

PROMOTING WOMEN'S CANDIDACIES

An overview of electoral systems,
political parties, and campaign financing



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The illustrations accompanying this text were created by Juliana Serrano of Amazink Studio as part of a graphic recording of ParlAmericas' inter-parliamentary gathering, **The Electoral Journey of Women Candidates**, held in Guatemala in September 2016. They document the interventions of the gathering's participants and reflect the results of the working tables and dialogue spaces.

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ABOUT PARLAMERICAS



*ParlAmericas is the independent forum that promotes **PARLIAMENTARY DIPLOMACY** in the **INTER-AMERICAN SYSTEM***



*ParlAmericas promotes policies and legislative measures to mitigate and adapt to the effects of **CLIMATE CHANGE***



*ParlAmericas is composed of the **NATIONAL LEGISLATURES** of the member States of the OAS from North, Central and South America and the Caribbean*



*ParlAmericas fosters **OPEN PARLIAMENTS** by advancing the principles of transparency, accountability, citizen participation, ethics and probity*



*ParlAmericas facilitates the exchange of parliamentary **BEST PRACTICES** and promotes **COOPERATIVE POLITICAL DIALOGUE***



*ParlAmericas works towards strengthening democracy and governance by accompanying **ELECTORAL PROCESSES***



*ParlAmericas mainstreams **GENDER EQUALITY** by advocating for women's political empowerment and the application of a gender lens in legislative work*



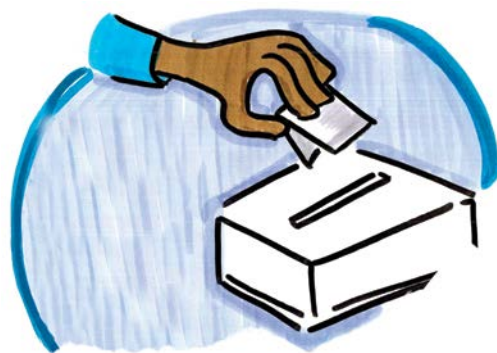
*ParlAmericas is headquartered in **OTTAWA, CANADA***

Elections and gender equality

In line with its commitment to strengthening democracy and governance in the Americas and the Caribbean, ParlAmericas carries out activities related to electoral processes and women's political participation.

With these objectives in mind, parliamentarians have joined delegations **accompanying and observing elections** in Haiti and in the United States. These missions applied gender perspectives in their work, examining the equality between men and women in exercising their political rights, with particular attention to the conditions for the participation of women candidates and voters.

In addition, ParlAmericas held a regional gathering, *The Electoral Journey of Women Candidates* (in Spanish), in Guatemala in September 2016.



At this gathering, current and former parliamentarians and political leaders from Central America, along with experts and representatives from the Department of Electoral Cooperation and Observation (DECO) and the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM, by its Spanish initials) of the Organization of American States (OAS), identified the main obstacles women candidates face throughout the electoral cycle and proposed legislative reforms to establish equitable conditions in electoral processes.



**THE GROUP OF WOMEN
PARLIAMENTARIANS OF PARLAMERICAS,**
a network that brings together parliamentarians from across the hemisphere, promotes women's political empowerment and the inclusion of gender perspectives in the legislative agenda of its member parliaments.

Since its creation in 2003, the Group has carried out activities and initiatives each year that bring together legislators from the Americas and the Caribbean to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and best legislative practices. These inter-parliamentary gatherings address topics such as strengthening and promoting the leadership of women in politics, eradicating gender-based political violence and harassment, strengthening dialogue with women's organizations, and many other issues of hemispheric relevance to further advance public policy for women's equality.



WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

Women's **political under-representation** persists, despite the progress made in the last 20 years that has been bolstered by, among other things, the consolidation of women's movements, the signing of international treaties and agreements on the subject, and the application of affirmative action measures. This under-representation affects the pluralistic and inclusive character that democracies aspire to and undermines the substantive representation of women and their interests. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), women occupy only 28%¹ of legislative seats in the Americas and the Caribbean. Within the hemisphere, the situation varies greatly; for example, women occupy more than

45% of seats in countries like Bolivia and Nicaragua, but hold a mere 2.5% in Haiti.

Aside from the social, economic, and cultural factors that inform this reality, there exist **structural obstacles** throughout the electoral process that hinder women candidates' full and equal participation and reduce their chances of being elected.

It is important to highlight that women candidates and aspirants do not experience these obstacles in a homogeneous way. Rather, obstacles to exercising one's political rights are "**intersectional**," as women may confront and be affected by multiple overlapping systems of oppression and discrimination.



¹ Data as of March 2017



INTERSECTIONALITY

is an analytical tool that recognizes that

inequalities cross different identity categories and that social identities have multiple dimensions. For example, gender is not the only aspect of a woman's identity that could affect her political participation; her age, ethnicity, (dis)ability, social class, and sexual orientation must be considered, among other factors.



The INTER-AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC CHARTER

establishes in article 3

the commitment of OAS Member States to hold inclusive, transparent, and competitive elections. It is an important source of shared standards on how to observe and evaluate electoral processes in the Americas and the Caribbean.



IT IS OF THE UTMOST IMPORTANCE to

analyze the structural obstacles that exist **throughout the electoral process** from a gender perspective, as these obstacles influence women's political participation and the resulting effects on women's access to decision-making spaces.

Recognizing these biases and inequalities — and proposing concrete actions to eliminate them — will allow for progress to be made towards the achievement of **equal conditions** for women in electoral processes, the promotion of their candidacies, and, by extension, the broadening of democratic representation.

ParlAmericas presents this brief review of the obstacles related to electoral systems and their respective mechanisms, political campaign financing, and the role of political parties, with the

objective of summarizing the principal — but not the only — filters that discourage and limit women's political participation.

Additionally, this document outlines proposals to reduce these obstacles, in order to create equal conditions for women to exercise their political rights. It includes an overview of electoral observation missions, as their recommendations constitute important tools to guide legislative solutions to the problems described.

Parliamentarians have a fundamental role to play in reducing structural barriers and gender biases affecting women's political participation, as they are essential for the advancement of the required electoral reforms. Through this document, we hope to provide insight on parliamentary work in the Americas and the Caribbean towards this end.



VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS consists of

intimidation, coercion, or aggression towards women for their public and political activities, in ways that exacerbate gender discrimination and have the intention of discouraging them from being, or remaining, politically active.

During a campaign, violence and harassment against candidates can take the form of any threat, deliberate or spontaneous, that influences the flow of the election process. These manifestations include explicit acts of violence and harassment during public meetings, and the use of sexist expressions and language in the media and on social networks.





For more information
on violence and
harassment against
women in politics:

[Declaration on Political
Harassment and Violence
Against Women](#). CIM, 2015

[Gender-based Political
Harassment: Building Awareness
in Parliaments](#). ParlAmericas,
2016

[Gender and Political Violence
in Latin America: Concepts,
Debates and Solutions](#). Mona
Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo
Sanín, 2016

[Mapping Gender-based Political
Harassment: Parliamentarians
Speak Out](#). ParlAmericas
(website)

[#NotTheCost: Stopping Violence
Against Women in Politics](#). NDI,
2016

HOW DO WE PROMOTE WOMEN'S CANDIDACIES?

Electoral systems

The variety of electoral systems and the nuances of their application due to the particularities of each country create a legal and normative structure that conditions the participation of women in the political sphere. Electoral systems, insofar as they are not gender neutral, establish obstacles that deter potential women candidates and reduce the chances of women candidates being elected.




ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

are a set of
elements (laws, rules, and
procedures) through which
the political will of citizens
is translated into seats.



ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

Majority Systems (Simple Majority)

Main features	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Single-member districts• Whoever receives the most votes wins, even if they do not get an absolute majority• Predominately used in the English-speaking Caribbean and Canada under the modality of First-Past-the-Post 
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow the electorate to choose between candidates and not just between parties, since voters can evaluate the performance of individual candidates as opposed to accepting a list presented by a party• Favour parties with a broad base. In multicultural or regionally diverse societies, parties with more electoral strength can present a broader spectrum of candidates in order to represent different segments of the population.• Simple and clear structure for the electorate and for the election officials responsible for counting votes
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May exclude minority groups, as party officials often present the candidate (generally male) perceived to have the highest level of acceptance in a specific constituency to avoid distancing themselves from a large part of the electorate• May deprive minority parties of representation consistent with the number of votes received, as the percentage of votes overall will not necessarily be reflected in the allocation of seats• A significant number of votes may not ultimately influence the election of a candidate, creating the perception among the electorate of “wasted votes”

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

Proportional Representation Systems

Main features

- Multi-member districts
- Convert the percentage of votes received into the percentage of seats
- In some modalities, allow for voting for parties or individual candidates, or both
- Predominately used in Latin America, with different modalities and characteristics

Advantages

- Foster the establishment of more representative legislatures
- Tend to facilitate the representation of minority parties — depending on the established electoral threshold — as any political party can attain seats, even with a low total percentage of votes
- A single vote can be essential to gaining a seat, generating the perception among the electorate that “every vote counts”




Disadvantages

- In certain circumstances favour radical and populist parties, which could be essential to forming a government coalition
- Parties with less electoral support can exercise disproportionate power by vetoing proposals and legislative initiatives
- Some modalities may be difficult for the electorate to understand and can impose significant logistical and technical challenges for electoral authorities

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

Mixed Systems

- Combine the main attributes and characteristics of the majority and the proportional representation systems
- The electorate votes for representatives under both systems

	Mixed Member Proportional	Parallel Systems
Main features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some of the seats, typically 50%, are elected by the relative majority formula, usually in single-member constituencies • The remaining seats are elected through party lists and are allocated using a proportional formula • They exist, with different nuances, in countries including Venezuela and Bolivia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use both the proportional representation lists and the relative majority single-member districts (winner takes all) • Each voter receives either a single ballot, on which she/he votes both for a candidate and her/his party, or two different ballots, one to vote for the majority seat and another for the proportional representation seats
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain the benefits in terms of representation that are characteristic of the proportional representation system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When there are enough proportional representation seats, smaller parties with less electoral strength can be compensated in the distribution of seats
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can create two classes of legislators: one responsible and committed to a particular constituency, and another without specific geographical links that is committed to the party leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May deprive parties that received significant numbers of votes of seats • Can be complex and create confusion among the electorate 

Electoral mechanisms

In the design of electoral systems it is necessary to consider different mechanisms, which are understood as the **variables and procedures** that make these systems operative and determine their nature and functioning. In examining the variables, it is important for the electoral authorities to **incorporate gender perspectives** that address obstacles hindering the participation of women candidates.



ELECTORAL MECHANISMS are a series of variables and procedures that

form part of the design of electoral systems and define their operation and scope.



THE MAIN VARIABLES determining electoral mechanisms are:

Electoral threshold

The minimum level of voter support required for a party or candidate to obtain representation. It can be:

- **LEGAL:** An established law sets a minimum percentage of representation to be able to receive seats in the allocation process
- **EFFECTIVE:** The minimum electoral support required to win an election

Electoral district

The territorial unit that serves as the basis for the distribution of seats for representation. Its magnitude defines the number of seats that are elected within each territorial unit.

Lists

The way in which political parties present candidates. There are three types:

- **CLOSED AND BLOCKED:** The order of the candidates on the list is determined by the party
- **CLOSED AND UNBLOCKED:** Voters can reorganize the list presented by the party according to their preferences
- **OPEN:** Voters can create their own list by choosing candidates from different parties



Taking into account the different electoral systems and mechanisms, there is some consensus on **which ones tend to favour the participation and election of women candidates**. It is important to note that there are **no universal formulas**; political, social, economic, and cultural contexts shape particularities that influence these considerations.

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS: The **proportional representation** system, accompanied by the mechanisms described below, tends to favour the election of women and promote the inclusion of minorities. In fact, this system arose from the need for traditionally marginalized groups to obtain political representation, which can be difficult in some modalities of the majority systems.²

ELECTORAL THRESHOLDS: Higher thresholds, while generating less proportional results, can in practice

benefit women candidates in large parties which, due to the number of representatives they can select, can present gender-balanced lists more easily.

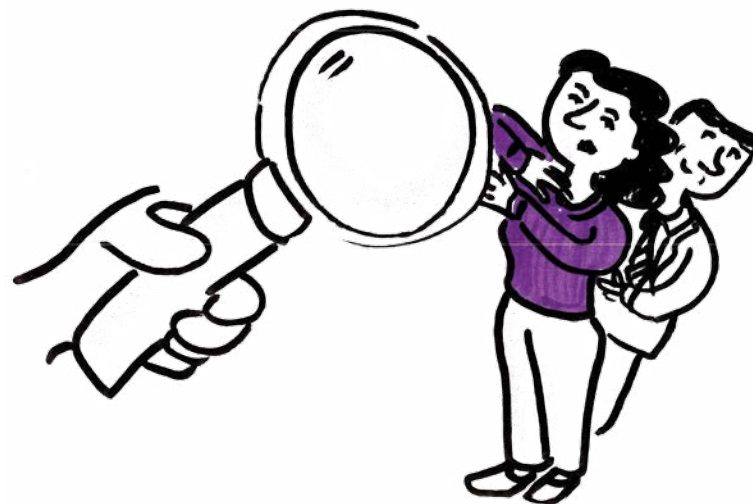
ELECTORAL DISTRICTS: The **greater the magnitude** of the district (higher number of representatives that can be elected) the more seats a party can obtain, creating more opportunities for women candidates to be included in party lists, even if they are placed in lower positions.

LISTS: Closed and blocked lists favour the inclusion of women, but they must be accompanied by a system of quotas with sanctions for non-compliance, as well as mandates regarding their positioning on the lists (**zipper system**), guaranteeing women positions where they are likely to be elected.

² *Electoral Systems and Gender*. Asunción Ventura Franch, 1999 (in Spanish)



PARLIAMENTARY ALTERNATES are electoral modalities that exist in some legislatures in the Americas and the Caribbean. These feature members and alternate members (*titulares* and *suplentes*, respectively, in Spanish), where the former holds the seat and the latter remains as an alternate in the event that the member (also known as *propietaria/o*, or “owner”) has to resign her/his seat or is temporarily absent. This has led to situations in which women elected as members are replaced by their alternate, usually a man, thus evading established gender quotas.





For more information on electoral systems and gender perspectives:

Designing for Equality. Best Fit, Medium Fit and Non-Favourable Combinations of Electoral Systems and Gender Quotas. International IDEA, 2007

Political Representation in Dispute: Conceptual Framework for a Gender-based Analysis of Electoral Systems. UN-INSTRAW, 2010 (in Spanish)

The Electoral Knowledge Network. ACE Project (website)

Political parties

The recruitment, selection, and nomination processes within political parties are vital to ensuring gender-balanced electoral competitions. The way in which parties establish their **nomination procedures** and comply with the established legal requirements determines to a large extent the gender gap in candidacies.

Parties determine the options they will present to citizens for elections, and are consequently instrumental in defining the map for women's participation and representation.

Parties can develop **voluntary initiatives** to mainstream gender considerations in their structures, as well as promote and foster women's leadership in internal decision-making bodies and as electoral candidates.

Many of these initiatives are driven by the women members themselves, who establish informal spaces like “**wings**” or “**arms**,” or formal ones like **gender secretariats**, through which they call for the adoption of mechanisms to remedy gender inequality and increase women's participation in the structures, policies, practices and/or values of their political parties.





POLITICAL PARTY MEMBERSHIP

in Latin American countries³ is made up of an average of

51% women; however their share of parliamentary seats is only 28%.⁴

This discrepancy can be explained by the **over-representation of women at the base** of parties and, by contrast, their **under-representation at governing levels**.



QUOTAS are a form of affirmative action designed to achieve

effective equality among different social groups — in this case women — in their access to decision-making spaces or elected office.

They can be:

- **OBLIGATORY IN NATURE:**
 - **CONSTITUTIONAL:** Enshrined in fundamental laws
 - **LEGISLATIVE:** Established by electoral laws
- **OF A VOLUNTARY NATURE:** Adopted by political parties of their own volition.

Regardless of their forms, quotas **do not seek to give women an advantage**, but rather to correct imbalances and structural inequalities.

The majority of laws of this nature have established quotas of 30% in the configuration of party lists, reserving these spaces for women candidates to achieve a “critical mass” (recommended in the Beijing Platform for Action) to stimulate



the effective representation of women in parliaments. The results of the progressive application of such quotas have been positive but insufficient — especially considering the absence of sanctions for failing to comply — and have led to the discussion of **parity** as a necessary evolution of quotas and a condition required to achieve gender equality.

Parity ensures a balanced presence in decision-making spaces, establishing that neither men nor women can make up a proportion lower than 40% or higher than 60% of the available posts and positions.

³ Gender and Political Parties: Far from Parity. IDB — International IDEA, 2010. Data is from Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, Mexico Paraguay, Peru, and the Dominican Republic

⁴ IPU. Data as of March 2017



PARITY has been theorized by the CIM with a **comprehensive proposal**

based on two dimensions:

- **ACCESS:** In all State institutions (executive, legislative, and judicial) from the international to the local spheres and in all aspects of public life in general
- **CONDITION:** Men and women participating in public and private life under equal conditions, free from discrimination and gender violence



For more information on quotas and parity:

[Banking on Parity: Democratizing the Political System in Latin America. Case Studies from Ecuador, Bolivia, and Costa Rica.](#) International IDEA — CIM, 2013 (in Spanish)

[Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties: A Guidebook to Promote Women's Political Participation.](#) NDI — UNDP, 2011

[Gender and Political Parties: Far from Parity.](#) IDB — International IDEA, 2010

[Quota Laws: Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean \(database\).](#) ECLAC (website)



Latin America has been a leader in the application of quota laws and in the debate and implementation of parity. Examples of the progress made include:

ECUADOR: The Constitution expressly establishes that parity must be applied for elected office, the executive committees of political parties, and various public sector positions.

MEXICO: The existing laws on parity include specific regulations to prohibit political parties from exclusively nominating women in constituencies where they tend to receive low numbers of votes.

Campaign financing

Political campaign financing is one of the obstacles that tends to dissuade⁵ women when it comes to considering running for election, and ultimately hinders their participation as candidates.

Women are faced with structural gender biases when raising funds. These inequalities largely emanate from **traditional roles assigned to women**, the resulting consequences of which include disproportionate responsibility for unremunerated work (care of dependents), the well-known wage gaps, and unequal access to the financial system.

These realities affect women candidates' chances of accessing campaign funding. It is thus less likely that they will make connections with influential groups and have **networks of contacts that provide**



campaign funding. There are also inequalities shaped by patriarchal party structures favouring the provision of funds for men at the expense of women candidates.

In addition, there are unique factors associated with a **sustained increase in campaign costs** and the existence of primary elections or internal consultations — both of which can pose further challenges for women candidates.

⁵ Equality in Politics: A Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments. IPU. 2008



There are three
METHODS OF FINANCING:

- **PUBLIC:** Funds are distributed to parties directly, with resources to finance campaigns, or indirectly, through in-kind contributions or subsidies
- **PRIVATE:** Funds are given privately — either by individuals or legal entities — as money or in-kind contributions
- **MIXED:** Both methods are allowed simultaneously

The most commonly used method in the Americas and the Caribbean is the mixed, with well-known differences in their respective regulatory frameworks.





Facilitating women's access to campaign funds can be done either via rules and regulations or via independent citizen-led initiatives.

ALLOCATING PUBLIC FUNDS: There exist rules that state that parties must allocate a percentage of the public funds they receive to train women members and/or support their campaigns. Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Panama, among other countries in the hemisphere, have adopted these kinds of regulations.

ESTABLISHING SPENDING LIMITS: Limiting authorized campaign spending favours candidates who lack sufficient resources or have difficulty raising funds. These measures aim to break with the paradigm that whoever raises the most money has the greatest chance of winning. The effectiveness of these regulations depends on the efficiency, autonomy, and independence of the monitoring and audit mechanisms designed for this purpose.

USING PRIVATE FUNDRAISING NETWORKS: Private networks can be established for decentralized fundraising. Perhaps the most successful example of this method is Emily's List in the United States. It operates as a network to finance political campaigns of women affiliated with the Democratic Party who identify as advocates for women's reproductive rights (e.g., pro-choice). It also provides courses and training for leaders and aspiring leaders.



UNEQUAL ACCESS TO THE MEDIA is one of the difficulties

faced by women candidates. In order to provide more equitable conditions and increase women's participation, the Superior Electoral Court of Brazil has established that 10% of the space dedicated to party advertising must be allocated exclusively to women candidates.



For more information on financing with a gender approach:

Electoral Financing to Advance Women's Political Participation. UNDP, 2007

Gender and Political Financing in Latin America and the Caribbean.
Delia M. Ferreira Rubio, 2009 (in Spanish)

Is Financing an Obstacle to the Political Participation of Women? CIM
— International IDEA, 2003

ELECTORAL OBSERVATION MISSIONS

Electoral observation missions (EOMs) monitor **transparency** in electoral processes. They evaluate the different stages of an electoral process through protocols and standardized tools. EOMs **issue reports and recommendations** to the responsible authorities with the aim of preventing and correcting errors or distortions.

In order to issue substantial and extensive analyses, EOMs can be carried out throughout the electoral process, including in the pre-election period, on election day, and in the post-election period. There are also short-term missions that cover just election day and the vote.

In the context of the democratization processes beginning in the 1980s in the Americas and the Caribbean, independent EOMs carried out by civil society and international

organizations **have generated confidence** in society at large and in political parties and their candidates, regarding the inclusive, clean, and competitive nature of elections. The EOMs that have been deployed by DECO-OAS since 1962 are recognized across the hemisphere for their rigorous procedures and continuous methodological innovations.



Gender mainstreaming in EOMs follows the development of **observation**

methodologies responding to international treaties and instruments on gender equality such as the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952), the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (1967), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) and the Inter-American Democratic Charter (2001).

Electoral observation with a gender perspective evaluates the **conditions for women electors and candidates to access and participate** in the electoral process and aims to “even out the playing field,” issuing recommendations directed to governments and electoral authorities to remedy inequalities in the full exercise of women’s political rights. In this sense, the role of the legislative branch can be fundamental in ensuring the necessary follow-up takes place for appropriate implementation of the recommendations by electoral authorities, political parties, and other agencies in question.



GENDER MAINSTREAMING

is “a strategy for

making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres.”

⁶ ECOSOC, 1997



For more information on electoral observation missions:

[Electoral Observation Missions and Recommendations Database. DECO-OAS \(website\)](#)

[Manual for Incorporating a Gender Perspective into OAS Electoral Observation Missions. DECO-OAS, 2013](#)

TO CONCLUDE

Electoral processes are not gender-neutral. On the contrary, **gender biases and inequalities converge** in the design and application of electoral systems and regulatory frameworks, which are the products of patriarchal power structures; they limit women and traditionally marginalized groups from fully exercising their political rights.

For women candidates, these biases can be manifested as obstacles that dissuade them from participating in electoral processes. They **complicate and reduce their chances** of being elected, affecting the pluralistic, inclusive, and representative nature to which all democracies should aspire.

Many of the main obstacles are centered around electoral systems and their related mechanisms, the regulation of political campaign funding, and the role of political parties in promoting women’s candidacies. It is possible to address these obstacles through concrete measures and actions that aim to **establish equitable conditions** for women’s participation in elections.

As a result, the role of legislators is fundamental, as they can advance the necessary electoral reforms to reduce structural inequalities, and promote mechanisms that strengthen women’s leadership and the mainstreaming of gender approaches in their parties.

Similarly, the exchange of best practices in spaces of cooperative parliamentary dialogue facilitates legislative action and the coordination of collective efforts. The recommendations put forth by electoral observation missions are also relevant points of reference to guide legislative action towards monitoring implementation.





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