

Understanding intersectionality and barriers to political participation

The case of the Women's Advisory Council of Popayán, Colombia

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Abstract

Political participation can both mitigate and reproduce multiple forms of inequality. In Popayán, a municipality in southwest Colombia, Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and campesino communities not only have faced a legacy of territorial and ethnic exclusion, but also barriers created at the crossroads of gender, poverty, and the divide between rural and urban spaces. Drawing on an analytical intersectional perspective, in collaboration with Popayán's Secretariat for Women, we drew on the case of the local Women's Advisory Council – an official local participation body – to understand challenges and opportunities for political participation by women within local public policy and governance processes. Although the Council creates a formal space for dialogue with the local government, enduring exclusions and hierarchies continue to shape who can participate meaningfully in local governance and whose knowledge, time, and political labour are recognised by institutions. This study situates these dynamics within Cauca's long history of social movements and the broader literature on political participation, gender and intersectionality, illustrating both the importance of intersectionality in understanding barriers to participation and its implications for more inclusive and equitable approaches to participatory governance both in Colombia and beyond.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Popayán's Women's Advisory Council and Secretariat for Women, Bogotá's Secretariat for Women, and Diana Pito, professor at the Universidad del Cauca, for their time and valuable contributions to this project.

During the submission of this document, Roxxy Vanessa Astaiza Mosquera, a transgender youth leader in Popayán and candidate to 2026-2029 Cauca's Women's Advisory Council, was assassinated. This is illustrative of the ultimate barrier to participation: pervasive violence that silences voices and is a threat to anyone who dares to be themselves and speak up.

Preface



By Johan Lilja, Secretary General, Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy

An inclusive local democracy depends not only on opening spaces for participation, but also on understanding who is able to enter those spaces, whose voices are heard once they are there, and whose knowledge and experiences influence decisions. The reality shows that formal opportunities for participation can coexist with significant inequalities in practice. Gender, ethnicity, socio-economic conditions, age, territory, disability and other dimensions of people's lives can intersect in ways that shape very different possibilities for engaging in local governance.

This report, *Understanding Intersectionality and Barriers to Political Participation: The Case of the Women's Advisory Council of Popayán, Colombia*, makes an important contribution to understanding these dynamics. Focusing on Popayán and its Women's Advisory Council, the study examines how different forms of inequality interact to shape women's participation in local governance. It shows that creating formal participatory institutions is an important step, but that meaningful participation also depends on the material, institutional and social conditions that allow people to take part and exercise influence.

A particular strength of the report is its intersectional perspective. Intersectionality draws attention to how gender interacts with ethnicity, socio-economic position, territorial inequalities, age and other dimensions of exclusion. The report also invites us to broaden our understanding of political participation itself. Community organising, collective care, territorial struggles and Indigenous, Afro-descendant and campesino practices of participation remind us that democratic life extends beyond formal institutions and that valuable political knowledge is produced in many different spaces.

The case of the Women's Advisory Council of Popayán also provides important lessons for local governments. Participatory mechanisms require more than a formal mandate. They need institutional recognition, resources, continuity and meaningful connections to decision-making processes. Practical conditions such as transportation, care responsibilities, time and access to information can determine whether participation is genuinely inclusive. At the same time, the report demonstrates the importance of recognising the knowledge and political labour that women and community organisations already contribute to local democracy.

At ICLD, we believe that strengthening local democracy requires continuous attention to both participation and equity. Research can help make visible the barriers that remain hidden behind formal structures, while also bringing forward practices and knowledge that can contribute to more inclusive forms of governance. This report offers valuable insights for municipalities, researchers and practitioners seeking to understand how intersectionality can move from an analytical concept to a practical consideration in democratic governance.

I really appreciate the authors and all those who contributed with their knowledge and experiences for making this important research. Their work reminds us that the question of who gets to take part is inseparable from another fundamental democratic question: under what conditions can people participate, be heard, and influence the decisions that shape their lives?

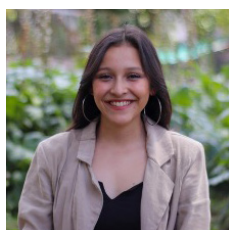
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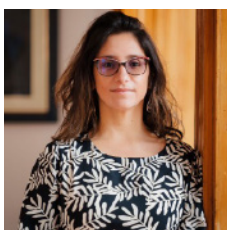
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Introduction

Research highlights various gaps in women's participation in democratic processes – from limited political representation to other forms of political engagement. These range from the gender gap of candidates in elections for public office to the gendered assessments or even harassment and violence that female candidates may face, and may be explained by structural barriers and issues of inclusion, to patriarchal cultural norms, gender gaps around education, civic training, care responsibilities and time availability, and financial limitations, among other factors (Ara, 2019; Fellegi et al., 2023; White et al., 2024).

However political participation is not only about engagement in formal processes such as elections but also includes informal or unconventional forms of participation such as activism, or even protest. Further, other factors besides gender alone can also influence women's participation. A broad body of international scholarship on women's political participation including studies from the United States, Europe, Africa, India, Colombia and across Latin America consistently show that women's political participation is shaped by the interaction of gender with race, class, age, ethnicity, sexuality, and territory, highlighting the importance of an intersectional approach (Bernal, 2017; Brown, 2014; Farris & Holman, 2014; Grasso & Giugni, 2025; Htun & Ossa, 2013; Jensenius, 2016; van Deth, 2001).

In Colombia, despite significant advances in the development of progressive laws and policies to support gender equality since the 1980s (Betancur Jaramillo, 2021), barriers to women's political participation remain multiple, layered, and deeply shaped by intersecting inequalities, including historical ones. The Colombian gender equity policies have expanded since the national ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1991 (National Congress of Colombia, 1981) to a set of around 30 national policies related to gender equity (Betancur Jaramillo, 2021). Throughout the years, this

policy set has incorporated policies that address intersections of different forms of discrimination – like the policies on rural and campesina women (National Planning Department of Colombia, 1984, 1994) — and policies that explicitly mention having an intersectional focus – like the National Care Policy (National Planning Department, 2025). Still, women face intersectional barriers to their participation: 19% of seats in the Colombian Congress are occupied by women, 1,4% by racialised women, and 0,7% is occupied by LGBTIQ+ people (National Ombudsperson Office of Colombia, 2026).

Colombia – like so many other countries, including in Latin America – is also far from homogeneous. It is a geographically and culturally diverse nation, with a long history of political fragmentation and violence, also crosscut by class, ethnic, and historic rural-urban divides tied to its colonial history. It is impossible to understand the dynamics of political participation and gender relations without considering this historical and territorial context.

The southwest or Pacific region of Colombia, and in particular, the department of Cauca, is marked by a history of structural inequalities, colonial legacies, intersectional exclusions and ongoing struggles for recognition within state institutions – all of which shape the conditions for women's political participation (Cortés Landazury, 2024; García Rincón, 2018; Sinisterra Rodríguez, 2009). Several national social movements born out of struggles for land and recognition by Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural communities also originate in this region (De Barros Ferreira, 2023; Jaramillo Salgado, 2005; Melo Guzmán, 2014; Parrado Rodríguez, 2023; Picciotti, 2019; Reyes Beltrán & Rodríguez Villabona, 2023; Torres Pulido, 2024). Despite the peace agreement signed in 2016, there continues to be extensive violence in the region, partly financed by the control of illicit crop production and trade as well as illegal mining. In this context, social leaders are continuous targets of political violence and assassination. The pervasive violence has contributed to local

migration to the department's capital, Popayán, as well as migration to other parts of Colombia and internationally.

In other words, while intersectionality is vital to gender research in any context, the Colombian experience – in particular southwest Colombia – underlines the importance of taking into account not only gender, ethnicity, age, etc., but also territorial history in shaping women's participation in political processes. There are profound challenges to political participation in a country with a long-standing conflict wrought through by a history of political violence and structural inequalities. Further, while intersectionality is now more widely recognized as an essential lens to understand and ameliorate gender gaps in political participation, there is yet more research needed to understand the barriers to putting intersectionality into practice in diverse settings and geographies.

Furthermore, it is vital to broaden the lens around gender and participation to include attention to less formal spaces and forms of participation, rooted in the particular context. A closer understanding of territorial history and the current sociocultural and territorial context also helps thus identify other ontological and epistemological practices that are tied to the Indigenous, Afrocolombian and campesinx traditions and may enable (or inhibit) participation by women and LGBTQI+ people.

In this context, this research sought to identify, examine, and explain the intersectional barriers faced by women in the municipality of Popayán. The study centred women's lived experiences of political participation and exclusion in the case of a specific formal advisory body for local government, the Women's Advisory Council (WAC) of Popayan, recognising how gender intersects with women's identities, sectors of representation, and socio-economic position to condition access to decision-making spaces at the local level. At the same time, the research sought to also identify non-institutionalized political

participation spaces beyond the WAC, or at the margins of the WAC.

The project objectives were co-defined with Popayán's Secretariat for Women to identify key processes that the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) could support to strengthen participatory governance. In particular, the research sought to deepen understanding of local formal and informal participation dynamics, relevant actors, and structural and relational barriers affecting women's political engagement related to the WAC of Popayan. Engaging with former WAC representatives offered insight into the body's strengths and limitations, as well as the institutional and socio-political challenges it faces. This engagement informed the identification of concrete measures to strengthen the WAC as an effective, representative, and inclusive participatory body for women in Popayán.

Popayán was among the first municipalities in Colombia to create a WAC, though it was not the first. This type of advisory body was first established in Bogotá, Colombia's capital city, in 2007, building on extensive earlier organizing by women in the metropolis. These foundational efforts included studies to identify women's needs and issues in the city, dialogues with political candidates, and efforts to include diverse women's perspectives in urban policies, such as around equal opportunities and gender equity.¹ Today, there are efforts to elect WACs in municipalities and regions across the country and globally, making lessons from Popayán relevant beyond the municipality itself. Among many others, some countries like Turkey, Poland, and India have implemented similar bodies with the aims of building channels for women's participation (Muszel & Strzałkowska, 2026; Sumbas, 2024; Zothansanga, 2024). While the WACs have been perceived as an innovative response to historic feminist claims for independent spaces, and as catalysts of civic and political leadership (Muszel & Strzałkowska, 2026), there have also been concerns about WACs not being able to

1 For a timeline of the Bogotá WAC, see Universidad de los Andes & Consejo Consultivo de Mujeres de Bogotá - Espacio Autónomo, 2025.

maintain feminist positioning or to improve women's participation, having little influence over local policy due to them being non-binding, being co-opted by political parties, or operating as a sandbox in which women's participation is contained or relegated to (Muszel & Strzałkowska, 2026).

Focusing on power relations that underpin marginalisation based on gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, this study examined how these co-produced inequalities shape women's individual and collective experiences of political participation, broadly conceived. The study highlights how often-neglected intersectional experiences and perspectives can inform gender policies and foster more inclusive political landscapes. It contributes to research on gender, intersectionality and participation by highlighting the relevance of historical, territorial and cultural contexts, including by drawing attention to non-institutionalized political participation spaces, and by bringing Latin American feminisms into conversation with other literatures on gender and political participation. The findings also aim to inform participatory governance approaches of Popayán's Secretariat for Women and comparable institutions within and beyond Colombia, contributing to efforts to advance gender equality and social equity in local governance.

With this in mind, we guided our research with the following two research questions and their respective sub-questions:

- **How do gender, ethnicity, territorial histories and socio-economic status intersect to shape the experiences and opportunities of participatory local governance in Popayán, Colombia?**
 - **What role do policy and governance structures play in perpetuating or mitigating barriers to participation for marginalised communities?**

- **How do Indigenous, Afro-descendent, and campesino epistemologies and ontologies promote participation and inclusion in political engagement?**

- **What can local governments learn from these ontologies and practices?**

The following section presents the theoretical framework, organized around these guiding questions, drawing on a detailed literature review focused especially on the Pacific region of Colombia. This section is followed by a description of our methodology, including a short reflection on the authors' positionality. Then, we present the study's findings and discuss results in light of our research questions and framework. The paper then closes with some conclusions summarizing insights from the research for both research audiences and policymakers, highlighting some recommendations specifically for the Popayan government, identifying opportunities for strengthening political participation in the municipality, as well as recommendations that apply beyond the local context and that can help understand and inform how intersectional inequalities are recognised, articulated and addressed across different policy domains and everyday political practices.

State of the art and theoretical framework

As already highlighted above, women's political participation – and political participation more broadly – in the department of Cauca in Colombia has a long history of structural inequalities, historical exclusions based on ethnicity and class, armed conflict, rural-urban divides, and ongoing struggles by social movements for recognition within state institutions. Today, women's participation, despite a progressive Constitution and efforts to install institutional spaces to specifically support women's political and economic participation, continues to present significant barriers.

The literature on women's political participation in the department of Cauca presents a complex field shaped by structural inequalities, colonial legacies, intersectional exclusions, and diverse forms of resistance across Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural communities. Through this literature review, we sought to explore how gender, ethnicity, class-based exclusions, rurality, territory, armed conflict, collective memory, social mobilisation and epistemology intersect to shape the possibilities – and limits – of participation for women, focusing on the municipality of Popayán.

While this literature review is deeply rooted in the Cauca context, it resonates with a broader body of comparative and national as well as international scholarship on women's political participation analysed through an intersectional and feminist decolonial lens.

This review is informed by an intersectional and feminist decolonial perspective. Intersectionality, first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), highlights how people's experiences are shaped by the interaction of multiple social positions and systems of power rather than by gender alone. Subsequent scholarship has demonstrated that inequalities emerge through the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, disability, age, and other axes of differentiation, all of which are embedded within broader historical and institutional structures (Patricia Hill Collins, 1990, 2019; Nira Yuval-Davis, 2006). While intersectionality is not a term that originates in the Latin American context, it has now been widely adopted and has strong synergies with

scholarship that originates in the region, while paying stronger attention to the historical colonial origins of inequalities. Feminist decolonial scholars argue that these intersecting inequalities cannot be understood independently of colonial histories and the ways in which they continue to shape institutions, governance, and dominant systems of knowledge (e.g., María Lugones, 2008; Ochy Curiel, 2016).

The concept of intersectionality highlights how people's experiences are shaped by the interaction of multiple social identities or positions and systems of power – including around gender, and how inequalities emerge shaped by these intersections. Taking this concept to political participation, women's experiences of participation – across many varied geographies – are shaped by the interaction of gender with race, class, age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, territory, and other forms or axes of social differentiation, rather than by gender alone (Bernal, 2017; Brown, 2014; Farris & Holman, 2014; Grasso & Giugni, 2025; Htun & Ossa, 2013; Jensenius, 2016).

Feminist decolonial perspectives further draw attention to the intertwining of colonial histories, gender and other inequalities, highlighting how colonialism and its legacies affect how inequalities were constituted and continue to unfold, whose knowledge counts, and as well as whose institutions and practices of governance are recognized (Arriagada Oyarzún, 2026; Escobar, 2007; Espinosa Miñoso et al., 2014; García-Torres et al., 2022; Lugones, 2008; Segato, 2014; Ulloa, 2020c; Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021). In emphasizing these histories and questions in relation to gender and political participation, feminist decolonial perspectives broaden the analysis of power relations shaping gender inequalities to include structural barriers and how historical structures continue to shape institutions, governance, and systems of knowledge. Together, these references provide a conceptual scaffold for understanding that the barriers identified in Cauca are not an exception but a context-specific manifestation of patterned global inequalities reproduced through political institutions and social hierarchies.

Barriers to political participation

Barriers to political participation appear deeply rooted and multi-layered. A rigorous examination shows that these constraints are deepened when it comes to gender. There are both formal and informal barriers to women's political participation. Formal obstacles include the explicit exclusion of women from political spaces, while informal ones are embedded in everyday life and affect women's entry into and continued presence in these spaces. Formal barriers include the legal prohibition that prevented women from holding public office in Colombia, a situation that only began to change in 1936, as well as the denial of women's status as citizens and, consequently, of their right to vote. In Colombia, women obtained suffrage only in 1954 and first exercised this right in 1957. As Bernal (2006) points out, informal barriers to the full participation of women in democracies originate "in the undervalued social position of women, in traditional views of gender roles, in the prejudices and cultural stereotypes constructed around them, and in forms of discrimination expressed through various barriers to entry into formal political participation, such as the so-called glass ceilings" (Bernal Olarte, 2006, p. 9).

The division between the public and private spheres, the assumption that these spheres are gendered, and the sexual division of labour contribute both to women's exclusion from politics and to the significant difficulties they face in gaining access to political life. Some authors highlight gendered patterns in leadership formation, noting that men tend to gain political confidence informally through broad access to communal spaces of political training and debate (Bernal Olarte, 2006; Picciotti, 2019; Zacipa Infante, 2019). In contrast, women often feel underprepared and silenced (Picciotti, 2019).

Some of the crucial aspects that act as barriers to political participation for women are legacies from patriarchal political cultures, manifested through exposure to violence linked to political engagement (Fajardo Hoyos et al., 2023). Beyond institutional barriers, some authors have captured discursive and

cultural obstacles. For instance, women's political aspirations and collective agendas are sometimes framed as "problematic", facing backlash due to feminism allegedly promoting a "gender ideology" that menaces families (Gómez & Montealegre Mongrovejo, 2021; Montealegre Mongrovejo, 2023) or by breaking community traditions (Amador Ospina et al., 2020; Zacipa Infante, 2019) such as moving with the groom's parents after marriage in the case of Misak communities (Zacipa Infante, 2019). This often exposes tensions between women's individual rights and their communities' collective projects, particularly when women's rights contradict local traditions.

As a consequence, women have faced stigmatisation, contributing to exclusionary practices and complicating women's efforts to gain authoritative positions within Indigenous and Western governance systems (Amador Ospina et al., 2020). Barriers also stem from institutional weaknesses and limited gender sensitivity among state officials and local governments, who often fail to grasp the territorial and gendered dimensions of participation. This contributes to reproducing stereotyped roles for women, framing their community engagement primarily through reproductive responsibilities, like attending to domestic tasks, weaving, or cooking for attendees of community decision-making spaces (Zacipa Infante, 2019).

Comparative literature reinforces that barriers to women's participation are not isolated since poverty is driven by unpaid care work, limited access to financial resources, and lower institutional recognition of non-formal political practices, which in turn systematically constrain women's participation (Brown, 2014; Farris & Holman, 2014; Grasso & Giugni, 2025). These findings align closely with the Cauca case, where women's leadership is often exercised through community labour and informal networks that remain undervalued by dominant political frameworks.

Although there are common barriers to women's participation, a feminist decolonial approach invites us to recognise that these barriers are also deeply context-specific. On the one hand, barriers are produced through the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. The exclusions experienced by Indigenous,

peasant, Afro-descendant women, and women from working-class and low-income sectors are shaped by racism, classism, patriarchy, and the division between rural and urban communities. Additionally, women who belong to LGBTQ+ communities face further discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. While some of these barriers may appear similar to those encountered by white or mestiza women, they are not the same, as patriarchy does not operate uniformly across contexts (Gómez Correal, 2024). Gender arrangements are the product of historical and culturally specific configurations that any analysis of women's participation must take into account.

For example, narratives from Nasa communities highlight that gender relations existed before colonisation but operated through dual, complementary logics rather than Western dichotomies. Duality is the Misak ancestral principle that conceives women and men as complementary and equally necessary halves of life, whose relationship should be based on balance, dialogue, reciprocity, and shared authority rather than hierarchy (Zacipa Infante, 2019). The introduction of colonial systems imposed new hierarchies that displaced women's authority and introduced patriarchal (*machista*) practices perceived as external impositions that destabilised relational balance (Picciotti, 2019; Zacipa Infante, 2019). Similarly, historical reconstructions among Misak women show that pre-colonial female authority – including leadership in warfare – was diminished with the arrival of Spanish political, religious, and economic models (Melo Guzmán, 2014).

The Misak and Nasa experience illustrates not only how intersectional barriers to participation emerge at the crossroads of gender, ethnicity, and racism as a product of colonial legacies, but also how culturally specific conceptions of women's participation, practices, and experiences take shape. Historically, Misak women held significant roles as transmitters of ancestral knowledge and guardians of territory (Zacipa Infante, 2019). Although the arrival of colonial structures disrupted these practices, embedding racialised and patriarchal hierarchies that delegitimised

indigenous forms of women's authority, women preserved knowledge and practices that have persisted over time.

The marginalisation of Misak women thus cannot be explained by gender alone; it reflects the combined effects of ethnic subordination and systematic dispossession that Indigenous peoples have been subjected to. At the same time, it requires us to examine the particular forms of women's exclusion within each Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural community, as well as the gender imaginaries and normative principles embedded in each worldview that may enable more symmetrical participation in rural and ethnic communities. As we have already highlighted, patriarchy does not operate in the same way across contexts, and cultural differences must be taken into account in any analysis and policy-making.

Campesino women in Cauca, for example, face layered exclusions tied to class, gender, and rurality. As Fajardo Hoyos et al. (2023) show, while campesino women are central to sustaining agricultural economies, their labour is undervalued politically and institutionally. Their limited visibility in governance spaces reflects not only patriarchy but also structural class hierarchies that dismiss rural voices in decision-making.

On the other hand, in the case of Cauca, women face additional barriers linked to the armed conflict and the current configuration of the Nation-state. In the Colombian context, Indigenous, campesino, and Afro-descendant peoples have become military targets not only because of their worldviews but also due to land tenure and territorial control. In this scenario, women's bodies have also been militarised and targeted (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición, 2022) – not only because their bodies are gendered, but because women have been central to the defence of land, territory, and their communities.

In this context, Indigenous women may have both an active political participation and simultaneously care for families, crops, animals, and household tasks, often pushing them to withdraw from public political spaces and instead participate from home or educational

and community settings (Picciotti, 2019). Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and campesino women have also mobilised within broader national processes, especially in the field of peacebuilding.

Feminist and women's organisations in Cauca were central actors in peace dialogues with the FARC-EP, pushing for the incorporation of gender perspectives and for women's presence both symbolically and physically at negotiation tables (Montealegre Mongrovejo, 2023). Universities, social movements, and regional feminist networks helped shape women's political consciousness, contributing to mobilisations such as the 2016 "Marcha de las Flores." Women's contributions to the implementation of the Peace Agreement – including leadership within the territorial development planning structures created as part of this process (PDET, for its name in Spanish – Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial) – were strengthened by training, simulations, and organisational collaboration (Montealegre Mongrovejo, 2023).

Chaparro and Martínez (2017) illustrate how rural women engaged in the peace process, demanding recognition of gendered harms and rights. Yet institutional responses often diluted their demands, revealing how the State fails to consider and address intersectional experiences. Chaparro and Martínez (2017) help us understand that the participation of campesino women cannot be analysed solely through a gender lens, and instead it is always necessary to question how gender, class, ethnicity, and rural marginalisation interact in each context.

Rethinking political participation

Another obstacle women face relates to dominant conceptions of politics and participation. Understanding women's political trajectories requires departing from a broader conception of politics and a long-term approach. Although women have historically been underrepresented in political parties and in elected office, they are often key actors within their communities.

In the Colombian case, women have played a central role in working-class or low-income neighbourhoods as well as in Indigenous, peasant, and Afro-descendant communities and social movements. Even more, before the Spanish invasion of the Americas, women had played a crucial role in indigenous communities. As Zacipa Infante (2019) highlights, before colonisation, in Misak society, women occupied leadership roles in their communities as wardens of territory, *cacicas*, and transmitters of communities' ancestral knowledge.

In the context of the internal armed conflict, women have not only resisted violence but have also defended their territories, communities, and families, while organising and participating in diverse social movements (Gómez Correal et al., 2024). Politics extends beyond political parties, elected office, or positions within the state; it also encompasses the everyday defence and organisation of life. In Cauca, while women's participation is relatively high, definitions of political participation remain limited and often fail to capture the full spectrum of women's community-based leadership (Fajardo Hoyos et al., 2023).

An important aspect to consider when examining women's participation is the wide range of forms it may assume. To name a few, among the Misak and Nasa women, political participation is built through everyday practices, symbolic spaces such as the *fogón* (the stove or hearth), and life stories of community involvement (Melo Guzmán, 2014; Picciotti, 2019). In Misak culture, kitchens are conceived as feminine spaces where families talk, receive trusted guests, and the hearth represents the elders' word, where territory begins (Melo Guzmán, 2014). In the Nasa cosmovision, the hearths are the heart of a home (Picciotti, 2019). Everyday cooking for families, and cooking for community assemblies, weaving for talking, caring for vegetable gardens, are spaces where political thinking is born, developed, and kept alive (Picciotti, 2019). In Afro-descendant contexts, political participation intersects with family structures and mining economies, illustrating how daily life and labour shape women's access to political engagement

(Carabalí Viveros & Ladino Mosquera, 2014).

Despite obstacles, campesino women also carve out political agency in spaces where survival and participation intersect. Carabalí Viveros and Ladino Mosquera (2014) document women miners in Buenos Aires, Cauca, who confront exclusion on three fronts: as rural women, as miners stigmatised by illegality, and as Afro-descendants in a racially stratified society. Their struggles show that intersectionality produces both intensified marginalisation and new forms of resistance that redefine local participation through economic and territorial claims

Governance Structures: Exclusion and Opportunity

Nonetheless, the guarantees provided by the Colombian state for women's political participation are not fully implemented at the territorial level, and persistent inequalities remain between *cabildos* and *consejos comunitarios* – semi-autonomous Indigenous and Afro-descendant territorial entities, respectively – and national government structures. *Cabildos* and *consejos comunitarios* have often been treated as peripheral policy arenas, understood as alternative political settings confined to the internal governance of ethnic groups. Thus, national actions for promoting women's participation also need to be context-specific.

International scholarship on Indigenous women's political participation highlights tensions between formal inclusion mechanisms and culturally grounded political practices. In Bolivia, for instance, Htun and Ossa (2013) show that gender parity reforms within Indigenous reservations did not automatically translate into meaningful participation for Indigenous women, as community norms, intra-group power relations, and divergent political priorities shaped outcomes. These findings underscore that formal institutional reforms, such as quotas or parity, must be interpreted through local cultural values, rules, institutional structures, understandings of the world, (onto-epistemologies) and collective projects, a point that strongly resonates with Indigenous women's experiences in Cauca.

Women have historically been excluded from decision-

making processes both within state institutions and within Indigenous *cabildos* (Amador Ospina et al., 2020), Afro-descendant *consejos comunitarios* (De Barros Ferreira, 2023), and peasant organisations (Fajardo Hoyos et al., 2023), revealing persistent gender disparities in the occupation of authority positions across these social and political organisations. This is the case of several Nasa *resguardos* (collective lands granted to Indigenous communities for their autonomy and governance), where there are persistent political and gender imbalances. In the case of the Misak women, their participation is mediated by both internal and external barriers. Melo Guzmán (2014) shows how women negotiate authority within Misak governance structures that are themselves shaped by patriarchal expectations. Literature on continental Indigenous women underscores how inequality is produced not only by external state structures but also within Indigenous communities through specific power relations, violence, and limitations on women's rights (Ulloa, 2020a).

At the same time, state institutions often fail to recognise the legitimacy of Indigenous women's knowledge – ranging from environmental management to food security, health to cultural memory – creating a double exclusion. Intersectionality here reveals how Misak women's political action must simultaneously confront gender norms within their community and ethnic discrimination in broader governance systems. Formal governance in Colombia frequently reproduces intersectional exclusions. Chaparro and Martínez (2017) highlight how peace agreements, despite including gender provisions, often neglect the compounded realities of rural, Indigenous, and Afro-descendant women. Policies that appear inclusive in gender terms rarely address the additional ethnic, territorial, and class-based barriers that prevent effective participation.

Indigenous, rural, working-class, and Afro-descendant women's experiences in Cauca make this gap clear. Cruz and Baracaldo (2020) show how reparations processes ignore the intersection of racial and gender-based violence, focusing instead on narrow state-led definitions of victimhood. Similarly, Alvarado Suárez

and Prado Martínez (2024) argue that Afro-Colombian women in peacebuilding contexts often face tokenistic inclusion – invited to speak as “representatives” but excluded from shaping decisions. Intersectionality here exposes the failure of governance to promote meaningful participation by women facing intersecting oppressions.

Learning from marginalised epistemologies and ontologies

Another important aspect to consider when examining women's participation is the relationship between the diversity of its forms and specific onto-epistemological frameworks. A decolonial feminist approach to women's participation requires us to acknowledge the worldviews and onto-epistemologies that shape ethnic and rural communities, in other words the ways of seeing, understanding and explaining reality and the knowledge systems that validate those ways of seeing and understanding. Ulloa (2020b) underscores that Indigenous women articulate their struggles through concepts of body, territory, and spirituality. This onto-epistemological perspective highlights that intersectional barriers are not only material (e.g., lack of access to institutions) but also epistemic and ontological: in other words, their worldviews are often dismissed by dominant frameworks, as such concepts are often difficult to translate or assimilate into categories and structures of modern state institutions. For Misak women, then, participation entails pushing against multiple, overlapping axes of oppression while crafting political practices rooted in indigenous ontologies (Amador Ospina et al., 2020).

Nasa women's political involvement requires deeper analysis to understand how authority roles are assigned, how women navigate both state and community political arenas, and how their Indigenous principles shape their political aspirations, as is the case of *wët wët fxi'zenxi* (living well) (Amador Ospina et al., 2020), a vision of wellbeing that contrasts with dominant development perspectives. Likewise, organisations of indigenous,

Afro-descendant, and peasant women victims have played a central role in shaping proposals for collective reparations, insisting on the recognition of cultural and ancestral knowledge as political contributions essential to community healing and territorial identity (Cruz & Baracaldo, 2020).

Intersectionality and a decolonial feminist framework are key analytical lenses for this discussion, as they allow us to recognise diversity among women and within women's organisations – diversity shaped not only by cultural, ethnic, class, and regional differences and inequalities, but also by distinct epistemologies and ontologies. Recognising the existence of multiple ontologies and their associated epistemologies reveals governance as a contested arena, where epistemic hierarchies reproduce marginalisation and impose not only dominant worldviews, but also specific ways of organising society. A decolonial approach to governance, therefore, invites us to embrace a project in which many worlds can coexist (Escobar, 2020).

Indigenous and black feminist thought in Cauca offers alternative epistemologies of governance. De Barros Ferreira (2023) highlights practices of collective care, memory, and resistance as central to political participation within Afro-descendant women. These practices emerge precisely at the intersection of race, gender, and class exclusions, transforming survival strategies into political knowledge.

In Cauca, feminist and community-based movements serve as powerful engines of political agency. Community feminism is framed not as abstract theory but as a living political practice that redefines social relations and centres community well-being in resistance to colonial and patriarchal structures (Picciotti, 2019). Indigenous women draw strength from long histories of resistance, particularly the Nasa struggles during the conquest, the first half of the twentieth century, and the mobilisations of the 1970s and 1980s. During this latter period, women protected their territories, led marches, cooked for large-scale mobilisations,

and participated in the founding of the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC) (Picciotti, 2019).

However, informal political spaces – the *fogón*, the communal kitchen, the *minga* (ancestral political and cultural mobilisation, drawing on an ancestral tradition of community and collaborative work, which seeks collective benefit), assemblies, healing practices, radio collectives, and the Guardia Indígena – are spaces where Indigenous women exercise authority, cultivate leadership, and transform community life (Picciotti, 2019). These help articulate political discussions regarding women's and broader political concerns of their communities, transmit knowledge, and organise collectively. Unexpected political spaces opened by religious organisations have also expanded women's capacities. For example, the Pentecostal congregation has offered safe spaces, leadership opportunities, literacy and health training, and a supportive community where women can develop confidence and a public voice (Zacipa Infante, 2019). In other cases some religious groups have pushed back against efforts to recognize women's reproductive and political rights, advocating for defined and limited roles for women and definitions of the category of "woman" (Ramirez et al., 2020; Vaggione, 2022).

Collective action emerges as a recurring catalyst for strengthening women's participation, informed by Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and peasant onto-epistemologies. In Afro-descendant territories, women's organisations have developed localised forms of Black feminism rooted in land defence and resistance to oppression (De Barros Ferreira, 2023). Ancestral practices, rootedness, and love for the collective territory have mobilised Black women's participation in decision-making spaces and defence of collective rights. In urban contexts, feminist collectives such as the Cinema Club Ágora in Popayán create educational and dialogical spaces that foster critical consciousness and participation, particularly during political mobilisations like the 2021 national strike (Ceballos Güengue, 2024).

Overcoming barriers: how marginalised groups open participation spaces

Alongside the barriers, several studies identify factors that strengthen women's political participation. Within democratic frameworks, the gender quotas, parity initiatives, and women's rights legislation are cited as key enablers of participation (Fajardo Hoyos et al., 2023). As previous sections expose, diverse historical, social, political and cultural factors linked to gender, ethnicity, and social status have resulted in limited rights of women, Indigenous, campesino, and other groups.

Intersectionality is often understood in terms of layers of marginalisation, but not in terms of the synergies for liberation between oppression types. Literature shows that Indigenous movements, pacifist movements (Montealegre Mongrovejo, 2023), and other social movements have planted the seeds for different emancipation processes – e.g., the Indigenous movement has catalysed the emergence of Indigenous women's movements.

Even as governance structures exclude, intersectional alliances generate new forms of participation. Montealegre Mongrovejo (2023) describes how Indigenous, feminist, and pacifist movements in Cauca converge, creating synergies that confront multiple oppressions at once. These coalitions demonstrate that intersectionality can be a framework for liberation, not just a description of marginalisation. Afro-descendant women's organising in Northern Cauca exemplifies this proactive resistance.

De Barros Ferreira (2023) documents how Black women create autonomous feminist spaces that integrate racial, gendered, and territorial demands. These spaces are not secondary to mainstream politics – they are alternative models of governance that challenge extractivist and patriarchal logics. Black women's organisations in northern Cauca have served as vital spaces for political action too, from collective empowerment and the development of a distinctly local form of Black feminism rooted in

the defence of territory and resistance to multiple oppressions (De Barros Ferreira, 2023).

Nasa women also illustrate how intersectional struggles unfold inside Indigenous governance. Amador Ospina et al. (2020) trace how Nasa women confront patriarchal practices within their communities while simultaneously resisting external discrimination. Their activism shows that intersectionality is not only about recognising barriers, but also about producing hybrid political strategies that operate across local, ethnic, and gendered dimensions. Within the Nasa community, for example, ACIN has established the *Tejido Mujer* as an articulation and encounter space to address women's rights, offering a leadership space for women to generate proposals (ACIN, n.d.; Picciotti, 2019).

Among Indigenous women, alternative political spaces – such as gatherings, traditional health practices, and community education – also emerge as sites of self-determination, where women recognise themselves as political subjects beyond formal authority structures. Roles such as *parteras* (women who assist in childbirth, transmitting ancestral knowledge to ensure comprehensive care for pregnant women and their families, especially in rural and remote areas), *sobanderas* (a person skilled in giving massages and musculoskeletal manipulation for healing purposes, a traditional empirical practice in Latin America), teachers, and health promoters are reframed not merely as community support but as political acts embedded in Indigenous worldviews (Amador Ospina et al., 2020). This is because they gain autonomy and self-determination in their communities by exercising their own practices, which ultimately lead to their own political order.

Women in rural areas have also mobilised and organised. The creation of women's organisations, such as Indigenous women's groups and women's productive associations, among others, has been crucial to overcoming the historical barriers women have faced in participating. This has been

strengthened through political advocacy within their communities and in their interactions with the State, as well as through active participation in ethnic and rural organisations and broader social movements, including women's and feminist movements.

Gender, ethnicity, territory, and historical inequalities combine to shape differentiated experiences. Indigenous and Afro-descendant women often experience compounded marginalisation, navigating exclusion not only as women but also as racialised and territorially marginalised subjects. This is why considering political participation from an intersectionality lens matters (Brown, 2014; Farris & Holman, 2014; Grasso & Giugni, 2025; Htun & Ossa, 2013; Jensenius, 2016; Kahi, 2024; Moreau et al., 2019). As an illustration, Indigenous scholars critique the tendency of mainstream feminism to homogenise women's experiences, noting that the category "Indigenous women" is preferred precisely because it recognises specific cultural contexts, political histories, and local identities (Ulloa, 2020b).

Synthesis and building blocks towards a conceptual framework

In summary, this literature review leaves us with the two following takeaways that guide our analysis of empirical results.

First, an analysis of political participation must take into account not only gender, but also ethnicity, territory, and historical inequalities. In other words, multiple social positions and identities combine or intersect to shape the opportunities and constraints to participation, generating differentiated experiences, also interacting with intersecting systems of power and oppression that shape access to resources and power (see Figure 1). At the same time, attention to these intersections means asking somewhat sensitive questions about these multiple identities and taking time to understand the historical and sociocultural context of the region. It is important to note, however, that

this does not mean just listing multiple identities, but taking note of how these effectively intersect and combine in nuanced ways. This brings some empirical challenges, as by asking about people's identities, it can also practically result in listing....

Second, the analysis must take into account multiple forms of political participation, including Indigenous or traditional spaces and practices that may not be integrated with formal spaces and institutions. Paying attention to such spaces also highlights forms of resistance to frameworks for institutionalised participation that can also

sometimes serve to exclude certain voices. Such spaces often exist or are embedded in a historical and sociocultural context of resistance, but can also manifest in contemporary institutionalised spaces, such as that of the WAC.

In the discussion section below, we revisit these building blocks to further develop the framework and connect this discussion to empirical data gathered on intersectional barriers to local participation and their specific effects and symptoms, while also highlighting some limitations to the data analysis.

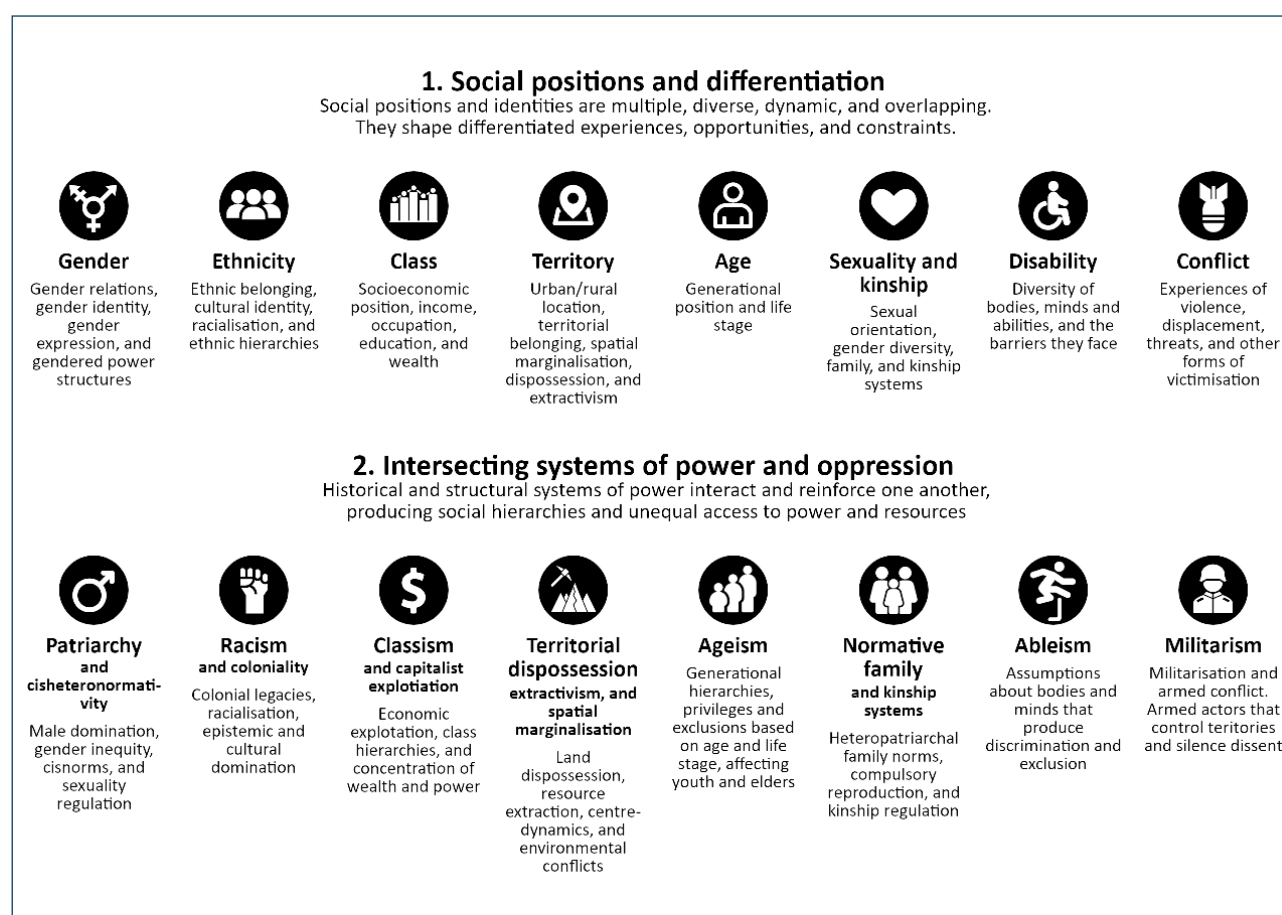


Figure 1: Foundations of Intersectional Barriers to Local Participation.
Source: authors' own elaboration.

This framework is a useful tool for understanding intersectionality as a lens to analyse how multiple identities shape people's political experiences differentially. Several studies argue that colonialism intensified gender inequities in Indigenous societies (Cabnal, 2010; Mendoza, 2014; Paredes, 2017; Segato, 2014), while others critique the superficial application of intersectionality, warning that focusing solely on adding categories – especially for racialised women – risks reproducing the same pitfalls seen with gender mainstreaming (Montealegre Mongrovejo, 2023). Comparative works from other regions reinforce that intersectionality must account for nuanced intra-group dynamics, recognising that individuals can be simultaneously marginalised and privileged across domains of class, race, ethnicity, caste, and sexuality (Farris & Holman, 2014; Htun & Ossa, 2013). From a feminist decolonial perspective, it is imperative to acknowledge the cultural, ethnic, and onto-epistemological differences, as well as the significance of recognising informal, quotidian, and community-based participation as forms of political engagement that frequently remain unnoticed in mainstream political analysis.

In addition, we must remember that intersectionality is not just a description of marginalisation, but it can also be a framework for liberation/transformation. We invite to read our conceptual framework not as a list of identities, or as a guide to identify them, but as a map of oppression systems and how they can manifest differently across social groups and categories. While identifying how different forms of marginalisation coproduce and intensify one another is paramount, it is necessary to advance into building frameworks to dismantle the intertwined systems that oppress people and the planet.

Research design and methods

To understand the barriers to political participation from an intersectional perspective – in recognition of the effects of the Colombian armed conflict, historical processes that have shaped territoriality in the country, and socio-economic context –, this study followed a qualitative design to encourage the sharing of narrative accounts, capturing the depth and detail of individual perspectives and experiences. Our methodology was evaluated by the SEI's Ethics Committee, an internal process to identify the measures that projects need to implement to avoid re-victimisation, extractivist research, harmful or side effects of the project's implementation, and develop a horizontal, enriching interaction with local partners and stakeholders.

The study was informed by a feminist praxis that seeks to involve, rather than instruct. The project objectives were thus co-defined with Popayán's Secretariat for Women. Partnering with Popayán's Secretariat for Women enabled access to institutional arenas of participation and the promise of impactful engagement while also demanding ongoing reflexivity about the power dynamics shaping the collaboration. While we did not engage directly the population we aimed to impact in shaping the project objectives, the Secretariat was a key intermediary and we sought out women representatives of the council in our interviews. Engaging with a municipal institution required balancing critical inquiry with policy engagement. We understood these dynamics as opportunities to examine how intersectionality is enacted, negotiated, and constrained within governance, informing the evolution of our collaborative research process.

Through a series of meetings beginning in August 2024 (the first, prior to initiation of the project), the SEI and Secretariat's teams discussed possible ways to integrate the research questions with their needs and current activities. In this context, we agreed to collaborate on two main activities: first, to support their efforts to diagnose barriers to participation through the development of a document, a Diagnostic

of Local Participation; and second, to support the Secretariat's efforts to reconstitute a local advisory body, Popayan's local Women's Advisory Council (WAC).

The Diagnostic of Local Participation was already one of the Secretariat's planned activities for 2025 and emerged as a key articulation element for the project. Together with the Secretariat's team, we supported structuring the document, identifying key topics for embedding an intersectional gender perspective, elaborating interview and survey documents, analysing data, and contributing to conclusions regarding local participation. In particular, we advised on the development and analysis of a survey that was administered in December 2025 by the Women's Secretariat and the Popayán's Observatory on Gender to support the diagnosis, and for which they collected 70 responses from women in Popayán. Women leaders were invited to participate in the survey based on the Women's Secretariat directory of leaders, and during thematic participation tables organised by the Secretariat. The selection of respondents by the Women's Secretariat including previously identified leaders and women who chose to participate in the Secretariat's events may have resulted in different results than if women were randomly selected to participate. While we had originally discussed a third-party university gender observatory conducting the survey and also developing a web-based survey that could be circulated by WhatsApp, this was not possible to implement given resource and time limitations, and the Secretariat preferred to conduct the survey themselves directly, which limited our ability to include demographic data on participants and also limited the scope of interpretation and analysis of results.

Since 2011, Popayán has had a local WAC, a women's participation body established by the local government to strengthen women's representation in local governance. Its first iteration operated officially between 2011 and 2015 and was set to elect a new set of representatives at the end of 2025, expanding its membership to represent 28 different sectors, including Indigenous, Afro-descendent, campesino, and LGBTQI+ women, among others. We advised the

election criteria for the new WAC, mapped national policies that contributed to each representation sector, and analysed how the first WAC operated, what its strengths and weaknesses were, and how it could be strengthened to foster participatory governance.

A literature review and periodic conversations with the Women's Secretariat of Popayán served as the foundation for the development of the action research case study focused on the WAC. As described in the prior section, we produced a literature review examining the issues of political participation through an intersectional lens in the Colombian context, building upon contemporary academic discourse, decolonial theory, feminist praxis, and grey literature. Decolonial theory is rooted in Latin America, even if it has also developed in dialogue with northern feminisms and other critical theoretical frameworks. Some influential decolonial academic literature has been inspired precisely by social movements from the Pacific region of Colombia, and we centred the review with this framing. We also reviewed current legislation regarding gender and intersectionality approaches to political participation in Colombia. A desk-based policy review was also conducted to identify best practices in gender-equal policymaking and implementation globally.

The WAC case study draws on six semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion with former Council representatives, Women's Secretariat staff in Popayán, and a local academic. While we made multiple attempts to reach out to all former WAC council representatives, only a subset were interested and available to be interviewed. The councillors we were able to interview identified themselves as *mestiza*, and one also identified as a victim of the armed conflict, but none identified as Indigenous, *campesina* or Afrocolombian. Given our conceptual framework's emphasis on understanding the nuanced ways in which multiple identities and social positions intersect to shape experiences of political participation, we would have liked to have been able to include women representatives who identified as Indigenous, *campesina* and Afrocolombian. We consider this to be a weakness of the empirical results from our fieldwork, but also

illustrative of the limited ongoing engagement of the WAC across ethnic groups, and also tied to the motivation of the Secretariat in seeking to broaden the sectors represented in the new elections. Our intention was to interview new candidates for the planned election of a new WAC to also help address this gap in our empirical evidence, but the call for elections was repeatedly postponed until it was no longer feasible given the timeline of our project.

We also interviewed staff from Bogotá's Women's Secretariat, whose WAC is the first of its kind in Colombia, and incorporated selective insights from other WACs nationally to situate Popayán within broader patterns. These conversations explored how the Council operates, the institutional context it inhabits, and the challenges its members navigate. They also allowed us to triangulate observations about how formal and informal political institutions shape and reproduce structural inequalities.

Interview citations are anonymised but are identified by the type of interviewee: S for Women's Secretariat staff, C for WAC Councillors, and A for academic participants. Table 1 presents a categorisation of the interviews.

Territory shaped the analysis throughout. Popayán's position as an urban administrative hub within a predominantly rural, ethnically diverse department produces spatial and material constraints on

participation that policy design ignores. We therefore considered how distance, mobility, time availability, and access to resources condition women's engagement with governance. Analytically, we focused on identifying participation trajectories across different women, examining how gender norms, ageism, bureaucratic requirements, and knowledge hierarchies shape who can participate, how, and with what effect. Research ethics were a consistent concern throughout, particularly given Cauca's history of political violence; we followed SEI's Ethical procedures and standards, prioritising participants' safety and confidentiality at every stage.

A Note on the Author's Positionality

None of the research team members is based in Popayán. Our engagement with the territory has been built through fieldwork, collaboration with local organisations, and sustained dialogue with participants. This distance shapes what we can see and what we cannot, whose experiences we centred, and how we translated those experiences into analysis. Rather than claiming an authoritative account, we offer a situated interpretation that seeks to remain accountable to local perspectives while acknowledging the limits of our position.

Interview ID	Type	Entity	Number of participants
Interview A01	Academia	University	1
Interview C01	WAC	WAC Popayán	1
Interview C02	WAC	WAC Popayán	7
Interview S01	Government	Secretariat of Women, Popayán	1
Interview S02	Government	Secretariat of Women, Popayán	1
Interview S03	Government	Secretariat of Women, Popayán	3
Interview S04	Government	Secretariat of Women, Popayán	1
Interview S05	Government	Secretariat of Women, Bogotá	3

Table 1: Interview categorisation

Findings and discussion: Intersectional barriers for political participation

This section examines how intersectional barriers shape local participation in Popayán. By focusing on the interplay of gender, ethnicity, and social status, the literature review showed that exclusions cannot be understood along a single axis. Misak, Nasa, campesino, and Afro-descendant women's experiences were highlighted and visibilised through the literature review, but empirically, we were unable to validate their experiences through the interviews conducted, as the representatives who were available for interview did not identify as such. Further, the survey questions did not include demographic data about participants, or about how they self-identified. The literature review, however, highlighted how women in Popayán confront not only patriarchal norms but also racialised hierarchies, rural marginalisation, and state neglect. These overlapping oppressions create distinctive challenges to political participation, while also giving rise to innovative practices of resistance and knowledge production. Nonetheless, given our partial empirical results with regard to intersectionality, our findings draw heavily on the secondary analysis of the literature review and several of the authors' prior research in the region. The results are organised in three parts: first, a contextual description of women's political participation in Popayán; then, an analysis of Popayán's WAC as a participation organ; and, finally, an analysis of persisting barriers to women's local participation in Popayán's WAC.

Field work and collaboration with the Women's Advisory Council and the Secretariat for the Women of Popayán

While the Council is now known as the Women's Advisory Council of Popayán and serves as an official organ within the local government, its origins were as a community mechanism to open up participation spaces. Currently, the Council is preparing its third iteration, established by Municipal Agreement 017/2024 (Acuerdo 017, 2024), and is further structuring and consolidating the Council as an official participation organism. Before this document, the Agreements that regulated the Council (Municipal Agreements 019/2010 and 032/2007) had not yet established terms, extending the councillors' terms indefinitely, who are still in charge for 10 years after the last elections.

The women who participated in the focus group discussion still adhere to the denomination of "Women's Community Council", and during the exchange, they reveal a space designed as a formal mechanism for women's political participation, yet one that remains largely invisible within the municipal administration and poorly understood by most Secretariats. They noted that the Council itself is "*completely unknown*", underscoring the disconnect between institutional mandates and actual implementation. These issues will be addressed and complemented in the following sections.

The context of women's participation in Popayán

The institutionalisation of Women's participation in Popayán has been recent. While currently there is a Secretariat for Women in operation, before 2018, women's affairs did not have an independent secretariat, but rather a Women's Program within the Secretariat of Government. The interviewees concurred that the establishment of the Secretariat for Women represented a significant milestone for the Women's Community Council and for the political participation of women. This is attributable to the existence of women's organisations surrounding the Council, which represent diverse sectors and articulate their demands. Consequently, this has led to the establishment of a governmental office dedicated to the development of policies for women. By contrast, men have dominated elected positions in recent years. Women held only 4 of 15 local legislative seats from 2020-2023 (Secretaría de la Mujer de Cauca, n.d.), and currently hold 4 of 19 (Concejo Municipal de Popayán, n.d.).



Photo 1: Meeting with Women's Secretariat, political participation team members.
Photo: Camilo Betancur

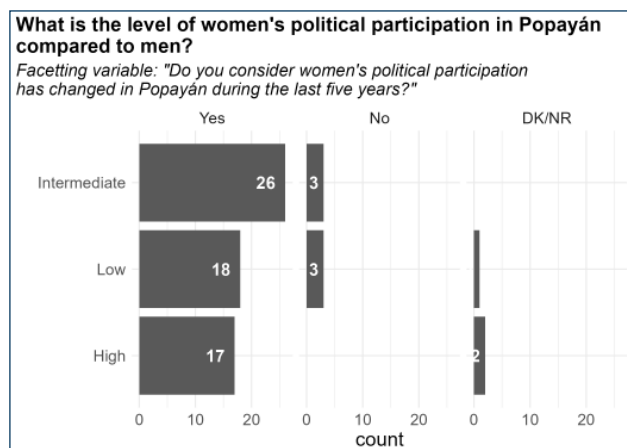


Figure 2: Question from the Women's Secretariat survey: Do you consider women's participation has changed in the last five years? DK/NR = Does not know / No response.

According to the survey developed by the Secretariat for Women, 87% (61) of the respondents affirmed that women's participation has changed during the last five years, 8.7% (6) affirmed it has not changed, and 4.3% (3) did not know or did not respond (Figure 1). On the other hand, 41.4% (29) of the respondents perceived that women have an intermediate level of participation, 31.4% (22) perceived a low level of participation, and 27.2% (19) a high level of participation. None of the participants who identified no change in the level of women's political participation reported a high level of participation, and most of those who identified a change in the level of participation reported an intermediate level of participation (Figure 1). These data must be interpreted cautiously given the methodological limitations raised above about the selection of survey participants, but in any case, they are subjective responses to the questions based on the individual participants' perception. Recent official data have indicated a rise in the political participation of women in the Cauca department, reflected in a higher rate of voter registration among women in comparison to men. However, even if women represent the main voting force, they are still a minority in elections due to lower, but increasing, participation in political spaces (Secretaría de la Mujer, n.d.).

Surveyed women stated that the main group of women for whom differentiated participation is promoted is young women, followed by rural (campesina) women and victims of the armed conflict. However,

a large proportion selected the "don't know / no response" option. This suggests the need to strengthen understandings of intersectionality in public participation, beginning with the inclusion of the topic on the public agenda, greater visibility of the work of feminist and gender-equity organisations, and open dialogue to deepen knowledge around this issue.

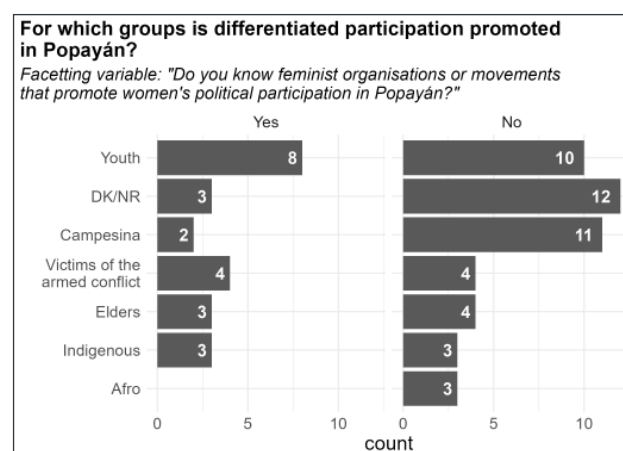


Figure 3: Question from the Women's Secretariat survey: For which groups is differentiated participation promoted in Popayán? DK/NR = Does not know / No response.

Examining this issue by distinguishing whether respondents are aware of active feminist organisations or movements in Popayán helps to illustrate the importance of organisational visibility. Respondents who reported knowing active feminist organisations in the municipality selected the "don't know / no response" option less frequently for this question. A similarity between both groups is their shared perception that the political participation of young women is strongly promoted in Popayán. However, there is a marked difference regarding rural women: respondents who reported knowing feminist organisations identified a low level of promotion of rural women's participation, whereas among those who reported not knowing such organisations, rural women were identified as the group whose participation is most strongly promoted (Figure 2).

Additionally, the survey identified some of the main barriers for women who want to participate in local politics. Figure 3 shows that the main barrier identified by respondents is the macho culture that permeates the local society in Popayán. However, the weight that respondents

attributed to barriers varies depending on their view of the level of political participation of women. For instance, women who perceive a high level of political participation were less likely to cite lack of party support, violence, and harassment as barriers, while women who perceive a low level of participation selected violence and harassment more often in relation to other barriers in the survey (Figure 3).

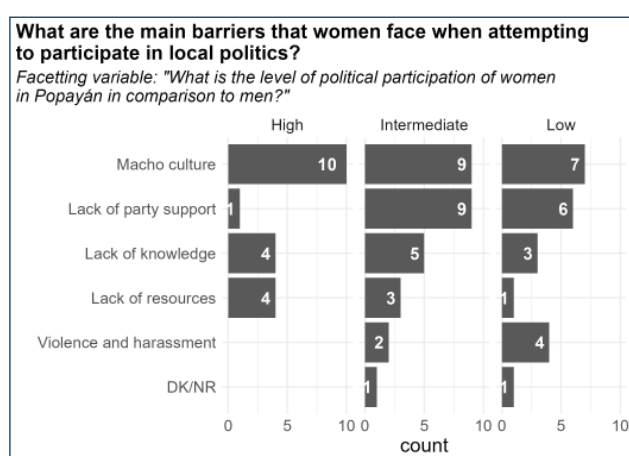


Figure 4: Question from the Women's Secretariat survey: What are the main barriers that women face when attempting to participate in local politics? DK/NR = Does not know / No response.

Finally, with 24 answers (34.2%), the survey respondents identified access to resources as the main factor that influences women's capacity to engage in local policy. The second most influential factor was women's empowerment (19 answers, 27.1%), followed by awareness of women's leadership (18 answers, 25.7%) and more representation (7 answers, 10%) (Figure 4).

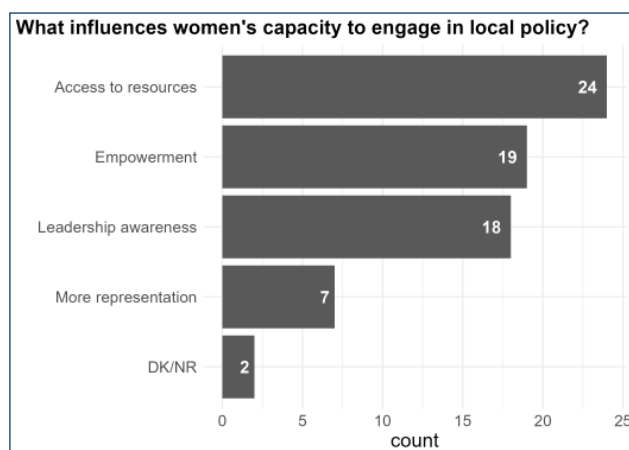


Figure 5: Question from the Women's Secretariat survey: What influences women's capacity to engage in local policy? DK/NR = Does not know / No response.

The Women's Advisory Council, a formal participation organ

Our case study focuses on the Women's Advisory Council (WAC) of Popayán, as a formal participatory space for advising the local government. WACs in Colombia are organs that have been implemented since the early 2000s to strengthen women's participation in public decision-making.

The WAC of Popayán was initially established under the name of the Women's Community Council in 2007 by the Municipal Agreement 032/2007. Its mandate is to address and challenge gender-based inequalities and discrimination, while contributing to the consolidation and long-term institutionalisation of women's rights and gender-responsive approaches in local governance. The WAC is a coordinating, articulating, consulting, and jointly responsible body of women who represent diverse sectors, organisations, groups and networks, as well as political parties, for developing public policy on women and gender equality. It is also a technical, political, and advisory body that represents the needs and interests of women, considering differences and diversity in terms of generation, culture, ethnicity, race, territory, socioeconomic status, ideological stance, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability.

The transition from the former Consejo Comunitario de Mujeres (created under Agreement 019 of 2010) to the current Consejo Consultivo de Mujeres sought to clarify its scope, expand sectoral representation, and align it with legal definitions of consultation and interlocution beyond afro-descendant community councils. This reform, consolidated in Agreement 017 of women signatories of the Peace Agreement, and LGBTIQ+ women, among others (Interview, SMP, 2025). Despite this broader and more intersectional composition on paper, the Secretariat acknowledges that intersectoral and intergenerational coordination remains weak, and that participation continues to depend heavily on the unpaid labour, personal resources, and resilience of the women involved. This was supported by the women's secretariat and the women councillors who were interviewed.

The age range of current members is 55 to 75 years old. They have been participating in the WAC since its first iteration, when elections were held. While there have not been elections since (though during this study, the intention of the Secretariat was to reactivate the elections, and the official launch was postponed), the WAC has operated with the then-elected members up to this date – many of whom have fatigued and withdrawn from the Council. Currently, the Secretariat is working on renovating the Council and organising a new round of elections, where each social sector determines the process autonomously (e.g., assemblies and other participatory mechanisms) and who gets elected to represent it. The councillors' paths into political participation were shaped by gendered struggles, including husbands who were *machistas* and opposed to their education or professional development, relegating them to the home. Some of the Women representatives served on the Council for a decade, entering the Council through a collective nomination from their sectors and running a self-financed campaign during the first elections in 2015, relying only on personal savings, banners, and flyers. The Council's history is equally marked by women's own initiatives, such as supporting the development of government plans, contributing to Popayán's POT (the municipality's land use plan), managing community support activities like raffles and Christmas gatherings, and participating in the creation of protective spaces like the *Casa de Paz* (Peace House).

Women's representativity should be built in a different manner: consulted, dialogued. To build it with the voices and not with a single voice. Women get to participate in the WAC and are left so alone! They are not supported even on their homes. It was attempted to discuss this with the Women's Secretariat of Popayán to have a basis of resources. People do not know the CCM exists. (Interview A01, 2026).

The Women's Council narratives highlight how women in the Council frequently served as intermediaries between institutions and vulnerable populations. Women's resilience is embedded in these leadership processes. Overall, the Council embodies a long-

standing, though undervalued, structure of women's political participation in the municipality – one that has relied more on solidarity, self-management, and personal resilience than on institutional support.

While the Women's Advisory Council has functioned for years as a space of representation and collective articulation, the documentary evidence highlights persistent gaps between its formal mandate and its effective operation. According to the Secretaría de la Mujer, the Council's current configuration is the result of a long and uneven institutional trajectory, marked by periods of neglect, leadership fatigue, and limited material support (Interview, SMP, 2025).

Although conceived as an autonomous body for consultation, dialogue, and incidence, successive municipal administrations have largely confined it to a consultative role without ensuring the conditions necessary for sustained participation, such as transport, food, meeting spaces, or technical accompaniment. Despite this institutional invisibility, the Council holds a rich collective history shaped by women from diverse social sectors, from victims of the armed conflict to representatives of local community organisations. Their trajectories reflect long-standing practices of self-management, political commitment, and personal sacrifice.

Interviews consistently underline that economic, cultural, and knowledge-related barriers disproportionately affect women's ability to participate in the Council and related governance spaces:

We participate *ad honorem*. We must reach lots of women, and for many of them it is difficult to visit the Mayor's Office because they need to pay for transport, there is nobody to leave the kids with, or they are carers. (Interview C01, 2025).

Limited access to transport, care responsibilities, and the absence of financial compensation or logistical support were repeatedly identified as factors that undermine continuity and renewal of leadership, particularly among rural, Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and low-income women. Secretariat staff also point

to a persistent “knowledge barrier,” whereby women with strong community leadership feel excluded from municipal decision-making spaces due to the technical language and procedures of public administration (Interview, SMP, 2025).

The WAC's women had leadership, but it was not enough at the local scale. They did not have the public management knowledge. Even if they did lead processes in their neighbourhood or sector, they needed to build knowledge to reach the municipal scale. (Interview, SMP, 2025).

At the same time, the Council exists within a crowded but fragmented local governance architecture. While Popayán has legally established participation mechanisms – such as the Committee for Evaluation of Public Policies (CONPOS, by its acronym in Spanish) and the Mesas Temáticas Poblacionales – the Council is often not fully integrated into these spaces, limiting its capacity to influence planning, budgeting, and policy monitoring (Interview, C02, 2025). The Secretariat itself recognises that, in the absence of an active and strengthened Council, it frequently needs to consult women's organisations on an ad hoc basis, weakening institutional coherence and legitimacy (Interview, S03, 2025).

Overall, our evidence reinforces that the Women's Advisory Council represents a necessary but structurally fragile pillar of women's political participation in Popayán. Its continuity and relevance have relied less on institutional guarantees than on women's collective commitment, solidarity networks, and personal sacrifice. Strengthening the Council – through stable resourcing, recognition of women's political labour, and stronger articulation with municipal decision-making bodies – is widely seen by local officials as both an institutional need and a prerequisite for more legitimate, inclusive, and gender-responsive governance in the municipality (Interview, SMP, 2025).

It is important to again highlight that we were unable to conduct interviews with councilwomen who identified as Afro-descendant, *campesina*, or Indigenous. While this is a limitation of the study, it

also is illustrative of the limited active participation by representatives of these groups, and a challenge that the Secretariat sought to address with a new election and expansion of sectors represented. However, as the election process was delayed, we were unable to accompany this process, which would have enabled interviews with the respective candidates.

In a Territorial Planning Council, a Diversity Roundtable, or even the WAC, the administration fails to provide adequate guarantees for participation. Although it creates spaces for participation, it does not provide the material conditions necessary for people to take part, such as transportation, refreshments, or compensation for the time they must take away from work to attend these meetings. Even when individuals are interested in assuming leadership roles, they receive little support, which ultimately undermines women's engagement and participation in these spaces. This ambivalent approach to participation also limits their ability to access the institutional programs and services being offered. (Interview S02, 2025).

Learnings from the Women's Advisory Council of Bogotá

The Bogotá Women's Advisory Council was the first of its kind in Colombia, created in 2007, and operates as a formal participatory body within the city's governance system. It is legally recognised, articulated with other participation spaces, and closely linked to Bogotá's Secretariat for Women, combining political dialogue, technical input, and institutional coordination. The Council's functions were updated most recently in 2023, including the adoption of an annual work plan and the election of a coordinating advisor. Its core roles include monitoring the Gender Equality Public Policy, promoting women's safety, and advancing cross-cutting gender commitments such as inclusive language and institutional practices. Committees are formed on an ad hoc basis, sessions occur every two to three months, and the Council operates without direct financial remuneration, relying instead on limited logistical support.

Key achievements include sustained policy impact, particularly in recent years, driven by consistent advocacy for the development of a local care system. This is an example of an action influenced by the current administration but also supported by councillors. Bogotá's Women's Advisory Council sustains its influence through engagement in development planning, budgeting, and policy processes, relying on institutional support, training, and political engagement. Further, due to the greater resources that Bogotá is able to leverage compared to other municipalities, it theythe Secretariat supports councillors with transport aid and childcare, though like in other municipalities the councillor role is unpaid. Staff from the Secretariat emphasises the value of inter-council learning, regulatory clarity, and institutional memory. Councillors emphasise the importance of exchanges with other cities and of prioritising autonomy, coordination, and intersectionality in strengthening emerging councils such as Popayán's. Bogotá's WAC, together with the city's women's and feminist movement, has historically played an important role in electoral processes. For many years, these actors were able to shape candidates' political platforms and mobilise electoral support. However, some interviews suggested that this influence has declined in recent years. For more details on the Bogotá WAC, see Universidad de los Andes & Consejo Consultivo de Mujeres de Bogotá - Espacio Autónomo (2025).

Persistent barriers to participation in the Women's Consultative Council

Despite its formal mandate, the Women's Consultative Council faces profound barriers that limit its effectiveness and recognition. A key challenge is institutional neglect: for two consecutive terms, the Council operated without formal recognition, and even after the creation of the Secretariat for the Women of Popayán, members note that *"there are women's plans, but they haven't taken the Council into account"* (Group interview, WAC, 2025). This institutional sidelining has fostered a sense of invisibility and marginalisation. Institutional and academic actors have

displaced women's and WAC's expertise. Members recount that during the development of the Women's Participation Plan, the municipal administration hired a university, sidelining the Council's lived expertise. Likewise, despite contributing to mayoral government plans, their role was subsequently erased.

Another major barrier is the lack of resources. Council members repeatedly emphasise that they have largely managed their work themselves, with the first term receiving very little funding and the second term receiving no funding at all. This absence of financial support restricts their capacity to engage communities, develop programs, or influence local policy. It was not entirely clear from our interviews whether this lack of support was due to an absence of political will to provide necessary resources to the WAC, or just due to the genuine budget constraints of the municipality.

Economic precarity also influences individual participation. Members described having to choose between attending meetings and feeding their families. This highlights how political engagement is constrained by unequal burdens of care and limited economic autonomy. Finally, logistical barriers persist. For them, participating meant meeting after work in public parks or the hallways of the mayor's office because there was no adequate institutional infrastructure for gatherings.

A conceptual framework for guiding intersectional analysis in political participation

Weaving together the findings presented throughout the literature review and this section, Figure 6 proposes a visual guide to the intersectional barriers that shape women's local political participation in Popayán. The conceptual framework conceptualises barriers as mutually constituted and mutually reinforcing processes operating across four interconnected dimensions, building on the conceptual foundations presented earlier in this paper (see Figure 1, page 21).

First, women's experiences are shaped by multiple and intersecting social positions, including gender, ethnicity, class, territory, age, sexuality, disability, and experiences of conflict. More than inviting the development of atomised lists of social markers and isolated experiences, these intersecting social positions require thinking relationally and focus on the oppression systems, their common factors, and how to draw on the affinity between different struggles and liberation pathways. Intersectional thinking must not fragment action, social movements, and knowledge; rather, it is a lens that helps articulate them into common goals and political practice.

Second, these positions configure systems of power – including patriarchy, racism, classism, territorial dispossession, ageism, heteronormativity, ableism, and militarisation – that structure unequal access to resources, recognition, and decision-making.

Third, these systems materialise through institutional and sociocultural barriers, such as exclusionary political cultures, unequal care burdens, epistemic marginalisation, and fragmented governance arrangements, which constrain meaningful participation.

Finally, these dynamics produce cumulative outcomes, including underrepresentation, symbolic participation, political invisibility, leadership fatigue, restricted access to resources, limited policy influence, and the reproduction of inequalities over time.

The following discussion section draws on the conceptual framework developed from the literature review and draws connections to the empirical evidence from interviews, focus groups, and the survey. Here we again identify some limitations to the empirical data, which did not reflect many of the categories and social positions mentioned in the literature. Nonetheless, the discussion offers some valuable analytical insights and practical lessons that can be relevant both within and beyond the case of Popayán.

Our findings highlight two broader implications for how women's political participation should be understood in contexts characterised by intersecting

forms of inequality and historically differentiated relations of power. First, they reinforce the importance of approaching political participation through an intersectional lens that considers gender in relation to ethnicity, territory, and historically produced inequalities. Intersectionality is not simply a matter of recognising that individuals hold multiple identities or social positions; rather, it draws attention to how these dimensions are mutually constituted and interact with systems of power to shape differentiated opportunities, constraints, and experiences of political participation (see Figure 1). From this perspective, gender cannot be understood independently of the territorial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and historical contexts in which political agency is exercised. This also raises important methodological and empirical challenges. Efforts to operationalise intersectionality through the collection of individual identity categories can inadvertently reduce complex and relational identities to a checklist of characteristics, obscuring the ways in which these dimensions acquire meaning through particular social and historical contexts. An intersectional analysis therefore requires not only identifying relevant axes of difference, but examining how they interact, how they are experienced, and how they shape access to resources, recognition, representation, and political power in specific territories.

Second, our findings point to the need for a more plural understanding of what constitutes political participation and where it takes place. Conventional analyses tend to privilege formal political institutions and forms of participation that are legible within established governance frameworks. Yet, particularly in Indigenous, Afro-descendant, campesino, and other historically marginalised contexts, political agency may also be exercised through collective practices, community organisations, customary institutions, and other Indigenous or traditional spaces that do not necessarily correspond to formal institutional models of participation. Recognising these spaces is important not only for broadening the empirical understanding of participation, but also for questioning whose forms of political engagement are recognised as legitimate in the first place. From a decolonial perspective,

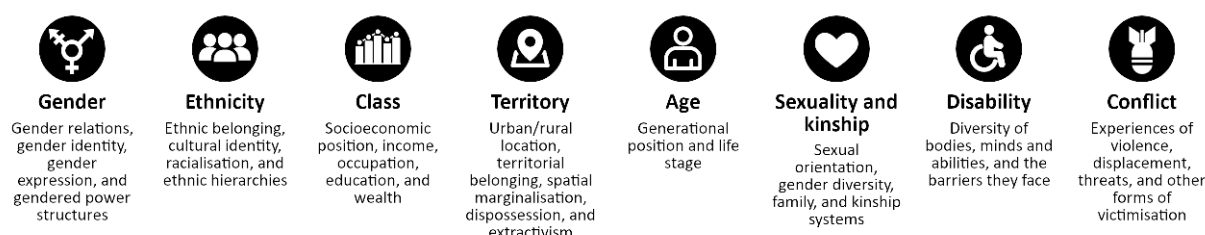
institutionalised participation should therefore not necessarily be treated as a neutral or universally applicable framework: the categories, institutions, and practices through which participation is defined can themselves reflect historically specific distributions of power and processes of inclusion and exclusion. At the same time, alternative and community-based spaces should not be understood as inherently separate from formal politics. As the experience of the WAC illustrates, forms of participation rooted in histories of collective and territorial resistance can also become articulated through contemporary institutional spaces, creating hybrid arenas in which historically marginalised women negotiate representation, recognition, agency, and access to decision-making.

Taken together, these findings suggest that understanding women's political participation requires attention both to **who is able to participate and under what conditions**, and to **what forms of participation are recognised and valued as political**. An intersectional and decolonial perspective thus shifts the analytical focus away from participation as a generic opportunity available to a homogeneous category of "women" and towards the historically and territorially situated processes through which different women experience, negotiate, and reshape political power.

Framework of intersectional barriers to local participation

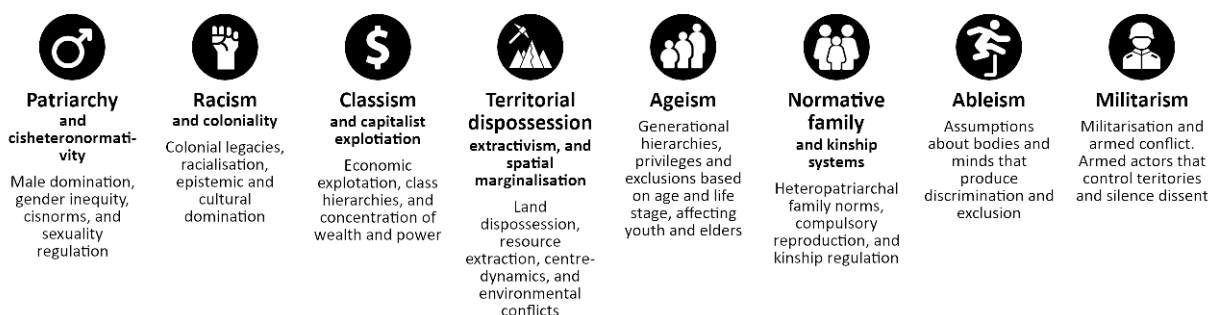
1. Social positions and differentiation

Social positions and identities are multiple, diverse, dynamic, and overlapping. They shape differentiated experiences, opportunities, and constraints.



2. Intersecting systems of power and oppression

Historical and structural systems of power interact and reinforce one another, producing social hierarchies and unequal access to power and resources



3. Intersectional barrier types and subtypes

These intersecting systems of power operate through multiple mechanisms and institutions, creating barriers that prevent equitable and meaningful participation for all



4. Outcomes: unequal and limited participation

The cumulative effect of intersecting barriers results in unequal participation and influence in local governance

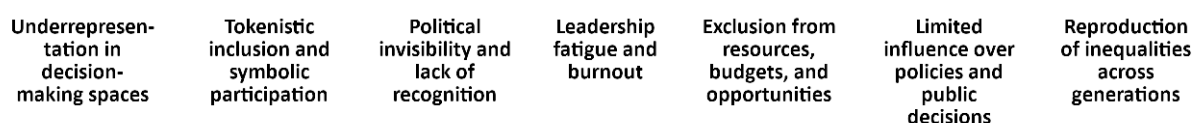


Figure 6: Framework of intersectional barriers to local participation

Discussion

The findings allow us to at least partially address the two research questions that organised this study. On the first, *how gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status intersect to shape women's experiences of participatory local governance in Popayán*, the evidence shows that these axes of differentiation do not simply add but co-constitute qualitatively different forms of political exclusion depending on their specific configuration. Councillors highlighted how economic resources and care work often limited their ability to participate in the WAC, for instance, by not being able to pay for transport or access childcare. In addition, during fieldwork we were able to evidence WAC's limited reach to Indigenous women, at least in its current iteration.

Nonetheless, the results also highlight how participation is constrained in ways that cannot be addressed by gender-sensitive policies alone. The structures of political authority, gendered organisation of care and reproduction, and institutional weaknesses and fragmentation combine to impact political participation. Policy and governance structures – even when aimed at improving participation – can deepen these barriers, both through omission (the absence of material support for participation) and implicit assumptions in institutional design (the privileging of bureaucratic over community-based expertise, the urban-centric geography of governance, the equation of formal with meaningful participation).

On the second research question, *how Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and campesina onto-epistemologies promote participation and inclusion*, the literature review shows that these collective political experiences offer alternative models of governance whose logics of care, territory, and ancestral knowledge fall outside the foundations of formal participatory institutions. Traditional participation spaces, such as *mingas* and assemblies, have the potential to transform conventional political participation by exemplifying how participation can be more accessible and open. The lesson for local governments is not simply to include more representatives of these communities in existing structures, but to allow those structures to be shaped by the political practices and knowledge systems these communities bring. This is a deeper form of

institutional transformation than setting quotas or reforming procedures, requiring sustained political commitment and reflexivity by multiple iterations of municipal administrations.

Gender, ethnicity, class, territory, age, and experience of armed conflict do not operate as additive layers of disadvantage but as mutually constituted systems that produce distinct forms of exclusion. Secretariat staff identified a persistent “knowledge barrier”, in which women with strong community leadership trajectories often felt ill-equipped to navigate the technical language and administrative procedures of municipal governance. This relates to the types of knowledge and practice that institutions recognise and value, and a mismatch of expertise between women's community organising and territorial defence and what institutional bureaucracy demands. Women who sought to operate at the municipal scale were expected to have public management knowledge that their formation outside formal institutions had not provided.

This mismatch points to an epistemic dimension of exclusion that the fieldwork does not resolve: how women in the WAC navigated it. What the evidence allows us to say is that the institution's procedural norms were not designed with community-based political expertise in mind, and that this design choice has not fulfilled the expectations of some councillors nor adapted to their political and community experience, weakening their will to participate and resulting in fatigue. This connects to broader arguments about how governance institutions embed knowledge hierarchies that reproduce marginalisation (Ulloa, 2020b).

A feminist decolonial reading of the findings complements the gaps in the intersectional framework, such as how contemporary governance institutions reproduce colonial legacies that shape who is a political subject.

The WAC of Popayán embodies a contradiction of participatory governance: designed to amplify the voices of marginalised women, its institutional architecture systematically imposes barriers to their

participation. This reflects a deep, structural problem in how formal inclusion is conceived, in which the form of participation (unpaid, technically mediated, bureaucratically integrated) reproduces the very hierarchies it aims to disrupt. This finding extends Htun and Ossa's (2013) observation from Bolivia that gender parity reforms do not automatically translate into meaningful participation for Indigenous women, because community norms, intra-group power relations, and divergent political priorities shape outcomes. What the Popayán case adds is that the mechanisms of exclusion operate through the design of state institutions themselves. The WAC was constituted and regulated, yet these formal acts maintained the material and epistemic conditions that condition who can participate. Successive municipal administrations recognised the Council's mandate without providing the transport, food, technical support, or meeting spaces needed to sustain women's engagement.

This also concerns other participatory governance concepts such as "invited spaces" and "claimed spaces" (Gaventa, 2005). The WAC is, from the outset, an invited space; it was created by a municipal agreement, structured by local and national administrative logics, and dependent on the goodwill of successive administrations. Nonetheless, its members participated in it through practices characteristic of claimed spaces: self-financing, peer support, and self-organising. The Council's resilience has rested on women's own political commitment and personal sacrifice. When women's political practice rests on individual resilience instead of strong political structures, women bear the burden of institutional failure, especially those with fewer resources.

The WAC's institutional architecture reflects its Western heritage of governance, in which political practice tied to private spaces, such as hearths and kitchens, is undervalued. Its underlying political architecture, with its norms and the knowledge it valorises, is organised around a conception of governance that marginalises the onto-epistemological frameworks through which many of the women it claims to represent have historically exercised political

authority. The WAC is conceived as an autonomous space in which Popayán's Secretariat of Women acts as technical secretariat and logistical coordinator. As an organ that advises the city's mayor, the WAC is designed to follow the local government's procedures, timelines, and frameworks, with no guarantee that its advice and petitions will be adopted. Ulloa (2020b) argues that Indigenous women articulate their political struggles through enactments of body, territory, and spirituality that modern state institutions have not incorporated. While we could not engage with councillors who identify as Indigenous during our fieldwork, the difference between institutional and Indigenous and community political practice can generate friction, especially when councillors lack experience with legal terminology and institutional procedures but are expected to act and propose according to them.

The Popayán case provides concrete institutional evidence of this dynamic, describing a context in which women's political expertise has been built on rights and territorial defence and community care but has not been adequately supported or recognised. Women's political participation is constrained not only because they are absent from institutions but because institutions privilege bureaucratic, technical, and professional forms of expertise over territorial, relational, and community-based knowledges.

This does not mean the WAC is irredeemable, nor that formal participation spaces are inherently colonial. It means that strengthening the Council requires more than adding resources or reforming procedures. It requires questioning the epistemic assumptions built into its design and an openness to governance arrangements that can accommodate multiple forms of political knowledge and authority.

This study's findings illustrate that multiple forms of inequity co-produce five broad types of intersectional barriers in Popayán. The Colonial-patriarchal restructuring of gender, territory and authority; the Institutionalised masculinization of political power; the Gendered organisation of care, labour, and reproduction; the Normative hierarchies

of knowledge, bodies, and political subjectivity; and Institutional weakness, fragmentation, and exclusionary governance are types of barriers (Figure 6) that constrict women's opportunities to participate in political discussions in Popayán.

These barriers manifest in women's quotidian political practices as unequal or limited participation and influence in local governance processes. That unequal or limited participation often manifests as underrepresentation in decision-making spaces; tokenistic inclusion and symbolic participation; political invisibility and lack of recognition; leadership fatigue and burnout; exclusion from resources, budgets, and opportunities; limited influence over policies and public decisions; and reproduction of inequalities across generations.

In summary, intersectional barriers must be conceived as dynamic processes that are woven through by social positions, systems of power, institutional mechanisms, and political outcomes. Such understanding helps interpret how exclusions are co-produced, reinforcing one another over time. In doing so, it offers an analytical tool for examining women's participation beyond Popayán while remaining attentive to territorial and historical specificities.

Conclusions and recommendations

Intersectional analysis of Cauca demonstrates that barriers to local participation are not reducible to gender, ethnicity, or class alone. Instead, they emerge from the overlapping effects of patriarchal norms, racial hierarchies, rural marginalisation, and state neglect. Women in Misak, Nasa, campesino, and Afro-descendant communities experience exclusion differently, but what unites them is the compounded nature of these barriers.

At the same time, intersectionality also illuminates how resistance and innovation are forged at these very crossroads. As the literature review reveals, marginalised groups do not wait for inclusion; they generate new political spaces from epistemologies and ontologies that are not newly generated but are historically rooted in the knowledges and ways of being of these communities that challenge both state and community-level exclusions. The councillors' experiences also show that formal mechanisms do not guarantee participation. Even if the WAC did not necessarily mean a big leap in their participation capacities, they continued leading in their own sectors and spaces, such as the cultural sector. From Black feminist organising and rural and indigenous women's epistemologies of territory and care, to the experiences of the WAC's women, these contributions redefine what democratic participation can look like in Cauca.

In this sense, intersectionality is not only a lens for analysing barriers but also a framework for recognising how multiple struggles converge into emancipatory projects. The report therefore argues that the future of inclusive governance in Cauca depends on learning from, and aligning with, the epistemic and political practices of those most affected by intersecting forms of exclusion – particularly Indigenous, rural, Afro-descendant, and popular-sector women.

Opportunities to improve the Women's Advisory Council of Popayán

Answering these questions resulted in the identification of key opportunities for strengthening political participation in Popayán, with a focus on

the WAC. These opportunities are not limited to institutional design or participation mechanisms but also relate to how intersectional inequalities are recognised, articulated, and addressed across policy domains and everyday political practices.

Upcoming initiatives for promoting women's participation and desired changes by women in the following years

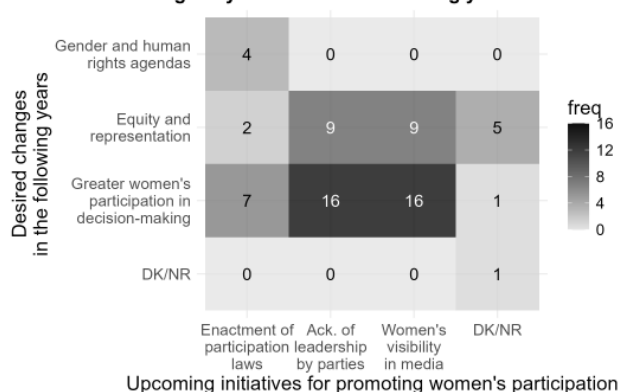


Figure 7: Questions from the Women's Secretariat survey: X-axis: What are upcoming initiatives for promoting women's participation? Y-axis: What changes do you consider that women expect to see in the following years? DK/NR = Does not know / No response.

There are several opportunities to strengthen the Council and reposition it as a key factor in women's political participation and gender governance in Popayán, overcoming the barriers mentioned in this report. The Council members define the Women's Advisory Council as a women's group that recognises rights.

Institutional strengthening is needed. Increasing awareness within municipal secretariats about the Council's legal mandate, role, and potential contribution would enable more meaningful engagement. Strengthening participatory mechanisms – particularly ensuring the Council's inclusion in the implementation of women's plans – would help align policy with community realities. For this, resource allocation must be consistent and stable. Funding for Council activities, transportation support, and operational infrastructure would enable women to participate without sacrificing their livelihoods or family obligations. Expanding access to polling places, especially in rural areas, would also improve representativeness and legitimacy.

The Council's accumulated experience constitutes an invaluable asset. The narratives of self-management, solidarity, and persistence reflected in the Council's history constitute a foundation for collective action. Ensuring that women understand their legal rights within municipal participation frameworks can support strategic advocacy and reinforce their capacity to claim institutional space.

Taken together, these opportunities suggest that with adequate political will, recognition, and resource allocation, the Women's Consultative Council can evolve into a stronger, more visible, and more influential mechanism for advancing women's rights and gender equality in Popayán.

When an initiative or project arises, the Women's Secretariat should be able to engage directly in dialogue with the Women's Council. Furthermore, it is essential that the departments within the administration solicit their input in order to inform decision-making processes. This requires not only supporting women with the skills and capacities to engage proactively in such spaces, but also training others within the municipal authority – the mayor's staff and other types of Secretariat's about the importance of an intersectional gender perspective and how to bring in women's concerns and needs into all areas of municipal policy and planning. Of course, it is also important. They should also benefit from it, such as gaining recognition and visibility for their role. Currently, they mostly face social and institutional attacks. It should be a two-way learning process for both them and the institutions. Consultation should not just be another step to slow down processes, but rather a continuous flow of dialogue with the local government. The goal is for the Women's Advisory Council to have a strategic action plan during its term and to be fully autonomous in its projects. Ideally, it should also have basic participation requirements, for example, a physical space for meetings, refreshments, and lunches.

One of the Women's Secretariat commitments in the action plan regarding political participation is to strengthen the Council's own action plan

so that it can truly become autonomous. Unlike previous administrations, the current government is involved and keen to strengthen the Council. The Women's Secretariat action plan for 2026 focuses on strengthening the Women's Advisory Council again, supporting new elections and ensuring the municipality has a body with representatives from every sector, and seeking to guarantee their effective participation, also through training support for candidates. Such support is key and could be further strengthened with an autonomous budget they could manage and prioritize in a participatory manner.

In addition to this strategy, the consultative nature of this institution constitutes an additional factor that warrants critical examination, as it imposes substantial restrictions on the development of more radical and transformative democratic practices. This applies not only to the Women's Advisory Council in Popayán, but also to consultative councils and other participatory bodies across Colombia.

In order to strengthen the Women's Advisory Council, it is important to differentiate between external enabling conditions, such as those already mentioned, and factors related to the Council's internal functioning. The State has an obligation to strengthen women's political participation. This obligation involves not only promoting quotas and parity measures but also supporting educational and capacity-building processes that focus on women's visions and practices of politics and power. The goal should not be merely to ensure women's inclusion within existing political structures, but to transform those structures. This implies avoiding the replication of patriarchal, racialised, heteronormative, and classist forms of power that may ultimately weaken the Council.

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