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**Informal rules and gendered political hierarchies: On the experience of women
deputies in the Argentine Congress**

Mariana Gené (CONICET/EIDAES-UNSA,) and Carolina Glasserman Apicella
(CONICET/EIDAES-UNSAM)

Abstract

Argentina has been a pioneer in affirmative action measures that contributed to mitigate gender inequalities in the political world, especially in the Legislative Branch. In 1991, the Quota Law established that 30% of the lists should be made up by women, and in 2017 the “Parity Law” raised that number to 50%. As a result, the descriptive representation of women in the National Congress grew significantly during the last thirty years. But beyond the regulatory changes and their effects on the composition of both Chambers, our knowledge about the informal power dynamics and internal hierarchies that open or obstruct decision-making spaces for women in Congress is still limited. Based on in-depth interviews with deputies of different generations, parties and provinces, and on the systematization of secondary sources, this paper interrogates the unwritten rules of the lower house, accounting for the changes and continuities of women’s experience inside the Congress. First, we focus on the processes by which women are included in the lists of candidates. Then, we examine their daily work once they reach the Chamber, paying special attention to the treatment among peers, the unequal distribution of speech and the place of conciliation between family life and political work in the development of their careers. We argue that the Chamber of Deputies is a gendered institution, that with its informally institutionalized practices limits women’s access to positions of greater value among their peers, but also that women themselves might not seek these roles by virtue of their previous expertise and of the masculinized conformation of these spaces. In this way, our work contributes to shedding light on the effective functioning of the Argentine Congress and also to understanding how gender shapes internal hierarchies in political work.

Keywords: informal rules, female political participation, legislative power

Introduction

Argentina was a pioneer in the application of mechanisms to promote the access of women to political positions. In 1991, the Quota Law established a minimum floor of 30% of women on lists for legislative elections, which was the first quota regulation of this type in the

world (Caminotti, 2013). Its effects on the so-called descriptive representation of women (Pitkin, 1985) were ostensible: if in 1991 female deputies represented 6% and female senators 9% of the total for each Chamber, ten years later female deputies and senators exceeded 30% in both institutions. Its impact can also be observed in the substantive representation and the strengthening of the agenda linked to the rights of women and LGBTI+ people (Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008): among the many laws that include historical claims of women's and diversity movements in the country we can name the Comprehensive Sexual Education Law (2006), the Integral Protection of Women Law (2009), the Equal Marriage Law (2010), the Gender Identity Law (2012) and the Abortion Law (2020). Closer in time, the "Parity Law" (2017) established that the lists of deputies and senators should intersperse women and men from the first incumbent position to the last substitute.

But if national deputies currently make up almost 50% of the House and there are no public voices in the main parties that object the equal numerical participation on the lists, what do we know about informal legislative dynamics and how they impact the careers of female deputies? How do women get into the House and what is their day-to-day work experience once they are elected? Pioneering work showed Congress as a gendered institution, where women legislators *accumulate disadvantages* to access roles with power over the agenda and legislative decisions (Marx, Borner & Caminotti, 2007). This can be seen at committees (*comisiones*), where the distribution of most powerful positions is biased in favor of male deputies (Borner *et al.*, 2009; Pérez, 2014; De Luca, 2020). Since the mechanisms for assigning these committees fall to the party leaders or presidents of the chambers, who are generally male, it is more likely that women legislators will be marginalized to committees of little importance or specialized in "women's issues" (Heath *et al.*, 2005). In short, "the relative gender equality in access to positions of political representation does not guarantee equal access to positions of power within congresses" (Pérez, 2014).

In this article we propose to address the informal dynamics and internal hierarchies that affect the places that women can or cannot occupy, the effective power they have, and the horizons of their careers. We focus on the experience of the representatives when they competed for a place on the lists of candidates and, then, on their practices within the Chamber of Deputies, paying special attention to the tacit rules that operate behind the scenes of politics and the internal codes that have an impact on their access and exclusions (Frederic, 2004; Gené, 2019). This will allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the effective functioning of the Argentine Congress and also to understand how gender shapes internal hierarchies in the political arena.

For this purpose, we conducted qualitative fieldwork that included in-depth interviews, a review of regulations and institutional documents, and the systematization of the trajectories of women deputies before reaching the Legislative Branch. The article is organized as follows. In the first section we briefly review the literature on women and politics in the Legislative Branch, and argue the importance of addressing the informal rules that open or block power spaces to them, especially in countries with progressive legislation in terms of female representation. In the second section, we focus on the candidate selection processes, from the approval of the Quota Law to the present. We show that during the first decades the informal rule of making “pay the woman” of the quota to the less powerful groups inside parties or political coalitions was common. In turn, nowadays the stigma of entering the House through affirmative actions is almost completely dissolved. However, the formation of lists continues to be a dynamic in which the power of decision falls on men who, following the native language, “have the pen” to decide who occupies each place, and are also favored by the management of money in electoral campaigns. In the third section, we focus on the daily work of female deputies once they arrive in the Chamber. We show that a set of practices and time management make it especially difficult for them to balance work and family and, despite the changes in family models that have occurred in recent decades, those habits seem to have less impact in the male deputies professional careers. Likewise, the less visible power hierarchies within Congress make women deputies speak less during sessions and perceive greater demands -and eventual sanctions- when it comes to fulfilling their role. The final remarks take up the main arguments and outline future lines of research based on an approach that privileges the analysis of informal political practices within the Congresses.

Discussion of literature and methodology

There are many different types of quotas to encourage more equal political participation of women, which spread unevenly throughout the world towards the end of the 20th century (Marx, Borner & Caminotti, 2007). In some of them, a minimum percentage of women on the candidate lists must be observed, but nothing is said about the order in which it must be applied, so the quota may be filled in positions that have no chance of being elected. In such cases, as in Colombia, the bibliography shows that the party elites, dominated mostly by men, tend to place women in non-expectant positions (Maddens, Muyters & Put, 2023). In others, such as Brazil, the quota interacts with the characteristics of the political system in such a way that the results are modest: the minimum of 30% of women candidates is applied to open lists, where it is possible to choose the order of representatives, so it does not have a direct impact on their

expectancy (Marx, Borner & Caminotti, 2007). In Argentina, the Quota Law -and later the Parity Law- were demanding and effective, since they indicated in explicit terms that women's candidates should be placed in a proportional and ordered manner on closed lists and quickly transformed the composition of Congress in gender terms.

But there are different informal rules and internal hierarchies in the political world that mitigate the relatively equal access of Argentine women to Congress. This can be appreciated in the candidate selection processes, and at the daily work in the Chamber. On the one hand, control over the electoral offer is usually in the hands of men, who also exercise party leadership and have more access to decision-making spaces within their organizations. In this sense, as in Latin America as a whole, women continue to have little weight in the decision-making structures and internal organs of the parties (Freidenberg, 2018) and the predominantly male party elites tend to reproduce gender stereotypes (Ferreira Rubio, 2015). When it came to leading lists for the Chamber of Deputies, women did so in 19,3% of the cases between 2003 and 2015 (Berardi, 2022) and if we consider the committees within the Chamber, they presided over 40% of the ones advocated to "reproduction and care" issues during the period 1991-2021, and just under 20% of those of "production and disbursement of resources" (Glasserman Apicella, 2022a).

This is why studying political work as it actually occurs (Hurtado Arroba, Paladino & Vommaro, 2018) involves being interested in the tacit rules that organize the interactions of political professionals and order their hierarchies. As Steven Levitsky and Gretchen Helmke (2006) have argued, to understand how democracy works, one must look at the informal rules of the game and attend to how formal and informal rules interact. For their part, various contributions of institutional feminism (Chappell & Mackay, 2017; Lowndes, 2014; Waylen, 2014) highlight the importance of incorporating the gender perspective in the study of informal institutions to account how gender stereotypes play within them, as well as to better understand the gap that often exists between formal institutional changes and their results. In the pioneering country of application of quotas, that also proved to be effective in their objective of changing the descriptive representation of women, it is especially important to understand their less obvious limits and their persistent challenges.

Based on this perspective, we interviewed deputies of different generations, political parties, provinces of origin, level of experience in the Chamber, and position towards

feminism¹. The sample enabled a longitudinal approach that allows to identify changes and continuities between 1991 -when the Quota Law was enacted- and today. For its part, the balanced selection of positions regarding gender perspectives sought to reconstruct the obstacles perceived in their daily practice by both those who are more alert regarding gender gaps in Congress and those who do not attribute importance to these variables. Their experience showed that, even openly rejecting militant discourses and feminist positions, these deputies identify spaces from which they are segregated and demands that are unequal to those of their male peers in their daily work. The reconstruction of their perspectives was crossed with archival materials, information from the Chamber and the specialized media *El Parlamentario*, bill revision, and systematization of previous political trajectories.

"If the negotiations end in the soccer locker room or at sauna, you are out": Women in the candidate selection process

Mapping the rules of party selection and how electoral lists are built is essential to approach power relations within political parties. In addition, it provides us with keys to understanding the subsequent behavior of legislators, their degree of party discipline, and the crossed loyalties to which they must respond. However, it is generally difficult to access internal party information on these nomination processes because they include informal, "hidden" or semi-secret practices (Bjarnegard & Kenny, 2016: 372). In the case of women, these informal rules have historically worked directly or indirectly to make it difficult for them to reach the charts (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). What happened in Argentina after the application of laws that significantly increased female candidates? How much have discourses about their legitimacy of origin and practices for including them on the lists been maintained or modified since the early 1990s? How do the female deputies today identify their conditions to become candidates and which are their weak points?

It is often stated that the candidate selection processes in Argentina are characterized by strong local roots, that is, they are focused on each locality, in each electoral district (De Luca, Jones & Tula, 2002). Hence, the presence in the territory of political leadership is essential in

¹We conducted 16 in-depth interviews. 13 of which were with female deputies and 3 with male deputies, taken as a control population. In terms of party representation, 7 are members of the Justicialista Party (peronism), 4 of the PRO, 2 of the Radical Civic Union, 1 of the Civic Coalition, 1 of Socialism and 1 of the Concord Renewal Front (a provincial political party, based in Misiones). In turn, 7 represent the province of Buenos Aires, 2 the City of Buenos Aires, 2 Santa Fe, 1 Córdoba, 1 San Luis, 1 Salta, 1 Tierra del Fuego and 1 Misiones. 56% had already completed their term at the time of being interviewed and 44% were with their term in progress; while 44% were deputies for one term and 56% two or more. Of the entire population interviewed, 56% stated that they adhered to the feminist perspective and 44% did not identify themselves in this way.

terms of electoral survival. However, the actors who can nominate in Argentine federalism are diverse, and the power to decide who enters to a list and in which position is distributed among governors and provincial leaders, but also among presidents and national party leaders (Cherny, Figueroa & Scherlis, 2018). Whether through arrangements between elites or by decision of the actors with the most power at any given time, via election in party assemblies or by direct primaries, in Argentina, there are no written rules on the guidelines of list building. On the contrary, it is a process influenced by the internal bids of each party, the current political situation in each jurisdiction and the menu of actors that each group has when deciding the conformation of the electoral offer.

With regard specifically to the legislative participation of women, the affirmative action measures that we mentioned above -quota and parity- regulate the conformation of the lists, but they say nothing about the process of selecting candidates (Borner *et al.* 2009). In this sense, they set minimum thresholds for female representation that all parties must respect but do not elaborate on the means to achieve that result. The fieldwork with deputies of different generations shows that the perception of the legitimacy of the female quota varied over time, and so did the practices associated with it. Even so, there are still obstacles to their entry into the list of candidacies that are related to the eminently masculine character of those who have decision-making power and the elusive challenge of obtaining financing.

The female quota seen from within: from stigma to incorporation

The enactment of the Quota Law was, in the words of Caminotti (2014), a product of the dialogue between "ideas, legacies, and political strategies". The experience learned in the past together with the inter-party organization of its promoters².

The Women's Quota bill was presented by the senator of the Radical Civic Union (UCR) Margarita Malharro de Torres on November 6, 1989, after discussing in the Congress of radical women the inclusion of gender quotas in the internal statutes of the party and not receive support from the male leadership. That same year, Deputy Norma Allegrone (UCR) presented a similar project in the Chamber of Deputies with the signature of legislators from different parties. The promoters of the quota agreed to promote a single project so that their treatment

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would be faster and in 1990 they formed the Network of Political Feminists, made up of women from more than fifteen parties, to demand their treatment (Caminotti, 2014). The Quota Law implied a dialogue between unwritten rules (those for the selection of candidates) with the legal obligation to incorporate a third of women in the composition of the lists. The female deputies interviewed for this research who entered the Chamber after the sanction of the quota and up to the first decade of the 21st century indicate that this legal duty at the head of the political parties meant a kind of stigma for women. Unlike men, their legitimacy of access was commonly questioned. At a time of change in the legitimate principles of organization of the competition, there was a question that circulated as a rumor or as a kind of tacit complaint: "Do they arrive on their merit or do they arrive because of the quota?".

When making decisions about the conformation of the lists, that subaltern value of women became explicit. In line with what Borner, Caminotti, Marx and Rodríguez Gustá (2009: 45) showed, the interviewees confirm that, when different internal currents came together in a single list, the woman was "contributed" by the less powerful faction. A deputy who began her term in 2005, fourteen years after the Quota Law, expresses it this way:

(...) I belonged within the Socialist Party to the minority space, and in the distribution that was agreed upon in that 2005 campaign for the National Congress, my space had to pay for the woman (National Deputy 2005-2009, Socialist Party, interview, November 11, 2021)

The former deputy alludes to that informal rule according to which the less powerful faction "paid" the woman required by the quota, evidencing the undervaluation of female participation that was common then. Another former deputy evokes the same informal rule and refers to the explicit costs that the new regulations implied for those who until then were the undisputed protagonists of party politics:

On the one hand, the entry of more women was facilitated. But, on the other hand, since we have taken so many places of power away from the men, the fight with the men also worsened. And even among them, this "you pay the woman on this list", which was said in my time. "Who pays the woman?", "whose turn is it...?". It was like a political cost, because you were taken the place out of man, for the sector that was number three, for example (National Deputy 2003-2007, Justicialista Party, interview, November 16, 2021)

Of course, like men, not all women have the same value in the Chamber of Deputies, nor does their nomination have the same relevance when drawing up a list (Glasserman Apicella, 2022b). The different previous trajectories of access to the Chamber, the political experience, and the partisan and personal connections are some of the determining elements to understand the "respect" that certain deputies deserve to the detriment of others. One of them, who took over the seat in 1991, refers to the impact of this set of resources on the room for maneuver that can be aspired to later:

The issue is how you got to that place. If you arrived because a guy fingered you, because in the cast it was the turn of "the woman", that's one thing. If you are a woman with a history, if "you are needed", probably the guys respect you more and give you some degree of autonomy (National Deputy 1991-1995, Justicialista Party, interview, November 2, 2021)

For both men and women, the fact of "representing something", as stated in the native language, that is to say, having held relevant positions in organizations of different types (from labor to student unions, through business chambers, movements of human rights or internal lines of the parties themselves), facilitates access to the lists and also greater autonomy once in the Chamber. The same can be said about leaders who have high public awareness and popularity at a given historical moment.

But beyond these fundamental features that distinguish the set of candidates for Congress, we can see that after the first decade of the 21st century, there were changes in the way of considering the legitimacy of women's access to their seats. In the interviews with deputies who began their mandate after 2010, references to access "by quota" or to the stigma of occupying a seat "paying" the woman imposed by some bill is no longer found. The reasons for this change are multiple. On the one hand, the Quota Law is increasingly taking root in the political culture and has resulted in the incorporation of 30% of women on the lists (today 50%), being progressively assimilated into the candidate selection processes. In this sense, it went from being a disruptive demand to becoming a guideline that is taken for granted. On the other hand, the women's movement had a major role on the public scene in Argentina, especially since 2015³, and contributed to diminishing the legitimacy of discriminatory discourses that were common before (which certainly does not mean that they have

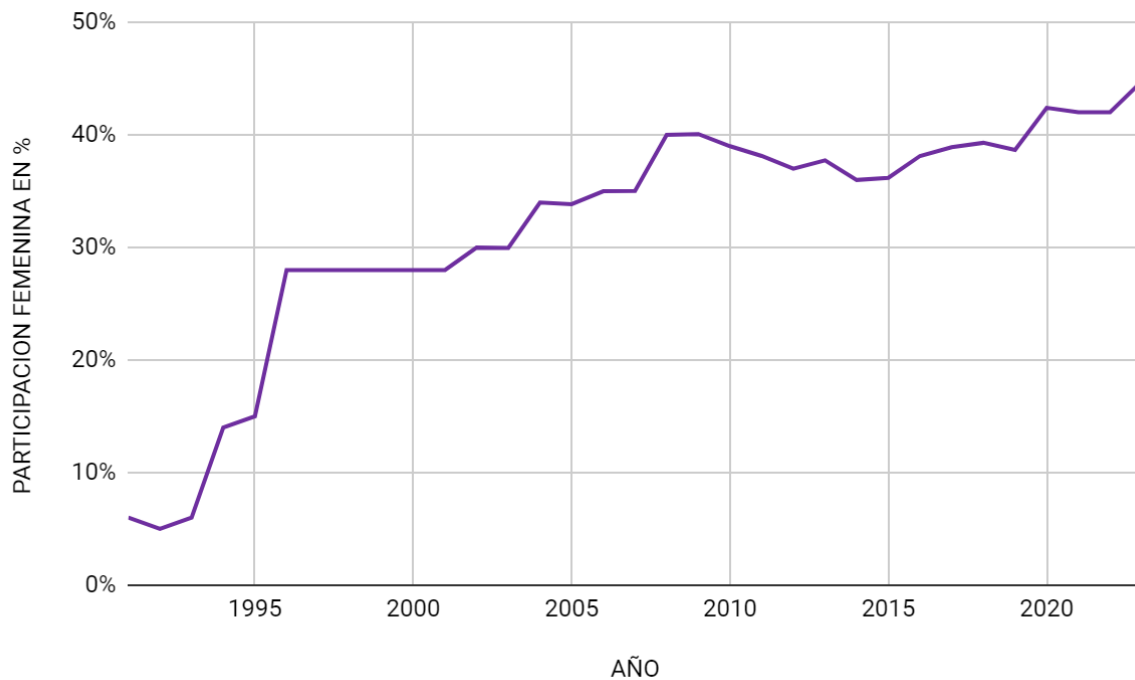
³ Gender activism has a long history in the country, and it has grown strongly since June 2015 with the first massive demonstrations against gender violence under the slogan "Not one less" (*Ni Una Menos*). Since then, the feminist agenda has gained ground in the media and in public discussion, and has had great mobilizing power.

disappeared). It also contributed, as happened at other times and in other latitudes, to the fact that the gender could be used, through various stakes, as a strategic resource (Dulong & Lévêque, 2002; Masson, 2004). Finally, the historical process makes women advance to different positions of power in a sustained manner⁴ and it is to be hoped that they will continue in that line.

In the words of Tula (2015), the incorporation of affirmative action measures encourages the appearance of female leaders, and these, in turn, facilitate the political participation of women in different spheres. In this sense, the longitudinal analysis of female participation in the Chamber of Deputies shows that women exceeded the percentage established by the quota before the law was more demanding (with the first implementation of parity in 2019). The first great leap in female representation was registered in the period 1993-2002, when the 30% of deputies established by law was reached; in 2002-2008 there was a second increase, now less pronounced, which brought the presence of women in the Chamber to 40%. This ten-point exceedance of the percentage required by law coincides with the period in which the deputies state that they have gone through a less discriminatory environment in comparative terms. During the years from 2008 to 2021, participation plateaued around that figure, with the lowest value recorded in 2014-2015 (36%) and the highest currently (45%), already with the Law Parity in force.

Graph 1. Evolution of female participation in the Argentine Chamber of Deputies (1991-2023)

⁴ Although unavoidable differences persist -currently only two of the twenty-four Argentine provinces are governed by women and only 12% of the municipalities are headed by mayors (DataGénero, 2023)-, after the return of democracy women occupied ministries not stereotypically feminine (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor Robinson, 2009), such as those of Economy, Industry, Security or Defense, in addition to the fact that a woman twice held the presidency of the Nation.



Source: Own elaboration based on information from the Parliamentary Information Directorate of the Chamber of Deputies.

A masculinized selection dynamic

These advances do not imply that the legitimacy of the access of women deputies is no longer questioned, but rather that the criticisms do not seem to be attributed to an affirmative action measure as was previously the case with “the quota”. The interviewees who occupied their seat in the last ten years coincide in pointing out the persistence of questioning by their peers of their suitability, which sneaks in even when they win internal elections. A unionist deputy refers to the initial rejection when women hold positions of responsibility:

When I took office as general secretary of my labor union, my colleagues did not respect me. Even so, they had voted for me. It took me many years. But hey, fifteen years have passed since then. So now it's different. But in the beginning, it was not like that. At the beginning you load with the underestimation, you load with "they gave her the position, she did not gained it", you load with "she is well off", you load with "she is very young". You carry all those prejudices. But hey, after time, you prove suitability... unlike male colleagues, whom only the position gives them suitability (National Deputy 2017-2025, Justicialista Party, interview, December 22, 2021)

If for women reversing the suspicion of lack of merit is a laborious process and, above all, implies time, for men, this questioning does not constitute a starting point. The construction of political authority is always the product of experience and of having successfully passed different types of tests (Gené, 2019; Soprano, 2009), but in the perception of the female deputies, greater credentials are required.

You look at the careers of my female colleagues and it takes many years, but they are achieving political authority (...) That political authority that is achieved with experience almost equates you with the power linked to the capacity of pacts between men. (National Deputy 2003-2007, Justicialista Party, interview, November 16, 2021)

The selection process to form the lists is a period of high tension among the party political leadership with chances of accessing an expectant place. The most suitable person will be the one who combines favorable personal traits to be elected with the blessing of the current leadership, in a general context where their figure maintains a balance between the different forces within each electoral coalition. However, what seeks to highlight here is that for women the difficulties of political participation within a gender social order are added, characterized by informal practices that reproduce masculine cultural codes (Borner *et al.*, 2009). In terms of the participants of the political world, "the pen" for the assembly of the final list is held by a few, and they are usually men.

I believe that today there is still an important misogyny in the dynamics of the functioning of the parties. At the end of the day, when there is someone representing a group, an internal sector, that someone is always a man (National Deputy 2016-2021, Unión Cívica Radical, interview, December 17, 2021).

The candidate selection process is identified in the overwhelming majority of cases as a masculinized dynamic. Even with some changes over time concerning how women perceive their positions in the face of the closure of the lists, there persists a notion of a "pact" between men, linked to exclusive spaces for them and conversations in which women are not part of. A deputy expresses it emphatically: "If the negotiations end in the soccer locker room or at sauna, you are out" (National Deputy 1993, 2003-2007, Justicialista Party, interview, November 11, 2021). These agreements, usually tacit, provide politicians with power over the assembly of the lists with additional symbolic authority. As Alles (2008) summarizes, the functioning of

political institutions is conditioned by non-institutional factors such as chats after soccer matches in which decisions are made, male saunas, and parallel WhatsApp conversations that are established because in the bigger groups it is decided to ignore the "conflictive" women, among others.

When Pateman (1988) develop the sexual contract as before the social contract, she makes explicit a pact that has excluded women from modern political life. Although the laws currently guarantee equal rights and the most exclusive practices have changed, more subtle logics of differentiation between genders persist, associated with how respect is earned or how leadership is exercised in a political *bloc* (parliamentary group). The logics operate as "informal agreements", in the sense assigned to them by Howard Becker (2018 [1963]), and their breach foresees sanctions of all kinds. For this reason, as a deputy points out, "being a man gives you suitability as a deputy", although this can be lost due to certain behaviors that are not allowed between peers while being a woman does not guarantee that suitability but must be built over time to the extent that gains political authority. As Becker also pointed out, the criteria for participation and exclusion are defined between groups and the principles of legitimacy and illegitimacy are not invariable. For this reason, it is possible to perceive changes in the time frame of this investigation, especially concerning the informal practice of "paying the quota" or the delegitimization of women due to the affirmative actions that led to their arrival in Congress. However, it is possible to continue finding forms of discrimination between the genders and particularly the exclusion of women from the "small tables" (*mesas chicas*) where decisions are made.

The question of financing as an additional obstacle

In this sense, the question of financing is a relevant factor to understand the obstacles in the access of women deputies to the Chamber and, more generally, in the deployment of their careers. Research on this topic yields different results depending on the countries in which women compete and must seek resources to carry out campaigns. While in the United States gender does not have a significant effect on the ability of candidates to raise funds or on their campaign spending (Adams & Schreiber, 2011), in Latin America women find in this aspect a clear vector of inequality. On the one hand, women candidates are often in a weaker economic position, given that women have lower incomes than men in all countries of the global south and have fewer own resources at their disposal (Piscopo, *et. al.*, 2021). On the other hand, donors are also mostly male, and corporate contributions are lower for women (Maddens, Muyters & Put, 2023). Finally, the fact that men are in the majority in the decision-making

bodies of the parties and among the party elites makes it more difficult for women to access the economic resources available in the organization, unless they have strong political sponsorships (Tula, 2015).

In Argentina, the regulations indicate that the State allocates public funds to finance electoral campaigns in the following manner: 30% is distributed equally among all the parties and 70% is distributed in proportion to the votes obtained in the previous election of national deputies (Ferreira Rubio, 2002). But it does not indicate how these resources should be directed during the campaign or how they are distributed among the different candidates in each space. Regarding private contributions, although there are ceilings, the receipt of financing depends on each candidate. Consulted about the barriers to access to the Chamber, several deputies agreed that “getting money” is more difficult for women.

An interviewee with vast experience, both legislative and executive, refers to the paradoxical counterpoint between women's claim to autonomy and the difficulty it represents for them to raise financing for campaigns:

Everyone wants you to arrive because of your impulse, not because someone put you in. And that is still very difficult today. Imagine that the quota gives you a chance, parity gives you a chance, but then you have everything related to the financing of political campaigns, it is much more difficult for women to find alliances in which you can find financing. Even financing is something more typical of men. And that underlies if you want to head a list if you want to participate in an internal election (...) There have been improvements, yes. For example, free advertising in television campaigns⁵. But today everything is based on social networks, and there you have to have financial resources. And normally the party, the Peronist party, in the provinces are presided over by men. So when you go to ask the president of the party for funding to compete within an internal election or for such a thing, he won't give it to you. (National Deputy 2001-2013 and 2019-2023, Justicialista Party, interview, March 16, 2022)

For women, becoming a competitive option outside of the patronage of the party leader, who is usually a man, is uniquely complex. Much more if that involves trying to dispute an existing leadership, presenting yourself to an internal election, or challenging established hierarchies. Numerical parity, then, avoids a disparity in access to economic and organizational resources. If, after the application of successive affirmative action measures, the female

⁵ The Political Party Financing Law establishes that radio and television broadcasting services are obliged to give away 5% of the total programming time for electoral purposes free of charge during the course of the campaigns.

presence on the lists should reach 50%, money management is still an eminently masculine matter: "Now [women] are the second or first on all the lists. However, the *pen* of the campaigns are still run by men", says a former deputy (National deputy 1993; 2003-2007, Justicialista Party, interview, November 15, 2021).

“Congress is not friendly with your life”: women deputies and daily work

Once the seat is obtained, women must manage balances from which their male counterparts are largely exempt, and dispute power in a space with rules that are based on male models. If we focus on decision positions within the Chamber, we see a clear sexual distribution of political work. On the one hand, women preside over -and even integrate- the less powerful committees in strategic terms and the less valued by the political system (Pérez, 2014). Due to very different factors, ranging from the mirror of a gender social order to the explicit blocking of positions by their peers, women deputies get much more to occupy the head of the committees that are dedicated to issues of "reproduction and care" than to those of "production and disbursement of resources" (Caminotti & Del Cogliano, 2017), although they do not exceed 50% in any of them. The truth is that occupying positions that are not very powerful can have negative consequences on female leadership, as it reduces their visibility and capacity for political influence (Pérez, 2014). In the same sense, women have been an overwhelming minority in the presidency of the *blocs* (parliamentary group) since the return of democracy, and only in the last period was there a female president of the Chamber of Deputies (Glasserman Apicella, 2022a), moreover, he took office when the leader of his party left that post to take over as the head of the Treasury.

If we focus on positions of power, what is the daily experience of women in Congress like? What elements express gender disparities in their daily work? What imperatives must they manage and what dynamics and internal hierarchies differentially order their behavior?

The eternal return of conciliation

The difficulty of managing the balance between family and political life is a constant for the deputies, especially when they are mothers. If the conciliation between work and care tends to force women to assume positions of "jugglers" (Faur, 2014), in high-ranking occupational categories this challenge assumes particular features. As Florencia Luci showed in the case of women in senior management careers in the business world, "the organizational space plots a series of demands and forms of competition that threaten female progress" (Luci, 2016: 95). The spaces and hours in which a large part of the political activity takes place -and legislative

work in particular- make the careers of various female deputies difficult. As we illustrated in the previous section, there are areas of sociability -which are also for negotiation and decision-making- that exclude them, and the same occurs with the nocturnal nature of both informal and institutionalized practices. Without going any further, the sessions in Congress have no time limit and sometimes extend for 18, 20, or even more than 24 consecutive hours. The existence of these "marathon sessions" has been criticized for undermining the quality of legislative work and for hindering the ability of "citizen monitoring" of them -which can be seen live on *Diputados* TV-⁶. But it also stresses the compatibility between the exercise of motherhood and political work. Certainly, when there are young children, that tension is even greater:

Sessions that last 24 hours are terrible for breastfeeding. Because you have to have your son sit in the office without any kind of space. With someone who is here. Or his father, or his grandmother, or someone you have sitting here for 24 hours, waiting for you, so that you can come and go and you can give him the breast. We present an infinite number of projects so that it starts at 8 in the morning, end at 10, midnight, resumes the next day, and meets every day of the week. But this nocturnal activity seems to be the result of an old patriarchy where the men went and the women were at home taking care of the five, twenty children, without any difference (National Deputy 2019-2023, PRO, interview, November 23 of 2021)

It is symptomatic that one of our male interviewees interpreted the objection of certain women representatives to this practice as referring to a gender stereotype that represents them as weak or unprotected. Thus, the deputy recounts that when he arrived at the Chamber, some "deputies came to ask me that the sessions begin in the morning. Because they finish at 2 or 3 in the morning... It was difficult for them when it was a minority group of women who were there". When inquiring into the grounds of that claim, he conjectures: "I think it's a security issue. Returning alone at 3 in the morning, 4 in the morning... Having to get a taxi... Sometimes there were no cars from the Chamber" (National Deputy 2005-2013 and 2017-2019, Justicialista Party, interview, 11/12/2021).

Although the length of the sessions is counter-intuitive for the public outside the Chamber and may also be so for debutant deputies, it is difficult to alter that tradition for various reasons. In the 2020-2023 period, five projects were presented to reform the internal regulations and restrict the hours of the sessions, but none were approved. Among the reasons for blocking these initiatives are the routines of the deputies from the *interior* of the country,

⁶ Cf. "Deputies debated the end of the 'marathon sessions'", *Ámbito*, 16/11/2022.

who travel to the City of Buenos Aires in what is usually called a “short week”: from Tuesday to Thursday they are in Buenos Aires to do their legislative work proper and the rest of the days they are in their districts to do political territorial work⁷ (Ortiz de Rozas, 2019). For this reason, many deputies from the provinces most distant from City prefer to compact the work into three days, even though the pace of the sessions is “inhuman”⁸. However, it is interesting to dwell on the experience of the deputies of the *interior*. For them, this organization can be particularly complex: “I was in Buenos Aires for four years and I only was from the office to Retiro⁹ and from Retiro to the office. I couldn't waste time because I had small children. And I felt that I had to go home”, says one of them (National Deputy 2005-2009, Socialist Party, interview, November 11, 2021).

For men, this is usually not a problem. Although care models are changing, in general, their professional performance is supported by a family dynamic that allows them to ignore the domestic sphere and concentrate on their political growth. A deputy from the interior evokes it in these terms:

When my son finished primary school, I remember that we were with my wife at the graduation ceremony. I was an escort or flag bearer, I don't remember, we were happy. We were chatting when I said to her "You know... I don't remember when [her daughter] finished primary school." And she tells me "You don't remember because you weren't there". Simple as that... Nor is it to be mortified (...) As a deputy I traveled to Buenos Aires on Mondays at noon, arrived at the Chamber on Mondays at 4 or 5 pm, and stayed until 9 or 10 pm, I began to prepare the week. As there are many people from the *interior*, Mondays and Fridays are the days with little activity. In general, I stayed Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Wednesday was the day of the session. I stayed until Thursday afternoon in Buenos Aires. Then I returned here to Rosario and divided my time. I went to visit someplace in the province. But my family stayed here [in the province of Santa Fe]. My wife worked in a bank here, and I had young children, who had not finished primary school. (National Deputy 2005-2013; 2017-2019, Justicialista Party, interview, November 12, 2021)

⁷ The distance from the Chamber is a factor that directly impacts the political careers of representatives of the *interior*. Generally, except for exceptions linked to the *bloc* (parliamentary group) authorities, they decide to divide their week between the City of Buenos Aires and their towns of origin, in view of the central importance they attribute to "not neglecting territoriality". This factor appears essential to strengthen the political profile of any legislator, especially if he or she aspires to be re-elected in that position or compete for another elective position (Glasserman Apicella, 2022b).

⁸ Verónica Benaim: "The end of the marathon sessions in deputies: there would be a quorum but there are few dates left to deal with it in 2022", *Tiempo Argentino*, 9/11/2022.

⁹ It refers to the main bus station of the City of Buenos Aires.

While for women this issue was presented as a recurring obstacle, for this deputy the problem was settled because another woman solved it in her house, “it was not a thing to be mortified either”. In her classic study on the double shift that women acquire when they massively enter the labor market and continue to do the housework without significantly altering the split at home, Arlie Hochschild portrays the much greater tear than their husbands who feel the women between the demands of work and family (Hochschild, 2021 [1989]). More than three decades later, the question of conciliation continues to be largely a "female issue." The behavior that is appropriate for men and women is marked by divergent moral discourses and expectations (Lowndes, 2014), and women who dedicate more time to their careers are called upon to justify themselves:

They asked me "Who do you leave your children with? Whom are you going to live with in Buenos Aires? My men colleagues, they were never asked those questions, ever. They had children, just like me. They had nuclear relatives, just like me. And they were never asked that. (National Deputy 2005-2009, Socialist Party, interview on November 11, 2021)

But although all the deputies interviewed in this research, both those who define themselves as feminists and those who do not, identified obstacles to their careers based on gender and spaces of power in which they can hardly participate, not all of them object to the rules of the daily work that tend to disadvantage them. One of the few women deputies who became *bloc* president of a large parliamentary group emphasizes, in this sense, that the rules of the game are already written and that the deputies must adapt if they wish to occupy those places:

Do you know what happens? Congress works a certain way. That also makes a... it is sacrificial. Congress is not "friendly to your life." You are a public servant. And that's where you have to be. Life is not comfortable being a deputy (...) And yes, you have to spend a lot of time traveling. And yes, you can't see the kids. That can happen to anyone. It is a sacrifice, but it is also a service. You are a servant, you are a servant. (National Deputy 2005-2017, Justicialista Party, interview on November 24, 2021)

As in the eminently masculine world of companies managers, among women who reach higher in politics, "understanding is mixed with individual responsibility for not wanting to

accept the challenge. Gender empathy has a limit when it comes to justifying one's own decision to have embarked on a demanding career" (Luci, 2016: 98-99).

Inequalities of “*soft power*” and authority to speak

For its part, the question of speaking is a fundamental edge to understanding the unequal experience of women and men within the Chamber. If politicians are generally "professionals of the word" (Offerlé, 2017), this acquires singular importance in Congress, where the defense of ideas in public and the mobilization of arguments for or against projects is a central ritual (Waylen, 2010). Interviews with women representatives suggest the existence of greater ease on the part of men to speak in highly visible spaces and less exposure to different types of objections. This divergence is not a novelty for those who have years in politics: they had verified it in their previous career and they find it again in the Chamber of Deputies.

I don't know of any, not even one of the best-known women politicians, whose legs did not tremble the first time they got on to speak at an political event. Me, even having taught at the university, the first time I had to speak at a big event I wanted to vomit, to get out of the act. The men pushed you to get up to speak on stage, to say “anything” (National Deputy 1991-1995, Justicialista Party, interview, November 2, 2021)

According to this deputy, not only is it natural for men to speak, but the exercise of orality is judged under different lenses:

The feeling is that they are going to look at you in much more detail. That a man is authorized, but you are not. There is a differentiated requirement. Because a man says “anything” and it doesn't matter. Also that they are going to look at how you are dressed, and how you move, that they are going to accuse you of being the lover of... (National Deputy 1991-1995, Justicialista Party, interview, November 2, 2021)

In this sense, various deputies point out the work they had to do to speak at meetings and in committees. Almost like an exercise in self-convincing, one of them recounts: "What can they tell you? Nothing more than saying “no”. Nobody is going to look for you at your house and ask you if you want to talk" (National Deputy 2017-2021, Frente de la Concordia Misionero, interview, January 31, 2022). Indeed, these places are not going to occupy themselves, and the socialization of women and men predisposes them differently to go to

dispute them. The question of speaking and the time allowed for men and women, arises both among those who were deputies in the 1990s and among those who are currently, even though there is now a much higher proportion of women in the Chamber and a "political climate" that changed substantially:

I see many times that the first ones who are encouraged to take a position or speak are the men. I seen that it's something of soft power, something not visible. It is not a rule of the game, that one as woman has to speak second. But generally, the ones who sign up to speak first are the ones who feel a position the fastest... It may be a personality issue or it may be a matter of how sometimes [women] are more shy, and we don't see that we have a valid position or something that others will listen to, or something legitimate. Many times the first to establish a position are men and it is more difficult for women, I think, to assert ourselves in the position we have (National Deputy, 2019-2023, PRO, interview, November 23, 2021)

Thus, the conditions for the exercise of discursiveness also seem to be subject to different requirements depending on gender. As Howard Becker recalls, "the degree to which an action will be treated as deviant also depends on who commits it and who feels harmed by it" (Becker, 2018 [1963]: 32). Departing from the norm is not the same for those who have just arrived then for those who have been in a space of power for a long time, and the call to order will not be the same either. Peer disapproval can demarcate with particular force and clarity the limits of the legitimate exercise of a role and thus strengthen the monopoly of those who exercise it (Lagroye, 1997: 13-15). In this sense, the same practices can arouse dissimilar reactions in the exercise of the word in the venue depending on who executes them. A deputy recounts a session in which the president of the Chamber interrupted a colleague's speech for reading it since the internal regulations prohibit it, but he did not enforce the same rule for one of their male peers:

I remember that I was very indignant when the president of the Chamber did not let Alicia Fregonese finish speaking, he cut her off while she was reading her speech. He told him "In the House, you don't read, you talk." The other day Carlos Heller read for an hour and a half. But of course, they didn't cut him off... (National Deputy 2017-2025, Civic Coalition, interview, March 18, 2022)

We can think that the discretion in enforcing or not this rule is related to the partisan membership of the person speaking: in this case, the female deputy is from the opposition and the male deputy is from the ruling party, just like the president of the House. However, the

observation of both interventions allows us to notice other gender marks since she reacts nervously to the warnings about the end of her speaking time¹⁰ and he acts with ease in his extensive intervention¹¹.

The measurement carried out by the legislative press *El Parlamentario*¹² on the duration of the speeches in the Chamber corroborates the male leadership. Male deputies represent 77% within the first twenty places in the ranking of the deputies who spoke the most in Congress during the period 2014-2021¹³. Among those who intervene the most, almost all of them are going through their second or third term, and the most important *bloc* and commission authorities have a significant weight, especially those who chaired the Budget and Finance Committee. This issue allows us to better understand the reasons why fewer women speak for longer, given that, as we have seen, their presence is a minority in the presidency of the parliamentary *blocs* and the most hierarchical committees (Pérez, 2014). In short, the conditions of possibility of the greatest discursive prominence are related to gender (masculine), but also to the previous trajectory in the Chamber (of high seniority) and the occupation of roles of intra-institutional power (presidency of the most important *blocs* and committees). As in the rest of the cases, the disadvantages that confine women to places of less visibility and, in the medium term, less capacity for political influence accumulate here.

Conclusions

In these pages, we address the informal practices and implicit hierarchies that run through the political activity of women in the Argentine Congress. This case can be considered a privileged laboratory to understand the scope and obstacles of the formal rules that promote female participation, given that it is the first country to apply gender quotas (which are also demanding and performing) and that shows a progressive agenda in this sense, with the recent Parity Law as its most concrete exponent. The most visible results of these initiatives expose a new map in terms of gender within the Legislative Branch, and the analysis of the evolution of this composition shows that the opportunities for female political careers increased, making in

¹⁰Intervention of the national deputy Alicia Fregonese (PRO - district of Entre Ríos), December 19, 2019. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaLbMGeoRFo&ab_channel=HonorableC%C3%A1maradeDiputadosdeLaNaci%C3%B3n

¹¹Intervention by national deputy Carlos Heller (Frente de Todos - district of Buenos Aires City), March 10, 2022. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOEWpEt88UQ&ab_channel=HonorableC%C3%A1maradeDiputadosdeLaNaci%C3%B3n

¹²“How much do the deputies talk in the room?” available in www.parlamentario.com.

¹³ These are all the years for which this measurement exists in Argentina.

some moments even the descriptive representation of women were above what the norms demanded. In the same sense, some informal practices associated with the change in formal rules, such as the custom of demanding that less powerful political factions "pay the woman" for the quota, are less and less common or are completely outdated and show the deep roots in the political culture of a norm that is already more than thirty years old.

A longitudinal and qualitative approach allows us, in this way, to notice subtle changes and continuities in the management and distribution of power within the Chamber. On the side of persistence, we observe that the assembly of the candidate lists continues to be the responsibility of the party leaders, who are mostly men and have predominance over the material and economic resources of the organization. Likewise, the experience of daily work in Congress shows significantly unequal opportunities and political results for the deputies and the deputies. On the one hand, the sessions schedules, which last for more than 20 hours and during the early morning hours, are more detrimental to women as they are usually "subjects of conciliation" (Faur, 2014). It is one of those neutral norms that have "gender effects", due to its interaction with institutions outside the sphere of formal politics (Lowndes, 2020). The same can be said about the spaces for sociability and camaraderie between men that exclude women in an almost "natural" way and, in addition, distance them from the spaces where decisions are made, bonds are strengthened and resources are distributed. The fieldwork with the deputies of different generations sought to reconstruct the framework of codes that work behind the scenes of politics and their value in understanding how roles and roles of power are distributed, and how resources are valued or penalized. In this sense, a whole set of practices that are hardly perceptible to an "external" gaze put up barriers to the advancement and visibility of women deputies: from the fact that their political authority requires additional evidence or that their performance is judged with different parameters than those of their male peers to the unequal distribution of speaking time in public or the relative confinement in stereotypically feminine committees, both imposed and sought after. These different factors represent the *accumulation of disadvantages* to which Marx, Borner & Caminotti (2007) refer, in such a way that they limit the access of women deputies to roles with power over the agenda and legislative decisions. Even with unquestionable advances, we still have a lot to learn about the political activity of women in contemporary democracies. Other works that show us the places that women occupy in the region's Congresses and the vicissitudes of their daily experience will allow us to better understand the scope and challenges of their political participation.

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