

# Perspectives of Gender Parity within Political Parties. Case Studies Mexico, Ecuador, and Colombia\*

## Perspectivas de la Paridad de Género al Interior de los Partidos Políticos. Estudio de Caso México, Ecuador y Colombia

*Sindy Viviana Medina Velandia \*\**

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### Abstract

This article is part of the interest in determining the importance and role played by political parties in the application of the principle of gender parity; this leads to the understanding that there are barriers and problems in terms of women's participation since political spaces are limited in societies such as Latin America, where the patriarchal model prevails in all spheres, both public and private. Thus, under a qualitative methodological approach, an analysis is made of the vision, contributions, and perspectives that, from the doctrine, the law, and international institutions or organizations, conceive gender parity and gender equality and equity. The results show that there are multiple barriers within the political parties to not complying with the obligations established in the law, either for the gender quota or for gender parity.

**Keywords:** Gender parity, political parties, public policy, gender quota, political participation of women.

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\*\*Doctoranda en Derecho, Universidad de Buenos Aires; Magíster en Educación, Universidad de Baja California; Abogada, Especialista en Derecho de Familia, Corporación Universitaria Republicana; Docente Investigadora del Centro de Investigaciones de la Corporación Universitaria Republicana. Correo electrónico: [sindy-meve@hotmail.com](mailto:sindy-meve@hotmail.com)

CvLAC: <https://scienti.minciencias.gov.co/cvlac/EnRecursoHumano/inicio.do>

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/my-orcid?orcid=0009-0000-9601-8069>

Google Académico: [https://scholar.google.es/scholar?hl=es&as\\_sdt=0%2C5&q=sindy+viviana+medina+velandia&btnG=](https://scholar.google.es/scholar?hl=es&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=sindy+viviana+medina+velandia&btnG=)

## Resumen

El presente artículo de reflexión se inserta dentro del interés por determinar la importancia y rol que desempeñan los partidos políticos frente a la aplicación del principio de paridad de género. Esto lleva a entender que existen barreras y problemas en materia de participación de las mujeres, ya que los espacios políticos se encuentran limitados en sociedades como latinoamericana, en el que prima el modelo patriarcal en todas las esferas, tanto pública como privada. Así, bajo un enfoque metodológico cualitativo, se procede a hacer un análisis sobre la visión, aportes y perspectivas que desde la doctrina, la ley y las instituciones u organismos internacionales conciben la paridad de género y la igualdad y equidad de género. Los resultados muestran que existen múltiples barreras al interior de los partidos políticos para incumplir con las obligaciones establecidas en la ley, bien para la cuota de género o para la paridad de género.

**Palabras claves:** Análisis de la educación, enseñanza universitaria, industrialización, economía agraria.

## 1. Introducción

Gender parity in the political system, more precisely in political parties, is a crucial need in Latin America, where women are generally on the margins of decision-making processes, that is, of those positions in which there is a high level of influence in the construction of public policies (Ballesteros, 2015). This importance lies in the fact that these parties play a fundamental role in decision-making, both in the legislative sphere, proper to the access or participation in the State for the formulation of policies, in the construction and definition of bills, and in the executive power; this is relevant since it is the way a government executes and directs public administration, develops public policies in charge of the State, and manages public resources (Uribe, 2013). It is, therefore, valid to reflect on what could be the gaps and strengths that govern gender parity in political parties, as it will allow delimiting perspectives for improvement.

Given these elements, the objective of this article is to identify the perspectives of gender parity within political parties, paying special attention to Latin America and, in particular, to the study of three countries such as Mexico, Ecuador, and Colombia. In order to meet this objective, the first step is to identify the problems on which the research is based, in which it is established that there are multiple barriers and bad practices on the part of political parties for not complying with the gender quota or with the requirement of gender parity; this is more visible in the candidacies for popular elections, but it is more complex to identify within the parties.

Secondly, the main notions that determine gender parity within political parties are identified, including parity democracy, political party, and gender quota. Once these elements have been delimited, in a third moment, an analysis is made on the perspectives of gender parity

starting from the Latin American scope and continuing with the analysis of specific cases of Ecuador, Mexico, and Colombia. The conclusions conclude with the need to promote greater affirmative actions to consolidate gender parity effectively.

## **2. Problems in which Gender Parity is included in the Framework of Political Parties**

One of the aspects that highlights the problematic object of study is to find that political parties in Latin America represent the patriarchal model or scheme that imposes gender violence (Giraldo et al., 2023; Oliveros, 2013); among them, the absence of gender parity (Ballesteros et al., 2021). The reason is fundamentally that multiple structural barriers coexist that affect the various scenarios of society, such as the political, economic, and political culture, which evidences the absence of gender parity.

These barriers lead, for example, to inequalities within the leadership of 94 political parties in Latin America, where only 10.2% of the presidents and 12.9% of the general secretaries are women. These data go against the participation of women in these political parties, which was calculated at 51.5% (Accossatto, 2021).

In addition, the role played by women in these political parties is administrative or logistical, but not in decision-making. One of the reasons for this could be found in the limitations and barriers to their political rights, among them that of active participation in the public sphere.

Likewise, the patriarchal scheme in the region has determined that the role of women is circumscribed to the private sphere, more specifically in the care of children and the home (Martínez et al., 2019).

Another problematic aspect observed is that there is growing opposition from conservative parties to limit gender equality in Latin America. In fact, Tabbush and Caminotti (2020) state that conservative activism has led to gender public policies being attacked, e.g., comprehensive education on sexuality, recognition of the LGBTIQ+ population, equal marriage, and abortion, among the most relevant.

It is also observed that there are countries in which the normative inclusion of gender parity is established, but its real exclusion is present within the political parties; this is pointed out by Rodríguez (2021) when he states that most political parties in Mexico continue to cling to traditional models of exclusion of women.

It is also stated that, despite its implementation, the structure of the electoral system could generate negative effects contrary to such parity, especially when there is no real commitment on the part of the political parties to achieve parity efficiency. It is specified that electoral systems with closed and non-blocked lists, in which the preferential vote is present, are likely to affect female candidacies, especially in countries of the region where patriarchy prevails and, with it, the majority vote for men (Ortiz & Carrión, 2023).

Similarly, it must be addressed that political parties in Latin America have a low level of credibility among the population, which leads citizens to abstain from participating in electoral processes due to the high level of corruption. In addition, quota laws have led to the instrumentalization of women's participation, as there is strong opposition from male leaders. As Johnson (2022) puts it: "The continued resistance of male party leaders to share power led to the development of a series of informal practices and deliberate strategies that allowed them to bypass the obligations of the approved quota laws" (p. 39).

However, in addition to this problem, significant progress has also been made in the region over the last three decades in terms of the presence of women in political activity and these institutions, including political parties. Indeed, the results show that the participation of women legislators increased from 9% in 1990 to 30.7% in 2018; this has meant that Latin America has the highest parliamentary representation in the world, with the exception of the European Nordic countries. The reasons for this increase are two basic factors: affirmative actions, which are represented in public policies, and the enactment of constitutional gender parity norms, with which the gender quota is already being discussed in various political scenarios.

In spite of the above, it is affirmed that this is not enough to achieve the parity objective since it is required to materialize in a special scenario such as the popular election, given that it is there where the true imaginary of parity can be observed,

especially because there are multiple structural barriers, as already mentioned.

In the case of Colombia, political parties have had a negative impact on gender parity, which has been reflected in the percentage of women in the popular election processes (see Graph 1). The results show how the 2019 elections mark significant differences. Thus, in the election of governors, 6.2% was the election of mayors (9%), municipal councils (17.3%), and departmental deputies (17.7%).

Graph 1. Women elected at the local level 2015, 2019



Source: OECD, 2021, p. 11

In view of these results, it is pointed out that there are several barriers that women must face in order to gain access to the country's political system, one of them being those established by the political parties. In this sense, it is pointed out that women candidates for popular election present multiple difficulties, among them the lack of economic and financial support due to the fact that they must pay to be designated, the limitations to access the media, and the absence of sanctions when the parties do not comply with the quota law.

### 3. Working Hypothesis

There is a regulatory and constitutional framework that promotes gender parity in countries such as Mexico, Ecuador, and Colombia. However, within political parties, there are limitations and barriers to access, which is a reflection of the patriarchal socio-political context that prevails in Latin America and the Caribbean.

### 4. Main Elements of Gender Parity in Political Parties

For Duverger (2012), political parties represent the way in which power is reproduced or distributed. Therefore, they are essential in the development of gender parity as a state policy; this is of utmost importance because it is suggested that the leaders of political parties broadly exercise their authority through a personalization of power, which would not lead to real democratic evolution. Added to this is the influence that financial and business power has on the State and the political parties themselves (Torres, 2023).

The notion of parity democracy has been defined by the Latin American and Caribbean Parliament (2015) as a model oriented to substantive equality and parity to be applied and materialized between men and women. Its objectives, based on trigger transformations of the State under criteria of responsibility and inclusion, are to establish a new social contract that leads to an organization of society that eradicates the historical and structural exclusion of women and girls and to create a new social balance

in gender perspective so that shared responsibilities are assumed in the public and private spheres.

In this way, parity democracy is focused on overcoming the condition of submission and the secondary role in which women find themselves. It is also to overcome the imagination of women's minority status and men's hegemonic political power in order to delve into parity and equality in their conditions as human beings. With the above, gender parity is understood as an integral component that makes it possible to consolidate democracy under criteria that overcome the patriarchal hetero-normative model that has historically consolidated relations of domination and power (García, 2022).

It is also reaffirmed that parity democracy goes beyond the scope of gender equity, as it addresses other groups that have been historically excluded in the enjoyment of rights (Afro-descendants, Indigenous people, people with disabilities, the LGTBI population, and others).

Similarly, there is the notion of gender quota, which is understood as affirmative action aimed at correcting or overcoming the historical discrimination and disadvantages of women in the political sphere. It is proposed that it is a temporary normative concept to the extent that once the barrier of inequity in the electoral processes is overcome, equal opportunities for men and women are achieved.

The temporality of quotas does not refer to the delimitation of a deadline set a priori, but rather that they cease to be relevant when the inequality they are intended to correct disappears” (Johnson, 2022, p. 38).

With this understanding, it is proposed that the gender quota is part of the approaches and advances on parity democracy in Latin America and the world in general. Under this perspective, gender parity necessarily entails redefining democracy as a model of social coexistence. It is, then, to establish criteria of social justice and to materialize the recognition of women in the various spheres of society, in particular, in politics (Johnson, 2022).

## 5. Perspectives on Gender Parity in Latin America

Initially, studies in Latin America and the Caribbean show that the normative inclusion of gender parity or gender quotas in Latin American countries has been very scattered. Thus, the first countries were oriented towards promoting the law of gender quotas, among which we can mention Argentina (1991), Mexico (1996), Paraguay (1996), Costa Rica (1996), Dominican Republic (1997), Brazil (1997) and Bolivia (1997). Already in the first decade onwards of the 21st century, with gender quota law, Colombia (2012), Honduras (2000), and Chile (2015) are mentioned.

As for gender parity, it is evident that it is a recent initiative in Latin America since very few

countries have promoted it by the end of the first decade of the 21st century: Costa Rica (2009), Bolivia (2009), Ecuador (2008), Honduras (2012), Panama (2012) and Mexico (2014) (Johnson, 2022).

It is important to emphasize that most of these reforms are mainly oriented toward the management of candidacies for popular elections but not so much towards the internal management of gender parity or gender quotas within the leadership of political parties.

The results of these initiatives show that they are affirmative actions to the extent that they have managed to increase women’s participation in the political system. However, it is observed that this parity criterion needs to materialize more efficiently, as in the cases of Panama and Honduras, where despite having a parity law, women do not reach 30% participation (Johnson, 2022).

Latin America has seen initiatives of great importance. An example of this is the affirmative action of the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM, 2021), an intergovernmental body created by the Organization of American States (OAS). One of these has been the search for a regional agenda aimed at parity in the political sphere, based on three dimensions: equal participation in decision-making positions, both in the public and private sectors; the exercise of power at levels and under conditions of equity; and finally, the creation of a gender equality and women’s rights agenda.



In the area of political parties, a parity system and structure is sought that makes possible the inclusion of women in their leadership and composition: “parity and women’s leadership as a sine qua non for effective democratic governance, sustainable integral development and an effective recovery and reactivation in the post-COVID period” (CIM, 2021, p. 15).

## 5.1 Gender Parity in Ecuador

With respect to specific cases, there is Ecuador, where the regulations require political parties to present parity candidacies for popularly elected positions, as well as parity in the governing bodies of each political party; this was established in the reform of the Code of Democracy, in its article 343, for the internal management of political organizations: “Their structure and operation shall be democratic and shall guarantee the alternation and parity between women and men in their boards” this has made it possible for the level of participation of Ecuadorian women in the highest bodies of political parties or their leadership to be over 40% in 2019, which is considered a significant advance (Accossatto, 2021).

The following elements can be mentioned as negative aspects of Ecuador.

- The handling given by political parties to parity is superficial or basically rhetorical.
- Imposition of internal (militancy, bureaucracy) and external (government, electoral) strategies of political parties to exclude women.
- Once women are elected, political parties force them to resign from the position they have achieved.
- Political parties place women in territories where they have no chance of winning or place them in a position subordinate to men.
- The use of leadership positions in political parties is restricted to men only.
- Political party statutes have very vague mentions of gender equality (Accossatto, 2021; Salgueiro, 2022; Ortiz & Carrión, 2023).
- The following can be mentioned as positive aspects of gender parity in Ecuador:
  - Legal advances aimed at gender parity.
  - Political parties are required to present parity candidacies for popularly elected positions, as well as parity in the governing bodies of each political party; this was established in the reform to the Democracy Code, in its article 343, for the internal management of political organizations: “Their structure and operation shall be democratic and shall guarantee the alternation and parity between women and men in their boards of directors.”
  - The level of participation of Ecuadorian women in the highest bodies of political parties or their leadership is over 40% in 2019, which is considered a significant advance (Accossatto, 2021; Salgueiro, 2022).

The balance given to gender parity by Accossatto (2021) points out that it is, in general terms, positive because there is a higher level of approval of gender equality by political parties and their elites. However, it is emphasized that greater real support is needed within their organizational structures.

## 5.2 Gender Parity in Mexico

In the case of Mexico, the National Electoral Institute (INE, 2020) emphasizes that political parties show little participation of women. There are several reasons, among them the culture of society and institutional designs, which impose barriers for women to assume leadership positions. Another reason is the need for more transparency within political parties in the selection and definition of internal candidacies, as well as in the use of women as a punishment or trophy.

Likewise, in order to support a rhetoric of equality between men and women, women's candidacies are usually included in Mexico and are not competitive but marginal. Thus, there is opposition or blockage by male leaders, which materializes with segregation in party work, sexual division of labor, blockages to representative or growing female leadership, and the invisibilization of female initiatives. These barriers end up generating deep segregation and discrimination based on gender (INE, 2020; Torres, 2023).

The inclusion of women within political parties could be better; this was expressed by INE (2020) when analyzing the period from 1994 to 2018. It is highlighted that of the 38,630 people who have been part of the governing bodies, 36.32% (14,032) have been women. However, of these women, only 3.12% (439) held the highest leadership positions in political parties. In this sense, only 1.17% have been able to exercise the presidency, while 2.96% have been able to exercise the general secretariat.

The regulatory changes applied in Mexico boosted the participation of women in the political system. Even so, it is observed that the challenge is now more directed towards real competitiveness; this is due to the fact that the implementation of the quota law had a discriminatory treatment by the Mexican political parties, which directed female candidates in electoral scenarios where their possibilities or chances of winning were infinitely low (Lozano, 2022).

However, the results show that women's participation has been effective in recent years, helped by the gender quota and gender parity, but also under the new criteria that political parties must assume internally. Thus, in the composition of the Chamber of Congress, women's participation went from 8.8% in 1991 to 48.2% in the period 2018-2021. Similarly, the Senate went from 15.6% in 2000 to 49.2% in the period 2018-2024.

The key to these positive results in recent years consisted of the so-called competitiveness blocks, which were established as affirmative action aimed at reducing the incidence of political parties in bad practices of manipulation of female candidates (Lozano, 2022).

These competitiveness blocks consisted of an electoral measure that allowed or required the parties to present candidacies in a group or block in each of the districts and that they had gender parity as a criterion. Likewise, based on the electoral history of each of the parties, it would be established whether there is manipulation of the parties by including women in the blocks with the



lowest percentage of votes for the specific party and men in the blocks with the highest percentage of votes for the party (Cárdenas, 2018; Lozano, 2022).

Thus, the normative provision established that no party should have only one gender in the blocks with the highest or lowest vote, but that it should be parity. The conclusion is clear: “Undoubtedly, the establishment of competitive blocs as a methodology represents a substantial advance to ensure that women candidates are not relegated exclusively to territorial demarcations where their parties have little chance of winning” (Lozano, 2022, p. 79).

### 5.3 Gender Parity in Colombia

In the specific case of Colombia, the constitutional basis for gender parity is found in Article 13 of the 1991 Political Charter, which clearly establishes that all persons are equal before the law and, therefore, enjoy equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities, regardless of race, sex or national or family origin.

In addition to this constitutional norm, there is Law 581 of 2000, or Quota Law, which regulates and establishes the criteria to achieve an effective and adequate participation of women at decision-making levels and in the organs of power. Although this law contemplated criteria applicable to the various branches and organs of power, it does not make any reference to political parties, even though their relationship with these decision-making and power organs is evident, since

it should not be forgotten that the parties exercise great power in the definition of appointments to positions in the various branches of public power.

In addition to the above, there is the Social Conpes Document 161 of 2013, in which the public policy on gender equality was materialized. This public policy establishes that the notion of equity has to do in a broad sense with non-discrimination, equality, and diversity; then, it should be understood as “equality oriented by differences” (p. 8). Under this conception, the State’s interest in going beyond a simple perspective of equality between women and men deepens the State’s duty to guarantee “equal access, enjoyment and exercise of opportunities and capabilities for both” (p. 9).

Similarly, there is Ley 1475 de 2011, which established the rules for the operation and organization of political parties, including the registration of candidates for popular elections. Thus, Article 28 of this law expressly establishes that in those cases in which five or more seats are elected in any of the popularly elected or consultative corporations, they must be made up of a minimum of 30% of one of the genders.

In addition to this regulation, the principle of gender equity and equality is also established, underlining that men, women, and other sexual options must enjoy real equality in their rights and opportunities to participate in the political system, including the leadership of political parties, among the most important.

## 6. Conclusions

Research on the level of efficiency of gender parity in countries such as Mexico, Ecuador, and Colombia shows that there is a broad growth of affirmative actions represented in regulatory frameworks that promote these initiatives. However, in practice, the patriarchal model in the region continues to impose practices within political parties that tend to limit women's participation or place them in secondary positions. These are barriers to access that reflect the real conditions of women within society, which are characterized by exclusion or by minimizing their level of importance. Given this panorama, the achievements and gaps or barriers that political parties have in relation to gender parity are mentioned below.

In the case of Ecuador, it is evident that political parties impose barriers and resistance to one of the first reforms in Latin America in which gender parity was included as a constitutional criterion. However, some practices are not in line with this, such as rhetorical but not effective and real management of gender parity, internal strategies of political parties to exclude women, placement of women candidates in places with the prevalence of patriarchal models, leadership positions in political parties headed by men, and formal mention of gender parity in the statutes, but without much effect in reality.

Likewise, it is suggested that in Mexico, important initiatives are being carried out to strengthen gender parity in the political system, especially in the regulatory sphere.

Even so, political parties have a fundamental role in gender parity. However, it has not been an effective and real practice, given that there are obstacles that lead to generating processes of marginalization of women, among others, the lack of transparency of political parties to apply gender parity (definition of candidacies or as an object of trophy/punishment), marginal candidacies of women, sexual division of labor and invisibilization of women's initiatives. An example of this exclusion or marginalization was observed in the fact that 36.32% of women were part of the governing bodies of political parties, but only 3.12% held senior management positions.

On the other hand, in the case of Colombia, it is clear that political parties have a high level of responsibility regarding the participation of women in the political system, including at the internal level of these parties. Likewise, it is concluded that the prospects for gender parity in Colombia are very limited, given that the political reform of 2011 established more gender equity criteria but with barriers.

One of these barriers determined that political parties could create a list of candidates with a minimum of 30% by gender; this means that discrimination and inequality criteria prevail that substantially affect women. Thus, since Colombia is a patriarchal country, it is evident that the power exercised within the parties will always be focused on benefiting men with a 70% chance of registration on these lists.

Furthermore, nothing is mentioned about the governing bodies of the party, so there is no

break with these patriarchal structures. Although the possibility of improving the internal statutes of these parties is established, traditional parties such as the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party maintain the criterion of 30% inclusion of women in their administrative and management bodies.

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