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WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT

Colombia

PHOTO: FERNANDA PINEDA

The women's political participation and leadership (WPPL) assessment in Colombia, one of an eight-country pilot under USAID's Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Learning, Evaluation, and Research (LER) II activity, uses the latest iteration of USAID's WPPL Assessment Framework. The Colombia WPPL assessment investigates the barriers to and opportunities for expanding women's participation and leadership in Colombia along socio-cultural, institutional, and individual dimensions. The research included a desk review of relevant literature and documents, a survey completed by 84 politicians, 26 key informant interviews, and nine focus group discussions with politicians, civil society, and media in Bogotá and the Pacific and Caribbean regions.

The Colombia WPPL Assessment Report can be used by the relevant stakeholders to identify priority areas where their investments in programs and initiatives to support women's political participation and leadership are likely to have the greatest and most meaningful impact.

FINDINGS

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

- Gender stereotypes, misperceptions about women's secondary role in society, and women's lack of leadership experience are pervasive throughout Colombian society and politics. "Machismo" culture favoring men's experiences undermines not only women's political participation but also more equitable, inclusive gender norms.
- Women's familial roles limit their participation in politics as domestic work fills most of their time. Patriarchal structures result in "family voting," with the father or husband inducing the family to collectively vote for the same candidate.
- Colombia's affirmative action measures have largely favored politically or economically elite women; other intersecting identities (rural, Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, working-class, young, disabled, LGBTQI+, etc.) face additional barriers.
- Colombia's gender quota law is flawed: it only applies to large electoral districts, it does not mandate women's placement on the list, and it does not include punitive measures for non-compliance.
- While low-income women can appear on candidate lists due to gender quotas, they are less likely to win elections since they cannot afford to finance their campaigns.
- Access to political parties depends on patronage, and parties often instrumentalize women to meet the 30 percent gender quota regardless of their interests or political ideologies.
- Political institutions such as parties and Congress maintain entrenched patriarchal structures and practices. Political parties' women's wings lack power and the gendered issues they raise are rarely debated or voted on in Congress.
- Women's fear for their safety and of appearing politically inexperienced result in a heavy reliance on training programs provided inside and outside political parties. These programs offer information on government structures, campaign finance, communication strategies, and violence against women in politics (VAWP), but do not cover political negotiation, how to prevent or report VAWP cases, or prospects for the aftermath of elections.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

- The increase in women elected as congresswomen and in leadership roles in the national government—including women from marginalized ethnic groups—is an opportunity to create new laws and policies for gender equality and WPPL, including a gender parity quota.
- Colombia's Constitutional Court is considering the recently passed law on VAWP, after which the government will need to properly resource its implementation.
- While the violence that plagued Colombia during a decades-long armed conflict disproportionately affected women and deterred political participation, women's involvement in and leadership of the peace process provided a foundation from which to further build women's participation.
- The Presidential Counselor's Office for Women's Equity aims to design, promote, coordinate, and implement policies for women and girls that lead to equal opportunities and relations between women and men.

SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS

- International donors and civil society organizations (CSOs) should shift harmful cultural views and behaviors by engaging men gatekeepers and allies in political parties, the National Electoral Council (CNE), and other public institutions through education on women's political participation, gender stereotypes, and "machismo" culture.
- CSOs and the CNE should undertake a public information campaign that confronts "machismo" behavior, such as during voter education campaigns targeting women's barriers to voting.
- International donors and CSOs should train diverse groups of media workers (regional and national, print, television, digital) to cover WPPL, VAWP, and gender-based violence. Content could include transforming social norms; the intersections of gender bias and racism, homophobia, and transphobia; preventing and addressing gendered disinformation through media platforms; and preventing violence against women media workers.

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

- The Government should partner with the CNE and women's and feminist organizations to support robust, inclusive electoral and political reform processes, including a formal review of the VAWP law, consideration of additional revisions of the national election laws, and application of the 2023 Statutory Law on VAWP to support women's access to public office.
- The Government should implement rigorous monitoring of the CNE, including punitive legal and financial measures for parties that do not comply with the quota law or the law on political finance.
- To support procedural reforms to increase women's access to resources and influence, political parties and Congress should undertake reforms, such as piloting reform agendas to promote inclusion or incentivizing a voluntary review of bylaws and practices.
- Donors should maintain funding and technical support for women's and feminist organizations that have demonstrated the capacity and willingness to further reform agendas, including groups in rural or underrepresented areas.
- The Colombian Government should pursue pathways to guarantee women's right to vote, with particular attention to LGBTQI+ individuals, such as developing gender sensitivity training for public servants and improving registry procedures that allow citizens to change their gender marker and photo on their ID.

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

- Donors should work with the Ministry of Education, the CNE, and CSOs to develop and deploy civic education materials targeting underserved women from Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and LGBTQI+ communities to bolster their knowledge and confidence to participate in civic and political life.
- International organizations should improve coordination between government agencies, civil society, and local equality offices on women candidate preparedness trainings to broaden their reach throughout the country.
- Government institutions and private providers of legal and psychological services should receive training on gender-sensitive approaches to engaging VAWP survivors.