

# Women and political participation

A minor field study of the political culture in Colombia

Annika Stjernquist

# Abstract

Since the elections of 2010 there are 14 per cent women in the Colombian congress - a remarkably low number in comparison with several other countries in Latin America where quotas of allocation are common. Decades of armed conflict might give a hint of why gender progress has been slow in Colombia, but at the same time as stereotyped gender roles are highly dominating, women are in no sense passive actors in the public sphere. More women than men graduate from higher education and women take an active role in social movements. It is said that the political arena is the most macho culture of all in Colombia and that the political parties actively work against women's participation in conventional politics.

Interviews with congressmen/women and gender experts show that stigmatisation is great, women face tougher requirements, are expected to take a higher moral ground and that the work is difficult to combine with the responsibility of taking care of a home. Theories of democracy and political culture are used to analyse the interviews, as well as a presumed dichotomy between public and private sphere. This study in many ways present a miserable outlook for women in formal politics, but it also shows that the alternative path that many women choose – social movements – might also be a way of avoiding getting corrupted or needing links to the drug-trade or paramilitaries.

*Key words:* women, political participation, public/private, political culture, Colombia, congress

# Abstract

Desde las elecciones de 2010 en Colombia, un 14 por ciento de los congresistas son mujeres – una cifra muy baja en comparación con otros países latinoamericanos donde cuotas de género son comunes. Décadas de conflicto armado pueden indicar por qué el progreso en aspecto de género ha sido lento en Colombia, a la vez que los papeles estereotípicos de los sexos son dominantes, las mujeres en ningún momento han sido actores pasivos en la esfera pública. Son más las mujeres que los hombres que se gradúan de la educación superior y las mujeres son muy activas en los movimientos sociales. Se dice que la esfera política es la más machista en Colombia y que los partidos trabajan activamente para dificultar la participación de las mujeres en la política convencional.

Entrevistas con congresistas y expertos de género muestran que la estigmatización es amplia, que las mujeres enfrentan requisitos mas duros, se esperan que tengan un nivel moral más alto y que el trabajo de un político es imposible de combinar con la responsabilidad de tener una familia. Teorías de democracia y cultura política son usadas para analizar las entrevistas. Una discusión de público/privado está presente durante todo el estudio. Los resultados finales, aunque en muchos sentidos deprimentes también muestran que la ruta alternativa que varias mujeres toman – los movimientos sociales – puede ser una manera de evitar volverse corrupta o involucrarse con el narcotráfico o el paramilitarismo.

*Palabras claves:* mujeres, participación política, público/privado, cultura política, presencia

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# 1. Introduction

All over the world women are under-represented in formal political power. A 19.2 per cent of members of parliament throughout the world are women (ipu.org, 2011). In the Americas the average number is 22 per cent. Colombia stands out remarkably as the level of women in the congress since the elections of October 2010 reaches 14 per cent (See Appendix)<sup>1</sup>. During the last 20 years the level of women in congress has been increasing in several other Latin American countries (eclac.org), at least partly thanks to an allocation of quotas guaranteeing a certain minimum presence of both sexes<sup>2</sup>. In Colombia several times a congress proposition to introduce electoral quotas of 30 per cent has been protested against by the parties. However, in the end the law was made valid in August 2011 when the parties presented their lists for the local elections in the following October. Women now made up 35.21 percent of the names; in 2007 the number was 19.64 (registraduria.gov.co). Even though this is a clear progress the debate it evokes shows that this is a political hot potato.

It is of great concern to understand the deficit of women in formal representation, as it is one of the foundations of democracy. In Colombia the problem of gender discrimination goes further than political representation. In January 2011 the vice president of Colombia, Angelino Garzón, announced that more measures need to be taken to guarantee the rights of women ([laopinion.com.co](http://laopinion.com.co)). Especially stressed are problems such as work-place discrimination and sexual violence. When as late as October 2011 congress was to vote on a proposition to criminalise abortion the debate and final decision was taken in a parliamentary commission where 15 of the 16 congressmen voting were men (senado.gov.co).

According to Anne Phillips, the importance of having women represented in assemblies is more and more recognised all over the world. Most progress is obtained where voluntary party quotas to increase female representation are used (1998:57ff). In 1998, Phillips concluded that positive action to increase the proportion of women elected had become a topic on the political agenda. She argues that even if lots of negative voices are heard, at least it is positive that politicians speak about it.

Surveys conducted in other Latin American countries in 2007 showed that women see politics as a masculine area where it is hard for women to enter

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<sup>1</sup> In the Senate (Senado) there are 16.7 per cent women and in the Chamber of Representatives (Cámara de Representantes) 12.7.

<sup>2</sup> Argentina was first out in 1991. Thereafter followed Mexico and Paraguay (1996), Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panamá, Peru, Dominican Republic & Venezuela (1997).

(Informe Regional 2007). In Argentina women believe that reaching political posts of certain importance is harder for women than for men. Among those with experience from politics the number agreeing with this statement was even higher. Especially stressed, as an obstruction for women in the political sphere, was the incompatibility to combine a political life with that of the traditional role of women, such as taking care of family. In Chile it proved obvious that women interested or participating in politics are those with higher socio-economic status, higher education and of younger age. In Bolivia women themselves explained the lack of women in politics with women's lack of education, proficiency, practice and that women are easier to manipulate. The results of these surveys were of great inspiration when designing this study.

## 1.1 Brief description of Colombia

Domestic fighting has filled Colombia's modern history. In 1948 civil war broke out between the two political groups – conservatives and liberals (Landrapport, 2011), this lasted until 1953. Today left-wing guerrilla and paramilitary groups, drug trafficking, corrupt politics and human rights crimes are widespread. The armed conflict has been going on for decades and there are millions of internally displaced, *desplazados*. Colombia's president, Santos, recognised in 2011 that there is an armed conflict in Colombia, which ignited hope of getting closer to reconciliation. During the last decade the guerrilla groups have decreased and Colombia has become more present in the international sphere. Trade agreements with the US and almost all South American countries have been ratified. During the same period there have also been a couple of great internal crises in Colombia such as the revelation of politicians' links with paramilitaries. Colombia is a dangerous country for people active in unions or journalism and organised labour and human rights groups (acnur.org, 2004-11). Due to decades of armed conflict there are more women than men in Colombia. More men than women are illiterates and more women than men go from school to higher education (Madrid, 2009:24).

About 25 per cent of all Colombians are Afro-Colombians and two per cent are indigenous (acnur.org, 2004-02). Whereas the armed conflict might have delayed some social development in Colombia such as gender progress (El Jack, 2003) there are other areas where Colombia has had a more progressive development than some other Latin American countries such as an early legalisation of same-sex union. Quotas for women however seems to evoke great resistance.

Colombia is a republic with a congress compounded by two houses (Córdoba, 2006:240). In the *Senado* there are 100 seats elected on a national level, two of them are earmarked for indigenous groups. In *la Cámara de Representantes* there

are 161 seats representing the 32 regions and five seats for the political minorities, Colombians residing abroad and the black and indigenous communities. Since 1954 women are allowed to vote.

## 1.2 Introduction of the research question

Research has shown that a variety of factors can contribute to female political participation, amongst them changes in society, women labour market participation and equalisation of educational qualifications between the sexes (Phillips, 1998:59). There is a correlation between a country's socio-economic level and the number of women in parliament (Norris & Inglehart, 2001). As stressed earlier, most progress is made where political parties voluntarily introduce quotas and put pressure for change. Structural and institutional barriers are assumed to play an important role but cannot explain the entire picture as similar countries perform differently on the matter. Remembering that the educational level of Colombian women is higher than that of men, one can assume that educational level itself is not enough. The general observation around the world is that even when women's rights progress in areas such as education, health care, reproductive services and domestic violence women stay under-represented in the political sphere (Norris & Inglehart, 2001).

A well-known Afro-Colombian politician, Piedad Córdoba writes in a report from 2006 that, in Colombia "maybe in more obvious forms than in other Latin American countries, traditional cultural patterns that deny women the possibility to share power with men prevail" (p.239). Córdoba argues that cultural barriers, stereotypes and prejudices keep women out from the political sphere. The party program of the left-wing party *Polo Democrático* states that 30 per cent of the candidates on their election lists should be women. However, in the election of 2006 two female names were to be found on the party's list<sup>3</sup>, none of them among the first five candidates (Madrid, 2009:44). Women that enter politics normally do not stay there for long. Those that stay longer usually move on to the diplomatic world or other spheres where they do not take part in domestic politics (ibid:48-9). It seems obvious that there is great awareness of the situation in Colombia and that discrimination of women is more and more recognised as a problem each day, yet women stay underrepresented in formal decision-making institutions in Colombia. By studying the Colombian congress this study aims to answer the following research questions:

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<sup>3</sup> Two female names amongst 100 names that is.



*Why is the level of female presence in the Colombian congress so low?  
And what is the explanatory power of political culture?*

Three sub questions will be kept in the back of my head while conducting the study to help answer the research questions. They will be presented in the theory section below. The aim of the study is to see how politically active people perceive the political culture in Colombia. In-group interviews will all be done with MPs of the Colombian congress (current or former), other politicians and people working near decision-making politics or within a party but not popularly elected. The terms *political participation* and *politically active* will be frequently used in this study. The focus of this study is the Colombian congress but knowing that people can participate in other ways than as popularly elected there is a need for two definitions of political participation. Participation in congress and conventional politics in general will be referred to as decision-making level or formal participation. *Political participation* will be a more open term where people themselves can judge what is “political”. This is much broader than the traditional definitions of being member of a party or voting. *Politically active* can be to participate in a demonstration, to form part of women’s movements, antiracism etc (please read O’Toole et al 2003 for in-depth discussion).

## 2 Theory and method

### 2.1 Theory

#### 2.1.1 Politics of presence

Politics of presence is a democracy model that puts presence of certain groups, rather than representatives chosen by majority voting, in focus. Anne Phillips argues that *politics of presence* is more democratic than *politics of ideology* as people with similar experiences and backgrounds may be better representatives of one's beliefs than people stating certain ideological beliefs (1998, ch.2). With majority vote, or ideological politics, those who are elected may be the ones with money or connections to the media. Majoritarian rule has shown to be prone to injustices and especially in countries where there is a permanent majority group. Political representation stands out in the sense that it is hard to argue for women's right to be elected to a political post. It is also hard to argue that men by some genetic explanation, or by some social skill, have a right to occupy the majority of the political posts though. Why is it of importance to increase knowledge of women and (lack of) political participation? Understanding women's political participation is an important contribution to studies of democratisation. The theories presented in this section both give this thesis' *raison d'être* and at the same time a good theoretical foundation for the study. The theories of Phillips will be analysed partly to see whether Colombian politicians actually see this as a problem but also to analyse whether and how female presence is motivated and defended.

The fact that Colombia is a multi-ethnic society adds a transversal dimension. Nira Yuval-Davis believes that we need to understand the problems women suffer not just by comparing their rights and citizenship to that of men but also in the context of which ethnic group they belong to (1997:11). In order to understand the full picture we need to recognise the importance of various group memberships and how that can affect people's priorities and values. For example there is a risk that women from minority groups cannot see the point in fighting for women's rights when their whole group is subordinated by other groups (Yuval-Davis, 1994:187). Yuval-Davis further notices that in societies where traditional and familial connections are important, even when the society enters into a more developed phase, the rules for people that want to enter into politics stay more or less the same. This on the other hand also means that women that normally cannot take part in politics have greater chance of participating if they are widows, wives or daughters of politicians (Yuval-Davis, 1997:14).

There is another standpoint put forward by Hanna Pitkin saying that if we put too much concern into the physical characteristics of a representative there is a risk that the real questions of importance are lost. The true concern ought to be about what questions are brought up and that the representatives really represent whom they should (Pitkin, 1967:142). Phillips asserts that women's interests are more likely to be represented in assemblies where the level of women present is higher (1998:82). A natural sub-question that arises from these first paragraphs is: *Do people within the political sphere in Colombia believe that there is a need for women in decision-making politics?*

Phillips lists four arguments pro gender quotas and women's representation; role models for others, as a principle of justice between the sexes, women's particular interests and finally that women enhance the quality of politics by approaching it differently (1998:62-3). According to Phillips, all but the role-model argument are important from a democracy point of view. With a justice perspective it is unfair not to have women represented; it contributes to denying women's rights and opportunities they otherwise would have had. Women can further contribute to politics as their interests differ from those of men. This should not be too controversial when considering areas such as certain low-paid jobs, unpaid household work, sexual harassment and child bearing. The last argument is that women approach politics, as well as other aspects of life, with different morals and other values than those usually seen amongst men, simply because of their different situations and roles in life. In this sense they can bring another type of morality into politics.

The most problematic aspect of Phillip's theories is the one of female presence in politics because of women bringing another kind of morality to the agenda. One of the explanations as to why women ought to bring a higher moral to politics is because of their roles as mothers; a woman who have born a child will never put herself first, but always look for the best interest of the child (1998, ch.3). In the political sphere she will thereby look for the overall good as well as be averse to violence and war as method of conflict handling. Phillips, also, criticises this by arguing that the difference between those who run for office and those who do not is bigger than the difference between the sexes within one of those spheres. Further, by expecting women to be a subject of higher morals, society also lays a heavy burden on women based on their role as mother. The idea means saying that women in general are superior to men when it comes to politics and if so, why should men at all be present in politics?

Iris Marion Young discusses that there are different types of exclusion. Even when people are no longer externally excluded as in present in decision-making assemblies, they may face an internal exclusion meaning that they are still not included in the actual decision making process (2000:54-55) This is relevant considering that in Colombia women not only are few in decision-making politics but they also seem to be short lived once entering that arena (Madrid, 2009:48). Next sub-question to understand the full picture is: *Are women accepted as political actors by the established political elite?* With internal exclusion in mind we will now move on to the next theoretical approach – political culture.

## 2.1.2 Political culture

Having lined out in the previous section that women's participation in decision-making politics is a requisite for democratic quality, we now turn to the question of how a society can get to democracy. A common theme for investigating democratic stability and/or quality is political culture. The dominating stream has been that a certain political culture welcoming democracy may lead to/sustain democracy. The dominating theory dates back to the 1960s; Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's *Comparative Political Culture*. Their definition of the phenomenon says: "The political culture of a society consists of the system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values which defines the situation in which political action takes place. It provides the subjective orientation to politics" (1965:513). They also present a broader definition:

When we speak of the political culture of a society, we refer to the political system as internalized in the cognitions, feelings, and evaluations of its population. People are inducted into it just as they are socialized into non-political roles and social systems. (1965:14)

People have feelings towards the political system they live in, they might ascribe its legitimacy or they may reject it. The idea is that people within the same nation, group or community share a political culture at the same time as their ideological stands may differ widely.

One of the lines of critiques towards the theories of political culture's alleged effect on democracy is that most authors have mainly assumed the order of causation without ever thoroughly investigating it. In a paper from 2010, Matthew Fails and Heather Nicole Pierce show that the order of causation is actually the other way around; a country's level of democracy helps creating a democracy-embracing culture amongst its citizens. The study shows that democratic mass attitudes seem to follow the democracy level of the regime, not vice versa. What is clear however is that there is a correlation between a certain political culture and democracy level.

In a study from 2001 Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart quantify the relationship between the percentage of women in parliament and political culture (2001:131ff). They ask people to agree on a scale with the statement: "On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do" and a regression is run with the level of women in parliament. They find negative correlation between this statement (which in their study represents political culture) and presence of women in parliament. According to the authors the attitude towards women in politics affect both whether women decide to run for parliament and the likelihood of them being elected. Attitudes towards female politicians are more negative where fewer women are politically present and vice versa, more positive in

countries where women make up a bigger part of the elected ones. One interesting finding is that, in Europe, Catholic countries perform worse than Protestant and this is believed to be because of the culture extracted from the Church as the Catholic Church is more associated with hierarchies and conservatism. Critique can also be directed towards their study. The statement representing political culture can seem simplified. And once again, although the correlation is strongly significant, the order of causation cannot be determined. In other words, if it can be shown that Colombia has a political culture hostile towards women in power we can still not know if this is the explanation as to why there are few women in congress or the other way around.

In the context of female presence in conventional politics we need to expand the perspective, as every woman is an independent actor and needs to choose to run for candidacy to be able to form part of e.g. congress. Norris and Inglehart argue that if people in general are more positive towards electing a woman, it ought to increase the likelihood of her candidacy. Where traditional values and gender roles are dominant, women both may be reluctant to try entering power politics and it may be harder for them to attract voters (ibid). Through interviews they have also found that one of the major reasons women stress for them not wanting to participate in decision-making politics is that they feel a hostile attitudes towards their participation. The task of differing between culture and political culture is hard and may not be necessary in this study. If a country has a culture saying that women should stay at home and thereby indirectly saying that they should stay out of the public sphere (e.g. occupying a political post) this culture is in itself political. Almond & Verba discuss that the distinction between political culture and non-political culture may be hard to make but they still believe that a distinction is possible<sup>4</sup>; it concerns the political system (1965:13). The origin of this study is based on the fact that there are few women in the Colombian congress but it is important to once again stress that although political participation on the decision-making level is the focus, other types of political participation exist as well. Saying that there are few women in congress is not the same as saying that women in general are not politically active. Political activism might take place in what is usually considered the private sphere, through agencies, meetings between housewives etc (See O'Toole et al, 2003). This will also be a subject of study and the last sub question is: *is there any difference between women running for office and women participating on other levels (e.g. grass root politics)?*

Even if political culture is hard to measure it is particularly suitable for a study such as this one as the subject to some extent is controversial. Elkins and Simeon stress that it might become more explicit when norms are thoroughly violated or rapid change is on the agenda (1979:137-140). As culture refers to a phenomenon where people believe and assume that everyone else feels and thinks the same way, a challenge to these stands is a good way to provoke norms to surface.

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<sup>4</sup> Here it might be worth stressing that Almond and Verba's study was published in the end of the 60s, before the feminists of the 70s chanted the slogan "the personal is political"

Political culture should be seen as a complement to other variables, not as competing with them.

## 2.2 Method

This study has primarily been conducted qualitatively. The main references are primary sources from interviews executed in Bogotá during April and May 2011<sup>5</sup>. The interviewees were chosen as a snowball sample. Carmenza Saldías, a woman with experiences from politics as well as feminist movements in Colombia and Diana Espinosa at UN Women Colombia helped me find and contact most of the interviewees. Five MPs with a varying party pertinence were interviewed. Further, two former ministers of state were interviewed as well as a young woman active within a party but not popularly elected for the post she is occupying. Also a man who is now working as a consultant to e.g. congressmen but in the 90s worked as an elected politician on the regional level was interviewed. As a complement, other people with an insight into politics were interviewed. Three people working with gender issues within UN Women, a university and an NGO were the study's gender experts for an outside and analytical perspective. They also helped collecting printed sources and statistics. What is common for all of the interviewees is that they all contributed with their stories, told from their point of view and with their background. The study has further been complemented with statistics and written sources such as news articles. To keep up to date on what is happening in the country I have followed Internet based newspapers and politicians on Twitter since the beginning of this study in January 2011<sup>6</sup>. Academic articles and books have been the main resources for theory and method.

It is mainly a respondent study in the sense that the majority of the interviewees were chosen because of their special experiences within the political area. Their thoughts and them as people are in focus (Esaiasson & Gilljam, 2007, ch.13). By interviewing women in politics, first-hand information from people who have experienced, or live with, obstacles to women's participation in politics is obtained. Men are equally relevant as they form part of what constitutes the political culture of Colombia. The second group of interviewees are informants; representatives from NGOs working with different aspects of women's rights questions, international organs such as UN and academics. Some of the

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<sup>5</sup> The study was financed by SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) as a Minor Field Study.

<sup>6</sup> This turned out to be extra useful in two cases where one of my scheduled interviewees actually passed away and another suddenly launched her candidacy to become mayor of Bogotá which meant that neither of them had time for interviews nor did they continue replying to my emails.

interviewees have been working in politics but have left it, others work with politicians but are not interested in putting themselves forward as candidates, these are very important as well as much can be told of a culture from those who have in some sense rejected the culture as those that accept it and work within it (Elkins & Simeon, 1979:137).

The interviews were built around three dimensions of possible obstructions to women's political presence; private/public sphere, political culture and formal institutional possibilities/obstructions. Two themes helped semi-structure the interviews with low degree of standardisation (Esaiasson & Gilljam, 2007, ch.13). One common fear when considering quotas is that competence will fall with the entrance of women (Phillips, 1998:60). For that reason and bearing in mind that since 2002 more women than men graduated from higher education ([eltiempo.com](http://eltiempo.com), 2010), one of the two themes is competence. The other one being quotas. Improvisation was used; sub questions came up during the interviews and all interviewees were encouraged to add anything they wanted at the end of the interview. The interview questions were revised after a while due to new information that came up during some of the first interviews. Steinar Kvale's book on qualitative research technique was of great inspiration (2009). Information that at first seemed confusing such as people implying opposing statements at different points in the same interview could with Kvale's help be interpreted as another way of understanding a reality which may in itself be contradictory (Kvale, 2009:47).

Eliciting the underlying assumptions of political culture can seem like a vague and complicated task. Elkins and Simeon give advice on how to handle this difficulty (1979:137-8). There are people in a society that might be more aware of their culture because their work puts them in such situations where they become more aware of them. These may be for example politicians and journalists. Also people who have moved from one culture to another may have a great deal to say on the subject. Some of the interviewees are new to the political sphere and others have left it. Their experience and insights will be of value due to their special circumstances. Using theories of political culture means I needed to interpret not just the manifest meanings but also latent implications (Esaiasson & Gilljam:305-6). Quotes are frequently used to increase credibility and to decrease the distance between the interviewees and myself.

### 2.2.1 Possible weaknesses & problems encountered along the way

Most of the interviewees were contacted with help from Carmenza Saldías and Diana Espinosa. I cannot know whether it was them as referees or the subject matter that made most people asked want to participate, but the majority of them replied and I was able to realise more interviews than first planned. Just like in the

rest of the world it is obvious that women, empowerment - gender issues in general – are sensitive subjects. I cannot exclude that this, as well as me being a woman, may have affected the outcomes of some of the interviews. Several of the men interviewed seemed a bit defensive and eager to show how “good/innocent”<sup>7</sup> they were in this aspect, giving me the feeling that they thought I was there to “reveal” them. One of them was directly rude towards me. It is possible that he might have been equally rude towards a man and, as I will never know, I will not use this as part of my conclusions. It is possible that a male interviewer would have gained better results in some of the cases though.

Some of the MPs were media trained and hard to get through to. I interviewed people on “lower” levels, in order to go around the problem of them being scared of speaking openly. I also tried to focus more on interviewing people within politics but not elected, or who had previously occupied such post. The other half of the MPs interviewed spoke more openly with me and in the end I felt that I had a satisfactory amount of interviews. I learned that I should have been clearer when contacting the interviewees about their role and what kind of study I was conducting. Some of them wanted to help me with statistics and answer with data. After starting the majority of the interviews I had to explain that I was interested in them, their thoughts and experiences, not facts. In some cases where this seemed to affect the interview so that it did not give any satisfactory outcome I have chosen not to use the interview as reference in the study. All of the interviews were conducted in Spanish and then transcribed into English. Quotes etc. have been translated as exactly as possible but where found necessary, I have made less literal but much clearer translations.

This study followed the ethic lines of research that is practice in Sweden (Teorell & Svensson, 2007:21). All interviewed people were guaranteed confidentiality. I concluded that it was preferable to present all, or none, anonymously in the study and as several of the participants are famous in Colombia, I concluded that anonymity was a better choice, so that no one would feel uncomfortable about speaking openly. They were further informed and guaranteed that the results will be used for my final thesis, that their participation is voluntary and that they could interrupt and finish the interview at any time.

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<sup>7</sup> One male MP actually said “We’re innocent” (Congressman 2) when asked if he wanted to add something.



## 3 The field study

In the sub-sections, the findings of the interviews will be discussed and the theories chosen for the study will be applied. The sections have been arranged so that the phenomena found follow under the appropriate theory but in most cases they intervene. A list of the interviewees and the dates the interviews were conducted is found amongst the references. This simplifies the use of references in the following text. To simplify the reading, the coding will refer to the profession of the interviewees: Congressmen/Congresswomen, Ex-Ministers, Party Activist, Ex-Politician, Administrators and Experts. Where the sex is not obvious from the coding but is of relevance for the study the letters (F) or (M) will indicate whether the interviewees are male or female.

### 3.1 Women's presence as a matter of democracy

#### 3.1.1 Women, politics and moral

When talking about what purpose women fill in politics the answers vary. Some (Congresswoman 2, Expert 2) stress that women are needed today if the people of tomorrow (today's girls) should think of the possibility of themselves becoming politicians – it improves the quality of democracy. The reason why Phillips considers this argument less interesting is because it does not in itself have anything to do with how politics is being done (Phillips, 1998, p 63). The interviewees however take it one step further and assume that in the long run it will, and in that sense they actually relate it to the other pro-quota arguments. As mentioned in section 3, several of them advance that women are needed because they contribute with other experiences due to the different roles ascribed to them in society; specifically they experience the armed conflict differently. Congresswoman 1 expresses this as follows:

Life has made us women take care of life. Whereas men in congress are concerned with the macro view, they talk about economics, war etc. Women could maybe bring forward the questions that really are of interest such as life nurturing and finding water.

One of the interviewees talked about fairness (Expert 1), that women should be present even if they do not contribute with anything new or different. In theory, women should not even need to be present, as politicians should represent them no matter what. She continues, stating that due to socialisation from society as it is

today this has clearly proven not possible. As all people are treated differently due to which group they belong to, there is a need for presence of these different groups, not just a presence of an intention of ideology. Congresswoman 1 too agrees with Yuval-Davis in the sense that she believes that Colombia needs representatives of not just men and women but also gay and indigenous people.

The most common argument among the interviewees for female presence in politics is that women can bring higher moral to the political sphere. Ex-Minister (M) also stresses that in the Colombian mind there is an image of women behaving more cleanly and honestly; therefore, people prefer women to handle the country's treasury for example. Another interviewee (Former Politician (M)) says: "*Women have certain characteristics that I like, they are more effective, more responsible, more transparent.*" Other characteristics mentioned are honesty and less corruption. Activist also talks about women's higher morals and says that women's movements have moved away from conventional politics, which might have had to do with not needing funding from drugs (which according to her and other interviewees is quite common among politicians). She feels that women are needed in Colombian politics to "*reconstruct ethics*".

Even if morality ought to be seen as something positive, in the context of democracy there are two possible problems with this attitude. The first being that women are not wanted in the sphere if they do not raise the moral standard. Former Politician (M) talks about the women that are present today, and complains that they act like men; they do not change politics into something better. Then when asked if women make any difference in politics he says:

If more women did the same as those few women that are there today, I don't see that it would make any difference. I don't know if it is because those women that have come to power had to develop similar ways to those of the men to win. [...] I don't think more women would make any difference. I would like more women but not the kind that there is today.

By that he is indicating that women are welcome as political actors if they fulfill requirements that differ from the ones men need to fulfill. The other problem is even more specific to the Colombian context where conventional politics are seen as corrupt by most interviewees. When Congressman 3 talked about how a capable politician should be he ended by saying:

Another person might answer that a good politician is one that can put his/her feelings, principles and convictions in parenthesis and always make the pragmatic decision. Doing politics like that is easy; I won't have a conflict while taking a decision.

Explaining his statement by saying that the type of politician described is the one who is usefully successful. Former minister (F) implied that the morality question might be a reason as to why it is hard for women to stay within politics. Conventional politics in Colombia are corrupt and if a woman forms part of that she will never be forgiven, whereas men frequently make these mistakes and it is forgotten. Also Party Activist (F) stresses this issue as an important one; men are allowed to get away with a lot of behaviour that women cannot engage in. If

women adapt to conventional politics they will face hard social punishment if they are found out, and if they do not they will face a great challenge trying to make it within a sphere built around this kind of behaviour. Here it is interesting to ask, whether politicians are not elected because of which ideology they present (and whom they represent) but thanks to finances from drug trafficking etc how can this be seen as a democratic representation? Anne Phillips motivates politics of presence exactly by this risk of the ones elected are the ones with money and contacts.

A couple of the interviewees (Congresswoman 2; Administrator 2) also talked about women as scared of trying something new, they are more afraid of failure than men are. For that reason less women than men would be willing to offer themselves as candidates. Remembering from above that women are being judged harder for moral failure, it does not seem too odd that women are more afraid of failure than men.

### 3.1.2 More than a gender-division

Several of the interviewees brought up the issue of Colombia being a multi-ethnic country and that this subordination of some groups and superiority of others has to be considered to fully understand the problems women suffer in Colombia. Some of the interviewees claim that the problem of political access in Colombia should not be seen as a division of gender but as one where race and ethnicity matter (Congressman 2). Others maintain, in line with Yuval-Davis, that the political exclusion of women is part of a greater problem of race and social class and where gender is another dimension of the problem (Expert 3). They both agree that anyone who wants to enter into Colombian politics and does not come from a family which has traditionally been within politics will face great obstacles.<sup>8</sup> Colombian politicians are usually white, rich, highly educated and from urban areas. In the cities you will find a standard of living similar to Europe, whereas in some rural areas it is close to the Congo. If you are an Afro-Colombian from a rural area, you are almost chanceless in entering politics –on top of that, if you are a woman, your chances are even less (Expert 3, Party Activist (F)).

Others do not talk about the problem as between ethnic groups but between for example rural-urban areas and how strong the influence of guerrillas or paramilitary groups is there. Party Activist (F) says that the problem of violence towards women is bigger in rural areas. A woman there who wants to be elected to a political post first need to take the fight of inferiority to her husband and then with the stigmatisation that all women face when entering formal politics. Congressman 3 puts this in relation to the debate of quotas: *“There will always be women saying that they made their career without any preferential treatment. But*

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<sup>8</sup> Here it may be appropriate to add that several of the interviewees actually come from families where politics have been present; Congressman 2, 3 and Ex-Minister (F)'s fathers were all politicians.

*for example women in rural areas don't have the same possibilities as urban ones.*". He argues that there are women currently opposing quotas because they themselves do not want to be seen as if they are there thanks to quotas rather than merit and experience. The problem is that the women saying that are all urban, white and with the right family background. Expert 1 even explained that there is not a single woman in congress who does not have the right background to be there. If the purpose of quotas is to lower the entry level for women, it is not effective.

Whilst this topic could make an entire study in itself, for now, we will keep in mind at all times that if it is definitely hard for all women to enter politics, it is even harder for some.

## 3.2 Political culture

### 3.2.1 Cultural factors

According to a report published in 2004 by a research group linked to the Colombian government working with gender questions, the scarce number of women in the political sphere is a reflection of the sexist and conservative Colombian society (Boletín 1, 2004:6). Stereotyped roles for men and women hold women back from being more present in the political sphere. Former Politician (M) confirms this when saying that Colombian conventional politics are structured in such a way that one has to go to the streets and meet the people to get votes. As this requires a lot of time to be possible women cannot do it, as they still have to take almost all responsibility for the household work.

Congresswoman 1 has been active within party politics only a bit over a year and was elected to congress in October 2010. She is divorced and has two grown-up sons with families of their own. *"I often think about what would have happened if I had had young kids. I believe I would have had to make a choice. [...] If I were responsible for another person, kids or parents I couldn't do it."* She explains why this problem does not affect men the same way as it affects women:

I've seen that my fellow congressmen differentiate between their professional life and their private life. Women don't. We can't. [...] My male colleagues that come from other regions totally disconnect from their private lives while here. They know that they have a woman back home taking care of everything.

Congressman 2 confirms this situation:

I believe that politics is a sphere for lonely people. They hardly have families. This makes it harder for women because of the type of politics we have in Colombia [...] And there's a lot of drinking involved, lots of alcohol and I believe that for these

reasons it doesn't really attract women. [...] All male politicians here (gesturing towards congress building, author's remark) have abandoned their families.

He explains that it is common that congressmen have several girlfriends in the important cities in Colombia, where they have to spend a lot of time.

Phillips says that in majority rule, often people with connections and money win. Congresswoman 1 comments that in conventional politics it is of great importance to have a big network. Former Politician (M) explains further that as women are forced to stay at home taking care of home and family they do not have the possibility of meeting their constituency and thereby gaining votes and networking. Women who do stay out of the house to do this make great sacrifices such as home and family, whereas successful men usually have a wife at home taking care of everything. He concludes: *“Us men, we like that women participate, we like that they are successful but not our own woman.”*

Once again it is clear that the distinction between private and public is hard to make. When the culture of Colombia says that women should stay in the private sphere and indirectly that they should stay out of the public (as the two roles cannot be combined when it comes to e.g. politics). The conservative culture is in that sense political culture. Making it possible for women to enter politics it seems that most interviewees agree that men ought to (to some extent) exit the “public” sphere and enter the “private”.

### 3.2.2 Quotas

Two types of quotas were discussed with the interviewees; the law in Colombia called *Ley de Cuotas* (“Quota law”) that states that the directive posts of the public administration should contain at least 30 per cent women; and electoral quotas. In 2010 congress decided to implement electoral quotas but immediately awoke more debate<sup>9</sup>. All the people interviewed stated that they were pro some kind of quotas. Most of them stressed that they see them as a phase and that they should be used as long as they are needed. So what could be the explanation be as to why proper electoral quotas cannot be implemented? Some stress that a great problem when it comes to women and formal political participation is that there are not enough women who want to participate (Ex-minister (M), Administrator). Ex-minister (M) says that quotas is a good way of proving that women really are competent; in line with Pippa & Inglehart it is harder to find arguments and negative attitudes towards women in politics when there are more of them. Another (Former Politician (M)) starts by stressing that the law is good because it obliges society to find the women, but then continues saying that the problem is that they cannot find enough women.

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<sup>9</sup> Since the interviews were conducted, this law has actually been put into practice as mentioned in the Introduction. As this was not yet the case when the interviews were conducted I will still present the material as if they had not yet been introduced.

There were two common explanations that came up to why the current *Ley de Cuotas* is not effective. Several (Expert 3; Activist) agreed that the problem is that there are not enough sanctions when not fulfilled, in other words, nothing happens. Former Politician (M) and Ex-Minister (M) stressed several times that there are not enough women. Former Politician (M) backs this up by telling me an anecdote from 1990 when he was elected governor and could not find enough women to work with him. Several of the congress men/women interviewed (Congressman 2; Congresswoman 2) and others of those that have been active within a party in some way (Activist) have stressed that they themselves did not seek to participate in politics but were actively searched for because of contacts, family connections etc. It seems that even though it is common in Colombia that politicians do not actively seek to participate in a party, this is exactly what women are expected to do. The introduction of an allocation of quotas could be a first step to go look for more women, but even before actually introducing real quotas, several of the interviewees instead complain that women do not actively seek to participate. Considering that the Colombian congress is made up by 86 per men it seems that the pressure may be greater on women that they should be the active part when it comes to entering politics.

More women than men graduate from university in Colombia. If competence is a matter of education there should not be a problem of there being eligible women or not. A study from UN Women shows that all women currently in congress are merit-wise competent for the posts they are filling, they are educated, have experience and lots of them come from traditional political families (unifeminandina.org). Then again, several of the interviewees (Administrator; Expert 3) also stressed that competence as in education and experience is unfortunately not what people look for in a politician. Administrator gives her point of view: *“I think they would prefer to have an incapable man or whatever than having a woman. [...] It's like they're always looking for a flaw so that she can't candidate as soon as a women decides to.”* She explains that this is not just what she sees thanks to her job within the administration of congress but in the whole of society: *“Society is so used to thinking that women aren't capable that when a woman is a candidate they think twice. And the electorate also think twice before giving a woman confidence.”*

### 3.2.3 The political parties as conservative institutions?

Remembering that history has shown that when it comes to number of women in parliament, most progress is made where parties introduce voluntary quotas, as in the case of Sweden (Norris & Inglehart, 2001) we now turn to the case of the Colombian parties. In an interview in November 2010, the director of UN Women Lucía Salamea-Palacios said that in Colombia the greatest opponents to quotas are in fact the political parties (González, 2010). This was something which came up in some of the first interviews conducted (Activist; Expert 1), Activist says that the political parties of Colombia are

Basically organisations where masculine subjects are discussed. Women within parties are almost never part of the decision-making process, they are present and functioning a lot and present in the voting system and party program but the leadership is and has almost always been masculine. The only women that come to the level of leadership are those that I call honorary men, those that have learned to play the same games and use the same terms as men. [...] And they therefore abandon the gender questions.

All interviewees actively working within a party were asked to comment on these types of statements. None of them fully disagreed. Congressman 3 seemed at first to be a bit surprised but agreed that the parties (including his own) are very conservative. He added further that e.g. his own party has ideas and ideology to change this, but that he is also aware that something written on paper does not mean that it is really practiced. Congresswoman 1 gives a similar conclusion; the party has a will on paper but that this has to be put into practice. Others gave more vague answers, agreeing to some extent but also arguing that their own party is performing better, either by listing names of women within the party (Congressman 2), saying that their own party is working a lot with the issue (Party Activist (F)) or by commenting that this is a problem but it is changing (Congresswoman 2). Although defending her own party, Party Activist (F) also verifies that the sphere she is working in is very difficult for women to be in:

Within politics women are made fun of for being old maids, or if we are young they say we got to that post because some male politician put us there for being their mistress or girlfriends. It's really difficult sometimes the stigmatisation that one has to suffer as a woman.

Ex-Minister (F) says that the party's resistance towards her was the reason that she left the party after working with it for decades. According to her, the political sector is the most macho one can find in Colombia: *"I always say that had I been a man I would have already been president."* She explains that the party she worked in for decades treated her badly by refusing to name her as a presidential candidate, giving orders internally to not vote for her and in the end, in spite of being a well-known senator, they would not let her continue on in the post. She decided to leave the party due to all this: *"There are other women that say that had they not been women they wouldn't have been able to become ministers. I don't believe in that. I feel that I have prepared myself and I've been treated very unequally."*

Congressman 3 believes that requirements demanded are set higher for women than for men. Women always have more to prove when it comes to capability. Political Consultant recognises that women make great difference as actors within social movements but that they still cannot get access to the decision-making institutions. Activist and Congressman 1 state that this situation persists because men will loose if more women enter decision-making politics, as men would have to give up their seats.

### 3.2.4 "But there are lots of women"

According to Expert 1 working within UN Women Colombia there has been a false perception of women in the economic sphere. People argue that there are many women occupying high posts within companies, banks etc. and people buy the image as there are some women on these kinds of posts and those few are very visible. In order to get rid of this image, in 2009 a cooperation of women's organisations decided to find out the true numbers. The true picture is that of the directors of Colombian companies there are 20 per cent women, whereas on the lower posts they make up 60 per cent (Madrid, 2009:25). Of the 100 biggest companies in Colombia four have women occupying the highest posts.<sup>10</sup> As the economic sector is filled with women, most of them occupy middle or low posts, meaning that a clear majority of the high posts belong to men (Madrid, 2009, ch.2).

This perception of the economic sphere would also turn out to be a common theme in the interviews. Several of the men interviewed (Congressman 2; Former Politician (M)) stressed the fact that the political top sphere is the only sector where there is few women, as to indicate that the problem is not part of something bigger. Congressman 2 was one of the interviewees talking about the many women within the economical sphere but he also provided his own analysis of the situation in the political context. He argues that all parties want one woman "*for the photos*". The first woman to approach a political party will be welcome and find it easy to climb within the party, whereas the women following her will be met with resistance. If the one woman within the party is colourful and visible it is even better because that way people will think of that party as the one where women are, even if there is actually just one woman.

### 3.2.5 The women's movements

Congressman 3 believes that there might be a difference or dichotomy between women in congress and women's movements. He feels that he sometimes needs to defend the women's organisations against women in congress, as the latter do not want to listen and carry forward the ideas and struggles of the women's movements. Party Activist (F) agrees:

Women learn to create barriers between us as we are forced to do so to be differentiated between parties etc. This is a great error, if we could articulate what the women's organisations do in the political organisations, the parties, we could do a great job.

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<sup>10</sup> See "Manual de reportería política con enfoque de género" by Sergio Ocampo Madrid for more numbers from 2009.



A common theme that came up during the interviews was the notion that women in congress are “honorary men”, meaning that they act like men; they are not willing to put women’s questions on the agenda (Activist; Congresswoman 2). Also Party Activist (F) stresses that Colombian women are cautious about bringing up women’s questions, as they are afraid of being stigmatised within politics. Expert 3 elaborates this question:

What I've seen is that several of the women that have political posts or work in ministries or other public organs have a tendency to be very authoritarian. Not that it's either feminine or masculine but women in power acting hard are seen as acting like men, and if they don't... Damned if you do and damned if you don't. If she's soft she's criticised for not acting with authority.

Ex-Minister (F) says that conventional politics are constructed around macho culture to the extent that the women that participate are almost never there on an independent political plan; they are there because they are, for example, wives of politicians etc. Expert 2 is preoccupied with the situation in Colombia. She points out that it is a problem that women such as Activist do not want to participate within a political party. There is a risk that feminists and others who are prepared to bring forward the gender questions only stay close to each other where they will never convince anyone who is not already convinced. The movements need to expand and show that it is a matter concerning everyone. Activist says:

Even the most progressive parties are very conservative and women working with them are seen as something strange. For that reason I believe that most of us women working with social questions and women's questions more or less took the decision to not participate there. Sometimes I think we don't even ascribe them importance, which might strategically be a mistake. It's hard to enter and the discussion of women and feminism is in practice not allowed. And women can easily be objects for jokes etc. We have therefore distanced ourselves from the conventional politics, at least the most progressive women’s organisations.

So what possibilities of influence are there within grass-root movements? Congressman 2 indicates that in Colombian society hierarchies are so important that initiatives are always top-down, influence from bottom-up is nearly non-existent. Political Consultant however says that women have played a great role within social movements. Activist states that feminist movements in Colombia more or less have taken the decision of not participating in conventional politics, as it is a masculine area. Neither are any of the experts in gender interviewed interested in working with the questions as elected politicians. Activist further talks says that she feels that while working as a technocrat on a more local level she can actually achieve greater change. Whereas male politicians are interested in the macro level, women’s movements deal with issues such as access to water, childcare, education etc. Congresswoman 1 stresses the same difference, as something that is also present within congress, how the questions handled by congressmen and congresswomen differ.

It seems that certain women are taking a deliberate step away from conventional politics which is an empirical confirmation of political participations

as far more complex than just decision-making level. It is clear that all women in Colombia are not victims under exclusion from conventional politics, but instead find other ways to influence their situation, and they do so by analysing their channels to influence and making strategic choices.

## 4 Conclusions

The research questions presented at the beginning of this study was: *Why is the level of female presence in the Colombian congress so low? And what is the explanatory power of political culture?* The theorists of political culture have been criticised for assuming the order of causation. Backed up by the interviews conducted I will however make the same assumption. It seems obvious that the political culture in Colombia creates a barrier for women to enter and stay within conventional politics. Further it seems, considering all the varying aspects that have surfaced during the interviews, confirmed that political culture alone cannot explain the situation but is an important factor. Apart from how women in politics are treated, there is also the issue of there being ideas of *how* women should be, which obviously creates pressure for women as well as raising the expected requirements. Women present in conventional politics are, in one way or another, supposed to represent their whole gender whereas men do not meet the same expectations. By the same logic, men are less punished when failing than women are; they fail as individuals not as a collective. This is linked to the sub-question: *Are women accepted as political actors by the established political elite?* An obvious problem is that men are aware of the fact that they will lose from more women entering the arena, as some of them would have to give up their seat. And some women are afraid of being seen as less competent if quotas are used to increase presence of women. It would be interesting to investigate this further as some of the interviewees believe that the problem is not just among politicians but amongst ordinary citizens as well. An even more in-depth study of the Colombian case, where citizens not active in politics participated would be beneficial.

A great problem is that it seems that there is a tendency to not want to recognise the problem, or at least not that society can do something to correct it. All interviewees agree that women are facing a problem of access when it comes to formal political participation. Although almost all interviewees say explicitly that the responsibility of having more women in politics rests on the shoulders of the whole society it is in some interviews evident that it is not what they actually believe. It is a contradictory way of reasoning, saying that one is pro-quotas but that the responsibility rests on the shoulders of women, as the purpose of quotas should be taking away the full responsibility from women. This is one of the areas where it is noticeable that culture is a phenomenon where beliefs can be rationalised in peoples mind when the culture they live in allows for it to happen.

Consistently through this study the definition of what should be considered belonging to the political sphere and what is outside of politics has been discussed. As all of the interviewed agree that women do most household work and all of the congressmen/women agree that the working hours they face are

impossible to combine with a private life it seems that the political sphere cannot be exclusively what goes on inside the congress building. Admittance that the so-called private sphere is linked to the public would in itself be a step forward. By denying this link the problem is left at an individual level.

*Is there a need for women in decision-making politics in Colombia?* What is interesting in the case of Colombia is that it does not seem controversial to say that there are areas that can be called *women's questions*. And if the existence of gender-oriented issues is not controversial, it seems easier to see why both sexes should be represented and, in line with Phillips, why this is a matter of democracy. The awareness that women and men suffer very differently from the armed conflict is great and thereby people can also see that in order to reach reconciliation, voices from both sexes are needed. This also leads to one of my recommendations for further study, inspired by Pitkins; as people seem to agree that in Colombia one can actually talk about women's questions, a study of public politics and whether women's interests really are represented would very interesting. Interesting is also that whilst it to great extent seems that Yuval-Davis theories on transversalism are of relevance to understand women's situation in Colombia, others use the different ethnic groups to diminish the problems encountered by women.

The last question was: *is there any difference between women running for office and women participating on other levels (e.g. grass roots politics)?* Women seem to perceive that the margin is greater when working in more or less any other sphere than the formal-political. Many women in congress prefer not to talk about gender issues to not be earmarked as someone exclusively working with women's issues. At the same time women's movements take a step away from conventional politics because they do not see how they can make any difference there. A question left unanswered is the one of whether it should be considered alarming that politically active women do not ascribe conventional politics respect. Is the true problem that they do not want to participate there or that conventional politics in Colombia is corrupt and dishonest to the extent that there is need for a new way of making politics?

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## 5.2 Interviews

### 5.2.1 Members of Congress

**Congressman 1:** Representing a smaller conservative, quite newly founded party with a high percentage of women as representatives. Worked as a lawyer before entering politics. 2011-05-09

**Congressman 2:** New in congress since 2010. Representing a right-wing party. His father too was in the party and he was therefore "headhunted" to become a politician. 2011-05-19

**Congressman 3:** Part of a left-wing party. Defines himself as a defender of human rights. Followed in his father's footsteps and became a politician to fight for human rights. 2011-05-19

**Congresswoman 1:** Famous for working with gender questions. In congress since 2010. 2011-05-07

**Congresswoman 2:** Member of a right-wing party and works with health-related issues (amongst others). Worked as a medical doctor before that. 2011-04-27

**Ex-Minister (F):** Well-known politician who has been working within politics for many years but no longer within a party. Used to be representative of a right-wing party (minister and senator). Started as a technocrat. 2011-05-10

**Ex-Minister (M):** From a right-wing party. No longer a party activist but still working as a lawyer and participating in debates etc. He has held a couple of important minister posts. 2011-05-02

### 5.2.2 Other in-group interviewees

**Party Activist (F):** A young woman in charge of gender and equality questions within a party. 2011-05-03

**Former Politician (M):** Lawyer doing consultancy work for (amongst others) the UN. For example working with *La Ley de Cuotas*. He has also been popularly chosen and an active politician in local and regional politics. 2011-04-25

### 5.2.3 People within the public administration

**Activist:** Middle-aged woman working as a university professor and has been working with the local government of Bogotá. Has for decades been working for the human rights of women. 2011-04-15

**Administrator:** A young woman who studied international relations and is now working with the team of a senator. 2011-05-16

**Political Consultant:** Has been secretary of a right-wing party. Now working as a political consultant. 2011-04-28

### 5.2.4 Experts in gender

**Expert 1:** Works with gender questions for a Colombian UN department. 2011-04-28

**Expert 2:** University professor and manager of a gender studies program in a Colombian university. 2011-05-03

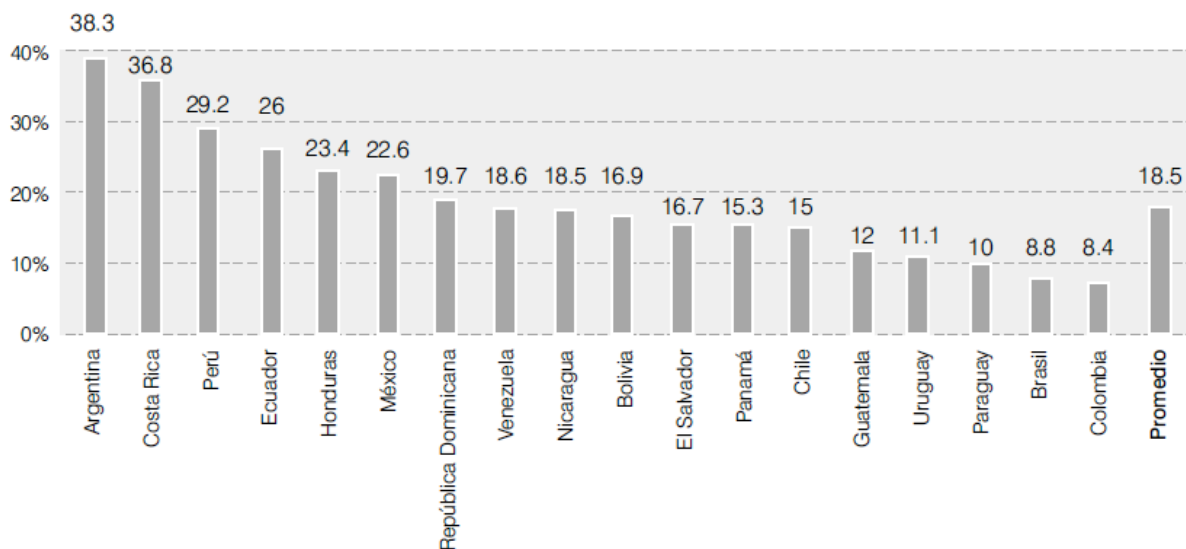
**Expert 3:** President of a Colombian NGO working with gender and women's human rights questions. 2011-04-29



## 6 Appendix

### 6.1 Diagram

Women in one-chamber parliament or lower houses in Latin America, 2007



Source: IDEA Internacional, 2008

Comment: This diagram is from 2007 hence the numbers differ from the ones in the text (It may also differ due to the fact that this diagram shows Latin America whereas the average number in the text was for North and South America). Here the average number (Promedio) for Latin America is 18.5 per cent and Colombia is still the country with the lowest level of women in parliament with an 8.4 per cent.