

BRIDGING THE LEADERSHIP GAP:

WOMEN IN LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA

Findings from the GWL Voices Women in Politics Initiative

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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PART 1 | Strengthening the Evidence Base on Women's Political Leadership



STRENGTHENING THE EVIDENCE BASE ON WOMEN'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Introduction

Women's political representation is widely recognized as a matter of rights and democratic legitimacy, as well as a driver of more inclusive and effective governance. A robust body of global **evidence links women's leadership to greater governmental responsiveness, transparency, and long-term social and economic development.**

Women in political office are frequently associated with stronger prioritization of policies related to equality and non-discrimination, health, care, education, social protection, and the prevention of violence against women, generating broader societal benefits and supporting inclusive economic growth.

International normative frameworks reflect this understanding. CEDAW General Recommendation No. 40 establishes **parity not merely as a policy aspiration, but as a democratic and human rights standard, essential to the realization of women's rights and the effective functioning of inclusive governance systems.** These dynamics are particularly salient at local and subnational levels, where governments are closest to people's daily lives. It is in territories where public policy becomes tangible, where services are delivered, where rights are either guaranteed or denied, and where democratic legitimacy is built or lost.

Yet **women's participation in local and subnational executive leadership remains strikingly limited.** While women's representation in local deliberative bodies has increased globally, their **presence in executive positions such as mayors, governors, prefects, and equivalent offices continues to lag significantly behind.** When women are excluded from these decision-making spaces, local priorities, budgets, and institutional cultures often fail to reflect the diversity of community needs and lived experiences, particularly those shaped by gendered inequalities. Not because women represent a single perspective, but because **excluding half the population narrows the range of experiences and knowledge informing public decision-making and weakening governance responsiveness.**

Local and subnational executive office also matters strategically because it shapes political trajectories. For many women, **executive roles at territorial levels represent an entry point into higher political responsibility, offering institutional experience, public visibility, and access to networks** that influence

leadership pathways across levels of governance. In a context of growing backlash against gender equality and women's rights, **strengthening women's leadership at the local and subnational levels is therefore essential both to protect hard-won gains and to sustain democratic progress.**

Despite decades of commitments, **structural barriers continue to constrain women's political participation.** Deep-rooted gender stereotypes, discriminatory party practices, unequal access to campaign resources and media visibility, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work remain pervasive obstacles. In many contexts, women who enter political life also face harassment, intimidation, and gender-based political violence, both online and offline. These **barriers are compounded by persistent data gaps** that obscure the scale of women's exclusion from local and subnational executive office and weaken evidence-based policy responses.

Responding to these challenges, this report presents the findings of Phase I of the **Women in Politics (WIP) initiative, led by Global Women Leaders Voices (GWL Voices) in partnership with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).**

The research focuses on six Latin American countries: Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Panama, selected based on recent electoral cycles held between late 2023 and 2024 and the availability of comparable data. By **combining updated representation data with first-hand perspectives from locally elected women leaders,** the report strengthens the evidence base and supports policy dialogue aimed at advancing gender parity in local and subnational executive leadership.

Methodological Insights

Comparable data on women in local and subnational executive office remains scarce and fragmented.

While significant progress has been made in tracking women's participation in local deliberative bodies through Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Indicator 5.5.1(b),

systematic and comparable data on executive positions such as mayors and governors or prefects is often incomplete. In several countries, sex-disaggregated data exists for elected authorities, while in others only lists of officeholders were available, requiring additional verification and manual analysis. Age-disaggregated data was rarely available, and information on political trajectories, professional backgrounds, political affiliation, constituency size, ethnicity, disability, and re-election patterns was generally absent or inconsistent.

To address these gaps, the **study combined official data with manual compilation through secondary sources,** including electoral information, institutional websites, campaign materials, media coverage, and publicly available biographical information. Given limitations in comparability and resources, the **analysis prioritizes the most consistent variables across countries, with sex disaggregation as foundational, age disaggregation where feasible,** and complementary variables such as party affiliation and jurisdiction size where data allowed.

The study **combines statistical analysis with qualitative evidence gathered through a survey of women holding locally and regionally elected executive positions.** The questionnaire was disseminated to 311 women authorities with support from municipal and subnational associations and UCLG networks, complemented by outreach by UN Women country offices. The **survey achieved a 32 percent response rate,** with 101 respondents and 63 percent completing the full questionnaire. **All valid responses were included in the analysis to preserve nuance,** resulting in varying response counts across questions. The survey's **intersectional design** helps illuminate how gender interacts with age, territorial contexts, socio-economic background, professional experience, and other dimensions shaping women's participation and leadership.

Taken together, the **mixed-methods approach** represents **one of the few systematic efforts to document women's participation in local and subnational executive leadership in Latin America.** Beyond generating new evidence, it highlights the urgent need to strengthen data systems, institutional transparency, and policy frameworks that enable women's meaningful participation and leadership.





PART 2

Women in Local and Subnational Executive Leadership: Findings from Latin America



WOMEN IN LOCAL AND SUBNATIONAL EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP: FINDINGS FROM LATIN AMERICA

Despite strong regional commitments, **women remain persistently underrepresented in local executive leadership across Latin America.** Recent electoral cycles between late 2023 and 2024, often described as a “super election year,” did not deliver the expected gains. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), **women held 16.6 percent of mayoral positions in the region in 2024**, reflecting only modest increases over previous years.

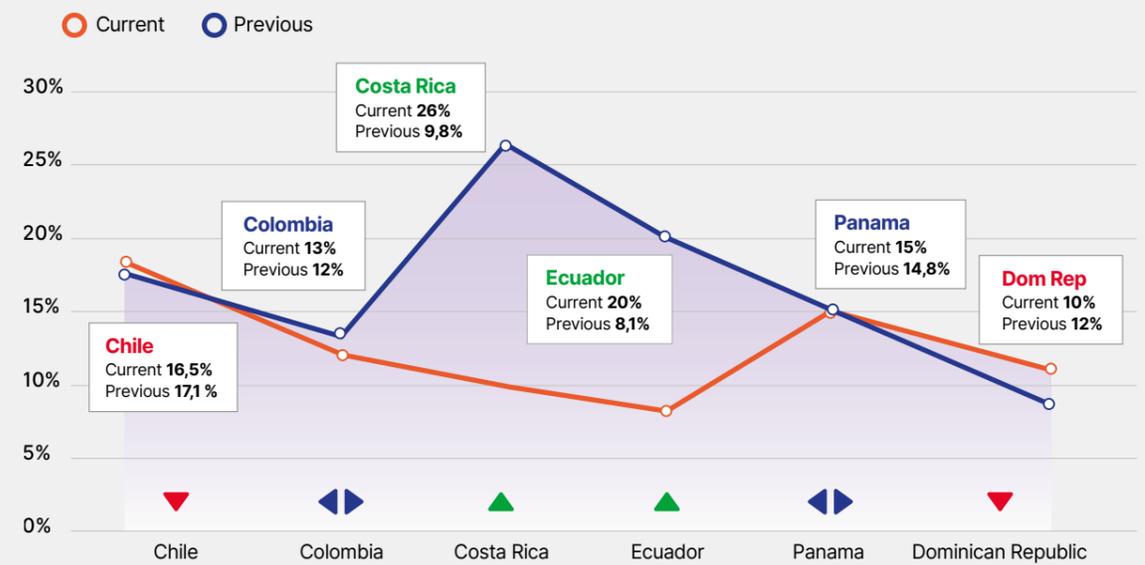
Against this backdrop, the Women in Politics initiative conducted a detailed analysis of women’s representation in local and subnational executive positions in Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Panama. The **analysis combines a regional overview with country-level profiles to capture both aggregate trends and national variation. Across all cases, women’s underrepresentation in local executive office emerges as a persistent structural pattern**, limiting the diversity

of leadership perspectives shaping local governance and public decision-making.

Regional Trends in Women’s Local and Subnational Executive Leadership

Across the six countries analyzed, women held an average of 17 percent of locally elected executive positions in 2024. This aligns closely with ECLAC’s regional estimate yet remains **far below parity and below thresholds reflected in some quota frameworks.** **Progress has been uneven.** Costa Rica and Ecuador recorded notable gains linked to parity mechanisms and reforms, while Colombia and Panama showed marginal change and Chile and the Dominican Republic experienced declines.

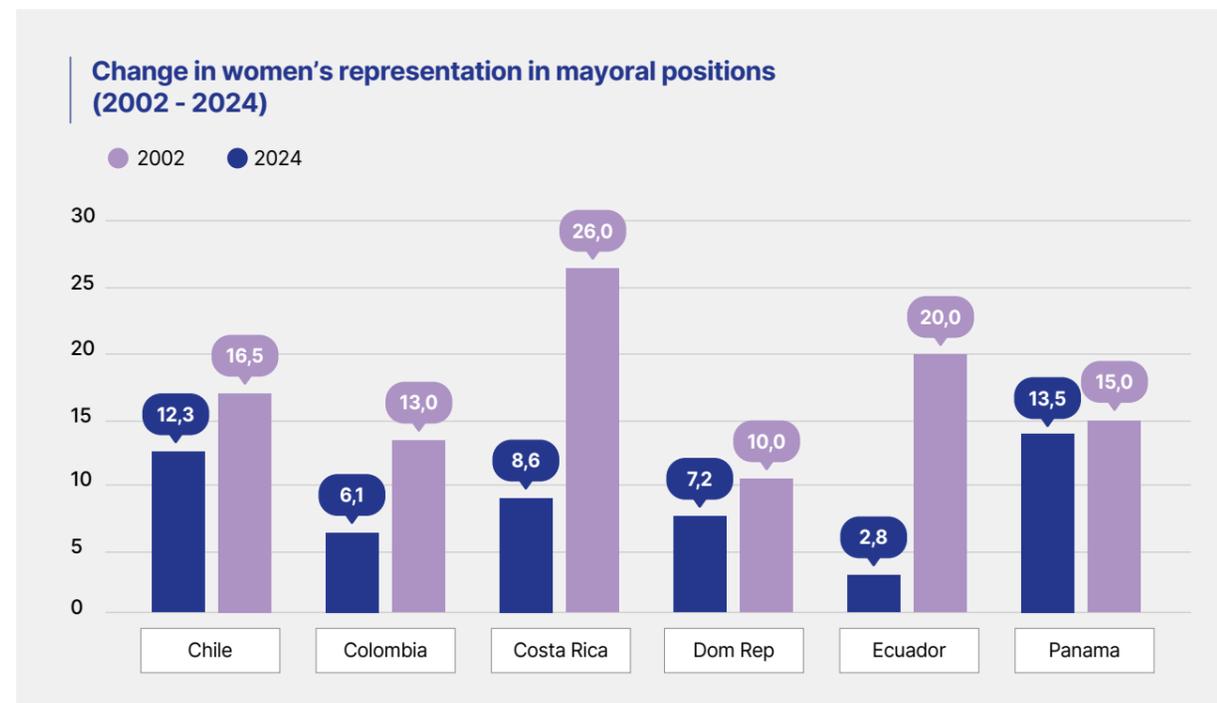
Change in the Share of Women Mayors in Selected Latin American Countries (Last Two Electoral Cycles)



Source: Developed by GWL Voices based on official electoral data and data from ECLAC (2025), Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean (GEO).

Over a longer time horizon, the **pace of change remains slow**. Across the six countries, **women's representation in mayoral positions increased by an average of only nine percentage points over the past two decades**. If current trends persist, **parity in mayoral positions would**

not be achieved for approximately 85 years, placing the milestone around 2110. This projection underscores the inadequacy of partial reforms and the urgency of more decisive policy action.



Source: Developed by GWL Voices based on official electoral data and ECLAC (2025), Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean (GEO).

Similar patterns appear in subnational executive leadership where such positions are elected. Across Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador, **women's representation in governorships or prefectures increased from around 12 percent in 2019 to 16 percent in 2024**, with progress concentrated in Ecuador and Colombia and a reversal in Chile, where no women were elected as governors in 2024. These **divergent trajectories highlight the fragility of gains in the absence of sustained enforcement and comprehensive measures**.



The analysis also reveals **generational disparities**. Women in local executive office tend to be **concentrated in older age groups, with an average age of 47 across the six countries, and an even older profile at the subnational level in several cases**. This pattern reflects **barriers operating across the life course, including gendered expectations related to caregiving, assumptions about leadership experience, and age-based biases**. **None of the countries analyzed applies youth quota mechanisms to single-office executive races**, reinforcing delayed access and limiting generational renewal.

Variation in legal and institutional frameworks helps explain differences in outcomes. While **all six countries have adopted some form of quota or parity measure, their scope, application to executive contests, enforcement, and sanction mechanisms vary**. Evidence across cases shows that parity and quota measures are most effective when they extend to single-member executive positions, are comprehensive in scope, and include enforceable sanctions. Where loopholes or weak enforcement persist, legal commitments coexist with limited results.

In parallel, structural barriers such as **political violence against women in politics and unpaid care responsibilities continue to constrain women's access and retention**. Although all six countries have adopted legislative measures to address political violence against women, implementation, enforcement, and access to effective remedies remain uneven. Care-related measures, by contrast, remain particularly limited across the region.

Country-Level Analysis: Women in Local and subnational Executive Leadership

Regional data highlights important patterns but does not fully reflect the diverse political and institutional environments in which women seek and exercise executive leadership. The country snapshots that follow examine recent electoral cycles across six Latin American countries, illustrating how national contexts shape both opportunities and persistent barriers to women's access to local and subnational executive office.

CHILE:

A paradox of national progress and local and subnational setbacks.

Women won 57 of 345 mayoralties in 2024 (16.5 percent), a slight decline from the previous cycle. Women's access to mayoral office is highly stratified by commune size. Nearly three-quarters of women mayors govern communes with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants, and women remain scarce in larger urban centers where political visibility and resources are greater. A notable shift is the growing role of independent candidacies as a pathway, with 54 percent of elected female mayors running as independents. Age patterns indicate delayed access, with an average age of 50 and limited representation among younger women. At the subnational level, the outcome was stark: no women were elected as regional governors in 2024. The absence of binding parity or quota measures for local and subnational executive races remains a central constraint.

COLOMBIA:

Persistent gaps in mayoralties alongside gains in governorships.

Women won 146 of 1,102 mayoralties in 2023 (13 percent), with limited improvement over previous cycles. Their representation continues to be concentrated in smaller municipalities, while access to leadership in major urban centers remains limited. Unlike Chile, most elected women mayors ran through parties and alliances across the ideological spectrum, indicating that exclusion is rooted less in ideology than in structural barriers within party nomination and campaign support. The average age of women mayors is 45. At the subnational level, women's representation improved, with six of 32 governors elected (19 percent), up from 6 percent. However, affirmative measures do not extend to single-member executive contests, contributing to low candidacy rates and uneven outcomes.

COSTA RICA:

Significant gains under a comprehensive parity framework, with persistent outcome gaps.

Women won 22 of 84 mayoralties in 2024 (26 percent), a substantial increase from under 10 percent in the previous cycle. However, although women comprised 43 percent of candidates, their share of elected mayoralties remained significantly lower, pointing to continued barriers beyond candidate selection. Women's leadership also remains concentrated in smaller cantons, and none of the provincial capitals elected a woman mayor in 2024. The age profile of elected women further reflects structural patterns in access to executive office, with female mayors averaging 50 years of age, indicating that leadership opportunities often emerge later in women's political trajectories. Costa Rica's strong legal framework, including parity and alternation, and the strengthened application of horizontal parity, is closely linked to recent gains. Complementary measures are still needed to address disparities in campaign resources, care-related constraints, and barriers limiting younger women's access to political leadership.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC:

Regression under partial parity measures.

Women won 16 of 158 mayoralties in 2024 (10 percent), down from 12 percent in 2020, with minimal progress over two decades. Women mayors are concentrated in smaller municipalities, with limited presence in large urban jurisdictions, though a few prominent exceptions emerged. Available data indicate an older profile, with an average age of 54 and no women under 40 among those with verified ages. Quotas apply mainly to plurinominal positions, while single-member mayoralties fall outside parity requirements. Alternation in joint tickets has not translated into parity in the top post, reflected in high shares of women in vice-mayoral roles but low shares as mayors.

ECUADOR:

Major gains and an enabling reform framework, with urban and generational gaps.

Women won 45 of 221 mayoralties in 2023 (20 percent), representing the highest level to date and a sharp increase from the previous cycle. Women remain largely absent from the largest cities, including Quito and Guayaquil. At the subnational level, women won seven of 24 prefectures (29 percent). Women prefects tend to be older, with an average age of 48, while available data for women mayors suggests an average age of 44 among those verified, with very limited representation under 30. Ecuador adopted a 2025 reform mandating parity across all candidacies, including executive tickets. As this reform was adopted after the electoral cycle analysed in this report, its impact on women's representation will need to be assessed in subsequent elections and will depend on effective enforcement and party compliance. Security risks remain salient in a broader context of insecurity affecting public life.

PANAMA:

Stagnation in representation alongside stronger generational renewal.

Women won 12 of 81 mayoralties in 2024 (15 percent), a figure largely unchanged from 2019 and reflective of the limited progress made over the past two decades. Women's leadership remains concentrated in smaller districts, with only limited breakthroughs in larger and more politically influential urban jurisdictions. Party gatekeeping remains central, and parity reforms have been weakened by loopholes that undermine compliance. Panama presents a distinct generational profile compared with other countries in the study. The average age of women mayors is 41, and nearly 60 percent are under 40, suggesting stronger generational renewal even as overall representation remains low. Care-related measures remain absent.



Facing the Barriers: Women's Realities in Local and subnational Politics

Alongside representation data, the survey constitutes a central pillar of the research, capturing **first-hand perspectives from 101 women leaders** serving in locally and regionally elected executive office. Respondents were primarily mayors, largely first-term, and mostly party-affiliated. Two-thirds were over 40, most had children, and many identified as heads of household, reflecting the intersection of public responsibilities and family obligations that shape women's political leadership trajectories.

Pathways and motivations¹. Respondents reported high education levels (85 percent university, 54 percent postgraduate) and long trajectories before attaining executive office (half with more than ten years of political activity). Entry routes most often included community or social work (45 percent) and party involvement (28.5 percent). Motivations were strongly public-interest driven, with nearly all citing improving the lives of women and young people (99 percent) and broader community conditions (97 percent), while party encouragement was less prominent.

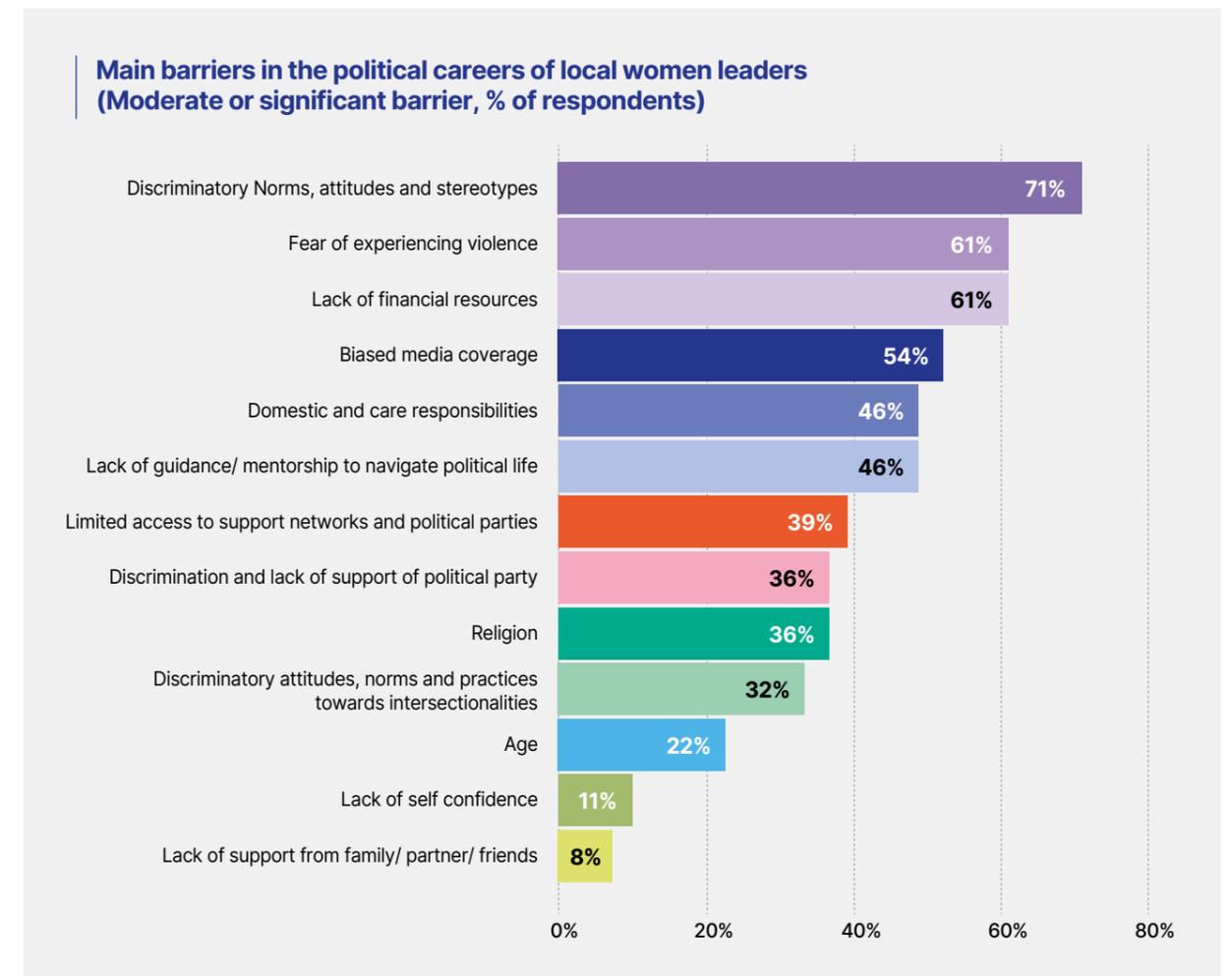


Source: Developed by GWL Voices based on survey findings

1. The findings on educational background, political experience, and motivations are based on 84 respondents.

Barriers and constraints.² Barriers are persistent and mutually reinforcing. Gender stereotypes and discriminatory norms were most frequently reported (71 percent). Financial constraints were widespread (61 percent). Party-related barriers were also significant, including discrimination or insufficient support (36 percent) and limited networks and

access (39 percent). Almost half cited lack of mentorship (46 percent), reflecting limited support structures and role models. Media bias was common (54 percent), often emphasizing gender, education, or personal life over policy platforms, and many women reported limited access to mainstream outlets.

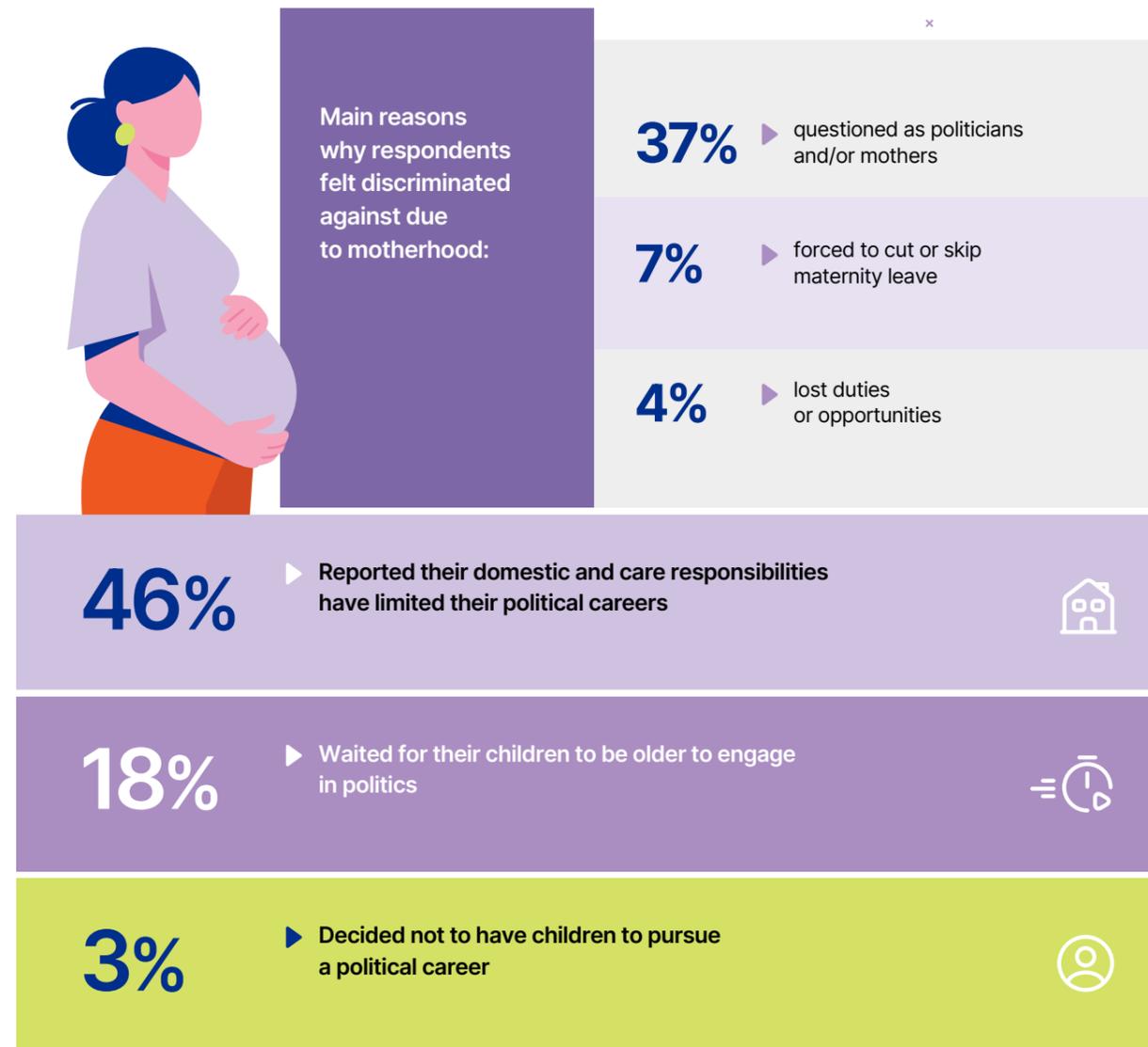


Source: Developed by GWL Voices based on survey findings

Note: Percentages represent respondents who identified each factor as a moderate or significant barrier.

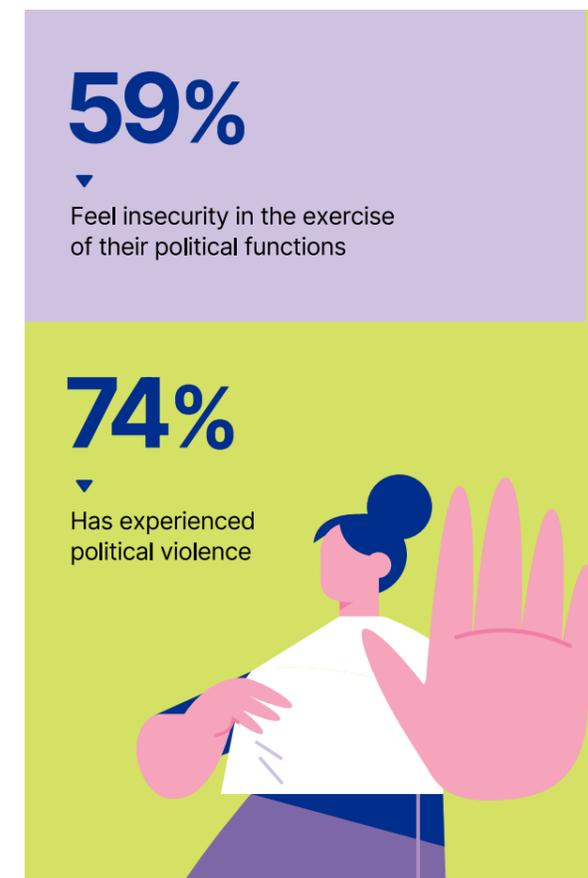
2. The findings on barriers to participation are based on responses from 84 respondents.

Care responsibilities remain a major constraint, with nearly half reporting that caregiving duties restricted political engagement and many mothers reporting discrimination linked to pregnancy or motherhood.



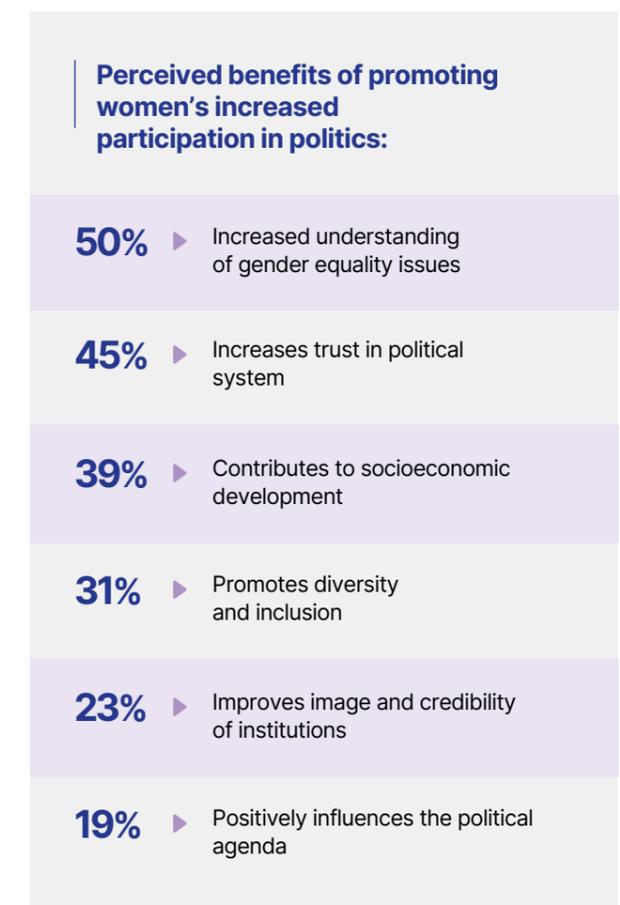
Source: Developed by GWL Voices based on survey findings

Violence against women in politics³. Violence and insecurity are pervasive. Nearly six in ten reported feeling unsafe or insecure in office, and 74 percent experienced some form of political violence. Reported forms include threats, intimidation, sexist or sexualized remarks, and online harassment, as well as smaller but significant shares reporting physical aggression, forcible confinement, or sexual harassment. The effects include reduced public engagement, altered personal behavior, self-censorship, and withdrawal. Reporting is limited and accountability is largely absent, reinforcing impunity and deterring women from seeking remedies.



Source: Developed by GWL Voices based on survey findings

Perspectives⁴ and retention⁵ Women leaders express strong support for institutional reform, including quotas and parity, and link women's leadership to stronger democracy and more responsive governance. Most intend to continue in politics, but those uncertain or planning to leave are disproportionately affected by violence, insecurity, care burdens, lack of resources, and limited party support, highlighting how barriers constrain both entry and retention.



Source: Developed by GWL Voices based on survey findings

3. The findings on political violence are based on responses from 68 participants.

4. The findings on perspectives regarding gender equality issues are based on responses from 64 participants.

5. The findings on outlook and retention are based on responses from 84 participants.



PART 3

Key Findings and Recommendations
for Action

03

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Key findings

Evidence from the six countries reveals a persistent gap between formal commitments to gender equality and women's lived political realities in local and subnational executive leadership. Despite important legal and policy advances, women's access to executive power remains constrained by the design of electoral and party systems, structural inequalities, and political ecosystem dynamics.

1. Legal frameworks are necessary, but their design, scope, and enforcement determine outcomes.

Where parity provisions are comprehensive, extend to executive contests, and are supported by effective oversight and sanctions, women's representation improves. Where frameworks remain partial, include loopholes, or lack enforcement, progress stagnates or reverses.

2. Women's exclusion reflects a clear geography of political power.

Women are more likely to govern smaller jurisdictions and remain significantly underrepresented in major urban centers and political hubs where visibility, influence, and resource control are concentrated. This territorial pattern reflects structural barriers that limit women's access to the most influential leadership spaces.

3. Generational and intersectional inequalities reinforce exclusion.

Women typically access executive office later in life, while younger women face compounded age- and gender-based barriers. Indigenous and Afro-descendant women remain largely absent from local executive leadership, highlighting persistent and overlapping forms of structural marginalization.

4. Barriers to women's leadership operate as interconnected systems of exclusion.

Gender norms, party gatekeeping, unequal access to campaign financing, disproportionate care responsibilities, and gender-biased media coverage interact to restrict

women's candidacies, electoral competitiveness, mandates, and long-term political trajectories, even in contexts with formal equality commitments.

5. Violence against women in politics remains widespread, while accountability mechanisms remain weak.

Women leaders frequently experience threats, intimidation, harassment, and other forms of political violence that restrict public engagement, undermine leadership effectiveness, and discourage political participation. Reporting remains limited and institutional responses are often insufficient, reinforcing cycles of impunity.

6. Despite systemic barriers, women leaders demonstrate strong commitment to inclusive governance.

Survey findings show consistent support for parity, institutional reform, and policies that advance equality, social protection, and community well-being. Women leaders overwhelmingly associate women's political participation with stronger democratic legitimacy, improved governance outcomes, and more inclusive development.

Recommendations for Action

Accelerating progress toward gender parity in local and subnational executive leadership requires coordinated institutional, legal, and cultural reforms. Priority actions include:

1. Strengthen and enforce gender parity frameworks across local and subnational executive leadership.

Parity provisions should extend to both candidate nomination processes and executive offices, including single-member positions such as mayoralties and governorships. Legal frameworks should include clear enforcement mechanisms, eliminate regulatory loopholes, and establish sanctions for non-compliance. To ensure inclusive outcomes, parity measures should incorporate intersectional approaches and, where necessary, targeted

affirmative measures to support women facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

2. Adopt and effectively implement comprehensive legal and institutional frameworks to prevent and address violence against women in politics.

Frameworks should clearly define, prevent, and sanction all forms of gender-based political violence, including physical, psychological, sexual, economic, symbolic, and digital forms. Measures should ensure accessible and safe reporting mechanisms, protection and security measures for both women candidates and women serving in public office, and coordinated institutional responses that provide legal, psychosocial, and economic support to survivors. Effective implementation should include timely investigation, prosecution, and sanctions to prevent impunity.

3. Integrate care-sensitive policies across electoral processes and political mandates.

Addressing unequal care responsibilities requires institutional measures that support women throughout their political trajectories, from candidacy to public office. These may include care support during electoral campaigns and mandates, flexible institutional arrangements, equitable parental leave policies for elected authorities, and scheduling practices that acknowledge caregiving responsibilities.

4. Establish sustainable and gender-responsive political financing systems.

Electoral authorities, governments, and political parties should integrate gender perspectives into public and party-based financing mechanisms. This includes earmarked funding for women's political participation, incentives for gender-equal candidate selection, equitable access to campaign resources, and strengthened transparency, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms.

5. Strengthen national data systems and gender-responsive monitoring frameworks.

Governments and electoral authorities should adopt standardized mechanisms to collect and publish sex-disaggregated and intersectional data on political participation across all levels of governance, including candidate and leadership positions. Integrating gender-responsive indicators into planning, budgeting, and monitoring systems is essential to support evidence-based policymaking and accountability.

6. Enhance political party accountability for gender equality commitments.

Political parties should adopt internal gender equality policies, promote parity in leadership structures, ensure transparent and inclusive candidate selection processes, and guarantee equitable distribution of political and financial resources. Parties should also establish protocols to prevent and respond to violence against women in politics and support leadership development and mentoring initiatives.

7. Invest in long-term transformation of discriminatory social norms and institutional cultures.

Governments and political institutions should support education, public awareness initiatives, and institutional training programs that promote gender equality and transform informal practices that restrict women's political participation.

8. Promote gender-sensitive media environments.

Media regulators, electoral bodies, and communication authorities should support fair and balanced representation of women in political coverage, promote inclusive language and imagery, and monitor disparities in media visibility and access during electoral processes.

9. Expand leadership development and mentorship initiatives for women at the local level.

Programs supporting women's leadership pathways, particularly for young women and women from historically marginalized communities, are critical to strengthening political participation and sustaining long-term leadership trajectories.

The findings of this report demonstrate that **progress toward gender parity in local and subnational executive leadership remains slow, uneven, and vulnerable to regression.** Despite important legal advances, structural barriers, institutional gaps, and discriminatory norms continue to limit women's access to political power.

Advancing women's leadership at territorial levels is **essential to strengthening democratic legitimacy and building governance systems capable of responding to diverse social needs.** Achieving substantive equality in local and subnational executive leadership will require coordinated action to reform electoral and political systems, strengthen protections against gender-based political violence, address economic and care-related constraints, and transform political cultures.

Through the **Women in Politics initiative**, GWL Voices, UN Women, and UCLG reaffirm their shared commitment to advancing women's political leadership through evidence generation, advocacy, and policy dialogue. **Ensuring women's equal participation in local and subnational executive leadership is not only a matter of rights and representation, but a necessary condition for building inclusive, resilient, and effective democracies.**

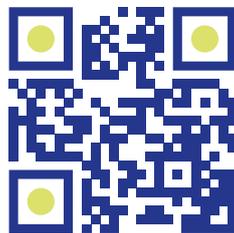


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