



Women's Political Participation in Bolivia: Progress and Obstacles

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Overview of Bolivia's Democratic Process

Representative democracy in Bolivia is confronting a not-very-participatory political culture¹ that still views the state as the benefactor state, and which associates democracy with solving social and economic problems more than with expanding citizen participation and placing limits on the arbitrary actions of rulers. It is a representative democracy in form but not in substance. It operates like a pacted democracy: given the dispersion of the vote no one can garner an absolute majority to elect the government.

The main problem with the Bolivian process is that it has not been accompanied by policies aimed at ideological transformation to promote a democratic and participatory culture to attain the exercise of full citizenship. Even though 'institutionalizing norms and values' is a slow process that stands in the way of substantial change in the practices of the political community, the institutionalization and transformation of the 'rules of the game' has been swift. Indeed, part of the progress made—and the very consolidation of democracy—has a great deal to do with the capacity of political parties to reach agreement to reform the regime, despite the fact that they have reproduced a series of 'traditional' and harmful practices that are gradually deepening the political crisis, including prebendalism, clientelism, *padrinazgo*, patrimonialism, *caudillismo*, and the exclusion of majority sectors from the public debate. That is the case of women, who constitute 50.2 percent of the national population, as illustrated in the following table.²

Table 1: Population According to the Census by Area and Sex, 1950–2001

DESCRIPTION	1950	1976	1992	2001
BOLIVIA	2,704,165	4,613,486	6,420,792	8,274,325
Men	1,326,099	2,276,029	3,171,265	4,123,850
Women	1,378,066	2,337,457	3,249,527	4,150,475
Urban area	708,568	1,925,840	3,694,846	5,165,882
Men		934,998	1,793,445	2,517,434
Women		990,842	1,901,401	2,648,448
Rural area	1,995,597	2,687,646	2,725,946	3,108,443
Men		1,341,031	1,377,820	1,606,416
Women		1,346,615	1,348,126	1,502,027

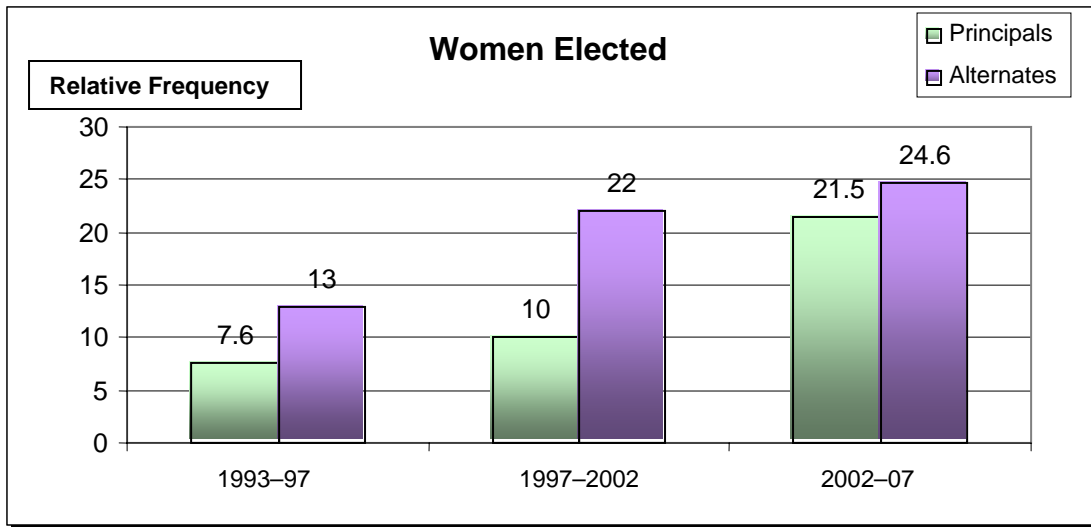
Despite all of the limitations, Bolivia's pacted democracy has facilitated the stability of the regime, but also the implementation of several major political reforms, which have made it possible to create institutions that promote greater representation and citizen participation in the structuring of power. The constitutional reform of 1995, which modernised the state, includes a new way of electing the Chamber of Deputies: a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) electoral system. The lower house is now made up of 68 single-member constituencies, elected by direct vote (a simple majority), and nine multi-member constituencies with representatives elected by party list. Political citizenship has been expanded to include all Bolivian males and females who are 18 years or older, and quotas have been introduced, requiring that at least 30 percent of candidates on the party lists be women.

Women's Political Participation

The political participation of women in Bolivia began in 1947 and 1949, when a few female members of the ruling oligarchy gained the right to vote in municipal elections. With the National Revolution of 1952, and universal suffrage in 1956, Bolivian women began to exercise political citizenship. But it is only recently (in 1997), with the introduction of quotas—a product of the struggle waged by the Coordinadora de la Mujer, Plataforma de la Mujer, Unión de Mujeres Parlamentarias de Bolivia, the Office of the Undersecretary for Gender Affairs, and those women from political parties grouped together in the Foro Político de Mujeres—that the Electoral Code has required that parties have at least 30 percent of women on their national lists of candidates, distributed such that at least one of every three candidates is a woman.

While the results do not translate automatically into parliamentary seats—for in a list of Senate candidates made up of two principals and two alternates, it is clearly impossible to apply—the impact of the law, as expressed in the 1997 national election results, was encouraging, even though it led to disruption and resistance within the political parties that abided by the measure more out of obligation than conviction. Making women candidates for alternate deputy positions was the easiest way to comply with the law, and it did not have much effect on the interests of the male candidates. The results of the national elections of 1993, 1997 and 2002 - when quotas were introduced - reflect the following changes.

Table 2: Women Elected in 1993, 1997 and 2003



The number of women elected as principal representatives has increased by more than 100 percent, while alternates have seen their numbers rise by over two percent. It is important to note, though, that only three cases currently constitute the sample—the national elections of 1997 and 2002, and the municipal elections of 1999. In just five years we are already close to the minimum threshold, such that, if the trend continues, within another five years the number of women participating can be expected to surpass 30 percent. With respect to the candidacies, there have also been some significant changes.

Table 3: Women Candidacies for the Senate, 1993–2003

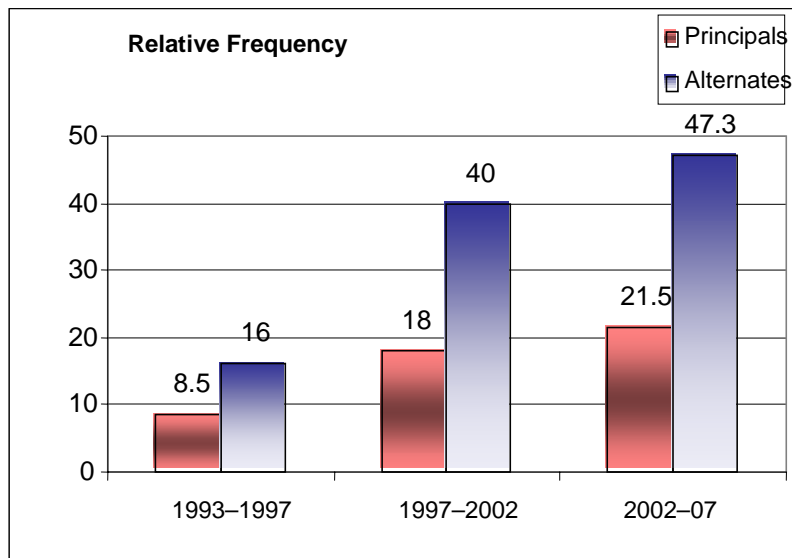
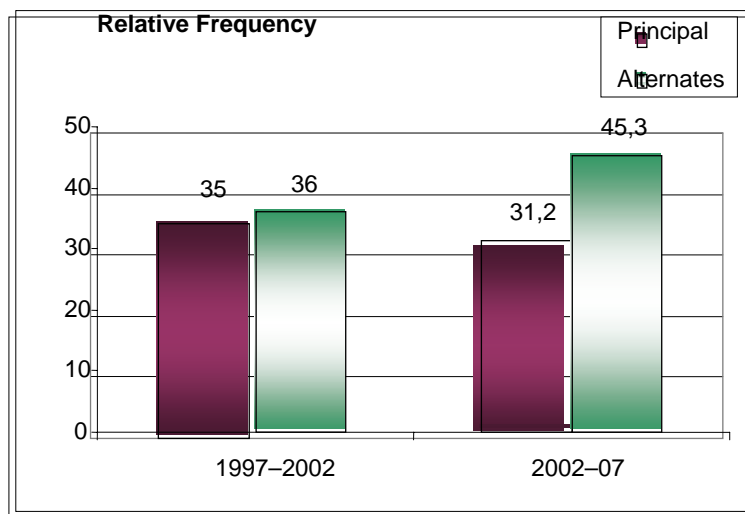


Table 4: Proportional Representation Women Candidates



Furthermore, given the characteristics of Bolivia's mixed system, the greater presence of women is concentrated in the Chamber of Deputies in the uninominal representations, as illustrated in the following graphs.³

Table 5: Women Senators, 1997-2003

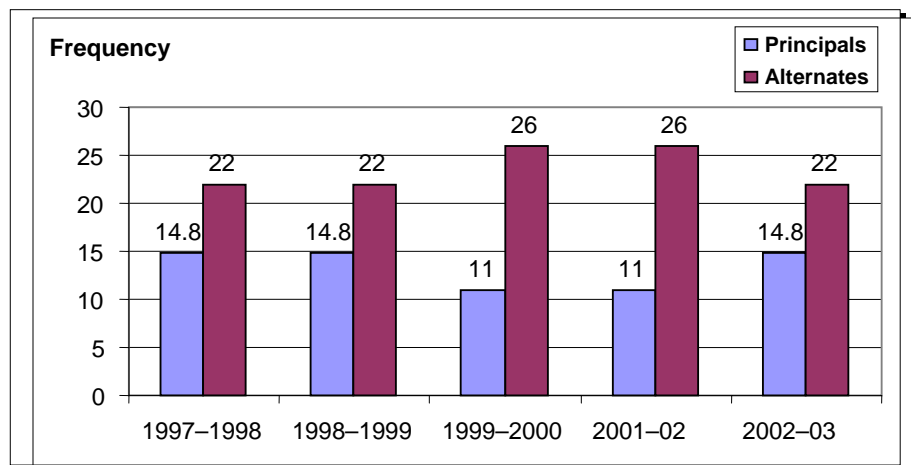


Table 6: Women Principal Candidates, 1993–2003

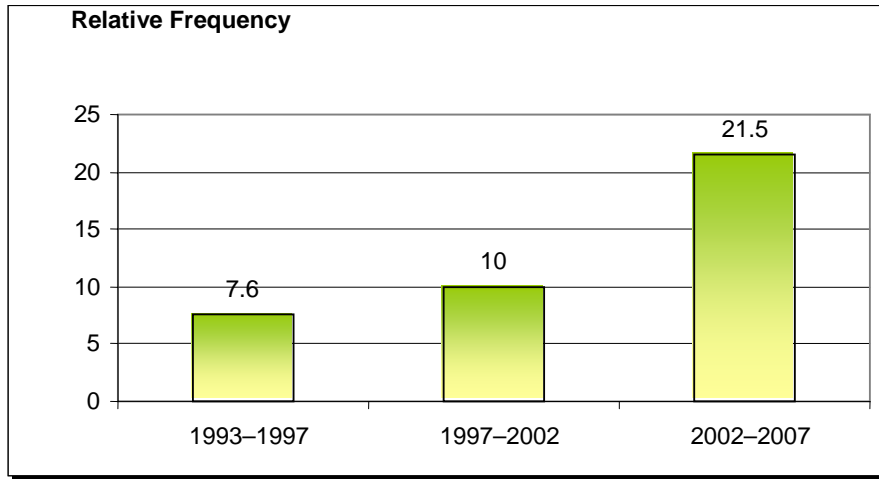
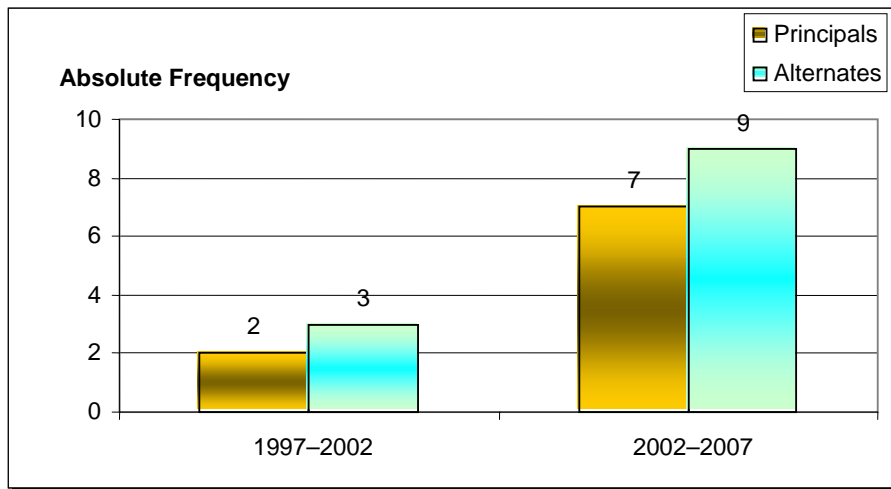


Table 7: Women Uninominal Deputies



Women in Power

Yet beyond the substantive gains, we must ask ourselves not only how many women have entered Congress, but also what their situation is once they get there. The research project by Lourdes Zavala⁴ on women's political participation in the National Congress after the implementation of the Quota Law shows that the main drawbacks for women are associated with the election of uninominal deputies. The main reason the majority principle has a negative impact has to do with the social and cultural characteristics of the Bolivian political community:

‘The dual or mixed electoral system (proportional and simple majority) operates perversely in terms of the quotas. First, it does so by reducing the parties' margin of security with respect to the first and second positions. In this very complex scenario, the possibilities offered by the quota are curtailed, if we consider that women are, almost mathematically, situated in

every third place on the ballots, almost invariably vying to get elected as alternates'.⁵

According to that report, another difficulty women face is the economic cost of political campaigns and family opposition to them standing as candidates. Even so, without this positive action measure, it would have been difficult to increase the number of women legislators.

A gain whose impact was even greater came in 1999 when the municipal governments, under the new Electoral Code, introduced the principle of 30 percent women plus alternation on the lists for the election of municipal council members: 'the first male/female council member shall have a female/male alternate. The second and third principal council members will be assigned alternately, i.e. M-F, F-M'.⁶ The results were 46.6 percent candidacies for alternate members, 29.4 percent for principal council member, 21 women mayors elected (in 1995 there were just 12), and 32 percent women council members elected (in 1995 women accounted for just 8.3 percent). Hence, the first time the new law was applied to municipal elections, the minimum quota was surpassed.

Yet one should note the other problems that arose in the municipal elections: post-election harassment, and physical and psychological violence⁷ to provoke the resignation of the women council members elected, generally for non-partisan cultural reasons.

The experience of 1997 to 2002 is but the beginning of a process that cannot demonstrate significant results in just five years. Despite the limitations detected, however, one can conclude that the Quota Law shows positive results, increasing the possibility of electing women to the legislative chambers and to the municipal councils. In the 1993 elections, nominations amounted to just ten percent, as compared to 24 percent in the 1997 elections, until reaching almost 50 percent in 2002, after implementation of the quota. Quotas are also a preventive mechanism to stop the number of women legislators from dropping.

Another fundamental factor to analyze concerns the legislative performance of the women elected: the legislative work seems invisible, and there appears to be a lack of participation in the decision-making and directing positions of the legislative branch. Accordingly the ranking positions in the legislature remain in the hands of male legislators. Zavala's work shows that women legislators have had a hard time doing their job in the legislative chambers: they often lack skills, do not have sufficient advice, and lack knowledge and information on the use of legislative instruments and congressional rules and procedures, which is also very common among men. Their capacity for legislative output is therefore hindered, but still significant considering their numbers. In Bolivia, women legislators do not adopt as their main collective objective the introduction of gender issues on the legislative agenda, which, while representing a qualitative leap forward with respect to the democratic consolidation, neglects a historic opportunity to introduce affirmative action measures in other instances. The following tables⁸ summarize the bills introduced in both chambers by women in the previous legislature.

Table 8: Chamber of Deputies: Bills Introduced by Women Members of Congress, 1997–2002

1997-2002 Term	National Legislative Reforms	Regional Issues	Social Issues	Gender-specific Issues	Total Bills
1997-1998	2	4	2	4	12
1998-1999	3	8	1	1	11
1999-2000	3	7	1	2	13
2000-2001	5	11	4	1	21
2001-2002	6	4	2	-	12
Total Bills	19 (26%)	34 (48%)	10 (14%)	8 (11%)	71

Source: Zabala, based on data from the Chamber of Deputies.

Table 9: Bills Introduced by Women in the Senate

1997-2002 Term	National Legislative Reforms	Regional Issues	Social Issues	Gender-specific Issues	Total Bills
1997-1998	1	2	-	-	3
1998-1999	2	2	-	-	4
1999-2000	1	1	-	-	2
2000-2001	3	2	2	-	7
Total Bills	7 (44%)	7 (44%)	2 (12%)	-	16

Source: Zabala, based on data from the Senate

Other problems were also flagged in the research project: the lack of commitment and coordination among female members of Congress when it comes to addressing the specific interests and demands of women, conflictive relationships among them, and the lack of a strategic vision in regard to forming alliances and pacts and entering into agreements that would enable them to act as a collective subject with the capacity to apply pressure.

Women’s Participation and the Political Party System

Under Bolivia’s democracy, the political parties have a monopoly on representation, and citizens can only exercise the right to hold public office and run for election through them. This is an impediment to the political participation of women, who confront a number of limitations and obstacles.⁹ The internal characteristics of the parties—with slight variations among them—can be summarized as follows: (1) personalised, that is, the organization is highly concentrated around the party leader; (2) internal divisions; (3) weak processes of institutionalization; (4) lack of ideological factors to encourage internal cohesion; and (5) persistence of authoritarian and ‘traditional’ relationships, such as *padrinazgo*, prebendalism, and clientelism. All of these factors have led to a

deepening of the crisis in terms of the legitimacy of, and representation within, the political system.

Analysis of the mechanisms to promote women’s political participation in the by-laws of the political parties shows that there are basically two instruments to achieve this objective: the quotas established by law; and the secretariats for women’s affairs—in which issues essential to the party are not discussed, and which do not enjoy the support of the party leaders. According to the study by Karin Monasterios and Luis Tapia Mealla, these secretariats may be a form of positive differentiation, but also an organizational means of exclusion, depending on the political party in question. Taking the 14 political parties with the largest presence in the party system, the analysis shows that only in two of them (the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) and the Movimiento Sin Miedo (MSM)) are there quotas both within the party and for public office.¹⁰

Table 10: Political Party and Public Office Quotas

	Declaration against Discrimination	Secretariat of Women’s Affairs	Quotas Public Posts	Quotas within Party
AND		Yes		
NFR	Yes	Yes		
FRI				
KND				
MBL	Yes	Yes		
MIP		Yes		
MIR		Yes		
MNR	Yes	Yes		30%
MRTKL		Yes		
MSM	Yes	Yes	50%	50%
NFR	Yes			
PCB				
PS 1	Yes			
UCS	Yes	Yes		
VR 9				

The party system is clearly a reflection of the society from which it has come; in it the politicians reproduce the styles and conduct of society. One underlying problem of Bolivian democracy is that the process of ideological transformation is not keeping up with fast-paced institutional changes; as a result, the rules of the game are observed partially or sometimes not at all. A new tension has arisen between an ideological process of democratization in some sectors, and a defence of questionable traditional practices in others—norms and conduct that are not very democratic or transparent, not only within the political system, but also in society. The main obstacle to women’s participation is not the parties, but the failure of the political culture to transform. The parties assimilate quotas out of obligation, not out of democratic conviction; they assume that the adoption of quotas has introduced distortions in the political market and that it impoverishes representation, reducing the participation of ‘the best and most capable men’. Nonetheless, those parties that have already

experienced some degree of internal democratization are characterised by considerable female participation compared to those parties that have not democratized. The MNR was the only party in the 2002 campaign that had quotas within the party.

Political Culture as an Obstacle to Participation

The historical circumstances surrounding the construction of liberal democracy in Bolivia leave little space for plurality. The foundations of liberal individualism have denied other identities and the traditional practices of some social and cultural actors; furthermore, the indigenous cultures are not based on gender equity and equality. One example is Aymara democracy—the Aymara being one of the most populous indigenous peoples in Bolivia—in which only males can participate in public debate: the Communal Assembly—*parlakipani*—as the highest authority and centre of community life, bars female participation. Being elected the main authority (*jilakata* or *kuraka*) is a privilege that is enjoyed only by men who are married, own land, and are heads of family. The criteria for selecting the leaders of peasant unions are similar: one must be male, the head of a family, married, own land, and have completed military service. In both cases, the criteria exclude women, youths, single persons, and those who do not own land.

When it comes to finding a characteristic common to all practices and sectors, from actors in the political system to members of civil society, cutting across all of these are the restrictions on women's participation in public decision-making processes, which are based on the view that men are better suited and more effective in politics. In addition, women hold a central place in rural areas.

The political practices of the *mestizo* western culture and of the indigenous cultures make women second-class citizens. Beyond the characteristics particular to each model, we note that, in the mixture, Bolivian political culture leads to discrimination against the participation of women in politics, and, when they are accepted, they are viewed as tools for satisfying the interests of the party or of specific leaders. The problem is that many women play into that role. The research done by Monasterios and Tapia in the city of El Alto shows that:

‘When it comes to applying the 30 per cent, one turns to one's sisters, female cousins, sisters-in-law, or simply those servile women of the party who will not object to the decisions of the influential men in the municipal government. It does not matter than they have no preparation, what matters is ensuring their loyalty, and in a sense their lack of understanding of politics, so as to perpetuate the non-interference of women in men's affairs’.¹¹

One can conclude that, in shaping the direction of democracy in Bolivian political culture, there are positive factors: pluralism, the right to dissent, freedom of opinion, expression, preference and association, and the effort to reach consensus and to establish mechanisms of accountability. Yet there are also negative factors: unequal distribution of opportunities to formulate preferences, discriminatory meritocratic criteria, corruption, intolerance, imposition of majorities over the minority, and discrimination, particularly against women. One additional problem is the profound fragmentation of the social movements and pressure groups within civil society. There is no one sector that enunciates the interests and demands of other sectors in an articulated and coherent way—that is, no sector is hegemonic. Accordingly, indigenous, ethnic, environmental, homosexual, human rights, urban, peasant, workers, and neighbourhood movements, among others, do not share common goals or ideologies. Consequently, the plural societies cannot yet overcome exclusion.

The mere implementation of the Quota Law is not enough to ensure substantive gains in women's political participation. It is necessary to take steps towards the ideological transformation of the political system, the party system, and, particularly, civil society, so that women themselves change their conduct and their expectations. Nevertheless, quotas in Bolivia are quickly achieving success, and women have significantly improved their position in the process of public debate: 32 percent female participation in municipal government positions in just five years.

Endnotes

¹ The concept of political culture is understood as a set of psychological orientations—emotional, cognitive and evaluative—that refers to political objects as roles or specific structures, to the persons who play such roles, and the principles of government, decisions or the imposition of public decisions. Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba. 1992. “La Cultura Política”. In *Diez textos básicos de Ciencia Política*. Barcelona: Ariel.

² “Censo Nacional de Población y Vivienda 2.002”. Instituto Nacional de Estadística.

³ The graphs were prepared by the author, and are based on official data from the National Electoral Court.

⁴ María Lourdes Zavala, Raquel Romero and Carmen Sanabria. 2002. *La participación política de las mujeres en el parlamento*. Document prepared with the support of the Program for the Support of Congressional Representation (PARC-USAID-RF/SUNY/Bolivia), La Paz.

⁵ Zavala et al. *La participación política de las mujeres en el parlamento*, p. 9.

⁶ Electoral Code, Title VI, Second Chapter, Article 112(2)(a) and (b).

⁷ There are many documented cases of women municipal council members or members of the Local Government Oversight Committees with support from political parties, who the community members beat in the town plaza, even cutting off their braids with hatchets or knives to get them to step down from their positions of representation.

⁸ Zavala et al. *La participación política de las mujeres en el parlamento*. Based on data from the Chamber of Deputies and the Honorable Senate of the National Congress.

⁹ See Karin Monasterios and Luis Tapia Mealla. 2001. *Partidos y Participación Política de las Mujeres en El Alto*. La Paz: Centro de Promoción de la Mujer Gregoria Apaza.

¹⁰ Karin Monasterios and Luis Tapia Mealla. *Partidos y Participación Política de las Mujeres en El Alto*, pp. 52–53.

¹¹ Karin Monasterios and Luis Tapia Mealla. *Partidos y Participación Política de las Mujeres en El Alto*, p. 84.