

THE STATE OF THE  
WORLD'S CHILDREN 2007

Background Paper

# Female Legislators and the Promotion of Women, Children, and Family Policies in Latin America

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December 2006



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**Female Legislators and the Promotion of  
Women, Children, and Family Policies in Latin America<sup>1</sup>**

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Manuscript prepared as a background paper for  
UNICEF's State of the World's Children Report 2007.  
Final Draft – May 1, 2006

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion of cases and the statistical models with corresponding discussions draw heavily from my article: Schwindt-Bayer, Leslie A. 2006. "Still Supermadres? Gender and the Policy Priorities of Latin American Legislators" *American Journal of Political Science* 50(3): 570-585. I thank Blackwell Publishing and the editors at the *American Journal of Political Science* for allowing me to use and adapt this material here.

## Introduction

In recent years, Latin America has seen a dramatic increase in representation of women in national legislatures (see Table 1). The regional average has nearly doubled from 10.7% in 1997 to 19.3% in 2006, with Cuba, Costa Rica, and Argentina among the top ten countries worldwide in terms of the percentage of women in legislative office. In Argentina, women's representation has increased from 5.8% in 1991, before the implementation of a national gender quota law for legislative elections, to 35% in 2005. Similarly, in Costa Rica, women's representation has grown from 15.4% during the 1994-1998 congress to 37% in the 2006-2010 congress. Less dramatic increases have occurred in many other Latin American countries, but almost all show a marked increase in women's election to national legislative offices (only Guatemala has lost women in office down to 8.2% from 12.5%).

While a clear increase is evident in women's *descriptive* representation (i.e., the representativeness of a legislative chamber in comparison to characteristics of the electorate), it is less clear whether this corresponds to an increase in women's *substantive* representation (i.e., acting on behalf of women in the electorate). In other words, do female legislators represent the interests and concerns of women in society? A significant amount of research suggests that women in the U.S. and Western Europe do represent women, though it varies across issues and activities. However, we know very little about how women legislate in Latin America. How do their attitudes and behavior differ from male legislators? Do they bring issues to the legislative agenda that previously have received too little attention? More specifically, do they prioritize women, children, and family affairs more so than male legislators do?

In this paper, I examine these questions and show that male and female legislators in Latin America do differ in their attitudes and bill initiation behavior on women's, children's, and family issues by examining three diverse countries – Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica. I show that women are more likely to place priority on these issues than men, and they are more likely to sponsor legislation in these areas suggesting that increasing women's descriptive representation can contribute to increased substantive representation of women's issues and children/family concerns. I also draw on specific examples of legislation sponsored by women in these countries to illustrate the role female legislators have played in promoting women's and children's issues. I begin by examining the reasons for the recent increase in women's descriptive representation and highlighting some of the obstacles to parity that remain.

## Getting Women Elected

Latin America has seen a dramatic increase in the election of women to national legislatures in recent years. This has been especially surprising given the dominant role played by the Catholic Church in Latin America and the cultural ideology of *machismo* that venerates men over women. But, Latin American countries have other characteristics that are more favorable toward women's election and have helped to overcome cultural obstacles. These include a changing socioeconomic environment, the adoption of gender quota laws, the use of proportional representation electoral rules, and high legislative turnover (Norris 1985; Rule 1987; Reynolds 1999; Schwindt-Bayer 2005).

Socioeconomic conditions facilitate the election of women by increasing the number of women with the experience and qualifications to run for office, in other words, the "candidate pool" (Norris 1985; Randall 1987; Rule 1987; Studlar and McAllister 1991; Oakes and Almquist 1993; Reynolds 1999). As more women enter institutions of higher education and the workforce, they become part of the candidate pool from which political parties seek candidates for their party ballots. Advances for women in education and workforce participation in Latin America over the past thirty years have contributed to the growing number of female legislators. In 1970, the average percentage of the labor force that was female in Latin America was 22.8%. By 2002, that had grown to 34.4%. The percentage of all students enrolled in higher education that was female was only 5.3% in 1970. In 1999, it had increased to 28%.<sup>1</sup>

In 1991, Argentina was the first country to pass a national gender quota law requiring all political parties running candidates in elections to the House of Representatives to ensure that at least 30% of their ballot included women. Since then, twelve Latin American countries have adopted similar legislation.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, cross-national studies have found little effect of quotas on the election of women (Caul 1999; Htun and Jones 1999). This is probably explained by the variation in quota rules – the use of placement mandates, the target percentage of women, and enforcement mechanisms – that generally are not taken into account (Schwindt-Bayer 2006a). Single-country studies show a stronger relationship between quotas and the election of women

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<sup>1</sup> All statistics are from the World Development Indicators 2004. They are based on the eighteen Spanish and Portuguese speaking Latin American countries (excluding Cuba), except where data is missing.

<sup>2</sup> The twelve countries are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela (which adopted its quota in 1996 only to eliminate it from the new constitution in 1999).

under specific conditions, such as closed-list PR, moderate district magnitudes, and placement mandates (Jones 1996, 1998, 2003; Schmidt and Saunders 2004). Quotas in Latin America appear to have had a substantial effect. As mentioned earlier, women's representation in Argentina has increased from 5.8% in 1991 to 35% in 2005. In Costa Rica, women's representation grew from 15.4% in the 1994 election before its gender quota to 37% in February's election for the 2006-2010 Assembly.

Finally, proportional representation (PR) electoral rules, which are used in most Latin American countries, facilitate women's move from the ballot to a legislative seat (Duverger 1955; Norris 1985; Rule 1987; Matland and Studlar 1996; Schwindt-Bayer 2005). PR with multi-member districts make it possible for political parties to cater to goals of diversity and representativeness without excluding men with long histories in politics. They can put men *and* women on the ballot rather than having to choose one over the other. In addition, quotas generally work better in PR systems making the combination of closed-list PR and quotas an important contributor to the election of women.

Despite recent progress toward increased women's representation in national legislatures, no Latin American country has achieved parity between men and women. And, women continue to face obstacles when running for office. These obstacles range from blatant discrimination to having fewer campaign resources than men to less support from families and lack of political training. Interviews that I conducted with female legislators in Costa Rica in 1999 illustrate some of these problems.

Numerous female legislators noted that a major obstacle for women was the inability to generate adequate funds to run a campaign. Deputy Alicia Fournier commented that "As a woman, one doesn't have the capacity to run an election...if you don't have your own money, it is difficult to acquire it because we still have the mentality of the domestic period, of daily expenses, and have not learned to have a strategic plan to finance your own campaign (Personal Interview, July 1999). Deputy Sonia Villalobos agreed, "There is one obstacle that all women have: this is economic. As women, we are more timid when it comes to soliciting money and resources to participate in a political fight" (Personal Interview, July 1999).

Other deputies commented on the importance of a supportive family and the fact that many women lack that, which is why they choose not to participate in office. Most elected

legislators have overcome that obstacle. Deputy Isabel Chamorro explained her “exceptional” situation:

I have not had many obstacles, personally, but I am an exception and not representative of most women. I had a very tolerant family. My parents, brothers and sisters gave me a lot of independence and never limited me in my political participation. I had an economic situation that permitted me to have the basic necessities for a political career. My husband’s family supported me a lot by taking care of my small children and alleviating my obligations of the home. (Personal Interview, July 1999)

Still others see lingering discrimination in the legislative arena as a deterrent to women. Culturally, women are still expected to spend their time in the home rather than getting involved in politics. Deputy Ligia Castro captured this saying “Politics is a man’s space. So a woman who insists on participating must earn her space” (Personal Interview, July 1999). Isabel Chamorro pointed out that “it is a society that gives more value to men than to women and more opportunities to men than to women” making it hard for women to attain political office. This also creates an environment where women are continually fighting to be accepted, both in the electoral process and once elected.

Despite these obstacles, women in Latin America have made great strides winning national political office. What does this progress in women’s descriptive representation mean for substantive representation of women? What differences do women make in the legislative arena and do those differences help justify calls for eliminating obstacles to women’s election? In the next section, I review some of the existing literature on women’s substantive representation.

### **Gender Differences in Legislative Politics**

For the past twenty years, scholars in the United States and some countries of Western Europe have examined whether gender differences exist in the attitudes and behavior of legislators. They have found that male and female legislators do have different priorities, especially on women’s issues and children and family concerns. Women are more likely than men to place priority on women’s issues and children/family issues both in their self-stated

preferences and in the legislation they sponsor (Dodson and Carroll 1991; Thomas and Welch 1991; Thomas 1994; Norris 1996; Reingold 2000; Wangnerud 2000; Swers 2002).

In one of the earliest studies in the United States, Dodson and Carroll (1991) found that ten percent of women in U.S. state legislatures named bills on women's rights as their top priority compared to only 4% of men. Eleven percent of women claimed children and family legislation to be their top priority compared to only 3% of men. In a more recent study on the Arizona and California state legislatures, Reingold (2000) finds more similarities between male and female legislators' attitudes and bill sponsorship behavior on a wide range of issue. However, one area where she finds significant differences in legislators' preferences is on governmental provision of child care. She finds,

Among Arizona legislators, women were much more likely than men to favor increasing government efforts to provide such services. While two-thirds of the women wanted to increase the state's role in providing child care, half the men wanted to maintain the status quo and almost a third wanted to *reduce* government activity. Men and women of the California legislature were equally likely to favor expanding government efforts to provide child care to parents. But while a substantial percentage (36 percent) of California male legislators believed that such efforts should be reduced, not a single one of their female colleagues agreed. (143)

In Latin America, significantly less research exists on this. In an early, but well-known study, Elsa Chaney (1979) interviewed women in government in Peru and Chile and determined that women in Latin American politics are *supermadres* – “tending to the needs of her big family in the larger casa of the municipality or even the nation” (21). She found that “‘male’ issues revolve around questions of authority, power, war, arms, monopoly over resources, economic policy” while “‘female’ issues tend to relate to the family, children, and the old, food prices and inflation, peace, moral questions” (164). She also reported that not only do women and men differ in the issues they prefer but in the tasks they perform while in office. She notes that even if women hold non-feminine or “neutral” positions, “posts which either a man or a woman might fill,” they “are overwhelmingly engaged in feminine-stereotyped tasks related to education, social welfare, health, and cultural fields” (133). Unfortunately, Chaney's study has some significant drawbacks. She does not interview men making it impossible to compare attitudes of women and men, and she does not include any control variables to ensure that the attitudes

women report are due to their gender and not other factors, such as their political ideology. But, while lacking in methodological rigor, her study was seminal and her characterization of Latin American women in politics as “supermadres” has persisted over time. In a recent chapter of an edited volume, she reaffirmed her hypotheses for female politicians in the 1990’s (Chaney 1998). It is only recently that new studies have provided more systematic examinations of women’s representation in Latin America.

Recent studies in Argentina and Honduras have found that women are more likely than men to promote women, children, and family issues (Jones 1997; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003). Jones (1997) found that in 1993-1994, female legislators in Argentina sponsored 21% more women’s rights bills and 9.5% more children and family bills than their male counterparts. This difference was higher than what he found in the U.S. Congress – women sponsored 14.4% more bills on women’s rights and 2.6% more children and family bills. In two congresses from the 1990’s in Honduras, Taylor-Robinson and Heath (2002) found significant gender differences on bill sponsorship patterns for women’s rights issues but not for children and family issues. However, they do find that women were more likely to make speeches on the floor of the Honduran Congress on behalf of both women’s rights bills and children and family bills than they were on other types of bills.

Zambrano (1998) offers a different picture of women’s representation in Colombia. She examines the bills sponsored by women in the 1994-1998 Chamber of Representatives and Senate and shows that only about half of the women in the Chamber sponsored women, children, and family legislation and that female senators only sponsored six gender-oriented bills. From this, she concludes that female legislators in Colombia do not see the theme of gender issues as particularly salient. While Zambrano may be correct that Colombian female legislators have sponsored less legislation on women, children, and family than women in other countries, she does not compare the bill sponsorship patterns of female legislators to those of male legislators making it impossible to know just what contribution (or lack thereof) women have really made. If the bills sponsored by women were the large majority of the gender-themed bills, then it would suggest that women are making important contributions, if only a few, in these areas. If men are the legislators sponsoring women, children, and family bills, then a different picture emerges.

All of these studies make important contributions to understanding the role female legislators play in promoting women, children, and family issues. However, to evaluate the importance of legislator gender in Latin America more generally, it is necessary to examine cross-nationally how gender affects legislators' policy priorities. The following sections consider gender differences in issue attitudes and bill initiation behavior.

### **The Cases: Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica**

I selected three countries that represent some of the diversity of Latin America to examine how men and women legislate differently. Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica are presidential systems, as are all nineteen countries in Latin America, with legislatures that play a considerable role in policymaking. The three countries provide four legislative chambers in which to test for gender differences. Costa Rica's National Assembly is unicameral while Argentina and Colombia have bicameral legislatures; however, I only examine the lower house in Argentina, the Chamber of Deputies, because the Senate was appointed up until 2001.

The choice of Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica is important because it provides variation on legislative and socioeconomic environments allowing a test of gender's effect across diverse settings. The proportion of women in office ranges from a low of 7% in the Colombian Senate during the 1994-1998 term to 31% in the Argentine Chamber of Deputies during the 2001-2003 term. Electoral rules vary from an extremely personalistic system in Colombia to more party-centered systems in Argentina and Costa Rica. The 2000 Gender Development Index, which estimates levels of development weighted by gender inequality, gives Argentina the highest rating of the three countries, 0.836, with Costa Rica in the middle, 0.814, and Colombia at the bottom, 0.767. In contrast, one of the poorest countries in Latin America, Guatemala, rates 0.617, and the United States' index value is 0.937.<sup>3</sup>

Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica also differ in several ways from the U.S. and Western Europe where the bulk of research on gender and legislative representation exists. They have strong, traditional, Catholic cultures dominated by "machismo." They are new democracies, but all three have had their current democratic regimes for a sufficient period of time for representation norms to be ingrained – Costa Rica since 1949, Colombia since 1974, and

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<sup>3</sup> Human Development Report (2002) <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2002/en/>

Argentina since 1983. They have levels of economic development that are much lower than the U.S. and Western Europe. In 2000, GDP per capita in constant 1995 U.S. dollars was \$31,730 in the United States compared to \$8174 in Argentina, \$3911 in Costa Rica, and \$2289 in Colombia (World Bank Development Indicators 2004). In sum, Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica provide a good setting for examining gender differences in legislative behavior, and the diversity among the cases helps to make them representative of Latin America, more broadly.

### **Gender Differences in Attitudes**

In 2001-2002, I conducted a survey of legislators in the 2001-2003 congress in Argentina and the 1998-2002 congresses in Colombia and Costa Rica. For Colombia and Costa Rica, legislators were in the last year of a four-year term giving them considerable experience as representatives even if this was their first term in office. Argentine deputies were more than half way finished with the 2001-2003 congressional session. They are elected to four-year terms, but half of the deputies are re-elected every two years creating two-year congresses. In all countries, the survey was either filled out in the presence of the legislator or, if legislators spent very little time in their offices, it was given to the legislator's staff with instructions for the legislator, not assistants, to complete it. In total, I surveyed 292 legislators across the three countries – 174 in Colombia, 50 in Costa Rica, and 68 in Argentina.<sup>4</sup>

To evaluate legislators' attitudes toward women's, children's and family issues, I use a question from the survey that asks representatives to "Please indicate the priority of the following policy areas to your legislative work," and among the list of policy areas are women's equality and children/family issues. They were given five priority choices to rank each: very high, high, moderate, low, and very low. I use ordered probit models to predict the likelihood that a legislator will respond in each one of the five priority categories with the two thematic

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<sup>4</sup> Colombia and Costa Rica had very high response rates, 67% and 88% respectively. Argentina's response rate was lower, 37%, but sufficient for analysis. Due to logistical problems in distributing surveys to the entire chamber in Argentina, the survey was only given to members of the two largest parties – the Partido Justicialista (PJ) and the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR). At the time, they comprised 71% of the legislature. The resulting samples were representative of each country's congress with the exception that the PJ in Argentina was overrepresented by 10% compared to the UCR. I adjust for this, for the overrepresentation of Costa Rican respondents, and the underrepresentation of Argentine respondents with a weight variable in each of the statistical models below.

areas as separate models. Due to missing data, the analyses in this section have sample sizes of 252 (women’s equality) and 250 legislators (children and family issues).

Gender is the primary independent variable, coded “0” if the legislator is a man and “1” if a woman. To isolate gender’s effect on attitudes, I control for personal characteristics of legislators that might influence their preferences. The survey asked legislators a series of background questions, and responses to those questions provide the basis for the control variables – age, whether or not the legislator has a college degree, whether the legislator’s previous occupation was in business, education, agriculture or a medical field, whether the legislator represents a rural (coded “0”) or urban district (coded “1”), and ideology. Ideology is a 5-point ordinal scale from -1 to 1 (leftist to rightist) based on Coppedge’s (1997) classification of political parties in Latin America. I also account for the different socioeconomic environments in the three countries with a control variable for level of development measured as logged GDP per capita in constant 1995 U.S. dollars during 2000.

Table 2 presents the results for each thematic area.<sup>5</sup> Female legislators place higher priority on both women’s equality and children/family issues. The ordered probit coefficients in the models do not offer a very intuitive interpretation for the substantive effect of gender so Figure 1 shows the predicted probabilities that male and female legislators will respond in each of the five categories of priority for women’s equality and children/family issues.<sup>6</sup> From one perspective, the figure shows that the gender disparity is substantively quite large for both thematic areas. Holding other variables at their mean, the first model predicts that 65% of female legislators feel that women’s equality is “very important” compared to only 25% of male legislators – a 40% difference. For children and family issues, the disparity is smaller but still statistically significant at 15%. From another perspective, the figure reveals that, overall, both men and women view women’s issues and children/family issues to be important. Combining the percentages of respondents in the “high priority” and “very high priority” categories shows that

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<sup>5</sup> Most of the control variables in Table 1 are not strong predictors of legislators’ preferences, but they are important components of the model because they reveal the effect of gender after taking into account other influences on legislators’ attitudes. This makes the findings for gender significantly more robust than if controls were ignored, and they suggest that the effect of gender is generalizable across legislators with different personal characteristics and across socioeconomic environments.

<sup>6</sup> I use the Clarify software created by Tomz, Wittenberg, and King (2001) in conjunction with STATA to compute the predicted probabilities (see also (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000)). Following standard practice, I set continuous variables at their mean and dichotomous variables at their mode.

94% of women are predicted to be highly supportive of women's issues but so are 68% of men. For children and family issues, a predicted 79% of women support them along with 66% of men. Clearly, differences exist between women's support and men's support, but the predictions also show that two-thirds of male legislators view these issues as important. In fact, the models predict that only a small percentage of male legislators place "low" or "very low" priority on these issue areas (9% for women's equality and 10% for children/family issues), and they also predict that women will be in those categories (1% for women's equality and 5% for children/family issues). In sum, while women place higher priority on women's equality and children/family issues than do men, both genders do view them as important political concerns.

These findings mirror anecdotal evidence suggesting such differences. In Costa Rica, all but one of the eleven female legislators in the 1998-2002 congress included women and children/family concerns among their primary legislative interests (Oficina de Relaciones Publicas de la Asamblea Nacional 1998). Specifically, the concerns included equal opportunity for women, development projects for empowerment of women, empowerment for poor women, projects and assistance to children and senior citizens, abandoned children and social risk children, street children, youth with addictions, programs supporting women and the family, and ensuring that youth have full societal opportunities. In Argentina, not a single man in the 2001-2003 congress listed women or youth as his area of specialization while numerous women did, and only one man listed family as his specialty (Baron 2002).

In sum, female legislators consider women's issues and children/family issues to be of higher importance than do men. Do the gender differences that exist for attitudes translate into differences in the bills legislators initiate?

## Gender Differences on Bill Sponsorship

I examine all bills initiated during two congresses in Costa Rica and Colombia, 1994-1998 and 1998-2002, and two years in Argentina, 1995 and 1999.<sup>7</sup> I coded bills as to whether or not they fit into the categories of women's issues or children/family issues. Across the three countries, three hundred and fifty-eight bills were sponsored in these two categories out of 6981 total bills (i.e., 5.1% of the bills were women's issue or children/family bills). One hundred eighty-seven were women's issue bills (2.7%) and 171 were children/family bills (2.4%). Of these, 39 became law by the end of the congressional term in which they were initiated (a passage rate of 10.9%). The subject matter of the bills sponsored covers a wide range. Some of the bills in the area of women's issues included reproductive health freedoms, domestic violence protections, gender equality legislation, civil rights for women, sexual harassment policy, and equal pay for equal work. Children and family bills include concerns such as divorce and other family contract matters, children's welfare, child sex crimes, child work restrictions, and drug prevention for minors.

As in the attitudinal analyses, I include a number of control variables to isolate the effect of gender. Two are operationalized identically to those used in the issue preference models – ideology and urban district.<sup>8</sup> I also include level of development here, but it is measured as GDP per capita in constant 1995 U.S. dollars averaged across all years in a congressional term. Additionally, I include three variables assessing a legislator's position in the legislative chamber that could influence bill sponsorship patterns – whether the legislator is a member of the largest party in the chamber, the seniority of legislators (number of terms served), and whether or not the legislator sits on a committee dealing with bills in the thematic area of the dependent variable. I account for differences in the legislative environment of each chamber, specifically, the incentives that legislators have to seek support from their constituents based on them as individuals or based on their party affiliation. Legislators operating under electoral incentives that encourage personal vote seeking may be more likely to promote women's issues as a way to distinguish themselves from other candidates or to court the women's vote. Lastly, I include

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<sup>7</sup> In Argentina, I use bills from one year only because of the disproportionately large number of bills introduced during a two-year congress. This yields a total number of bills more in line with what legislators in Costa Rica and Colombia initiate in a four-year term and ensures a balanced dataset such that no one country skews the results.

<sup>8</sup> Age, education, and occupation are not in the bill initiation models because archival data on legislators' backgrounds are scant in Colombia and Costa Rica.

variables that control for the total number of bills a legislator initiates and the total number of bills initiated in each legislative chamber to ensure that the findings for gender are not because women sponsor fewer bills overall than men or that they are more often in chambers with fewer bills initiated in them.

I analyze bill sponsorship patterns with the legislator as the unit of analysis and the dependent variable measured as the number of bills a legislator sponsors that fall into each thematic area broken into four categories – 0, 1, 2, and 3 or more bills. I include three or more bills in the final category because of the extremely small number of legislators who sponsor more than three women or children/family bills. A total of 1102 legislators sponsored at least one bill during the terms under consideration here. For women’s issue bills, 863 legislators did not sponsor any bills, 139 sponsored one, 53 sponsored two bills, and 47 sponsored three or more.<sup>9</sup> For children and family bills, 919 sponsored zero children/family bills, 122 sponsored one, 37 sponsored two, and 24 sponsored three or more.<sup>10</sup> In other words, twenty-two percent of legislators in the three countries sponsored at least one women’s issue bill and 17% sponsored at least one children or family bill. I use ordered logit statistical models to analyze the data because the dependent variable consists of four categories on an ordinal scale.

The statistical models presented in Table 3 reveal the likelihood that any given legislator will sponsor 0, 1, 2, or 3 or more women’s issue bills and children/family bills. The statistical significance of gender shows that women are more likely to sponsor larger numbers of bills than men are, holding all other influences on bill sponsorship patterns constant. As with the attitudinal analyses, it is difficult to discern the substantive effect of gender from the logit estimates. Therefore, Figure 2 shows the predicted probability that a legislator will sponsor 0, 1, 2, or 3 or more women’s issue or children/family bills based on the estimates of the statistical model. The predictions clearly show that women are more likely to sponsor larger numbers of women’s issue and children/family bills than men. While the model estimates that 86% of men will sponsor zero women’s issue bills, only 55% of women will. Six percent of women will sponsor three or more women’s issue bills compared to only 1% of men. The gender gap is smaller for children and

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<sup>9</sup> In the three or more category for women’s issue bills, 25 legislators sponsored 3 women’s issue bills, 5 sponsored 4 bills, 7 sponsored 5 bills, 6 sponsored 6 bills, 2 sponsored 7 bills, and 2 sponsored 8 bills.

<sup>10</sup> In the three or more category for children and family bills, 13 legislators sponsored 3 children/family bills, 7 sponsored 4, 2 sponsored 5 bills, 1 sponsored 6 bills, and 1 legislator sponsored 7 bills.

family bills, but still statistically significant. Only 11% of men will sponsor one or more children and family bills but 18% of women will.

The control variables have little effect on the number of bills legislators sponsor with two exceptions. One, legislators who sit on women's issue committees are more likely to sponsor women's issue bills, and legislators who sit on committees dealing with children and family legislation are more likely to sponsor those bills. Two, legislators who sponsor more bills overall are more likely to sponsor both women and children bills. A key reason why Otto Guevara Guth sponsored 2 women's issue bills and 4 children and family bills was because he sponsored 148 bills during his four years in office – an exceptionally large number of bill initiations! These control variables serve to reveal the effect of a legislator's gender on the number of bills he or she sponsors after accounting for other influences.

The statistical models analyzed in these two sections allow generalizations about the importance of gender in determining attitudes and bills sponsorship patterns across congresses in the three countries and to comparable countries. They elucidate the effect of gender after taking into account other factors that might affect bill sponsorship patterns. But, how do these statistical estimates represent the real numbers of bills that male and female legislators sponsored in Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica? The following section provides some specific examples of legislator and the bills they prioritize.

### **From Bills to Laws**

While sponsoring legislation does not guarantee that those bills become law, the issues with which a bill is concerned cannot become law without someone sponsoring the legislation. As the above analyses show statistically, women in these three countries have played important roles getting women's issues and children/family issues on the legislative agenda, but several women stand out as particularly strong leaders on these concerns. Piedad Córdoba has been one

of the most prominent promoters of women's rights and children/family issues in the Colombian Congress. During her 1994-1998 and 1999-2002 terms as senator, Córdoba sponsored twelve bills in these areas on issues such as reproductive health, toughening sexual harassment laws, creating a special legislative committee on the rights of women and another one focused on constructing equality for women, and equal opportunity for women. She sponsored Law 294 of 1996, which is an effort to tackle inter-family violence. The law clarifies the definition of family under the law, classifies types of violence, and outlines measures to protect family members, especially children, from violence and specifies penalties for those committing domestic violence. Her equal opportunity bill became Law 823 in 2003, a law with an objective to establish an institutional precedent guaranteeing equality and equal opportunities for women in both the private and public sphere. The law has wide-reaching provisions aimed at both young girls and women to promote and guarantee their rights, to remove obstacles to exercising their rights, and incorporating gender equality policies at all levels of the state. It is the first of its kind to tackle the issue of women's equality so broadly in Colombia.

In the Costa Rican Assembly, several female legislators were key in promoting women and children concerns. Two women in the 1994-1998 congress and five women in the 1998-2002 congress sponsored five or more bills on these issues.<sup>11</sup> Deputy Rina Contreras López (1998-2002) was important not just for sponsoring women and children bills but in getting them passed into law. She sponsored twelve bills in these areas, eight of which were directly targeting women and four of which were aimed at children and family concerns. Five of these twelve bills (42%) became law by the end of the four-year term – a higher success rate than any other woman achieved for women and children bills in either the 1994-1998 or 1998-2002 congress. One of these bills was the “Ley Contra Explotación Sexual de Menores” (Law Against Sexual Exploitation of Minors, L-7899), which was signed into law by President Miguel Angel Rodríguez on August 4, 1999. The law toughens penalties for sex crimes involving minors such as pornography and the child sex trade. Another of her bills that became law outlined reforms to Costa Rica's penal code to toughen penalties for those convicted of sexual assault against children or the disabled (L-8002).

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<sup>11</sup> In the 1994-1998 Assembly, Mary Alban López sponsored seven bills on women and children issues, two of which became law. María Sanchez Valverde sponsored five bills of which two became law. In the 1998-2002 congress, the five women who focused many of their bills in this area were María Isabel Chamorro Santamaría, Rina María Contreras López, Alicia Fournier Vargas, Jorcelyn Sawyers Sawyers, and Irene Urpí Pacheco.

Female legislators in Argentina have been equally active sponsoring women and children bills but less successful getting their bills passed. Three of the most active initiators of women and children legislation during 1999 include Elisa M. Carrió, who sponsored 6 bills on women and 7 on children, Miriam Curletti with 5 bills on women and 5 on children, and Margarita Stolbizer who sponsored 5 on women and 4 on children. Of all these bills, only one became law, but it is a major piece of legislation on women's health – the Sexual and Reproductive Health Law (L-25.673 of 2002). It was cosponsored by Deputies Carrió and Curletti who overcame significant objections from the Catholic Church of Argentina and defended the bill on the floor of the Chamber of Deputies to pass the law (Carrió 2001). The main component of the law is the creation of a national reproductive health program that will work on many fronts including the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and breast/genital cancer, providing information on sexually transmitted diseases and contraceptive use, bringing contraceptives to public hospitals, offering programs on family planning, and promoting sex education in schools. Elisa Carrió was the primary sponsor of another major women and children's bill that became law in 1999. This law modified the penal code to distinguish explicitly sex crimes towards of women and children and toughened penalties for those convicted of such crimes.

Another significant piece of legislation on children's rights in Argentina was the Law for Integral Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents, which became law in October 2005. The bill was sponsored in April of 2004 by Hilda Gonzalez de Duhalde with five cosponsors, two of whom were women and three were men. The law is a wide-ranging effort to conform with international conventions on the rights of children and includes articles prohibiting discrimination against pregnant women, mothers, and fathers, protecting maternity and paternity, outlining rights to education for youth, and protecting children from exploitation in the labor force. Deputy Gonzalez de Duhalde has a long-running record of promoting children's issues. Going back to her work in 1999, she sponsored five bills on children in that year alone.

In addition to these examples of female legislators who have been leaders on women's rights and the protection of children and families, many other legislators also have sponsored and passed important legislation in these areas. Table 4 lists some of the major laws on women and children that have passed since the countries ratified the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the

Child, which was signed by the United Nations in 1989.<sup>12</sup> Many of these laws were sponsored and pushed through to passage by women.

### **Other Ways Female Legislators Effect Policy on Women, Children, and Families**

Women are more likely to sponsor women's issue, children, and family bills, but they influence the policy process in other ways too. Women are more likely to sit on standing committees that study, amend, and report on women's issue, children, and family legislation giving them gatekeeping power in the policy process (Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005). In Argentina, this committee is the Family, Women, Children, and Adolescents Committee, one of forty standing committees. In Colombia and Costa Rica, they are more general social issue committees that include women's issues and children/family affairs as part of their jurisdictions.<sup>13</sup> Costa Rica has taken a further step to ensure that women and youth concerns receive legislative attention by creating two special committees in the Assembly: the Committee on Women and the Committee on Youth, Children, and Adolescents. These committees not only review and report on legislation but analyze societal problems concerning women and children, propose amendments to existing legislation to address those problems, and act as a control on government actions in these issue areas. More often than not, female legislators comprise the majority of the seats on these committees.

Voting is another legislative activity where male and female legislators sometimes differ in their behavior. Studies of the United States Congress report mixed results on whether gender differences emerge in roll call voting patterns, particularly on specific women's issue and children bills. Swers (2002) finds that Republican women are much more likely to vote liberally on women's issues generally, and reproductive issues specifically, than Republican men. Tamerius (1995), however, finds a small and statistically non-significant effect for gender in predicting how legislators vote on feminist issues. It would be invaluable to test for gender

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<sup>12</sup> The Convention was adopted by the United Nations on November 20, 1989. It was ratified by the Argentine Congress on December 4, 1990. Colombia ratified it with Law 12 of 1991 on January 28, 1991. In Costa Rica, it was ratified on August 21, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Colombia has 7 standing committees and Costa Rica has 6.

differences in roll call voting in Latin America, both as a comparison to the U.S. and to understand the behavior of Latin American legislators better. Unfortunately, most Latin American legislatures, including Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica, do not record roll call votes.<sup>14</sup> Instead, they ask for a show of hands or ask legislators in favor of a bill to stand, and they simply record the vote totals. Only in rare circumstances where a legislator explicitly asks for a roll call vote do they record how individual legislators vote, and these are sufficiently uncommon that they provide little systematic insight into voting behavior.

Women's role in effecting women and children policies has focused thus far on their direct influence on the policy process through their personal priorities, the bills they sponsor, committee assignments, or voting. But, women's representation also can have an indirect influence by increasing *men's* attention to women and children policies. One interpretation of the "critical mass" argument is that as an underrepresented group increases its presence in an organization, other groups begin to take on the concerns of the underrepresented group until they become indistinguishable from traditional issues (Kanter 1977). According to this argument, as the proportion of women in legislatures increases, issues of particular concern to many women, such as women's rights and children and family concerns, may diffuse among all legislators. Evidence suggests this may be occurring to some degree in Latin America.

For example, the statistical findings presented here show a significant difference between men's and women's attitudes and bill sponsorship patterns, but they also show that men do think women's and children's issues are important and that some men sponsor legislation in these areas. While many of the laws listed in Table 4 were sponsored by female legislators, others were sponsored and championed by men. As mentioned above, three of the cosponsors on the Law to Protect the Rights of Children and Adolescents in Argentina were men, and three other Argentine laws in Table 4 had men as their primary sponsors. Male legislators in Costa Rica and Colombia have played equally if not more substantial roles sponsoring some women and children legislation. And, in none of these countries do women have the majority needed to pass legislation without the support and votes of male colleagues. Consequently, female and male legislators must work together in their efforts to legislate policies on behalf of women and

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<sup>14</sup> Brazil is one of the few exceptions. It has recorded votes regularly since the Constitution of 1988.

children. The inclusion of women to the legislative arena can make it acceptable, even “politically correct,” for men to focus on these issues as well.

Another example of this is female legislators working with male presidents to get legislation on women and children sponsored and passed. In Latin America, it is not uncommon for the president and his or her cabinet members to have the power to introduce legislation into the national legislature.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, many important pieces of legislation are not sponsored by legislators but by the president. Some of the major laws on women and children have been sponsored by presidents. In Costa Rica, for example, Miguel Angel Rodríguez promised to address the problem of “deadbeat dads” when he was a presidential candidate in 1997. Upon assuming office in 1998, he worked together with the National Institute for Women, male and female legislators, and other state agencies to draft legislation aimed at increasing fathers’ financial and moral responsibility for children born out of wedlock. In August of 2000, President Rodríguez introduced the bill, and it became the Law for Responsible Paternity in early 2001.

The increased role that men play in promoting women and children policies is important for many reasons. One of the key reasons is that more participation by men means less “pigeonholing” of women. A major concern of some scholars is that too much attention to the differences between male and female legislators will perpetuate marginalization of women into legislative activities that do not threaten male dominance. In other words, if women place greater priority on women and children concerns, then men may use that to justify excluding women from more powerful policy areas such as economic policy or foreign affairs. Instead, women’s rights activists prefer to see women getting involved in power policies and attaining top positions while also being able to promote women and children policies. Partnership with male legislators and increasing men’s priority on issues related to women, children, and families is one way to improve attention to these policies and achieve equality between men and women in the political arena.

In sum, this paper has shown that female legislators are more likely than male legislators to sponsor bills on women, children, and family issues and have helped get legislation on these issues on the policy agenda. But, the role of women is not exclusive and men also place priority

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<sup>15</sup> In many Latin American countries, the president has been the most powerful policymaking actor traditionally, though this has become less so in recent years. Carlos Menem of Argentina (1989-1999) was well known for legislating by decree.

on these concerns. The next step is to evaluate the implications of this and to determine what can be done to ensure continued attention to women, children, and family concerns.

## **Conclusions**

Representation of women in legislative politics does have an impact on policy. Women place higher priority and initiate more bills on both women's issues and children/family issues in Latin America. Female legislators view these issues as more important than men do and have been able to translate preferences for women, children, and family concerns into bills. While men also view these issues as important and do initiate some bills in these areas, it is women who have been more effective at getting these bills on the policy agenda. The implications of this are important – women are bringing issues to the legislative arena, such as increased penalties for sex crimes against children or social programs for displaced youth, that would not receive the same amount of attention from male legislators.

This paper has shown that having women in political office means more legislative attention to the needs of women and children in society. In this vein, policies that promote greater representation of women in legislative politics may mean greater attention to women's and children's issues. Efforts to address some of the obstacles described earlier will be important. Electoral gender quotas are one mechanism to do this that many Latin American countries have already implemented. Quotas are an important mechanism to ensure that women get on party ballots, but they are limited if women are not sufficiently qualified for office or if qualified women choose not to get involved in politics. Thus, in addition to quotas, countries need to focus on cultural and socioeconomic obstacles that currently hinder women's election. In other words, they need to ensure that women are in the candidate pool. This can be done by encouraging women to continue their education beyond secondary school and get degrees in professional fields that can be springboards to a political career such as a law degree. Another target should be getting more women into the paid labor force and providing leadership training such that they can hold managerial positions – another springboard to politics.

Political parties play an important role in building the capacity of women to hold public office. The National Liberation Party (PLN) in Costa Rica has a Feminist Movement within the party that works to increase the participation of women through *capacitación* (i.e., training)

(Personal Interview with María Lydia Sanchez, July 1999). The idea is that helping women get the training and experience necessary to hold offices within the party and in the government will benefit the party and politics, more generally. They work on issues such as how to overcome obstacles to campaign financing, building leadership skills, and balancing politics with work and family. Efforts such as these can help increase the number of women in legislative office, and consequently, may increase legislative attention to the problems of women and children.

Female legislators today have changed from Chaney's (1979) characterization of female legislators as "supermadres". In some ways, they are still super-mothers – holding political office while raising a family, take care of the home, and continuing their pre-politics responsibilities. Many of them refer to the "triple-burden" they face – home, career, and politics. Also, similar to female politicians in the 1970's, they still promote traditional concerns of children and the family. However, female legislators today differ from earlier political women in two important ways. One is that many of the issues they promote today are feminist issues. While many women in Latin America still shun the word "feminist" because of its western roots, they see feminist issues, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and equal opportunity, as top priorities. These were not issues discussed in public or promoted by the "supermadres" of the 1970's. Many of the children's concerns promoted today have a feminist undertone to them, which has helped bring to light problems such as sexual abuse and interfamily violence that previously were considered private affairs.

The second difference is that while female legislators today do promote women's and children's issues more than men, it is not their only policy concern. Most female legislators place high priority on issues traditionally thought to be "men's domain" such as economic and fiscal policies and sponsor bills in these areas as well (Schwindt-Bayer 2006b). The idea of women as "supermadres" means that women would not be concerned with issues outside of their traditional domain of experience – caregiving and taking care of the home. Thus, these differences suggest that women's representation in Latin America has changed in important ways over the past thirty to forty years.

There are several reasons why these changes may have occurred. As mentioned previously, women's enrollment in institutions of higher education is much higher than in the 1970's, and the proportion of the paid labor force that is female has increased significantly as

well. Women comprise remarkably large proportions of national legislators in several countries, and record numbers of women have been appointed to ministerial positions – in 2003, half of the Colombian cabinet was female (in large part thanks to the administrative gender quota law). Changes also are evident at the household level in Latin America. An increase in female-headed households has led women to take on the role of sole economic provider in addition to traditional roles such as caregiver. At the same time, a decline in the average size of families in Latin America has made it easier for women to work outside the home and participate in political activities. Of course, highlighting these improvements in women's status obscures the fact that women and men in Latin America are still far from equal, and it obscures variation across countries. But, the changes that have occurred may be responsible for some of the changes over time in how women legislate.

The increased numbers of women in Latin American legislatures in recent years has helped bring the concerns of women, children, and families to the forefront, placing these concerns on the policy agenda by sponsoring bills, and getting new laws on the books that protect the interests of these groups. While many male legislators now recognize the importance of these issues and have initiated bills on women, children, and families or helped to ensure their passage, it is still female legislators who are the predominant actors taking steps on behalf of women and children. To ensure sustained attention to women, children, and family issues, it is important to continue promoting descriptive representation of women in legislative politics. As former Costa Rican deputy Maria Lydia Sanchez points out, "society is made up equal numbers of women and men, both of which deserve representation." (Personal Interview, July 1999).

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Table 1: Percentage of Female Legislators in Latin America, 1997 and 2006 (Lower or only house only)

Country	Percentage of Women 1997	Percentage of Women 2006
Argentina	25.3	36.2
Bolivia	6.9	16.9
Brazil	6.6	8.6
Chile	7.5	15.0
Colombia	11.7	12.1
Costa Rica	15.8	35.1
Cuba	22.8	36.0
Dominican Republic	11.7	17.3
Ecuador	3.7	16.0
El Salvador	10.7	10.7
Guatemala	12.5	8.2
Honduras	7.8	23.4
Mexico	14.2	24.2
Nicaragua	10.8	20.7
Panama	9.7	16.7
Paraguay	2.5	10.0
Peru	10.8	18.3
Uruguay	7.1	11.1
Venezuela	5.9	29.9
<b>Regional Average</b>	<b>10.7</b>	<b>19.3</b>

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Situation as of January 1, 1997 and January 31, 2006. [www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)

Table 2: Determinants of Attitudes toward Women's Equality and Children and Family Issues

	Women's Equality	Family
Gender	1.05 ** (.22)	.41 * (.21)
Ideology	.11 (.22)	.05 (.22)
Age	-.005 (.009)	-.01 (.01)
College Degree	-.10 (.21)	-.28 (.25)
Occupation:		
Business Professional	-.04 (.17)	--
Educator	--	.23 (.23)
Health Professional	--	--
Urban District	.08 (.18)	.24 (.16)
GDP per capita	-.29 † (.16)	-.07 (.16)
Log Likelihood	-305.66	-329.04
Chi Square	25.88	12.77
n	252	250

*Ordered probit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.*

†  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

Table 3: Determinants of the Number of Bills Legislators Initiate on Women’s Issues and Children and Family Bills (Unit of Analysis is a Legislator)

	Women’s Issues	Children and Family
Gender	1.60 ** (.20)	.55 * (.23)
Ideology	.22 (.29)	.24 (.28)
Committee Assignment	.89 ** (.22)	.92 ** (.22)
Legislative Experience	-.01 (.07)	-.04 (.08)
Urban District	.31 (.20)	.34 (.22)
Member of Largest Party	-.31 (.20)	.11 (.21)
Total Number of Bills Initiated by Legislator	.07 ** (.01)	.05 ** (.01)
Total Number of Bills Initiated in Chamber	-.001 (.001)	.001 † (.001)
Personal Vote Seeking Incentives	-.001 (.002)	-.0004 (.002)
GDP per capita	.0002 ** (.0001)	.00 (.00)
Log Likelihood	-618.99	-547.74
Chi-square	225.04	168.12

*Tobit estimates with standard errors in parentheses. † p<.10, \* p<.05, \*\* p<.01  
n=1102*

Table 4: Major Laws on Women, Children, and Families

Country	Laws
Argentina	<p>Quota Law (L-24.012 of 1991)            Law on Interfamily Violence (L-24.417 of 1994)            Newborn Rights to Identity Law (L-24540 of 1995)            Modification to Penal Code regarding crimes against sexual integrity (L-25.087 of 1999)            Law for adolescent mothers missing secondary school (L-25.273 of 2000)            Sexual and Reproductive Health Law (L-25.673 of 2002)            Law reforming previous law to protect pregnant and lactating women in schools (L-25.808 of 2003)            Law for Integral Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents (L-26.061 of 2005)</p>
Colombia	<p>Law 82 of 1993 – Special protections for female heads of household            Law 294 of 1996 – Prevention, remedy, and sanctions for interfamily violence            Law 361 of 1997 – Mechanisms to integrate citizens with disabilities (especially children)            Law 548 of 1999 – Prohibits military drafting of youth under 18 years of age            Law 581 of 2000 – Quota Law            Law 679 of 2001 – Prevention of Child Pornography and Child Sex Tourism            Law 721 of 2001 – Reforms to the paternity law            Law 731 of 2001 – Sets standards to improve quality of life for rural women            Law 750 of 2002 – Law allowing house arrest or community service for female heads of households convicted of light crimes            Law 823 of 2003 – Equal Opportunity for Women Law</p>
Costa Rica	<p>Law of Promotion of Social Equality for Women (L-7142 of 1990)            Electoral Code Reform creating gender quotas (L-7653 of 1996)            Law against Domestic Violence (L-7586 of 1996)            Law against Sexual Harassment in the Workplace and Education (L-7476 of 1995)            Law to create the National Institute for Women (L-7801 of 1998)            Law to Promote Breastfeeding (L-7430 of 1994)            Law against Sexual Exploitation of Youth (L-7899)            Law of Responsible Paternity (L-8108 of 2001)            Law of General Protection of the Adolescent Mother (L-7735 of 1997)            Law to toughen penalties for sex crimes against children (L-8002 of 2000)</p>

Figure 1: Predicted Probabilities of Attitudes toward Women’s Equality and Children/Family Issues

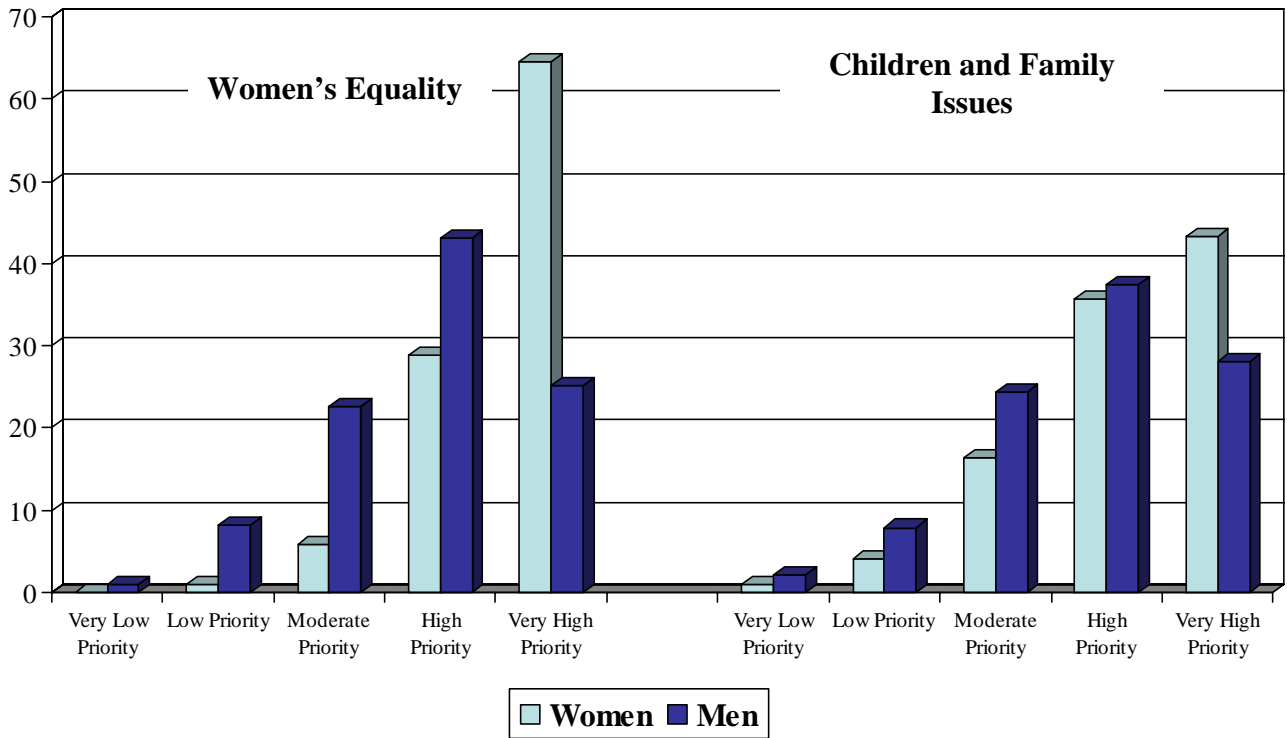
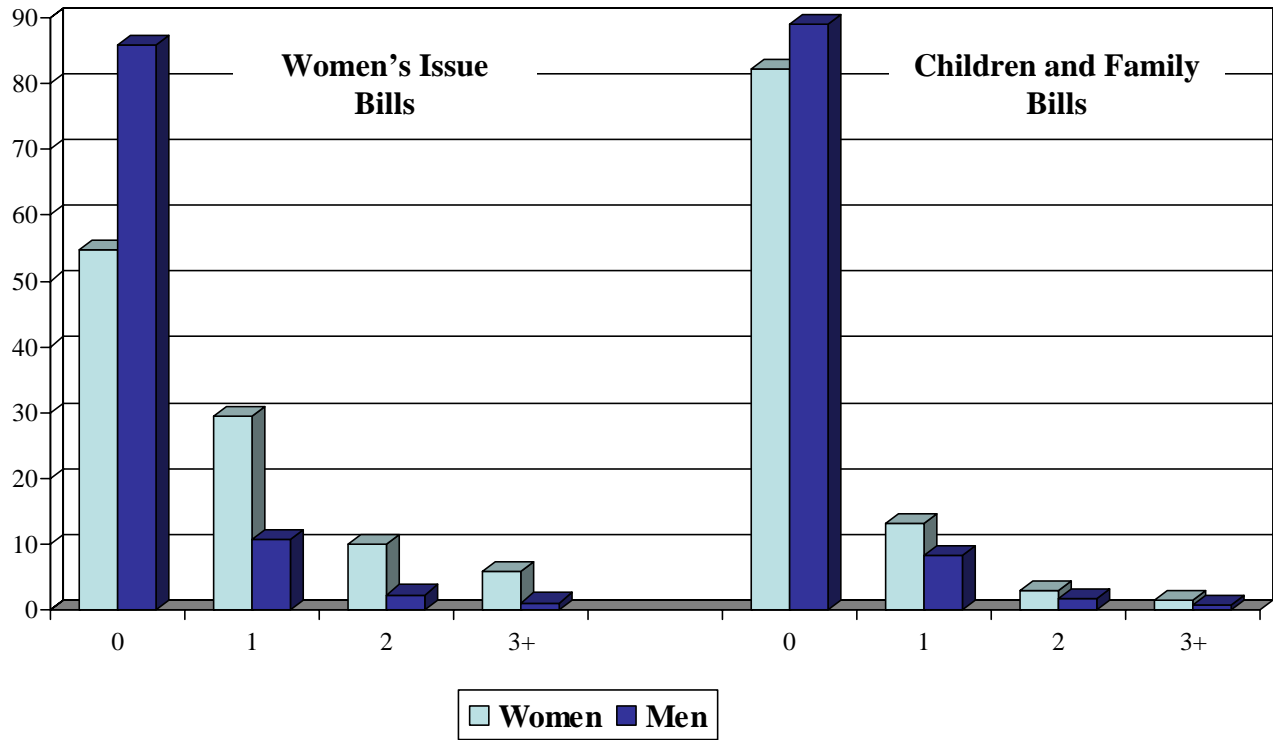


Figure 2: Predicted Probabilities that a Legislator will Sponsor a Particular Number of Bills<sup>i</sup>



<sup>i</sup> Predicted probabilities for gender's effect on bill sponsorship calculated from ordered logit models in Table 3 holding continuous variables at their mean and dichotomous variables at their mode.

