

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond Parity in Figures: The Challenges in Reality of Municipal Women Councillors in Bolivia

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Bolivia is a country that has advanced substantially regarding women's representation in politics. In fact, at a global level, Bolivia rivals Rwanda at both the national and local representation levels. This is particularly true at the local level where several women from all social conditions and ethnicity groups have become the majority of municipal councillors, even though women mayors are still a rarity. However, parity in figures does not mean parity in reality. Many of these women councillors face hard realities impregnated with discrimination and harassment of all sorts. Moreover, some mechanisms—like the rotation principle designed to increase participation and democracy—have been turned against many of these women councillors. Based on a field work using interviews and participant observation as well as findings of previous relevant works, this article discusses these problems and offers an analysis as to the causes of such a situation where parity in figures is not reflected in shared power and equal respect in the daily realities at the local level.

Keywords: women; Bolivia; municipal councillors; masculinity; political harassment

Introduction

...I've continued in spite of the political threats I've received and the fears of my family. I told them, it's only threats, nothing will happen. But I've seen a woman being elected and leaving her position the day after the election because her brother pressed her to leave her place to her deputy, a man.... (councillor Lupalaya 2012)¹

Does an increase in descriptive representation of women lead automatically to equality in the sharing of power? As the quote above illustrates, harassment because of sex and position may be the price some women pay for this increase.

All over the world many women are achieving parity in many spheres only to discover that principles, laws and rules are one thing and reality another. In the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action from the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, two of the agreed strategic objectives were to take measures in order to ensure women's equal access to full participation in power structures and decision-making, and to increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership (UN Women 1995). Quotas and other mechanisms have been introduced in most countries and as of 2016 two poor

countries head the list of most women representation at parliament level: Rwanda—with 63.8% in the lower house and 38.5% in the upper house in the 2013 elections—and Bolivia—with 53.1% in the lower house and 44% in the upper one in the 2014 elections—(Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016). At the local level in the case of Bolivia, 51% of municipal assemblies were composed by women after the 2016 municipal elections. These advances in figures are surely valuable but what are the realities these elected women face?

Taking the case of women elected at the local level (an area that has not received as much attention as the national representation), this article tries to demonstrate that there are serious structural challenges women still have to confront and that even applying an intersectional analysis gender remains as the most powerful explanatory variable for this situation. As our empirical evidence shows there is an increase in political violence and such violence, as Krook and Restrepo argue, is 'seeking to prevent women's participation as women' (2016: 459). That means to scare women looking for elected positions as to the harassment they may face if they become elected.

The local level dimension is particularly important as 'the policy impact of women in office [...] is perhaps most tangible in local government' (Goetz 2009: 16). Moreover, according to some authors, higher representation of women at national and local office may correlate with better allocation of resources which is an important factor in overcoming poverty persistent violence and even deep-rooted corruption (Beall 2009; Momsen 2010; Dahlerup & Layenaar 2013). In Latin America the average percentage

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of women represented in municipal councils has advanced from 13.7% in 1998 to 25.1% in 2012 (PNUD 2012: 44). And in Bolivia, our case study, this percentage was 43% in the 2010 elections and 51% in 2015 (ACOBOL 2010: 1 and 2014: 8). Yet, higher presence of women in local government also appears to lead to more conflicts, where women are perceived as intruders and challengers of the establishment (Massolo 2006; Tello Sánchez 2009; ACOBOL 2010; ACOBOL 2013a).

The case of Bolivia is particularly relevant not only because of the advances in descriptive representation but also because of its context of poverty and indigenous traditions, as well as for the reforms promised by a government to the left. This article is based on fieldwork with respondent interviews and participant observation at different periods of time.

Previous research regarding women's political participation

There has been extensive research as to women's participation in political systems and the quota—and other quantitative—advances and challenges.² Regarding local government, previous research has identified two broad reasons why women at this level face different kinds of obstacles in their effectiveness in government: their inexperience and their culture of institutionalised patriarchal management in local government (Goetz 2009). Shvedova (2005) suggests that the hindrance women encounter can be organised around three themes: ideological and socio-cultural, political, and socio-economic obstacles which fits very well into our findings.

The quantity and quality of studies on elected women in local politics in Latin America vary. Several studies on the statistical advances of women relative to quotas at different levels of political participation have been published by international agencies such as Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)—e.g. Llanos & Sample 2009; Uriona 2009—, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)—e.g. Montaña & Rico 2007; Hinojosa 2012—and United Nations Development Program (UNDP, PNUD in Spanish)—e.g. PNUD 2013. The UNDP study considers the advances of women's representation at the subnational level as particularly relevant given the growing importance of these local powers in the operationalisation of social policies in a process of decentralisation. This report gives us a quantitative update of the continental situation at a general level and at the country level it goes into the subnational situation. The correlations observed locally in this report regarding percentages of representation at the executive and the legislative councils, the impacts of quotas, and the relation between resources and women's participation are a good starting point for any kind of research on these issues. There are also a number of works on women as political actors at the municipal level (Massolo 2006; Tello Sánchez 2009; Choque Aldana et al. 2013; PNUD 2013). Tello Sánchez (2009) presents a statistical overview of several surveys and interviews on women as mayors or municipal councillors in the whole of Latin America, in which she documents women politicians' views about their careers,

obstacles and experiences. The results are both interesting and disappointing.

Regarding Bolivia, as we have seen in the context, Htun and Ossa (2013) have written an excellent analysis on the paradox of women being more successful than indigenous minorities at the level of parliamentary representation in spite of Morales's promises to satisfy the claims of indigenous movements. They explain this through an intersectional analysis where gender solidarity and alliances will prevail over indigenous interest and political divisions. The authors discuss the phenomenon of gender-based political assault as the background of the different reforms and electoral laws facilitating gender parity. However, they conclude by stating that the aftermath of quotas has not led to "a 'revolution' or significant changes within the parties" (Htun & Ossa 2013: 18). Moreover, they assert 'coalitions forged by women to achieve quotas are often weakened inside of a legislature once they become subject to agenda control and discipline imposed by party leaders' (2013: 18). This can be translated at the municipal case in our study as the prevalence of political loyalties over gender ones as we will show.

Also regarding Bolivia, there have been several case studies done at the local level in different municipalities (See: PNUD 2012: 63–70; ACOBOL 2013b) focusing mostly on rural and indigenous women in municipal councils. As we shall see, our own results coincide with many of the findings coming from these studies.

Bolivia: Indigenous and Gender Emancipation with an Increase in Political Violence?

In the case of Bolivia, political developments (the arrival to power in 2006 of an alliance of social movements headed by an indigenous leader who promised ambitious social reforms) and women's mobilisations have favoured an advanced process of institutionalisation of gender equality during the last years (Htun & Ossa 2013: 10; ACOBOL 2013a: 19). However, this process of institutionalisation had advanced well before the arrival of *Movimiento al socialismo* (MAS) to power, probably due to women's mobilisations and the international trends and pressures favouring gender equality. In March 1997, the first quota law establishing 30% of women in the lists of candidates was adopted. The new law regulating political parties in 1999, included in article 19, made the 30% quota for women obligatory. Nonetheless, there was a certain resistance to the application of these laws and women were systematically relegated to the bottom of the lists, to deputy positions or to the places where they were less likely to be elected. To counter this the Law on Civic Organisations and Indigenous People in 2004 incorporated the rule of 'a quota of 50% for women in all candidacies for positions of popular representation' (Ley de Agrupaciones Ciudadanas e Indígenas 2004) and introduced the concept of "rotation," according to which if the elected candidate is a man, his deputy should be a woman and vice versa. The principle of rotation and alternation in parties' lists was confirmed by the Electoral Law of 2009 that symbolised a victory for parity even though the term parity was replaced by "equality of opportunities" (Htun

& Ossa 2013: 12). It should be noted that this “rotation principle” is the other side of the same coin; that is to say, an obstacle to fulfilling complete elected periods by new councillors, harming particularly women councillors as we shall see later on.

Finally, women’s groups (in a rather unusual women coalition where indigenous and urban feminists joined forces) obtained that the Constitution of 2009 would establish—in its article eight—the principle of ‘an equal participation of men and women’ in the election of the Plurinational Legislative Assembly, thus outrunning the proposal for reserved seats for indigenous groups (Htun & Ossa 2013: 12). The Supreme Electoral Court ratified this principle by ruling the application of “parity and rotation” within the electoral legislation. So parity (50%) at all levels was finally implemented in 2010 (Htun & Ossa 2013; PNUD 2012: 34). At the municipal level the candidates’ lists are closed and the system is proportional, something that appears to favour the effectiveness of affirmative action (PNUD 2012: 37–38; ACOBOL 2013a: 1).

Due to these institutional changes, triggered as already said by the constant pressure of women’s groups, women’s political representation has changed dramatically during the last ten years. In the 2014 national elections, women obtained 49% of parliamentary seats. Moreover, at the national government level since 2006 about 50% of all ministries have been led by a woman, several of them indigenous. In 2015 at the municipal elections women councillors went from occupying 43% in 2010 to 51% of the municipal assemblies. The enforcement of these quotas has come from above and from central government. Results regarding mayors are less positive: from 7% of all mayors after the elections in 2010 (decreasing in absolute terms from 24 to 22) they increased to 8.5% after the elections in 2015 (29 in absolute terms) (ACOBOL 2010; ACOBOL 2014; ¿Cuál paridad? 2015). Also due to the reality of political harassment suffered by elected women, and as we shall see in the empirical part of this article, the law against harassment and political violence—Law 243—was approved in 2012 after a long struggle by different women’s groups and organisations supporting women municipal councillors (ACOBOL 2013a: 18; ACOBOL 2014).

In Bolivia about half of the country’s population is indigenous, therefore the struggle for gender equality and parity has been carried out in a parallel but synchronised way with the struggle for indigenous rights. In fact, MAS government had, from the beginning, privileged indigenous rights over gender equality (Htun & Ossa 2013). In this sense a “decolonisation” and “de-patriarchalisation” campaign was launched according to which most of the history of (class, ethnic, gender) oppression could be blamed on colonisation. Thus, the decolonisation campaign would take care of these oppressions and restore the complementarities and symmetries that pervaded in precolonial societies. As we have already mentioned and despite a number of disagreements, indigenous women and urban based feminists joined forces and saved parity rules not only regarding electoral positions but also institutions like ‘the Electoral Tribunal, the Judicial Branch, the Constitutional Court and even the selection of leaders in

autonomous indigenous territories’ (Htun & Ossa 2013: 12). However, indigenous women and urban feminists still disagreed in a number of issues such as free choice regarding abortion, or sexual and reproductive rights. These divisions among women’s movements have always existed and have to do with class/ethnic/religious factors (Choque Aldana et al. 2013; Htun & Ossa 2013; Mokrani & Uriona 2009; PNUD 2012; Uriona 2009; Widmark 2007).

Moreover, the concepts of complementarity between the sexes (Chacha-Warmi in Aymara, Quari-Warmi in Quechua) implying sexual dualism in all spheres of society (and in nature) was a subject of debate. According to Burman (2011), for most Aymaras and even female Aymara leaders fighting for women’s rights, the Chacha-Warmi principle of complementarity was alive before colonialism and still has an inherent potential for gender equality once decolonisation has taken place. For non-indigenous, middle-class feminists and even for indigenous communitarian and anarchic feminists (like Julieta Paredes and the group *Mujeres Creando*) the Chacha-Warmi concept should be demystified since patriarchy and *machismo* existed even during pre-colonial times and is still strong in most indigenous communities (Burman 2011: 80, Htun & Ossa 2013: 12; Mokrani & Uriona 2009).³ In what both the Aymara women defending this concept and those critical of it coincide is in the lack of correspondence between the notion of Chacha-Warmi as a cultural ideal of complementarity and how deeply asymmetric socio-political realities in indigenous communities can be. This lack of correspondence is confirmed by several indigenous women interviewed in various fieldworks (for example ours and ACOBOL 2013a). And this is particularly relevant in the case of indigenous women councillors at the municipal level.

Also, the dialectical relationship between complementarity and asymmetry is illustrated by the Thaky tradition that regulates the system of community authorities and responsibilities, and that affects the rotation principle in the aforementioned rural areas. This is also a consequence of the Chacha-Warmi principle and tradition. According to the latter, positions of authority in the community should only befall people who are “complete” in the sense ‘that no unmarried man or woman may be designated to a position of authority in either the rural community or the urban neighbourhood’ (Burman 2011: 79). The couple should be a model for the community and both man and woman are supposed to assume this responsibility. However, several studies point to the fact that even within the Thaky, women play a secondary role to men who are still the decision-makers (Quispe et al. 2003). As this system of community authority (based on the ideal complementary unity) is very much in use among indigenous communities, in the highlands it has a definite impact in municipal councils’ election systems. This election system is a liberal-based, individual system (representing territorial entities as well as the main socio-economic organisations) but several indigenous communities want to adapt it to “complementarity” rules, that apparently coincide with the parity “spirit” (ACOBOL 2013a: 43; ACOBOL 2013b). Thus, there should be a woman and a man for the same position: one as titular and the other as deputy (ACOBOL

2013a: 43). This is mandatory within the Law of Reform to the Electoral Code (ACOBOL 2013a: 24). However, the tradition-based *acuerdos pactados* (convened agreements) in which for the most part women councillors should leave their elected position to their deputy—a man—at the middle of the term (which is 5 years in total) are not legal but morally mandatory from the indigenous community viewpoint. Although the case may be that the deputy is a woman who benefits from the rule, most of the time those benefiting are men, as the 2013 study by Asociación de Concejalas de Bolivia (ACOBOL—Association of Women Councillors of Bolivia) demonstrates based on extensive fieldwork (ACOBOL 2013a: 36–44). This situation is aggravated by what in Bolivia is called *prebendalismo*, a sort of clientelism due to the increase in financial means flowing into the municipalities because of decentralisation reforms (Autonomy Reforms). This has made municipal councils seem more attractive to communities in order to access those resources (ACOBOL 2013a: 44). The consequence has been a dramatic increase in political violence and all kinds of harassment to force titular women to step down, as we shall see in our empirical results. And even if social reforms have improved the socio-economic and educational situation of many indigenous women, gender-based violence has not decreased. In the 2013 Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) report, Bolivia was ranked as the country with the highest rates of sexual and physical violence in 2008 and second regarding lifetime violence among twelve Latin American and Caribbean countries (PAHO 2013: 6, 9).

A last important issue regarding the context is the several organisations created to help/assist municipal women councillors to confront the challenges we are presenting in the empirical section. These are NGOs financed by development cooperations or solidarity funds such as ACOBOL at the national level and Asociación de Concejalas de La Paz (ACOLAPAZ—Association of Women Councillors of La Paz) or Concejalas de Sucre (COSUCRE—Women Councillors of Sucre) and several others at the departmental level.

Descriptive Representation and the Realities of Sharing Power

The material presented here has been obtained through our own fieldwork and data gathered by ACOBOL, which is a very extensive collection of interviews carried out through many years and a particular in-depth fieldwork covering 24 municipalities in six of the nine departments of Bolivia (ACOBOL 2013a: 36). Our own fieldwork consists of life stories, semi-structured interviews and observations of meetings, work groups and of the women's own context working environment during November 2012, August 2013, and February and March 2014. We chose to interview women and not men as the goal of the study was to learn from their experiences and perceptions and the time to carry out these fieldworks was limited. We are aware that interviewing men would have changed this vision but we think that given the fact that cumulative information gives strong signals as to the problems faced by these women it was urgent to start with them.

Most of the women interviewed were municipal councillors, although we also interviewed mayors and advisers from supporting organisations. The first of these fieldworks was more exploratory, it accomplished about 25 interviews with both women councillors and some women mayors, both indigenous and non-indigenous, from urban and rural environments and different social classes throughout Bolivia. The second fieldwork was carried out during 2013–2014, as part of a master's thesis, focused on women councillors from municipalities in the La Paz region and active members of ACOLAPAZ, most of them belonging to the Aymara communities. The third fieldwork, also in 2014, was based on interviews and observations with women councillors and mayors of two of the highland municipalities surrounding La Paz. Most of the interviewed women come from social movements or organisations, rather than political parties and they are first-time politicians, although some have previous political experience.

In other words, the sample we present here includes both rural and urban experiences from different regions of Bolivia, although most of our interviews come from the rural highlands. Being a qualitative study, it does not claim statistical representation but this sample certainly reflects widely shared experiences that should be taken seriously. Lastly, the interviewed informants from the support organisations—ACOLAPAZ, COSUCRE, ACOBOL—are the only ones identified by name in the quotations. These representatives have given their consent to such an identification and we thought it important to identify them given their position and authority. The rest of the interviewees are only identified as “councillor” or “mayor” with the name of their municipality. All of them had given their consent to be identified by name but given the sensitivity of their contributions we prefer to omit them, we only identify their village or province.

The presentation of the empirical material departs from the background of these locally elected women to their experiences as local councillors, the challenges they refer to and finally the strategies they use to confront such challenges.

1. Who are these women councillors? What is their political background?

A lot of the literature regarding women's representation in Latin America has dealt with party mechanisms behind the choice of women as candidates (see: Krook 2013; Htun & Ossa 2013; Barnes 2016). However, in Bolivia, as well as in many other Latin American countries, many of these newly elected women do not belong to traditional parties but to different kinds of organisations (ACOBOL 2013a: 44). They may be peasant, worker, or women organisations, many of them belonging to traditional mass mobilisation organisations (like territorially or community-based). Our interviews suggest the same background although non-indigenous urban women tend to have a party affiliation, often non-traditional parties and their previous political experience is also within social organisations linked to the solution of concrete problems like education. Regarding rural or semi-rural indigenous

environments, the main point to notice in the choice of the candidates is the importance of the community, not of the party. They are chosen by consensus by the whole of the community, according to certain criteria like marriage as much as leadership experience, and consequently they are regarded as accountable to the community, not to the party that gives them an affiliation to contend. This is the case of one of our informants in the highlands near La Paz:

I was chosen by the community because of my engagement in school and sport activities of my neighbourhood. I did not belong to big organisations like 'Las Bartolinas' but people knew me because of my engagement and even my economic activities. The people voted for me. MAS was to endorse my candidacy but finally they said no so it was the *Sin Miedo* party (Fearless party) who endorsed it. (councillor Achacachi, 2014)

This is extremely important when the problem of rotation or replacement of elected councillors by their deputies arise. Indigenous women in rural or semi-rural environments feel very coerced to give in to the pressures to leave their place to their deputies as they feel the force of the whole community behind this demand, as we shall see later on. This is part of the *usos y costumbres* (traditional rules) indigenous communities abide by.

2. Challenges facing elected women at the municipal level

Socio-economic and socio-cultural preconditions leading to harassment and political violence

As already signalled, most of the women being elected as councillors for the first time in the highlands around La Paz—and even in other highland contexts like the Potosí area—have an indigenous background, low income, basic or upper basic educational level, no political nor public administration experience, and scarce juridical knowledge. According to ACOBOL, this is the reason why most new indigenous councillors face insecurity.

I've tried to educate myself and now I'm no longer afraid where to come in, what to do, what to say. However, several months ago I had a lot of problems, I felt very lonely. My husband had to get me a personal consultant... at the beginning I had no idea of the laws, they insulted us telling us we were ignorant and I had to bear out until I started going to a course and I got this personal consultant.... (councillor Achacachi, 2014)

People criticise us, they say: they are very ignorant those women councillors, they only warm their seats. Sometimes I cried. Among men they stand out and they understand each other drinking beer. When you cannot read and write well it's very difficult. (ACOBOL 2013a: 40)

As these quotes show, rural women with indigenous background and low educational level are made to feel

particularly vulnerable. But is this the case with men in the same conditions? Apparently not. According to the material gathered by the 2013 ACOBOL study, male councillors lacking education do not face the same criticism and harassment (ACOBOL 2013a: 41). The explanation ACOBOL's study got from all their interviews was that men are trained since they are children to have a public role, they are encouraged to do it, even if their educational background is poor. Women are neither trained nor encouraged. Moreover, their lack of experience, as to the tasks they are supposed to perform, forces them to look for solutions that may be individual (personal advisers) or collective (through the support of the above mentioned organisations). However, the lack of educational background and political experience only partly explains the harassment these elected indigenous women suffer.

Harassment transforming into political violence

Several studies and reports point to a structural phenomenon of violence in Bolivia. This is particularly visible among elected women like the case of municipal councillors. There is a debate between Krook and Restrepo (2016) and Piscopo (2016) as to the need to create new theorisations on violence against women in politics or if this is a subcategory of violence in politics. Regarding the case of Bolivia we tend to coincide with Krook and Restrepo in 'that violence against women in politics is distinct from violence in politics, seeking to prevent women's participation as women' (2016: 459). According to the same ACOBOL study (2013a: 38) there is a well-known "route" in such kinds of violence: "invisibilisation," pressures of all sorts to make female councillors resign, not letting them speak in council meetings, restrictions on the information they need in order to perform their tasks, imposing tasks on them that they are not supposed to perform, unjustified punishments (affecting their salaries), obstacles to their labour rights, slandering, questioning of their ethics and of the "decency" in their private life (or of their failure to perform their home and family duties). As already argued, this kind of violence affects not only the individual but tries to convey 'to women and to society that *women as a group* should not take part' (Krook & Restrepo 2016: 463). As ACOBOL's own testimonies witness: 'Harassment and violence may take subtle forms that devalue us with *sexist*, contemptuous jokes and we often don't realise that we are being humiliated' (ACOBOL 2013a: 38).

Our own interviews give examples of typical "master suppression techniques" such as "invisibilisation," and indifference towards these women councillors.

My own experience, since I was starting as a candidate is that men don't want you there, they always look for excuses, in my case they said I had a criminal background, which was not true, but they were saying that. And as women we make proposals at the municipal government but those proposals are not taken into account, our work is to no avail. The proposals are just lying there and only men's proposals are taken seriously. (councillor San Andrés de Machaca 2012)

The political work may also take place in places where women have no access:

...they [men] go to a bar, they drink together and decide things... but a woman hardly goes to those places, she is more direct and honest, says and does things openly.... (Councillor Lupalaya 2012)

As we have mentioned, the harassment has many faces and takes different forms:

We had a lot of cases of political harassment and a lot of discrimination... they [women councillors] were not allowed to go to capacitation courses, the calls for these workshops didn't reach them... in some cases the harassment is so extreme that male councillors prevent their female colleagues from getting any means of transportation to visit the projects or places they must inspect as part of their functions or just fail to give them the necessary information for them to get to those places.... (Mabel Morales, ACOSUCRE 2012)

Also, in contrast to men, women councillors face critiques as to their lack of fulfilment of their traditional gender roles.

There was one municipality where the council demanded the resignation of a woman councillor and pressed her own husband to persuade her... she finally divorced but the council denounced her moral behaviour accusing her of having a lover something which [according to them] contributed to the divorce. She denounced this at ACOBOL who followed this investigation... they [the councillors who opposed her] didn't succeed in making her resign. (Mabel Morales, ACOSUCRE 2012)

Even non-indigenous women with better pre-conditions and university education may suffer harassment:

In Bolivia, there's a high rate of political, sexual and domestic violence against women that is hidden behind political and legal decisions... Yes, I've suffered political violence before it was considered a crime... I was also attacked physically during the political campaign in front of my house, I had a double fracture in the nose. That case was never cleared up and the investigation was closed. (councillor Sucre, 2012)

From these examples we can see that an intersectional analysis that takes into account several variables like sex, class, education, political experience still points to sex or gender as the main explanatory cause for harassment. And the fear for harassment, among other obstacles, may be one of the reasons discouraging women to engage in politics or already elected women to try to accomplish changes.

The other side of parity: the rotation problem

We have already seen how this issue is one of the main pretexts for harassment and political violence against women in rural areas. In the 2013 ACOBOL study the interviewed women councillors explain that the rotation principle is part of the communities' belief in the role of political representation as an obligation for all members of the community (ACOBOL 2013a: 44). That means that in the parity lists, if the elected councillor is a woman, the deputy is a man and she has to leave her place to him after the mid-term (the mandate is 5 years). This and the *prebendalismo* practice—according to which the communities sending representatives to the municipal council expect a maximum of resources for their different projects—make rural women councillors especially vulnerable to pressures. Their loyalty is assumed to be always to their community (whatever their political party, program or support group) who may punish them even physically, if the community decided they are not fulfilling their duties (ACOBOL 2013a: 36–44).

As we have already said, the rotation principle may be applied to both women and men but most of the cases regarding political violence refer to women being pressured (ACOBOL 2013a: 44; ACOBOL 2010, 2013b, 2014).

The obligation to rotate [to leave your seat to your deputy] is mostly applied to women, do men suffer these aggressions of being forced to resign, are they physically abused or insulted? (ACOBOL 2013a: 46)

Male deputies are angry, they resent being elected only as deputies, they have interests and have political support which we [women] lack. (ACOBOL 2013a: 46)

He made me sign a document saying that I would resign after two and half years... I didn't know this was not legal. Now he's demanding my resignation. (ACOBOL 2013a: 46)

The effects of the rotation system are particularly harmful for rural women as they may be in the process of getting trained—for example by support organisations such as ACOBOL—and given the tools to exercise their functions when they suddenly must pass their mandate to their deputies. When rural women councillors resist and refuse to step down or denounce this to the courts, they often suffer harassment by the rest of the council and by their own communities.

Another aspect that makes this issue more complex is the question of salaries. In the 2013 ACOBOL study we found that demands against female municipal councillors to resign decreased in municipalities where councillors salaries were quite low (ACOBOL 2013a: 50). Many men said that such low salaries were right for women but not for men, according to some interviewed women: 'For women there's not so much opportunity as for men, that's why they tell us that this kind of job is good for women' (ACOBOL 2013a: 50). So the problem of harassment against women councillors decreases with low salaries as men's privileges are less threatened.

Ideological and socio-cultural structures: *Machismo* as an everyday practice

I think it is possible that in the middle term Bolivia can have a woman as president as in Brazil or Argentina. Bolivia must work on this not only as a symbol but because we already have centuries of male political decision-makers to define our destinies and it is time to have a woman elected in open democratic elections because we have never had that experience... For example, in the majority of the municipalities most of the mayors are men, very few women, and I see how they treat women mayors, how they underestimate them and their capacity. So I say one day women are going to take more political power. (councillor Lupalaya 2012)

According to the conclusions of a study regarding the municipalities and the reforms of the latest years there is tension between progressive rules regarding women's rights and state and social structures that are still patriarchal and thus limit the application of these rules (ACOBOL 2013a: 27). These structures shape a reaction of resistance and aggression against what they see as threats. According to some researchers the number of elected women 'may pose a threat to the dominant group's favoured status and provoke a backlash from male legislators' (Krook 2015 in Barnes 2016: 32; Franceschet & Picopo 2014: 106). Ideological and structural hindrance to gender equality as a phenomenon is still very much alive among all social classes in Bolivia and behind the political violence and other obstacles most elected women confront. It is part of a hegemonic cultural practice, questioned by new norms regarding gender equality but still extremely rooted in the gendered realities of everyday life.

To confront this *machismo* many of our interviewees assume "essentialist" arguments. That is to say they attribute women certain "natural virtues" and capabilities (like honesty) that threaten men's dishonesty.

Men see us as a threat, we could say, as we know that women will always walk straight, that they are more transparent, instead men are always recurring to tricks... men see that [honesty] as a threat... *machismo* makes them reject women as authority, as I've seen it.... (councillor Lupalaya 2012)

However, this "essentialism" may be counterproductive, raising expectations of "exemplary behaviour" among women that may lead to disappointments.

The challenge of uniting women

One of the problems several of these women point out is the lack of solidarity among them. This is not so unusual. Gender strategic interests (the awareness of having a common denominator of discrimination, that is to say gender-belonging) seem to be absent and in many cases political loyalties or other discourses are framed to block solidarity among women councillors. According to ACOBOL's material there is a high political polarisation at the level of municipalities. This provokes party-based political conflicts

that lead to a stronger social control especially of vulnerable elected representatives, like women (ACOBOL 2013a: 43).

Among men, problems are easily solved but among women there's mutual discrimination and some women want to do their own political career, or some proposals are always postponed or are carried out by men. That is what happens in my municipal government and I don't think it differs much from other municipalities... I like to be councillor but the other councillors (three women and one man) they gossip about me, horrible comments and they didn't want to give me the presidency of the council. (councillor San Andrés de Machaca 2013)

...But we are enemies among women, sometimes I think that I'm better off alone, there's less selfishness and envy. (councillor Gauqui 2013)

As we have seen before, intersectional interests (political loyalties, social class or ethnic divides) split the potential women's alliances and solidarities. But apart from these divides, sharing of information may be another issue. In one of the municipalities we studied in 2014, there was a deep rift among women councillors and apparently this had nothing to do with political or socio-economic differences. According to the newly arrived councillors a senior woman councillor that had managed to stay for the entire period of her mandate did not share with them necessary information and contacts in spite of the fact that she was part of the board of the local support organisation. There may be other reasons for these tensions but they definitely affected any gender solidarity among the councillors.

One of the most dramatic cases regarding the lack of solidarity among women was the one precipitating the murder of councillor Juana Quispe at the municipality of Ancoraimes. According to the investigations, this was a case of political violence where another woman councillor (together with a male councillor) was implicated. This case was a critical push for the approval in 2012 of Law 243 against harassment and political violence affecting women politicians.

3. Strategies to survive and advance

The material of interviews and observations has given us two sorts of strategies women councillors use to overcome the above mentioned problems and to become effective in their work as councillors: individual and collective strategies. At the individual level, support of personal advisers or consultants has been key.

During the first three months I was alone and I had to oversee reports and complaints and at that moment my husband hired a personal adviser for me. We had already at the municipality an adviser and an engineer but I didn't trust their reports because they didn't belong to my party, they were people from the mayor.... (councillor Achacachi, 2013)

The fact that councillors receive a salary of their own allows them to finance such consultancy. This salary is also

a resource even though it is often controlled by the husband or the community. And, as we have seen, the lower the salary the less threatened they may feel for coercion to leave their seat to their deputies.

The collective strategies are mostly associated to the work of organisations such as ACOBOL, ACOLAPAZ or COSUCRE with women councillors and mayors at the steering committees. Political harassment was at the origin of the creation of ACOBOL:

...One of the motivations behind the creation of ACOBOL is precisely because of a case of political harassment, although that was not the term used at that time. The founder of ACOBOL Gloria Aguilar, a municipal councillor, was subjected to slander to force her to resign through false arguments. She went to the press and started a hunger strike. She said that even if she had resources and the support of her family, it was not easy for her to prove her innocence... She then reflected that if she, in spite of these resources, had to go through such an ordeal, how could it be for those with less resources living in rural areas. That's how the idea to create ACOBOL was born, to push for a law that forbids such practices.... (interview with Jessy López, ACOBOL 2012)

ACOBOL started in 1999 as a resource against political harassment. Nowadays it is a national organisation with regional offices sustained by the fees of their members (about 5% of their salaries for the councillors and 6.5% for the mayors) and international cooperation. Their work is basically the provision of tools to help women councillors and mayors to perform their duties through capacity building but also through legal aid. They also carry out political lobbying towards the government and parliament to obtain new laws and policies to help women councillors. For example, in the case of political violence and harassment they lobbied for many years until Law 243 forbidding harassment and political violence against women was finally approved in May 2012. Afterwards, ACOBOL continued its campaign to raise awareness and find ways to regulate and implement the new law; something they finally attained in September 2015 (interview with Jessy López, ACOBOL 2015).

Spontaneous collective mobilisations of women still happen but not as organised collective strategies.

I was in the hospital as a result of the physical aggression I had suffered when I learned there was a big demonstration of infuriated women because of this aggression.... (councillor Sucre 2012)

It was such a mobilisation after the murder of Juana Quispe of Ancoraimes (a well-known woman councillor fighting political harassment) that precipitated the approval in 2012 of the Law 243 forbidding harassment and political violence. Alliances and massive reactions may not be easy to organise but when they happen they are extremely powerful strategies to achieve changes.

Ideological, Socio-Cultural, Institutional and Structural Challenges

As we have seen, these women come from an organisational background that has little to do with formal politics. Their motivation and engagement is linked to the desire to solve the social problems they face in their local communities. The communities have to respect the quotas or election of women as a condition to continue to receive funds from the central government. The elected women in many cases are ill prepared for the obstacles they confront: formal institutions and rules they hardly know and informal institutions (as the rotation practice) they are forced to accept. So even if institutions and norms can facilitate, they can also obstruct women's substantive representation (Franceschet & Piscopo 2008). This is exemplified in our interviews regarding the different understandings of parity from the indigenous community perspective (leading to the rotation practices) and from the formal legal parity principles. In other words, these women have to fight their own inexperience and the institutionalised patriarchal management culture in local government but also the ideological, socio-cultural, political and socio-economic hindrance (Shvedova 2005). Moreover, they are often perceived as a threat—due to the increasing numbers—by the dominant groups (Barnes 2016: 32). And this threat becomes concrete in the form of political harassment and such violence as Krook and Restrepo (2016) argue, is 'seeking to prevent women's participation as women' (2016: 459).

Obviously these women do not form a homogenous group. Applying intersectionality as an instrument (Crenshaw 1993, Weldon 2008) we can see how the different categories of oppression increase the vulnerability of women councillors being indigenous and poor women with low levels of education as the ones who suffer most harassment and obstacles. However, even among non-indigenous groups in urban and more favoured social groups we find cases of political violence. Thus, gender prevails regarding the explanation of discrimination and harassment beyond all other categories.

Another issue that is particularly visible in Bolivia is the influence of two types of discourses that complement but also contradict each other: the official indigenous discourse of complementarity according to the Andean traditions—the Chacha-Warmi principle previously mentioned—and the liberal discourses of gender equality appropriated by most women's movements. A broad women coalition (including indigenous women's organisations) permitted, as we have seen, the integration of such principles in the latest constitution. The tension between these conceptions has become an ideological challenge for indigenous women. *Machismo* as a structural phenomenon has also been an issue shared by both indigenous and mestizo women's organisations.

Most observers of gender relations in Latin America would agree that *machismo* as an attitude is part of cultural patterns and an ideology deeply ingrained in the social and political structures of all countries of Latin America (Nash 1988: 15; Nazzari 1996). In Bolivia, this *machismo* attitude and behaviour can be associated, even

legitimised by traditional practices already mentioned above among indigenous groups while among other non-indigenous groups it may be linked to more Spanish colonial traditions of masculine superiority. Whichever its origins, it would be safe to say that as hegemonic mentalities and practices, it is still very much alive among all social classes in Bolivia and behind the political violence and other obstacles most elected women confront. Thus, in spite of the reformist ambition of a government to the left reclaiming indigenous traditions, social justice, and human and women's rights, the obstacles these women as local representatives face are still considerable.

Conclusions

Bolivia is an extremely relevant case study that demonstrates that an increase in descriptive representation does not automatically lead to equal access to power and decision-making. Even if the country has experienced several positive changes in the last decades—not the least on parity rules and indigenous rights with a national government sympathetic to gender equality in official discourses—as we have shown, there are still serious problems regarding obstacles democratically elected women confront at the municipal level in order to exercise their functions.

Our findings suggest persistent structural challenges that vary along intersectional variables but that emphasise gender as the explanatory factor. And these obstacles have to do with ideological, socio-cultural, political and especially structural causes. Among the socio-cultural obstacles we have the notion of *machismo*; this male aggressiveness which is visible at all levels of society and in the case we present has resulted in political violence against women. We thus agree with Krook and Restrepo (2016) in 'that violence against women in politics is distinct from violence in politics, seeking to prevent women's participation as women' (2016: 459). This is very much the case of women councillors in Bolivia. The official *de-patriarchalisation* discourse has not been able to change attitudes because the roots of such masculine behaviour are deeply ingrained in both rural and urban environments and even in traditional practices and beliefs (ideological-cultural factors) that in the name of complementarity may encourage parity in numbers but asymmetries in practice as the testimonies of these women prove. The "rotation" practice in rural areas, and the unfair pressure on rural women councillors, is one of many causes leading to harassment of all sorts. Socio-economic obstacles affect most indigenous, poor and uneducated women but these hindrance should be understood within the general socio-cultural context of *machismo* and in the deeply rooted asymmetrical practices. And such context goes beyond class, culture, rural or urban environments to have gender as an essential explanatory variable. Here we see again that institutions and rules may encourage while limiting women's access to real gender equality in the sense of lack of respect for elected women unlike the case of elected men. Our empirical material also shows that an increase in numbers may provoke an increase in aggressions turning to political violence against elected women and that sharing experiences of discrimination make women more

aware of structural barriers as authors like Barnes have argued.

However, sharing experiences of discrimination is not enough to create common positions and solidarities because political loyalties and cultural practices hinder such common fronts. The strategies of resistance may be individual or collective but they share the agency to access resources that will strengthen their position and allow the exercise their functions and protection from harassment and political violence in all its forms. Their access to support organisations give them access to social capital, to the possibility of receiving training in democratic practices (such as election and overseeing of steering committees) that may inspire them to demand the same democratic procedures at the municipalities where they exercise. The support and help they get from these organisations may make a difference as to the experience these women get from their practice as councillors or mayors. A positive experience may encourage a continuation of a political career, a negative one may cut it short. A more formal engagement with the individual empowerment of these women by public policies that train, educate and support them during the entirety of their elected time (but also before and afterwards) would make such political careers more sustainable in the long run.

Much more is to be learned about the women who engage in public, elected service in order to improve the realities they confront. The more we learn about these experiences the better the possibilities to improve these policies so parity in numbers translates into equality in reality. Both society and democracy may be the winners.

Notes

¹ Quotations from interviews and articles originally in Spanish have been translated by the authors.

² See Goetz 2009; Hinojosa 2012; Franceschet & Piscopo 2008, 2014. It is still debated if a growing number of women in elected organs at the national or local level has led to addressing gender specific issues more or better. For example in one of the most studied cases regarding the consequences of quotas, the Argentinian one, Franceschet & Piscopo (2008) argue that although 'substantive representation' as a process (legislative initiatives and legislative agenda in general) does change, 'substantive representation' as an 'outcome (passing more 'women rights laws') is not equally successful. Moreover, quotas may result in 'mandates' not easy to fulfil as there's also a reinforcement of negative stereotypes about women's capacities as politicians (Franceschet & Piscopo 2008: 393). According to these authors, 'institutions and norms can facilitate but also obstruct women's substantive representation' (Franceschet & Piscopo 2008: 394). There is also research on women parliamentarians' potential for collaboration within or across party affiliations in order to increase their influence as a group (Barnes 2016). Other studies have found little or no correlation between high representation of women and qualitative changes (Goetz 2009).

³ *Mujeres Creando* gathers indigenous communitarian and anarchic feminists. It started as a pioneer movement in 1992 as a proposal of non-racist feminism that questioned middle class/elite feminism and criticised the left. They try to recover the Bolivian anarchist traditions of the beginning of the 20th century. Up to today this group remains quite isolated within the broader Bolivian women's movements although their intellectual influence goes beyond their limited political presence. Julieta Paredes left this group in 2004 (interviews and personal observations).

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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