

# PARTICIPATION IS NOT ENOUGH

Women, intersectionality, and local democracy in Colombia



## Executive summary

In Colombia, participatory mechanisms have opened spaces for women, but these spaces have not enabled their political agency as expected. Often, these mechanisms have focused on “women” generically, reproducing discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and class. Drawing on a case study of the Women’s Advisory Council (WAC) of Popayán, this policy brief examines the challenges participatory bodies face for their effective functioning and advances recommendations for policymakers aimed at strengthening the functioning of Women’s Advisory Councils in Colombia. The challenges were analysed using the framework of intersectionality to understand how overlapping and co-produced forms of discrimination interact and shape experiences of political participation.

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## Introduction

Since the 1980s, following ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Law 51, 1981), Colombia has enacted several laws and norms to protect women's rights. Legislation such as the Quota Law (Law 581, 2000), Rural Women's Law (Law 731, 2002), and the Law of Commissions for Women's Rights in Municipalities (Law 1981, 2019) illustrate this. However, this legal framework is yet to guarantee an effective and equitable women's participation in political spaces and decision-making. This is especially true for Indigenous, Black, and campesina women, as well as for women victims of the Colombian Armed Conflict, among others.

This problem involves not only the design and wording of laws, but also their implementation. Participation laws and participatory bodies designed for women, as observed in the case of the Women's Advisory Council (WAC) of Popayán – a formal civil society advisory body to the municipal government – often operate without adequate resources, meaningful integration into decision-making processes, or recognition of the political work and knowledge that women generate within their territories and communities. As a result, participation is reduced to a formal requirement that legitimizes existing power structures rather than transforming them, and becomes a discursive tool that can obscure a lack of substantive action.

**4** OUT OF **19**

seats at the local legislative body (municipal council) are occupied by women\*

**87%**

of surveyed women in Popayán recognise that participation has changed in the last 5 years. However, 31% still recognise it as low and 41% as intermediate\*\*

**34%**

of surveyed women recognise access to resources as the main factor influencing women's political participation in Popayán. 27% mention empowerment as the most relevant factor, and 26% mention awareness of other women leaders\*\*

\* current data from February 2026 (Concejo Municipal de Popayán, n.d.)

\*\* based on a survey conducted by Popayán's Secretariat for Women in November 2025

This situation is not confined to Popayán, but forms part of a broader systematic pattern across Colombian municipalities: the creation of participatory bodies without the material, financial, or institutional resources necessary for their effective functioning. The mere establishment of participatory spaces does not, in itself, guarantee meaningful, effective, or inclusive women's participation.

By analyzing the challenges faced by Popayán's WAC, this brief suggests broader lessons for strengthening women's participation mechanisms across Colombia and proposes recommendations for governments seeking to build more inclusive, representative, and effective participatory institutions.

## Methods

This policy brief synthesises the findings of a qualitative research project that analysed intersectional barriers to women’s political participation in Popayán, Colombia. The Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) Centre for Latin America conducted the study in collaboration with Popayán’s Secretariat for Women and Popayán’s WAC. The policy brief draws from a literature review, interviews with women leaders and the Popayán’s and Bogotá’s Secretariat for Women, focus group discussions with Popayán’s WAC, and the analysis of a survey conducted by Popayán’s Secretariat for Women. SEI’s Ethics Committee approved the project’s methodological design.

## Results: Evidence from Popayán

### Formal participation reproduces structural inequity

In Popayán, the Women’s Advisory Council (WAC) was established by the local government in 2007 to represent twelve women’s sectors. Since then, the *Consejeras* – women councillors – have encountered persistent structural barriers to their participation, including:

- a. A restrictive vision of women. Only until 2026, with a new local norm (Municipal Agreement) that will renovate the WAC, the representation of Indigenous, Black, and rural women will be included.
- b. Tensions between care work and political participation. The caring responsibilities of many women councillors created barriers for women’s political participation and attendance at WAC’s meetings.
- c. Misrecognition of WAC’s experience. When the Plan for Women’s Participation was elaborated, the local government hired an external team from the local university.
- d. Epistemological barriers to participation. Women with a strong community leadership background have identified technical and legal language as a barrier to fully understanding and participating.
- e. Lack of resources for participation, including:
  - Periods of operation without formal recognition or integration into municipal planning and budgeting processes.
  - Lack of an official meeting space; as a result, councillors have had to meet in public parks and in the corridors of the mayor’s office.
  - Limited institutional technical support. The WAC has assumed technical responsibilities for which its members do not always have sufficient experience, such as developing work plans, establishing timelines, and navigating institutional processes and technical language.
- f. A siloed governance structure within the municipality means that different participation bodies and institutional offices work in parallel with little to no communication between them. For example, the Women’s Secretariat and the Secretariat of Ethnic Affairs have no permanent formal channel of communication.

These barriers reflect the limited priority given to women’s participation, a restrictive understanding of participation and democracy, and the reproduction of women as a universal subject in local government approaches to date. In a region where most of the population is Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and peasant, their participation was only formally recognized with the 2026 reform—clear evidence of the reproduction of class, racial, and rural–urban power relations and lack of intersectionality. The following section examines this structural barrier to women’s participation.

### **Gender, ethnicity, and class interact and produce additional inequities**

In Popayán, surveyed women identified a patriarchal society and macho culture as the main barrier to their political participation. However, this barrier does not apply uniformly for all

*Increasing the number of sectors within the WAC does not guarantee increased representation in itself. In practice, the focus should be on ensuring that the intersecting forms of discrimination are addressed, rather than on adding sectors of participation.*

women. Indigenous and Black women experience intersecting forms of discrimination produced by patriarchal relations within their communities, by the articulation of patriarchy and racism in state institutions, and by class-

based hierarchies in society. Campesina women face erasure on two fronts. On the one hand, campesino culture has been kept at the margins of ethnic policy frameworks and has only recently gained recognition through sustained social mobilisation. On the other hand, institutions do not recognise the spaces in which campesina women’s collective action happens as political, excluding their leadership from official participation records.

Although the WAC will now include the representation of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and campesina women – undoubtedly an important step – considering this inclusion without attending to the intersection of oppressions leads to a misrecognition of the differentiated barriers women face in political participation. Moreover, inclusion alone is insufficient; broader socioeconomic transformations are necessary to improve the living conditions of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and campesina women.

Expanding representation to 28 sectors without guaranteeing the resources required for effective operation is a contradiction. When only five or six councillors currently participate in a twelve-member WAC, duplicating sectors without concrete material conditions risks producing a less effective and less legitimate Council. For example, Bogotá’s WAC illustrates other possibilities when there’s political will and operational resources. This WAC has an annual work plan, articulation with other citizen participation bodies and official decision-making spaces, and impact on the District’s Gender Policy and Care System (more information: Universidad de los Andes & Bogotá’s WAC - Autonomous space, 2025).

## Women produce political knowledge from unrecognised spaces

Indigenous, Black, and campesino communities produce participation spaces and territorial

*When institutions fail to recognize the kitchens, hearths, mingas, and other community and feminized spaces, it's not that women aren't participating, it's that the State fails to see them.*

legitimacy from places unrecognised and undervalued by institutions, such as kitchens, hearths, *mingas* – an ancestral tradition of community and collaborative work, which seeks

collective benefit –, collective care networks, and traditional roles like that of *parteras* – women who accompany pregnant women before, during, and after childbirth.

- Ignoring traditional political spaces impoverishes local democracy and reproduces the epistemic hierarchy that has excluded community practices and women's political work from public institutions.
- The State has a limited ability to recognise participation that happens within territories, particularly in family or private spaces.



Discussion space with directives from Universidad del Cauca, organised by the students' movement Photo: Juan Camilo Betancur Jaramillo / SEI

## Conclusion

WACs are spaces for participation where local democracy can learn to represent the women it has excluded the most. In Popayán, that space was sustained for more than a decade by women holding meetings in parks, who self-financed their campaigns and contributed their own time and resources, with limited or no support from the municipal government. The next period of Popayán's WAC, already backed by Popayán's Municipal Agreement 017 (Municipal Agreement 017, 2024), is an opportunity to do things differently. That opportunity requires political will, budget, and institutions' openness to learn from those who know more about obstacles: women in all their diversity.

Colombia's extensive legal framework on women's rights has not translated into meaningful, inclusive political participation, particularly for Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and campesina women. The case of Popayán's Women's Advisory Council reveals that the problem lies not only in legal design, but in persistent failures of implementation, resourcing, and institutional recognition. The structural barriers to women's participation highlighted in this brief, such as insufficient resources and technical assistance, lack of recognition of women's plurality and the intersection of oppressions, and limited awareness of cultural differences, are not unique to Popayán. Participation mechanisms, when underfunded and disconnected from decision-making processes, risk becoming symbolic exercises that reproduce existing power hierarchies.

## Policy recommendations

Drawing on the experience of Popayán's WAC, we propose a set of recommendations that are relevant not only for this municipality but also for other governments aiming to strengthen women's participation through consultative bodies or similar mechanisms. These recommendations are applicable across national and local contexts in which multicultural and pluri-ethnic societies are present.

## Local Women’s Secretariats

### Material conditions

Guarantee minimal material conditions to the WAC’s functioning, such as official physical spaces, support to transport, meals, technical support, special support to care work, and capacity development in public management and gender equity. Without this, participation is underpinned by women’s personal sacrifices, increases the load of unpaid labour, and limits possibilities for consolidating an effective political agency.

### Support to operational tasks

Strengthen institutional support to the WAC, especially regarding logistics and bureaucracy. This way, councillors can focus on their labour as councillors instead of procedural issues.

Address the needs associated with the inclusion of new sectors by tackling material, technical, and operational barriers, including budget, access to meeting spaces, and the provision of technical assistance.

### Intra- and interinstitutional interaction

Formally integrating WACs into planning, budgeting, and monitoring and evaluation systems. Likewise, establishing explicit mechanisms for substantially integrating WAC’s advices into decision-making.

Guaranteeing that the knowledge held by WAC representatives is recognised and consulted before hiring external consultants for advising political decisions on women’s participation.

### Representativity and connection with citizenship

Promoting councillor’s reflections on what women’s equity means for each sector, beyond gender-based violence.

Before creating WACs, municipalities can catalyse a broad municipal dialogue on what being a women means and entails locally, and on possible, collectively desired futures. This will contribute to keep councillors’ representativity rooted on their sector and connection with citizenship.

## Local governments

### Financing

Enacting specific, stable, and fair budgets for the WAC's functioning. Continuity of participation bodies must not depend on political cycles.

### Legal frameworks and accountability

Revising local norms that regulate WACs to include local government accountability mechanisms towards them.

### Intersectionality

Adopting an intersectional perspective for designing all participation mechanisms and bodies. This is not reflected solely on what representation sectors exist, but also on the inclusion of their political practices and knowledge.

Recognising the intersectional nature of discrimination, as well as the intra-group diversity of women and other social groups, requires analysing various axes of oppression. It is important to develop social diagnostic baselines that are sensitive to how multiple forms of discrimination co-produce and intensify one another.

### Intra- and interinstitutional interaction

Establishing communication channels between local institutions (mayor's offices, secretariats, local legislative bodies) and with community participation bodies (e.g., between ethnic affairs offices, women's secretariats, and WACS).

## National government institutions

### Monitoring and evaluation

- Creating a registry of active WACs, including information about their functioning, resources, institutional articulation, and impact.
- Develop trainings and spaces for exchange between WACS to support capacity building and their local development.

### Legal frameworks

- Developing national guidelines that differentiate between formal and effective participation, with indicators that capture the real impact of advisory bodies in local decision-making.
- Adopting mechanisms to integrate the cultural and epistemological diversity of campesino, Indigenous and black communities into legal participation frameworks such as Advisory Councils.

### Recognition of unofficial forms of participation

- Recognising and financing unofficial political participation practices, such as community assemblies, Indigenous government structures, and community women's associations.
- Recognising community action as the foundation of political practice. Additionally, recognising contemporary practices of community action, such as women's and youth's gatherings, and collectives.

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