

From descriptive to substantive representation? Women and politics in Latin America

*¿De la representación descriptiva a la sustantiva?
Mujeres y política en América Latina*

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Abstract

Studying women's representation in legislatures is relevant because women's access to these bodies and their participation in decision-making are essential to the right to equal participation in democratic governance. An increased female presence in legislatures does not always lead to women's access to the most important working and decision-making bodies on an equal footing with men. Thus, the aim of this article is to analyze women's participation in the lower or single chambers of 17 Latin American countries from two dimensions of representation: descriptive and substantive. The research is quantitative. In order to study substantive representation, legislative committees are taken into account. It is found that a higher percentage of women occupying a seat does not always translate into women holding an equal proportion of committee chairmanships. It is also observed that women are predominantly the chairpersons of reproductive committees. It is concluded (1) that access to positions of political representation does not necessarily translate into equal access to positions of power within the legislative chambers and (2) that women occupy a smaller proportion of the most important committees, demonstrating that the strong and most powerful committees continue to be held by men due to the construction of politics and its exercise as androcentric.

Keywords

Committees, descriptive, governance, Latin America, women, politics, representation, substantive.

Resumen

Estudiar la representación femenina en las asambleas legislativas es relevante porque el acceso de las mujeres a estos órganos y su participación en la toma de decisiones son fundamentales para hacer efectivo el derecho a participar por igual en la gobernanza democrática. Se ha constatado que una mayor presencia femenina en las asambleas legislativas no siempre conduce al acceso de las mujeres a los órganos de trabajo y decisión más importantes en igualdad con los hombres. Así, el objetivo de este artículo es analizar la participación de las mujeres en las cámaras bajas o únicas de 17 países latinoamericanos desde dos dimensiones de la representación: descriptiva y sustantiva. Se trata de una investigación de carácter cuantitativo. Para estudiar la representación sustantiva se tienen en cuenta las comisiones legislativas. Se constata que un mayor porcentaje de mujeres ocupando un escaño no siempre se traduce en que estas ejerzan en igual proporción las presidencias de las comisiones. También se observa que las mujeres ocupan, sobre todo, presidencias de comisiones de reproducción. Se concluye (1) que el acceso a cargos de representación política no se traduce necesariamente en el ingreso igualitario a puestos de poder dentro de las cámaras legislativas y (2) que las mujeres ocupan en menos proporción las comisiones más importantes, manifestando que las comisiones fuertes y que mayor poder representan siguen siendo para los hombres por la construcción de la política y su ejercicio como androcéntrica.

Palabras clave

Comisiones, descriptiva, gobernanza, Latinoamérica, mujeres, política, representación, sustantiva.

Introduction

Governance practices and ideas hold great potential with their emphasis on accountability, transparency, inclusive citizenship, and democracy for changing gender equality. But that potential is not being tapped. Gender equality in decision-making is pivotal to empower those who have been excluded from power because of their sex. Some progress in addressing gender inequality in national governance institutions, such as quota or parity laws, is noteworthy. But these measures do not always guarantee equal participation in institutions (Brody, 2009).

While it is important to increase the number of women in legislative assemblies, it is equally important to analyze whether this increased presence translates into substantive representation, i.e., whether women occupy leadership positions in legislative bodies. In Latin America, affirmative action to increase the presence of women in the legislature began in the 1990s. In 1991, Argentina was the first country to implement a quota law under the name National Quota Law 24.012.1991, amending Article 60 of the National Electoral Code. Taking this country as an example, the adoption of this affirmative action has been positive, with the percentage of women parliamentarians rising from 5.84% in 1991 to 44.75% in 2023, representing a significant increase in descriptive representation. In this regard, the literature on female political representation has evolved in recent decades. The first investigations were associated with the conditions of access to the legislature. Once a certain critical mass has been reached in the national congresses, the analysis focuses on the actions of women when they get their seats (Caminotti, 2009; Chasquetti and Pérez, 2012; Heath *et al.*, 2005; Johnson, 2014; Krook and Norris, 2014; Palmieri, 2011; Pérez, 2014; Rodríguez and Madera, 2016; Rodríguez, 2011; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006, 2010; Tremblay and Pelletier, 2000), showing that women's access to the most important work and decision-making bodies on an equal basis with men remains a challenge (substantive representation) (Aldrey, 2016; García, 2019; Martínez and Garrido, 2010). In other words, greater gender equality in access to positions of political representation does not necessarily translate into equal access to positions of power within the legislative chambers (Pérez, 2014; Freidenberg and Gilas, 2020), as may be the chairs of legislative committees.

The study of women's representation in legislative assemblies is relevant because women's access to these bodies and their effective participation in

decision-making are essential for their right to equal participation in democratic governance (UN Women, s.f.). Thus, the research questions that drive the elaboration of this article are the following: Does an increased presence of women in the lower or single chambers mean that a greater number of commissions are chaired by women? Is there a gender division in the work of the commissions? Thus, the objective of this article is to analyze the participation of women in the lower or single chambers of 17 Latin American countries, from two representation dimensions: descriptive and substantive. In order to improve the position of women in parliaments, it was necessary to analyze not only the number of seats they held, but also the impact of their participation. While the first element refers to descriptive representation, the second refers to substantive representation (Pitkin, 1967).¹ In order to study this type of representation, legislative committees are taken into account (García, 2019; Gutiérrez, 2021).

Commissions can be defined as working groups, permanent or temporary, structured from thematic areas and constituted by a part of the members of a legislative assembly, in which they delegate some of their functions with the aim of promoting greater efficiency in the performance of matters specific to legislative work (García-Montero and Sánchez, 2002). There are a number of reasons for considering the commissions as a way of approaching substantive representation. The commissions are responsible for the analysis of legislation and perform functions such as monitoring the Government and aggregating the interests of legislators. They also influence public policies (Rivera, 2005). In this sense, they are arguably “small congresses” (Krehbiel, 1992). Since it is impossible for the full congress to discuss all the legislation presented (Cox, 2006), with exceptions, the legislation is sent to the committees for its study, and these bodies can send it to the plenary for approval or dismissal.

1 “In substantive representation, women and men accept a responsibility in which they must stop acting for themselves and begin to act for their represented; although, this expression can be understood in two ways: ‘on the one hand, it may mean acting instead of; on the other hand, it may mean acting for the benefit of, or it may mean both at the same time’ (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 137-138), but the context will determine the difference of its implementation. For Pitkin (1967), the descriptive and symbolic representation approach, as an inanimate object, the representative and, in practical terms of their exercise, are omitted in their functions, because the priority is how they are considered, their similarity and characteristics, not what they do or do not do. So he wonders: what does it really mean in practice? The concept of substantive refers to ‘the articulated perspective of representation as an activity’ (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 124-125). The ideas of substitution, of taking care of others, of acting in the interest of or acting as subordinate are not sufficient for the idea of representation developed” (Cortés, 2023, pp. 33-34).

In this process, committee chairs play an essential role, as they decide which bills are considered first and put off discussion by others (Pérez, 2014). In this sense, the legislators who occupy them have “special agenda powers” (Alemán, 2006; Cox, 2006; Cox and McCubbins, 2005).

Analyzing the distribution patterns of commissions in a legislature allows to know the decision-making processes, the interests of political elites and the power relations between those elites (Martin and Mickler, 2018). According to traditional gender roles, commissions, following Skard and Haa-vio-Manila (1985), can be classified as productive, reproductive and system preservation. The first are those related to economy, taxation, industry, etc. Reproductive issues deal with the issues of educational policy, health, family, housing, etc. Finally, the preservation of the system deal with constitutional issues, foreign relations, etc. Traditionally, the commissions of reproduction and preservation of the system are the areas in which women have participated the most, either in Latin American (Aldrey, 2016; García, 2019; Heath *et al.*, 2005; Martínez and Garrido, 2010; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006, 200 10) or abroad (Coffé *et al.*, 2019; Pansardi and Vercesi, 2017). However, other research has concluded that the explanatory variable of this inequality is not sex, but years of experience in the legislative assembly (O’Brien, 2012; Palmieri, 2011) or the magnitude of the district for which the legislator was elected (Chasquetti and Pérez, 2012).

Although it is a well studied topic, it is important to replicate previous research on descriptive and substantive female political representation to analyze with updated data whether the fact that there is a higher percentage of women in the lower or single chambers translates into women occupying power spaces in those chambers. The main contribution of this study is to analyze a significant number of Latin American countries, allowing not only to know the situation in a single case, but also the comparison and the state-of-the-art at the regional level. To achieve the above objective, the article is structured in three sections. The next section presents the sources used to extract the data. The other section shows the results, providing descriptive and substantive representation data. The last section shows the discussion and conclusions.

Materials and methods

The objective of this article was to examine the participation of women in the lower or single chambers of 17 Latin American countries, from two

dimensions of representation: descriptive and substantive. A total of 17 Latin American countries were analyzed.² The research design was non-experimental, cross-sectional and descriptive. Data on the percentage of women in the lower or single chambers were retrieved from the Inter-Parliamentary Union Database as of January 2023. On the other hand, substantive representation through the participation of women in legislative committees was studied because, as stated by Gutiérrez (2021, p. 50), “commissions are decision-making bodies within legislatures, so they allow to have a proxy of women’s substantive participation”. Likewise, García (2019) also understands the female chairmanship of commissions as an indicator of substantive representation. Only the standing committees of the lower or single chambers were analyzed; the data were collected from whose websites. The composition of the committees may change over the course of the parliamentary term, so data dated 21 April 2023 were used. The database is composed of the following variables for committees: 1) country; 2) name of committee; 3) sex of chair. A total of 394 commissions were analyzed. Both data on representation of women in lower or single houses and data on parliamentary committees were collected using the Microsoft Excel program. The classification retrieved for its analysis and interpretation is observed in Table 1.

Table 1
Classification of Parliamentary Committees

Production	Reproduction	System Preservation
Economic policy	Social policy	Political and administrative reform
Fiscal policy	Familiar	Foreign policy and defense
Labor	Healthcare	Support for interest groups and minorities
Industrial	Educational	
Energetic	Housing	
	Environment	
	Culture	

Note. Aldrey (2016, p. 44).

² Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. Not all data from Honduras and Haiti could be accessed.

Results

Descriptive representation

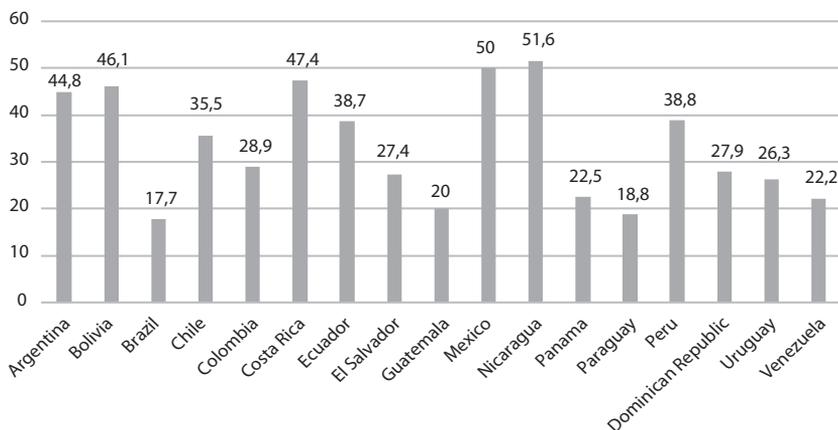
Descriptive representation in Latin American countries has advanced from a series of measures for integrating women into political participation and representation in their countries. As mentioned above, since the 1990s, in Latin America gender quotas were adopted in order to put an end to patriarchal practices of exclusion and domination of women in political life. “In other words, legal mechanisms were established to ensure and encourage the inclusion of women candidates and, consequently, women in decision-making positions within the parties and the State” (Cárdenas and Cortes, 2021, p. 25).

Quotas seek to achieve representativeness and proportionality a quantitative and qualitative distribution in accordance with the composition of the population, of demands, needs and interests in a State. However, once implemented, it has been detected that the gender gap in Latin American countries is not directly reduced by this measure, but by other variables according to the context, such as the electoral system of the country, the order of women on the multi-member lists and the distribution of candidates in electoral districts, and even the resources that the feminist movement and its actors put in electoral tribunals and above all, due to the lack of political will of political parties and actors (Martínez and Garrido, 2013). It should not be forgotten that the logic of exercising power is predominantly patriarchal (Cárdenas, September 29, 2022).

Affirmative action, particularly gender quotas, was the beginning of the path to parity in different countries. Parity is an institutionalized public policy already observed in Latin American countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Nicaragua. It is a fact that both legal and institutional mechanisms are essential to guarantee the presence and representation of women in legislative assemblies. Figure 1 shows the percentage of women in the lower or single chambers.

Figure 1

Percentage of women legislators in the Lower or Single chambers, 2023



Note. Own elaboration with data from IPU Database.

Figure 2 shows that significant variations are observed when comparing the percentage of women legislators present at the congresses, which can be classified into three groups:

- Group 1. Women account for no more than 20% of the population. The countries of this group are Brazil (17.7%), Guatemala (20%) and Paraguay (18.8%), which are directly related to the fact that gender quotas do not exceed 30% in their legislation and their legislation does not make them mandatory.
- Group 2. Female legislators make up between 21% and 40% of the total number of seats. This group has the largest number of countries in Latin America analyzed, i.e., 10 out of 17. These are: Chile (35.5%), Colombia (28.9%), Ecuador (38.7%), El Salvador (27.4%), Honduras (27.3%), Panama (22.5%), Peru (38.8%), Dominican Republic (27.9%), Uruguay (26.3%) and Venezuela (22.2%). In this group of countries, two have mandatory gender quotas of at least 30% (Colombia and El Salvador), while four have 50% (Ecuador, Panama,

Peru and Venezuela). Unlike group 1, quotas (except El Salvador, Panama and Uruguay³) are mandatory.

- Group 3. Women representatives are over 40% of the political representation, close to or exceeding parity. Five countries stand out: Argentina (44.8%), Bolivia (46.1%), Costa Rica (47.4%), Mexico (50%) and Nicaragua (51.6%). These countries count on the establishment of the parity principle; in the case of Bolivia, Costa Rica and Nicaragua, it has taken a little more than ten years with the institutionalization of this public policy.

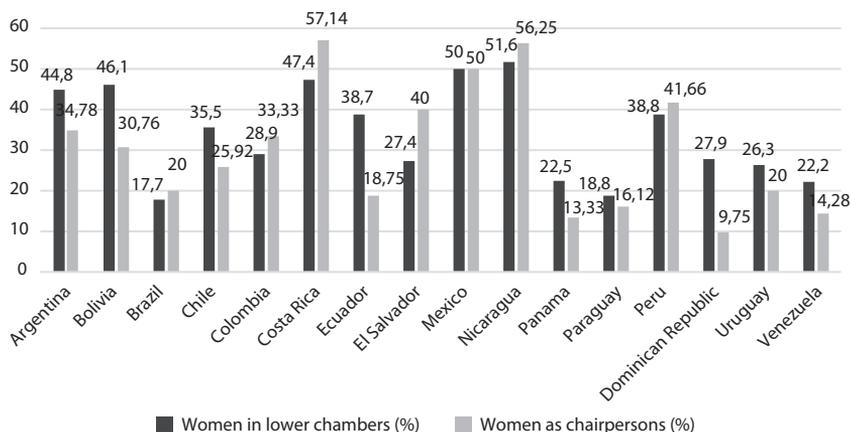
One of the striking elements is that most countries have mandatory gender quotas or parity, however, no mention is made of mechanisms to implement the quota or parity once the distribution of seats is done. Similarly, the results of group 3 make us ask: why, if the parity principle is legally established in five countries, only two countries (Nicaragua and Mexico) have a parity in their lower chambers? For example, it can be suggested that in Mexico, this is due to the central role played by the federal administrative authorities (National Electoral Institute) and jurisdictional (Electoral Tribunal of the Judiciary of the Federation) in establishing Agreements, Resolutions and Sentences to regulate parity ranging from the conformation of the candidacies of political parties by competitiveness blocks in both principles of representation (relative majority and proportional representation) to the distribution of proportional representation seats to compensate for the male overrepresentation that may be the result of the mixed electoral system. As seen, a detailed explanation of each of the countries that explains this phenomenon would involve other research, so it remains pending for future research.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of women legislators in the lower or single chambers of the 17 countries analyzed and the percentage of women committee chairpersons. In some cases, the reforms that establish parity transversalize the composition of commission leaders (as in the case of Mexico); however, the results indicate that only Nicaragua and Mexico (out of the 17 countries) have 50% of committee chairs headed by women.

3 El Salvador (30% quota, no obligation or punishment for non-compliance), Panama (guarantee of parity but no sanction, no explicit obligation) and Uruguay does not have explicit quota or obligation.

Figure 2

Percentage of women legislators in the Lower or Unicameral Houses and committee chairs, 2023



Note. Own production with data from IPU Database and the websites of the national lower chambers.

From the figure above, it can be seen that Argentina has 16 of 46 commissions chaired by women (34.8%); Bolivia four of 13 (30.8%); Brazil six of 30 (20%); Chile seven of 27 (25.9%); Colombia five of 15 (33.3%); Costa Rica 12 of 21 (57.1%); Ecuador three of 16 (18.8%); El Salvador eight of 20 (40%); Guatemala nine of 37 (24.3%); Mexico 25 of 50%; Nicaragua 9 out of 16 (56.3%); Panama two out of 15 (13.3%); Paraguay 9 out of 31 (16.1%); Peru ten out of 24 (41.7%); Dominican Republic four out of 41 (9.8%); Uruguay three out of 15 (20%); Venezuela two out of 14 (14.3%).

The percentage of women committee chairpersons in seven of the 17 countries is equal to or higher than that of women parliamentarians, such as Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru. By contrast, in three of the 17 countries, the percentage of women committee chairs is barely half (or less) of women parliamentarians, namely Ecuador, Panama, and the Dominican Republic.

Substantive representation

An analysis of the political representation of women involves not only counting them numerically, but also considering their exercise of political power, substantive representation. For this purpose, the number of women chairing commissions and the type of commissions (reproduction, production and preservation) they usually chair are analyzed below.

Table 2

Classification of women commissions in 17 countries, 2023

Country	Reproduction (%)	Production (%)	Preservation (%)	Total female chairpersons
Argentina	17.4%	6.5%	10.9%	34.8%
Bolivia	23.1%	0	7.7%	30.8%
Brazil	10%	6.7%	3.3%	20%
Chile	11.1%	11.1%	3.7%	25.9%
Colombia	13.3%	13.3%	6.7%	33.3%
Costa Rica	19%	23.8%	14.3%	57.1%
Ecuador	6.3%	6.3%	6.3%	18.8%
El Salvador	20%	5 %	15%	40%
Guatemala	10.8%	8.1%	5.4%	24.3%
Mexico	32%	6%	12%	50%
Nicaragua	25%	0	31.3%	56.3%
Panama	13.3%	0	0	13.3%
Paraguay	3.2%	3.2%	9.7%	16.1%
Peru	20.8%	12.5%	8.3%	41.7%
Dominican Republic	7.3%	2.4%	0	9.8%
Uruguay	13.3%	6.7%	0	20%
Venezuela	13.3%	0	0	13.3%

Note. The highest percentages per country are marked in bold. Own elaboration with data from IPU Database and the websites of the national lower chambers; classification according to Skard and Haavio-Manila (1985).

According to the classification of Skard and Haavio-Manila (1985), Table 2 shows the results of the congresses in the 17 countries analyzed. In summary, they are as follows:

- There is a majority trend where women chairing commissions do so in those classified as “reproduction”, such as in 11 countries such as Argentina (17.4%), Bolivia (23.1%), Brazil (10%), El Salvador (20%), Guatemala (10.8%), Mexico (32%), Panama (13.3%), Peru (20.8%), Dominican Republic (7.3%), Uruguay (13.3%) and Venezuela (13.3%).
- Chile and Colombia share a tied percentage between commissions classified as “reproduction” and “production”, Chile with 11.1% and Colombia with 13.3%.
- Ecuador is the only country that has equal percentages in the three categories, with 6.3% each.
- All the commissions where women lead in Panama and Venezuela belong to the classification of “reproduction”, so there are none in the commissions that are considered more important, such as production.
- Costa Rica is the only country with the highest percentage of commissions headed by women classified as “production”. The country also has 57.1% of committee chairs.
- Nicaragua has the highest percentage of commissions headed by women classified as “preservation” with 31.3%, although it does not have any commission classified as “production”. It should also be recalled that the State has 56.3% of female chairpersons in its committees.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the last two countries are the only ones where women chair the majority of commissions and in both cases, their rankings are not mostly in “reproduction” but in some of the other categories.

Conclusions and discussion

This research has examined whether a greater female presence in lower or single chambers means that more committees are chaired by women. It has also explored whether there was a gender division in the work of the commissions. Thus, the initial objective was to analyze the participation of women in the lower houses of 17 Latin American countries from two dimensions of

representation: descriptive and substantive (Pitkin, 1967). In this sense, the results show, on the one hand, that a greater descriptive representation does not necessarily translate into a higher percentage of women occupying positions of power within the legislative assemblies. On the other hand, the results indicate that women chair mostly reproduction commissions, being this the case of 11 of the 17 countries analyzed.

Regarding descriptive representation among the 17 States analyzed, a number of findings can be commented. First, countries with a maximum of 20% of women in the lower or single chambers have quota laws that do not exceed 30% and do not make them mandatory (Brazil, Guatemala and Paraguay). This result is consistent with previous literature, which points out that for the effectiveness of quotas it is necessary to have a sanction in case of non-compliance (Hernández-Gutiérrez, 2022; Slaviero, 2021; Tula, 2015). On the other hand, the principle of parity is established in most countries where women make up more than 40% of the congresses (Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Nicaragua), highlighting the importance of this type of measures to move towards greater female descriptive representation in legislative assemblies.

When comparing the percentage of women in the seats with those who preside over committees in Congress, it is seen that only seven of the 17 countries have a composition of women committee leaders equal to or greater than that of women parliamentarians (Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua and Peru). By contrast, in three countries, Ecuador, Panama, and the Dominican Republic, the percentage of women committee chairs is only half (or less) than of women parliamentarians. This finding suggests that access to positions of political representation does not necessarily translate into equal admission to positions of power within legislative chambers, such as committee presidencies (Perez, 2014; Freidenberg and Gilas, 2020).

Studying the exercise of power by women and in this case the substantive representation of women through the number of women in committee chairs, shows that women continue to chair, for the most part, the commissions of “reproduction”, i.e., those related to the roles and stereotypes of women, a finding that coincides with previous research (Aldrey, 2016; García, 2019; Heath *et al.*, 2005; Martínez and Garrido, 2010; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006, 2010). This shows that there are less women in the most important commissions that receive more budgets, in this case those of “production”, stating that the strong commissions and with more power in national congresses remain for

men by the construction of politics and their exercise as androcentric (Cárdenas and Cortés, 2021).

However, it is necessary to delve into the reasons why women do not occupy committee presidencies in the same percentage that are represented in congresses and why they mostly occupy the chair of a certain type of committees, since previous research found that sex is not the explanatory variable of these phenomena, but the size of the district for which the legislators were elected (Chasquetti and Pérez, 2012), the type of electoral system (Matland and Studlar, 1996; Shugart, 2008) or the years of experience in the legislative assembly (O'Brien, 2012; Palmieri, 2011). In the latter case, it is a reality that women have had fewer years as legislators, despite having political rights since the last century. However, to delimit the explanation to the fact of lack of experience implies not observing the predominance of patriarchal practices that continue to prevent women from accessing and exercising their political power.

Substantive representation is a logic that leads us to analyze the action of those who represent us; it is the "introduction of priorities and of a specific legislative agenda by those elected to representative positions" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 152). It is necessary to mention that the specific agenda of representatives would have to be related to the needs and interests of the people who elected them, for example, substantive representation for women would mean a greater presence of their interests, the defense of their rights and the guarantee of their fulfillment in the legislative agenda. There are, however, interesting discussions about whether women should prioritize women's demands or feminist demands when they reach representative positions. It is considered that beyond the particular or general agendas of each of these representatives, what would imply a democratic logic and justice is that these women have exercise of power with the same opportunities as men, and especially under the same conditions and free of violence because of their generic status.

If democracy was born incomplete, without the political participation and representation of half the population, institutional design and redesign, through the establishment of legal mechanisms to compensate for what was unequal from the beginning, is a matter of justice, no less. Little progress can be made if this path of formality is not accompanied by the eradication of these violent and patriarchal practices, without a change in the informal rules, the political culture, those of political practice. It is a reality that democracies will remain incomplete, as long as women do not really exercise power, making decisions for society as a whole.

To conclude, future research could overcome some of the limitations of this article and consider longitudinal data to analyze the position of women within legislative assemblies in each of the selected countries. In this way, the variables that affect the unequal distribution of power between men and women can be observed once they access parliaments. Finally, this study should be extended from a qualitative approach, considering the thematic agendas and strategies of women as representatives of parliamentary committees.

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