

**Women and power:  
For a world of equality**



Organization of  
American States

# 2010

## INTER-AMERICAN YEAR OF WOMEN

### Women and power: For a world of equality

The General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS), proclaimed 2010 the “Inter-American Year of Women” (AG/RES. 2322 (XXXVII-O/07)),<sup>1</sup> in recognition of the progress made and the challenges that remain to full equality between men and women, and of the pioneering role played by the Inter-American Commission of Women in the struggle for civil and political rights and equal opportunities.

The Inter-American Year of Women 2010 constitutes a space for reflection, celebration and renewal of our commitment to advance towards the achievement of gender equality and women’s empowerment in the hemisphere. The participation of women in all areas of society, politics and the economy is directly linked to the recognition and respect of human rights, and is an essential precursor and contributor to democratic governance and inclusive and sustainable human development.

During this year, the international community will also observe the 15th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 15th anniversary of the entry into force of the Belém do Pará Convention, and the 10th anniversary of the Inter-American Program on the Promotion of Women’s Human Rights and Gender Equity and Equality. In addition, many countries of the region will celebrate the bi-centennials of their independence. These processes will no doubt include reflections and evaluations of the contributions of women to the fight for independence and the evolution of their right to political participation.

The theme of the Inter-American Year of Women, “Women and power: For a world of equality,” points to a disturbing reality: in spite of the achievements made and the massive and active participation of women, their real access to power and influence in political and economic decision-making processes is still very limited. A key component of women’s empowerment is their ability to influence the direction of social change in order to create a more just social, economic and political order at all levels.

A just and critical evaluation of the current situation of women in the region demands that we take into account the voices of all women – in all their ethnic, cultural, age, geographic, sexual, etc. heterogeneity – in order to absorb the lessons of history, re-think our conceptions and beliefs and adjust our approaches and methods in order to respond to emerging global realities.

A number of regional studies have identified the main barriers to women’s effective political participation and incidence:

1. The OAS General Assembly approved Resolution AG/RES.2322 (XXXVII-O/07) “Inter-American Year of Women” with the aim of dedicating 2010 to its celebration.

- The difficulty in reconciling the decision to begin a political career with the exercise of their traditional gender roles
- The sexual division of labour. Barriers created by the domestic responsibilities that are attributed to women, which create conflicts in terms of availability of time, little support from partners or other family members, etc.
- The traditional norms, culture and dynamics of political parties and institutions
- Discrimination against women
- Discrimination and inequality in electoral competition
- The traditional views held by political party leaders of women's role in social welfare matters
- The modalities of some electoral systems and/or the existence of quota laws mandating women's political representation
- Limited access to economic or other resources for financing political work
- Limited opportunities for political training/capacity-building
- Lack of support from families, communities and society in general for women's political participation as a result of existing stereotypes and prejudices about women's role and capacities.
- The lack of shared responsibility and conciliation policies
- The absence of a gender-sensitive political culture

We are witnessing new scenarios and challenges that lead us to the redefinition of our notions of "women and power." Women, as advocates, heads of households, workers, community and national leaders, political representatives, students, activists or entrepreneurs are contributing from different perspectives to the definition of political, economic and social agenda(s). The political inclusion of women and other marginalized groups, on the basis of their own interests and expressed demands, must be a central component of the reforms that will be implemented to strengthen democratic governance in the Americas. Challenges range from the traditional neoliberal economic model and its current crisis to ongoing changes in the traditional models of the family and community, new social movements, migrations, the impact of natural disasters and the emergence of new information and communication technologies.

Women and their organizations are one of the most important political and social actors, with the capacity to propose and specific demands. The promotion of dialogue and the construction of plural consensus, implicit in the notion of democracy, require that women participate actively in agenda-setting, policy formulation and decision-making processes:

- The proportion of women in legislative bodies in the Americas is still only 22.6%,<sup>2</sup> with 18.5% women in Chambers of Deputies and 14.9% in Senates.<sup>3</sup>
- The situation is even more serious at the local level, where over the last ten years the percentage of women elected to mayoral office rose from 5.1% to 7%. The representation of women as councillors, an office that is more often subject to quotas, increased during the same period from 14% to 21%.<sup>4</sup>
- Between 1998 and 2008 the representation of women in executive-level cabinets increased from 15% to 29%. Nevertheless, women ministers are still concentrated in social and cultural portfolios (35%) and remain under-represented in ministries that are traditionally accorded more importance (17.9%) such as politics or the economy.
- At the highest level of the justice sector, women's representation increased over the last decade from 8% to 19%.
- Though 46.5% of Latin American women are affiliated with a political party, they occupy only 19% of leadership posts within these parties.<sup>5</sup>
- At the moment, 11 countries of the region have adopted quota laws mandating women's political representation in parliamentary electoral lists, which set targets between 20 and 40%.<sup>6</sup>
- The World Economic Forum reports that in 128 countries, representing over 90% of the world's population, the gap between women and men on economic participation and political empowerment remains wide: only 58% of the economic outcomes gap and only 14% of the political outcomes gap has been closed.<sup>7</sup>

2. Inter-Parliamentary Union: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> (visitado el 15/12/2009)

3. Llanos, B. y K. Sample. 30 años de democracia, ¿en la cresta de la ola?: Participación política de la mujer en América Latina. Lima: International IDEA, 2009.

4. ¡Ni una más! Del dicho al hecho: ¿Cuanto falta por recorrer? Octubre de 2009. Campaña del Secretario General de las Naciones Unidas "Únete para poner fin a la violencia contra las mujeres", Santiago de Chile, 2009. <http://www.cepal.org/mujer/noticias/noticias/2/37892/Niunamas2009.pdf>

5. ¿Quién responde a las mujeres?: Género y rendición de cuentas. Nueva York: Fondo de Desarrollo de las Naciones Unidas para la Mujer (UNIFEM), 2009. [http://www.unifem.org/progress/2008/media/POWW08\\_Report\\_Full\\_Text\\_es.pdf](http://www.unifem.org/progress/2008/media/POWW08_Report_Full_Text_es.pdf)

6. Ríos, M. Mujer y política: El impacto de las cuotas de género en América Latina. Santiago de Chile: FLACSO, International IDEA y Catalonia, 2008.

7. Hausmann, R. L. Tyson and S. Zahidi. The Global Gender Gap Report 2007. Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2007 (p. 13). <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2007.pdf>

Beyond these numbers, women's access to representation in political, economic and other decision-making processes does not guarantee their ability to negotiate and determine political, economic and social agenda(s). Domination and discrimination are still manifested in more and less subtle forms of marginalization and violence that impede women's capacity to present and defend alternative development agendas. This reality is true not only in traditional political and decision-making spaces, but also in personal decision-making spaces that are linked to women's bodies, minds and life projects. Without the necessary support, capacity-building, commitment and follow-up, we run the risk that the representation and participation of women in decision-making processes becomes a purely cosmetic change.

The need to continue in the defence of and demand for gender parity and equality in political and economic representation and decision-making in the Americas is clear, not merely as a question of formal equality but as a means of acknowledging and incorporating the voices, needs and concerns of all women. Some of the priorities highlighted by many of the countries in the region are:<sup>8</sup>

- Open a dialogue between women in the political and economic spheres that aims to identify an articulated policy and advocacy agenda for women's political, economic and social empowerment at the local, national and international levels;
- Increase the availability of and access to information on laws and statistics around the issue of women's political and economic participation and gender-responsive governance;
- Identify and publicize good practices and lessons learned on women's political and economic participation and representation from all the countries of the region;
- Build the capacity of women political representatives in terms of:
  - gender-responsive planning methodologies and strategies, including gender budget analysis
  - management, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs from a gender perspective
  - communication and utilization of media to advance a policy agenda in the political and economic spheres
  - conceptual issues related to gender relations in governance processes

8. Adaptadas de: Gobernabilidad y participación política de las mujeres en el ámbito local: Necesidades de fortalecimiento de capacidades. Santo Domingo: UN-INSTRAW, 2006

- the exercise of democracy, including how to manage conflicts and resistances
- citizenship in practice, in particular social auditing from a gender perspective and the creation of new modalities for dialogue among women of different groups and sectors, and between men and women within the political sphere
- strategies for promoting negotiation, coordination, conciliation and conflict resolution between different social, economic and political groups
- the management of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to strengthen democratic citizenship and governance from a gender perspective (i.e. creation of observatories, forums, transparency and access to public information, etc);
- Initiate reflection and dialogue processes among women political representatives on the discrimination they may have dealt with, both in their work and personal lives (households, communities, etc.);
- Open investigation and accountability channels for identifying and denouncing situations of gender-based discrimination or violence among women in elected positions;
- Create a space that allows women political representatives to exchange and analyze their professional and personal experiences at the local, national and regional levels, as well as between regions. Within this context, strengthen women's capacity to critically reflect on these experiences in a collective environment of analysis for action.

The Inter-American Year of Women presents an opportunity for political parties, parliaments, cabinets, the justice sector and other formal political mechanisms at the national and local levels to rethink the parameters of women's participation in political and decision-making processes and strengthen the commitment of all Member States to promoting and protecting women's right to participation in conditions of equality and non-discrimination.

We invite other international organizations, civil society groups and other key stakeholders to join us in this time of celebration, evaluation, learning and evolution.

The Organization of American States (OAS) is the world's oldest regional organization, dating back to the First International Conference of American State (October 1889 to April 1890). It was established in 1948 with the aim of achieving among the States of the Americas "an order of peace and justice, to promote their solidarity, to strengthen their collaboration, and to defend their sovereignty, their territorial integrity, and their independence." The OAS prioritizes four pillars - democracy, human rights, security, and development - that support each other and are intertwined through political dialogue, inclusiveness, cooperation, and legal and follow-up instruments that provide the OAS with the tools to maximize its work in the Hemisphere.

Established in 1928, the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) was the first official inter-governmental agency in the world created expressly to ensure recognition of the civil and political rights of women. CIM is made up of 34 Principal Delegates, one for each member state, and has become the principal forum for debating and formulating policy on gender equality and women's empowerment in the Americas