


Women, political power and gender equality law in Paraguay

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Latin America has once again become void of female presidents and only 13.4% of local posts were occupied by women in 2016. Paraguay is no exception. **Español**



Ex-Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff during official handing over of the Relatório de Proteção Social para uma Globalização Equitativa e Inclusiva with ex-Chilean president Michelle Bachelet

“Don’t ask for equality, you’re beautiful without it” Horacio Cartes, President of Paraguay

On the 11th of March, 2018, the presidential mandate of Michelle Bachelet in Chile came to an end making Latin America once more a hemisphere void of female presidents.

This fact garnered much deserved attention among both regional and international press ([La República](#), [Infobae](#), [New York Times](#), [BBC](#), [El País](#), among others).

What’s more, the next presidential elections in the region predict this scenario is unlikely to change given that the main candidates in Colombia and Mexico are men.

The presidential elections of the 22nd of April in Paraguay illustrate this male-dominance: There were ten candidates for the presidency and not one woman was among them (only one for the vice-presidency).

The national focus on electoral analysis often disregards what happens with executive positions during popular elections on a sub-national level. These positions do not foster media interest and thus receive less attention.

To some extent, the debate about affirmative action measures (gender quotas) and/or the principle of gender parity within the national legislative bodies (women make up almost 30% of politicians in Congress) tends to eclipse what happens on a sub-national level where female presence is equally limited in the majority of cases.

On a local executive level, only 13.4% of posts were occupied by women in Latin America in 2016 and on a regional level, this percentage is barely 10%.

The presence of women in executive positions on an intermediate sub-national level is scarce throughout the region.

Once again, the results of the elections in Paraguay are telling. None of the 17 departments will be governed by a woman during the period of 2018-2023. In fact, out of 34 candidatures of the two traditional political parties (Asociación Nacional Republicana y Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico), only one was a woman.

The absence of female governors represents a regression in relation to previous elections (2003, 2008, 2013) where there was always one female governor elected. The capital district of Asunción has had only one female mayor since 1989.

The case of Paraguay is not unique. The presence of women in executive positions on an intermediate sub-national level is scarce throughout the region.

In Argentina, there are only 4 female governors out of 23 provinces. In Brazil, there is only one female governor in the state of Roraima. In Mexico, much the same as in Brazil, there is only one female governor in the state of Sonora out of 32, and in Venezuela, the remaining federation of the region, there are only 5 female governors out of 23.

In non-federal countries, the data demonstrates a similar tendency. In Bolivia, not one of the nine departments are governed by a woman. In Colombia, only 5 women can call themselves governors out of 32 departments. In Ecuador, only one of 24 provinces, Orellana, is governed by a woman.

In Peru, there is only one regional president in Arequipa of 24 departments. In Uruguay, only one woman occupies the position of mayor in Lavalleja out of 19 departments.

In Chile, where regional mayors are not selected by popular vote, President Piñera recently named 5 women as governors out of 15 regions across the country; women paradoxically have the highest presence in Chile where governors are not popularly elected. Executive positions of an intermediate level are therefore clearly 'male property'.

Sub-national politics is much more controlled by local leaders and their networks of “old friends” who act as guardians and block female access to candidacies.

These figures show that sub-national politics is not necessarily more open to female political participation. The political “prize” is smaller and therefore, the positions are less attractive and contested, as is the economic cost of regional politics and the personal sacrifices that the position would require.

However, sub-national politics is much more controlled by local leaders and their networks of “old friends” who act as guardians and block female access to candidacies. And when they support them, they usually position them as trophies, submissive, loyal and incapable of taking charge of their position independently.

Generally speaking, these women face the same barriers as their colleagues on other levels. They often face the consequences of prejudice and gender stereotypes, a lack of economic resources and/or personal networks and may be subjected to violence for gender-based motives.

Additionally, the presence of women in presidential positions or a high percentage of female politicians in Congress do not always help to achieve higher female representation in sub-national politics: female presence does not translate automatically between institutional levels nor between territorial spaces.

On the one hand, in Brazil, the number of female governors went down during the government of Dilma Rousseff (2010 – 2016), and in Chile, President Piñera named more female governors than Michelle Bachelet (2014-2018) during her second mandate.

On the other hand, in countries that uphold principles of vertical parity and a high presence of women in Congress such as Bolivia or Ecuador, there are almost no women in sub-national executive positions on an intermediate level. This suggests the logic of access for women is different regarding different levels and types of electoral position.

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Political representation of women in Paraguay on a sub-national level is ultimately discouraging. The country has a very weak gender quota in comparative terms: only 20% female presence is required on internal electoral lists, although some parties voluntarily adopt higher percentages, which effectively does not guarantee their presence on the final electoral lists.

The candidate selection process works as an additional filter that makes female access to the political sphere more difficult. In the context of at least 6 countries in Latin America having adopted the principle of gender parity regarding access to candidacies, it is evident that said principle is not sufficient in order to provide women with equal opportunities to compete for positions and political representation.

In 2015, an important collective effort under the auspices of Grupo Impulsor de la Paridad Democrática (GIPD) arose, with the intention of promoting gender parity in internal election lists (although not for general election lists).

The GIPD congregates women from political parties (and other types of organizations) from across the ideological spectrum and it is supported by international organizations such as UN Women, PNUD Paraguay, and an outfit of local social groups.

Based on comparative experience and the results of the elections of the 22nd of April, the new law should include not only vertical parity for plurinominal posts (alternation of gender in lists) but also horizontal parity, demanding candidatures on the same level are also integrated in an equal way.

Horizontal parity currently forms part of legislation in only Bolivia, Costa Rica and Mexico, but given the data regarding political representation of women in sub-national executive positions, it should be the new guiding principle for the whole region.

In Paraguay, a new level of institutionalism will help to improve this absence of female governors (and the low presence of mayors on the local level at around 10%) and political equality.

After a three year long effort, the Democratic Gender Parity Law was validated with vertical and horizontal parity by the Senate at the beginning of March this year. The law needs approval without delay or modifications by the outgoing Chamber of Deputies and the support of the president.

This could be one of the last meaningful acts of the currently president (and future senator) despite his damaging opinion regarding the Gender Parity Law and the conditions of gender equality in the country. Although imperfect (mostly because it can only be applied to internal elections), this law is a significant legislative advancement in Paraguay today.

In the case that the legislation is not passed, the new Chamber of Deputies should approve this much needed law. Likewise, the new president, Mario Abdo Benítez, should accompany and support this initiative, just as he committed to doing so throughout the electoral campaign.

The new law would make Paraguay one of the most legally advanced countries in the region regarding gender parity and it would allow women to compete in more equal conditions.