

ALIGN REPORT

Male politicians and gender politics in Colombia: a long path to walk



José Fernando Serrano Amaya and Carlos Iván García Suárez
Universidad de los Andes

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Departamento de **Lenguas & Cultura**
Facultad de Ciencias Sociales

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Key findings

- A growing number of male politicians in Colombia are interested in understanding gender issues and in strengthening their commitment to gender equality. Their knowledge of feminism and their strategies for change, however, remain limited.
- In defining themselves as 'allies', male politicians express solidarity and empathy with gender equality and feminism, positioning themselves within broader political agendas of equality, social justice, and human rights. Their understanding of allyship though lacks clarity.
- There is often some distance between their 'allyship' and a full commitment to feminism and the struggle for gender equality. There is even some resistance to feminism that echoes a current global context of anti-gender 'push back'.
- Male politicians demonstrate their allyship in three ways:
 - by supporting the gender initiatives of others (often women politicians)
 - by developing their own initiatives dedicated to gender equality (often as part of their own political priorities)
 - by incorporating a gender perspective into their actions or the actions they support.
- Male politicians face structural and systemic obstacles to their support of gender equality initiatives, including political party structures that are still patriarchal and based on male control and political systems that resist change.
- The enablers of their commitment to gender equality are found at the micro level, including reflection on personal experiences and male privilege, education, participation in organisations working on gender politics, and alliance building with feminist organisations.
- Discussions with students and activists reveal doubts about the motivations and impact of male politicians who express a commitment to feminism and gender equality, ranging from a complete rejection of the involvement of male politicians to some pragmatic acceptance of the need for such commitment and a recognition that they can contribute.
- Despite these limitations, male politicians are key for the promotion of change. Their contribution can be strengthened with capacity building through training and support to their technical teams. These teams have a key role in supporting, and giving content to, their initiatives.
- Civil society organisations also need to improve their own political culture to demand accountability on gender policies from their elected representatives. This can be achieved through civic engagement and civil society engagement.

Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CPEM	Consejería Presidencial para la Equidad de la Mujer (Presidential Advisory Office for Women's Equity)
DANE	Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (National Administrative Department of Statistics)
DNP	Departamento Nacional de Planeación (National Planning Department)
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)
GBV	Gender-based violence
HIV/AIDS	Human immunodeficiency virus/Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and others
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Key terms

Allyship: 'Allyship is described in the literature using several terms, for example advocate, champion, change agent, sponsor. Although the definitions vary, broadly, allies align themselves with disadvantaged or oppressed groups and recognise the need for further progress in the journey towards equality. For example, male allies actively confront inequality (e.g. racism, (hetero-) sexism) in interpersonal interactions and intervene to address the structural and institutional dimensions of inequality' (Nash, 2021:2).

Anti-gender movements: The term 'anti-gender' captures the forms of resistance and pre-emptive opposition that have emerged to oppose women's sexual agency, gender and sexual diversity. 'Referring to the use of the terms 'gender' and 'gender ideology by conservative actors who have overlapping motivations and interests driving their efforts to protect a hetero-patriarchal social order, the term 'anti-gender movement' is now frequently used to describe the transnational constellation of actors working to preserve the hetero-patriarchal sex and gender power hierarchy in all areas of social, political, economic, and cultural life' (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023:3-4).

Caudillismo: Used extensively in the studies of Latin American political culture to explain how, since the formation of Latin American states, electoral politics has been exercised by men who have embodied a type of populist, authoritarian and individualist exercise of power. This power is embedded in a patriarchal, heterosexist, classist, and racist masculinity that perpetuated colonial norms during the emergence of 19th century republics.

Co-responsibility: Policies on masculinities that displace the understanding of the role of men as simple participants in, or contributors to, care work and replace it with an understanding of the shared and mutual responsibility of men and women.

Gender politics: This signifies the interplay among actors who seek or control spaces of power and influence in public affairs that results from the relationship between peoples' genders and political phenomena. As an interdisciplinary field of study, gender politics is concerned with analysing how an individual's political beliefs influence their gender identity and how society's notions of gender influence the structure and function of political institutions. It encompasses diverse issues, such as the politics of the body and sexuality, gender-based violence (GBV), the political economy of gender associated with both production and social reproduction, the relationship of gender with political bodies, and the impacts of gender on political institutions and decision-making (Waylen et al., 2013).

Gender orders: These are structural factors, such as the economy, social structures or political power, which establish patterns of relationships between men and women and the hierarchies between them, as well as definitions and actions associated with femininity and masculinity (Connell, 1987).

Introduction

What is being done is just a warm water handkerchief: 'Yes, up with women, equality, equity'. That's all very well, but the problem is that politicians won't allow it to happen, because there is nothing better than money and power, and politics provides both.

Focus group participant, male student

Background

Colombia's 2022 election of President Gustavo Petro and Vice-President Francia Márquez raised hopes for a feminist agenda in the country's new government. In particular, the election of an Afro-Colombian, working-class woman as Vice President was seen as an important change in politics (despite the constant racist and classist attacks she has faced since her election). While this was not the first time that a woman had reached such a high office, it was the first time that a woman had emerged from a background of land rights mobilisations, environmental rights, and the struggles of Colombia's racial, cultural, and social minorities to become Vice President.

The creation of the Ministry of Equality was one response to the feminist mobilisations that supported the election of the new government and reflected an agenda for change in which gender issues were central. However, the government's promised changes have taken more time than initially thought and the resources to implement a feminist agenda are not yet flowing with the necessary speed.

Behind this is a longer history of the struggles of women's and feminist social movement for structural changes in gender relations. These struggles have either contested or incorporated men's issues and masculinities at various times and with distinct approaches. In the past five years, for example, social pedagogy strategies for change in gender relations in interpersonal, family, and community settings have been developed at national and local levels in cities such as Bogotá and Medellín (Box 1). These strategies exemplify an approach that has seen gender and masculinities issues entering the public agenda due to alliances among institutions, organisations, social movements, academia and international partners.

At the same time, Colombia has seen the consolidation of anti-gender movements as political actors in the public arena. These movements had already been organising and acting for decades to challenge women's rights and changes in gender relations in Latin America (Corrêa, 2018). In 2016, they had a significant public presence in discussions on sex education in schools and on the signing of the Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The impact of their mobilisation gained such visibility that the then President Juan Manuel Santos had to make a public statement in August 2016 affirming that his government did not promote 'gender ideology', thereby giving the term some status as a topic for presidential agendas. This confusing term was also used to question the gender perspective that was incorporated into the Agreement because of the mobilisation of women's, feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations (Serrano Amaya, 2017), and played a significant role in discussions on the vote against the first version of the Peace Agreement on October 2, 2016 (Beltrán and Creely, 2022).

The case of Colombia illustrates how a series of significant processes of change toward gender equality have taken place over several decades, while encountering continued resistance and backlash. Although important discussions on issues of gender equality, feminisms and masculinities are taking place in public policy and electoral debates, this is not a scenario of cumulative or sustained progress. The political response to the demands of women's and feminist movements, the conversion of the issue of masculinities into policy issues or the emergence of alliances between feminist agendas and men in elected office have all been interrelated issues, but their developments and trajectories have differed.

About this research report

In this context of both advances in, and resistance to, changes in gender orders, this research explores how men in elected positions who express some commitment to gender agendas and changes in gender relation explain and enact this commitment. The research investigates the personal and socio-political factors that underpin the actions of male politicians in gender equality, the ways in which they position themselves in relation to gender equality and feminism agendas, and their motivations and forms of political action. To draw some contrasts between the views expressed by male politicians during interviews, this research also considers the perspectives of students, activists and academics, aiming to offer a more complex reading of the issue. The research contributes qualitative information to topics that are still emerging in academic research, such as political masculinities.

This is important research at a time when analyses of gender inequalities show that, despite some advances, it will still take 155 years to close the gender gap at the current rate of progress (World Economic Forum, 2022). The transformation of gender injustice is an agenda that requires action by all social actors in long-term and sustained changes, as feminist movements have demanded for decades.

We are also seeing the emergence of male leaders around the world who express and legitimise sexist and misogynist politics, with direct consequences for feminism and for the struggle to change gender relations or manage global challenges such the Covid-19 pandemic or climate change (Encarnacion, 2017; Parmanand, 2022; Sperling, 2015; Stephens, 2020). Male presidents in several Latin-American countries have incorporated some of the rhetoric of anti-gender movements into their speeches, giving these movements increasing visibility in national debates (Arguedas Ramirez, 2020; Serrano Amaya, 2021). Understanding the motivations, obstacles and facilitators for male politicians who express some interest in gender change can help to strengthen political and civic responsibility in challenging today's gender inequalities.

This report starts with contextual information on the politics and economy of Colombia as an upper-middle-income country and how, in its structural conditions, public policies that target men on gender issues and groups of men working on gender and masculinities have helped to drive the emergence of male politicians who are interested in supporting this agenda. This is followed by a summary of the methodology used to collect and analyse data and its limitations. The report then presents key findings, focusing on how male politicians relate to feminism, what motivates them to participate in gender equality initiatives, and the factors that either constrain or enable their participation. The report finishes with conclusions and implications for policy, practice and research.

The political system and socio-economic situation in Colombia

Colombia is a presidential participatory democracy. Political power is divided into three branches: the executive, the legislative and the judicial branch, with various bodies playing key roles on gender equality issues. At the provincial level, the executive power is constituted by department governors, municipal mayors and local administrators for administrative subdivisions such as city councillors. The Congress of the Republic is elected every four years and consists of 108 senators, elected from national lists, and 188 representatives, elected from territorial lists.

Until the constitutional reforms of 1991, Colombia had maintained a two-party system since the mid-19th century, defined as liberal and conservative parties, which had excluded the participation of other ideologies and political positions. Successive political and electoral reforms opened the door to new political representations through the collection of signatures from citizens and by alliances between various emerging parties and, since 1991, citizens have been able to create political parties or movements. Those who want to compete for an elected position can seek the support of a recognised political party or create their own. This has also created heterogeneous parties and weakened the relationship between those competing for elected positions and the parties or movements they intend to represent. Colombia now has 35 registered political parties.

The current President, Gustavo Petro, began his term in 2022 as the first leftist leader to hold such a position. His presidency was preceded by social unrest and mobilisations between 2018 and 2021 across the country, led by young people who opposed government measures which increased social inequalities – made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic – and the consequent economic crisis.

Poverty and inequality remain evident across the country. In 2022, 36.6% of Colombians were living in poverty and 13.8% in extreme poverty. The Gini coefficient was 0.556, which makes the country one of the most unequal in the world, and the second most unequal in Latin America and the Caribbean after Brazil. 85.9% of Colombians do not recognise themselves as belonging to any ethnic group, 10.5% identify as black, 3.4% as Indigenous and 0.01% as Roma (DANE, 2023).

Although some progress has been made, significant structural gender inequalities and gaps persist in economic and social indicators. Between 2008 and 2019, for example, the participation of women in the labour market increased from 46.4% to 53.1%. In 2022 it stood at 51.4%, for women and 76.5% for men. In terms of unemployment, the rate in 2022 was 17.1% for women and 10.4% for men. The gender pay gap narrowed from 18.2% in 2013 to 5.8% in 2020, but there is a real contrast between the informal and formal sectors, with a gender pay gap of 28.4% in the former, falling to 4.4% in the latter. There is also a significant gender difference in the hours spent daily on care responsibilities, with women spending an average of 7.14 hours on care, compared to only 3.25 hours for men. Land ownership is also unequal, with men accounting for 63.7% of single landowners and women accounting for only 36.3% (DANE et al., 2022).

In terms of politics, Law 581 of 2000 establishes a minimum quota of 30% for the representation of women in the management positions of public entities. In 2021, 46% of decision-making positions in public administration were occupied by women, which can be seen as a sign of progress. However, of the 296 seats in Congress, only 86 are occupied by women (29%), even though 75.2% of the population consider gender equality in politics to be a condition of democracy.

Political conflict is also gendered: of the 9,639,422 people affected by armed socio-political violence recognised in February 2024, 50.2% were women, and they were 53.2% of all those who suffered forced displacement (UARIV, 2024).

It is important to consider the position of Colombia in terms of regional migration. In 2020, the country received 2.26 million migrants from Venezuela, of which just over half (50.2%) were women (DANE et al., 2022).

Background to the growing interest in political masculinities

This section sets out the context for the emergence of men in elected positions in democratic institutions who take up gender equality agendas in Colombia. It is argued that this emergence features two parallel phenomena: the recognition of issues of men and masculinities as a matter of concern that must be addressed by public policies and the emergence of groups of men and individuals who have reflected on gender inequalities and who are interested in this agenda. While the interaction between these processes is conflictive and unequal, it has facilitated the emergence of masculinities as a matter of interest in policies and for male politicians who articulate, advocate, and develop elements of gender equality and feminist agendas.

Public policies on men and masculinities

The development of public policy initiatives for the engagement of men in gender equality and for debate on masculinities has been a long-standing interest in the region, with variations and specific characteristics in each country. As scholars like Aguayo and Nascimento (2016) note, pivotal global conferences of the 1990s – the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing – as well as binding treaties like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), have helped to codify the importance of including men in policy conversations on sexual and reproductive health, violence prevention programmes, paternal obligations, HIV/AIDS and other matters.

As discussed later, the emergence of the studies of men and masculinities in the region has been connected to the development of relevant interventions in social policies and to calls to shift the discussion from concerns about individual crises in men to the promotion of social transformations (Careaga and Cruz Sierra, 2006; Menjivar Ochoa, 2012; Valdés and Olavarría, 1997b; Valdés and Olavarría, 1998).

Universal and regional treaties related to gender equality have played an influential role in shaping laws and public policies in Colombia and the rest of Latin America. Colombia's signing and ratification of such instruments provides activists and advocates with an essential framework for lobbying to institutionalise gender equity principles domestically. These international agreements have contributed to the development of a rights-based framework that social movements have used to apply pressure on governments.

During the Constitutional reform of 1991, for example, a women's working group was created in Colombia to incorporate CEDAW's mandate in the new Constitution. A total of 75 organisations from all over the country joined the Women and Constituent Network, which succeeded in incorporating specific rules into the Political Charter on the general right to equality, women's participation in the public administration, equality in the family and special protection for women heads of households.

Shortly after the promulgation of the 1991 Constitution, a diverse set of women's organisations participated in major legal reform processes based on international instruments, such as the Law against Domestic Violence (1996), the Quota Law (2000), the Law to Guarantee a Life Free of Violence (2008), the Law on Equal Pay (2011) and the Law for the Guarantee of Victims of Sexual Violence in the Context of the Armed Conflict (2014) (see Annex 1 for a chronological overview of Colombian laws related to gender equality).

Legal developments since the early 2000s have focused on constructing guiding frameworks and a supportive bureaucratic infrastructure to ensure the effective implementation of gender equality commitments signed by the Colombian Government. In 2003, for example, Decree 519 created the Presidential Advisory Office for Women's Equity. This body serves as a crucial advisory and coordination entity, focusing on rights and policy issues affecting women. Lawmakers took another significant step in 2023 by transforming this advisory office into a Vice-Ministry of Women's Affairs under the newly established Ministry of Equality through the enactment of Law 2281.

Colombia's inclusion of men and masculinities in gender equality public policies dates back to the beginning of this century. One significant milestone was the inclusion of a module on Masculinities, Gender Relations and Domestic Violence (Gómez et al., 2001) within an educational programme for the general public on the prevention of domestic violence. This was published as part of the development of the National Policy for Peace and Family Co-existence, known as 'Haz Paz'. The programme took the form of handouts and workshops with public officials in the justice sector and family police stations. This policy was continued in the national development plans for 1998–2002 and 2002–2006.

During the 2010s, the institutionalisation of public gender policies and issues of men and masculinities began to include, first, a greater emphasis on the prevention of GBV, and second, ideas of co-responsibility for and the participation of men in care responsibilities. Co-responsibility denotes policies on masculinities to shift the perception of the role of men as mere participants in or contributors to care work, to an understanding of the shared and mutual caring responsibilities of men and women. In 2013, the National Public Policy on Gender Equity was adopted with the inclusion of the 'co-responsibility' of men for care, and an Intersectoral Commission was created for its implementation to give the policy a broader scope of action.

National public policy actions have been paralleled by international cooperation strategies that call for the inclusion of masculinities issues in gender policies. In 2015, actions by the Government of Colombia aligned with the *HeforShe* campaign, promoted by UN Women. The Colombia Country Strategy 2014–2017 included the Strategy for co-responsible, democratic, and non-violent masculinities, which aligns with the first recognition in a National Development Plan (2018–2022) of the 'value of the transformative role of men in the recognition of women's rights' (DNP, 2018:1048). As part of this framework, the National School for the Unlearning of Machismo (Box 1) was launched in November 2020 (García and Hernández, 2022). The current National Development Plan 2022–2026 'Colombia, a world power of life', creates a National Care System that includes programmes for 'awareness-raising, education, and communication for the promotion of caring and nonviolent masculinities, which encourage the full participation of men, young people, and children in care responsibilities' (DNP, 2022:105–106).

Box 1: The National School for the Unlearning of Machismo

In November 2020, the Colombian government launched the National School for the Unlearning of Machismo, an educational and communicational campaign to involve men in the promotion of positive changes in gender relations and to tackle GBV. The campaign, which is funded with public, private and international resources, includes 13 graphics to be distributed nationally in social media and shown in public spaces with the motto: 'I unlearn machismo to learn'. The aim is to challenge patriarchal and misogynist cultural attitudes and imagery in the economy, politics, community leadership, education and at home. One of the graphics, shown below, emphasises the importance of having more women participating in politics.



Source: Government of Colombia/SECNewgate Communications.

These communication materials invite the public to join this initiative as a social 'movement' for change and to enrol in the school. The school itself is an educational programme developed through an alliance between the Presidential Council for Women's Equity, the EAN University, the European Union, and USAID's Generating Equity Programme. Its purpose is to encourage public officials and leaders of social organisations to identify, prevent, reflect on and transform sexist imagery, attitudes and practices that are at the base of gender inequities and violence.

The school has both face-to-face and virtual activities. Nearly 1,500 men and women from across the country and from Colombia's diplomatic representations abroad have participated in the school to date. Some of the topics taught through its pedagogical guide (García and Hernández, 2022) include: complicity with machismo, gender stereotypes, misogyny, responsibilities in domestic work and in care, active fatherhood, love relationships, sexuality, women's right to a life free of violence, and machismo in organisations. The school is expected to open a large online course in 2024, aiming to reach at least another 14,000 public employees across the country.

These national policies also have applications at the sub-national level. Over the past two decades, educational and civic engagement campaigns have been developed in Bogotá and in Medellín (Colombia's second largest city), and to a lesser extent in other cities, to raise awareness and sensitise men to issues of violence prevention, co-responsibility in care, and change in notions of masculinity. Most of these strategies target working class men and are implemented at the micro-local level although some also reach the mass media and wider audiences.

While there have been diverse developments in the involvement of men and masculinities in public policies on gender equality across Latin America and in Colombia, six key limitations have been raised since the earliest stages of the growing interest in this issue:

1. Improvements in some dimensions of men's lives do not automatically reconfigure unequal gender relations (Keijzer, 2011).
2. Changes in male roles may attract excessive attention, reducing the visibility of other problematic and permanent issues (Viveros, 2007).
3. Some advances may be partial and provisional, with no guarantee of sustainability (Madrid et al., 2020).
4. There is a risk of reinforcing traditional ideas of masculinity that lead men to acquire more power in everyday life (Careaga and Cruz Sierra, 2006).
5. The heteronormative condition of public policies can be an obstacle, particularly those that attempt to address issues of gender identity or sexual orientation (Provincia de Buenos Aires, 2023; Serrano Amaya, 2011).
6. Cis sexism makes invisible the specific agendas and needs of trans men in public policies (Radi, 2019).

Men and masculinities collectives

In Latin America, men and masculinities collectives are critical actors in pro-feminist thinking and in the struggle for gender equality (Aguayo and Sadler, 2011; Figueroa, 2011; Jimenez Rodas and Morales Hererra, 2021; Sequeira, 1998; Various authors, 2009). These collectives emerged in the early 1990s, aiming to reflect on the construction of masculinity and its implications for men's relationships with themselves, with women and with other men. The use of the term 'men and masculinities' aims to capture their diversity and heterogeneity. These collectives have contributed to the politicisation of masculinities, public policy advocacy, and the creation of dialogues and connections with gender agendas and feminist mobilisations.

One key reference point for these collectives is the influence of Latin American popular education, grassroots church groups, and popular mobilisations for social justice (Serrano Amaya and Vidal, 2015). This element distinguishes them from similar groups in the United States and European countries where self-reflection, identity development and support are more relevant than social justice because of their origins in awareness raising. These influences and connections with other social mobilisations can be found in experiences across several countries in the region, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, and Uruguay.

In 2018, UN Women funded an evaluation of these collectives and other initiatives working with men, in particular those working on issues of violence prevention and 'co-responsible' masculinities (Essayag, 2018). Of 154 initiatives identified in Latin America, 42 were found to have a positive potential to question traditional masculinities, promote gender non-violence, and develop actions on care and co-responsibility. Some include public officials as their target audience or are conducted by governmental bodies.

In all, 17 of the 42 experiences studied have been developed in Colombia. They focus on the promotion of non-violent and co-responsible masculinities, with strategies that include promoting spaces for men to discuss their issues, creating centres where men's needs can be heard, raising awareness through experiential and artistic methods, training promoters to implement prevention campaigns, and pedagogical workshops for adults. There are also policy initiatives to produce gender sensitive data, such as surveys on the social and institutional tolerance of violence against women and on the use of time by men and women. In general, the weaknesses of these strategies include a lack of impact measurements, limited sustainability, and problems to take smaller initiatives to scale and transform them into broader plans of action.

The research found that even in collectives that did not emerge directly under the influence of women's groups, feminism does operate as a 'horizon' of the struggles, and there are shared trajectories between some collectives and others (Essayag, 2018: 64). However, the author also points out that this connection to feminist movements has yet to be developed and warn of the risk of instrumentalising feminist ideas.

The relationship between men and masculinities collectives and feminisms, both as political stakes and as forms of mobilisation, is neither homogeneous nor automatic. On the contrary, there are gaps and unresolved issues, not least because feminisms are not homogeneous either and relate in different ways to masculinities and men's collectives working for gender equality. Pro-feminism is a broad category used to describe a variety of ways to interact with gender equality agendas, including alliances with feminist organisations, participation in gender equality activities or denouncing of GBV. Serrano Amaya and Vidal (2015) identify three ways of understanding 'pro-feminist' in the perspective and action of men's collectives in the region:

1. As an alliance with women's and feminist organisations to work on specific projects.
2. As support for declarations and demands for gender equality without working directly with women's and feminist organisations and maintaining some separation to work only with men or on men's issues.
3. Using feminisms explicitly to identify themselves and to define their agendas and stakes.

Serrano Amaya and Vidal find, however, that when talking about alliances and being in favour of feminisms, it is unclear what dimension of feminist struggles men's collectives align with or with which feminism they identify.

Collectives of men and masculinities in Colombia have three different origins: sexual and reproductive health promotion, the work of feminist organisations, and in academia as outlined below:

1. Sexual and reproductive health promotion. Service providers have played a pivotal role in challenging traditional masculinity norms and promoting a more inclusive understanding of gender roles (García and Gómez, 2003; La Furcia, 2013). Profamilia's approach, for example, extends beyond specialised health services to encompass research, education and the formation of support and peer groups focused on men, masculinities, gender and sexual rights.

2. Collectives working with or in close relation to feminist organisations. These collectives are heterogeneous, as they combine interests in therapeutic and self-reflection with socio-political organisation and training in popular education and community work. Those that have emerged in Colombia since the mid-1990s include Taller Albierto in the city of Cali (Taller Albierto, n.d.) and the *Colectivo Hombres y Masculinidades* (Men and Masculinities Collective) in Bogotá. The *Mesa Nacional de Masculinidades por la Igualdad de Género* (National Roundtable of Masculinities for Gender Equality) was formed in 2016 and remains active today (Box 2).

Box 2: National Roundtable of Masculinities for Gender Equality



National Roundtable of Masculinities for Gender Equality. Photo © Carlos Iván García.

Colombia's National Roundtable of Masculinities for Gender Equality, created in 2016, is a space for the exchange and connection of territorial experiences on men and masculinities. Current participants include representatives from 12 social organisations, four public institutions, and social activists from nine regions across the country. The National Roundtable is the focal point of the MenEngage Global Network for Colombia.

As well as making public statements, the Roundtable organises face-to-face workshops and meetings. It also conducts research and intervention projects with the support of international cooperation agencies such as Promundo, UN Women and the MenEngage Network. In 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Roundtable promoted the 'Men Who Care' initiative, one of the first virtual strategies in Latin America that called on men to talk about care, aiming to counteract violence, inequity and inequality unleashed by pandemic confinement measures.

At its latest national meeting, held in November 2023, in Medellín, members reaffirmed their commitment to carry out advocacy actions in public policies with a focus on gender and masculinities, as well as to promote the ethics and economy of care as a fundamental axis of change in masculinities in their work with men, through partnerships with key stakeholders.

3. Academic spaces. Universities have facilitated the emergence of collectives interested in masculinities either at the intersection between self-reflection and research or through work that is more oriented toward academia. These include the Masculinity Studies Network of the National University (1996-1998); the research group Family Studies, Masculinities and Femininities of the University of Cartagena, created in 1999; the New Masculinities groups of the Industrial University of Santander created in 2008; and the University of Pamplona 10 years later.

There have been various forms of confluence between these origins, such as the simultaneous participation of some men in academia and in social activism, and activities such as fora and seminars where these different initiatives combine. However, their different origins also imply different approaches to gender equality and to feminism, from those more oriented to the promotion of behaviour change (such as sexual rights collectives) and from the self-reflection of those coming from a feminist background, to the critical analysis of gender and power in the more academic collectives. This variety of initiatives matters for the consideration of the development of some collective interest in positioning men and masculinities as a matter for public discussion.

Scholarship on men and masculinities in the region

Men's studies in Latin America have been closely linked to feminism, to initiatives for social transformation and development (such as those promoted by UN agencies or by international cooperation agencies in European countries), and to social mobilisations on gender, transformation and social justice. There has, for example, been a long-term theoretical interest in understanding masculinities in relation to the question of power and the way in which patriarchy has shaped Latin American societies and cultures (Valdés and Olavarría, 1997a) and masculinities (Schöngut Grollmus, 2012; Martini, 2002; Albelda, 2011). Some initial studies sought to question the concept of 'machismo', a term that is often used and that stereotypes Latin American societies, hiding the structural conditions that have produced, and resulted from, gender inequality (Fuller, 1998; Gutmann, 1998; Gutmann, 1996; Lancaster, 1992).

Interactions between men and masculinities with various dimensions of gender politics have been studied extensively in the region to demonstrate their complexity, permanence, and resistance to change. Some key issues explored have included the growing but still limited participation of women in elected democratic positions and the impact of this on male control of politics (Ruiz Tena, 2022; Wills Obregón and Cardozo García, 2010), as well as on lack of gender parity in representative positions and the reproduction of violence against women in politics (Albaine, 2015; Romo, 2008).

Caudillismo is a concept used extensively in the studies of Latin American political culture. The term is used to explain how, since the formation of Latin American states, political power has been wielded by men who embody a type of populist, authoritarian and individualist approach that is embedded in a patriarchal, heterosexist, classist, and racist masculinity – a masculinity that perpetuated colonial power during the emergence of 19th century republics (Crespo, 2015; González, 1982). Even in countries with a certain tradition of gender equality and explicit policies to promote women's participation, such as quota laws, there are still spaces that are closed to women and controlled by traditional forms of male politics (Campbell, 2006).

The first studies of masculinities in Colombia emerged in the mid-1990s in the framework of alliances between nascent groups of activists, organisations and universities. La Furcia (2013) suggests that studies on masculinities in Colombia emerge from five sources:

1. feminist academic scholarship
2. the actions of private institutions working on sexual and reproductive health with specific services for men

3. non-governmental groups and organisations that organise interventions with men
4. public sector social programmes on issues such as fatherhood, violence and sexual and reproductive health
5. individual initiatives in the field of masculinities that are not necessarily associated with activism.

As politics is a space for male control, some men use a variety of mechanisms to exercise their power over others, taking advantage of the patriarchal system in which they find themselves (Connell, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2010). This can be seen not only in structural issues but also in everyday forms of political interaction, such as debates, conflict management, or the creation of alliances to conduct political projects. We know less about the importance of masculinities for electoral participation and representation, however, particularly in thinking about the gendered status of men in politics.

There is little academic discussion of the role of male politicians in gender agendas in Colombia. There is, however, a growing body of knowledge on how masculinities enter the political sphere and political power relations. Two themes, in particular, have been developed: the political masculinities of men in representative positions, and the relationships across masculinities, militarism and conflict.

Viveros (2013) studied the intersections of race, masculinity and political power by analysing the ways in which President Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010) used his media image of masculinity and whiteness to gain political legitimacy and popularity. This study demonstrates the political benefits of a traditional masculinity associated with firmness and authority. It also aligns with studies on presidents such as Duterte, Trump, Bolsonaro and Putin as examples of politicians who embody masculine, racist, sexist and classist privileges, both in their political agendas and in the way they exercise political power (Borba, 2021; Valente and Borba, 2023).

A study of the gender policy of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez by Bernal et al. (2022) found that the notion of women's role during his administration promoted the idea of empowerment and economic entrepreneurship in gender equality policies. The comparison is relevant to highlight how two seemingly contradictory but relevant ideas of gender can be combined in terms of the practice of a specific policy agenda.

A second group of studies with a certain tradition in Colombia is concerned with issues of masculinities, armed conflict, and peacebuilding. This is relevant, given the importance of the armed conflict in shaping politics in Colombia and its impact on the politics of gender and sexuality. In its diversity, this literature demonstrates how the production of forms of masculinity and gender regimes have been central to the dynamics of the armed conflict in Colombia. If caudillismo is central to the political practices of those who wield political power, then militarism is its counterpart. Therefore, studies were found on:

- men in armed groups and criminal organisations and their constructions of masculinity both before and after the war (Baird, 2018; Andrés Rivera and Escobar, 2018; Flisi, 2016; Neira Cruz and Castillo Olarte, 2021; Theidon, 2009)
- the symbolic production of militarist masculinities to legitimise state action (Poveda, 2019)
- the gender regimes of the guerrillas (Dietrich Ortega, 2012)
- the impacts of war on the gender constructions of non-combatants (Browne et al., 2021)
- the importance of militarism for the construction of gender identities and national identity (Losada, 2022; Ovalle et al., 2022).

Research objectives and methods

This research aims to understand the personal and socio-political causes and factors behind the recent emergence of male politicians in Colombia who adopt feminist identities or support gender equality agendas. It also intends to explore the factors that facilitate or impede the commitment of male politicians to such agendas and whether this contributes to any shifts in gender norms that are tied to political leaders and masculine norms more broadly. The study forms a part of a cross-country collaborative research project on *Men in Politics as Agents of Gender Equitable Change* conducted in Colombia, Liberia and Malaysia with leaders who support feminist foreign policies (See Michalko et al., 2024).

This cross-country project asks three questions:

1. How do feminist, pro-feminist, or gender equality champions amongst male politicians perceive gender norms in their country context and around the world?
2. How do gender norms and other factors shape how these men act and the type of masculinities they demonstrate in the political sphere?
3. What impact, if any, do the feminist, pro-feminist, or gender equality champions among male politicians have on gender norms and masculinities in their society?

In the case of Colombia, three additional specific research questions were included:

1. How do these politicians position themselves in relation to gender equity agendas and feminism?
2. Which factors motivate them to participate in such agendas?
3. How do they do it?

Research methodology

The departing premise of the research was a consideration of gender as a relational issue. Therefore, even if the focus was on men and (political) masculinities, the research explored not only the perceptions of men, but also the interactions among men as a diverse group and between men and women, also as diverse groups. It also explored political masculinities not only from the perspective of those formerly or currently involved in politics, but also from the perspective of civil society, in this case represented by university students.

This study has used qualitative research techniques. All research methods and protocols have been designed by the international team from all three country case studies coordinated by ODI, and then translated into Spanish and approved by the Ethics Committee at Universidad de los Andes (Uniandes). All information was collected in Spanish. In all, six focus groups and 16 in-depth interviews were conducted between July and September 2023 by the two main researchers and authors of this report.

The research was divided into two phases of work: data collection, and data analysis and writing. In the first phase, a list was created with the profile of 50 people of interest for interviews, including male and female politicians, academics and activists involved in gender politics. Male politicians were selected on the basis of their involvement in gender equality initiatives, such as legal reforms or public advocacy and commitment to gender policies. The female politicians have all been prominent in

writing or speaking out in support of initiatives aimed at gender equality. The activists were involved in creating, researching and organising gender equality initiatives, while the academics were selected for their participation in research on masculinities. In some cases, the division of categories has not been so neat, because some politicians have had previous experience in academia, and some academics are also activists.

This research has focused on male politicians who have taken elected democratic positions in government. The report will use the terms 'male politicians' and 'men in politics' interchangeably to refer to them. It is understood that the landscape of men in politics is broader, since it may include also men designated for positions in state institutions, such as Ministries or High Courts. While this research does not include these men, further research with them is highly recommended.

Possible participants were contacted by e-mail with an invitation explaining the research objectives and methodology and a consent form. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes (though some participants had less time available). Interviews were recorded after the signing of written consent or the oral consent of participants.

The final sample for interviews was composed of seven Colombian male politicians, three Colombian feminist female politicians and six Colombian social activists, four of whom are also academics. Of the politicians interviewed, one belongs to a right-wing party, and nine to the centre political parties, mostly associated with the Green Party. Participants are identified in their quotes by their political party to illustrate their different political perspectives.

The focus groups included students from two private universities in Bogotá and activists in the field of gender, masculinities and the LGBTQI+ community. Focus groups were held from June to October 2023. Of the six focus groups, four were held with university students from two universities in Bogotá. The focus on students aimed to explore how political masculinities and the actions of male politicians' impact young people, as part of civil society. One university attracts mostly students from the middle to upper classes and the other mostly working class or middle-class students. There were two focus groups in each university, one with young men and another with young women. Participants were recruited through open invitations that were publicised in university spaces. Non-binary students were invited to join the group of their preference. In total, 14 men and nine women took part in the student focus groups, with an average age of 20 years.

Focus group participants were provided with summary information sheets about the project and the focus group methodology. Students filled out a survey that collected general data on their political positioning and socio-economic classification, which was kept confidential. Most were in their third year of university and their fields of study ranged from social sciences and humanities to electronics and engineering. None of the participants expressed any explicit affiliation to a political party. With the exception of three students, the majority voted in the most recent elections for parties identified as left-wing. And with the exception of one participant who identified as Mestizo (mixed race), the majority identified their ethnicity/race as being Colombian. Finally, the participants stated that their socio-economic background allowed them access to public transport and to the internet at home, and reported that the internet was their main source of information.

Two focus groups were conducted with activists. One was conducted with seven members of the *Mesa Nacional de Masculinidades por la Igualdad de Género* – National Roundtable of Masculinities for Gender Equality, with an average age of 39. All participants identified with the statement about their socio-economic context 'my main economic resources come from my work' and all identified as men. Three of the seven participants identified themselves as Colombian, one as a member of an Indigenous community, one as Mestizo, one as 'other' and one did not specify. None of the participants is a member of a political party, but they identify more closely with left-wing parties.

Another focus group was conducted with LGBTQI+ activists, with an average age of 37. Only one of the five participants is a member of a left-wing party. Two participants identified as Colombian, two as mixed, and one as Afro-Colombian. Four stated that their gender identity is male, and one identified as non-binary. Two are Catholic, one preferred not to answer, one is Christian, and one agnostic. All respondents identify with the statement about their socio-economic context 'I live alone, and I am responsible for my own well-being'.

The methodology promoted participation and the development of ideas during the conversation. All focus groups began by showing the participants two images (see Figures 1 and 2) of the current president of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, who accepted the invitation of 36 feminist collectives to participate in a debate on 2 June 2022, during his presidential campaign. During that debate, the then presidential candidate received and wore a scarf that has been emblematic of the struggle for the right to the voluntary termination of pregnancy.

Figure 1: Picture of President Petro used for focus group discussions



Source: EFE/Carlos Ortega, 2022.

Figure 2: Picture of President Petro used for focus group discussions



Source: EFE/Carlos Ortega, 2022.

These images were used to start a conversation about the involvement of male politicians in feminist and gender agendas.

In the second phase, interviews and focus groups recordings were transcribed and anonymised before being shared with other participants in the research. The information was organised according to the agreed nomenclature and the team's own layout. Finally, the transcribed information was analysed using a qualitative coding matrix with the key categories of the research. This coding matrix was the basis for the writing of this final report.

In terms of ethics and positionality, both main researchers are known academics and activists in gender, masculinities and LGBTQI+ rights in Colombia. This facilitated access to some of the interviewees and to participants in the focus groups. To avoid some possible interference due to such familiarity, there was an agreement to adhere as closely and consistently as possible to the established order and wording of the research protocols. At the beginning of each interview or focus group there was a clear explanation of the researcher's role in the research, their involvement in the topic and the goals of the research. When calling for participants in the focus groups, there was also an agreement that researchers' current students would not be included.

Research limitations

This is an exploratory study. Its main limitations are:

- 1. Sampling.** The lack of response to the invitation to politicians to participate was significant and several attempts were needed to obtain a sample of participants, in particular male politicians. The limited response to the invitation may be because data collection took place in the months prior to local and regional elections in October 2023. Male politicians have also declined to be interviewed because they do not feel that they are the right people to talk about this, even if they have promoted some initiatives.
- 2. Generalisability.** Due to the small sampling size for interviews and focus groups, research results are more illustrative than general for the populations included.
- 3. Homogeneity.** The male politicians interviewed are mostly those who have expressed some interest in supporting gender agendas as a part of their open commitment to law reform for gender equality. Members of parties who opposed gender policies were not interviewed. Students who participated in the focus groups are mostly those who express some interest in gender issues and while this was relevant to their contribution, it also implied less interest from those who may have different perspectives. There were no focus groups in public universities or in universities outside Bogotá, due to limited access.

Findings

This section presents the main findings of the research in three sub-sections. The first discusses the ways in which male politicians relate to feminisms, as well as their motivations, positioning and perspectives on change for gender equality. The second sub-section explores the factors that facilitate or impede the work of male politicians for gender equality. The final sub-section shares the perspectives of young male and female students and activists on the participation of male politicians in gender equality policies.

These findings aim to show how men in politics who support gender agendas have developed initiatives to discuss their place as men and as politicians in the struggle for gender equality, working in alliances with women politicians and feminist organisations to position these issues in laws and public policies. They have also contributed to the development and expansion of the idea of 'gender', including questions of masculinities as well as sexual orientation or gender identities in ongoing debates. They are, however, a heterogeneous group with diverse political affiliations and understandings of gender and feminisms and do not always act collectively or with clear articulation. Their reasons for supporting gender agendas are also varied and range from personal interests anchored in their own lives, their political agendas, or their party programmes, as will be discussed.

Men, feminism, and politics: an empty signifier

I never intended to present myself as a feminist man or as a feminist leader being a man, or even as a champion on gender issues, but doing it was to me much more genuine, spontaneous, not calculated... I don't think I am a feminist, I always approached it from common sense.

Male politician, right-wing party

The male politicians interviewed were cautious about calling themselves feminists, even if they were asked to participate in gender equality initiatives. None of the interviewees responded affirmatively to calling themselves a feminist. Instead, they insisted that gender struggles have been led by women and that they cannot, therefore, appropriate their struggles or claim spaces in feminist mobilisations. This way of positioning themselves to express a critical and self-reflective view of the risks of appropriation or the impossibility of 'being' feminists because they are men was more evident in those who had the closest relationships with feminist discussions and perspectives. In other words, there is a tendency to not self-identify as feminist and to keep a certain – and cautious – distance.

This is consistent with feminist critiques of men's participation in feminisms and reflects, among those who report such a cautious attitude, some absorption of such critiques. It could also be the result of current anti-feminist activism that paints feminism in a negative light and leads politicians who depend on public support to keep a certain distance.

Respondents across all political parties tended to identify themselves as 'allies' or to express profound empathy toward gender and social justice issues. This allyship was seen as a core part of their overall political ideologies, rather than as any direct affiliation with feminist movements. This perspective suggests a nuanced interpretation of their roles in relation to feminist advocacy that avoids direct identification with the movements themselves. Notably, there were various interpretations of this allyship, indicating that the concept functions as an 'empty signifier' (Laclau, 1996). This term refers to a rhetorical construct that, while resonant and significant in discourse, lacks a universally acknowledged definition. As such, it allows for multiple interpretations that depend on the subjective perspectives of those involved.

The ally position expressed by the interviewees starts from a recognition of the quest for gender justice as a general political umbrella of work, while acknowledging the specificity of women's struggles and feminism as a social movement with its own agendas. As mentioned, it also suggests a cautious distancing from feminisms due to not feeling legitimate to claim a space there.

The sense of allyship also varies in degrees of sympathy, commitment, and participation in feminist agendas. This coincides with previous research (Serrano Amaya and Vidal, 2015) that finds a variety of meanings for the concept of allyship, which is sometimes underdeveloped or used in a general way to define some closeness, empathy or commitment. What seems new here is the caution or reflection on the impossibility of claiming membership in feminism, which may be associated with some literacy on feminist discussions and on the increasing impact of feminist struggles on public debates. Interestingly, this rejection of a sense of belonging creates a view of feminism as some kind of otherness and fails to challenge the male/female gender binary that presents masculinity and femininity as homogeneous realms.

One of the male politicians interviewed proposed the possibility of working with feminist agendas without assuming that it implies being in the same place:

I identify myself as an ally. Our causes are similar but not the same. I don't pretend to take up the banners of feminism because I'm not the one and I'm not called to do that. What I always say is that we walk hand in hand... We have to manage to walk hand in hand. Considering myself as part of feminism seems to me to invade that space of that struggle a little, and I am very respectful of the struggles of each one of us.

Male politician, centrist party

Another interviewee, reflecting on his own experience as a politician and policy maker, makes a distinction between those who call themselves feminist just to express some empathy and those allies who have made clear and explicit contributions to gender and feminist struggles:

I am not going to be so bold as to describe myself as a feminist, a media feminist, but I have been an ally. Yes, I have been an ally, I have been committed to gender equality and I believe that I have contributed, and I have transformed myself. I have supported, I have collaborated, I have learned, and I have transformed myself. I also say this calmly and with pleasure.

Male politician, centrist party

Another way of understanding the meaning of being an ally involves recognising that men have certain privileges that they can use to promote change. In this case, having a political responsibility implies using that position as a platform to promote the work of feminist organisations or gender agendas more widely. In this respect, one interviewee pointed out:

It's not my banner [gender agendas], it's not the main reason why I do what I do, it's not up to me, but it does guarantee being the platform for these other people.

Male politician, centrist party

This idea can relate to the concept of patriarchal privilege introduced in social studies on masculinities to explain how men as a group benefit from the power imbalance in gender relations (Connell, 2005). The call to recognise their own privilege has become part of a common language of feminist challenges to male power, often heard in public debates and feminist mobilisations. Some male politicians are questioned by the ideas that circulate in feminist debates and are incorporating them into their explanations of their understanding of alliance.

This positioning in terms of ‘sharing but not being in the same place’ may also be a way to point out that not all feminist issues or agendas have the same resonance for male politicians in this study. Strategic positioning allows them to navigate responsibility, commitment and political coherence. In this regard, one interviewee notes:

I don't know if I'm a feminist or not... I would like to be named an ally to the cause, because I do believe that this is a cause that has a very clear ownership by women who demand their own right. I believe that I am not a feminist to some extent, because I do not share all the causes of feminism.

Male politician, right-wing party

As well as avoiding feminist identities, the male politicians interviewed do not label themselves as representatives of ‘alternative’ or ‘new’ masculinities either. Rather, they relate their various experiences and postures to personal self-reflection and to their efforts to promote the need for change and to educate their political colleagues. For one politician interviewed (male, centrist party) gender equality has become a phrase used as part of the general repertoire of politics, as something politically correct rather than as a real commitment. In his experience, he sees many inconsistencies between what his male colleagues say in relation to supporting gender equality and their practices in daily life:

I look at their behaviours and I say 'this one still has a long way to go', in the sense that they still expect women to be the ones who serve them.

Male, centrist party politician

As a reaction to cases of political violence in the Bogotá City Council, one of the interviewees (male, centrist party politician) proposed creating a group in the Council called ‘Traitors of the Patriarchy’, that lasted for a short time. His idea's aim was to generate a proposal in the Council, and beyond, that would ‘contribute to the construction of responsible, non-violent, caring masculinities that would have a different role within society’. He is now on a kind of pedagogical mission:

I do always try in any space, even if it is a small or closed meeting with other councillors, to make them realise: 'what you are saying is super outdated. Your joke is violent'.

Male, centrist party politician

Taking a similar position of problematising the experience of masculinity and that of his colleagues, a congressman believes that the rudeness of male politicians expresses a fragile masculinity:

We have to try to make a change to understand that masculinity is not that macho, brave, rude, aggressive man. The issue of telling men 'you have to get involved because this is a rights issue'. This is not a question of his manhood or his masculinity.

Male, centrist party politician

This implies the need to advance the discussion of whether the way to resolve men's place in relation to feminism is about identity and whether these male politicians are indicating other kinds of relationships. It also raises questions about whether this resistance to labelling oneself as part of feminism may be linked to strategic distancing, given that not claiming to be a feminist provides some public protection in a context where the term arouses resistance. This last aspect is of particular relevance in a context of increasing anti-feminism and anti-gender mobilisations in Colombia and across the region (Correa, 2018), which affects the positioning of politicians on feminism and gender agendas.

Male politicians, positioning and gender equality

The positioning of the male politicians interviewed on gender equality agendas can be broadly classified according to three types of relationships. These are summarised in Table 1, which includes examples of initiatives identified in this research.

Table 1: Three positions of male politicians on the gender equality agenda

Type of allyship	Examples of initiatives
<p>Temporary and strategic support</p> <p>Refers to politicians who support gender equality initiatives in response to calls from other legislators to participate in their projects. This support is the result of temporary and circumstantial political alliances and is a consequence of the advocacy and convincing capacity of those promoting gender agendas. As one female politician and feminist activist noted, it relates to the men who 'get on board' when they are called but who do not demonstrate a permanent commitment.</p>	<p>In response to the invitation of a female member of the House of Representatives of a centrist party – who was interviewed for this research – several male colleagues from various right-wing parties agreed to support her 2021 legislative initiative, which aimed to promote and strengthen sexuality education in the country.</p>
<p>Development of their own gender-focused initiatives</p> <p>Refers to politicians who develop concrete projects on gender issues as part of their more sustained interest. The topics emerge from their own agendas, campaigns, or political party issues. In several cases, these are actions that politicians mobilise in alliance with social organisations or their constituencies. These may be specific projects and are not necessarily the result of sustained collective agendas.</p>	<p>Some of the male politicians interviewed, who belong to a centrist party, and members of the LGBTQI+ community, support gender equality initiatives as well as projects to defend the rights to sexual freedom. For example, Bogotá Council debated a legislative project to guarantee the rights of transgender persons to all health services. Another example was the 2022 bill to prohibit conversion therapies. This initiative was presented by male representatives of a centrist party with the support of other members of Congress, including a representative of a left-wing party who openly identifies as a member of the LGBTQI+ community.</p>
<p>Incorporation of gender in other political agendas</p> <p>Refers to politicians with established political careers (or those who have responsibility in executive positions) who integrate or mainstream their support for gender equality into other areas of their work, such as social development plans or employment policies. Some male politicians interviewed report having people in their technical teams who are responsible for checking that there is an explicit gender perspective in their initiatives, even if these initiatives do not deal directly with gender topics. As in the previous case, the design and implementation of such agendas are closely related to alliances with women's social movements and progressive perspectives in their political practice.</p>	<p>Some public servants and politicians from centrist parties have implemented cultural transformation initiatives such as banning beauty pageants and replacing them with a contest for talented young women in Medellín, the country's second city, or the establishment of a telephone counselling service for men in Bogotá. These initiatives have taken place within the framework of a generally progressive agenda in terms of social equity.</p>

The general tendency, however, is that these reflect individual commitments or the interests of specific men at a given moment in their political careers. In other words, they are not articulated actions that are sustained over time or the result of alliances between male politicians that allow for the continuity, accumulation, or escalation of actions. In addition, the lack of any explicit mention that their commitment to gender issues was a response to their party mandate indicates a limited connection to more sustained political projects.

The male politicians interviewed exhibit a certain political pragmatism in their understanding of gender, what they can do within the feminism and gender equality agendas, and the role they assign to politics as an instrument of gender norm change. The following quote illustrates this pragmatism and summarises the profile of male politicians described in this section:

I believe that when society produces unjust realities or structures of exclusion, it is somewhat the role of law and the state to attack such circumstances, and that certainly happens in the role of women in society. I have no idea if that makes me a feminist or not, and I understand that feminism is extremely diverse and nuanced... I do believe that our role in this is to reinforce, to support, to help to add up.

Male politician, right-wing party

Motivations and politicisation of gender experience: the personal is political

All male politicians interviewed expressed a particular sensitivity or interest in gender issues because of their personal histories. For example, they talked about having grown up in family environments where they witnessed gender inequality, or in families with strong and important female figures, or having feminist life partners who are committed to these issues. However, their personal motivations underwent various forms of politicisation to become salient for their political work.

One of these processes of politicisation relates to sexual orientation. Male politicians who are openly gay express a more explicit connection between their experience as gay men and their sensitivity, concern, interest or alliance in relation to gender issues. One interviewee said:

Discrimination for me has been the driving force of my struggle... For me, the fact that since I was a child I suffered discrimination, at school, at university, being taken out of a bar for being with a group of LGBTQI+ friends who were dancing when the bar was supposed to be heterosexual and requested that you had to respect others...

Male politician, centrist party

The heterosexual male politicians who were interviewed did not connect or reflect on their heterosexuality and their interest in gender issues to the same extent. Instead, they reflect on their male privilege as a motivation and as a source of their responsibility to act. Their politicisation seems to occur through their interactions with feminist politics at personal or collective level, which allows them to read their individual and collective position in gender terms. For example, one interviewee who had an important career in academia and public opinion explained his motivation as a kind of moral duty:

I have also been able to see from my role as a male leader in the public sphere, in politics, in the community, the advantages that a man has... And here women not only break glass ceilings but also cement ones. I have been able to see this throughout my life through my family, through my friends, through the people closest to me.

Male politician, centrist party

Several of the interviewees recognised both the privileges they enjoy as men, and the injustices derived from gender inequalities and violence that they consider to be common elements in society. This recognition appears to be related to their response to feminist critiques of male power and suggests a displacement from the other ways in which pro-feminist men position themselves. They were exposed to those critiques through their interaction with feminism in academia or in their work with social mobilisations.

What these male politicians are saying could be connected to new positionings in pro-feminist politics that are characterised by 'humility, self-critique and vigilance' and the recognition of structural complicity (Wolfman, 2023). However, such recognition is also problematic if it remains at purely a personal level and is not connected to a broader discussion of structural inequalities. Amuchastegui coined the concept of 'guilty vigilance' (2006: 170) to explain how some men justify their commitment to feminist agendas based on individual guilt for living in some privilege, but without connecting this to the structures that produce such guilt.

The politicisation of personal experience among male politicians can also be explained through the sensitivity to social injustice and economic or political inequality that is gained through collective action. Examples of such collective processes included participation in a citizens' initiative, academic or training actions, joining political parties, or contact with other people with previous experience on these issues. This finding suggests the benefits of intersectional approaches to various social justice struggles and the opportunities to politicise men for gender equality through other issues of interest to them, such as efforts to deepen democracy and protect individual and collective rights, struggles for dignity or even discussions on environmental rights or climate change.

Generational differences and changes also have an impact on the understanding of what should be transformed for gender equality and how. Several interviewees, as well as focus group participants, agreed that more young men in general, as well as male politicians, are becoming more progressive, liberal and equality-minded, with attitudes that may break with the ideological lines of their own parties. In the 2018-2022 legislature, for example, a cross-party alliance of young politicians was formed, which resulted in the approval of several important gender equality initiatives. These included flexible parental leave, the possibility of choosing the order of children's surnames, and some rules for the promotion of work equity and the closing of labour gaps for women. Interestingly, generational changes seem to be more relevant factors for politicisation than party affiliation – an area that requires further research.

It may also be misleading to associate the promotion of gender equality with progressive politics. This may reflect what Messner describes as 'the tendency in privileged men's gender strategies to present oneself as an educated modern man who is supportive of gender equality' (2016: 13). In the case of Bogotá, a male councillor from a centrist party stated:

I know young politicians who are from right-wing parties, who are absolutely open and progressive on many of these issues, who defend some women's issues, LGBTQI+ inclusion, because they connect more with this generation in this respect, although they are more conservative on security, on the economy, more punitive.

Male politician, centrist party

This perception of younger politicians as more interested in gender equality can be seen as a way in which some of the male politicians interviewed justify their initiatives. It does not necessarily correspond to a generalised fact (or one that can be confirmed by other data). It does, however, open a discussion on how male politicians perceive gender in relation to other social justice issues and, in particular, how gender can be co-opted by other political agendas.

Understanding of feminism and gender equality

Diverse forms of collective politicisation resulted in a diverse understanding among male politicians of 'gender equity', 'gender equality', 'justice' or the very idea of what gender is. In this respect, the agendas of the politicians interviewed are closer to questions of gender violence, equality and access to rights such as sexual and reproductive rights or political rights. In some cases, the idea of gender equality is connected to social justice agendas in general. In others, the notion of gender is broadened to include issues of masculinities or the rights of LGBTQI+ people.

The perception that some issues are considered more appropriate for men as part of gender agendas was corroborated by the women politicians interviewed. One pointed out that there is a certain hierarchy of issues or topics that are easier for men to accept than others. For example, women's issues are more 'acceptable' than LGBTQI+ rights. There are further hierarchies within these issues, with women politicians saying that men are more receptive to, for example, issues of labour or political equality than to those of sexual and reproductive rights or abortion, which would generate more resistance. Similarly, there is a greater willingness to discuss LGBTQI+ issues in terms of anti-discrimination or marriage equality than in terms of transgender rights issues, which face more resistance than issues of sexual orientation.

The men interviewed made no references to other feminist agendas such as radical feminisms, lesbian feminisms, or intersectional or colonial feminism. This may be because these agendas, although present in activism and academia, still have a limited presence in policy discussions or in projects for legal change. This raises concerns about whether these men would be interested in representing such agendas, whether these feminisms could dialogue with these male politicians as allies of their agendas, and even whether such feminism is interested in policy making or mobilisation inside the state.

The contrast with the perspectives of women politicians who include masculinities issues in their agendas is of relevance here. For some of them, the idea of 'gender equity' is not in conflict with the idea of working on gender and masculinities. One interviewee, a female politician, academic and feminist activist, has worked on an initiative that focused on men and their responsibility for care, although this aimed to address a situation of inequality experienced by women. She promotes the Intersectoral Care Working Group of Bogotá, created in 2014, where civil society organisations, academic institutions, political institutions and state entities come together to discuss the effects of the sexual division of labour in maintaining unpaid and feminised care work. The Working Group also develops public policy strategies to recognise care as a socially relevant problem and to advocate for the rights of those who are mostly involved in the economy of care. In this perspective, the participation of men in gender change is positioned as addressing specific issues rather than as a generic call for inclusion.

Change: obstacles and facilitators

This section explores the factors that impede or facilitate action by male politicians in favour of gender politics. These factors act across diverse levels, from the individual to the collective and from the structural to responses to specific circumstances or issues. The main obstacles faced by male politicians in supporting gender equality initiatives are found at the macro, structural, and long-term levels, such as political party structures and political participation systems. The facilitators tend to be found at the micro, local scale, and include changes within political parties or alliance making.

This finding is relevant for the consideration of the areas that are likely to have the greatest impact in terms of engaging more men to join these agendas with more adequate, sustained and high-quality initiatives. While macro-level changes are necessary, they may involve more complex strategies for action. The facilitators, when accumulated and acted upon at the local level, may have more capacity for advocacy, continuity, and ownership by those who promote them.

Obstacles to the commitment of male politicians with gender equality

Obstacles to the commitment of male politicians to gender equality agendas relate to the way in which gender norms shape the interest of political actors in this issue. The patriarchal condition of politics remains a structural factor that limits actions, but it can be either reproduced or transformed in various ways when it comes to political action.

This section first explores how gender orders and regimes affect the way in which male politicians relate to gender issues and then how they navigate them through diverse political strategies. While gender orders are structural factors, such as the economy, social structure or political power, which define gender, gender regimes are the ways in which an institution is gendered and, in turn, produces forms of gender relations (Connell, 1987). Political institutions have their own gender regimes that interact with the broader gender orders. Both factors are interrelated but are dealt with in different ways, depending on the male politicians' background, agenda and political positioning.

Gender orders and regimes in politics

Male politicians report that one of the obstacles faced by those who support gender agendas is the patriarchal nature of politics – meaning that politics produces and reproduces patriarchy and is, therefore, resistant to gender equality. The interviewees, despite coming from a spectrum of political parties and ideologies, all point out that the forms of political practice of their male peers are a major obstacle that prevents or hinders progress on gender issues.

This situation is seen as part of the status quo that is defended and maintained by 'traditional politics'. In naming 'traditional politics' as a form of politics based on male control, these politicians position themselves and their interest in gender equality as being associated with modernity and progressive politics. This factor is of relevance to this report's understanding of how politicians explain the limitations they face and how they justify their actions.

These obstacles to the work of male politicians on gender issues are associated with the perceptions that those who are not feminist allies or gender equality champions perpetuate 'machismo culture'. Machismo culture and machismo are terms often used by the politicians interviewed to encapsulate the societal attitudes they want to leave behind, and that are related to male control, male privilege and misogyny. According to the research participants, this culture not only prevents women's full

participation in politics, but also makes gender equality issues irrelevant, or prevents more sustained change. The 'macho culture' according to one interviewee:

[Macho culture] prevents the participation of women. Because it is aggressive, it is violent, because it causes fear, because being exposed, because anything is an aggression and it takes one more step, one more effort for a woman to dare.

Male politician, centrist party

The macho culture is also reflected in the forms of interaction in politics and among male politicians. According to some interviewees, male politicians can also be affected by gender stereotypes when, for example, supporting certain gender equality issues is seen as undermining their identity or personal and political image. This is seen most clearly in the case of support for agendas around LGBTQI+ rights.

It is important to take a critical look at how male politicians use the idea of macho culture as an all-encompassing explanatory term to justify a lack of responsibility or to deny their own agency in changing gender roles. Even more, the use of the term to explain gender inequalities creates a perception that the problem is based more on generalised cultural characteristics than on the social or structural conditions of inequality.

In contrast to the idea of some structural obstacles such as machismo, the interviewees also stated that there is now a tendency to treat gender in politics as a matter of being 'politically correct'. In their understanding, gender equality is an issue that few politicians in general will oppose explicitly, but it is one that they would not actively support either. In the following testimony, an interviewee describes the resistance he faced from other male politicians to one of his initiatives on gender issues:

So, they were the ones who were all absent from the discussions, they were never there, but they didn't want to put it on the agenda either, because if they put it on the agenda, then they would get on some people's backs, but if they voted no, they would get on other people's backs. So, to be politically correct, they decided to simply absent themselves, to stay away from the decision on whether to take the debate to the second debate.

Male politician, centrist party

The behaviour of male political peers in response to other men's support for gender agendas is most evident in the case of those who are openly gay. These interviewees have experienced the derogatory or subordinate valuation of their work on gender issues, as this work is seen as being driven by their sexual orientation and is, therefore, subject to suspicion. Even heterosexual male politicians noted that their sexual orientation was sometimes called into question for raising these issues among their peers. Still, none of those who reported this behaviour said that such accusations were a problem for them or their political careers. Further exploration might reveal whether supporting gender equality agendas could work in positive ways for heterosexual male politicians who may obtain some gains by being perceived as more 'progressive' or 'modern'.

The male politicians interviewed describe their situation as one of a tension between the impossibilities of changing something so embedded as a machismo culture and the banalisation of gender equality. Behind this is the issue of how gender agendas enter political arenas, under which hierarchies and languages and how individual and collective interests are negotiated. This topic is expanded in the next section.

Strategies to navigate political obstacles

The politicians identified two key barriers to their support of gender equality: economic costs and political calculus. The main obstacles reflect the fact that to be considered pro-feminist, male politicians need to make a real commitment to gender agendas. The obstacle they face is how to navigate the political game. The economic costs or challenges of building the alliances needed to make the necessary changes successfully often outweigh any interest in support, or allyship, for gender equality.

The economic cost of gender initiatives is, from the perspective of some interviewees, a powerful political argument that is used to prevent change. One of the female politicians interviewed pointed out that this issue was the most difficult to address in a masculinities-focused initiative that she promoted. The cost of the proposed change, rather than the need for this change, was the main argument used by public institutions and by opposition legislators. To win the support of both public and private economic actors, such as businesses, the promoter of this initiative had to gain support from influential economic sectors that made the same economic case to show its benefits. The politician also recalls that those most in favour of the initiative were women from the private sector.

Economic or budgetary investments were seen as another factor that can demonstrate real commitments to gender equality, because they so often make the difference between commitments on paper and concrete action. This is of particular importance in Colombia, where gender-focused law-making is prolific, but implementation is limited. The fact that politicians mention this issue as an obstacle highlights the need to shift the discussion on feminist political masculinities beyond the realms of individual will or moral duty where these issues are often framed.

Another aspect related to the reality of politics is the electoral calculus. The male politicians interviewed are cautious about associating their support for gender equality with a direct political gain or loss. While these issues may be of interest to one electoral sector, they may not be of interest to others, and may, therefore, be counterproductive for a politician's political success and survival. The main challenge is how to ensure these issues generate gains for those who promote them, rather than political losses. In this respect, three possible courses of action emerged for male politicians to ensure their support for gender equality issues secures them political gains:

1. achieve change by creating alliances
2. make incremental progress through partial negotiations
3. push these issues through political negotiation, despite the potential for backlash.

Further examination of these strategies and their relative efficacy could reveal the conditions under which male politicians can balance their support for social issues with their electoral objectives.

One additional obstacle that may deter further engagement with gender agendas is the perceived risks to political capital that can be associated with the differential value given to some of the topics included in such agendas. One man who has championed a few LGBTQI+ rights projects in Congress believes that such an agenda, for example, does not lead to any gains in political power because it tends to meet resistance from other politicians and the electorate:

It always adds up to a negative... I was constantly thinking about how my sexual orientation would or would not impact the electorate. How would the people who voted for me, because I was the representative of entrepreneurs and education, not be disappointed when they discovered that I was a diverse man and that they were going to take away my vote? So, undoubtedly, that generates affectations among the funders themselves.

Male politician, centrist party

The perception among male politicians, therefore, is less of accumulated progress and more of uneven, unequal and circumstantial changes in the incorporation of gender agendas into political culture.

Facilitators for the engagement of male politicians with gender equality

Five key factors that facilitate male politicians' feminist work were identified:

1. The rise of a new generation of politicians.
2. Supportive political party ideologies.
3. The creation of alliances with civil social organisations and media.
4. The training and capacity of politicians' support teams.
5. The positioning of gender issues in public discussions.

As noted in the introduction, gender equality policies and significant changes in the politics of gender and sexuality in Colombia shape the context within which male politicians define and enact their own gender agendas. This history of reform is the main structural facilitator for the engagement of male politicians with gender equality, even if they do not recognise this explicitly. It was not possible for this research to establish a direct or cumulative relationship between this progress and the actions of male politicians. Indeed, while all recognise the importance of feminism and women's movements in bringing about change, male politicians seem unaware of their detailed and long history. Even so, the accumulated progress that has been made operates as a great enabler of change that cannot be ignored.

The rise of a new generation of politicians

Some of the gender equality proponents interviewed are just starting their political careers and are in their positions for the first time. Some do not even expect to continue because, for them, politics is just one moment in their professional careers. The fact that they are young professionals from urban settings and that they express some knowledge of feminist discussions, suggests a greater acknowledgment of gender discussions as part of the development of new political actors.

All participants mention explicitly the role of feminism in making gender politics a matter of public and political concern. The absorption of gender agendas by these new politicians can be seen as an impact of feminist mobilisations and of feminist politics. The visibility of a new generation of male politicians interested in gender politics or who are allies with feminist organisations contributes to create a sense of collective responsibility and commitment for gender change. As one of the male politicians interviewed said:

I think that if more young people arrive, regardless of their colour [political position] we will have legislative agendas in the Council, in the governments, public agendas that are much more inclusive and much broader in terms of guaranteeing rights and gender equality. I think that until that happens, it will be very difficult, because it will be the same people with mostly retrograde thoughts from 40 or 50 years ago who have been in the same place, who will not allow this change of generation and ideas to also occupy a space in politics.

Male politician, centrist party

It should be noted that there are also men with a longer history in politics who support these agendas. Several well-known politicians in Colombia who were supportive at the beginning of the century were mentioned in the interviews, including those who promoted rights agendas, social justice agendas, or agendas for change in traditional politics. In contrast, a new generation of male politicians is also emerging in anti-gender politics (Moragas, 2020).

Supportive political party ideologies

Some political parties tend to be more in favour of gender policies than others. Gender issues tend to have a stronger presence in the agendas of parties on the left or centre-left, such as those related to the so-called green parties. While the analysis of party strategies is beyond the scope of this research, the male politicians interviewed did refer to the role of their parties as a key element in achieving progress on this issue. Five of them are from the Green Party, a political party that has an explicit gender mandate in its activities. In other words, explicit party support appears to be an enabler of commitment to the issue.

The creation of alliances with civil society and media

This political strategy relates to the type of alliances that are created to promote gender equality and the way in which this issue is positioned in public debates. Politicians who have supported gender equality initiatives affirm the importance of collective and concerted work with social organisations for success. Those who described positive actions on the issue pointed to alliances with social organisations, academia, the media and other politicians as facilitators of their work.

The training and capacity of politicians' support teams

Male politicians who hold representative positions in the legislature and the executive mentioned the expert knowledge and commitment of their support teams as a factor that facilitated their work on gender equality. It is these teams that design the initiatives and provide content to the politicians' actions and they play a key role in facilitating, supporting, and giving legitimacy and credibility to the work of male politicians. Some are constituted by professional women with academic expertise on the topic. Working with technical teams can, therefore, strengthen work with pro-feminist male politicians.

The positioning of gender issues in public discussions

Some of the politicians interviewed cited some cultural changes or transformations as facilitators, at least in terms of symbolic matters or in the greater presence of the gender agenda in broad social and political debates. The male politicians interviewed recognise that interest in gender equality is now on the public agenda in a way that it was not before, and this makes it more important to work on the issue. In a way, they are responding to a broader social, political and cultural change resulting from gender and feminist mobilisations that call on politicians to take a position. A combination of personal and political commitment with the issue is what seems to make the difference between some male politicians who opt to support gender equality and others who may be facing the same changes, but who resist or deny participating in them. This may be the result of recognising a significant change in politics, as one interviewee stated:

The political face of the 21st-century is that of a woman activist and fighter. It is as simple as that. And we should rather be opening up spaces for more women activists and fighters to reach these spaces.

Male politician, centrist party

Perceptions of male politicians' work on gender issues and the politicisation of masculinities

This section explores the participation of male politicians in gender agendas from the perspective of male and female university students and representatives of activist collectives who took part in focus group discussions.

The research questions about male politicians' involvement in gender or feminist agendas were discussed in terms of broader political topics and deeper questions about politics. The role of men in gender equality was perceived as being related to gender inequalities that are pervasive in society and to the limitations of democratic societies. In other words, participants focused less on whether male politicians can or should incorporate gender or feminist issues into their agendas, and more on the ways in which culture reproduces gender inequality; how political culture and political structures produce and reproduce male privileges (at the expense of women's rights); and how feminist and gender change agendas are being understood today in limited, contradictory and instrumentalised ways.

A critical attitude of suspicion: from rejection to pragmatic acceptance

All students and activists viewed the engagement of male politicians with gender agendas with 'permanent suspicion' of the reasons for and the results of their commitment to feminism and gender equality. The fact that participants were unable to identify concrete actions for change or any accumulated tradition of commitment seems to support their perspective. This critical thinking was mentioned explicitly in their answers to the focus group questions and confirmed during the process of collective reflection. This mirrors an active and vigilant attitude, which suggests that participants are aware of the limitations of male politicians' commitment to gender politics. The varied intensity of these suspicions was expressed in four attitudes that are not mutually exclusive, but that are held in combination and with some intensity: rejection of appropriation; scepticism about male politicians' commitment to gender equality; pragmatic acceptance for the greater cause; and acknowledgement of the potential for transformation.

Rejection of appropriation

All six focus groups were highly critical of the adoption of gender agendas by male politicians. This attitude was held most extensively and included concerns about the following areas, in particular:

- the appropriation of feminist agendas without any knowledge of them for opportunistic or utilitarian ends
- the view that this might be rather 'hypocritical', particularly when it relates to politicians who have, at other times, voiced very different opinions (opposing abortion, for example)
- suspicion about whether men can really represent agendas that have no connection to their own life experience.

This perception among students is, therefore, a warning that they have concerns about false inclusion and false equity in politics, with women's issues sometimes used in campaigns and in strategic positions to gain power, and a failure to meet expectations. Participants gave examples of failed promises to justify why, in some cases, their first reaction to hearing male politicians talk about gender agendas is one of rejection.

Scepticism about male politicians' commitment to gender equality

A second group of reactions fluctuated between suspicion and surprise, for example, when acknowledging the gesture made in 2022 by the then presidential candidate, when he wore a scarf symbolising the right to the voluntary termination of pregnancy. While this was undoubtedly seen as 'different' to the normal behaviour of other male politicians, participants also acknowledged it was a campaign event. Questions were raised, therefore, about whether such actions are genuine or just opportunistic.

Scepticism arises from the view that, as gender equality is not really an agenda for these politicians, their support was more likely to be linked to political campaigning moments or circumstantial statements of support. One of the young women participants described this as 'forced empathy', with male politicians perhaps responding to speeches that are seen as politically correct, but with doubts about whether this is honest support. In the same sense, one of the LGBTQI+ activists, referring to the presidential candidate's act of wearing the scarf, said, 'perhaps the tacit act of the neckerchief is quite innovative, but for me in terms of symbolism, to empathise with the populations, it does seem to me that it is a bit old', meaning that this is an old strategy that has already been used by politicians. In a similar vein, one of the male participants in the focus group from the lower-middle-class university pointed out that while it is important for male politicians to express their commitment to gender equality, what matters is what they do once they are in power:

It feels more like a strategy to connect with feminists and women, but who knows if his personal style really coincides with what he shows. He can stay very much in the image and very much in the words, but not in his actions and how he behaves.

Focus group participant, male student

Pragmatic acceptance for the greater cause

A third perspective highlighted the pragmatism needed when responding to male politicians' engagement with gender equality. While acknowledging the existence of political opportunism, forming alliances and collaborative efforts can still be necessary and beneficial, even when motivations vary. Certain endorsements, even those that are temporary or situational (such as comments from a president), have an influence because of the speaker's prominence. As one female participant observed, 'these are things that help open doors'. Similarly, a LGBTQI+ activist noted that although men's involvement in these issues might sometimes seem 'invasive', it is valuable to have male supporters at the regional level who support these agendas with concrete data, evidence and logical arguments.

This perspective also applies to politicians who champion these causes by incorporating them into their party's platform or government programmes. This reflects the way in which affinity toward these issues differs across political sectors and across politicians' willingness to engage. This pragmatic approach may also intertwine opportunism with the strategic manoeuvring that is integral to power struggles. An important consideration that emerged in the focus groups was the specific identity of politicians expressing such commitments, as well as the political agendas they represented.

Acknowledgment of the potential for transformation

One perception that appeared less frequently was the view that there are changes in the way some politicians adopt these issues, particularly because it is not possible to avoid the subject in the current context. The image of the current Colombian president wearing the green scarf was pointed out in every focus group as a strong and novel gesture of change, and one that would have been unimaginable for previous presidents.

Such significant changes were associated with various initiatives, such as feminist struggles in the country and abroad, with initiatives such as #MeToo positioning the issues in such a way that some politicians have begun to respond or integrate gender issues into their agendas. Another reason for this possible change raised in the focus groups was generational changes and the emergence of some male politicians who are more sensitive to these issues, for personal, family, professional, or political career reasons. For example, a participant in the LGBTQI+ focus group pointed out that in youth activism, important changes are happening where young men are protagonists.

Participants acknowledge some openness to dialogue among this new generation of politicians, although the question remains about the coherence of male politicians. A woman in one of the focus groups agreed that men should play a role as allies of feminist causes and give visibility to women in their respective positions:

...more than just talking about the issue themselves, of course they can give their opinion and support it, it is about putting these discussions about women on the table and giving women a voice.

Focus group participant, male student

Mistrust of the patriarchal political establishment

This oscillation from profound scepticism to the recognition of the efforts of male politicians who embrace gender agendas can be explained, in part, by a broader mistrust in politics and in political institutions. A recent survey of 5,465 young people from across Colombia found that they value democracy and want to participate in democratic deliberations, but that less than 12% trust political institutions, falling to just 7% for political parties (El Tiempo, 2020).

The oscillation is also linked to how gender norms materialise in the public sphere and the participants' perception of the patriarchal nature of politics. Participants acknowledge that while there are commendable efforts by some male politicians to demonstrate a commitment to gender equality, the patriarchal elements of politics limit the possibilities that those men will transform that commitment into concrete support for feminist agendas and gender equitable politics.

Participants in the focus groups did not perceive any explicit difference between feminist politicians or male politicians who are committed to gender equality agendas, and other politicians. While they identified some shifts in attitudes, as discussed earlier, their general perception is that the relationship between politics and gender inequalities is so strong that the commitment of some male individual politicians has only a very limited impact.

The patriarchal practices highlighted by the participants included the double standards that are applied to women; 'paternalism' and 'infantilism'; and masculine characteristics, traits and behaviours.

Double standards applied to women

Both the groups of young women and men outlined examples of how politics acts with a logic that privileges male politicians and allows them to do a variety of things, yet censures or hampers women who wish to do the same. This double standard is found in the way women's work is valued. For example, even when women hold technical positions and positions of high political responsibility or power, they are not valued in the same way as men in the same roles. Participants also emphasise that women are required to do more work than men, or that they are judged in a negative way when they do something that male politicians do regularly. This double standard is even more problematic when it comes to gender topics. While some men may be praised for their support for gender agendas, some women are criticised for doing the same, as stated by women in the focus groups.

'Paternalism' and 'infantilism'

Participants in the focus groups raised problems that are illustrated by these two terms, which describe how men in politics deal with women and gender issues. They either assume a position of authority on the issue that they do not have (paternalism) or place women in subordinate positions (infantilism).

Focus group participants criticise male politicians in general for justifying their actions by making stereotypical, condescending or essentialist statements about women. They also criticise the reasons given by male politicians for supporting gender initiatives, such as valuing women in their family circle or emphasising their reproductive role. This patronising way of justifying their commitment is expressed, as mentioned by a group of young men, in a number of ways. These include the fact that female politicians tend to be called by their first name while male politicians are called by their surname, their treatment during political debates, and criticism of the way they dress or speak – criticism that is rarely aimed at male politicians.

Masculine characteristics, traits and behaviours

The recognition that politics is a highly masculine and patriarchal space is linked to the previous two points, as well as the wider scepticism about politics and the motivations of male politicians who take up these issues. Even if there are women in politics, they are expected to stop 'being feminine' and become 'tougher' in order to be recognised. This issue was highlighted by both young women and men, by participants in the LGBTQI+ activist group, and by masculinities activists. This group mentioned that gender markers are so strong in the political exercise of power by men that they transcend their different political affiliations:

They share those markers of politics that cannot be erased, of traditional, authoritarian, non-dialogical masculinity. The presence of the male phallus is inevitable... it is a figure of authority and power, not conciliation... The men who do politics in this country, whether they dress in green, red or whatever, have these markers very much present in their way of doing politics.

Focus group participant, men's collectives

The fact that politics remains 'masculine' is seen, for example, in the way male politicians express themselves, separate the personal from the public, or impose their agendas. The counterpart to this is that women are asked to adopt attitudes or styles of politics that are considered 'masculine'. One male student pointed out that:

For a woman to enter politics she has to adopt masculine behaviours.

Focus group participant, male student

Another male student felt that the adoption of masculine characteristics by women in politics extends to discourse, body appearance, and the need to show a 'sense of authority, discourse and power'.

This is perceived as women assimilating themselves with, as one participant described it, the figure of:

... the caudillo, the politician who shouts, raises his arms, positions his ideas, and also puts forward this image of being a saviour. To be heard, she has to appeal to these symbols, to this aesthetic and this masculine performance.

Focus group participant, men's collectives

The perception of participants of politics as a masculine space, even with the increasing presence of women, is particularly relevant for this study. However, this process is not exclusive to the political

sphere, and has been observed by the focus group participants in their work and academic spheres. While it could be affirmed that these young people reproduce an idea that assumes that assertiveness and voice are more 'masculine' matters, they also pointed out that politics is a space with so much masculine control that the opportunities to integrate gender issues are very limited. This also applies to initiatives that attempt to broaden women's participation in politics, as reported by young men from the university from the lower-middle class strata.

The group contrasts initiatives for parity in women's political representation with the need to address the structural social challenge of the need to educate women from an early age to take on the social and political leadership roles so often occupied by men. If women face disproportionate care burdens, their opportunities for political office are limited, and they may end up supporting the rise of men in the political space. In other words, participants felt that the prevalence of male privilege in social structures limits the impact of initiatives that aim to increase women's participation in politics.

Even if there are men who adopt gender agendas, this does not imply that they change their own patriarchal or macho attitudes in politics, as one LGBTQI+ activist pointed out:

Do men in politics change because they talk about gender and diversities? No, they don't change, they continue to be macho, they continue to be patriarchal, they continue to be racist, classist, but let's say, they comply. They are going to do it in the exercise and in the function of their work as governors, so they are elected to respond to some stakeholders.

Focus group participant, LGBTQI+ activist

In addition, the masculine condition of politics leads to a differentiated cultural valuation of gender initiatives because a woman who proposes an issue from a feminist stance tends to be perceived as obvious and is considered to be of lesser value. Meanwhile, the fact that male politicians address these issues is interpreted as progressive and gives them more relevance because of the position of power they represent, as the women in one group pointed out.

The current situation, then, is a certain 'short-circuit'. While gender issues are becoming increasingly important and cannot be avoided, politicians cannot or do not know how to react to them. As one male student mentioned:

The problem is that they don't know how. What I feel is that they are adopting flags, they are adopting rhetoric about them, but unlike other issues [in politics, this is an issue where they cannot take ownership, and this is an issue where they just say 'I have a mother, I have a sister'. So, I find it fascinating that they are doing it, but I feel that many of them are lost.

Focus group participant, male student

There are changes, but they are fragile

Participants also recognise that there are changes in gender politics, even if they are partial, incomplete or fragile. There are examples at the national level, such as the creation of the Ministry of Equality, which was a campaign promise of the current government, and previous laws or jurisprudence related to the LGBTQI+ community, such as anti-discrimination norms or the approval of equal marriage. Likewise, in the capital city, the various groups mentioned specific programmes, such as the *Casas de la Igualdad* – Equality Houses (spaces provided by local public administration for counselling and care for women victims of violence), and the *Manzanas del Cuidado* – Care Neighbourhoods (a public policy scheme that provides support and training programmes for women who are carers).

Participants do not, however, associate those changes with the work of male politicians. Instead, they credit the women who have broken into the political space, such as the current mayor of Bogotá, Claudia Lopez, and the long-term work of feminist and women's organisations. The group of male activists saw the current changes as the result of a broader change toward equity that is not limited only to gender, but also to the need to close the gaps in opportunities for diverse populations. Likewise, they recognise some actions for change, such as the creation of the Ministry of Equality, but they are not certain about its continuity. As one participant from the men's collectives focus group said:

I don't want to be pessimistic, but the problem is that those who come later and the references we have are practically the opposite.

Focus group participant, men's collectives

The sense of hope that progress will be made, but also that no profound transformations have yet been made, is relevant for this report's understanding of how participants evaluate what is happening with the emergence of male politicians who express commitment to gender agendas. As one male student put it:

What is being done is just a warm water handkerchief: 'Yes, up with women', equality, equity. That's all very well, but the problem is that politicians won't allow it to happen, because there is nothing better than money and power, and politics provides both.

Focus group participant, male student

There is also a recognition that the growing emergence of feminist views on a variety of issues and in public debates is accompanied by a certain social and media vigilance that also effects what male politicians can or cannot do. As one male student stated:

The feminist movement has led to the fact that not just anything can be done, so to speak, in music, in cinema... If someone does something politically incorrect, they are finished in social networks.

Focus group participant, male student

The same applies to the role of surveillance and monitoring that social movements can play because, ultimately, little change can take place if they do not exercise control. One LGBTQI+ activist pointed out:

And if the social movement is doing advocacy and if the social movement is making bets, then they really have to respond.

Focus group participant, LGBTQI+ activist

It is also acknowledged that it is not always favourable, in an electoral sense, to support these agendas. The group of masculinities activists pointed out that male politicians who work for gender equality agendas face a high political risk:

This has political costs, and it is an art to know how to navigate in these waters because they are very dangerous. In some moments it works, it is very useful, it helps, it catapults you, but in others it can also sink you and condemn you.

Focus group participant, male activist

This analysis coincides with the views expressed by male politicians on how gender equality issues are given different values, causing diverse risks and gains for politicians.

Differences in the perceptions of male politicians on gender agendas

The groups of young men, women and activists had different perspectives on the value of the engagement of male politicians in gender agendas. These varied valuations were based on a number of factors, including gendered differences, political positions, relationships with feminist and gender issues, regional differences, and different forms of activism.

Gendered differences

Young women tended to place more emphasis on the importance of gender agendas as broad and core topic in politics than young men, who tended to see them as complementary to other dimensions of politics. Women also tended to be more sceptical than men about the participation of male politicians in gender agendas. For young women, gender agendas should be at the centre of politics, which is not how male politicians handle these issues, as they also tend to them as complementary or secondary. As a female student stated in one focus group:

Usually, men are more interested in the economic side, in issues like infrastructure. Their proposals and their speeches are more focused on development, on progress.

Focus group participant, female student

Even if the interest of male politicians is honest, women stress that these politicians still embody and represent physical experiences that are different from those of women. The young women pointed out that seeing the President wearing the green scarf, while it may have demonstrated relevant support, appeared strange because he was wearing something that did not belong to him. They relate this to a certain masculine performativity in politics in which the relation with the body is more formal, almost rigid, and distant.

Young women stressed their different relationships with their bodies as political spaces. This issue of women's bodies as a space for political action was not raised by the groups of young men. It was young women who were most adamant that, while there have been some changes in gender orders, they feel little transformation in their lives. They also emphasised the need to recognise that feminist struggles should be at the core of gender politics and that their demands require an immediate response.

Political positions

The political position of the participants also influences how they value the presence of men in gender agendas and their understanding of the way in which changes occur. In the opinion of young women from the lower-middle-class universities, for example, left-wing politicians who support these actions are more trustworthy than male politicians from right-wing parties who commit to gender agendas. As one female student said:

If you suddenly hear a politician who is conservative, who is more to the right, you feel a kind of scepticism – like this person is only doing it to please people, not because he really wants to bring about change.

Focus group participant, female student

This finding may, however, be the result of the research participants' preference for more leftist political positions. Further research with broader samples should consider how to evaluate the perception of male politicians in gender agendas from more diverse political positions.

The group of young men from the lower-middle class university made their left-wing political position more evident and argued that leftist politicians tend to be more receptive to these issues than those on the right. From their perspective, right-wing parties have conservative positions or even taboos on gender issues, and a political agenda that is more focused on economic development and on 'white male' privilege than on gender justice. As a result, they feel that there are more possibilities for change from politicians on the left.

Young men also feel the role of social movements and public opinion was more important than the role of politicians in driving change. They recognise, therefore, that the equality agenda for women and for other social groups such as the LGBTQI+ populations or the black or Indigenous communities has been gaining ground because of the social mobilisation of traditionally excluded sectors. This has generated changes that are not the result of actions by male politicians.

Relationships with feminist and gender issues

Not all participants identified themselves as feminists or indicated that they knew about or were even close to feminism. However, those who were closer to feminism had a more critical attitude toward men's participation in these agendas.

Young women and men who did not identify themselves as feminists, or who had less knowledge of the subject, expressed a more pragmatic attitude toward the presence of men. Yet, they also point out that because feminisms are diverse, there may be different ways of relating to male politicians who embrace gender equality issues. This is relevant to the identification of how these young women and men reflect on the broader debates that are taking place in feminism and gender struggles.

In the same sense of differences between agendas, LGBTQI+ activists expressed less recognition or positioning of their agendas at the regional level on certain women's and gender issues, such as sexual- or gender-based violence. This is partly the result, as the same group reflected, of the only limited and marginal collaboration between LGBTQI+ and women's mobilisations.

Regional differences

Participants pointed out that debates on gender, feminisms, or masculinities tend to be very urban and are relevant only for certain social sectors. They argued that what happens in terms of political progress on gender equality in the main central cities of the country, such as Bogotá, Medellín or Cali, is very different to what happens in small cities or in rural areas. This division was pointed out by focus groups participants from smaller cities but was also confirmed by others as a common issue for the prospects of changes in gender politics or for different action by male politicians. For them, politics as it is practiced in non-urban areas or small cities is very different from central and urban politics.

Participants gave examples of how gender issues, if they gain attention in local and regional politics, tend to be resolved with forms of politics that are still strongly patriarchal and that maintain male privilege. One young woman from a university reported that in her small home city, close to Bogotá, even if there are male politicians who talk about gender equality, their spouses still take the traditional roles of supportive wives and 'first ladies'.

One of the LGBTQI+ activists from another small city pointed out that, although the image of the President supporting feminist struggles was known in his city, debates about feminism, gender equality or men in gender politics are far from being raised openly or publicly. He mentioned that 'populist' speeches are more prevalent in his city and that they may well use discriminatory or sexist speech to win votes without encountering much opposition among citizens. Another participant

pointed out that politicians in his region tend to make agreements behind closed doors to gain votes that the public do not know about. Ironically, there may even be politicians who support gender issues or make agreements with women's groups, but would not say so publicly because of the potential political cost.

Different security conditions across regions also shape perceptions of the gender equality agenda. A LGBTQI+ activist working in an isolated region of Colombia badly affected by the conflict emphasised how addressing these issues can lead to someone being labelled as a 'revolutionary' and face security risks:

Unfortunately, here politics is conducted with a rosary in the left hand and the Bible in the right hand. Now, almost all political candidates are right-wing who are seeking precisely the reduction or total annihilation of the rights of women and LGBTQI+ populations. So, the reading that we can make of these spaces is that someone who wants to make this type of demonstration is seen as a revolutionary. They are seen with all those pejorative synonyms that we can find on the left.

Focus group participant, LGBTQI+ activist

Participants were clear in warning of the risks faced by male politicians who intend to commit to gender action, particularly in contexts highly affected by the struggles between guerrillas and state armies or paramilitaries. Here, being associated with 'revolutionary' agendas is a stigma that can put some people at risk.

Differences in activism

Participation in activism is also a factor that may differentiate the way in which participants value the role of male politicians in gender agendas. Participants who had more experience of activism, whether on masculinities, feminism or LGBTQI+ rights, offered a more sophisticated analysis of the limits, strategies, duties and possibilities faced by male politicians. Activists on masculinities, for example, offered a deeper, more long-term and critical look at the actions of male politicians and their level of commitment to equity and equality. However, they shared with the groups of LGBTQI+ activists a critique on the limits of the discourses on gender, equality and equity.

Summary of findings

This research has examined how male politicians in Colombia who have expressed commitment to gender equality agendas negotiate gender norms and advance political change, and how they are perceived by young people and activists. The findings show that these male politicians constitute a heterogeneous group with a variety of agendas, understandings and strategies to realise their commitment. They build on a long tradition of legal and political changes that have been the result of women's activism and from which they pick and choose and connect some of their interests.

In terms of the relationship between male politicians who are supportive of gender equality and gender agendas, the research reveals three types of allyship, all marked by their limited impact:

1. temporary and strategic support to gender equality initiatives that are presented by other politicians (mostly women)
2. the development of their own initiatives, mostly in response to their constituencies and to commitments made during their political campaigns
3. their work to incorporate gender agendas into other social transformation agendas for which they work, for example when occupying executive positions.

The allyship of male politicians with gender equality agendas is the result of three factors:

1. the politicisation of their experience of gender inequalities through learning, participation and dialogue with feminist collectives, other more experienced politicians and social movements pushing for social justice
2. the effectiveness of the strategies they use to negotiate their interests in gender equality within their own parties and during the times when they exercise some political power
3. their interactions with the broader context in which they locate their initiatives.

These factors often have different rhythms, which makes the results of male politicians' commitment uneven and temporary, and limits its results. When describing their positions, some of the committed male politicians said that they might be in politics for only a short time, making their contribution limited and time-bound. Meanwhile, the agendas with which they interact have been active for longer periods and require long-term resources, commitment and political will.

Various elements of political culture and structures shape the possibilities for men in politics who want to spark change in gender norms. At the structural level, these include the pervasive gender gap that maintains politics as a male space and the limited implementation of legal changes intended to achieve gender equality. At the level of political culture, there is still a limited understanding of equity, equality and the need for a strategic commitment, with gender agendas based on a balance between possible political benefits and pitfalls. In other words, the logic of today's politics in Colombia creates a cement ceiling that limits the kind and the amount of commitment these male politicians can exercise.

Within this structural and cultural context, male politicians are cautious in identifying themselves as feminists. Most of those interviewed described themselves as allies or supporters, which gives them the freedom to focus on their own political action and is a retractable, if more strategic, position.

Allyship itself has a variety of meanings. It is sometimes defined as an acceptance of a moral duty to contribute to gender equality: the recognition of a position that cannot substitute for or compete with the role of women. It is also a strategic position that is halfway between a favourable attitude to

gender norm change and the fulfilment of their duty as democratically elected representatives who must comply with their voters' preferences.

Being an ally can be explained as a position that facilitates the transactional logic that characterises politics. The question remains whether feminism is truly an aspiration in politics that these men wish to embody and work towards, or if gender equality is a more comfortable position for them because it falls under the general political umbrella of equity and social justice. The allyship positioning of male politicians also perpetuates the view of gender, women's political claims and feminism as 'otherness', because rather than questioning the gender binary, they maintain it as a taxonomy.

When male politicians express their allyship, it remains unclear what dimension of feminist struggles they support, or with which kind of feminism they empathise. Their positioning is not embedded in or linked to feminisms that are more radical. Instead, they follow a hierarchy of differences in gender issues in which issues such as equal access are more acceptable than, for example, the struggle for reproductive rights. This reluctance to move beyond the more acceptable topics is expressed in their own terms as a way to avoid appropriating feminist agendas. It can also be the result of backlashes and anti-gender or anti-feminist attitudes, with male politicians avoiding an explicit commitment because feminism is seen as a kind of stigma for their political agendas.

Nevertheless, the research has identified some favourable elements for the gender equality agenda, including generational changes that have seen the emergence of a more diverse set of male (and female) politicians, alliances between male politicians and social organisations, the incremental and progressive nature of law reforms, and the increasing development of technical support teams equipped with new knowledge to support political arguments in deliberative processes.

These important (though limited) changes have not, however, had an impact on a general suspicion and scepticism about male politicians and political parties, as illustrated in the focus groups. The focus group participants, while exhibiting differences in terms of gender, territorial affiliation, political position, proximity to feminisms, and roles as activists, reflected critically on the role of male politicians in gender equality agendas. Their reflections were characterised by a permanent attitude of suspicion, with varying degrees of intensity, ranging from complete rejection and scepticism to pragmatism and recognition.

It is also important to understand the context in which male politicians who support gender equality agendas in Colombia must operate, which is one of permanent suspicions of politicians and political parties and the increasing political relevance of anti-gender movements. These movements have been organising and acting for decades across Latin America to oppose women's rights and progress on gender relations (Corrêa, 2018). The growing presence of anti-gender discourses, in which anti-feminism is a core topic, affect the way in which politicians strategise their political agendas. Even if the male politicians interviewed for this research do not fall within such an ideological and political perspective, further research needs to explore how anti-gender rhetoric is acting as a vigilant point of reference to undermine or reverse progress towards gender equality and the transformation of gender norms.

Implications for policy, practice and research

Before discussing the implications of this report, it is important to recall the structural dimension of gender inequalities in Colombia and the multiple legal commitments signed by successive governments. Lasting progress requires concrete, sustainable, and well-funded long-term plans to transform structural gender inequalities. In addition, the rich landscape of legal measures intended to close the gender gap requires the implementation of policies and programmes that are well designed, enacted and evaluated. These initiatives need to be seen as state policies, not just temporary government policies, as demanded for years by women and feminist organisations.

The research findings suggest that increasing the contribution of male politicians to feminist or gender equality agendas is not only a matter of adding more male politicians to the cause or increasing the number of allies. It is also about the kind of allyship that is needed, when and for what purposes.

The interviews with male politicians and the discussions within the focus group suggest that expressing interest or allyship is not enough if it not backed by clear and sustained action based on alliances with social organisations. The priority is to identify which actions, at which moments, and for which initiatives male politicians should take, not only to overcome the suspicions about their action, but also to maximise their impact for gender justice and social justice agendas. This report propose 10 recommendations grouped into two areas of action: the capacity building of male politicians and their technical teams, and civic education and civil society engagement.

Capacity building of male politicians and their technical teams

While some male politicians are interested in supporting these initiatives and incorporating them into their agendas, they do not always have the knowledge, strategies and mechanisms to make their actions more sustainable and permanent. They may not know how to connect, associate or differentiate the various gender and other social justice agendas. The following initiatives could be considered:

1. **Provide tailored gender agenda training for male politicians interested in supporting such agendas.** According to the interviewees, male politicians require training on a variety of issues related to gender, masculinities and politics, such as the design, implementation and evaluation of gender policies, the commitment required from politicians and policy makers, and their responsibility for changing gender relations. The Colombian government's long-term tradition of signing agreements that commit the country to international standards of gender equality does not seem to have had a concrete impact on the actions of male politicians in general, including those who are interested in gender equality. It is important, therefore, to recognise that diverse types of training is needed, geared towards strengthening the capacity of male politicians to advocate on these issues.
2. **Enhance gender-savvy technical teams of male politicians.** Several of the male politicians interviewed noted the importance of their technical teams for the development of their gender initiatives. These teams are made up of technical professionals with expertise on a range of issues, including gender. While these teams were not the subject of this research, it did identify the significant presence of women within these teams. The teams not only play a technical role in identifying evidence to support initiatives, but also interact with other policy teams, and can be key actors in the development of more sustained initiatives. Working with these teams may help to create stronger and better supported agendas and facilitate lobbying strategies

for political projects. Support for these teams could also enhance their ongoing work on policy and law making. They have constant communication with their peers, offering opportunities to reach other politicians who may not have an explicit or open commitment to gender agendas. They also have a key role in creating alliances with civil society organisations, with media and with academia.

3. **Build collaborative peer education in political circles.** Both male and female politicians describe experiences where working with male peers played a significant role in facilitating support and alliances. Being able to draw on the experiences of other male peers is useful to motivate political change, particularly when there is no explicit or organised opposition to the issues, but rather a lack of information and knowledge, or incorrect perceptions of what the initiatives aim to achieve. This can also be relevant for building trust and alliances among politicians, getting to know the language of political action, and exchanging experiences.
4. **Support the crafting of sustained gender issues agendas for male politicians.** Male (pro-) feminist politicians tend to act in a sporadic, isolated or circumstantial manner, which limits the continuity or escalation of their actions. The creation of long-term agendas can involve politicians from broad sectors, with the aim of accumulating actions and initiatives. It also implies knowing how to identify when and in what way it is possible to position certain issues.
5. **Learn from the past by systematising effective gender strategies.** There are already both positive and negative experiences of male politicians' involvement in gender agendas. However, they have not been documented sufficiently or used as a basis for the development of action strategies. Male politicians know little about the policies and strategies that have been developed over time on this issue, and their use of these cases as the basis for strategy development is critical.

Civic education and civil society engagement

The involvement of male politicians in addressing gender issues must be contextualised within broader social norms, people's understanding of gender-related concerns, and the formation of public demand for politicians' sustained and concrete action. The key challenge is to avoid the promotion of unnecessary or counter-productive male protagonism while fostering a widespread social dialogue that acknowledges and honours decades of efforts by women. These actions can take the following form:

6. **Elevate the role of male politicians in gender progress through the power of data and accountability.** In political discussions, it is vital to provide statistical information and empirical data on why change matters for law, equity and equality. The actions of male politicians on gender equality need to be enhanced with relevant data on gender issues in general, and with specific information on why these are key topics for their agendas. Male politicians interested in these topics can have a more visible presence if they include gender perspectives across the variety of topics in which they are involved, and if they can provide evidence-based, updated, academic and strategic knowledge. They can also use such knowledge as an accountability tool to oversee policy making.
7. **Set up a sustained dialogue on gender and masculinities between men in politics and the public.** A lasting impact on the political agenda requires not only sporadic statements about men's participation in gender politics, but also sustained and persistent initiatives over a long period of time. This implies learning from the way women's organisations have made their issues public, but also developing other initiatives specific to men's issues and masculinities. For male politicians to develop greater commitment to gender policies, this must also become a demand from their constituents.

8. **Mobilise media advocacy to catalyse discourse in the public and the media.** As one of the male politicians interviewed stated, 'the media can activate conversation campaigns about what these discussions entail and completely demystify everything that is around it' (Male, centrist party politician). The media, public opinion programmes or spaces for public debate play a crucial role in opening discussions on gender in which male politicians, as public figures, can help to shape public opinion.
9. **Build capacity to work with allies.** The political agenda for gender equality requires not only the involvement of various political actors, but also the support and backing of many sectors of civil society. However, not all alliances have the same weight or impact, and not all actors in the same sector act in the same way. In the experience of those who have promoted gender equality initiatives, working with various political parties is fundamental to the achievement of change, even those that are undecided or that express reservations. This implies the need to know how to create these alliances, with what agreements and for how long, and embed a perspective that goes beyond opportunistic or ephemeral alliances.
10. **Support engagement with civil society and advocacy organisations.** Colombia has a long history of activism on promoting change in masculinities. However, male politicians in elected office do not always interact with these activists to build on their accumulated work and expertise. Collaboration between male politicians and civil society can be strengthened and dialogue facilitated, so that the politicians can support their interests with the accumulated work and knowledge of activists on men and masculinities and ensure that this activism has the desired political impact. Politicians can also learn from and engage with citizen oversight initiatives on gender issues and improve their commitment with permanent and public accountability on their responsibilities in relation to gender equality. This is more relevant than ever in a context in which social movements are making increasing use of social media and communication to express their grievances and demand change.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Gender equality norms and public policies in Colombia

Instrument	Description	Issued by	Year
Decree 2820	It gives equal rights and obligations to women and men.	Presidency of the Republic	1974
Law 051	It ratifies the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - CEDAW for Colombia.	Congress of the Republic	1981
Political Constitution of Colombia Article 13	'All persons are born free and equal before the law, shall enjoy equal protection and treatment by the authorities and shall enjoy the same rights, freedoms and opportunities without any discrimination on grounds of sex, race, national or family origin, language, religion, political or philosophical opinion.'	Colombian State	1991
Political Constitution of Colombia Article 40	It calls for the 'adequate and effective participation of women in the decision-making levels of public administration'.	Colombian State	1991
Political Constitution of Colombia Article 43	It states that women and men have equal rights and opportunities. Women shall not be subjected to discrimination of any kind. During pregnancy and after childbirth women shall enjoy special assistance and protection from the State and shall receive from the State a food allowance if she is then unemployed or destitute. The State shall give special support to women heads of household.	Colombian State	1991
Political Constitution of Colombia Article 53	It demands that in work regulations there should be 'special protection for women, maternity and under-age workers'.	Colombian State	1991
Statutory Law No.158	It determines the creation of mechanisms to comply with the principle of equality stipulated in Articles 13, 40 and 43 of the Colombian Constitution	Congress of the Republic	1998
Law 581 (Quota Law)	It regulates women's participation at decision-making levels of public power, with a minimum of 30% at each level	Congress of the Republic	2000
Law 731	It aims to 'improve the quality of life of rural women, prioritising low-income women, and to enshrine specific measures aimed at accelerating equity between rural women and men'.	Congress of the Republic	2002
Law 823	It establishes the institutional framework and guides government policies and actions to ensure equity and equal opportunities for women in the public and private spheres.	Congress of the Republic	2003
National Agreement for Equity between Women and Men	It constitutes the commitment of the National Government and the Legislative and Judicial Branches, to materialise the empowerment of women through their participation, on equal terms with men, in all spheres of society, and the elimination of all forms of discrimination against them to achieve human development with quality and equity.	Presidency of the Republic	2003

Instrument	Description	Issued by	Year
Decree 519	Article 5 creates the Presidential Advisory Office for Women's Equity and establishes its functions	Presidency of the Republic	2003
Law 1257	It establishes rulings for awareness-raising, prevention and punishment of forms of violence and discrimination against women. It includes protective measures for victims and creates a committee to monitor the implementation of the law.	Congress of the Republic	2008
Decree 1930	It adopts the first National Public Policy on Gender Equity, which is composed of the set of policies, guidelines, processes, indicative plans, institutions, instances and the Comprehensive Plan to guarantee a life free of violence. It creates an intersectoral commission for its implementation.	Presidency of the Republic	2013
National Development Plan. 2018-2022. 'Pact for Colombia, Pact for Equity'	As part of the NDP, its 'Pact for Women's Equity' contains specific measures to achieve equity and autonomy for women and defines strategic actions in the different areas.	Congress of the Republic, the National Government and the National Planning Department	2018
Law 2114	It aims to extend paternity leave and to create shared parental leave and flexible part-time parental leave	Congress of the Republic	2021
Law 2129	It allow parents to determine the order of child's surnames, by agreement between the father and the mother	Congress of the Republic	2021
Conpes 4080	It establishes a new Public Policy on Gender Equity for Women. It sets out a route for action to generate the conditions that will allow the country to advance towards gender equality and the guarantee of women's economic, social, cultural, participation and health rights, as well as the possibility of living a life free of gender violence, with a horizon until 2030.	National Planning Department	2022
National Development Plan. 2022-2026 'Colombia is a world power of life'	It includes six areas of change with a view to guarantee women's rights and to overcome gender barriers and gaps: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Women as drivers of sustainable economic development and protectors of life and the environment. 2. Women at the centre of the politics of life and peace. 3. Guaranteeing women's full health rights. 4. For a life free of violence against women. 5. A society free of stereotypes and with gender governance. 6. Towards a feminist foreign policy with national leadership on gender issues. 	Congress of the Republic, the National Government and the National Planning Department	2022
Law 2297	It establishes effective measures and for the benefit of persons with disabilities and their carers.	Congress of the republic	2023

About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that supports a global community of researchers, practitioners and activists, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms.

About this report

This Colombia country report is part of ALIGN's 'Men in politics as agents of gender equitable change: gender norms and political masculinities' series.

ALIGN Programme

ODI
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE18NJ
United Kingdom
Email: align@odi.org.uk
Web: www.alignplatform.org

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