



Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas

Final Report

**“Changes in Women’s Participation in Politics:
Situation and Outlook”**

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
1. Methodology	4
- What actions can women parliamentarians take to foster greater female representation in politics, within both interparliamentary women's networks and their respective States?	5
2. Portrait of Women in Politics	5
2.1 Portrait of the Women Surveyed.....	7
2.2 Who Are the Women in Politics?.....	8
2.3 Role of Women Parliamentarians in Improving Women’s Participation in Politics.....	9
3. The Factors Influencing the Election of Women	9
3.1 Socio-economic Factors.....	10
3.1.1 Education and Entry into the Job Market	11
3.1.2 Alternate Structures.....	12
3.1.3 Financial Constraints and the Difficulty of Conducting a Campaign.....	13
3.2 Political Factors	14
3.2.1 Democracy and Women Parliamentarians	14
3.2.2. The Electoral Systems	15
3.2.3 The Political Parties.....	17
3.2.4 Other Political Factors.....	18
3.3 Cultural Factors	20
3.3.1 The Perception of Roles and the Patriarchal Culture	20
3.3.2 The Political Culture.....	21
3.3.3 The Media	21
4. Public Initiatives	22
4.1 Quotas	22
4.2 Parliamentary Commissions Studying Gender Issues	25
5. Other Initiatives	26
5.1 The Political Parties	26
5.2 Civil Society.....	28
Conclusion	29

Introduction

For centuries, women have fought to gain and solidify their democratic rights. They have achieved hard-won political citizenship by obtaining the right to vote and the right to stand for election, but this citizenship remains incomplete. True, there are now more women than ever holding political office, which is changing how laws and public policies are developed and is helping to consolidate democracy. However, there remains a series of institutional, economic and socio-cultural obstacles hindering women's participation in electoral life.

In light of this issue, the Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas (the Network) gave itself the mandate, in 2008, of studying the changes in women's participation in politics by assessing the current situation and then analyzing the outlook. A first report on this theme analyzed the effects of the different types of electoral systems on the political representation of women and the role of the political parties as a vector. This analysis determined that the configuration of the institutions plays a significant role in everything that promotes or, conversely, inhibits the participation of women. However, the institutional aspects cannot be dissociated from the dominant societal standards and attitudes or the women's socio-economic situation in the community.

The goal of this report is to highlight the progress achieved over the past decade while at the same time reiterating that there is still considerable work left to do to ensure equitable representation of women in the parliaments of the Americas. Consequently, we will note both the positive experiences of the past decade and the obstacles that remain. The purpose of this report is not only to detail obstacles and remedies with regards to reinforcing women's presence in parliaments, but also to document the perspective and experience of the women parliamentarians in the Americas. To that end, a survey was conducted among the women in the Network to find out their point of view on women's participation in politics.

We will begin by briefly discussing our methodology and presenting a portrait of women in politics. We will then review the political, socio-economic and cultural factors that impact the political representation of women. Finally, we will look at private and public initiatives that can have an impact on increasing women's presence in parliaments.

1. Methodology

Three methods were used to gather the input of the women in the Network and round out the data collected from the documentary sources. First, a questionnaire was developed for the elected members of parliament in the Americas participating in the Network's activities primarily to learn about the path they took to become parliamentarians. In tandem with this process, three interviews were conducted with members of the Network's Executive Committee from three separate regions of the Americas in order to gather additional qualitative data on the parliamentarians' personal experiences. Finally, to supplement the responses obtained, two questions were submitted to the IKNOW Politics organization.

The questionnaire distributed to the Network members contained 14 questions, six of which were open and eight of which were closed. For most of the closed questions, the respondents were asked to qualify the impact of the factor concerned on their political career as "positive," "negative" or "no influence." The questionnaire was divided into five distinct sections corresponding to the primary categories of influencing factors noted in the documentary sources: personal elements, political and socio-economic factors, cultural and ideological factors, public initiatives and private initiatives. The respondents were asked to indicate the impact certain factors had on their entry into the world of politics and to mention the initiatives which, in their opinion, promote women's political participation.

The questionnaire responses were gathered between July 2010 and June 2011. The questionnaire was sent to all women members of the Network's Executive Committee and of COPA, and distributed to all parliamentarians attending the Queretaro and Mar del Plata meetings. A total of 14 replies were obtained. This sampling is admittedly not very representative of the women parliamentarians in the Americas as a whole. However, it is representative of the women participating in the Network's activities and, to a lesser degree, those participating in COPA. The relevance of the sampling is also reinforced by the fact that these parliamentarians' participation in the organization demonstrates a sensitivity to matters of gender and a willingness to effect change. They are women who have already given some thought to the issue. Finally, despite the sampling size, it is interesting to compare the opinions of the women parliamentarians living the political experience with the expert analyses.

This approach made it possible to correlate the quantitative results of a survey on the opinions of women parliamentarians with the qualitative information on their personal opinions contained in their

responses to the open questions. Their responses are supplemented by the experiences of certain parliamentarians, which were recorded during in-depth interviews conducted separately. These individual interviews enabled us to learn the details of the entry into politics of three members of the Network's Executive Committee and their opinions on the world of politics. The three women interviewed were Diva Hadamira Gastelum Bajo, President of the Network; Maria Elena Torresi de Mercuri, Representative of the Southern Cone; and Hortensa Margarita Lopez Quintana, Representative of Central America.

To complete the answers obtained through interviews and questionnaires, we called on the firm iKNOW Politics. The International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (iKNOW Politics) is an interactive network allowing women in politics around the world to share their experiences, access resources and discuss topics of interest¹. Through this network, they can ask experts questions regarding the political participation of women. To complete the *Final Report on Women's Political Participation*, the organization was asked two questions:

- What are the primary economic barriers to women's participation in politics, and by what means can these be overcome?
- What actions can women parliamentarians take to foster greater female representation in politics, within both interparliamentary women's networks and their respective States?

2. Portrait of Women in Politics

In 1997, when COPA was created, women represented 18.7% of the parliamentarians in the Americas². Today, they represent 22.5%³. This is mainly due to the significant progress made in Trinidad, Argentina, the Bahamas and Guatemala. However, the results remain insufficient in other countries; at this pace, it will take several decades to achieve equality between men and women. Furthermore, increasing numerical representation is only the first step in the process of promoting change in the balance of power. It is essential that the number of women holding positions of importance in governments and parliaments also increase. Indeed, in terms of presiding officers in parliament, positions within the

¹ <http://www.iknowpolitics.org/>

² Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), "Women in National Parliaments, Situation as of December 25, 1997," <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/world251297.htm>.

³ IPU, "Women in National Parliaments, Situation as of April 30, 2011," <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>.

executive branch and heads of state, progress has been even slower⁴. For example, the advancement of women in governments between 1994 and 2005 was 3.8%, versus 4.4% in the legislative assemblies⁵.

In most countries, women comprise over 50 percent of the population eligible to run for election and hold a seat in parliament⁶. However, as mentioned above, because of the many obstacles, the number of women who run and are elected is much lower. Furthermore, among the women themselves, some will be more capable of running for election and being elected. Family, money, socio-economic class and self-confidence are examples of factors that favour certain women over others. Using the responses obtained, we endeavoured to create a portrait of the respondents to identify what characterizes them and determine if they form a homogeneous group. Next, we looked at the profile of women in politics according to various studies.

Table 1: Women Executive Leaders of Government in the Americas to Date

Name	Country	Year(s)
Presidents		
Isabel Martinez de Peron	Argentina	1974-1976
Lidia Gueiler Tejada	Bolivia	1979-1980 (8 months)
Ertha Pascal-Trouillot	Haiti	1990-1991 (11 months)
Violeta Barrios de Chamorro	Nicaragua	1990-1997
Rosalía Arteaga Serrano	Ecuador	1997 (2 days)
Janet Jagan	Guyana	1997-1999
Mireya Moscoso de Arias	Panama	1999-2004
Michelle Bachelet	Chile	2006-2010
Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner	Argentina	2007-
Dilma Rousseff	Brazil	2010-
Laura Chinchilla	Costa Rica	2010-
Prime ministers		
Mary Eugenia Charles	Dominica	1980-1995
Kim Campbell	Canada	1993 (5 months)
Beatriz Merino Lucero	Peru	2003 (6 months)
Portia Simpson-Miller	Jamaica	2006-2007

SOURCE: Women World Leaders, <http://www.terra.es/personal2/monolitj/00women.htm>

⁴ IPU, *Women in Parliament in 2009: The Year in Perspective*, <http://www.ipu.org/news-e/wop/37/5.htm>.

⁵ Mathiason, John (2005), *What Went Wrong With the Women's Revolution? Factors Impeding Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action*, Maxwell School of Citizens and Public Affairs, Syracuse University.

⁶ Manon Tremblay (dir.), *Femmes et parlements : Un regard international*, Remue-ménage, Montréal, 2005, p. 10.

2.1 Portrait of the Women Surveyed

The parliamentarians were first queried on their main pathways into politics. Specifically, they were asked to indicate the extent to which their education, interpersonal relations, employment, union activities and community involvement had influenced their choice of a political career. Over 80% of the women confirmed that their community activities had greatly influenced their involvement in politics. As for their education, 64% also stated that it had strongly influenced their decision. In fact, Diva Hadamira Gastelum, President of the Network, noted during the interview that her university studies in law had helped sensitize her to gender issues and motivated her to become politically active to improve the living conditions of women. The surveyed parliamentarians also answered a question concerning their motivation to seek office. In general, their principle motivation was the desire to serve their country, since all of the women surveyed answered that this reason greatly influenced their decision to run for election. Several also mentioned improving the living conditions of their country's citizens as a reason for undertaking a political career. Conversely, few indicated being driven by a desire to participate in decisions impacting their own lives. Also, level of self-confidence seems to be a factor they all agreed on, with 86% indicating that it had positively influenced their decision. As well, 92% of the women surveyed indicated that their level of experience in areas related to representation, such as the ability to give public speeches and develop networks of contacts, had definitely had an impact. So, overall, the respondents appear to be women with a good level of education and high degree of self-confidence who already had relevant aptitudes and abilities when they entered politics.

How have your past experiences influenced your choice of a political career?

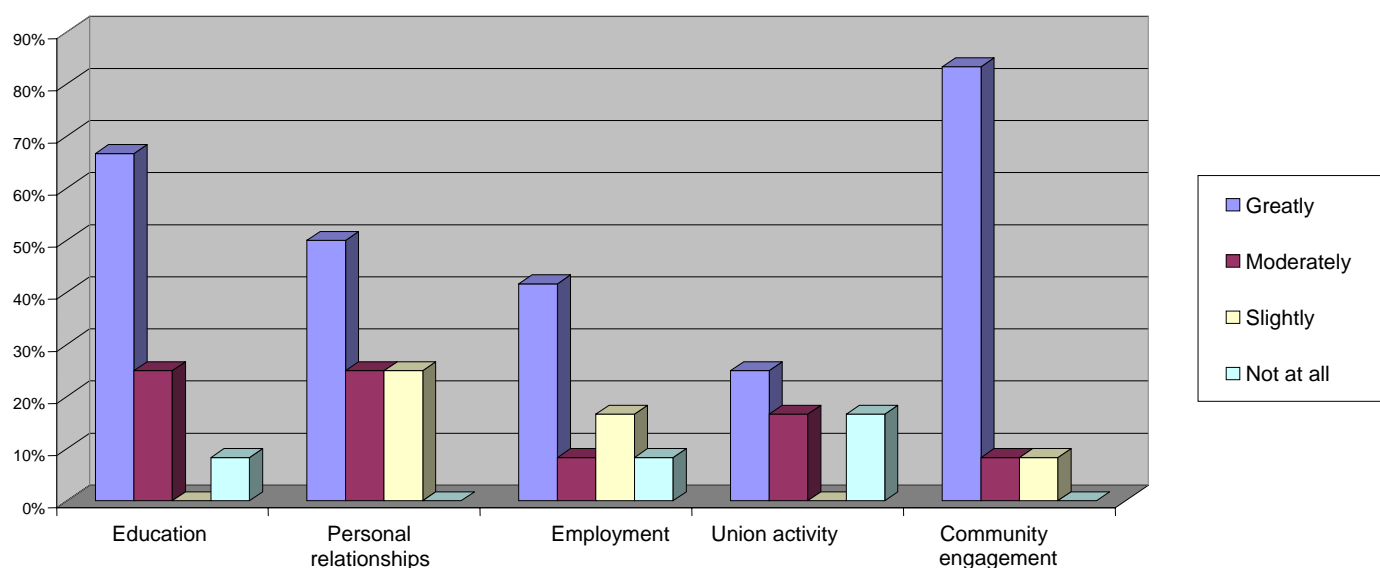


Figure 1: Influence of Past Experiences on Choosing a Career in Politics

2.2 Who Are the Women in Politics?

The studies reveal that, on the whole, women in politics are much better educated than their male colleagues. And a survey conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) among 272 men and women parliamentarians around the world confirms this finding. Fifty percent of the women respondents had a graduate university degree and 35% an undergraduate degree. An appreciably lower percentage of the men respondents had achieved the same levels of education. Women politicians also often come from professions “at the top of the job market hierarchy⁷.” They are lawyers, directors, businesswomen, doctors, university professors, economists and psychologists. They therefore have access to significantly higher incomes than women in general. For the most part, they have also had a long history of involvement in civil society and other levels of politics before entering parliament⁸. These characteristics correspond with the responses obtained from the women in the Network, who confirm that their education and community involvement greatly influenced their entry into politics.

The data therefore show that the portrait of women in politics does not closely resemble that of women in general⁹. Women in politics also typically share similarities with their male colleagues. They belong to

⁷ Manon Tremblay, *100 questions sur les femmes en politique*, Remue-Ménage, Montréal, 2008, p. 199.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

“an elite group¹⁰” just like the men. This could be explained by the fact that, to be accepted in a mostly male environment, women must have exceptional qualifications. Consequently, it is incorrect to believe that the women and men in politics form two opposite groups and that the women resemble each other and are different from men who are similar to each other.

2.3 Role of Women Parliamentarians in Improving Women’s Participation in Politics

Even though women parliamentarians have a profile that distinguishes them from women in general, they still have a role to play in improving women’s participation in politics. In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked the following open question: As a woman parliamentarian, how can you contribute to fostering the participation of women in politics? The most frequent response was consultation and information for women through various means, such as conferences, round tables and consultation sessions. In a way, there seems to be an understanding that to interest women in politics, they must be shown that politics can work for them. It is also necessary to find out their points of view and ideas. Finally, a number of respondents mentioned that mentoring programs could be an effective means of familiarizing new recruits with the world of politics.

The questionnaire responses show that to encourage women to participate in politics, the parliamentarians must actively defend women’s interests. They must use their prerogatives to promote the place of women in politics and improvement of women’s status. To that end, several mentioned the importance of their role as legislators and propose both creating and reinforcing laws pertaining to gender equality. Others affirmed that they have an obligation to use their role of control to ensure that the government takes concrete actions. The respondents thus seem mindful of representing women’s interests in carrying out their duties as members of parliament.

3. The Factors Influencing the Election of Women

Anyone, whether woman or man, wanting to be elected to parliament must go through four steps. In other words, to sit in parliament, a person must have the ability to do so, decide to run, be selected by a political party and, finally, be chosen by voters to represent them¹¹. A person’s eligibility and recruitment concern the person’s ability and willingness to run for election, whereas the person’s

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹¹ Norris, Pippa and Joni Lovenduski (1995). “Pathways to Parliament,” *Talking Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 90-94.

selection and election depend instead on the desire expressed by voters and the parties to retain that person's candidacy. The process of accessing parliament can thus be viewed in terms of the economic model of supply and demand and, in each of these steps, women face a multitude of obstacles. In general, we can say that most of the obstacles are the same for everyone, but they do not occur everywhere in the same way or to the same degree. However, the importance of these obstacles varies according to the context in each country. Indeed, women who want to enter into politics often face a political, public, cultural and social environment that is hostile to them. Therefore, in this section of the report, we will consider those factors which can influence women's entry into politics. In order to simplify our analysis, the factors will be organized into three categories: socio-economic, political and cultural.

3.1 Socio-economic Factors

Since the first step for a woman is to decide to run for election, she must see opportunities for her to do so. Indeed, a woman's willingness to undertake a political career will be affected by the number of opportunities available, the political environment and the possibility for her to amass the resources to conduct an election campaign. So her social and financial status in society has a direct impact on her participation in the political process. In fact, the improvement in women's living conditions has been the main reason for the significant advances made in women's representation in politics over the past few decades¹². In this part of the report, we will therefore consider advances in the financial and social conditions of women in the Americas that have contributed to the increase in the number of women in politics. Specifically, we will look at women's education and their entry into the job market and the creation of alternate structures.

The survey results show that the above three factors had a significant impact on the respondents' decision to undertake a political career. Ninety-two percent of them affirmed that level of education had a positive influence and 85% noted the same for access to employment. Conversely, 77% of the women stated that the double workload of domestic and professional responsibilities could dissuade women from beginning a political career. In this section, we will also consider the financial constraints faced by women wanting to hold parliamentary office.

¹² Joni Lovenduski and Azza Karam, *Les femmes au Parlement : faire la différence*, IDEA, Stockholm, 2003, p. 174.

3.1.1 Education and Entry into the Job Market

Increasing education and employment among women has certainly had a major effect in correcting the situation. Indeed, eligibility and involvement in politics depends in part on access to certain facilities such as education, income and free time¹³. By spending more time in school and university, women acquire skills and knowledge that make them more qualified. Furthermore, it is quite clear that education also increases women's self-esteem. As a consequence, they feel more able to fulfill a parliamentary mandate and compete with other individuals. In short, access to learning frees women from their household constraints and opens the door for them to political representation by giving them greater self-esteem and tools to undertake a political career. Thus everything leads one to believe that gender-related disparities in education have impeded women's entry into the world of politics. However, there is cause for celebration since in the Americas practically no more gender-related differences exist in the literacy rate of 15 to 24 year-olds¹⁴.

In addition to being better educated than before, women are also holding jobs in greater numbers. Women's participation in the active population has consistently proven to have a significant impact on the proportion of women taking part in political life. In fact, leaving the household and entering into the active population undoubtedly awakens women's political awareness and leads to an increase in the number of women likely to benefit from an experience of activism and training within professional and union organizations. Added to that is the opportunity to build networks and contacts and develop abilities which could be useful in politics.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹⁴ UN Women, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/session/presskit/fs2.htm>.

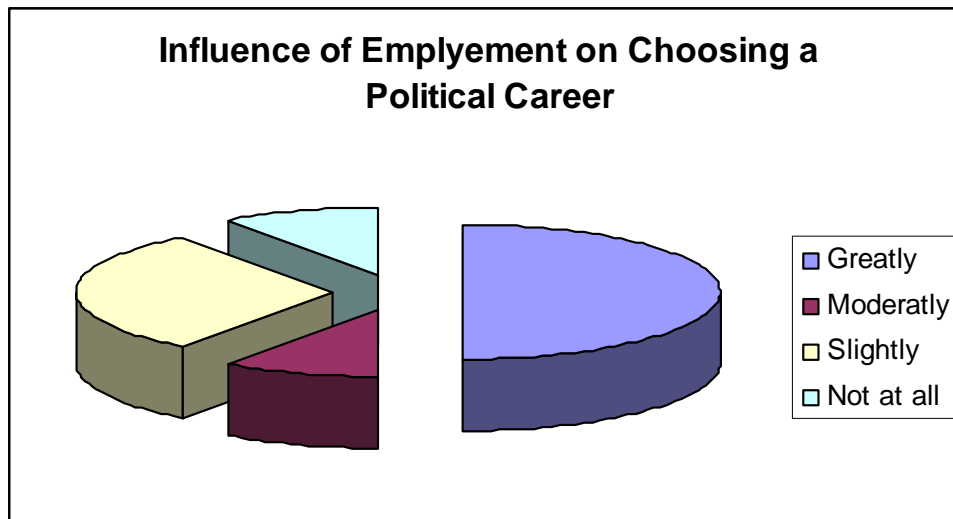


Figure 2: Impact of Employment on Choosing a Political Career

3.1.2 Alternate Structures

Almost everywhere in the world, most domestic duties are the woman's responsibility. How can women participate in political life when they often have only one choice, namely survive and provide for the most basic needs of their family? Indeed, many of them are both wives and mothers and work full-time jobs. It is nearly impossible to consider aspiring to political office under these conditions.

Furthermore, parliamentary agendas rarely pay any attention to creating structures that make it easier for mothers to access the job market and, in particular, parliamentary work¹⁵. Many women parliamentarians struggle to balance their family life with the demands of their duties as elected officials, which involve long hours, travel and sometimes a lack of material support¹⁶. Moreover, the results of the above-mentioned IPU survey show that all of the women respondents felt that family responsibilities were the main dissuasive factor for women when beginning a political career¹⁷. Conversely, for the men surveyed, family responsibilities were not much of a discouraging factor.

Given the above, gradually putting in place alternate structures to lighten women's family responsibilities can only facilitate and encourage their entry into politics¹⁸. Daycare centres are a perfect example of this type of alternate structure. The impact of family responsibilities on the political ambitions of women is clearly highlighted in certain studies, which have shown that a country which

¹⁵ Azza Karam (dir.), *Au-delà du nombre, Obstacles à la participation politique des femmes*, IDEA, Stockholm, 1998, p. 30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁷ IPU, *Equality in Politics: A Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments*, 2008, Geneva, p. 12.

¹⁸ Richard E. Matland (1998). "Women's Representation in National Legislatures: Developed and Developing Countries." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 23(1): 109-125.

invests in the social and economic development of its communities, for instance by offering alternate structures for families, indirectly promotes women's representation in parliament.

3.1.3 Financial Constraints and the Difficulty of Conducting a Campaign

A report by the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), which draws on the results of a meeting of experts held in December 2007, sheds light on the obstacles women candidates face to finance their campaign¹⁹. Indeed, as cited by several female political leaders during interviews for iKNOW Politics, election campaigns are quite costly and a lack of financial resources can represent a major obstacle to winning an election²⁰.

It is true that the question of funding affects both women and men candidates in elections. However, women face particular difficulties. For example, they rarely control their family's financial resources. As a result, when they decide to run for election, they often hesitate to invest the family's resources, take out loans or risk their own capital. This is all the more true when you consider that they must outlay money at the very start of a campaign and even beforehand. MP Maria Elena Torresi, Regional Representative of the Southern Cone, in fact mentioned during her interview that even for women parliamentarians, it was sometimes difficult to obtain their fair share of the funding. They have to assert themselves loudly and clearly to ensure they obtain the money to which they are entitled.

As such, even with regard to public funds, there may be an imbalance between men and women. Women often have less power within their political party, which controls the distribution of funds.

The influence of electoral campaign costs on the political participation of women is context-specific. It varies based on whether measures have been adopted that work in favour of women, such as public funding, quota systems, and imposed limits on electoral spending, campaign periods and donations. "In contexts where women are not supported by these measures, economic investment at the campaign stage becomes more important and relevant to the running of successful electoral candidacies²¹." To this effect, during their interviews for iKNOW Politics, some women proposed discriminatory measures,

¹⁹ WEDO, http://www.wedo.org/?search-class=DB_CustomSearch_Widget-db_customsearch_widget&widget_number=preset-default&all-4=Library&cs-all-0&cs-all-1=Political+Participation&cs-Media_Type-2&cs-Resource_Type-3&cs-Publication_Year-5&cs-Publication_Year-6&cs-Publication_Year-7&search=Search

²⁰ iKNOW Politics, <http://www.iknowpolitics.org/news/interviews>

²¹ Marcela Tovar Restrepo, "Campaign Finance for Women: Challenges, Incentives and Recommendations," in IPU Reports and Documents No. 62, "Is Parliament Open to Women? An Appraisal" (Geneva, 2010), p.38. Available online at <www.ipu.org/PDF/publications/wmn09-e.pdf>.

i.e. funding to allow women politicians to increase their chances in order to guarantee that public funding be fairly distributed.

As to the question posed to iKNOW Politics regarding economic constraints, we can conclude that a lack of financial resources may constitute a major obstacle to achieving lasting parity in parliament. Yet there do exist financial strategies that could help women overcome this hurdle and increase their participation in parliament.

3.2 Political Factors

In September 2009, during the Annual Meeting of the Network of Women Parliamentarians in Salta, Argentina, a first part of the report on the theme of the political participation of women was presented. This document detailed the effects of different types of electoral systems and examined the role of the political parties as a vector of women's political participation. Since the electoral system and the political parties' role are the most decisive political factors, we will briefly discuss the report's conclusions in this section. Other variables of the political regimes, such as the number of seats and the renewal and plurality of mandates, will also be quickly reviewed in order to measure their impact on women's political participation. Before explaining the impact of all of these factors, we will endeavour to determine if there is a link between the "quality of the democracy" and the proportion of women holding a parliamentary seat.

3.2.1 Democracy and Women Parliamentarians

In the questionnaire distributed to the women in the Network, 79% of the respondents affirmed that the character of their nation's democracy positively contributed to increasing the number of women undertaking a political career in their country. This result can no doubt be explained by the fact that the principles underlying a representative democracy imply that a certain number of women will hold a parliamentary position. It is essential for the legitimacy of the institutions. However, in reality, we note that countries face a lack of gender parity in their democratization processes. Only the Nordic countries, recognized for the quality of their democratic governance, tend to confirm the existence of a link between democracy and a strong proportion of women parliamentarians²².

²² Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark respectively rank 4th, 7th, 8th and 13th globally.

Moreover, higher female representation does not necessarily indicate a greater recognition of gender equality. As Diva Gastelum, Network President, mentioned in her interview, not only must there be large numbers of candidates, but they must also be able to take their rightful place on the political scene. In conclusion, despite the imbalance between the level of democratic life and the number of women in parliament, it is undeniable that to claim a system is democratic, the number of women in parliaments must be representative of society.

3.2.2. The Electoral Systems

Understanding the effects of the different types of electoral systems on the political representation of women is crucial to devising strategies aimed at expanding their contribution and developing their ability to participate in political life. An electoral system can be defined in broad terms as the series of rules governing the organization of elections in a state²³. By virtue of these rules, the votes cast during an election are translated into seats won by candidates and parties. As a result, the electoral systems' configuration can significantly impact women's representation in politics. In the questionnaire, 85% of the respondents affirmed that their electoral system had a positive influence on the number of women parliamentarians in their country.

To simplify our analysis, we have grouped the electoral systems into three major categories: plurality/relative majority, semi-proportional, and proportional. The plurality system is used to attribute the seat or seats to the candidate who obtains the majority of votes in a constituency. Unlike proportional voting, plurality systems are often perceived as being unfavourable to women. The main reasons for this perception are the method for selecting candidates and the limited number of seats involved in this voting method. Indeed, the uninominal majority voting system, which is the most common variant of this type of electoral system, requires that each electoral district be represented by only one person. Consequently, there is considerable pressure to select a candidate who is viewed as most likely to win²⁴. However, according to several studies, not all candidates are equal in this game since an informal model guides the process of selecting a perceived winning candidate. This informal model seems to include few women, corresponding more to the profile and experiences of men²⁵. So it is not plurality voting systems as such that are unfavourable to the election of women but rather the

²³ Andrew Reynolds and Ben Reilly, *Electoral System Design: The International IDEA Handbook*, International IDEA, Stockholm, 2002.

²⁴ André-Paul Frogner and Anne-Sylvie Berck, "Les systèmes électoraux : types et effets politiques," A. Laurent, P. Delfosse, A-P. Frogner (dir.), *Les systèmes électoraux : permanences et innovations*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2004, pp. 25-46.

²⁵ Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski (1989), "Pathways to Parliament," *Talking Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 90-94.

situation created by the predominance of an informal winning-candidate model combined with the obligation for political parties to retain only one candidate per electoral district. In this area, the good will of the political groups is essential to increasing the number of women parliamentarians.

Unlike the plurality system, proportional representation is considered favourable to the election of women. Thus, in the Americas, Costa Rica and Argentina, which respectively have 38.60% and 38.50% women in their parliaments, have a proportional voting system. It is a general characteristic of list systems that appears to contribute to making them more favourable to the election of women. Whereas uninominal majority voting systems are limited to one candidate per party in each electoral district, proportional voting involves several candidates per party in each district. Given this fact, "it is not very strategic from an electoral standpoint to present a uniform team comprised of only men²⁶." However, application of proportional voting does not clearly stand out as favouring women's representation in the specific cases of Brazil and Colombia, which each have no more than 10% women in their lower chambers. Therefore, despite the characteristics of proportional systems that are favourable to women's political participation, there are many other factors that impact the election of women and they are not only political in nature but also socio-cultural and economic. Furthermore, the impact of the voting methods on the number of women parliamentarians also depends on the players using them, i.e. the political parties²⁷.

Finally, the semi-proportional system is characterized by the fact that one parliamentary party is elected by proportional vote and another by plurality vote. In America, the existing mixed electoral systems are compensatory, i.e. seats from the proportional voting can be used to compensate any disproportionality in the district seats. Consequently, the performance of mixed voting in terms of increasing the number of women parliamentarians falls midway between the proportional and plurality systems²⁸. To sum up, certain aspects of a voting method impact the relationships between women and political power. However, social and historical context, political culture and women's status in a society are still influential factors in the level of women's representation in politics.

²⁶ Manon Tremblay, *Op. cit.*, p. 120.

²⁷ Matland, Richard E., *Enhancing Women's Political Participation*, IDEA, Stockholm, 2005.

²⁸ Ferrara, Federico, Erik S. Herron and Misa Nishikawa (2005). *Mixed Electoral Systems. Contamination and Its Consequences*, New-York, Palgrave Macmillan.

3.2.3 The Political Parties

While the questionnaire respondents seemed to consider their electoral system as a positive factor, their responses were mixed regarding the political parties' influence. Fifty percent of the respondents believe that the support of their political party had a positive impact whereas 42% believe the opposite. This type of result shows that a political party's impact on the proportion of women in politics can be either negative or positive, depending on the party's values and rules.

In most parliamentary systems, the political parties are the primary means by which candidates are elected. At present, most of the candidates put forward by the political parties are men. According to a study by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), in the Americas, only 25% of the electoral candidates are women²⁹. However, the characteristics of the candidates presented by the political parties in power have a significant impact on the make-up of the legislature. The candidate nomination procedures vary from one country to the next and can be distinguished by several characteristics, such as the level of participation and centralization or decentralization of the process. However, regardless of the type of process, we note that the winning candidate sought after very often has qualifications and experience gained in male dominated fields. As previously explained, the informal winning-candidate model is more favourable to men. This model does not necessarily involve recruitment of the most competent candidates and does not allow voters to choose from a representative sampling of the population.

The political parties can choose formal, explicit rules to select their candidates or informal, unstated rules known by the participants. It has been shown that a selection process guided by rules is more favourable to women since it enables them to take the process into account and use the rules to their advantage. In addition, the more institutionalized parties discuss and debate their rules more frequently, which allows women to propose parameters better suited to selecting female candidates³⁰. Conversely, less institutionalized parties rely on a process that lends itself more to endorsement and in which nominations can give an advantage to individuals with personal connections and an influential network. Given their more recent entry into politics relative to men, women have less political capital and less access to these networks. On the other hand, informal rules can allow more flexibility and

²⁹ Vivian Rauza, Beatriz Llanos and Gisela Garzon de la Roza, *Partidos políticos y paridad, La educación pendiente*, IDEA, Stockholm, 2010, p. 48.

³⁰ Richard Matland, *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

provide more opportunities to adapt and respond to the realities of women. However, the gains can be volatile and easily reversible during subsequent elections.

3.2.4 Other Political Factors

The documentary sources frequently mention that women's underrepresentation can also be explained by the lack of positions available. Indeed, for there to be recruitment and selection of candidates for legislative elections, there must first be positions to be filled. However, the number of available positions is limited by two phenomena: the number of parliamentarians renewing their mandate and plurality of mandates.

Parliamentarians running for re-election often win more easily because they have well-established networks and their names are well-known³¹. They thus have greater social and political capital. At present, 83% of the parliamentarians in the world are men. So, in a context where the number of available seats is limited, the existing parliamentarians are preventing new people from accessing parliament. It would therefore be logical to propose limiting the number of consecutive mandates in order to increase the number of women in the parliaments.

Plurality of mandates, which makes it possible to hold multiple political portfolios simultaneously, can also impede renewal of the political ranks and, consequently, women's entry into politics. Studies have also shown that the number of parliamentary seats plays a role in the proportion of women in parliament. In fact, there is a strong relationship between the number of seats to be filled in an electoral district and the number of men and women candidates that a political party elects. The more seats a party wins in a district, the more women there are who reach parliament³².

³¹ Manon Tremblay (dir.), *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

³² Manon Tremblay, *Op. cit.*, p. 200.

Table 2: Electoral Systems of the Lower and Single Chambers of the Countries in the Americas, and Number of Seats

<u>Country</u>	<u>Electoral system</u>	<u>Number of seats</u>	<u>Percentage of women in parliament (%)</u>
Antigua and Barbuda	Plurality	19	10.50
Argentina	Proportional	257	38.50
Bahamas	Plurality	41	12.20
Barbados	Plurality	30	10.00
Belize	Plurality	32	0
Bolivia	Mixed	130	25.40
Brazil	Proportional	44	8.60
Canada	Plurality	308	22.10
Chile	Plurality	120	14.20
Colombia	Proportional	166	12.77
Costa Rica	Proportional	57	38.60
Cuba	Plurality	614	43.20
Dominica	Plurality	32	12.50
El Salvador	Proportional	84	19.00
Ecuador	Proportional	124	32.30
United States	Plurality	435	16.80
Grenada	Plurality	15	13.30
Guatemala	Mixed	158	12.00
Guyana	Proportional	70	30.00
Haiti	Plurality	18	11.10
Honduras	Mixed	560	18.00
Jamaica	Plurality	60	13.30
Mexico	Mixed	500	26.20
Nicaragua	Proportional	92	20.70
Peru	Proportional	130	21.5
Panama	Mixed	71	8.50
Paraguay	Proportional	80	12.50
Dominican Republic	Proportional	183	20.80
St. Kitts-Nevis	Plurality	15	6.70
St. Lucia	Plurality	18	11.10
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	Plurality	21	14.30
Surinam	Proportional	51	9.80
Trinidad and Tobago	Plurality	42	28.60
Uruguay	Proportional	99	15.20
Venezuela	Mixed	165	17.00

SOURCE: IPU, "Women in National Parliaments, Situation as of April 30, 2011," <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

3.3 Cultural Factors

“Culture refers to the values, standards, beliefs and attitudes that control a society and its institutions and that are inspiration for the population’s ways of being, talking and doing³³.” It exerts a specific influence on the political participation of women independently of the other factors. Consequently, in two countries with similar development levels but very different cultures, there can be a significant gap in the progress toward equality. The political culture, the perception of the gender roles, the image conveyed by the media, and religion are the key determining factors for women’s representation in parliament.

3.3.1 The Perception of Roles and the Patriarchal Culture

The patriarchal culture, which still exists in most societies in the Americas, establishes a hierarchy between men and women in which the men are favoured³⁴. In fact, in a patriarchal system, because of their dominant position, men determine the role that women play in society³⁵. Thus, in those societies where patriarchal and hierarchical norms play a central role, people believe that a woman’s most important contribution to society is in the domestic sphere. Furthermore, the emphasis placed on the family responsibilities assumed by women is reinforced by the dominant cultural view of the woman’s role in society. This represents a major difficulty for women wanting to have a political career. Indeed, MP Lopez Quintana, Network Representative for Central America, affirmed during her individual interview that this patriarchal culture results in a belief that women are incapable of holding political office. She feels this is one of the biggest obstacles to women’s political participation in her country.

Despite their different history, traditions and values, “societies throughout the world agree on the idea of a division between the public space and private space, attributing to them roles and duties based on gender which vary depending on the society³⁶.” Consequently, 57% of the women surveyed mentioned that the expected social roles and stereotypes negatively impacted women’s participation in politics. Because of this deeply rooted way of thinking in the populations, women often don’t have the support of those around them when they decide to enter politics. This lack of support is another dissuading factor: 93% of the respondents indicated that the socialization and education they received greatly

³³ Manon Tremblay, “Democracy, Representation, and Women: A Comparative Analysis”, *Democratization*, 14, 4, 2007, 533-553.

³⁴ Eisestein, Z., *Contemporary Feminist Thought*, Unwin, London, 1984.

³⁵ Adrienne Rich, *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Virago Press, London, 1997.

³⁶ Nadezhda Shvedova, *Obstacles à la participation politique des femmes au parlement*, IDEA, Stockholm, 2003, p. 20.

influenced their decision to become a politician. In her interview, Network President Diva Gastelum in fact mentioned that the education she received from her parents helped her have the necessary confidence and combativeness to undertake a political career.

3.3.2 The Political Culture

The political culture is the main reason traditionally associated with the lack of women in parliaments. Politics are often seen as a world of confrontation not suited to women and contrary to their traditional socialization. It is believed that women do not have the ability to be good political leaders in a world where the masculine model is predominant. In fact, politics would change the women long before they managed to change politics³⁷. “Political life is organized around the values of men and their lifestyle³⁸.” The existence of this masculine model leads to women rejecting masculine-style politics and politics in general. In this respect, 38% of the women responded that their perception of politics as a masculine environment had a negative influence when they began their political career. One of the respondents in fact stated that to increase women’s political participation, we needed to remove the stereotypes from the collective consciousness and demonstrate that women are capable of performing diverse functions in society. Furthermore, in response to an open question asking the women of the Network what advice they would give to a woman getting ready to begin a political career, several stated that politics is a difficult environment and that it takes courage and perseverance. It seems that despite women’s entry into politics, changes are still needed for them to feel truly welcome.

3.3.3 The Media

The media are a population’s main source of political information. So the way in which the news is reported and the interpretive framework provided by the media have a significant impact on public opinion³⁹. Furthermore, the media have the ability to direct public attention and decide the importance given to different news events. Because of this power, they can either impede or impel women’s participation in politics.

³⁷ Manon Tremblay, *Op. cit.*, p. 100.

³⁸ Nadezhda Shvedova, *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

³⁹ Beatriz Llanos, Juana Nina, *Election Coverage from a Gender Perspective*, A Media Monitoring Manual, IDEA, Stockholm, 2011, p. 6.

The studies conducted so far show that the media treat women in politics not only differently but often in a stereotyped and negative manner while at the same time giving them less coverage⁴⁰. In fact, as notes author Manon Tremblay:

“... despite the fact that women politicians operate in the public realm, the media have a tendency to associate them with the private universe of the family. Their interests are therefore those that confirm their traditional family roles⁴¹.”

This type of media framing can give rise to questions about the women’s competence and their ability to handle traditionally masculine responsibilities. For example, during the 2008 race for the Democratic nomination in the United States, critics raised doubts about Hilary Rodham Clinton’s ability fulfill the role of Commander in Chief of the US Armed Forces⁴². And from a more quantitative perspective, the media generally devote less time and space to women politicians than their male counterparts. Furthermore, they place a disproportionate importance on the women’s appearance—clothing, makeup, hairstyle—to the detriment of their ideas and achievements.

Obviously, this portrait of the media coverage of women politicians requires some qualification. For example, the media can also contribute to enhancing the image of women politicians in those areas typically considered to be reserved for women. In the questionnaire, the parliamentarians were asked if the image of women and men conveyed by the media positively or negatively influenced women’s participation in politics. Half of the respondents felt that it was positive while the other half thought it was negative.

4. Public Initiatives

4.1 Quotas

Several American states have imposed quotas on the political parties, forcing them to put forward a minimal proportion of women candidates for the elections. These initiatives are intended to reverse the parties’ tendency to present an insufficient number of women, which creates an obstacle to increasing the number of women elected. The data show that most countries which have introduced a quota system have a higher percentage of women in politics than the others. There is also a consensus in the

⁴⁰ In particular, see: Pippa Norris (dir.) (1997). *Women, Media and Politics*, New York, Oxford University Press, Kahn, Kim Fridkin (1996). *The Political Consequences of Being a Woman. How Stereotypes Influence the Conduct and Consequences of Political Campaigns*, New York, Columbia University Press.

⁴¹ Manon Tremblay, *Op. cit.*, p. 101.

⁴² Beddall, Kate (2008). “Hillary Clinton fustige le ‘sexisme’ dans la campagne,” *Le Devoir*, May 21, p. A5.

documentary sources regarding the effectiveness of quotas for addressing the exclusion of women from the political structures. In fact, in Latin America where quotas are quite widely used, two-thirds of the population considers them beneficial for ensuring the political participation of women⁴³.

However, there is still some controversy surrounding the use of quotas. For example, in Canada, the political parties seem reluctant to implement positive measures such as quotas to promote the presence of women in politics. One of the arguments raised against quotas is that they are a form of discrimination, which runs counter to the principle of the most competent candidate. Nevertheless, others maintain that they are instead a means of compensating for the structural barriers facing women which prevent fair competition between the candidates. Those in favour of quotas also note that in addition to the quantitative results, quotas have a beneficial effect since they serve to focus the public's attention and concern on the inequalities between the genders.

There are mainly two types of quotas: those imposed by the Constitution or a law and those that the parties require themselves to adopt. In Latin America, the most common quotas are those mandated by a law. However, some countries, such as Costa Rica and Ecuador, have included this obligation in their Constitution. The manner in which the rule is established plays a big part in the results that can be obtained. Setting a certain percentage of candidates does not necessarily mean that it will produce a similar percentage of seats held by women. For example, some political parties will respect the law but not its spirit by placing women candidates at the bottom of the lists or in districts where they have little chance of winning. So, to ensure the effectiveness of quotas, other measures must be taken, such as sanctions and rules regarding the order of the candidates on the lists for proportional systems. For example, in Bolivia, the law states that for every three candidates on the list, one must be a woman. When the list is open, as is the case in Brazil and Panama, voters have much more latitude. In other words, it is the voters who decide on the placement of the winners. In these cases, the political culture is often dominant and the male candidates remain the most favoured. In Rwanda, which leads the world in women's political participation and had, as of 2008, 48.8% women parliamentarians, things are done differently: a specific number of seats are reserved for women⁴⁴.

⁴³ *Implementations of Quotas: Latin America Experiences*, IDEA, Stockholm, 2003, p.20.

⁴⁴ IPU, "Women in National Parliaments, Situation as of April 30, 2011," <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-f/world.htm>.

Of the women responding to the questionnaires, 67% indicated that laws establishing quotas for women's political participation are an initiative with a positive impact. As for quotas set by political parties, 82% qualified them as an initiative with a positive impact. Unquestionably, quotas are a good means of quickly remedying the situation and increasing the number of women in parliaments. However, other measures must also be taken at the same time to improve the status of women in society and politics.

Table 3. Quotas in the Lower and Single Chambers of the Americas

Country	Year quotas implemented/ source	Percentage (%)	Proportion of women elected (%)	Closed or open list	Placement rules	Sanction
Argentina	1991/law	30	39	Closed	Yes	Exclusion of the electoral list
Bolivia	1997/law	33	25	Closed	Yes	Exclusion of the electoral list
Brazil	1997/law	30	9	Open	No	Candidates from the overrepresented gender can be removed
Costa Rica	1997/Constitution	40	39	Closed	No	Exclusion of the electoral list
Ecuador	1997/law 2008/Constitution	50	32	Closed	Yes	Don't know
Guyana	?/Law	33	30	Closed	No	Exclusion of the electoral list
Mexico	1996/Law	30	26	Closed	No	Exclusion of the electoral list
Panama	1997/Law	30	8	Open	No	Don't know
Paraguay	1996/Law	20	13	Closed	Yes	Exclusion of the electoral list
Peru	1997/Law	25 (1997) 30 (2001)	21.5	Open	No	The election commission reserves the right to reject a candidate
Dominican Republic	1997/Law	33	21	Closed	No	None
Uruguay	2009/The election law applies only to the 2014 election	33	15		Yes	Exclusion of the electoral list

SOURCE: <http://www.quotaproject.com>

4.2 Parliamentary Commissions Studying Gender Issues

According to the data of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, some sixty parliaments around the world have created a commission tasked with studying the issues of equal opportunity for men and women⁴⁵. Such commissions are able not only to promote strategies for increasing the proportion of women parliamentarians, but also to facilitate consideration in the parliamentary agenda of gender parity. As a result, women elected already who want to discuss gender issues have more latitude in a parliamentary proceeding where the positions taken can be less dictated by party discipline. A parliamentary commission can also play a role in ensuring crucial issues for women, such as increasing the number of women parliamentarians, are acted on. Parliamentarians have several options available to them for exercising their duty of control, such as the possibility of asking questions orally and in writing, as well as the right in certain parliaments to summon ministers and representatives of the government. Thus, parliamentary commissions can be an additional tool for achieving gender equality through the exercising of parliamentary control.

In many countries, these parliamentary commissions have been very successful. However, they face several challenges to be truly effective, such as coordinating with the other parliamentary commissions, civil society and other sectors of the country. They must also, at a minimum, exercise functions of observation and control⁴⁶. And some experts note that the advantages of a parliamentary commission on gender equality are even greater when the commission holds the power to legislate. In the questionnaire, 69% of the respondents considered a parliamentary commission dedicated to equality between women and men in their country a positive influence.

To sum up, creating a parliamentary commission to study gender issues allows for greater consideration of these matters within the walls of parliament. Bringing together men and women from different political parties to examine this subject makes it possible to more fully engage all parliamentarians in the rights of women.

⁴⁵ IPU, *The Role of Parliamentary Committees In Mainstreaming Gender and Promoting the Status of Women*, Geneva, 2006.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

5. Other Initiatives

5.1 The Political Parties

As mentioned above, the political parties play a decisive role with respect to the political representation of women. With that in mind, these organizations must bring forward multiple initiatives to increase the number of women parliamentarians if we hope to obtain significant results. In the past decade, and even before, some parties began adopting strategies to promote women's participation in politics. Among these strategies are the inclusion of gender equality in the parties' statutes and statements of principles, training and preparation programs for women, and women in the party leadership.

Including clauses or statements concerning gender equality in the political parties' documents can be an initial indicator of the importance the parties place on women's presence in politics. For example, in Costa Rica, a country which is doing quite well with respect to women's political representation, all of the political parties mention gender equality in their statutes⁴⁷. Furthermore, these principles of gender equality detailed in the parties' official documents also become crucial tools for women to hold the parties to their promises. For this reason, employing these types of measures can provide women with additional legitimacy when presenting and negotiating their demands with the other sectors represented in the parties.

Many political parties in the Americas have created an institutional space for women in their internal structure. These organizations can serve as an active branch of the party, mobilizing women voters and providing logistical support to women. They can also be a means of promoting gender equality, advise the party on related policies, and generally educate members on the importance of women's presence in politics and improving the status of women. However, their ability to function and their political weight depend on several factors, such as their level of coordination, the resources allocated by the party and their ability to mobilize. In practice, studies have shown that in numerous cases, these female organizations lack support from their party and their role is limited to a symbolic function. An assessment carried out by the National Democratic Institute revealed that, in the Americas, these organizations are often inactive or poorly functioning because they do not have a defined structure or a

⁴⁷ Beatriz Ilenaos and Kristen Sample, *Manual de buenas practicas para la participacion de mujeres en los partidos politicos latinoamericanos*, IDEA, Stockholm, 2008, p. 21.

working plan⁴⁸. Still, 91% of the questionnaire respondents indicated that establishing female networks within political parties is an initiative with a positive impact.

Lack of financial resources can be a significant barrier to women's access to electoral politics. In order to eliminate this barrier, some political parties commit to allocating part of their financial resources to promoting women's participation in politics. There are even four countries in the Americas—Brazil, Mexico, Costa Rica and Panama—that have passed legislation requiring political parties to earmark part their public funding for this cause. In this regard, the measures adopted by Brazil during the reform of its electoral law in 2009 are quite strict. Five percent of the public funding received by the parties must be reserved for developing and maintaining promotion and dissemination programs for women's political participation. The law also stipulates that partisan advertising must promote women's political participation by setting aside for women an amount of time determined by the party's national executive body, which must be at least 10% of the total time⁴⁹.

The political parties also have a role to play in increasing women's ability to become parliamentarians. In fact, they have the possibility of offering training to their members and militants and of providing them with the necessary tools to acquire certain skills. Of the women surveyed, 83% indicated that programs for developing female leadership have a positive impact on the political participation of women. Organizing seminars, conferences or courses to help women enter the world of politics is a very good way to strengthen their presence in politics. Aside from these training activities, the political parties could also make a point of recruiting candidates in those parts of society where there are greater concentrations of women. It would be beneficial for them to obtain candidates from such sectors as education and healthcare.

Finally, the political parties have an important role to play in improving the political participation of women because the same stereotypes and obstacles that exist in society can be found in their organizations. They have many options for correcting the situation. They must accept that change depends on them, and even though it may prove politically costly in the short term, there is no denying that the long-term results will be beneficial for all of society

⁴⁸ National Democratic Institute, <http://www.ndi.org/>

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Percentage of Women Who Qualify the Impact of These Private Initiatives as Positive for Women's Participation in Politics

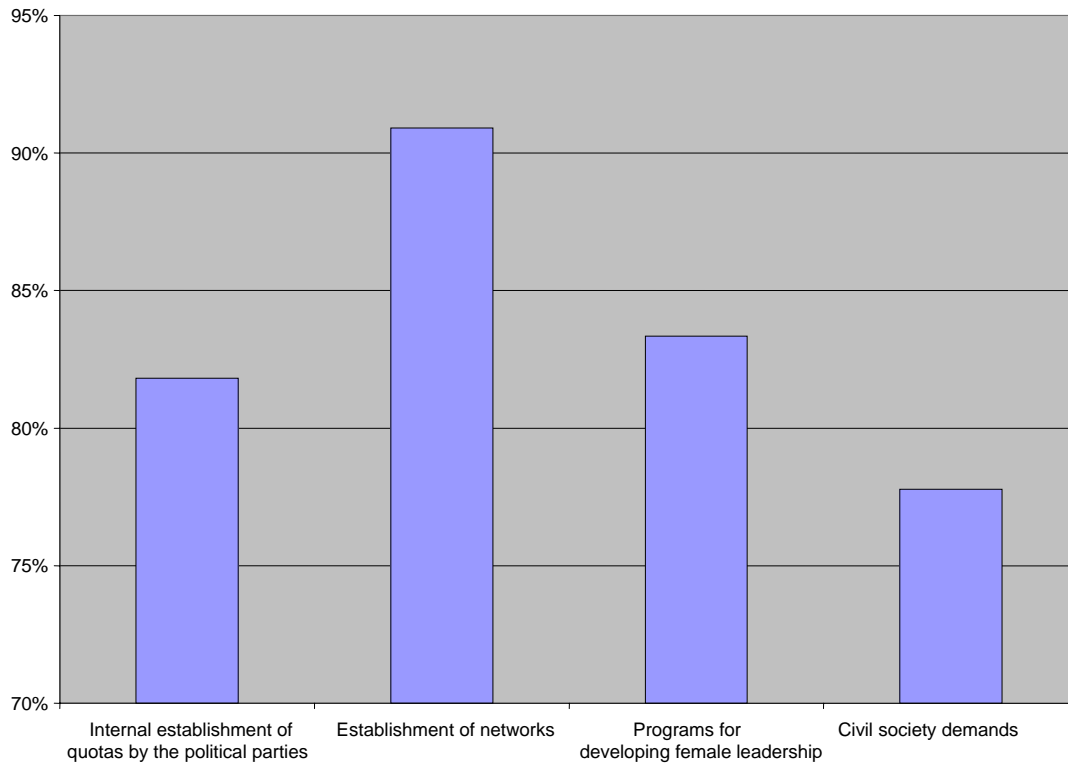


Figure 3: Impact of Private Initiatives on the Political Participation of Women

5.2 Civil Society

Civil society groups, such as nongovernmental and union organizations, can play a significant part in advancing the status of women. In the past, their actions have enabled numerous advances in various countries around the world. For example, the idea to impose quotas in Argentina originated from women's movements in civil society. Seventy-eight percent of the women who completed the questionnaire, indicated that the activism of civil society has a positive impact on women's participation in politics. The survey also contained an open question about what initiatives civil society could champion to increase women's participation in politics. One parliamentarian answered that it is essential for civil society to work to change the image conveyed by the media by denouncing programs which promote stereotypes and the image of women as sexual objects. Another parliamentarian mentioned that civil society needed to valorize the role of women as politicians. Finally, it was also

suggested that these organizations should support women aspiring to become candidates by enabling them to develop the required skills for a political career and helping them obtain the necessary resources for an election. So, as is the case with other societal issues, civil society has an important role to play with respect to education and awareness as well as training and support.

Conclusion

Given that there is a link between democracy and the right to equal participation in politics, increasing the place of women in the parliamentary institutions represents a key factor in democratic consolidation. It is important that women be represented in politics in a sufficient proportion that they are able to lead the parliaments of the Americas to consider socio-political issues from a gender perspective and include on the political agenda marginalized themes that mainly affect women. The Network's analysis of this issue has made it possible to explore the conditions under which women endeavour to access parliamentary duty and the various means possible for fostering greater representation of women in the parliaments of the Americas.

Our analysis of the situation and the obstacles leads us to conclude that much remains to be done in order for women to be fairly represented in parliaments, despite the improvements achieved over the past few decades. Both women and men parliamentarians therefore have a responsibility to remain vigilant in order to preserve the gains made and to encourage an ever greater number of women to become involved in politics. The questionnaire responses and our review of the various studies show that there are many options for improving women's political participation. And without a doubt, the Network has a role to play in this area. The practical workshop on political participation that will be held in conjunction with the Annual Meeting is an example of concrete action that can be taken. We could also target specific objectives and establish an action plan, promote solidarity among women, create mechanisms for communicating the actions taken in the parliaments of the Americas, or work in partnership with male parliamentarians to sensitize them to the women's cause. As well, the Network could play a monitoring role with the governments of the member countries. And we could consider ongoing follow-up of this issue in the Network to report on the various regional realities and the initiatives taken in the Americas relative to women's political participation. Furthermore, it would be in the interest of the Network's members to establish partnerships or collaborative arrangements with the leadership of the major organizations that are active in this area (UN Women, Inter-Parliamentary

Union) to promote information exchange, training and access to various resources. The current partnership initiated between iKNOW Politics and the Network, as well as the Network's collaboration on the regional warning system for women's political participation, which the United Nations Development Program is working to set up, are good examples of such initiatives. Finally, it would also be possible to conduct sub-regional seminars on women's participation in politics or related subjects such as strengthening leadership and the relationship with the media.

In conclusion, many options are available to us for encouraging women's representation and action in the parliaments of the Americas. Regardless of the approach chosen by the Network to define its contribution to encouraging women's participation in politics, it is important to remember that the parliamentarians can and must take action to increase the number of women taking part in political life.