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**Cross-party alliances around gender agendas:  
critical mass, critical actors, critical structures, or critical junctures?\***

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

## Introduction

It is self-evident that women in political life will exert more influence on the decision-making processes if they manage to engage in collective action both within their own party-political groupings as well as with those of other persuasions. However, it is not at all self-evident which conditions are most propitious to the formation of such alliances to further progressive gender equity and equality policies. This paper therefore investigates the conditions under which women work across party lines, with both men and women who, under other circumstances, are their electoral competitors.

The paper focuses principally on the experience of Latin America, and examines in detail the case of a successful cross-party women's alliance in Brazil.<sup>1</sup> It begins by examining the validity of one of the key arguments of the proponents of gender quotas: that of **critical mass**. It then proposes that we should perhaps look at more at other 'critical' variables, such as the characteristics and strategies of **critical actors** who have been successful in forging strategic alliances. It also highlights the importance of a number of variables related to the **critical structures** of regimes of representation and governance, especially the party system. In particular it notes the nature of political cleavages and the degree of ideological intensity in the party system, and organizational histories and the degree and type of institutionalization of individual parties. The political habitus the party system and of individual parties has a strong bearing on the likelihood of women representatives seeking cross-bench alliances. However, within this structural analysis one should not omit mention of the opportunities afforded by **critical junctures**, such as regime change or constitutional revision, which can momentarily freeze such dynamics and allow in new actors with a greater propensity to seek alliances for specific ends.

### 1. Critical mass?

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on my forthcoming book *Gender politics in Brazil and Chile: the role of parties in national and local policy-making* Basingstoke, Palgrave

There are several compelling arguments for positive discrimination measures aimed at increasing the proportion of female representatives both in legislatures at all levels, and within the executive branch. Historically, women activists in several – but not all - Latin American countries justified their entry into the public sphere by claiming to be the bearers of feminine, maternal qualities imported from the private, domestic sphere. However, others deployed alternative framing arguments such as those of equal democratic rights; the expansion of the talent pool; and the fairness of adequate descriptive representation. In particular, some proponents of gender quotas appeal to the idea of substantive interest representation. They deploy a ‘critical mass’ argument that the more women are elected, the more likely these women are to represent ‘women’s interests’, to be sympathetic to a gender-progressive agenda, and join together to push for key gender policy reforms (Jaquette, 1997). Is this true? Will the numerical rise in female representation lead to a greater or lesser desire to find common cause both within party ranks and across party lines? Around what issues, why and when?

There is something to be said for the politics of presence. For example, there was a furore when male legislators passed Honduras’ Equal Opportunities Law in substantially watered-down form<sup>2</sup> whilst their female colleagues were absent at a meeting of Central American parliamentarians (Clulow, 2003). However, a simple rise in numbers does not necessarily add up to a more *effective* female presence in parliament. In Bolivia, a quota law raised the percentage of women deputies from 7.6 per cent in 1993 to 21.5 per cent in 2003, but the new women legislators did not coalesce as a group and prioritize gender issues (Costa Benavides, 2003). In 1991 Argentina very successfully introduced a quota law aimed at raising female representation in the national chamber of deputies to at least 30 per cent, the figure that the Commission on the Status of Women identifies as being the threshold for ‘critical mass’. However, a study of the impact of this influx of women (currently 33.7% of Argentina’s federal deputies are women) showed that although this led to more bills on women’s issues being introduced, it did not strengthen the political alliances necessary to get the bills passed. As the authors note, ‘quota laws are neither necessary nor sufficient for the formation of such alliances’ (Htun and Jones, 2002: 48-50). The only other countries to surpass 30 per cent are Cuba (with 36 per cent) and

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<sup>2</sup> They removed a quota provision for party lists and a guarantee of equity in the distribution of property after divorce.

Costa Rica with 35.1 per cent. As the first is a single party system with a legislature subordinated to an unaccountable centralised executive, the likelihood of those women striking alliances or exerting influence on policy is minimal. In Costa Rica, as we shall see, the high level of representation is actually the *result*, not the *origin*, of cross-party women's mobilisation in the 1980s around a broad package of gender reforms, including a quota law.<sup>3</sup>

But to give a counter-example, perhaps the most cohesive and effective cross-bench women's parliamentary caucus in Latin America is that in Brazil's national congress, although the percentage of women elected to the lower house has never exceeded 8.2 per cent, one of the lowest in the region. Indeed, after Brazil introduced a statutory quota law obliging parties to run at least 25 per cent women candidates on their lists, the proportion of women elected actually *dropped* (from 6.2 to 5.6 per cent).<sup>4</sup> The *bancada feminina* has been able to steer the party votes successfully on key bills such as the gender quota, reforms to the civil and penal codes, maternity and paternity leave, rights of women prisoners, reproductive rights, anti-discrimination measures (race, HIV status, sexual orientation), and gender violence.

Thus, we conclude that the ease with which women legislators act individually and collectively on gender issues does not depend on their sex per se or on sheer numbers. It would be misleading, firstly, to essentialise the notion of 'women's interests', because differing life experiences, multiple social positionalities, and adherence to various political or religious doctrines all shape how women – as much as men – come to define what they believe is in women's 'best interest'. As Molyneux (2001) notes, the formulation of women's interests is highly context-specific. There are a number of players involved in defining what is desirable for women – the political parties, religious authorities, other social authority-bearers such as tribal leaders, and women's groups, as well as the women within the representative institutions.

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<sup>3</sup> At the time these reforms were being debated and voted on, women constituted only 12.3 per cent of the legislators.

<sup>4</sup> This drop was due to several factors. The electoral system in Brazil is open list proportional representation, so that parties impose few selection criteria, the number of candidates allowed per party exceeds the total number of seats available, candidates compete among themselves as most voters vote for an individual, not the party, no placement mandate is possible, and the law was not enforced by the electoral courts.

Studies have also shown that when women are in a minority in parliament, some see themselves as pioneers defending women's rights, whereas others fear being pigeonholed and marginalised on committees dealing with mere 'women's issues' such as health, education and social welfare.<sup>5</sup> Once the number of women increases, the fear of ghettoization declines and women may feel emboldened to tackle more controversial gender rights issues. On the other hand, it may be that, perversely, women might then feel less onus to be standard-bearers precisely because they feel less beleaguered.

Therefore, the formation of alliances between women representatives must depend more on other personal characteristics such as their political career paths (through party and grassroots activism or family ties), their personal ideological and moral preferences, and their degree of loyalty and attachment to the party or constituencies they technically represent. It is also shaped by the structural elements of the political environment, such as the intensity of ideological conflicts, whether gender issues form part of the core political cleavages in the party system,<sup>6</sup> and the degree of permeability to social movement actors, such as the women's movement.

## 2. Critical actors?

How, then, has Brazil's *bancada feminina* achieved this degree of success? Is it replicable? Its success is illustrative of several of these variables. The feminists elected to the National Congress over the last two decades have constituted critical actors in the sense that they have worked as catalysing agents both among the women elected to parliament, and within the parties of which they are members. Critical actors are those who are able to bring resources that give them leverage in the process of building alliances, and influencing gender policy outcomes. These resources may include the programmatic backing of their party for gender issues, positions of

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, women in both the legislative and executive branch still tend to be clustered in committees, ministries or departments dealing with such issues, even when their number rises above 30 per cent.

<sup>6</sup> We presume here a minimally competitive party system in which women and men run on party tickets. However, we also need to consider the dynamics of *intra*-party alliances in single-party or dominant party systems. Where representatives may run as 'independents' or where seats are reserved for women, the party variable will be different again.

influence within their party, their personal prestige, or strong connections to the local women's movement or to international gender institutions

The effectiveness of the *bancada feminina* as a change agent is partly linked to shifts in its composition, which brought in women with different kinds of political resources. The female federal deputies elected since 1978 have tended to fall into two categories. On the centre-right they were often the relatives of male politicians; some 'parachuted' straight into national office with no prior experience whilst others acquired a name through performing charitable works associated with their husband's office. On the Left, they generally ascended from posts in municipal- or state-level politics, backed by specific social sectors or grassroots movements. However since the mid 1980s the number of women with family connections has dropped from around 40 per cent in 1990 to under 10 per cent in 2002. By contrast, from the mid-1990s onwards, the majority have had experience in women's issues, either through participation in the Beijing Conference, membership of state or municipal councils on women's rights, involvement in various parliamentary inquiries into women's issues such as maternal mortality and sterilization, through legislative activity, or through leadership positions within their parties. This includes nearly all the centre-left women as well as some elected for conservative parties and through family connections.

As a result the *bancada* enjoys a high degree of cohesion. All female federal deputies and senators are nominally members, most back it solidly, and none opposes it. 'Feminism' is much less of a taboo word in Brazilian political discourse than it is elsewhere in the region, and has even been appropriated by conservative politicians. Differences of opinion among the members tend to be personal, not party political, ideological, or religious, and none those women who participate in the cross-party Catholic group, has a fixed position on the issue of reproductive rights. The *bancada's* agenda has been guided predominantly by the National Council on Women's Rights (in the latter half of the 1980s) and by feminist NGOs such as the Feminist Research and Advisory Centre (CFEMEA) since 1990. This indicates the importance of linkages between the national state mechanisms for gender equality and women in the legislature, who worked closely on the drafting of the constitution, and the importance of feminist NGOs collaborating closely with legislators on

drafting and pushing through bills (Macaulay, 2000). These linkages give both confidence and leverage to women legislators to act together and seek support across party lines in Congress.

### 3. Critical structures?

#### (a) Types and intensity of party system cleavage

One key element in this enduring alliance is the low degree of ideological intensity in the Brazilian party system. Since the Second World War, party system cleavages have centred on three main axes: pro- and anti-Vargas, military rule, and state involvement in the economy. The first two have disappeared, the third persisting due to the late advent of neo-liberalism in Brazil. This generated a discernible left-right spectrum, but one mainly focused around economic rather than moral, issues. The classic sociological dividing lines of race, class, religion and gender have been virtually irrelevant to competition and ideological differentiation in this party system.

The impetus for the women's caucus has come – predictably – from the centre and centre-left, first from the PMDB, the 'official' opposition party under military rule and the dominant actors in the democratic transition, and latterly from the Workers' Party, As women tend not to belong to the other cross-party groupings in Congress and the parties of the centre-right have a low ideological definition, women representing those parties tend to be open to involvement in women's issues. In the absence of party political conflict over gender issues, they seem happy to follow a feminist agenda set by the centre-left representatives, the only ones with a strong party identification.

Both underlying cleavages and conjunctural factors influence whether or not parties differentiate themselves using gendered political discourse, styles of representation or distinct policy platforms. The *intersection* of the left-right and religious-secular cleavages helps to explain when, how and why parties deploy gender-ideological discourses for the purposes of both party system competition and their social and economic projects. The left-right cleavage is less likely to generate evidently gendered contests than the religious-secular one, given the focus on class and capital. Modernizing, secular conservative parties also have primarily economic

concerns and are much less concerned with confining women within strict gender roles than are traditionalist, semi-confessional parties. Cleavages hinging on moral values invariably invoke gender relations through an emphasis on sexuality and the family, and tend to obstruct enduring alliances between women legislators.

Historically, religious-secular political disputes have been of little relevance in Brazil, which has never had a significant Christian Democratic or Church-associated party. In the twentieth century, the Catholic Church's political power became most visible in its oppositional stance to military rule in the 1970s and, unlike the Chilean Church, it went beyond criticisms of human rights abuses to embrace the principles of liberation theology, actively sheltering and supporting social movements. The rightward shift in the Vatican since the 1980s has had comparatively little impact, as the National Council of Bishops and much of the flock remained committed to social justice, a posture that at the ballot box primarily benefits the Workers' Party, a secular, pluralist party. The parliamentary Catholic and Evangelical groups are also dispersed across several parties.

In consequence, the women's movement has not faced much organized, party-centred and value-based opposition in Congress. When Brazil moved to sign the Optional Protocol to the CEDAW and the National Council of Bishops dutifully invoked the Vatican line that this represented an 'assault on national sovereignty', this view found no political constituency.<sup>7</sup> Opinion polls show that parliamentary backing for public provision of legal abortion<sup>8</sup> rose steadily to over 87 per cent in 1999, with 78 per cent in support of limited decriminalization. During the 1993 constitutional revision process, an attitudinal survey of deputies and senators concluded that, while the centre-left was predictably consistent and supportive of extending

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<sup>7</sup> It passed unopposed in the Chamber of Deputies and, after some debate, in the Senate, where the Catholic Church attempted to intervene.

<sup>8</sup> The 'legal abortion' movement in Brazil is attempting to enforce the existing law as a precursor towards eventual decriminalization (a termination can currently only be granted under very limited circumstances by a court order) and liberalization (Htun, 2003: 156-61). Even Catholic members of the Committee on Social Security and the Family approved a bill in favour of legal abortion in 1995.



women's rights, the Right was not necessarily hostile (CFEMEA, 1993).<sup>9</sup> It found little consensus within party blocs, ideological groupings or economic credos with respect to gender or 'private' realm issues such as sexuality, family and reproduction. The parties of the governing centre-right coalition of 1995-2002 they generally opposed gender legislation only when it required financial commitments by the State, such as paid maternity and paternity leave, and the extension of pension and welfare rights to domestic and rural women workers.<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, in Chile the religious-secular cleavage combines with well-institutionalized parties to make it much more difficult for women to form cross-bench alliances. Individually, the parties have reacted to gender-related bills not just along a binary government-opposition axis, but also according to their own ideological orientation (Haas, 1998). Generally, consensus has been achieved only when bills can be framed as pro-family. The law preventing public schools from expelling pregnant teenagers could be viewed by the secular Left as upholding girls' right to education, and construed as a 'pro-life' measure by the religious centre-right (Haas and Blofield, 2005).

For female legislators intra-coalition unity has been easier than cross-bench collective action. For example, women deputies on the government benches lobbied strenuously to set up the Family Committee (Haas 1998), which was then colonized by feminists and succeeded in blocking the two most draconian anti-abortion bills. However, inter-coalition collaboration increased with the arrival of a more socially liberal generation of representatives of National Renovation (RN) who have adopted a feminist discourse and worked with the government on bills such as divorce, pregnant schoolgirls' rights, abandonment and family support, the right to breastfeed at work, higher penalties for offences against women and children, positive discrimination reforms to the electoral system, restoration of therapeutic abortion, distribution of the 'morning after' pill, the CEDAW Optional Protocol, outlawing sexual orientation discrimination, and gay civil union, positions no UDI representative has ever taken. The far

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<sup>9</sup> The CFEMEA survey covered employment guarantees for pregnant women, maternity and paternity rights, childcare provision, non-discrimination and labour rights, sexual harassment, penalties for rape, family planning, sterilization, abortion, and de facto unions.

<sup>10</sup> The same pattern was visible in the attempted constitutional revision of 1993-4. Amendments that were regressive in gender terms tended to be aimed at cutting state expenditure, for instance on childcare provision.

right-wing party UDI has consistently used its delegation to veto or stall bills, such as those on domestic violence, parental recognition of children and sexual assault, but sometimes votes in favour once a majority consensus has emerged in Congress following modifications to the bill. RN, although conservative, is a secular, business-oriented party, and its quality as a catch-all party and lesser orientation around moral and value issues has allowed for greater dissent. However, both the government and opposition benches have been divided, the former due to the deep schisms in the Christian Democrat Party between its secularizing modernizers and Catholic traditionalists, between its delegations in the Chamber (liberal) and Senate (half of them conservative) and sometimes it has been possible for women legislators to exploit these divisions

Whilst the left-right cleavage has faded in the region, the secular-religious one has been enjoying a resurgence. After the assumption of John Paul II to the papacy in 1979, the Vatican took an aggressive stance on private sphere issues, and was supported in international arenas by a significant number of Latin America countries where conservative forces, such as Nicaragua's Liberal Party and El Salvador's ARENA, used reproductive rights and sexual mores to regain the moral high ground they had lost through their association with repressive regimes and corruption. At the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development, the Vatican and nine Latin American countries bracketed references in the Programme of Action referring to reproductive rights, sex education, abortion, contraception, the definition of the family and safe motherhood. A Papal communication sent to political leaders in advance of the Beijing conference contained objections to the terms 'gender', 'families' in the plural and 'reproductive rights' later rehearsed by several country delegations during the conference itself, with Argentina and Guatemala the Vatican's most vocal proxies (Franco, 1998). Where moral questions are highly party politicized, women legislators may adopt opposing views on issues such as reproductive rights.

#### (b) Party identities and power structures

The degree of institutionalization of party systems and of individual parties also plays a part. It has also been argued that partyarchy (that is, excessively dominant parties, which penetrate most organized channels of civil society) squeezes to the margins women who then

cast themselves as interlopers in the political system, impelling them to build broad coalitions *outside* the parties, for example for reform of the Venezuelan Labour code (Friedman, 2002) and even, in the Chilean case, for regime change (Baldez, 2002). However, it appears to be very difficult for women to build alliances *across* and *within* the parties in these circumstances. In Mexico and Argentina, although the dominant parties (the Institutional Revolutionary Party and the Peronists) are somewhat protean in terms of ideological definition, they have been bitter rivals for decades with their competitors. In such system ‘party loyalty frequently trumps gender identity’ (Htun and Jones, 2002: 49; Rodríguez, 1998: 8). In Chile, party identities are also strong and electoral competition both within and between the government and opposition coalition blocks fierce. In Brazil, a low degree of institutionalization (most parties lack rank-and-files, are often elite led, with representatives frequently hopping parties for electoral reasons), means that party identity, with the exception of parties on the left of the spectrum is very low. This means that it is much easier for women representatives to ally and vote with women across the political spectrum.

Finally, it is worth asking whether women’s experience within the hierarchies of the political parties, or within the structures of government or representation, affect their propensity to seek alliances. There is clearly some connection between the percentage of women in leadership positions within parties (now increased, at least on the centre-left in Latin America, due to reserved seats quotas instituted by individual parties), and their promotion as viable candidates and as potential office holders. To the extent that women have access to the inner circles of power within the parties, they may be able to use this leverage to bring shift their party’ voting preferences to support gender progressive legislation. However, the same problems remain with the idea of ‘representation of women’s interests’ as in national assemblies. It appears that more is required to shift party platforms, including dedicated gender units within the parties, and the mobilisation of women’s movements outside the parties.

Does the approach of women legislators to the job of representing and legislating differ from that of their male counterparts, and do these differences help them form alliances? One survey in Brazil characterized the cohort of female deputies in the Constitutional Assembly (many of whom regarded themselves as more representatives of the women’s movement that had helped to

elect them than of the party ticket on which they had run) as harder working with a greater legislative success rate than their male counterparts (DIAP, 1988). Similarly, women in the Costa Rican assembly enjoy much higher public approval ratings than their male counterparts as their bills have double the success rate (81 per cent), which they themselves attribute to spending more time in committee and consultation. As Costa Rican legislators may not run for immediate re-election, male deputies dedicate time to tending their business and professional interests to which they will return, whereas the women treat politics as their sole occupation (Furlong and Riggs, 1999). It may be that an ethos of professionalism (in the latter case) combined with weaker party loyalties (in the first case) is able to override party loyalties. Again, women legislators' exclusion from the 'real' circuits of power with the party may, ironically, make them more willing to cross party lines for the sake of much-needed gender reforms.

#### **4. Critical junctures**

There appear to be a number of critical junctures during which the rules of the political game – both in terms of representation and policy agenda – are set aside or radically modified, even in highly institutionalized or divided party systems. Some of these domestic junctures include peace processes, transitions to democracy, and the writing of a new constitution. In these moments, the monopoly of political parties over representation relaxes and access expands for non-traditional political actors, whose organizations or movements may put forward candidates to represent their interest, seek a presence within transitional authorities, or lobby through mobilization. This allows temporary coalitions to form between women legislators around very specific issues on which there are no major divergences, sometimes on a package of reforms.

In the post-conflict situation in Central America, women's cross-party coalitions might have seemed unlikely because of the bitter ideological divisions of the civil wars. Yet, following the peace process in El Salvador, feminists managed to win the support of right-wing women on several issues such as gender quotas, responsible paternity and domestic violence, but not on abortion or economic rights (Hipsher, 2001: 150). Radical feminists, leftist and conservative women in Nicaragua came together in the 1996 National Women's Coalition to support women's candidacies and to agree upon a Minimum Agenda to be incorporated into the party platforms for

the forthcoming elections (Blandón, 2001). During the transition to democracy in Uruguay in the mid 1980s the all-party Working Group on Women's Status, which had struggled to be included within the National Consensus-Building Forum (CONAPRO) managed to draw up a set of recommendations on domestic violence (Johnson, 2002: 103), overcoming traditional rivalries between the Liberals and Conservatives.

Often mobilization around the drafting of a new constitution marks a high point of networking and common cause amongst women's groups. Brazil's *bancada feminina* was set up informally during the Constitutional Assembly (1987-8) when a women's movement campaign elected an unprecedented number of feminists with the aim of inscribing women's rights into the new Constitution. This recalled a strategy half a century earlier in 1934 when nine women, mostly members of the suffragist Brazilian Federation for Women's Progress, were elected to state-level constitutional assemblies (Costa, 1998: 99; Schumaker and Brazil, 2000).<sup>11</sup> For example, women's groups have also managed to elect a notable number of movement representatives to, and/or to influence, the Constitutional Assemblies in Nicaragua (1985-6), Paraguay (1992), Ecuador (1997-8) and Venezuela (1999). Constitutions are not just regime markers, signalling a normative break with the preceding regime, but they also set out the definition of citizenship, the relationship between State and citizen, and the boundaries between private and public sphere. As a result, women's movements have often managed to lobby to insert articles that explicitly outlaw sexual discrimination and extend women's rights.

However, the degree of access that women's movements gain to constitutional drafting bodies often reflects the type of transition, and the commitment of the political leadership and outside agencies in promoting participation. In South Africa both the pressure from women from within the ANC and from a cross-party umbrella group, the Women's National Coalition ensured that women were included in the negotiating teams involved in constitutional redrafting, resulting in a very progressive document in gender equality terms. This process was assisted by the presence of a multi-party system (albeit a racially exclusionary one), by the overall sympathy of the ANC, as a dominant player, to women's demands, and by a relatively strong civil society

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<sup>11</sup> The 1934 Charter included a statement of the legal equality of men and women whereas the 1946 Constitution was written only by male legislators and omits mention of women's rights.

outside the political parties. By contrast, the post-Communist constitutions drafted in Eastern Europe were little influenced by women legislators, whose numbers dropped dramatically in any case, as a result of the transition from one-party rule and the weakness of civil society. Leaving constitutional revision in the hands of a small male elite, however 'efficient' that might seem, will make it impossible for women to build cross-party alliances to shape the fundamental legal framework of their country up which a multitude of women's rights then depend.

Women's movements are also not the only actors that mobilise anti-feminist alliances around constitutional revision. The anti-feminist backlash has seen conservative legislators take advantage of the widespread revision of legal texts to *retrench* gender discrimination, particularly around reproductive rights, which remain highly contentious. In a number of countries, attempts have been made to nullify existing provision for legal abortion<sup>12</sup> by changing the text of the Constitution, adding the words 'from the moment of conception' to the article guaranteeing the right to life. In January 1998, legislators in El Salvador succeeded in criminalizing all terminations, and altered the constitutional text accordingly the following year.<sup>13</sup> Guatemala, Nicaragua and Costa Rica all gave official status to the Day of the Unborn, whilst El Salvador's and Panama's legislators refused to sign the Optional Protocol to the CEDAW, arguing that it could facilitate abortion.<sup>14</sup> In these countries the women's movement was unable to form an alliance strong enough to counter that backed by the Catholic Church. On the other hand, in Brazil feminists manage to mobilise cross-party support for their position. In 1995, the whips of nearly all the parties instructed their members to vote against a constitutional amendment to protect life 'from conception', in a very unusual movement that goes against the normal pattern of a 'free' vote on such controversial issues (Htun, 2003: 161). In neighbouring Argentina a women's alliance also defeated President Menem's attempt to change the Argentine Constitution (in 1993) and article 15 of the Civil Code (in 1999) to this effect.

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<sup>12</sup> Since at least the mid-twentieth century, most countries in Latin America have permitted legal abortions in the cases of danger to the mother's life or pregnancy resulting from sexual assault.

<sup>13</sup> The FMLN criticized, but could not stop, this constitutional amendment as it needed only 56 votes to pass. The party allowed a free vote and some of its 27 deputies voted in favour (Center for Reproductive Law and Policy, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Once appeals to national courts have failed, the Protocol enables individuals or groups of women to submit complaints to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which itself may also undertake investigations of grave or systematic violations of women's rights.

Some catalysing events are externally generated. The CEDAW has allowed women to form alliances to lobby for ratification, for accession to the Optional Protocol, for submission of the periodic reports or for the implementation of the committee's recommendations. Regional and international conferences often prompt networking within and between countries. Preparations for the Beijing Conference on women and action focused on the Platform for Action have had a similar effect. In these cases the women's alliances form around a broad package of reforms, meaning that even if individual representatives for reasons of party ideology or personal conviction may not subscribe to every single detailed point, they may nonetheless support the general thrust of the legislation. Costa Rica's bill on Women's Social Equality prompted representatives of the main two parties to work closely in a women's caucus, producing a raft of gender-progressive legislation (Figueres, 1998). Likewise, most countries in the region have approved over-arching Equal Opportunities Plans, which tend to receive multi-party support.

However, in some cases, as with transitional moments, it is easier to forge alliances around specific issues. In the three years following the launch of the 1994 'Belém do Pará' Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women, virtually every country in Latin America drafted and approved legislation on this issues, again often as a result of the formation of broad alliances in Congress. As Friedman (1998) points out, political opportunities are not gender-neutral and female legislators and sympathetic external agencies need to be able to seize these opportunities to push for gender reforms.

## **5. Conclusions**

In summary, if the sheer number of women elected to parliament does not, in and of itself, necessarily affect female representatives' propensity to ally across party lines, we need to shift focus from the sex of the individuals to the political environment in which they act. In party systems that are weakly ideological, have a weak religious-secular cleavage, or are composed of parties driven more by personalism or rent-seeking, a well-organized women's movement in conjunction with a sympathetic party can set the legislative gender agenda, and legislators of different political stripes will have a higher propensity to collaborate on gender issues. However, party systems that are overly institutionalized, with few avenues for civil society to exert

pressure and seek allies, leave little space for cross-party alliances within the representative institutions. Similarly, party systems with strong religious-secular cleavages often divide women legislators on a variety of issues. Common ground then has to be found very carefully.

Sometimes the terrain for finding common ground is opened up when new political opportunities appear. Where international actors are involved as ‘honest brokers’, or have intervened in regime change in some way (one thinks of El Salvador, Guatemala, Afghanistan, Iraq and beyond), there is clearly an onus on them to open up avenues both for women to participate as political representatives and for grassroots input into constitution drafting, political transitions, peace accords and peace building.

We should also not forget that female representatives themselves are not the sole generators of, or force behind, progressive gender policies. Female representatives are pivotal actors, interacting with the regime of representation in parliament or the town hall, with the institutions of the state that deliver policy, and with the women’s movement. Therefore, the ability of organized women’s movements to target legislators with clear reform proposals around which they can unite also affects the likelihood of effective cross-party alliances. It also seems to be that those women legislators – of whatever political persuasion – who are linked to national and international gender rights movements and organizations are the more sympathetic to collective action.

In short, this paper has argued that we need to look beyond critical mass to understanding the strategic resources of critical actors, and how both critical structures and junctures shape the political opportunity field within which cross-party alliances can take place for the purpose of promoting women’s rights.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This paper is clearly not exhaustive and I would urge attention also to sub-national fields of government to see whether, using this framework, conditions might be more or less conducive to cross-party alliances.



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