ParlAmericas

EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY WITH PARLIAMENTS: A GUIDE FOR WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

ParlAmericas is the leading institution for promoting parliamentary diplomacy within the inter-American system. Composed of the national legislatures from across the Americas and the Caribbean, ParlAmericas fosters cooperative political dialogue, facilitates the exchange of effective legislative practices, and develops tailored resources to support parliamentarians in their work. Its International Secretariat is headquartered in Ottawa, Canada.

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INTRODUCTION

Interactions with parliaments can provide highly effective avenues for women's organizations[1] to elevate their influence in decision-making arenas and open doorways to impact positive, long-term policy changes. By nurturing stronger relationships with parliamentary bodies and their members, women's organizations can better position themselves to influence strategic agendas, advocate for legal frameworks that promote gender equality, and ensure that their perspectives are represented in legislative processes.

In 2022 and 2023, ParlAmericas surveyed more than 200 representatives from women's organizations across the Americas and the Caribbean on their relationship with parliament. The findings, available in the What We Heard reports for Latin America (2023) and the Caribbean (2022), demonstrate that women's organizations see value in strengthening their advocacy with national legislative bodies. The reports highlight the most commonly used mechanisms for advocacy and shed light on challenges encountered in the process.

In collaboration with partner organizations, ParlAmericas additionally convened capacity-building sessions aimed at strengthening the legislative advocacy efforts of women's organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean. These brought together more than 200 civil society representatives spanning 30 countries in the region.

One of the key takeaways from ParlAmericas' surveying and capacity-building sessions was the importance of sharing among women's organizations on good practices for engaging with parliaments. Such knowledge exchanges can have concrete results on gender equality advocacy goals by fostering collective learning and collaboration.

This publication compiles a series of legislative advocacy strategies and considerations, drawing from the experiences of women's organizations from across the hemisphere. It offers tips, useful resources, insightful examples, and lessons learned from successful – and unsuccessful – experiences engaging with legislative bodies in pursuit of women's empowerment and substantive gender equality.

Many of the practices and frameworks presented are informed by the open parliament movement, which centres civic participation as an exercise of democratic rights through methods like co-creation of legislative initiatives by the public with decision makers. When made accessible and meaningful, these civic participation instruments can enhance the diversity of perspectives and quality of debate on issues that impact the lives of women and marginalized or underserved populations.

ENGAGING PARLIAMENTS: A WORTHWHILE ADVOCACY PURSUIT

Parliamentary bodies play a crucial role in shaping national policies and budgets that directly impact the achievement of gender equality, making them vital arenas for feminist advocacy. They have the power to pass gender-responsive laws, allocate or oversee funding to critical services, and hold the executive branch accountable for commitments to women's rights and equality. Channeling efforts towards parliamentarians and other parliamentary actors can therefore be the

1 For the purposes of this document, women's organizations is used as an umbrella term to refer to non-governmental entities led primarily by women, including members of the LGBTIQ+ community and other historically marginalized populations, and which operate from a feminist perspective and specialize in issues related to women's rights, gender equality, and/or gender mainstreaming.

key to seeing the demands of women's organizations reach concrete legislative and institutional changes that have greater sustainability, building on the organizing power of public mobilization and grassroots advocacy.

Women's organizations can tap into different mechanisms to engage with parliaments and parliamentarians. For instance, parliamentary committees, debates, and inquiries provide structured opportunities to introduce evidence and diverse perspectives into policy discussions, influencing not just immediate decisions but long-term systemic change. Other less formalized approaches to engaging with parliamentarians and the decision-making process can also be essential to building sustained attention and political will to important causes, contributing to concrete actions that enhance the lives of women, girls, and members of other traditionally marginalized communities.

Women's organizations in the Americas and Caribbean have a strong history of pushing for change using both formal and informal channels, which include:

- ✓ Participation in town halls and other community public meetings
- ✓ Public demonstrations or marches in front of the parliament building
- ✓ Appearing as expert witnesses in committees
- ✓ Oral or written contributions to a legislative initiative in the process of review
- ✓ Submission of petitions and other formal requests to parliament
- ✓ Use of digital engagement tools for online citizen participation

Success Story

The National Forum of Women in Political Parties (FONAMUPP) and the Association of Women Parliamentarians and Former Parliamentarians (APARLEPXA) in Panama contributed to the drafting of the bill that became Law No. 184 (2020) on addressing gender-based political violence. The leadership ensured that their organizations were expressly mentioned in the text of the law as part of a civil society council established to advise on its implementation.

It is important to remember that parliamentarians have a duty to represent and serve all members of society and to ensure that decisions reflect the needs of the entire population. Active public engagement is part and parcel of a well-functioning democracy, where all voices must have the opportunity to be heard in decision-making.

UNDERSTANDING LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY: IS PARLIAMENT THE RIGHT ROUTE?

A first step in your legislative advocacy journey as a representative of a women's organization is to determine whether national parliaments are the appropriate route for your efforts.

A fundamental pillar of representative democracy, parliaments, as the **legislative branch** of government, are responsible for developing, reforming, and passing the laws which define the shape and parameters of government policy and other regulatory measures. Parliaments also hold the executive branch accountable through different mechanisms for oversight (for example,

question period and commissions of inquiry), approve national budgets, represent constituents, and debate matters of public interest.

- If your goal is to push for new or different laws, draw public attention to gender equality issues, or increase the amount of public resources dedicated to gender-related initiatives, engaging with national parliaments may advance your demands. More information on these actions is provided below.

Certain issues may not be effectively addressed solely through a legislative response, or at the national level. Keep in mind that:

- The **executive branch** is responsible for implementing and enforcing laws, administering government programs, and overseeing the day-to-day operations of several public agencies and bodies.
- Some issues may fall under **subnational jurisdiction**, which means that they should be addressed by municipal, provincial or state governments rather than the national parliament. This is particularly the case in federations,[2] where powers and responsibilities are divided between two or more orders of government.

It is also important to consider that, in some cases, there may already be a law, regulation, or internal procedure in place, but obstacles or failures in its implementation may persist, preventing the problem it intends to address from being resolved. In those instances, to avoid overregulation, an advocacy strategy directed at the relevant implementing authorities may be more effective to advance the changes sought.

Overregulation refers to the excessive or overly complex application of rules and laws. It results in the creation of bureaucratic barriers that increase compliance burdens and hinder meaningful work, particularly for implementing bodies with limited resources or capacity. Instead of stimulating systemic change, overregulation can end up reducing otherwise transformative actions to a formal check-box exercise, thus undermining substantive progress on gender equity and inclusion. Furthermore, when regulations go beyond what is required to achieve their intended policy objectives, they can inadvertently create loopholes and contradictions with other laws, on top of potentially provoking resistance or backlash from actors who perceive increased regulatory requirements as intrusive or disruptive.

Parliament's responsibilities

As mentioned above, parliaments have specific areas of responsibility that can be generally categorized as: legislation / law-making; approval of the national budget; representation; and executive oversight. Each of these areas of work provides important entry points for advocacy by women's organizations and is best suited for certain types of asks.

Passing or amending laws

One of parliament's most well-known roles is law-making — drafting, passing, amending, and repealing legislation. This shapes the legal framework that governs a country. Through this function, women's organizations can seize concrete opportunities to advance legal and policy reforms in pursuit of their goals.

2 There are six federations in the Americas and the Caribbean region: Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and the United States.

Each country has its own set of rules for how a bill becomes law. To support your engagement, the Annex at the end of this guide provides an overview of how law-making processes typically unfold across different systems of government in the hemisphere.

Women's organizations might look to engage with this work to:

- ✓ Propose legislative action on a new issue;
- ✓ Support or oppose a piece of legislation parliament is considering;
- ✓ Suggest revisions or reforms to an existing piece of legislation;
- ✓ Contribute expert input and lived experiences to shape the content of draft laws; and/or
- ✓ Advocate for the repeal of discriminatory or outdated laws.

Entry points for advocacy and action in relation to the legislative process:

- ☑ **Draft stage of legislation:** Women's organizations can play a role in the conceptualization and drafting of bills (draft laws) by providing research, proposals, and sharing model legislation with parliamentarians to shape content even before a bill's formal introduction.
- ☑ **Engagement with individual parliamentarians:** Schedule formal and informal meetings to share constituency viewpoints and build support for your cause.
- ☑ **Committee stage:** Submit written briefs and materials, deliver oral testimony during public hearings, or respond to requests for public and expert input.
- ☑ **Citizen participation mechanisms:** Where available, submit proposals and other contributions through citizen participation offices, mobile apps, petition processes, or other mechanisms that exist in your parliament.
- ☑ **Key decision moments:** Organize campaigns and ramp up action around key debates and votes to increase visibility and build pressure.

Tip! Model laws

Depending on your goal, consult model laws and laws from other countries from CARICOM and the inter-American system, as these can be tailored to local needs and legal systems. The Inter-American Commission on Women has a series of model laws that reflect high standards on different gender equality issues, developed with regional expert committees.

Tip! Different procedures for certain kinds of laws

Certain types of legislation can follow specific rules and processes.

Some legal reforms require constitutional amendments, which follow a specific process that cannot be bypassed. Examples of issues that would require such amendments include enshrining or expanding fundamental rights protected by the constitution or changing the structure and composition of legislatures.

Some countries also have specific rules around the role parliament - or specific parliamentary chambers - can play in putting forward laws that modify the budget. For example, in some countries, Congress cannot increase spending levels without the President's approval. In other countries, only the lower chamber is able to introduce bills that impact public spending.

Success Story

Raise Your Voice Saint Lucia was able to successfully lobby for legislative changes in the Domestic Violence Bill by strategically applying political pressure near the 2020 General Elections. Raise Your Voice Saint Lucia hosted numerous educational campaigns teaching women and the citizens of Saint Lucia on the importance of the draft bill on domestic violence which was developed by a consultant for Raise Your Voice Saint Lucia. This draft bill was previously rejected due to concerns on a clause that focused on LGBTQI+ rights. However, the national advocacy during the election season and external support from contributors to educational campaigns resulted in the bill successfully being brought forward.

Success Story

Equality Now contributed to a capacity-building session on legislating to address gender-based sexual violence from a consent-based approach as part of the *Conferencias Día Naranja* (Orange Day Conferences) organized by the Technical Unit for Gender Equality of the Senate of the Republic of Mexico. Commemorated on the 25th of each month, Orange Day Conferences seek to raise awareness and promote concrete actions to prevent gender-based violence and foster a culture of non-violence. The session delivered by Equality Now, in which parliamentary staff from the federal Congress and state legislatures participated, explored persistent challenges in existing legislation addressing sexual violence, reviewed key international standards, and identified measures parliaments can adopt to close legal gaps. It also emphasized the importance of survivor participation and the involvement of feminist organizations in shaping legal frameworks that are more accessible, just, and free from revictimization.

Approval of the national budget

While budgets are developed by the executive branch, parliament plays a central role in this process and in shaping national priorities through its power to approve, review, and oversee the budget. This process determines how public resources are allocated and ensures fiscal accountability. The efficacy of these processes is further strengthened by the use of open and participatory approaches throughout the financial cycle.

For more information on the role of parliaments in the budgetary process, consult the publication Strengthening Accountability through Fiscal Openness, developed by ParlAmericas in partnership with the Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy (IFSD) and the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT).

Women's organizations might look to engage with this work to:

- ✓ Call for additional resource allocations to support the implementation of gender equality priorities;
- ✓ Draw attention to funding issues noted through analysis of the budget and the ways in which allocations would address the needs of diverse population groups; and/or
- ✓ Advocate for gender-responsive budgeting, an overall approach to budgeting that integrates gender equality objectives into planning, resource allocation, and policy evaluation.

Entry points for advocacy and action in relation to the budget:

- ☑ **Engagement with individual parliamentarians:** Meet with members of public finance or budget committees to advocate for specific allocations, provide input to their budget review or presentations before such committees, share key financial data, or propose budget amendments to close funding gaps regarding gender equality priorities.
- ☑ **Public engagement opportunities:** Participate in pre-budget consultations, budget-focused town halls or forums, and formal review processes to contribute gender-sensitive evidence and community perspectives.
- ☑ **Monitoring and oversight mechanisms:** Collaborate with oversight bodies like Public Accounts Committee or other similar spaces to track the rollout of gender-responsive budgeting commitments and advocate for accountability.

Success Story

In Argentina, the feminist organization *Equipo Latinoamericano de Justicia y Género* (ELA, by its Spanish initials) and the *Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia* (ACIJ, by its Spanish initials) partnered with the National Congress' Budgetary Office,[3] academics, and other civil society organizations to conduct the country's first gender-responsive budgeting studies,[4] analyzing public expenditures through a gender lens – an initiative which continued over time.[5] Launched during Argentina's Budget Week in 2015, these efforts assessed how public budgets addressed gender equality[6] and highlighted the critical role that women's organizations can play in analyzing expenditures, identifying gaps, and advocating for more inclusive and equitable fiscal policies, which also supported the first national implementation of gender budgeting.[7]

Representing the public

Parliament serves as the voice of the people, representing diverse interests and ensuring that policies reflect the needs of all citizens. Through debates, public consultations, and constituency engagement, and their own platforms as public figures, parliamentarians advocate for the communities they represent at the national level.

Women's organizations might look to engage with this work to:

- ✓ Amplify the voices of women and marginalized groups, ensuring their concerns are reflected in legislative priorities and decisions;
- ✓ Open new conversations with the public or bring forward new concerns affecting the population; and
- ✓ Raise awareness of solutions / initiatives your organization is working on.

3 The Budgetary Office has a Gender-Responsive Budget tool that allows users to monitor the implementation of budgetary programs identified by the executive branch as contributing to gender equality policy and carrying the gender-responsive budgeting label.

4 See The Value of Gender Equality (available in Spanish).

5 See Budget and Gender: Analysis of the 2021 Budget Bill (available in Spanish).

6 Argentina's Ministry of Economy maintains an interactive platform (in Spanish) to highlight the share of the national budget targeting inequality, expose existing gaps, and track related expenditures.

7 See 2021 Budget: First Budget with a Gender and Diversity Perspective (available in Spanish).

Entry points for advocacy and action in relation to representation:

- ☑ **Ongoing engagement with individual parliamentarians:** Establish rapport with parliamentarians – particularly the one in your specific constituency - by participating in different spaces that invite constituent input, attend community/constituency events hosted by your representative, or visit the parliamentarian's constituency office.
- ☑ **Outreach and event organization:** Use public events your organization hosts as opportunities to showcase your work and create visibility around key issues. Invite parliamentarians to participate in these programs as attendees or speakers.
- ☑ **Public engagement opportunities:** Engage in participatory spaces such as town halls to share perspectives and advocate for greater parliamentary attention to gender equality issues.

Success Story

In Costa Rica, the *Parlamento Joven de Mujeres por el Clima* (Women's Climate Youth Parliament in English), coordinated by the civil society initiative Misión 1.5 in partnership with the Legislative Assembly and other domestic and international stakeholders, offers a compelling example of how non-governmental actors working to advance women's rights can support parliaments in strengthening citizen engagement and representation. Based on a vision of climate justice and inclusive leadership, this program equips young women from across the country with the knowledge, tools, and experience to understand and meaningfully engage in legislative processes related to climate policy. In doing so, the initiative strengthens the relationship between parliament and civil society, enhancing the legitimacy of democratic institutions through more inclusive and participatory policymaking.

Conducting oversight

Parliament exercises oversight to hold the executive branch accountable, ensuring that government actions align with laws, budgets, public interests, and international agreements. This function is carried out through inquiries, audits, hearings, budget reviews, and other monitoring mechanisms.

Women's organizations might look to engage with this work to:

- ✓ Push for stronger accountability measures that help to ensure that policies effectively address the needs of women and marginalized communities;
- ✓ Inquire about progress on the implementation of international agreements or national laws/policies; and/or
- ✓ Advocate for the adoption of more active and transparent oversight mechanisms to ensure public access to information.

For practical guidance on how to advance political and parliamentary accountability in support of gender equality, consult ParlAmericas' publication Strengthening Accountability: A Tool to Support Good Governance and Gender Equality in the Caribbean.

Entry points for advocacy and action in relation to oversight:

- ☑ **Strategic outreach:** Proactively reach out to members of relevant committees and parliamentary oversight bodies to flag gaps in policy implementation and to encourage greater scrutiny of government actions related to gender equality.
- ☑ **Data and community-based evidence sharing:** Share data collected on how specific issues, such as laws, programs, or funding decisions, are impacting women and other relevant groups, to build cases for the need for urgency for action or a review of progress towards the achievement of international agreements.
- ☑ **Public education:** Advocate on social media, through events, and in communications on international agreements focused on gender equality and human rights to build understanding of these frameworks and their provisions laid out within.

Ratification of international agreements

Beyond oversight responsibilities, parliaments have various roles in relation to international agreements and treaties, including reviewing and amending national legislative frameworks to align with the commitments of adopted agreements, advocating for their adoption and, sometimes, contributing formally to their country's approval of the agreement as outlined in national laws and processes.

For women's organizations, work around international agreements presents key advocacy opportunities. You can engage with legislators to push for full and meaningful adoption of gender equality provisions, ensure that reservations do not weaken commitments, and lay the groundwork for effective implementation and oversight of international treaties at the national level, in addition to advocating for the adoption of agreements in the first place.

Tip! Shadow Reports

Women's organizations have been effective at linking their national advocacy efforts to international gender equality agreements and commitments. By submitting their own alternative reports, or shadow reports, to monitoring bodies such as the CEDAW Committee and MESECVI, they provide critical civil society insights that complement official government reports. Shadow reports help international experts formulate recommendations for member states, including legislative reforms. When these mechanisms highlight rights violations, they often lead to recommendations for legislative action. Women's organizations can use these recommendations as strong evidence to advocate for policy changes and legal reforms in national parliaments.

Success Story

Various women's organizations in the region have advocated for amendments to criminal legislation to strengthen protections against gender-based violence. The Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights (CLADEM) and the Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL) brought the Maria da Penha case in Brazil to the attention of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the OAS. The IACHR held the Brazilian State responsible for omission, negligence, and tolerance in relation to domestic violence against Brazilian women, using the Convention of Belém do Pará as a frame of reference. As a result of international pressure and advocacy efforts by civil society, Law No. 11.340 (Maria da Penha Law) was passed in 2006, creating mechanisms to address violence against women in Brazil.

Success Story

In Mexico, women's organizations joined the Nosotrxs movement to support the recognition of domestic workers' rights. As the country's ratification of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 189 on domestic workers was outstanding, these organizations gathered and amplified firsthand accounts from affected workers, highlighting the impacts of the legal gap. They also put forward a shared vision of decent work based on international standards to strengthen their legislative advocacy efforts, ultimately contributing to the Convention's ratification.

Refining the "Ask"

When engaging with parliament, it is important for your efforts to align with one or more of its core functions. This increases the likelihood of action and support from parliamentarians who are invested in their legislative responsibilities and the needs of their constituents. A clear and well-structured "ask," linked directly to parliamentary work and priorities, can help secure focused, productive interactions and tangible outcomes.

To further strengthen your ask when engaging in parliamentary advocacy, keep the following criteria in mind:

- **Strategic** – Link your ask to ongoing legislative processes, budget cycles, or debates on relevant policies to ensure it resonates with current parliamentary priorities.
- **Measurable** – Define specific goals that can be tracked through parliamentary actions, such as the introduction of a bill, amendments to existing laws, or changes in budget allocations.
- **Ambitious yet realistic** – Set achievable targets that can be realized in the current political landscape and power dynamics within parliament – an amendment, motion, or expression of support can lay the groundwork for more comprehensive change.
- **Time-bound** – Connect your ask to specific parliamentary timelines, such as legislative sessions, budget discussions, or treaty ratification processes.
- **Intersectional** – Ensure that your ask reflects the diverse needs of women and marginalized groups, making it relevant across different demographics.
- **Equitable** – Advocate for policies that address systemic inequalities, ensuring fair treatment and opportunities for all, in line with parliamentary representation responsibilities.

DO'S AND DON'TS

The sections that follow provide suggested "do"s and "don't"s to help women's organizations navigate parliamentary systems, build meaningful relationships with parliamentarians, and amplify the impact of your advocacy efforts. These are practical tips and common pitfalls to avoid, with concrete examples and supplementary information that will support you in refining your approach to parliamentary engagement.

The key recommendations, expanded upon below, are the following:

- ✓ Learn the particulars of your country's parliamentary system
- ✓ Compile a strong evidence base to support your advocacy
- ✓ Draw upon your evidence base to craft clear and convincing messaging
- ✓ Communicate and build relationships with parliaments
- ✓ Identify and engage through existing formal parliamentary channels
- ✓ Complement your efforts with informal advocacy strategies
- ✓ Draw upon networks and coalitions to amplify your efforts
- ✓ Ensure your engagement is sustainable

Learn the particulars of your country's parliamentary system

- **Acquaint yourself with the legislature's overall structure** – Research how the parliament operates and familiarize yourself with the role of different actors within it, like presiding officers, committee chairs, clerks, the ombudsperson, and party leaders. Structures and roles will depend on whether the parliament operates under a Westminster system or a Presidential system (for more information on the differences between these systems and their impact on advocacy, please see the annex).
  - If the parliament is bicameral – featuring a Senate/upper chamber and lower house – how does legislation or other business pass between the two?
  - What units, offices, or departments exist within parliament?
  - What caucuses or permanent (standing) or other committees exist?
    - The ParlAmericas dashboard on institutional progress on gender equality can be consulted for information on the existence of committees, caucuses, and technical units focused on gender equality in the national parliaments of the Americas and the Caribbean.
- **Learn about the basic phases of the legislative process** – Identify where and when in the process your advocacy can have the most impact (e.g., bill drafting, committee hearings, public awareness or campaign ahead of a vote). Knowing how bills are introduced, debated, and approved will help organizations intervene at the right moments.
- **Narrow in on the key players that currently interact with your areas of interest** – Identify the individual parliamentarians, committees, political parties, etc. that are most likely to be compelled to advance work in your advocacy areas. You may wish to check voting records to identify allies.

- **Monitor parliamentary agendas** – Track upcoming debates, motions, and bills related to gender equality and other issues that intersect with your advocacy areas.
- **Understand the laws around lobbying** – Familiarize yourself with applicable lobbying regulations governing interactions between civil society organizations and public officials to ensure compliance with national legislation.
  - In some countries, organizations seeking to influence policy-making may be subject to requirements such as registering with regulatory bodies.
- **Don't disregard procedural rules and timelines** – Understanding legislative procedures, deadlines, and formal requirements will help ensure that advocacy efforts are well-timed and effective, and that you are less likely to be surprised by bureaucratic steps. Keep in mind that committee hearings may have fixed schedules for public input, submissions may need to follow specific formats, and parliamentary rules may restrict when amendments can be introduced or when debates can be reopened.
- **Don't overlook power dynamics** – Consider the influence of political parties, party discipline, executive-legislative relations, and committee structures in shaping decision-making.
- **Don't assume all parliamentarians have the same level of influence in all areas** – To maximize your impact, focus on those who serve on relevant committees, hold leadership positions, represent the geographic constituency most-affected, or are already vocal advocates on the issue in question.

Tip! Parliamentary Information Offices

Some parliaments in the region have parliamentary information offices that can be consulted not only by parliamentarians but also by citizens. Their services can be used to check whether bills on the subject your organization is working on have been considered by the legislature in the past. From there, you can devise a strategy based on lessons learned.

Organization profiles

Various civil society organizations in the region analyze the profiles of parliamentarians to inform citizens about their representatives.

- *Directorio Legislativo*, for instance, created a directory with information on the functioning of the legislative branch of government in Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico. It publishes information about legislators, including their professional background and parliamentary careers, contact information, staff, and electoral data.
- The Jamaica Accountability Meter Portal is a citizen-centric platform that provides access to databases, public information, and tracking tools to strengthen public accountability.
- Some academic institutions also compile this type of data. For example, the Visible Congress project at the University of the Andes in Colombia presents information on parliamentarians and their legislative activities.

Organization Profile

The National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL) is a Canadian organization dedicated to feminist legal education, research, and advocacy. It also runs workshops for other organizations on lawmaking processes, writing parliamentary briefs, petitions, coalition work, and using social media for activism towards legal reform.

Compile your evidence base

- **Ensure data quality and credibility** – Use reliable, well-sourced data from recognized institutions, peer-reviewed research, or rigorous community-based studies. Cite sources transparently to strengthen credibility.
- **Regularly update your data** – Keep your evidence base current by tracking recent research, emerging trends, and new statistics that can reinforce your advocacy.
- **Disaggregate data** – Where possible, collect, analyze, and provide data that is not only disaggregated by gender but by other intersecting identity factors as well (e.g., by age, ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic status) to highlight disparities and make inequalities visible.
- **Combine quantitative and qualitative evidence** – Pair statistics with real-world narratives, testimonies, or case studies to make the data more compelling and relatable to decision-makers.
- **Don't rely solely on global reports** – While international reports are useful, policymakers often respond better to national or local data that reflects their constituencies' realities. Useful sources include national statistical offices, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) monitoring dashboards, reports produced by governments or UN agencies, and research from women's organizations or academic institutions.[8] Local newspapers and other media outlets can also provide valuable insights into emerging issues and public opinion around key topics.
- **Don't let evidence sit unused** – Ensure that your data is actively used in legislative debates, committee hearings, and policy proposals by maintaining engagement with parliamentarians and their advisors.

Success Story

In line with the demands for immediate action, the organization Artemisas carried out the #ParidadYA campaign, with the aim of urging the Congress of the Republic of Colombia to legislate for the achievement of a parity democracy. As a result of the collective efforts during the advocacy process, the parity law was finally passed. Though it does not apply to parliament, the law establishes 50% representation of women in the highest decision-making positions in the executive branch and in representative positions outside the country. It should be noted that the organization also worked on its communication campaign to dispel myths and, to this end, it was necessary to build solid evidence beforehand.

8 National statistical offices typically publish census data, household surveys, and gender-disaggregated indicators that can provide strong and reputable inputs to your advocacy efforts. It is also worth checking whether your jurisdiction has institutionalized gender machineries (for example, national ministries or secretariats for women) that may produce policy briefs, reports, and other materials on the implementation of gender-related commitments. UN agencies such as UN Women, UNDP, and ECLAC also feature valuable region-specific data and tools, such as the Gender Equality Observatory for Latin American and the Caribbean. In addition, organizations like the Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights (CLADEM) and Equality Now provide access to relevant data and publications that can further strengthen your evidence base.

Use your evidence to craft cohesive messages

- **Make it accessible and engaging** – Present information and findings in clear, non-technical language with visuals like infographics. Use formats like policy briefs or short videos to ensure that busy parliamentarians can quickly grasp key points.
- **Link findings to policy impact** – Clearly demonstrate how the evidence supports specific legislative or budgetary decisions, presenting actionable, realistic recommendations. What would change if action is taken?
- **Use comparisons and best practices** – Use comparative data to bolster your case and show how similar policies have worked in other countries or regions.
- **Align your data with legislative priorities** – Frame your evidence in ways that connect with parliamentarians' existing priorities, national policies, or international commitments (e.g., CEDAW, the SDGs, ILO conventions, the Beijing Platform, Belém do Pará Convention, UN Security Council Resolution 1325, ECLAC Regional Gender Agenda).
- **Don't overload with raw data** – Large spreadsheets or overly complex reports without context or clear takeaways can be overwhelming. Focus on key statistics and insights that support your argument.
- **Don't use anecdotal evidence alone** – While personal stories are powerful, they should be supported by broader data trends whenever possible to avoid appearing unrepresentative or isolated. If quantitative data on an issue does not exist, share this as a further challenge for attention and ensure that the qualitative data draws on a variety of individuals' experiences.

Success Story

Belizean activist Seidy Quetzal successfully lobbied for the elimination of taxes on all menstrual products in her country by providing evidence in support of her Don't Tax My Femininity campaign. She created a fact sheet based on a survey launched to collect data on the experiences of Belizean women, which found that even employed women had difficulty purchasing menstrual products. That evidence persuaded high-level authorities, including the Special Envoy for the Development of Families, Women, and Children, the Minister for Human Development, Families, and Indigenous People's Affairs, and the Prime Minister. The result was a reduction from 35% to 0% tax on menstrual products effective April 2023.

Tip! Turn opposition into learning opportunities

If parliamentarians or other parliamentary actors raise concerns or disagree with a proposal you are putting forward, use the opportunity to better understand their perspectives and arguments being presented. Taking note of these points can help strengthen your ability to build evidence-based responses. Many organizations try to predict or analyze counterarguments to refine their messaging and prepare for future discussions.

Communicate and build relationships with parliamentarians

- ✅ **Use constituency links** – Approach parliamentarians representing areas where your organization has a presence, or where the issue you are advocating on is especially felt.
  - The number of parliamentarians representing you depends on the electoral system. In a first-past-the-post system, you are typically represented by a single elected official from your district. In a proportional representation system, multiple representatives may be elected for one area based on the share of votes received by each party. See the annex for more details.
- ✅ **Be clear and concise** – Regardless of the mode of your communication, get to the point quickly. Whether it is a meeting request, proposed policy support, or participation in an event, clearly and confidently express what you are requesting and frame it as a meaningful opportunity.
  - If there is no response within a reasonable timeframe, send a polite follow-up message.
- ✅ **Avoid jargon or overly-technical language** – Make your messages accessible to non-specialists.
- ✅ **Anticipate counterarguments** – Be prepared to address skepticism by acknowledging potential limitations, alternative solutions, or uncertainties while reinforcing the strength of your overall argument.
- ✅ **Provide supporting information** – Attach or link to concise fact sheets, reports, case studies, or other ready-to-use material to back up your argument. After an in-person meeting, leave behind additional relevant material with the parliamentarian's staff and advisors on details of the issue not covered in the conversation.
- ❌ **Don't rely solely on one or two parliamentarians** – Build relationships with a diverse network of parliamentarians across parties and chambers (if relevant to your context) and with other supporters to prevent advocacy setbacks.
- ❌ **Don't send a generic, mass message** – Avoid using a one-size-fits-all approach. Tailor your message to each recipient.
- ❌ **Don't be too lengthy or overwhelming** – Long emails are often disregarded. Keep written information, especially in initial outreach, to a few short paragraphs.
- ❌ **Don't focus only on the problem** – Also offer solutions or ways the parliamentarian can take action.
- ❌ **Don't ignore political timing** – Avoid presenting proposals when parliamentarians are distracted (e.g., election seasons, major budget debates).
- ❌ **Don't assume they will remember you** – Parliamentarians meet countless people every day, so even if you have contacted them before, include a brief reminder of your/your organization's work and/or a time you met previously to help refresh their memory.

Tip! Check Local Protocols

You can often find country-specific guidelines for styles of address for parliamentarians and dignitaries on government websites. See for instance, the example of Jamaica.

Success Story

Advocacy efforts spearheaded by the *Asociación de Concejalas de Bolivia* (ACOBOL), and supported by several feminist groups, were crucial to the passage of Law No. 243 (2012) on political harassment and violence against women in Bolivia. In 2004, these actors formed the *Comité Impulsor*, a multi-stakeholder body that brought together feminist organizations, parliamentarians, and other actors to raise awareness and empower women across political institutions around the urgent need to address harassment. This initiative provided an important platform to coordinate advocacy with congressional committees and caucuses, inform legislative recommendations, and amplify testimonies from elected women, ultimately helping to move the bill forward and translate years of grassroots mobilization into legislative change.

Success Story

Students Jasmyn Sargeant and Tirelle Duncan, part of the Ignite group at the University of the West Indies' Institute of Development and Gender Studies, established a platform called Write Yuh MP for the general public to contact parliamentarians in Trinidad and Tobago about gender inequality issues. This campaign provides templates for citizens to call, email, or send letters to their representative about shortcomings in the justice system and the alarming levels of violence against women. The Write Yuh MP platform provides a database of contact information for members of parliament across the country's 41 constituencies. This had tangible results; a parliamentarian responded to these letters and invited those who wrote to a meeting to discuss the concerns.

Engage through formal parliamentary channels

- **Take advantage of existing or upcoming opportunities for input** – Check whether there are already-scheduled spaces for parliamentary engagement – such as town halls, public hearings, or calls for input on bills – to streamline or expedite advocacy efforts.
- **Identify institutional entry points** – Determine whether your parliament has designated offices, staff, or mechanisms responsible for citizen engagement on gender-related issues, such as citizen participation offices, parliamentary outreach programs, legislative transparency bodies, gender technical units, women's secretariats, or gender focal points. Gender equality/women's committees and caucuses - and the staff that support them are further spaces to assess.
  - Some parliaments also allow for the public to submit petitions and/or proposed bills; consult the mechanisms above or the parliament's standing orders for more information on specifics of these processes. Details on formal mechanisms of interaction can be found in the ParlAmericas document Regulatory Frameworks for Citizen Participation in the Legislative Process in the Americas and the Caribbean.
- **Participate in committee hearings** – Request to submit written evidence or to testify on relevant bills. Some committees and parliamentarians will proactively issue calls to participate in hearings or submit written feedback on bills. Parliament's websites and social media channels often share these requests.
- **Collaborate with parliamentarians to support oversight actions** – Work with parliamentarians to submit formal inquiries or requests for debates that hold the government

accountable. In Westminster systems (see Annex), question period is a strategic space for advocacy issues to be raised.

- ✅ **Identify whether civil society participation / consultation is legally-mandated** – Consult legislative frameworks, standing orders, and internal procedures to identify instances where civil society participation or consultation might be required by law, and use these opportunities as relevant.
  - 📌 Mandated citizen participation can include: public consultations or hearings, expert testimonies in committee sessions, citizen participation in parliamentary committees, constituency work, and citizen participation in appointments of public officials.
- ❌ **Don't ignore procedural rules** – Understand how to navigate parliamentary procedures effectively.
- ❌ **Don't wait for invitations** – Be proactive in requesting meetings and submitting input on bills or other parliamentary matters.

Success Story

In Honduras, a group of women's organizations have become key stakeholders in formal auditing processes to monitor the gender-sensitive execution of public resources. Their active involvement in these activities builds on years of sustained advocacy efforts that not only helped drive the adoption of gender-responsive budgeting but also contributed to the creation of institutional mechanisms that enable ongoing engagement by women's organizations with parliamentary oversight processes. As a result, these organizations and other civil society stakeholders are now able to capitalize on formal parliamentary channels – such as public hearings convened by congressional budget and gender equity committees – to voice their concerns, monitor compliance with gender-related mandates, and advocate for a more equitable allocation of public resources.

Leverage informal advocacy strategies

- ✅ **Engage in public campaigns** – Use different media channels and social movements to amplify advocacy efforts and apply external pressure. Well-timed campaigns can influence political discourse and create momentum for legislative action.
- ✅ **Host informal gatherings** – Organize networking events, coffee chats, and other casual activities with parliamentarians and civil society organizations to discuss key issues in a non-confrontational setting and build trust.
- ✅ **Build personal relationships** – Cultivate trust and lasting relationships with several actors, including parliamentarians, staffers, and allies through informal meetings and social events.
- ✅ **Tap into social capital** – Capitalize on networks within community groups, professional associations, and social movements to amplify messages informally. Mobilizing existing relationships can help spread messages organically and give advocacy campaigns greater reach.
- ❌ **Don't underestimate unofficial channels** – Casual conversations and social events can be valuable opportunities to further engage with parliamentarians. These interactions can provide relevant insights into legislative priorities and political dynamics.
- ❌ **Don't mistake access for influence** – Despite its importance, simply having direct contact

with parliamentarians does not automatically translate into policy impact. Informal engagements should be supplementary to more formal engagement to follow up on prior conversations, or to create an entry point for future formal engagement by sharing purposeful, strategic information backed by sound arguments.

- ✗ **Don't overlook grassroots engagement** – Legislative action is more likely when parliamentarians see widespread community support. Activating local organizations, activists, and constituents can increase pressure on decision-makers and make your advocacy efforts more persuasive.
- ✗ **Don't rely on a single strategy** – Use a mix of informal advocacy methods to connect with different audiences and decision-makers effectively. Combining informal networking, public campaigns, and grassroots mobilization can help you reach different stakeholders through multiple touchpoints.

Success Story

Akola Thompson is the founder and managing director of Tammuke Feminist Rising, an intersectional collective focused on public education and community development. As Guyana's youngest columnist, she uses the media as an advocacy channel to push for a safer world for women, calling for government intervention and legislative reforms. Her column The Minority Report has covered topics on unpaid labour and colonialism, workers' rights, maternal mortality and reproductive rights, among other issues, highlighting problems and sharing legislative recommendations and policy actions.

Draw on networks and coalitions

- ✓ **Develop a coherent advocacy strategy** – Whenever possible, collaborate with other actors, ensuring that coalition members align on messaging, goals, and priorities to present a cohesive and coordinated front when engaging with parliamentarians and their staff.
- ✓ **Leverage the strengths of different groups** – Utilize the expertise of various coalition members — some may be strong in research, others in community outreach, media engagement, or direct parliamentary advocacy.
- ✓ **Reach beyond women's rights and feminist organizations** – Connecting with other segments of civil society that do not necessarily define their work as feminist, but that work on other relevant issues, helps mainstream a gender perspective into different policy areas.
- ✓ **Mobilize constituency influence** – Encourage coalition members with grassroots connections to demonstrate public support, which can be particularly persuasive for elected officials.
- ✓ **Maintain consistent communication** – Regularly update coalition partners and parliamentary contacts on progress, challenges, and opportunities for engagement to sustain momentum and collective action.
- ✓ **Recognize and respect different approaches** – Civil society organizations may have varying strategies, from radical activism to institutional engagement. Find common ground while respecting differences in tactics.
- ✗ **Don't overlook the role of parliamentary staff** – Many advocacy efforts focus only on MPs and neglect the key role played by staffers who shape legislative priorities and manage

daily operations.

- ✗ **Don't create a loose, uncoordinated network** – Without clear roles, decision-making structures, and shared goals, coalitions can become ineffective or fragmented.
- ✗ **Don't compete for visibility or credit** – Internal tensions over recognition can undermine collective efforts. Prioritize impact over individual organizational branding.
- ✗ **Don't rely only on established voices** – Ensure that grassroots feminist groups, youth activists, and marginalized communities have a seat at the table, rather than centering only well-known organizations.
- ✗ **Don't abandon the coalition after a legislative win** – Strengthen long-term alliances by continuing collaboration on implementation, monitoring, and future advocacy needs.

Success Story

In 2021, the Candlelight Movement emerged in Trinidad and Tobago following the tragic femicide of Andrea Bharrat. Across the country, groups mobilized to organize candlelight vigils and rallies, raising awareness about violence against women and gender inequality. As part of the movement, a petition was launched advocating for better protection for women, specifically calling for the availability of pepper spray as a self-defense tool for those who meet certain qualifications. The petition garnered 128,587 signatures and was delivered to Parliament. In response, the Firearms (Amendment) Act No. 7 was passed in July of that year, which, among other things, regulated the legal use of pepper spray.

Follow up and sustain engagement

- ✓ **Send timely and relevant updates** – Keep parliamentarians updated on progress, new developments, and milestones in your advocacy efforts, particularly at key moments in a parliamentary session (for example, before debates, committee meetings, or votes).
- ✓ **Recognize supporters** – Publicly acknowledge MPs who take positive action on gender issues, drawing attention to their efforts in visible forums and communication channels, such as social media, newsletter, and events.
- ✓ **Monitor policy outcomes** – Track how advocacy efforts translate into policy changes and use that information to adjust your advocacy strategy.
- ✓ **Invite parliamentarians to events** – Extend invitations to panels, roundtables, or community forums where parliamentarians can engage directly with stakeholders and constituents on gender-related issues.
- ✗ **Don't follow up without a clear purpose** – When contacting parliamentarians or parliamentary staff, make sure to provide an actionable request, relevant updates, or new insights rather than just checking in.
- ✗ **Don't assume one meeting is enough** – Advocacy requires persistence and ongoing engagement. Continue your engagement efforts even when there is no urgent request to build solid relationships.
- ✗ **Don't neglect follow-ups** – After presenting evidence, maintain engagement through meetings, policy briefs, and public advocacy to ensure the issue stays on the agenda.

- **Don't disregard political timing and parliamentary processes** – Be strategic about timing engagements around electoral processes, committee hearings, budget cycles, and legislative debates to ensure your demands get proper attention.

Success Story

Ronelle King, from Barbados, is the founder of Life in Leggings: Caribbean Alliance Against Gender Violence. Ronelle created a hashtag to encourage women to break their silence about sexual assault, which started the #LifeinLeggings campaign. This led to other women in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and The Bahamas, among other Caribbean states, sharing their stories as a means of holding perpetrators accountable and raising awareness in society at large. This powerful message has captured the attention of Caribbean parliamentarians, and even the Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and responsible for Gender and Children's Affairs in Trinidad and Tobago also took to social media to support this powerful message and share her own personal experience.

ANNEX

Legislative Advocacy in Parliamentary and Presidential Systems

Effective advocacy strategies should be tailored to account for the specificities of parliamentary and presidential systems of government. While the main steps of the law-making process may seem fairly similar between these two systems, their inherent differences regarding the relationship between the legislative and executive branches, the tenure of elected members, and the role of government and opposition parties all impact how your organization engages with parliamentary officials.

The law-making process in parliamentary systems

1) **Proposal of a bill:** usually, the Prime Minister or a cabinet minister proposes a bill. However, in many countries, individual members of either chamber can also do that. These are often referred to as private members' bills, although specific terminology and procedures vary across jurisdiction and may not apply to all types of proposals.
2) **First reading:** formal introduction of a bill to the chamber, making it available to be consulted and examined by MPs and citizens.
3) **Second reading:** MPs debate the principles of the bill and vote whether it should continue the legislative process.
4) **Committee stage:** the bill is thoroughly examined by a parliamentary committee composed of members from different political parties, who review it clause by clause, discuss amendments, and hear expert testimony.
5) **Report stage:** the bill returns to the plenary of the parliament, where MPs consider any changes made by the committee and debate additional amendments.
6) **Third reading:** MPs debate and vote on the final version of the bill.
7) **Second chamber (if applicable):** if a parliament is bicameral, the second chamber reviews and votes on the bill. If the bill is amended at this stage, it returns to the chamber that originally voted on it for approval.
8) **Final approval:** in order to officially become law, a bill must receive final approval, which can take two forms:
    a) Royal assent: Where countries have a Governor-General (who represents the monarch), this individual gives royal assent to the bill.
    b) Presidential approval: In the case of republics, the President signs the bill into law.

The law-making process in presidential systems

1) **Proposal of a bill:** members of Congress and the president can introduce a bill, even though some constitutions might limit the topics on which each actor has the power to introduce legislation. In some countries, other actors can also propose a bill, as is the case with popular initiatives presented by citizens.
2) **Committee review:** the bill is assigned to a legislative committee, which can put forward recommendations, modify or reject the bill before it moves forward in the legislative process.
3) **First debate and vote:** the bill is sent to the chamber's plenary for debate and vote.
4) **Second debate and vote (if applicable):** if a congress is bicameral, the second chamber will debate and approve, amend, or reject the bill.
5) **Presidential review:** at this stage, the president can sign the bill into law or impose a veto, which can apply only to specific parts of the bill or reject it altogether.
    a) If a bill is vetoed, some congresses – but not all – have the option to either revise the bill and resubmit it to presidential review, or to override the veto, which normally requires a substantial majority of votes (for example, two thirds of the legislature).

Key Aspect	Parliamentary System	Presidential System
Who proposes laws?	Mainly the government (Prime Minister or Cabinet ministers); individual members of either house (in the case of bicameral systems) can also typically introduce bills	Mainly legislators and the President
Who approves laws?	Parliament	Congress
Can the executive veto?	No direct veto	Yes, full or partial veto
Can the legislative branch override a veto?	No veto process	In some countries, often requiring a supermajority
Legislative-Executive Relationship	Close relationship, as the Prime Minister and Cabinet members are drawn from the governing party	Complete functional separation between the legislative and executive branches

Setting your advocacy strategy up for success…

… in parliamentary systems

- In Westminster-style parliaments, Cabinet Ministers are also elected Members of Parliament (MPs) or appointed Senators, meaning they hold both legislative and executive responsibilities. Given the government's primary role in the legislative and policy implementation processes, make sure your advocacy strategy includes reaching Cabinet Ministers and key advisors who influence policy decisions. At the same time, don't overlook the role of other parliamentarians, who can become important allies to support your cause in parliamentary spaces.
- As parties tend to vote as a bloc, think of ways to use this in your favour – particularly when engaging with members of the governing party.
- Don't forget that opposition parties can introduce private members' bills and shape parliamentary debate.
- Closely monitor the political climate and confidence in the government to anticipate looming election cycles and priority issues for an incoming administration, as well as to orient advocacy toward political parties in the shaping of their platforms, as these will guide parliamentary action post-election.
- Since parliamentarians represent specific constituencies, framing your advocacy message around the local relevance of an issue can be an especially effective way to gain their support and encourage parliamentary engagement for your cause.

… in presidential systems

- Be mindful of the political dynamics within national legislatures. While presidents do not require the confidence of a congressional majority to stay in power as a prime minister would, coalitions remain a crucial aspect of presidential systems, especially when the president's party lacks a legislative majority. In this context, coalition-building becomes a central piece for advancing policy agendas.
- If the president might veto a bill you are supporting, assess if an override strategy is possible to secure the necessary votes to overturn it.
- Since party discipline may be weaker in presidential systems, make sure to reach members of congress within and across party lines. Similarly, legislative coalitions tend to be fluid and operate in a fragmented political landscape where parties frequently shift alliances. Consequently, it is important to monitor coalition dynamics and assess which parties or individual legislators are most likely to support your cause.
- Presidential systems are particularly prone to legislative deadlock, which makes it even more important to devise an outreach and communication strategy to urge legislators to act.
- As many presidents in Latin American countries have decree powers, some policies can be implemented without legislative approval. In particular, if congressional support is weak, advocacy efforts can focus on persuading the executive to issue regulations, executive orders, or administrative changes rather than passing a law.

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