



Democratization

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Challenges of political participation: my experience

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The political participation of women is increasingly necessary, considering the ongoing cultural and political evolution. If we want to achieve more just, peaceful and egalitarian societies, then there must be representation of over 50% of the world's population in each area of impact. Women's perspective should be included in interventions and decision-making processes.

Parliaments are a representation of our democracy. Our parliament mirrors the state of our democracy.

When women decide to participate in politics, we must face many obstacles, yet we must be familiarized with notions of equality and aspire to inclusion in order to notice them. Many times, we ourselves are the victims of unfairness and, as such, it is hard for us to recognize what happens, so instead of condemning injustice, we normalize and fail to reject it.

How did I become a parliamentary member?

My experience on the National Parliamentary stage was very productive. I feel that I grew considerably as a politician working as a public servant, and I understood the role that both men and women should definitely occupy in public spaces: encouraging

balance in each scenario, being the voice and representation of those who trust in our leadership, in our actions.

I have been politically active since my time as a student leader, when I sought solutions to make the life of “*Sansebastianeros*” students happier, less hard, through transportation routes, and social benefits for students. Later on, I worked alongside the Governor of the State of Guárico, Venezuela, in his office. From ages 19 to 23 I worked as his assistant, managing his schedule and coordinating alongside a great team tours around the state.

At the same time, I was working hand-in-hand with my husband, who aspired to become the mayor of the San Sebastián Municipality, in the south of state of Aragua, which he fortunately won. I dedicated myself to accompanying him throughout his days in office, managing the social branch, and taking on the first ever role of a young female municipal leader.

After two periods fulfilling this responsibility, I was sought out by my (current) political organization, *Primero Justicia*, in order to form the electoral model for the National Assembly for Circuit 4 of the Aragua State, a circuit that for 19 years had been represented by a man from the official government party. Now, it was to be a multi-member circuit, which would yield two main seats and two alternates to the National Assembly.

I was facing a dilemma. Initially I resisted the idea of taking on this offer, for it seemed really challenging and scary. But I ended up accepting. My campaign manager at the time said something to me that is still engraved in my memory: “Asking for water is not the same as giving it away”.

I had always been in political action, service, articulation, organization teams, but I had never been the leading figure. Now,

I was supposed to address crowds, do speeches, concentrate the emotions of the people, merge their feelings with mine. Despite being part of a campaign for national unity, very well designed and articulated, I was facing a new scenario.

Arriving at the National Assembly was surprising for me. I underestimated our triumph. We have always known that the electoral contest against the regime is always contaminated, loaded with tricks, so we feared that a victory, even a perfectly fair one, would not be acknowledged. However, our triumph was recognized and so began the meetings and the organization of work teams for performing our parliamentary responsibility.

My organization, Primero Justicia, had a very important role. I am still very grateful for being part of a team that considered, trained and accompanied me, to have been guided with humility and detachment by people with experience in the legislative role.

Even though people around me trusted me, my capabilities and my experience, I still felt like I was navigating through new, unknown waters. And I definitely was, yet I knew I had to live up to my commitment. I won't deny some difficulties I faced. Journalists, parliamentary assistants, legislative teams were sometimes very kind and collaborative, but on other occasions I met people who underestimated my abilities, noticed my inexperience, and mockingly underestimated my need to know and to learn. I understood that I should take advantage of the space I occupied in order to serve.

My commitment to equal opportunities

The relationships built within the National Assembly and my political party offered me invitations to train in feminism, equality and the participation of women in politics.

Elaisa Ferris, Family Secretary of Primero Justicia, always invited and accompanied me. Since then, I have been able to get close to figures and women in politics who are very admired and important to me, such as Evangelina Garcia Prince, former senator, sociologist, anthropologist and feminist activist; Natalia Brandler, President of the Cauce Association dedicated to the training of women in politics, and Susana Reina, of Feminismo Inc, psychologist, coach and whom I later chose as my mentor. This was a great learning experience, understanding the importance of mentoring as a transforming tool for professional development, especially in the area of politics.

Being in the midst of this team and in permanent training on the importance of gender equality to advance in women's issues, I understood that I had been offered great opportunities in my life, that my own behavior and professional development had earned me others, but that not many of my female peers in Venezuela had the same chances. I began to understand the need to develop proposals to support the political participation of women in different spaces of the national arena, but especially within my political organization.

It is to my understanding that proposals to take over powerful positions and offer services that answer the population's needs are structured within the spaces of political organizations.

In addition to promoting and developing the issue of women's political participation, we must maintain our presence in other areas such as science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and generally in academia. We must place our attention on women who are not only leaders in the so-called soft sciences, but also in hard sciences (i.e., the aforementioned areas).

The glass ceiling in politics

All this experience made me understand that, when women decide to participate in politics, we face great obstacles. I would like to discuss three of them: The first one is there from the get-go and has to do with daring to make the decision to delve into politics. We may be academically prepared, but the field is unknown, so we must develop skills to work in public issues.

The second obstacle is of a cultural nature: stereotypical questions such as «Whom will she leave the children with?» or “She’s gotten this far because she is the wife of...”, the distrust of families on the prestige of being a woman in politics.

The third obstacle has to do with the issue of permanence. We find ourselves faced with actions that we don’t identify with and that displace us from the public, forcing us to return to the private scene. This is political violence. When a woman makes a bad decision, she is much more condemned, more looked down on than a man would be. The personal cost is ending up divorced or with broken families.

We belong to patriarchal societies with very marked roles of what men and women should do. As women, we have advanced rapidly to position ourselves in the workplace, but mostly by taking on too many roles: work, but also traditional and even sexist roles assigned to women such as caring for children, parents, preparing meals, cleaning, among others).

My experience has not been different. Being in such a demanding work and political scene always led me to build an important support team, which would allow me to tend to my

role as a mother remotely, helping with my children's homework, and also providing permanent care to my parents.

Building an egalitarian democracy is my commitment

A society that prides itself on being democratic should do everything possible and necessary so women do not feel discriminated for being in public spaces and so men also feel comfortable in the private space of the home and caring for children.

Women are not a social representation. We are not a minority: we are more than 50% of the world's population. Therefore, the intervention of the State –understood as the set of institutions that aim at the development of society– through affirmative actions is necessary. The State thus recognizes that there have been historical discriminations and shows the political will to rectify them. These most common affirmative actions are quota laws that seek to move toward absolute parity.

Quotas or parity have generated changes in countries that have established them. In Mexico and Spain, for example, there was medium representation, and affirmative actions have been achieved with a floor of 30% that have been misconstrued as a ceiling and not as a quota minimal.

The leading role of political parties

This experience of parliamentary political participation also allows me to understand that it is through political parties that we can generate social change. Political parties are going through credibility crises and applying inclusive strategies for women in leading and decision-making positions is a smart strategy to overcome this.

Political parties are organizations that aim to wield power, and that can mitigate discrimination against women in their operating structures.

Political parties must not only incorporate women into their administrative and decision-making structures; they must generate proposals and specific programs that consider the needs, expectations and interests of women in order to be truly inclusive organizations.

Political parties are the social expression of people's wills, with whom they have things in common, with which they imagine a model of society. If this model does not include the expectations, needs or interests of women, it would be an exclusionary program.

Political parties as opinion generators must put women's issues on the public agenda:

1. Include the issue in the general proposal of the party.
2. Make the candidates refer to the topic.
3. Manifesto in the statutes of political parties.
4. When elections are won, those elected must make the commitment of creating spaces for the participation and inclusion of women.

It is vital to guarantee that political parties are sisterhood spaces, so that women remain active within it during electoral times or not.

Men and women for a common agenda

Women must develop a common agenda through activist organizations, aimed at raising awareness of the need to build more decision-making spaces together.

Women will begin to break down barriers or overcome obstacles as we become more educated. When one of us is educated and sensitized, she educates and sensitizes a brother, a son, another man. Inequalities do not overcome themselves, policies must be generated to move forward.

The notion of leadership has evolved, from the managerial hierarchical model to the conscious model of servant leadership, and there, men and women have much to contribute if we work together for a common purpose. This is my life mission and that is why I will continue working.

Conclusion

The fourteenth issue of *Democratización* comes to an end with the compilation of five articles that show how Venezuelan women have been opening spaces in society –and what is still to be done– to achieve equal conditions that allow their inclusion in public life and the end of serious injustices such as gender violence.

In the precarious social, political and economic context in which Venezuela finds itself, talking about feminism, gender equality, violence against women and women's participation in politics is not only a necessary act, but an indispensable one. The purpose of this issue is to contribute to the debate that is increasingly present in our society.

With this in mind, there are three ideas that can summarize and conclude this issue:

1. These texts reveal figures of inequality and violence against women. In this sense, we can conclude that the road ahead is still long and that we must continue working day by day for a more equitable and just society.
2. The fight must not be solitary or individual. We must work to join forces, to make our struggle visible, and to make both men and women aware of what we have achieved and what we want to achieve.
3. We must not be afraid to raise our voices, to express our opinions, to participate and to seize. There are many women in our democratic history. Their example and their struggle have helped to plow the field so that new

generations of women can have more rights and spaces for participation. Like Gloria Lizárraga de Capriles, let's not be afraid to take on new challenges, no matter how big.

4. Women must be an example and a sisterhood. An example for all those girls who are born, who grow up and who have big dreams every day so that they see in us the will, empathy, power, responsibility and courage that inspire and encourage them to fulfill their dreams. And a sisterhood, so that we help each other grow, supporting each other in whatever field we work in, as Adriana Boersner Herrera, Maryhen Jiménez and María Corina Muskus do with the 101 women who are part of the Venezuelan Investigan network.
5. And finally, in the words of Paola Bautista de Alemán, let us embrace our femininity and the benefits of our gender, turning them into an engine that drives us to continue fighting, breaking through and taking down barriers that exist in our society, because “it is wonderful to be a woman”.