



# Newsletter of the Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas

**MARCH 2012 - NOVEMBER 2012**

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News from the Network  
News from the President  
Themes of study for 2011-2012  
Articles from the members

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## **Diva Hadamira Gastélum**

### **SENATOR OF THE FEDERAL SENATE OF MEXICO**



**E**ver since my election as President of the Network, in Mar del Plata in 2010, I have insisted that the Network focus its efforts on two main objectives, namely, the dissemination of knowledge on key study themes aimed at the advancement of women and the strategic positioning of the Network through various activities.


In this newsletter, I proudly offer you an update on the activities carried out over the course of the past year, during which we strived for the advancement and consolidation of the Network and the achievement of tangible results.

Regarding the study themes, the rapporteurs did some fascinating work on "Women's Participation in Politics", "Poverty, Pay Equity and Economic Empowerment of Women" and "Water, Environment and the Status of Women". Mention should also be made of the contributions by parliamentarians to the various editions of the Network's Newsletter. Thanks to the support of the Mexican Congress, I was also able to publish, in several languages, "Women of the Americas" and "Women and armed movements in the Americas", which recount the history of women's involvement in the democratic consolidation of the Americas. Lastly, in keeping with our objective of producing tangible results, we published a map of comparative legislation showing the laws passed by the continent's nations prohibiting violence against women.

We have also worked on making the Network more widely known within the Americas and on the world stage. I was privileged to represent the Network in Turkey for the Global Summit of Women in 2011 and in Serbia for a UN meeting on human rights in 2012. The Network also established ties with organizations such as iknow politics, UN Women and, of course, the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) of the OAS. In fact, we participated in the Second Hemispheric Forum "Women's Full Citizenship for Democracy", organized by the CIM and held in Santo Domingo in July of 2012. This forum offered us the opportunity to lay the groundwork for future collaboration with the CIM, which plays an important role within the Inter-American system

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and focuses on the reinforcement of parliamentary committees dealing with gender equality issues. This event also allowed us to introduce the Network to more than 200 participants from over 20 countries.

We could not have achieved such positive results without your collaboration. In particular, I would like to thank the members of the Network's Executive Committee for their support, their hard work and their devotion to the Network. I also wish to thank all the parliamentarians who, through their contributions and their participation, have breathed life into the Network and helped strengthen it.

We will pursue our efforts in order to enable the Network to become an even more useful forum for women parliamentarians of the Americas, providing them with the tools and support they require in their role as representatives of the people.



## NEWS FROM THE NETWORK

**10TH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE NETWORK, QUÉBEC, CANADA, SEPTEMBER 6, 2011**



The Network's 10th Annual Meeting was held on September 6, 2011, with 50 participants in attendance. The meeting's main theme was Women's Commitment to a Better Future: Water, Poverty and Sustainable Development. This theme included two sub-themes under study for 2010-2012. To introduce the debate on the issue, two experts took the floor: Almas Jiwani, President of the National Committee of UN Women Canada, and Angélica De la Peña, Advisor on Women's and Children's Rights, Mexico.



Speakers and participants exchanged questions and opinions on different aspects of the theme, including the feminization of poverty, the privatization of water, the political representation of women and the role that women, especially parliamentarians, can play to improve the status of women.

Following the debate, the President introduced the meeting's special guest, Rocío García Gaytán, President of the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) of the Organization of American States (OAS). García Gaytán presented her commission's work and proposed initiating a collaboration between the Network and CIM.

The President of COPA and President of the National Assembly of Québec, Jacques Chagnon, welcomed the participants of this prominent meeting in Québec City.

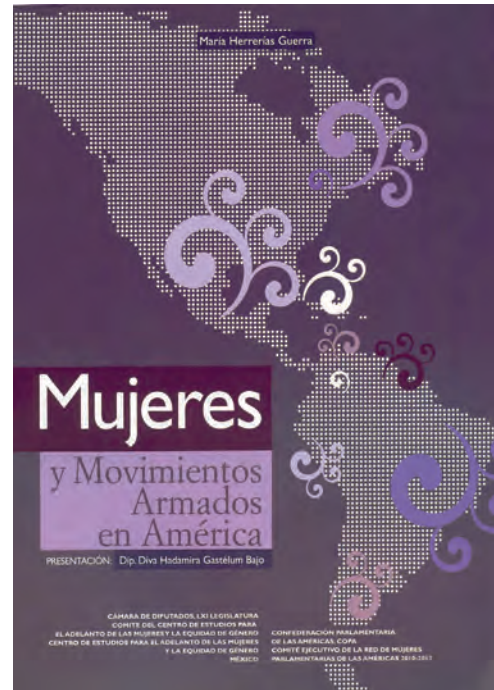
The Member of the National Assembly of Québec and Rapporteur of the Network on the theme of the political participation of women, Monique Richard, presented the main findings of a recent two-year study on this theme carried out by the Network.



Two draft resolutions were presented: the Draft Resolution on the Political Participation of Women and the Draft Resolution on Women's Commitment to a Better Future: Water, Poverty and Sustainable Development. Participants proposed and adopted amendments, and

subsequently adopted the final versions of the two texts.

Lastly, the President presented the research work prepared in the past year entitled Women and Armed Movements in the Americas. She specifically thanked Mexico's Centre for Studies on the Advancement of Women and Gender Equality, her committee members, and the Mexican Congress for their vital support. She emphasized that an important precedent has been set for the Network and COPA: the research relied on the organization's own bibliography and analytical information on women's advancements and contributions throughout the history of the Americas and thus these will become better known. The President concluded by announcing that a new research project entitled Women in the Americas would be presented at a future meeting held by COPA and the Network.



## MEETING OF THE NETWORK'S EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE, SAN JOSÉ, COSTA RICA, MARCH 16, 2012



The Network's Executive Committee met in San José, Costa Rica, on March 16, 2012.

The following Executive Committee members were present: Deputy Diva Hadamira Gastélum, Network President; Senator Norma Esparza Herrera, North American representative; Deputy Mireya Zamora Alvarado, Central American representative; Member of the National Assembly Monique Richard, representative of the founding Assembly and of the Network Secretariat; and Deputy Alicia Gutiérrez, representative of an interparliamentary organization.



The members approved a list of the 13 observers who would be allowed to sit in on the meeting.

The President outlined proposed collaborative projects between the Network and the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) of the Organization of American States (OAS), involving the Network's participation in CIM's Second Hemispheric Forum "Women's Full Citizenship for Democracy" and the organization of a panel discussion as part of that event; and the holding of a special consultation with the chairs of the parliamentary committees on gender equality and other parliamentarians as part of a broader collaborative project designed to strengthen the capacity of these committees.

The Executive Committee members approved the Network's participation in both events. As a preliminary to the CIM consultation, the then President led a discussion on parliamentary committees on gender equality. A number of parliamentarians provided an overview of the situation in their countries.

The Network's rapporteurs for the two work themes adopted for 2011–2012, "Poverty, pay equity and the economic empowerment of women" and "Water, the environment and the status of women", presented their initial findings and the state of affairs in their respective countries. They invited Network members to submit their ideas and comments to the Network Secretariat for consideration in drafting the final reports.

The proposed agenda for the next annual meeting was reviewed and approved. It was decided that the theme for the next meeting would be "Women parliamentarians of the Americas defending human rights".

The President presented two documents published by the Mexican Congress for the Network: a book on women of the Americas who have fought for women's rights and equality, and a comparative analysis chart of the federal statutes of countries of the Americas that promote women's access to justice and the right to a violence-free life.



MNA and Network Secretariat representative Monique Richard presented a draft motion to commemorate International Women's Day. The motion was adopted as presented and sent to the Executive Committee of COPA for approval the following day.



## **PARTICIPATION OF NETWORK PRESIDENT AND REPRESENTATIVES IN THE HEMISPHERIC FORUM HOSTED BY CIM AND THE CONSULTATION WITH PARLIAMENTARIANS OF THE AMERICAS, HELD IN SANTO DOMINGO, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC FROM JULY 18 TO 21, 2012**

Following the agreement reached by the Network's Executive Committee meeting in March 2012, two collaborative projects involving the Network and the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) of the Organization of American States (OAS), the two bodies discussed the joint organization of certain activities planned for the Second Hemispheric Forum hosted by CIM.

The Second Hemispheric Forum "Women's Full Citizenship for Democracy" was a high-level

event that brought together representatives from the executive, legislative and judicial branches of all levels of government of the Americas, from international organizations concerned with gender issues, and from academia and civil society, for the purpose of identifying and discussing the political and state reforms necessary in order to expedite the exercise of women's full citizenship in the Americas by promoting the creation of pluralistic dialogues, synergies and concerted actions.



As part of the Forum, CIM invited the Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas to moderate the “Status and current perspectives on legislative-level reforms for real equality” panel. Moderated by Diva Gastélum, President of the Network and Deputy from Mexico, the panel enabled Network representatives Norma Esparza Herrera, Senator of Mexico, Alicia Gutiérrez, Deputy of the province of Santa Fe in Argentina, Mireya Zamora, Deputy of Costa Rica, and Danielle Doyer, Member of the National Assembly of Québec to present laws and good practices for gender equality in their respective governments.

In parallel with the Forum, the Network organized the “Consultation with Parliamentarians of the Americas” in

cooperation with CIM and the Commission on Gender Equality Issues of the Chamber of Deputies of the Dominican Republic. The main objective of this Consultation was to develop a hemispheric initiative to strengthen the capacity for incidence and for fiscalization of legislative commissions and parliamentary groups on women and gender equality. The Consultation was held on July 18, in the presence of the presidents of the Commissions on Gender Equality in the legislative assemblies of the 34 member States of the OAS and parliamentarians concerned with the promotion of women's rights. Within the framework of that event, the President moderated a debate on laws and programs for gender equality.

The Forum helped to consolidate the relationship between the Network and CIM and to identify the next possible stages of cooperation between our organizations. Moreover, this event allowed the President to heighten the awareness of political representatives from a number of American states and international organizations about the activities of the Women Parliamentarians of the Americas and to plan future collaborative efforts.



## *NEWS FROM THE PRESIDENT*

### ❖ PARTICIPATION OF NETWORK PRESIDENT AT A MEETING OF THE COPA COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND SOCIAL PROTECTION, AND PRESENTATION OF THE BOOK *WOMEN IN THE AMERICAS*, HELD IN HAVANA, CUBA, FROM OCTOBER 27 TO 28, 2011



The Network President participated in a Meeting of the Committee on Health and Social Protection held in Havana, Cuba, on

October 27 and 28, 2011. The President represented the Network in participating in debates on the themes under study by the Commission directly aligned with issues related to the status of women, such as maternal health and assistance for people with disabilities.

At the end of the first day, the Network President took the floor to present a book entitled *Women in the Americas*—the result of research carried out under her direction. She then led a brief discussion on the challenges related to the status of women in the Americas.

### ❖ PARTICIPATION OF NETWORK PRESIDENT AT EXPERT'S INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS AND PARLIAMENTS, HELD IN BELGRADE, SERBIA, FROM FEBRUARY 21 TO 23, 2012

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Serbian Parliament invited the Network President to participate in the Expert's International Seminar on the Relationship between National Human Rights Institutions and Parliaments.

The objective of the Seminar was to produce a set of principles and recommendations for the United Nations to improve the relationship



between national human rights institutions and parliaments in protecting human rights and promoting accountability. Participation was limited to 50 experts from across the world, and included our Network's President and an Ecuadorian parliamentarian—both representing the Americas.



## **NETWORK PRESIDENT MEETS WITH COPA ELECTORAL OBSERVERS, IN MEXICO CITY, MEXICO, JUNE 28, 2012**



In preparation for the polling day scheduled to be held on July 1, 2012, the Network President attended a working meeting with the members of the COPA electoral observation mission at the Senate of the Republic of Mexico on June 29, 2012. President Diva Gastélum stated that election observers will witness the election process on behalf of voters and the international community and, through their participation, certify its legality.

Over 25 elected representatives from Argentina, Québec, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Uruguay and Venezuela met with the COPA observers delegated to cover polling day operations and verify their compliance with the

Electoral Code (Código Federal de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales – COFIPE).

The President stressed that this election marks a step toward attaining gender quota as, for the first time ever, over 120 women were running for federal deputy seats and 26 women for Senate seats, which could only result in better representation of women in the Congress of the Union.

A total of 2,127 officials were elected, including federal deputies, senators, governors, heads of government, local deputies, delegation heads and heads of municipal authorities. The observers' final report will be presented at the next General Assembly of the Parliamentary Confederation of the Americas (COPA).




## **COMMEMORATION OF THE PROGRESS OF POLITICAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN MEXICO, OCTOBER 17, 2012**

On October 17th 2012, day of the commemoration of the progress of women's political rights in Mexico, the President of the Network has shared with the members of the Executive Committee and on the Internet Website, a comparative table of the year

women gained the right to vote in the countries of the Americas and of gender quotas.

The President also invited the members of the Executive Committee to convey this table to their respective parliament.

 <b>COMPARATIVO CUOTAS COPA</b> 				
PAÍS	AÑO EN QUE SE OBTUVO EL VOTO FEMENINO	¿EXISTE CUOTA DE GÉNERO?	PORCENTAJE DE CUOTA	PRINCIPIO DE PARIDAD
Antigua y Barbuda	1951	-	-	-
Argentina	1947	Constitucional/Ley Electoral	30%	-
Bahamas	1962	-	-	-
Barbados	1950	-	-	-
Belice	1961	-	-	-
Bolivia	1952	Ley Electoral	30% Local 33% Cámara Baja 25% Cámara Alta	-
Brasil	1932	Ley Electoral	30%	-
Canadá	1918	Voluntaria a Nivel Partido	NDP 50% LPC 25%	-
Chile	1949	Voluntaria a Nivel Partido	PPD: 60-40% PS: 60-40% PDC: 20%	-
Colombia	1957	Ley Electoral	30%	-
Costa Rica	1949	Ley Electoral	40%	Si
Cuba	1934	-	-	-
Dominica	1951	-	-	-
Ecuador	1929	Ley Electoral	30% Local	Si
El Salvador	1939*	Voluntaria a Nivel Partido	FMLN 35%	-
Grenada	1951	-	-	-
Guatemala	1945*	Voluntaria a Nivel Partido	UNE 40% URNG 30%	-
Guyana	1952	-	-	-
Haití	1950	Constitucional	-	-
Honduras	1955	Ley Electoral	30%	-
Jamaica	1944	-	-	-
México	1953	Ley Electoral	60-40%	Si
Nicaragua	1945	Voluntarias a Nivel Partido	FSTN 30% PCT 40% MRS 40%	-
Panamá	1945	Ley Electoral	30%	-
Paraguay	1961	Ley Electoral/ Voluntarias a Nivel Partido	No menos del 20%	-
Perú	1955	Ley Electoral	30%	30%
República Dominicana	1942	Ley Electoral	33% Federal excepto Senado 50% Local	33% Federal excepto Senado 50% Local
San Kitts y Nevis	1952	-	-	-
Santa Lucía	1951	-	-	-
San Vicente y las Grenadinas	1951	-	-	-
Suriname	1948	-	-	-
Trinidad y Tobago	1945	-	-	-
Estados Unidos	1920	-	-	-
Uruguay	1932	Ley Electoral**	33%	Si
Venezuela	1947	-	-	-

Fuente: IDEA Internacional, Universidad de Estocolmo y la Unión Interparlamentaria. "Proyecto de Cuotas: base de datos global para mujeres", <http://www.quotaproject.org/>  
\*Parcial.  
\*\*Reforma en vigor hasta 2014

## CONCLUSION OF THE PRESIDENT

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The activities outlined in this report represent the highlights of my work as President of the Network over the last year. They reflect the priorities that we have been pursuing, as members of the Network's Executive Committee, in the last year.

The results described in this report indicate the significant headway that has been made in consolidating COPA's Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas. Despite budgetary constraints, we have successfully broadened our Network's reach.

Network members can be proud of the progress that has been achieved through the work of our rapporteurs, through our collaboration with other international organizations and through the publication of our newsletter.

While new challenges lie ahead for us, we have helped to build a stronger Network—a hub where we can continue to work together to improve the rights of women throughout the Americas—and ensure that we can meet those challenges head on.

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## *ARTICLES FROM THE MEMBERS*



**GLORIA BIDEGAIN**

**NATIONAL DEPUTY OF THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARGENTINA**

### **PROGRESS MADE BY THE REPUBLIC OF ARGENTINA TO COMBAT GENDER VIOLENCE**

Violence against women is a scourge in the history of humanity, present in nearly all cultures and countries, in addition to discrimination and a lack of recognition for women's rights. This situation is caused by cultural assumptions which encourage the subordination of women and justify the imposition, even by force, of men's authority.

These coercive actions against women may be observed in many spheres of society: the cultural, corporate, political and economic realms, trade unionism, employment and, particularly, the family. The family is certainly influenced by the context of social violence in which it finds itself, and may also generate violent behaviours which then work themselves into the fabric of society.

In our region, in 1994, the OAS Assembly adopted the INTER-AMERICAN CONVENTION ON THE PREVENTION, PUNISHMENT AND ERADICATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, known as the Convention of Belém do Pará. This was the first regional instrument to recognize violence against women as a violation of human rights.

The Convention affirms the right of women "to be free from violence in both the public and private spheres" and to be "educated free of

stereotyped patterns of behavior and social and cultural practices based on concepts of inferiority or subordination".

The progress made thus far has resulted in the concept of gender violence, according to which the very fact of being a woman implies an increased level of risk or vulnerability with regard to rights violations, discrimination and abuse.

In several countries of our region, as democracy has gained a firmer foothold in recent years, women and women's organizations have stepped up their social and political involvement, with the result that they are now better represented at the executive and legislative levels of government, both provincially and nationally.

In Argentina, legislation on gender violence is now a chief priority in efforts to guarantee human rights, non-discriminatory practices and women's participation in society as full and active citizens.

In 2008, the national government adopted Act 26.485 respecting "full protection through the prevention, punishment and eradication of violence against women in their interpersonal relations", in order to guarantee that women's

lives are free from violence in both the public and private spheres. The Act places violence against women in the context of the protection of human rights and includes it as a component of essential public policies focusing on gender, while defining the legal, political, social and cultural situation of women and recognizing their rights as citizens.

The Act is applicable throughout the country, and provides for the following actions:

- To develop institutional and social networks at the national, provincial and municipal levels.
- To develop policies that foster public education and consciousness-raising.
- To provide full, free and immediate assistance to women who are victims of violence.
- To train people who work with victims of violence.
- To provide economic resources.
- To establish a national plan for the coordination of institutions.
- To implement follow-up and evaluation measures to make sure that the provisions of the Act are being complied with.

- To systematize data on violence against women.

- To facilitate access to the legal system by ensuring that basic rights and guarantees regarding legal and administrative procedures are protected.

I should not wish to conclude without mentioning "femicide", the most extreme form of violence against women, of which 75% of the cases go unpunished.

Two bills have recently been introduced in the Argentine Congress. A debate is currently taking place between those who believe that femicide ought to be included in the category of crimes "aggravated by a family relationship" and those who believe it should be punished as another category of crime. It will be necessary to establish legal frameworks that facilitate access to the legal system, with appropriate legal protection and the consideration of gender in each case. Finally, it will be necessary to create mechanisms that allow the legal process to be monitored by the appropriate authorities as well as by civil society.

*Original text in Spanish*



**ILEANA BRENES JIMÉNEZ**

**DEPUTY OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF COSTA RICA**

## **WOMEN AND POVERTY**

The “reality” of poverty can be very different depending on whether you are looking at it from a woman's or a man's perspective. Poverty is generally equated with basic needs not being met. However, for women, poverty also often means social deprivation in the sense of a lack of power over their own lives, a lack of respect and support from their families and communities, as well as the impossibility of satisfying certain needs in terms of personal development, creative leisure and social involvement.

This is the face of female poverty in Costa Rica and in most countries where gender disparities still exist and patrimonial and legal inequalities are still engrained in traditional values.

An accurate assessment of the economic aspects of poverty is vital, but determining the causes as well as the measures that need to be taken to counter them will not suffice—unless we also identify other related factors that are in play.

It is a proven fact that gender inequality is an obstacle to the reduction and elimination of poverty, particularly in societies where the percentage of single mothers is on the rise.

Female poverty is not only the result of an unequal distribution of income, but is also due to the subordinate position women hold in society.

The traditional gender-based division of labour and the invisible unpaid work that women do for their families and society are other factors contributing to the opportunity gap between women and men.

The female workforce in Costa Rica today is generally highly educated and very active, but this does not necessarily translate into better prospects on the labour market, as is reflected by the under-representation of women in all employment sectors. Men earn an average of 23% more than women. Furthermore, women are employed mainly in domestic service, sales and teaching—all fields in which men are paid 30% more than their female counterparts.

What measures should be taken to advance women's economic empowerment?

More effort should be put into creating high-quality jobs that will give educated women access to better-paying jobs and better working conditions—which will benefit both themselves

and their families. Telework and results-oriented work are two work arrangements that are particularly well suited to the situation of households headed by women.

Women, especially low-wage earners, would greatly benefit from the recognition that the responsibility of caring for children and seniors should be shared by families, the State and private enterprise. Thus, the creation of institutional, community and workplace facilities dedicated to providing reliable professional care and services for children and seniors would afford women the freedom and peace of mind to work outside the home.

To gain more power in society, women must first attain physical and economic autonomy. Such autonomy can only be achieved through norms and social policies that acknowledge existing inequalities and provide measures for positive action.

*Original text in Spanish*



**NORMA ESPARZA HERRERA**

**SENATOR OF THE SENATE OF THE CONGRESS OF THE UNION  
OF THE UNITED STATES OF MEXICO (2006-2012)**

**NORTH AMERICAN REPRESENTATIVE OF THE NETWORK  
OF WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS OF THE AMERICAS**

## **GENDER EQUITY IN PARLIAMENTS**

The Parliamentary Confederation of the Americas recognizes the consolidation of democracy in the Americas as the central focus of its action.

We, the parliamentarians of the Congress of the Union of the United Mexican States, of which I have had the honour of serving as a member for the last six years of intense legislative work, have also been concentrating our efforts on consolidating democracy—a goal that includes achieving gender equality in all its forms in the houses of public representation of the various states across the American continent.

Today, I will not dwell on the various causes of gender inequality. Instead, I would like to broach the topic of discrimination against women in politics, in particular, the gender gap observed in legislative bodies, a sensitive issue that is of primary importance for all parliamentarians around the world.

It is no secret that, throughout the world, but more particularly in Latin America, the vast majority of legislative seats are held by men. Although we should not underestimate the progress made by women as public representatives, I would like to appeal to all parliamentarians, men and women, to adopt

legislative measures that would make it easier for women to be elected to and remain in public office.

As elected representatives, it is our duty to consider the ongoing challenges we face in our fight for gender equality, in particular, with respect to women's representation in legislative bodies.

Although some may feel that women are still far from achieving equal participation in a world governed mainly by men, no one can deny that women everywhere around the world are pursuing their fight to ensure female representation in democratic institutions.

It is clear that equal political representation as promulgated by the constitutions and electoral laws of several countries, such as Mexico, remains a dead letter, since there are still few women legislators in the parliamentary bodies of those countries.

While some legal frameworks require that women be granted access to public office, it remains absolutely essential to ensure, through normative tools, that women continue to be represented in legislative assemblies. We might require, for instance, that substitutes to replace women legislators must also be women.

Establishing legislation based on positive or reverse discrimination to ensure gender continuity when replacing woman legislators is not the ideal solution for Congress. However, such a measure is needed, at least until democratic habits have evolved to the point where such "gender protection" is no longer required.

In Mexico, women parliamentarians of various political parties have taken a stand, both in the Lower House and in the Senate, to defend the rights of democratically elected women.

We hope that one day, "gender protection", rules and quotas will no longer be needed, but for now and in the face of generally observed phenomena, legislative measures favouring women must be adopted, legal frameworks fostering gender equality in political representation must be reinforced, and gender quotas must be increased, all with a view to maintaining elected women legislators in office and ridding society of long-standing misconceptions and prejudices.

*Original text in spanish*



**ALICIA V. GUTIÉRREZ**

**MEMBER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PROVINCE OF SANTA FE, ARGENTINA**

**MEMBER OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE NETWORK OF WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS OF THE AMERICAS**

## **ARGENTINE : THE SUPREME COURT DECRIMINALIZES ABORTION IN RAPE CASES**

The Supreme Court of Argentina, in a decision handed down on March 3, 2012, in the case of F., A. L. s/ Medida Autosatisfactiva, set a precedent in the interpretation of paragraph 2 of article 86 of the Argentine Penal Code. Article 86 reads as follows:

Physicians, surgeons, midwives or pharmacists who make an improper use of their science or their art to cause or help to cause an abortion shall incur the penalties set out in the preceding article and, in addition, shall be dismissed from their position for twice as long as the period of their penalty.

An abortion carried out by a certified physician with the pregnant woman's consent is not punishable

(1) if the mother's life or health is in danger, and if the danger cannot be avoided by other means; or

(2) if the pregnancy is the result of a rape or an indecent assault against a feeble-minded or insane woman. In such a case, the consent of the woman's legal guardian shall be required for the abortion.

Prior to this decision, article 86 was interpreted in a restrictive manner to mean that a rape victim could have an abortion only if she was mentally handicapped.

In its decision, the Supreme Court states that interpreting the law to allow the termination of a pregnancy only when it is alleged to be the result of a rape committed against a mentally-handicapped woman establishes a precedent of unreasonable differential treatment for victims of similar offences who are in the same situation but who do not qualify for a legal abortion because they do not meet the valid differentiating criteria.

Moreover, even when an abortion was authorized under article 86, physicians would refuse to perform the procedure for moral reasons and refer such cases to the courts, endangering the lives of the women concerned, who then had to face the considerable delays of the legal system.

In that connection, the Supreme Court sets out reasons that appear sufficient to dispel any doubt among health professionals as to the non-punishability of abortions carried out on those who claim to be victims of rape.

The Supreme Court goes on to say that, as it has ruled out the possibility of penal prosecution against those who provide medical services in cases like those examined in the record, persistence in behaviour such as that described can only be considered as impeding access to health services, and those responsible must assume the penal consequences.

Thus, the Supreme Court decision authorizes women who have been raped to request an abortion in a public hospital regardless of whether or not they are mentally handicapped; they need only make a statement to a physician with no police report or legal authorization required.

It is a matter of protecting the integrity of women who have been abused. For in Argentina, offences against sexual integrity are in the private domain, which means that they can only be reported by the victims themselves, and not by a Crown prosecutor, as is the case for other offences.

The judicial resolution orders the national and provincial authorities to apply high standards and "hospital protocols" in performing non-punishable abortions and providing all necessary assistance to the victims of sexual violence, even in health care centres where some professionals may object to abortion. In that regard, a register is to be created for health care personnel who object to certain practices.

This broader interpretation of article 86 of the Argentine Penal Code is clearly an important step forward in safeguarding the sexual and reproductive health of the women of Argentina.

*Original text in Spanish*



**MARIE BOUILLÉ**

**MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF QUÉBEC**

**REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARIAT OF THE NETWORK  
OF WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS OF THE AMERICAS**

## **FOSTERING THE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN QUÉBEC**

Québec women have made significant economic progress over the past few decades. But while their participation in the labour force<sup>1</sup> has increased, and in many cases a higher level of education has improved their career opportunities, they have yet to achieve economic equality with men. They still hold a disproportionate number of precarious or minimum-wage jobs and, regardless of age group or level of education<sup>2</sup>, their average annual salary is still lower than that of men<sup>3</sup>.

Since undervaluation of jobs traditionally held by women is inherent within the job market itself, it became necessary to introduce measures to remedy this long-standing bias. The purpose of the *Pay Equity Act*, passed unanimously in 1996, was to “redress differences in compensation due to the systemic gender discrimination suffered by persons who occupy positions in predominantly female job classes.”<sup>4</sup> As a result of this legislation,

the gender wage gap shrank from 16.51% in 2000 to 11.93% in 2010. Subsequent amendments have increased the fines imposable on non-complying businesses, made compensation available to women and, since March 2011, obliged businesses to file an annual pay equity implementation report.

Increasing the representation of women in positions of power is a key factor in bringing women's needs to the forefront and fostering their economic empowerment. In Québec and throughout the world, women remain generally under-represented in decision-making positions, whether political, economic or social. Thirty-five women currently have a seat in the National Assembly, occupying 28,6% of the total 125 seats. But it should also be noted that women hold the positions of Premier and of First Vice-President of the National Assembly.

While women remain under-represented on boards of directors, Québec has made notable progress in recent years with the unveiling in April 2006 of a policy statement entitled *Modernizing the Governance of Government Corporations*. One of its objectives was to ensure that, by 2011, the boards of directors of Québec's government

1. In 2010, women made up 47.8% of Québec's labour force; their participation rate was 61% as against 69.8% for men, a difference of 8.8% (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2011).

2. In 2008, women's average annual income was \$28,200 compared to \$38,600 for men, or 73% of that of men (ISQ, 2010).

3. In 2010, 62% of minimum-wage earners were women (ISQ, 2011).

4. Pay Equity Act, R.S.Q., chapter E-12.001, section 1.

corporations would be composed of an equal number of men and women. This measure, which is now included in the *Act respecting the governance of state-owned enterprises*, caused the proportion of women on such boards to rise from 27.5% in April 2006 to 48.3% in March 2011, a gain of more than 75%.

The policy entitled *Turning Equality in Law into Equality in Fact*, which covers the years 2006 to 2015, and its 2007–2010 *Action Plan* introduced measures aimed at increasing the number of women in positions of power. Examples of these measures include the continuation of the *Equal Access to Decision-Making program*, which grants financial assistance to projects aimed at increasing the participation of women on local, regional and provincial decision-making bodies, and the creation of the *Centre de développement Femmes et gouvernance*<sup>5</sup>, which trains and supports women interested in assuming a decision-making role or pursuing a political career. The action plan also contains measures to support women entrepreneurs. One such measure led to the creation of FEMMESSOR<sup>6</sup>, a network of regional bodies that supports female entrepreneurship and now facilitates funding in 11 of Québec's regions.

Québec has made encouraging progress in its efforts to empower women economically. The implementation of the new 2011–2015 *Government Action Plan on Gender Equality* should allow us to continue advancing toward economic gender equality, in particular by encouraging greater diversity in women's educational choices, fostering their school persistence, assisting adolescent mothers, supporting women entrepreneurs, and facilitating balance between work and family life<sup>7</sup>. The battle is far from over, however, and must continue in the years to come through hiring and retaining women in the labour force, narrowing persistent wage gaps, and improving economic security for women throughout their lives.

*Original text in French*

5. Centre de développement Femmes et gouvernance, [www.cdfg.enap.ca/](http://www.cdfg.enap.ca/) (Consulted on June 19, 2012).

6. Réseau Femmessor, <http://www.femmessor.com/> (Consulted on June 19, 2012).

7. Ministère de la Culture, des Communications et de la Condition féminine, *Plan d'action pour l'égalité entre les hommes et les femmes 2011-2015*, <http://www.scf.gouv.qc.ca/index.php?id=25> (Consulted on June 21, 2012).

Secretariat of the Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas  
Parliamentary Confederation of the Americas  
Assemblée nationale du Québec  
1020, rue des Parlementaires, 6e étage  
Québec (Québec) G1A 1A3 CANADA  
Tél. : 418 644-2888  
Fax : 418 643-1865  
[feminamericas@assnat.qc.ca](mailto:feminamericas@assnat.qc.ca)

