

Women's Political Representation in Honduras: A Comparative Perspective on Party Resistance and Inclusive Reform Proposals

Dr. Flavia Freidenberg

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August 29, 2019

Dr. Flavia Freidenberg
Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, UNAM [Institute of Legal Research, National Autonomous University of Mexico]
Red de Politólogas - #NoSinMujeres [Female Political Scientists Network - #NotWithoutWomen]
flavia@unam.mx
@flaviafrei

Introduction

Historically, women have been poorly represented in Latin American politics. Women's absence from democratic institutions and from the processes of making decisions and shaping and implementing public policy underscores the shortcomings of the region's political systems. This is no small matter: When female politicians committed to the push for substantive inclusion participate, it enhances democracy, allows multiple views to be included and interests to be defended, puts men and women on equal footing, and makes institutions and public policies more inclusive (Bareiro and Soto 2015; UN Women 2012).

In recent decades, women's political representation on national legislatures in Latin America and the Caribbean has risen by an average of more than 25 percentage points.¹ The main reason for this substantive change is electoral reforms requiring political parties to select women as candidates for public office (Došek et al. 2017; Llanos and Martínez 2017). Since 1990, 17 countries have undertaken at least 37 constitutional and/or legal reform processes with the aim of allowing more women to access and be elected to democratic institutions (Freidenberg and Lajas García 2017).

These reforms created, strengthened or restricted the legal framework, and in at least seven cases (Bolivia, Mexico, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Argentina) they established the requirement of parity for candidacies in national legislative elections, although in Honduras this requirement only applies to intraparty elections.² In contrast to most of the gender components of electoral design adopted in the region since 1990, the rules (quota and/or parity) in Honduras, Paraguay, and Panama (during some years) apply to the precandidate selection process (Llanos and Martínez 2017; Freidenberg and Lajas García 2017). While the two processes are related, the effects are less efficient.³

* This research was undertaken from June 2018 to July 2019 with the sponsorship and backing of The Carter Center. As part of the research, the author made three institutional visits where she was able to hold work meetings with different political and social organizations and interviews with key stakeholders. The visits took place in July of 2018 and May and June of 2019.

¹ The average number of female lawmakers tripled from 1990 to 2018, jumping from 9% to 30% in Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL 2019).

² Gender parity refers to the aim of integrating gender diversity into representative democracy (Bareiro and Soto 2015), meaning there should be an equal number of male and female candidates for elected offices, a step toward "parity democracy" (Bareiro and Soto, 2015). Various countries have adopted this requirement, even for state and local elections (Mexico, Costa Rica, Honduras).

³ Some would even argue they are not the same process at all and that Honduras' rules should not be considered inclusive. According to ATENEA Honduras (2018), "The country received no score whatsoever for the quota for publicly elected offices that was amended in 2012 (increasing the required percentage from 30% to 40%) because for this index, quota or parity measures, to be most effective, must be applied to candidacies at the electoral level (not to precandidacies for primary elections) and have certain guarantees built into their design."



Latin American political parties, which have monopolized access to candidacies in most countries in the region, have had to be required by law (or have set an internal rule) to select women candidates. The stronger the design of these laws or electoral rules on gender, the better the outcome in terms of women's descriptive representation (Caminotti and Freidenberg 2016). The adoption of inclusive laws has brought neither uniformity in the gender components of electoral system design (or their outcome), nor an end to party resistance.⁴ Of course, the political, economic, societal, or private barriers women face when intending to run for and/or hold public office have not been eliminated, either.

Honduras is an excellent laboratory for evaluating the informal dimensions of one type of gender-related electoral design that does not perform as hoped in terms of representation. It is also an excellent case study on two key aspects: including women on equal footing with men in offices and candidacies, and the presence of processes that guarantee pluralism and high levels of intraparty democracy to resolve conflicts. When Honduran parties are made up of different groups and/or internal factions, they are forced to hold primaries to settle their differences (Romero 2015), and this puts pressure on party leadership regarding the need to meet the gender parity requirement for candidacies.⁵ Honduran parties usually resolve the tension between holding "primaries" and meeting the quota of "women" by holding internal elections.

While parties have established internal rules requiring that they select women candidates, they have also developed strategies to "feign compliance" with them. The formal institutional design (the laws) have to be coupled with willingness from the parties, as well as institutional and societal monitoring, in order to improve women's political representation. Honduras stands as an example of the interplay between how gender is addressed in the electoral design, the type of electoral system, and how the lack of societal and political monitoring of parties' regulatory compliance gives them free rein to flout the law.

The legal path to improving women's political representation has thus been a circuitous one in this Central American country. While Honduras has signed various international conventions,⁶ adopted affirmative action measures (gender quotas) early on in the first wave of reforms (2000), and become one of the first countries to approve gender parity for candidacies (2012, with implementing regulations in 2017), these rules do not bring about the representation of women. Despite these institutional changes, the gender components of the electoral design are weak and inefficient. Three institutional reasons for that weakness are: parity is required when registering candidates for intraparty elections (not for general elections); the requirement that women be selected for winnable positions does not follow the zipper system (strict alternation between male and female candidates); and the practice of preferential voting, which removes the safeguard of winnable positions for women provided by elections with closed, fixed-order lists.

After more than 15 years of affirmative action measures, and even after approving gender parity for candidacies, 169 women were elected to the legislature between 1980 and 2020, versus 1,071 men. Currently, women only make up 21.09% of Honduras' congress, meaning the country ranks 91st in the world for descriptive representation of women (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018). These meager results have been denounced at various international levels (United Nations 2016; OAS 2017), since Honduras' political system is systematically excluding half the population from the decision-making process, resulting in a political system that could scarcely be called democratic.

Male politicians are often reluctant to back the best institutional designs for gender equality, whether because they refuse to share power (with the other part of the population, which in Honduras also happens to

⁴ The resistance tactics that Latin American parties often deploy include: pressuring electoral authorities not to comply with the law (or not to enforce it until after the election); arguing that there are no women to select as candidates and thus the reform cannot be implemented; proposing male candidates with feminine names (like Guadalupe); proposing transgender candidates; interpreting the quota as a ceiling rather than a floor on which to build more representation, only selecting women up to the percent required by law (Freidenberg 2017b).

⁵ Candidates who win primaries cannot later be switched out to achieve parity, and when women compete in primaries, they usually lose to men for various reasons, making it unlikely that a candidate who won many votes in the primary will want to relinquish his candidacy for a woman (just because she is a woman).

⁶ Honduras has signed conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Inter-American Convention on the Granting of Political Rights to Women, the 2007 Quito Consensus and the Latin American Parliament Regulatory Framework to Consolidate Parity Democracy (2015).



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be the majority), because they fear changing the status quo, because they are unaware of the (comparative) effects of the rules they pass, or as a deliberate strategy to avoid achieving (through these rules) the best outcomes for the women's political representation. This explains why rules leading to substandard representation outcomes continue to be adopted even though the literature,⁷ international cooperation, and practitioners have clearly identified the most inclusive regulatory frameworks.

Analysis of the Problem: Obstacles Honduran Women Face When They Want to Participate in Politics or Hold Power

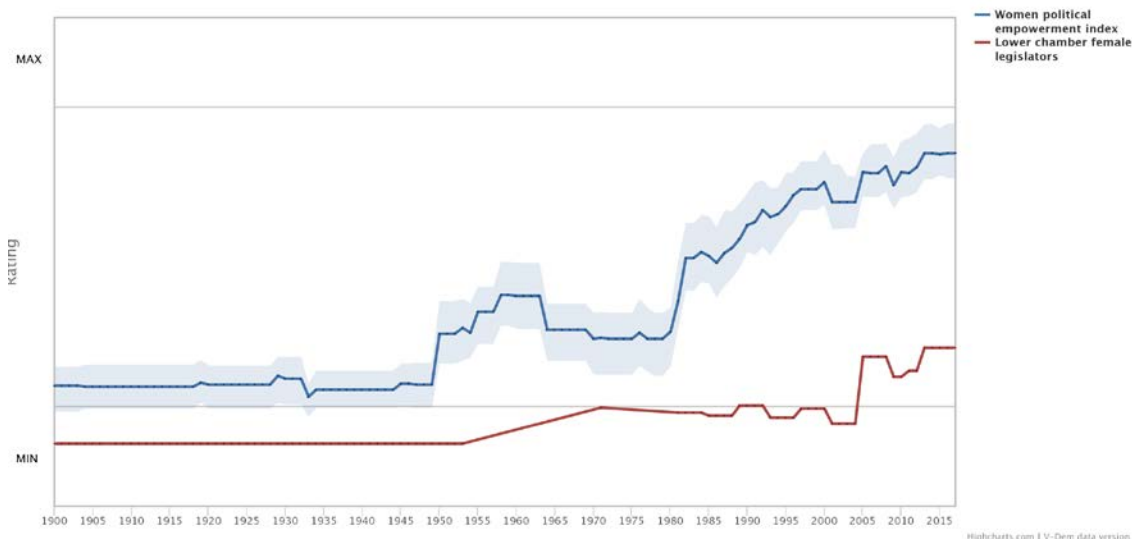
Honduran women are empowered and participate in politics, but they are not elected to public office. Comparative data (V-Dem 2019) reveals the substantial difference between women's level of political empowerment and their level of descriptive representation in the country's legislature (Graph 1).⁸ As in other countries in the region, this is not necessarily due to a lack of political participation but rather to women not being elected (no matter how much they participate). The problem lies in what is offered in the candidacies: women are not chosen as candidates for elected office, or they are, but in "losing positions" (where parties historically lose the election regardless of their candidate's sex).

According to statistics from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, women constituted a majority of voters in the November 2013 general elections, though they did not receive the most votes. The portion of women who actually voted out of all women registered to vote was 62.8% in that election, while the figure for men was 57.7%, or five percentage points less.

⁷ See the studies by Schwindt-Bayer (2018); Došek et al. (2017); Caminotti (2016); Bareiro and Soto (2015); Jones (2009); among many others.

⁸ The source of the indexes and indicators used is the V-Democracy project (1900-2019): "Women's Political Empowerment Index" (v2x_gender). The indicators are a response to the questions: "How politically empowered are women? Women's political empowerment is defined as a process of increasing capacity for women, leading to greater choice, agency, and participation in societal decision-making. It is understood to incorporate three equally weighted dimensions: fundamental civil liberties, women's open discussion of political issues and participation in civil society organizations, and the descriptive representation of women in formal political positions" and "Lower Chamber Female Legislators (v2lqfemleg)": "What percentage (%) of the lower (or unicameral) chamber of the legislature is female? Bear in mind that the empowerment index contains part of the second indicator, at least in relation to legislative positions."

Graph 1
Level of empowerment of Honduran women compared to level of political representation in the legislature
Honduras



Female Honduran politicians face various obstacles, as is the case in other countries in the region (ON 2018: 21; Freidenberg 2017a; Dosek *et al.* 2017). These barriers include:

- a. *Institutional and political barriers*, due to electoral laws and systems that provide fewer chances for female candidates to be elected, or due to the lack and/or weakness of gender parity and/or affirmative action measures (quotas) (OAS 2017);
- b. *Party barriers*, due to circles of male power that foster old practices, making it difficult to select female candidates, or due to processes, like primaries, that water down inclusive election rules (OAS 2017; FES 2013); due to the lack of rules in party statutes (or weak rules that are not monitored or enforced) that directly required women to be included in leadership positions, or due to the fact that these rules are often ignored when they do exist (Atenea Honduras 2018);⁹ and, lastly, due to male power monopolies that control organizations' bureaucratic structure (Atenea Honduras 2018);
- c. *Socio-economic barriers*, due to the lack of resources for female candidates' campaigns (cash ceilings), since women have less access to resources (money, political capital, mobilization capacity) than men;
- d. *Private, family and/or work-related barriers* (or the lack of shared family responsibility), due to demands on women's time in both the private and public spheres, limiting their chances to fully devote themselves to politics;
- e. *Cultural and attitude barriers*, due to the belief among citizens and party elite that women are less capable of being candidates, of winning an election and/or governing; due to women's own lack of confidence in their opportunities (concrete ceilings); and due to the presence of cultural values at odds with gender equality and nondiscrimination;
- f. *Organizational barriers (collective action barriers)*, due to the weak coordination of a broader social movement of women for the cause of women's political representation; and, lastly,

⁹ According to Atenea Honduras (2018), analysis of the selected indicators shows that six of the seven parties have made explicit commitments to gender equality and against sex-based discrimination as part of the principles and objectives in their statutes. But despite these formal steps, female leaders of political parties report that the statutes' provisions on equality and nondiscrimination are not backed by action. In practice, there is no political will to follow the law, much less apply affirmative action measures that bring equal outcomes sooner.



- g. *Gender-driven political violence* when women run for office or are elected to party leadership positions.¹⁰

While all of these barriers create a hostile climate for female Honduran politicians, this paper focuses on the political/institutional and party obstacles, since they can be tackled—as experience in Latin America has shown—through electoral reforms, or in other words, by changing parties’ incentives reducing the gender gap in the region. This does not mean they are the only—or even the most important—obstacles, but rather that reforming the institutional design can lead to keys that generate incentives that improve political representation.

Reforms of Gender-Related Electoral Design Aspects and Women’s Political Representation in Honduras

In the first National Congress following the 1980 post-transition elections, only two non-alternate members of congress were women, out of a total of 82 (Table 1). The number of women grew in successive elections, reaching 12 congresswomen (9.4%) in 1990, 31 non-alternate members in 2006 (24.2%), and a historic peak for Honduras of 33 female lawmakers in 2014 (25.8%). The 2017 election was a step backward, with 27 women elected (21.7%) despite the changes to the gender components of the electoral design.¹¹

¹⁰ The Civil Society Group (GSC for its Spanish acronym) documented around 14 cases of political violence in the 2017 pre-election period against female candidates running for public office at the national level, as well as 8 at the municipal level and 6 against political activists (ON 2018: 22).

¹¹ According to UN Women Honduras, 25% of municipal council members elected in 2017 were women, and 19 of 298 mayors were women, attesting to the low levels of women’s political representation in the country and the differing impacts of the rules at local levels of representation. This also lends credence to the idea that it is a multilevel and systemic problem of Honduran politics. See: <http://hn.one.un.org/content/unct/honduras/es/home/presscenter/comunicado-ley-paridad-alternancia.html> [Retrieved: June 13, 2018, at 3:16 PM]

Table I
Composition of the Honduran National Congress by Sex
Since the Start of the Current Democratic Period (1981-2020)

Legislative Period	Men	Women	Total Men and Women	% women
1981 – 1985	80	2	82	2.4%
1986 – 1989	125	9	134	6.7%
1990 – 1993	116	12	128	9.4%
1994 – 1997	119	9	128	7%
1998 – 2001	116	12	128	9.4%
2002 – 2005 *	119	9	128	7%
2006 – 2009 *	97	31	128	24.2%
2010 – 2013 **	103	25	128	19.6%
2014 – 2017	95	33	128	25.8%
2017– 2020 ***	101	27	128	21,7%
Totals	1071	169	1,240	

Source: INAM, Mujer y Ciudadanía Política en Honduras and data from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal.

*The general elections from 2002 to 2009 had a 30% quota.

*The intraparty and general elections in 2012 and 2013, respectively, had a 40% quota.

***The requirement of parity for precandidacies was applied to the intraparty and general elections in 2016 and 2017.

The introduction of gender quotas that obligated parties to select women as precandidates explains the first changes in levels of political representation. The Equal Opportunities for Women Law (LIOM in Spanish) (Decree 34-2000) and the Electoral and Political Organizations Law (LEOP in Spanish) in 2000 set out legislative reforms on the exercise of women's political rights, establishing minimum quotas of 30% for women's participation in primary elections for all publically elected and party leadership positions (Article 81, LIOM). This quota was set for precandidacies, not for general elections.

The LIOM, adopted on April 11, 2000, stipulated a progressive increase until achieving equality between men and women in elected offices and party leadership. The law thus established two important elements: the progressive nature of the reform (as was the case in Ecuador) and the requirement that female candidates must be selected for winnable positions on the lists (IFES 2013: 5; Méndez and Montesdeoca 2010: 338).¹² This was the result of the actions of the women's movement and the work of certain congresswomen (IFES 2013) who sought to improve political representation. Despite the law's initial weakness and ignorance of it among politicians and the general public, its adoption was crucial to the national discussion about equality between men and women in the country (Méndez and Montesdeoca 2010: 335, 339).

¹² This meant selecting women as precandidates for principal and alternate members of the National Congress, the Central American Parliament, mayors, deputy mayors, municipal council members in winnable positions based on a scale created using the last three elections (Méndez and Montesdeoca 2010: 338).

When these rules were first applied (intraparty elections in 2000 and general elections in 2001), they did not increase representation as hoped, and the number of female congresswomen dropped (Table I). One explanation for the rules' poor performance is the short time between when the law was passed and when the elections were held, which made it difficult to disseminate, provide training on and implement the rules (Méndez and Montesdeoca 2010: 347). Also, the law, which in reality was more declaratory than executive, lacked implementing regulations (Méndez and Montesdeoca 2010: 347), and it was not widely shared among citizens, particularly women (IFES 2013: 6). Other general reasons were the continued force of patriarchal and sexist party structures (ATENEA Honduras 2018) and the lack of political will among party leaders to expand women's participation (IFES 2013:6). Furthermore, a very common practice up to that point was to select more women as alternates than principal candidates, under the assumption that progress was thus being made to protect women's political rights.

The laws passed in 2000 set minimum required percentages for precandidacies (and not for general elections), and they had a winnable position requirement of sorts and something of a competitiveness principle (for elected offices). However, they had an escape valve and were restrictive because they did not require single-gender tickets (in the sense that if the principal candidate was a woman, the alternate would be too), they provided a way around the quota by holding primary elections, and they failed to establish clear penalties for not following the law. These ground rules were amended by the October 2004 reform of the Electoral and Political Organizations Law (Decree No. 44-2004), and the new rules were implemented for the intraparty and general elections in 2005. Despite strong participation from the women's movement in an effort to gain higher standing for inclusive rules, parties put up fierce and limiting resistance to this reform (Méndez and Montesdeoca 2010: 356).

While the reform maintained a quota of 30% women in party leadership positions and candidacies for principal and alternate members of the National Congress and the Central American Parliament, as well as for mayors, deputy mayors and municipal council members, it eliminated the winnable position requirement, thus legitimizing the practice of relegating female candidates to races where they had no real chance of being elected (to "losing races"). It also did away with the progressive increase established by the Equal Opportunities Law, meaning the quota remained fixed and, in practice, served more as a ceiling for women's participation on electoral ballots rather than a lower limit (IFES 2013: 7) ("up to 30%" had to be women). The Electoral Law was thus a setback for women's rights, regardless of the various legal interpretations on whether article 81 of the Equal Opportunities Law was repealed or remained in effect.¹³

The 2012 reform of the LEOP amended the Electoral Law, increasing the quota of women to 40% at minimum for lists of candidates for positions of authority and party leadership positions (Article 105, Decree 54-2012). This reform raised the percentage and introduced the requirement that principal candidates and alternates must be of different genders.¹⁴ Those evaluating the first implementation of these rules in the 2013 elections found that they were followed during primary elections, but after that the candidacies no longer met the 40% requirement, and women certainly did not end up being elected at similar levels.¹⁵ They also found

¹³ According to IFES (2013: 7), "Critiques of the law's design aside, the incorporation of the quota in the 2004 Electoral Law was a step forward in terms of the percentage of women elected. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal's stricter control over candidate registration and compliance with the quota may have contributed to this outcome, since the mandate now came specifically from the Electoral Law." This is an important point, because regulatory requirements are not open to interpretation by politicians and elected officials when set out in the laws.

¹⁴ "Article 105. Equitable distribution of opportunities in publicly elected offices. To promote and achieve the effective participation of women in public office, political parties must have a minimum of forty percent (40%) in their lists of candidates for positions of authority and in the makeup of their leadership bodies. This minimum is established for publicly elected offices and is applicable to the presidential ticket, principal and alternate members of the National Congress, Central American Parliament members, mayors, deputy mayors, and municipal council members. In departments with only one party authority position or congressional seat, the principle of representation of both sexes will be applied in that if the principal candidate is a woman, the alternate must be a man, and vice versa. This measure applies to: 1) Intra-party elections; 2) Primary elections; 3) General elections when political parties do not hold primary elections; and, 4) Independent candidacies." See DECREE No. 54-2012

<https://reformaspoliticas.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/honduras-leydecuotas-2012-decreto-54.pdf>

¹⁵ In her research on the 2013 election, Funes Valladares (2014: 18) points out that in the congressional candidacies for the 2013 election, for example, the PN nominated 47% women and 53% men for the intraparty elections, which turned into 36%



problems with the tickets: parties mostly selected women as alternates and men as principal candidates (Funes Valladares 2014: 18).

These reforms also included Article 105_A, which stated that the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE for its Spanish acronym) had to issue “Regulations on Parity with an Alternation Mechanism” to guarantee parity in the percentage of men and women running for office (50/50 men and women) and the implementation of the “alternation mechanism,” known as a “zipper” or “braid” system, to alternate back and forth between men and women, which would take effect for the 2017 elections.¹⁶

The Regulations clarified that the principles of parity and alternation were mandatory for intraparty elections for choosing party leaders, for parties’ primary elections for selecting candidates for public offices, and for general elections (although this is questionable because in practice it has not been enforced). It is also mandatory for parties that do not hold primaries due to the absence of rival internal movements or currents, as well as for coalitions of political parties and independent candidacies.¹⁷

While the law was clear about expanding women’s rights in order to achieve equality, the Regulations of the TSE, which took effect on March 12, 2016, hindered the effective implementation of parity (ON 2018: 21) and limited effective alternation between men and women on lists of congressional candidates by only requiring alternation starting from the third, fourth, or fifth spot on the list, depending on the number of members of congress to be elected from the district. For example, at the request of the parties, the regulations established that alternation between men and women will be required starting with slot five on congressional candidate lists in the departments of Francisco Morazán and Cortés.

This provision clearly impacted women’s chances of being elected (Women’s Political Observatory N-26 2018: 22). This interpretation of the winnable position requirement runs counter to the principle of alternation and goes against the spirit of the commitments undertaken by the Honduran State upon signing the CEDAW, the Quito Consensus, and the Latin American Parliament’s Regulatory Framework to Consolidate Parity Democracy.

As a general rule, the regulations also respected the application of parity to principal candidates and alternates alike on congressional candidate lists. If an odd number, parties were required to ensure the same number of men and women across the entire list.¹⁸ It is interesting to note the widespread belief among the Honduran political class that both principal and alternate positions count equally toward overall parity.¹⁹ While the TSE’s regulations respected alternation on municipal lists, in practice parties chose to select men as mayoral candidates 75.95% of the time, overwhelmingly relegating women to deputy mayoral candidacies.²⁰

women and 64% men in the general elections, with a final outcome of 21% women and 79% men. This trend occurred in the other parties as well.

¹⁶ “Article 105-A. Principle of Parity. The Principle of Parity for the participation of men and women on lists for party leadership positions and publicly elected positions will be applied from the 2016 primary election process onward, with the aim of achieving lists containing men and women in equal measure (50%). The Supreme Electoral Tribunal will create regulations for applying the Principle of Parity and will implement the mechanism for alternating between men and women on tickets and lists of candidates [...]”. See DECREE No. 54-2012 <https://reformaspoliticas.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/honduras-leydecuotas-2012-decreto-54.pdf>

¹⁷ According to the regulations, if a party fails to apply the principle of parity and alternation mechanism in choosing its authorities, the party authorities will not be recognized, although in practice this is not the case, rendering the penalties ineffective.

¹⁸ La Tribuna, “Así quedó el reglamento de paridad de hombres y mujeres para cargos públicos [An Overview of the Gender Parity Regulations for Public Offices],” published on September 12, 2016. Available at: <http://www.latribuna.hn/2016/09/12/asi-quedo-la-trenza/> [Retrieved: June 16, 2018, 5 PM].

¹⁹ In different interviews and interactions, political actors affirmed that parity can be achieved between a principal and alternate candidate. In reality, they are misusing the term “parity,” because parity should be understood horizontally—taking into account the principal candidates in one group and the alternates in another—rather than vertically for each specific ticket.

²⁰ This practice was found in other Latin American parties that chose women as alternates to meet the quota (in Bolivia, Panama, Paraguay, and Mexico) or forced female principal candidates, if they ended up winning, to step down once elections were over to make way for their male alternates (Mexico) (Freidenberg 2017a). The fact that women were put in the position of alternates (or deputy mayors) clearly shows that there are women within the parties and that they are willing

Lastly, the Honduran law requires all political parties to approve a gender equity policy (Article 104) and prepare a report on its implementation six months prior to calling intraparty and primary elections and submit it to the electoral authorities. The political parties usually do not submit these reports on Gender Equity Policy compliance (ONU 2018: 22), despite a fine equivalent to 5% of the national debt. According to the Electoral Observation Report by the European Union (2017) and Civil Society Group (ON 2018: 22), only three parties submitted their gender equity policy (PN, PINU and PDCH) during the 2017 elections, and none submitted a report describing the policy's implementation. The TSE did not enforce the legally required fines in these cases.

Table II
Inclusive electoral rules in Honduras

Country	Year law was passed	Size (Minimal, Intermediate, Parity)	%	Winnable Position Requirement	#	Enforcement (nonexistent, weak or strong)	Type of Enforcement (strong)	Scope (restricted or full)	Escape Valve (present or absent)	Voting Structure
Honduras I	2000 Decree No. 34-2000	Minimal (intra-party elections)	30 (Progressive until reaching equality)	Strong (Winnable positions based on the last three elections)		Nonexistent	No penalty	Restricted	Present (with exceptions: the quota is only applied when there is more than one candidate. If there are only two, it is not applied)	Preferential voting
Honduras II	2004 Decree No. 44-2004	Minimal (intra-party elections)	30 (fixed, not progressive)	Nonexistent		Weak	Fine equivalent to 5% of the national debt if quota is not met	Restricted	Present (with exceptions)	Preferential voting
Honduras III	2012 Decree No. 54-2012	Intermediate (intra-party elections)	40	Nonexistent		Weak	Fine equivalent to 5% of the national debt if quota is not met	Principal candidate and alternate of different genders	Present (with exceptions)	Preferential voting
Honduras IV	2017 TSE Regulations	Parity (intra-party elections)	50	Weak	Alternation (from the third, fourth, and fifth spots on the list onward)	Weak	Fine equivalent to 5% of the national debt if quota is not met	Principal candidate and alternate of different genders	Present (with exceptions)	Preferential voting

Source: Freidenberg y Lajas García (2017). Observatorio de Reformas Políticas en América Latina (1978-2019), Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México [Latin America Political Reforms Observatory (1978-2019). Legal Research Institute, National Autonomous University of Mexico]. www.reformaspoliticas.org

Date updated: June 29, 2019.

Evaluation of the Institutional Conditions Impeding Women's Political Representation in Honduras

Data shows that the gender-related electoral rules are inefficient because though parties respect numerical parity on precandidate lists, in practice they do not propose gender-balanced candidacies for the general

to participate in politics. Historically, this presence and willingness have been denied, a denial often used as a pretext to refuse to train female party members and back them as candidates or even give them leadership positions within party organizations. (Personal phone interview with an expert on Honduran politics on June 24, 2018. This idea was also confirmed in work meetings held with the leaders of various political parties in a visit to Tegucigalpa in June 2018.)



elections²¹, and they usually select mostly men for the favorable (winnable) races.²² Women have declared before the Office of the Attorney General that the Parity and Alternation Regulations are more like a “mockery and humiliation because they violate rights and set their progress back 12 years.”²³

Party leaders see the required percentage as a ceiling (not as a floor on which to build broader representation) and place women low on the list as if they were “symbolic candidates.”²⁴ While the number of women participating increased (88.7%), women do not secure top positions, alternation (the zipper system) is disregarded, and women are selected for noncompetitive slots.²⁵ Additionally, greater representation of women in office (that is, 27%) does not translate to more women with decision-making power or “more chances to truly take the lead, but rather means that they are being used as spectators.”²⁶

These rules are exacerbated by an electoral system that does not favor women's representation: preferential voting.²⁷ This voting structure means that the results do not reflect the intent behind parity in candidacies, since the electorate can choose the candidates it prefers from one list or another regardless of the candidate's position on the list (which negates the winnable position requirement) or to the gender parity and alternation criteria originally contained in the spirit of the electoral law.

Occasionally, preferential voting systems can favor the election of women who are placed toward the bottom of a party's list. It is feasible for a female candidate to win many votes and be among those elected for that party, but these are special and exceptional cases (based on the candidate's career up to that point and the electorate's prior knowledge of her). In practice, preferential voting alters the original order (set based on the legal requirements) and hampers the election of women (Jones 2009; Jones et al. 2012) because of the gender stereotypes and attitudinal barriers of an electorate that does not usually vote for women.

Proposed Political and Electoral Reforms to Improve Women's Political Representation in Honduras

The Honduran political system needs multifaceted strategies to increase women's political representation. The following are *general recommendations*:

²¹ The rules were only applied to primary elections for political party leadership positions and not to the lists of municipal council and congressional candidates.

²² In the 2017 elections, many stakeholders denounced this, including the European Union, which specified that it is “in clear opposition to the spirit of the Electoral Law” (2017 European Union Report: 34).

²³ “This decision made by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal through the Regulations is a slap in the face for all women in Honduras, because it sets us back 12 years to when we began fighting for power quotas,” said Partido Innovación and Unidad Social-Demócrata (PINU-SD) congresswoman Doris Gutiérrez. Published in Criterio, “Mujeres denuncian ante el MP que reglamento de paridad y alternancia del TSE es una burla” [Women Denounce the TSE's Parity and Alternation Regulation as a Mockery before the Office of the Attorney General], on September 14, 2016. Available at: <https://criterio.hn/2016/09/14/mujeres-denuncian-ante-mp-reglamento-paridad-alternancia-del-tse-una-burla/> [Retrieved: June 16, 2018 at 6:00 PM].

²⁴ “Symbolic candidacies” include alternate positions and/or the spots at the bottom of the lists in multimember districts, as well as candidacies in single-member districts that are not a party stronghold (and where the party leadership already knows its chances of success at the polls are slim).

²⁵ According to the Interparty Women's Network and the Women's Political Observatory, 893 women were elected to the lists of municipal candidates (mayors, deputy mayors and municipal council members) in the primaries held on March 12, 2017, by PN, PL and Partido Libre. This is twice as many as were elected in the 2012 primaries held by the same parties. Published in Criterio, “Mujeres denuncian ante el MP que reglamento de paridad y alternancia del TSE es una burla” [Women Denounce the TSE's Parity and Alternation Regulation as a Mockery before the Office of the Attorney General], on September 14, 2016. Available at: <https://criterio.hn/2016/09/14/mujeres-denuncian-ante-mp-reglamento-paridad-alternancia-del-tse-una-burla/> [Retrieved: June 16, 2018 at 6:00 PM].

²⁶ Statements from a female leader of a traditional party in a work meeting held with members of civil society, the Honduran Women's Political Participation Observatory, international cooperation and the Honduran Interparty Women's Network, May 2019.

²⁷ The regulations' preamble emphasizes that “the Honduran electoral system uses preferential voting to elect members of congress. Under this system, voters choose the candidate they prefer directly, regardless of their position on the ballot. In other words, position is no guarantee of number of votes.”



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- a. Implement public policies on substantive equality and intersectionality, including affirmative actions and gender parity for elections and the gender identity law, which could help overcome the obstacles to building an inclusive and pluralist parity democracy;²⁸
- b. Put in practice the mechanisms established in current national and international laws for promoting and fostering women's human rights, and implement them not only in the electoral sphere but also in the area of civil and social rights;
- c. Establish strong (clear and unambiguous) mechanisms to spotlight women's participation, promote their leadership, and help transform cultural patterns;
- d. Design and implement more efficient public education policies that transform and eradicate misogyny, exclusion, discrimination, and the patriarchy, among other factors (the approval of the Gender Equity and Equality Plans—PIEGH for its Spanish acronym—notwithstanding).
- e. Approve inclusive and gender-balanced rules for elections with clear penalties and no escape valves and that require parties to select women as candidates for public office. The reason for this recommendation is that parties' compliance with the existing rules has been merely formal. They select women as an instrument to meet the legal requirements but do not seem convinced of the effectiveness of that instrument or the need for equality to build democracy.

The *specific recommendations* include the following electoral reform proposals, which center on strengthening inclusive electoral rules by requiring vertical and horizontal gender parity (50/50) for all public offices (and not just at the intraparty level), changing the electoral system's voting structure (eliminating preferential voting), introducing the requirement that women be placed in winnable candidacies (strict alternation of candidates in multimember districts and horizontal parity in single-member districts), eliminating escape valves (the ability to register candidates without meeting parity requirements by holding internal elections), and increasing direct financing for female candidates and to strengthen women leadership.

Further recommendations include requiring the monitoring of media so their coverage is free of gender stereotypes; introducing gender mainstreaming at institutions (genderized institutions); strengthening the political observatory on women's participation, and pushing for the adoption of a law for life free of violence, including gender-based political violence, as well as the Gender Identity Law, which would allow transgender candidates to run for office using their name chosen under their new gender identity (ON 2018: 33);

Recommendation 1: *The law itself should require inclusive electoral rules for general elections (and not just for pre-candidacies in primary elections).*

When the rule is only applied to the system of selecting candidates for primaries, the combination of factors that keep women from being able to run as candidates is intensified. The number of votes won by each candidate in the primaries determines who will be on the lists of candidates for popularly elected office. This means the lists submitted for the general election do not have to follow the formal rule (quota and/or parity requirement) (IFES 2013).

Since the rule applies to candidates for general elections only when parties have not held a primary election process, primaries end up hindering women's participation,²⁹ serving as an "escape valve." Under this regulatory design, Honduran women are better off running for parties that do not hold primaries (IFES 2013) because the current design only creates the impression of requiring parity, while in practice the requirement only affects parties that do not hold primary elections and only applies at the internal level, not to general elections.

²⁸ The Montevideo Strategy states: "In order to achieve gender equality by 2030, it is essential to progress in interrelated processes: the deepening and fine-tuning of democracies and the democratization of political, socio-economic and cultural regimes. Both are conditional upon achieving parity in the distribution of power. Parity democracy—as a quantitative and qualitative criterion—is thus central to the process of generating the conditions for women's full exercise of human rights and citizenship." (CEPAL 2016: 12).

²⁹ If a party does not hold primaries to choose its candidates, it has to meet the quota and/or achieve parity directly through the candidates it puts on general election ballots.

Honduras should thus **adopt the parity rule for general elections**, regardless of the internal selection mechanism each party uses (although eliminating primaries is not recommended). And, echoing the European Union's recommendation, the country should **adopt new TSE Election Regulations that ensure effective alternation between men and women in congressional candidacies and at the local level**, in accordance with the principle of gender parity established in the 2012 Electoral Law. Honduras should also, in line with the OAS' suggestions in 2017, put the requirement of **vertical and horizontal parity for candidates in multimember districts and single-member districts at all levels (national and regional elections) in the law rather than just in the regulations**, since the latter is often subject to interpretation.

Recommendation 2: *Inclusive electoral rules should be strong and continually monitored and controlled by civil society and judicial and administrative electoral authorities.*

An inclusive and strong design for electoral rules has: a) a **high percentage requirement** for the quota (parity) for multimember districts (vertical parity) and single-member districts (horizontal parity); b) clear winnable position requirements—with **zipper system alternation (1/1)**—regarding where on the list different genders have to be located (effective candidacies), with a **competitiveness principle** (specifying the districts where the party normally loses and women candidates cannot be put in those districts, as required by the rule from 2000); c) **tickets** (principal candidates and alternates) of a single gender, to keep male alternates from pressuring principal female candidates to resign once they are elected, and to eliminate the possibility of counting principal candidates and alternates equally toward parity; d) **strong penalties** for those who break the law, including the loss of candidate registration rights; and e) **no escape valves** allowing parties to circumvent the law's requirements (any type of exception established by the law or the application of these rules only to intraparty elections or primaries operates as an escape valve).

The rules should require **gender parity within each list** (in multimember districts) and also between the **top candidates from different districts at the same institutional level** (whether the elections are for **single-member or multi-member districts**). Horizontal parity means **that the two genders are represented equally among top candidates on lists for multi-member districts or candidates for single-member districts at a given institutional level** (for example, elections for governors or congressional elections with preferential voting). In this regard, reintroducing the **competitiveness principle** is key. This rule keeps parties from assigning women, as symbolic candidates, to “losing districts” and increases women's likelihood of being elected because they are running in districts where they have a real chance of winning.

The **presence of actors with veto powers** (authorities from judicial and administrative electoral bodies, the media, public opinion and/or women's movements) that oversee the application of the affirmative action measures and strive to standardize constitutional (national) rules is essential for ensuring a more efficient electoral design for gender-related matters.³⁰ To this end, the broader women's movement urgently needs to be strengthened so it can be an agent of social control over the registration of candidates.

Recommendation 3: *Reform the electoral system. Preferential voting affects women's chances of being elected and weakens parties. Closed, fixed-order lists are therefore more conducive to the election of women.*

As pointed out extensively in the literature (IFES 2013; Jones 2009; Htun 2005, among others), the electoral system affects the efficacy of quotas and/or gender parity in the candidates registered. The most favorable systems are built on the principle of proportional representation (Jones *et al.* 2012), have closed, fixed-order lists (Jones *et al.* 2012), and have large electoral districts (Archenti and Tula 2017; Jones 2009). The more seats a party wins in an electoral district, the greater the proportion of those seats that will be held by women (Jones *et al.* 2012). Small districts make affirmative action less effective if political parties put male candidates at the top of the list and relegate women to symbolic positions.

³⁰ Judges (Argentina) who oversee compliance with the quotas law and change the order of candidates as dictated by law proved key to improving the effectiveness of the country's quotas. Also key were women's networks (Mexico) or electoral authorities (Mexico) and electoral tribunals (Mexico, Costa Rica), which monitor compliance with legal parity requirements and also use judicial activism to close loopholes left in the regulations by lawmakers (Došek *et al.* 2017; Sobrado 2016).

This has posed a major challenge in political systems with small districts, since women are not put high up on the lists and so are not usually elected. Systems with preferential voting also make it hard for women to get elected (Archenti and Tula 2017). People rank their preferences through their vote, and the final list is determined by those votes. If female candidates have poor performance at the polls, they will not win a spot (or votes, or status, or power) on the party's list for the general election.

It is thus necessary to **overhaul the electoral system with the aim of implementing parity**. Mechanisms such as open lists (or preferential voting)—often considered tools for furthering democracy because they allow the electorate to choose between candidates on various lists—obscure the inequality that women in politics face. Requiring a quota and/or parity in candidacies only ensures the effective presence of women when combined with **electoral systems with closed, fixed-order lists, with large- or medium-sized electoral districts, and preferably a proportional representation structure**. Other combinations usually result in significantly fewer women being elected, even when quota requirements are met (IFES 2013: 7), because preferential voting overrides the safeguards put in place, as it fails to respect the clear winnable position requirement established in the law.

Recommendation 4: *Internally democratize political parties to make them more inclusive (without abolishing the intraparty and/or primary election system).*

When political parties recognize the benefits of including more women in democratic politics and in the institutions, they will open up their organizational structure to foster new leadership and strengthen their grassroots support, creating changes within these organizations that have historically excluded women. Parties can take a more active role in working toward substantive equality, training and strengthening of male and female leaders to make them more aware of gender equality and parity democracy, and coming alongside women leadership (mentoring). Parties should promote gender equality and push for regulatory, cultural, and economic reforms that eradicate the formidable intra-party obstacles women face.

Parity, or equal numbers of men and women, should be the rule **for both party leadership positions and political appointments (cabinet members)**. While the 2012 law already established the requirement of parity for party leadership, compliance with this requirement needs to be monitored. Experience shows that despite the law, parties do not follow the parity requirement. It is important to advocate for **changes to the permanent structure of political parties**: shifts in the **composition of the executive committees**, as well as the institutionalization of gender concerns by creating **Women's Secretariats, Gender Units**, or other organizational structures within parties.

Additionally, Honduran parties usually disregard the requirement to submit a report on their gender non-discrimination policy. **The TSE should be compelled to enforce the penalties set forth by the law for these cases**. Here again, the parties flout the law's requirements and the relevant authority neither monitors nor punishes them, revealing informal practices of feigned compliance with the law's requirements.

Recommendation 5: *Reinforce female politicians' leadership capabilities and technical knowledge, and bolster public appreciation of the work of women in office.*

For women in Latin America, local community work is a gateway into municipal politics (Massolo 2007; Tello Sánchez 2009). Once women prove their effectiveness in elections, parties' strategy becomes simple: Continue selecting candidates who can win those districts, regardless of gender. In Honduras, **strategies to help enhance training and promote local female leadership and community work should be developed**. Article 105 of the Electoral Law already states that from 2013 onward, funds should be allocated in order to transfer the equivalent of 10% of the national debt to each political party. This rule, which is already included in the law, should be enforced, and the electoral body should supervise the type of activities it is used for and penalize noncomplying parties.³¹

³¹ In her research on the 2013 election, Funes Valladares (2014: 21) found that parties, especially those that held primaries, were given 60% of the money. The rest of the funds, or 40%, were withheld because the parties failed to submit the records of money spent on training for women.

The electoral authority should also monitor the implementation of **technical training programs on politics for women**, especially for young and indigenous women with leadership potential and the profile to be elected to public office. It is also key to publicize the good performance and contributions of women legislators to incentivize votes for women in elections for these positions. Support for **training workshops on equality policies and new standards of masculinity for men** is also recommended. There should be a push for **communications campaigns designed to recognize, raise awareness about and promote women's careers and capability** to perform well in politics. The aim of the campaign would be to encourage women to participate more in politics and have **society acknowledge their abilities and contributions**.

Recommendation 6: *Grant direct, gender-earmarked funding to strengthen female leadership and improve tools for overseeing gender equality resources.*

Female members of political parties have fewer options than their male counterparts for funding their electoral campaigns and participating in the networks of contacts that make running those campaigns easier. In countries where parties are publicly funded, regulating (and overseeing) how those funds are used can be an effective way to promote women's access to public offices. Parties may be more motivated to back female candidates if they are likely to receive more public funds for doing so. The state can thus encourage parties to choose more women through **positive incentives linked to party funding regulations** and tied to the overall number of female candidates and the number of female candidates elected to office. (If women win, parties receive more public funding, as is the case in Bolivia, Chile and Colombia.)³²

Women need resources to do politics. It is thus necessary to establish **direct economic support** and opportunities for Honduran women in the area of political participation. Precise procedures and structures should be established to grant **specific, direct funding to female candidates** (as is currently done in Canada or as required by the new law in Haiti). This should not be particularly difficult since Honduras and Panama are the two countries where candidates (or at least independents) can receive public funding directly from the state without its passing through party structures (Ferreira Rubio 2009: 12).

Under this system, **female candidates** (who always struggle to receive funds from party leaders) **would be able to receive direct financing for their campaigns**. Along with Costa Rica, Panama, and Mexico, Honduras has already made legislative strides toward dedicating public resources to making training for female leaders and the promotion of political participation an institutionally sustainable and ongoing function of parties. Despite this, transparent and efficient tools need to be developed **to ensure that the 10% specified in the most recent version of the LEOP³³ is actually transferred each year and used correctly** to train and promote women's involvement in politics. According to the Interparty Women's Network and the Women's Political Observatory, in practice this does not happen.³⁴

³² Five countries in Latin America (Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, Mexico and Panama) have put in place affirmative action measures for women involving the allocation of public funding for political campaigns. These measures include laws requiring parties to devote part of the resources they receive to training women (Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Panama); media access for electoral campaigns (Brazil since 2009); and the creation of a fund for training on democratic values (gender equality, human rights, and empowerment) that must benefit men and women equally (Costa Rica) (Freidenberg 2017a).

³³ "Article 105A. In order to strengthen the capabilities required to implement the Parity Principal with equal opportunities for women, starting in 2013 the Supreme Electoral Tribunal will make budget projections for inclusion in the General Budget of Income and Expenses of the Republic in order to transfer an amount equal to ten percent (10%) of the national debt to each Political Party each year. Those funds must be used exclusively to train women and promote their political involvement. Political Parties can use financing mechanisms to receive the resources in advance and pay the money owed when the transfer is received. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal will create rules for and supervise the transfer and use of those funds. It will also establish monetary and administrative penalties for when the funds are not used for their intended purpose." See DECREE No. 54-2012

<https://reformaspoliticas.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/honduras-leydecuotas-2012-decreto-54.pdf>

³⁴ See El Heraldo, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/eleccioneshonduras2017/1126800-508/mujeres-en-lucha-por-la-inclusi%C3%B3n-pol%C3%ADtica-en-honduras>

Parties' expense reports, with a breakdown of equality-related items, should be available to the public. For example, the Honduran Women's Political Participation Observatory or the parties themselves should publish information on the money received by each political party and what they spent it on.

Recommendation 7: *Promote policies that mainstream gender at democratic institutions and foster intersectionality, providing for the integration of indigenous communities and sexual diversity at the institutions.*

This recommendation involves pushing for public institutions to **incorporate gender mainstreaming into their policies and decisions** and promote **a comprehensive strategy for equality between men and women**, clearly outlining how each public institution (National Congress, Superior Electoral Tribunal, Executive Branch, and others) will implement it. The policies that have already been designed and implemented but have not yet fully accomplished their aims (see the PIEGH) should be put into practice more efficiently. This paper also recommends the **creation of a technical gender unit within the National Congress**. The task of this unit would be to provide advice on new laws, ensuring the Honduran state's compliance with national laws and international treaties on women's rights (many of which it has already ratified).

Recommendation 8: *Monitor media coverage of elections to keep it free of gender stereotypes.*

Mass media paint a picture of women as powerless and incapable of transforming their community, societal or political reality. The media perpetuate gender stereotypes, connecting certain tasks and functions to certain genders and placing women in roles that undermine portrayals of powerful feminine figures (Freidenberg 2017a; Llanos and Sample 2008). Women's initiatives at public institutions or in society in general are often kept out of the limelight, women's voices frequently go unheard (Massolo 2007), and they are regularly excluded from spheres of power because they are considered masculine arenas.

It is thus **necessary to monitor mass media** and analyze how it creates and propagates gender stereotypes about the candidacy and leadership of female politicians. As is the case in Mexico, **media outlets should be monitored during election season to determine how (and how much) they cover the electoral campaigns of female candidates (as compared to male candidates)**, and **training workshops for journalists** should be held to promote media coverage without gender stereotypes.

Recommendation 9: *Adopt a Comprehensive Law on the Right to a Life Free from Violence and criminalize gender-based political violence against women.*

Greater inclusion of women as political actors has repercussions, and electoral rules to promote their participation are not enough to completely level the political playing field (Krook 2017). Women have been "bargaining chips" between internal groups (along the lines of a punishment: "Whoever loses the intraparty election has to select a woman") (Freidenberg 2017b: 13). In this context, the debate about different forms of sexism and violence against women in politics (Albaine 2017; Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2016) has brought attention to the issue and mobilized national and international actors to eradicate and punish that sexism and violence. The problem is exacerbated by Honduras' structural violence, which particularly affects women, among other groups.³⁵

Lawmakers in several Latin American countries, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Mexico, have pushed for laws to prevent and punish different forms of persecution, harassment and violence against women in politics, although only Bolivia has enacted legislation.³⁶ While Honduras does have the Equal Opportunities for Women Law, as well as the National Women's Law and the National Women's Institute, it does not have a Comprehensive Law on the Right to a Life Free from Violence as required under the Belén do

³⁵ See the Social Watch Report "Can Commitment to the 2030 Agenda Restore Human Rights?" National Report on Honduras. Available at <http://www.socialwatch.org/es/node/17339> [Retrieved it June 16, 2018, 8:26 PM.]

³⁶ In 2012, Bolivian lawmakers approved the Law against Political Harassment and Violence against Women in response to the murder of municipal councilwoman Juana Quispe and in answer to the demands of women's organizations who reported that in the eight years leading up to the law's enactment, women participating in politics had filed more than 4000 reports of harassment with the police. The law defines different acts that should be punished, such as political harassment (with a prison sentence of two to five years) or political violence (three to eight years).

Para Convention. It also has no antidiscrimination law, although its constitution does establish the principle of nondiscrimination.

Honduran political parties toy with the expectations of women who want to make a career out of politics. They promise them resources, support and positions, only to then renege on their promises. Or they train female party members and then do not back them as candidates, with the excuse that they need to keep developing their skills (which is not usually required of male candidates). These parties continue to use criteria that have little to do with merit to select female candidates (which is also not the case with men): They prefer women from their family or with a close tie (spouses, daughters, sisters) over active party members because they continue to think of these women as “theirs” (belonging to them), believing they can exercise power through them as persons under their control (Freidenberg 2019).

It is thus important to advocate for a **reform of the Domestic Violence Law** to transform it into a **Comprehensive Law Against Gender Violence or Law on the Right to a Life Free from Violence**, including gender-based political violence (toward women for being women), that follows the guidelines set out in the Belem do Pará Convention. In lieu of a comprehensive law, **there should be a push for a Law against Gender-Based Political Violence**. This initiative should build on the existing national congress bill,³⁷ and it should criminalize gender-based political violence, establishing punishments for perpetrators and specific restitution for victims.³⁸ The law should clearly state what happens when violence is committed against women, what qualifies as a serious or very serious offense, and what the punishment is for each manifestation of violence (Model Law CIM-OAS).

Comprehensive action needs to replace assessments of the problem, and women should no longer be the ones to bear the brunt of the demands: that they need to band together, that they need to be trained, that they need to show solidarity with each other, in addition to championing women’s interests. The burden should not continue to fall to women. Debate between a criminal versus administrative approach has characterized the discussion. International cooperation, authorities, and academia increasingly agree that it is more important to **advocate for administrative, political and party-based and/or electoral penalties** than criminal ones, and that immediate consequences associated with these measures are needed (Freidenberg 2019).

These penalties include a) public admonishments; b) suspension of party membership rights; c) temporary disqualification from running for office for a party; d) temporary disqualification from holding office for a party or holding a party leadership position; e) loss of the office or position currently held; and/or f) expulsion (or loss of membership) from the party. To this end, parties should also have rules and internal bodies—facilitated by their leaders and members—for identifying, overseeing, reporting, punishing, and following up on instances of gender-based political violence.

The party should also **create Protocols for Addressing Political Violence** against women that clarify what is and what isn’t violence, what to do within the party if gender-based political violence is reported, the extent to which the exercise of political and electoral rights are affected, how much violence is a determining factor in an election, and the extent to which the gender component—an aggravating factor in the sphere of political rights—is present.

³⁷ See the bill “Law against Political Harassment and Violence against Women” of the Legislature’s Gender Equality Commission dated 3/4/2015 and sponsored by Congresswoman Doris Gutiérrez.

³⁸ The Inter-American Commission of Women of the Organization of American States (CIM/OAS) established the first regional agreement by approving the Declaration on Political Harassment and Violence against Women (CIM/OAS 2015), in which the signatory countries declare the need to “promote the adoption, where appropriate, of regulations (...) for the prevention, attention, protection, eradication of political violence and/or harassment against women, that allow the proper punishment and reparation of these acts, in the administrative, criminal, electoral spheres (...)” The CIM also drafted a proposed Inter-American Model Law on Political Violence against Women (2016) to encourage countries to adopt specific laws on this issue, in accordance with the Montevideo Strategy for Implementation of the Regional Gender Agenda within the Sustainable Development Framework by 2030 (CEPAL 2016). The Montevideo Strategy asserts that it is necessary to “(a) adopt comprehensive and specific laws and regulations on gender equality and women’s human rights, including legislation on the right to a life free of all forms of gender-based violence, and ensure their full and effective implementation.”

Recommendation 10: *Strengthen public institutions and their gender departments, as well as civil society associations and organizations that promote women's political rights.*

The **Honduran Women's Political Participation Observatory (OPPMH for its Spanish acronym)** should be directly and effectively reinforced through partnerships with civil society organizations, electoral bodies, political parties, and academia. The aim would be to generate statistics and knowledge to monitor the political participation of women and investigate the causes and implications of women's absence from institutions and public decision-making processes. To advance women's political rights, it is crucial to be able to form a broad social movement that brings together women's proposals.³⁹

This paper also recommends strengthening the public institutions that defend women, such as the **National Women's Institute (INMujer)**⁴⁰ and promoting policies and the planning and approval of public funds earmarked for gender issues. **Congress' Gender Commission and the TSE's Gender Unit** also need to be reinforced (OAS 2017).

Conclusions

A female leader of one of the traditional Honduran parties said during a work meeting that “the law is on our side; the attitudes are not.”⁴¹ This paper presents evidence to the contrary: neither laws nor attitudes are on women's side in Honduras' political system. The situation seems to be stacked against female politicians: the political system has a weak electoral design in terms of gender, with mock compliance and informal practices that undermine the spirit of gender parity; the electoral system is exclusive, with hierarchical and vertical political organizations that perpetuate sexist microaggressions; and social movements are weak, with little coordination about how to move forward with the electoral reform process.

The current rules do not help require parties to select women, who make up the majority of the population, as candidates. These rules are weak, unclear, and stated in the regulations rather than the laws, leaving them open to interpretation by political actors. The broader women's movement (in civil society and political parties) should thus see the 2019 electoral reform process as an opportunity to push for and demand a series of electoral reforms that level the playing field for women. Honduran women are up against adverse attitudes, practices and feigned compliance, despite all the regulatory and institutional efforts to make competition and the exercise of power more equal. The structure of incentives (electoral rules) needs to change to force parties to select more women as candidates and allow them to be elected and hold office without experiencing violence.

Party members and leaders commit gender-based political violence because they can. They commit this violence because it has no repercussions for the party, because people do not seem to care, and, therefore, it has no political and/or electoral cost. In this regard, politicians are not the only ones responsible. The general populace should ally itself with female politicians and emphatically refuse to further a political system said to be democratic but which in practice excludes women from decision-making. If voters use their power at the polls to castigate leaders who curtail women's careers, and if they refuse to vote for candidates with a track record of gender-based violence against other female candidates and instead vote and participate in a way that creates more room for women in politics, politicians will very likely understand the need to democratize the Honduran political system.

³⁹ For example, in regard to the 2019 electoral reform process, participants at different meetings said that: “Women are not organized to debate the issue (of electoral reform); women are not debating with each other or with key political actors, and they are even unclear on the slate of nonnegotiable safeguards that should underlie any discussion of women's political rights.” (Meetings held with people from civil society, the Honduran Women's Political Participation Observatory, international cooperation and the Honduran Interparty Women's Network, May and June of 2019.)

⁴⁰ This suggestion is also included in the analysis of Meza *et al.* (2018: 62).

⁴¹ Statements from a female leader of a traditional party in a work meeting held with members of civil society, the Honduran Women's Political Participation Observatory, international cooperation and the Honduran Interparty Women's Network, May 2019.



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Political violence against women should have an electoral cost. Parties understand the language of voters: A single electoral defeat (or the prospect of losing an election) sparks a change in strategy. Gender-based political violence should be grounds for declaring an election invalid. In this vein, journalists should do their part by shifting the narrative and creating frames that culturally censure and condemn violence against female politicians.

Lastly, the change has to go beyond simply regulating behaviors (and then letting perpetrators off without punishment or feigning compliance with formal rules). Rather, what is needed is a cultural shift that involves questioning men's power over women, roles, stereotypes, and the different forms of exclusion that permeate Honduran society. A crucial part of the strategy is feminizing politics and society, with an agenda pursued jointly by men, women and others, to bring about the cultural shift needed to transform the way in which politics are understood, run, and experienced in the country.

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