committee made up of a delegate named by each party, and a president who is elected annually; at that time, the new Co-ordinating Committee members are also named.”*

(Llanos, Beatriz: “PERÚ, En busca de la igualdad: marchas y contramarchas en la participación política de la mujer,” p. 47, in Annex to Llanos & Sample, 2008).

The most recent initiative is in Colombia, where an ad-hoc bicameral commission for the defence of women’s rights was established in July 2006. The commission is in the process of organising its work (for more information, see: Llanos & Sample, 2008, pp.51-52).

### **Underlying factors**

Gaining access to public venues, especially Parliament, does not mean gaining access to neutral spaces. These venues are designed according to a masculine mindset. Women who win political office, regardless of their

### **What led to the formation of the BBF in Uruguay?**

Our expert Niki Johnson answers:

1. The need to strengthen women as political players, since they are still a small minority (since 2000, they have held 11 percent of the seats in Uruguay’s Parliament). One dimension has to do with feeling they have support, including emotional support. The existence of a certain degree of “gender solidarity” and the perception of the need to reinforce it were factors that contributed to the formation of the BBF.
2. The presence of women with gender awareness among the congresswomen elected in 2000, particularly three women who had served as co-ordinators of the RMP.
3. The long tradition of inter-party relations among women in the country. This dates back to the last phase of the transition to democracy, when women from all parties and from the grassroots women’s movement fought for a place in the National Programmatic Consensus (Concertación Nacional Programática). Later, they continued to co-ordinate agendas and actions in other multi-party forums, until the Network of Political Women (Red de Mujeres Políticas, RMP) was formed in 1992.
4. The need to seek ways of making more legislative progress on women’s issues. For example, the first domestic violence bill was introduced in 1991, but as of 2000 it still had not been voted into law, even though Parliament had ratified the Convention of Belén do Pará in 1995

**(Johnson, N. Expert Opinion. 2008)**

social or ethnic origin, are subject to various forms of discrimination and doubly strict scrutiny by their colleagues and the media. It is therefore difficult for them to stay in office for more than one term, unless they begin to blend into the predominantly male environment around them.

To “keep being genuine” (in the words of former Mexican Deputy Angélica de la Peña Gómez), they must create their own public venues. As our expert Diana Espinosa notes:

*“One good reason to promote these experiences is the need for public venues in which to build women’s common interests. ... As Hannah Arendt says, “they are not innate; they are formed in public terrain, in dialogue and debate with others, the interests are acts of communication (...) the public world is the one from which worlds held in common emerge.” The caucus reflects an effort to move beyond inclusion and achieve true representation. “Inclusion is not enough; participation and representation are needed.” According to María Emma Wills, inclusion is the right to elect and be elected, to express one’s political preferences. Political representation, meanwhile, means “acting substantively in the interest of those who are represented, and responding to them” (Espinosa, D. Expert Opinion. 2008).*

The double or triple work day characteristic of women is also clearly reflected in Parliament.

As our expert Jutta Marx points out:

*“Compared to men, women came late to political representation, arriving when men had already shaped its culture. Their participation, even when they reach significant numerical levels, is conditioned by norms, dynamics, strategies, networks and operational guidelines that were established in their absence.*

*In spheres of political representation, women tend to encounter prejudices based on the roles they occupied and continue to occupy in the sexual division of labour (which tend to be reproduced in Congress).*

*In general, women legislators must work harder than their male colleagues for their parliamentary efforts to be recognised. It is therefore particularly important that the more experienced women legislators help their more newly elected colleagues to facilitate their understanding of the dynamics and norms of the legislature.*



*All of these aspects underscore the need for women in positions of political representation to form alliances. These can be expressed in short-term networking (alliances formed around particular bills), as has occurred until now in Argentina, or in stable mechanisms for interrelating, such as the women's caucuses in Brazil or Uruguay. It is worth noting that even in a country such as Argentina, where the percentage of women's participation is high in both houses of the national Congress, having a women's caucus appears to be important. The Argentine Senate recently approved the formation of a women's caucus, in accordance with an initiative presented by some of its female members" (Marx, J. Expert Opinion. 2008).*

Ultimately, these are efforts to preserve the "difference" of women in public venues while ensuring that this "difference" will enrich the public sphere. As noted by the InterParliamentary Union, "there is a difference in interests, outlooks and styles between men and women in parliaments" (IPU, 2008, p. 50). This is acknowledged even by men who have a broader outlook.

## **Results**

Women's caucuses have been identified as one of the four most successful strategies for developing greater gender awareness in national parliaments:

*"Respondents identify four factors that are most influential in creating a more gender-sensitive parliament. These are: the support of the ruling party in parliament; the work of parliamentary committees; the work of women's parliamentary caucuses, which are cross-party networks of women; and the rules that govern the functioning of parliament. However, by a more than two-to-one margin over their male counterparts, women believe that parliament is still dominated by a gentleman's club or old boys network. Only eight percent of respondents believe there have been substantial changes in the rules and practices of parliament because of the presence of women. Small but noticeable changes have been noted in parliamentary language and behaviour, which are seen as having become less aggressive since women began taking up parliamentary seats" (IPU, 2008. p. 2, emphasis by iKOW Politics).*

Multi-party women's caucuses have not only facilitated progress on specific legislation on women's issues, but have gone further, permeating all parliamentary work with a gender perspective. This is particularly important in the preparation of the national budget, which is generally approved by the legislature. Women's caucuses



have also enabled women to create support networks and develop mutual trust and specific skills for taking on new responsibilities.

But that's not all. The question asked at the beginning referred to the impact of multi-party women's caucuses on countries' political cultures. Although there are no definitive studies, the most significant national experiences indicate some impacts

For example, our expert Niki Johnson notes that Uruguay's experience:

*“Represents an inter-party work style that is relatively uncommon in a legislative environment that is generally marked by divisions along party lines. Although there have been cases of co-ordination between departmental caucuses, these are contingent strategies in response to certain events (the flooding in Canelones, for example). In contrast, the Women's Caucus represents a longrange, proactive strategy that has overcome potentially divisive challenges, such as the introduction of or debate over issues, such as quotas or abortion, that did not have the support of all of the members”*  
(Johnson, N. Expert Opinion. 2008).

At a time when, almost without exception, the credibility and legitimacy of national parliaments is low, partly because they are perceived as overly partisan arenas, multi-party women's caucuses can project a positive image of consensus building that transcends ideological and partisan divides. This is especially true when they are building consensus on issues that are gaining increasing legitimacy among citizens, such as various aspects of the women's agenda.

One indicator of the degree of recognition the caucuses have gained could be whether they have been formally incorporated into the parliamentary structure. Of the five experiences in South America, four have gained such recognition. Globally, the Inter-Parliamentary Union notes that half of the 77 parliaments about which there is information have parliamentary women's caucuses. It also states that 61 percent of the women parliamentarians interviewed in countries with caucuses respond affirmatively when asked whether the caucuses have had an impact on progress on women's issues.

## Challenges

Although their experience has been positive, much work still lies ahead for women's caucuses. First, they must solidify their position in the parliamentary structure. This will come not only with formal recognition of the caucuses, but especially by providing them with the material and human resources they need to operate adequately.

Second, the caucuses must pay particular attention to establishing solid ties with civil society organisations that support a women's agenda. Women's caucuses also risk being affected by the bureaucratisation and distancing that affect parliaments in general.

Third, the caucuses must deal with the tension of having different ideological and partisan orientations within them. Strengthening democracy means making the representation of the diverse interests of society visible. Women's caucuses help accomplish this. But it cannot come at the cost of diluting identities that represent diverse views of society. The existence of programmatic parties is also an indispensable requirement for a solid democracy.

Finally, the caucuses face the challenge of not confining women parliamentarians to certain issues and excluding them from others. It is generally recognised that women legislators' concerns tend to centre on three major areas: social recognition, control over one's body, and development (IPU, 2008). Nevertheless, this must not be an excuse for excluding them from other issues that are still the private terrain of the male parliamentary elite: economy and finance, defence and security, international relations.

## **Conclusions**

Let's return to the original question: How has the formation of a women's political caucus affected the political culture of your countries? The research leads us to a few conclusions:

1. Women's caucuses help change the political culture not only by making a usually "invisible" agenda visible, but also by giving it voice and a face.
2. Linked with other strategies, caucuses help create a "critical mass" that can bring about legislative changes, authoritatively appealing to citizens to mobilise for the cause of women's rights.
3. Women's caucuses provide an opportunity for empowerment and capacity building for women legislators who face the challenge of working in a scenario that is designed and managed according to an male-dominated model.
4. These efforts have begun to change the mindset, structure and work styles of parliaments, both in their political functions and their everyday operations.
5. Finally, at a time when parliaments are generally discredited (at least in most Latin American countries), women's caucuses represent a new way of doing politics, based on an agenda that transcends party lines.

## Further Reading:

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Interview with Mónica Xavier, Uruguayan Senator and president of the steering committee of IPU's meeting of parliamentarians. 2008. <http://www.iknowpolitics.org/en/node/6534>

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