

Representation Behind Closed Doors: The Effect of Electing Women Mayors on Domestic Violence *

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Abstract

Extensive research shows that electing women improves public goods provision in areas like education and health, but less is known about their influence on private yet socially consequential issues such as domestic violence. A key challenge in studying domestic violence is that increases in cases may reflect either a greater willingness to report or a rise in incidence. We address this using administrative data from Chile that distinguishes between citizen-reported and police-identified cases, the latter serving as a benchmark since the police operate independently of local governments. We find that citizen-initiated reports increase a few years after the election of a woman mayor, while police-identified cases remain unchanged. These patterns suggest that the increase reflects greater reporting and improved visibility of existing violence, with no evidence of a rise in incidence. Exploring mechanisms, we show that women mayors highlight gender-based violence in policy proposals and increase resources for community organizations.

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In recent decades, women's representation in elected office has expanded across the globe, prompting a growing body of research on how their presence shapes political behavior and policy outcomes. Much of this work has focused on highly visible areas such as education, health, and gender equality, showing that women leaders can influence these domains (Taylor-Robinson and Heath, 2003; Htun and Weldon, 2010). Far less is known, however, about whether and how women in office affect outcomes in less visible but deeply consequential areas that disproportionately affect women, such as domestic violence. Domestic violence, though often hidden from public view, is a social problem with wide-reaching public consequences. It includes physical, emotional, sexual, economic, and psychological abuse, and limits victims' ability to fully engage in social, civic, and political life (Heise, 1998). Studying domestic violence also poses a methodological challenge: observed increases in reported cases may signal either more violence, greater willingness to report, or both.

In this paper, we examine whether electing women mayors affects domestic violence outcomes in Chile. We focus on whether women's leadership at the local level influences reporting behavior, one of the key obstacles to state intervention in domestic abuse cases. We argue that these effects occur through a combination of substantive representation, where women mayors prioritize policies related to women's issues, and constituency representation, where women voters and feminist networks amplify these efforts. These dynamics are particularly relevant in the Global South, where local governments often play a central role in service delivery and responsiveness to citizen needs (Escobar-Lemmon and Funk, 2017). This makes the municipal level a critical arena for examining gendered patterns in governance.¹

To assess the impact of electing women mayors on domestic violence, we use administrative data that distinguish between two types of reports: those initiated by citizens, typically the victim or a witness, and those independently identified by the police. Because Chile's national police force is institutionally independent of municipal governments, police-identified cases serve as a benchmark for actual incidence. By contrast, changes in citizen-initiated reports can reflect shifts

¹See Appendix A for a broader discussion of gender-based violence.

in reporting behavior or accessibility of services.

Using a staggered difference-in-differences (DiD) with dynamic (event-study) effects, we find that the election of a woman mayor results in a significant increase in citizen-initiated domestic violence reports, with no corresponding effect on police-identified cases. This pattern indicates that women are reporting more, with no evidence that the actual incidence of domestic violence is increasing. Importantly, the timing of these effects is relevant, as they are lagged and not permanent: reporting rises a few years after a woman is elected mayor and then fades within a decade. These results suggest that women's leadership can boost reporting in the medium term, but such gains might be difficult to sustain without deeper structural or cultural change.

We also explore potential mechanisms as to why this effect may occur. First, using municipal security plans, we find that women mayors devote greater attention to gender-based violence, reflecting substantive representation and potentially encouraging victims to come forward. Second, we examine spending on community organizations and show that electing women mayors increases both the number of such organizations and the resources they receive, consistent with constituency representation.

Additionally, we test whether the results reflect general improvements in governance rather than gendered leadership. Women mayors neither increase reports of other citizen-initiated crimes nor expand the number of security cameras or booths. These null findings support our interpretation that the rise in reporting is specific to women's substantive and constituency representation, rather than to general improvements in municipal security.

This study contributes to the gender and politics literature by examining strategies that may reduce violence against women (Arias, 2019; Green, Wilke and Cooper, 2020; Córdova and Kras, 2020; Lindsey, 2022; Amaral et al., 2023). We place particular emphasis on private domains, offering insights into the role of local leadership in addressing gendered violence.² At the same

² This complements a large body of research on how women's representation shapes political behavior and policies on women's issues. (e.g., Franceschet, Krook and Piscopo 2012; Barnes and Burchard 2013; Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer 2019; O'Brien and Reyes-Housholder 2020).

time, private issues that disproportionately affect women remain underrepresented in the literature, often due to challenges in measurement and data availability. By leveraging administrative data that captures these private dynamics, we highlight the importance of studying such phenomena in a broader global context.

Theoretical Framework

We build our theoretical framework on two related but distinct concepts: substantive representation and constituency representation. Substantive representation highlights how women leaders prioritize issues that disproportionately affect women, such as gender-based violence ([Wängnerud, 2009](#)). Constituency representation emphasizes the political incentives and networks that encourage women leaders to sustain these priorities, especially through ties with women voters and feminist organizations ([Reyes-Housholder, 2019](#)). The constituency theory helps explain why descriptive representation may translate into substantive representation in this context, explaining not only why women mayors are likely to act on issues like domestic violence, but also how those actions are reinforced and amplified.

A large body of scholarship demonstrates that women's political representation affects policy outcomes, particularly in areas that disproportionately affect women and marginalized communities. Research across diverse contexts shows that electing officials who share marginalized identities often mitigates policy bias and produces more inclusive outcomes. For example, studies in the United States have shown that policies affecting marginalized voters, such as women, racial minorities, and first-generation immigrants, become more equitable when representatives from these groups are elected ([Gay, 2002](#); [Weldon, 2002](#); [Zingher and Farrer, 2016](#); [Sances and You, 2017](#); [Kao et al., 2022](#)). When women are elected, they are more likely than men to prioritize issues such as reproductive rights, maternal health, and social welfare ([Bratton and Ray, 2002](#); [Taylor-Robinson and Heath, 2003](#); [Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004](#); [Schwindt-Bayer, 2006](#); [Childs, 2006](#); [Wängnerud, 2009](#); [Piscopo, 2014](#); [Funk and Philips, 2019](#); [Jiang and Zhou, 2022](#)). These studies

illustrate the logic of descriptive and substantive representation: women leaders are perceived and often act differently from men in terms of which issues they place on the agenda and the resources they devote to them.

Substantive representation is particularly important in the context of domestic violence, where survivors face severe barriers to seeking help. These include prioritizing the safety of children, financial dependence, or social and legal constraints surrounding separation from a spouse. Such barriers are especially pronounced in the Global South, where women face persistent gendered divisions of labor and disproportionate caregiving responsibilities that limit their autonomy and opportunities (Carreras, Vera and Visconti, 2023). While national hotlines such as the US National Domestic Violence Hotline or South Africa's Stop Gender Violence Hotline exist, many countries lack comparable nationwide services, and local communities often have limited access to support. Research shows that community-based educational programs, such as radio broadcasts or video demonstrations, can reduce violence against women and increase support for gender equality (Arias, 2019; Green, Wilke and Cooper, 2020). For example, evidence from Mexico indicates that women mayors can significantly reduce homicide rates among women by prioritizing budgetary plans to combat gender-based violence (Alcocer, Skillman and Torres-Beltran, 2025). These examples illustrate how substantive representation can translate into concrete policy initiatives that lower barriers to reporting and protection.

Constituency representation complements this dynamic by linking together descriptive and substantive representation, highlighting the political incentives and networks that sustain such policies. Women mayors, in particular, can expand access to resources such as hotlines and safe houses, introduce school-based education programs, and promote bystander interventions to shift community norms. Beyond policymaking, they cultivate constituencies that incentivize and reinforce these actions (Reyes-Housholder, 2019). By framing violence prevention as a women's issue, women mayors mobilize women voters as a core constituency and form alliances with feminist organizations and grassroots activists. These networks provide expertise, legitimacy, and advocacy pressure, helping translate policy commitments into tangible initiatives and ensuring that efforts to

address domestic violence are effectively implemented.

Taken together, the presence of women in office (descriptive representation) may shape policy attention, responsiveness, or institutional behavior (substantive representation) precisely because women leaders may be more attentive to, or electorally responsive to, constituencies disproportionately affected by gender-based violence (constituency theory). This suggests that electing women mayors should increase reporting of domestic violence by both expanding survivors' access to support and generating political incentives for proactive policy. Women mayors act substantively by prioritizing violence prevention and protection, while their constituencies of women voters and feminist networks sustain and amplify these efforts. We therefore argue that electing women mayors influences reporting of domestic violence by empowering survivors to come forward and by providing avenues for disclosure and support through policy initiatives and feminist networks.

The timing of when these effects take place is likely to vary. On the one hand, electing a woman mayor may generate immediate symbolic effects, as survivors could interpret the presence of a woman leader as a sign of institutional receptivity. Such symbolic representation can embolden survivors to report, producing an immediate increase. On the other hand, effects may emerge more gradually, as substantive policies, such as shelters or gender-sensitive school curricula, require time for design, funding, and implementation. These efforts may also depend on building trust with civil society organizations and feminist networks that extend their reach and legitimacy.

Regarding the persistence of effects, they may either stabilize or fade. Once reporting pathways are institutionalized and survivors gain confidence in consistent state responsiveness, reporting levels may remain elevated over time as a reflection of lasting changes in reporting behavior. However, these gains may not be permanent and could diminish without deeper cultural transformation or in the presence of antifeminist backlash. Put differently, women's leadership is likely to be most transformative when institutional investments are followed by sustained cultural change. In this sense, it is the layering of institutional and cultural effects that ultimately determines whether women's leadership yields long-term transformations in domestic violence reporting.

Gender, Policing, and Violence in Chile

In 2006, Chile elected a woman as president for the first time. Michelle Bachelet served from 2006–2010 and again from 2014–2018, covering much of our period of analysis (2005–2020). Her Social Protection Agenda contributed to the institutionalization of gender policy and may have shaped the environment in which women mayors pursued their priorities (Waylen, 2016).³ Beyond the presidency, electoral reforms in 2002 had gendered effects (Hinojosa and Franceschet, 2012) and subsequent reforms, including the 2020 Constitutional Assembly quota, produced notable gains in women’s representation (Reyes-Housholder and Roque, 2019; Suarez-Cao, 2021; Piscopo et al., 2023; Reyes-Housholder, Suárez-Cao and Arce-Riffo, 2024). Yet these improvements have been less evident at the local level: women remain underrepresented in mayoral posts (Holman, 2017; Alberti, Diaz-Rioseco and Visconti, 2022).⁴ This is not unique to Chile; women are often underrepresented in local executives across Latin America (Escobar-Lemmon and Funk, 2018), in part because candidate nomination processes are controlled by men, who are generally less attentive to reducing gender gaps (Hinojosa and Franceschet, 2012).

Despite this underrepresentation, women who do reach the mayoral office have been especially active in combating gender-based violence in Chile (Franceschet, 2010). For example, Mayor Claudia Pizarro of La Pintana has led a campaign against domestic violence that includes the “Woman Alert” program, which delivers GPS devices with a panic button to users. If threatened, a person can press the button, allowing responders to locate them (Cooperativa, 2020). Similarly, Mayor Carolina Leitaó of Peñalolén has overseen the “SOS Women Program,” which equips users

³While Bachelet’s presidency marked an important moment for the politicization of gender issues nationally, we find no systematic correlation between her time in office and the number of women mayors.

⁴Additionally, there is no formal gender quota requirement for mayoral candidates. While political parties may voluntarily promote gender balance among their slate of local executives, there is no legal mechanism mandating this.

with a panic button that tracks their location and connects them to an operator for real-time assistance (Acuña, 2021). At the national level, Chile also witnessed a wave of feminist mobilization during 2019–2020 (de Fina Gonzalez, 2021). These protests underscore the growing salience of gender violence in Chilean political discourse; however, because they occurred at the very end of our observation window, they are unlikely to explain the broader reporting patterns we observe.

Understanding how women mayors influence reporting also requires recognizing the institutional limits of their authority over policing. A key feature of the Chilean case for our research design is that mayors do not control the police, making police-identified cases a useful benchmark. The Carabineros (the national police) are a centralized institution that operates autonomously from municipal governments. Although they are formally under the authority of the Ministry of Interior, even the central government cannot manipulate police deployment at the municipal level. The police themselves determine the number of officers required in each municipality (Alberti, Díaz-Rioseco and Visconti, 2023). This autonomy largely reflects institutional reforms introduced during Pinochet’s dictatorship (Frühling, 2012).

If the Ministry of Interior has little control over Carabineros, then local governments have even less capacity to influence their actions. Municipalities have assumed an increasingly visible role in public security, but without actual authority over policing. This creates a tension: local governments are expected by citizens to address crime and insecurity, yet they lack the ability to command or restructure police institutions (Dammert, 2004). Moreover, because Chile has no subnational or municipal police, the protocols for detecting and classifying domestic violence are uniform and nationally standardized. These institutional features mean that police-identified cases are largely insulated from mayoral influence. Even when local authorities request additional policing in certain areas, the Carabineros make the final decisions. Simply put, women mayors do not have a direct path to affect police-identified domestic violence cases, making these a good benchmark for actual cases. By contrast, they could influence citizen-reported cases through substantive and constituency representation.

To see why our outcomes capture both incidence and reporting behavior, it is important to

understand how domestic violence is legally defined and classified in Chile. The classification of an incident as domestic violence (*violencia intrafamiliar* or VIF) is determined by Carabineros, either at the moment a complaint is filed or when they directly detect a case. The framework guiding this process is established by the Law on Domestic Violence (Law No. 20,066, enacted in 2005), together with Carabineros' operational protocols (Carrasco Navarro, 2021). According to these guidelines, domestic violence against women includes multiple forms of abuse within legally recognized family or intimate relationships and encompasses physical, psychological, sexual, and economic violence.⁵ It is important to note, however, that not all acts of violence against women fall within the scope of domestic violence. When aggression occurs between individuals without a legally recognized family or intimate link, such as neighbors, coworkers, or acquaintances, the case is classified under the general Penal Code, most often as assault or threats.

Finally, Chile offers a uniquely valuable context for our study because it sits between developed and developing contexts. On the one hand, Chile stands out within Latin America for its consolidated democratic institutions, strong state capacity, and reliable administrative records, placing it closer to advanced democracies where institutional weakness is less salient (OECD, 2018). On the other hand, the country continues to grapple with challenges typical of developing contexts, including persistent inequality and uneven provision of local public goods (UNDP, 2017). This dual positioning, ahead of much of the Global South but still behind high-income democracies, makes Chile an ideal bridge case. It allows us to investigate domestic violence reporting in a setting where institutional weakness is not the primary barrier, while still capturing the social and structural constraints that remain central in many developing societies. Importantly, being a bridge

⁵Law No. 20,066 and Carabineros' protocols specify that domestic violence applies when the victim and aggressor share a legally recognized relationship. This includes spouses, civil partners, cohabitants, partners of a sentimental or sexual nature without cohabitation, and the father of a son or daughter in common. When a complaint is filed, the officer must first determine whether this qualifying relationship exists. If so, the case is officially recorded as domestic violence (Carrasco Navarro, 2021).

case increases the broader relevance of our findings: the effects of women mayors on citizens' willingness to report domestic violence is likely to extend to other democracies where local executives campaign on women's issues and engage directly with citizens in providing basic services.

Research Design

To estimate the effect of electing a woman mayor on domestic violence, we address two methodological challenges. First, women mayors are not randomly assigned. Municipalities that elect women may differ from those that do not in observed and unobserved ways. While adjusting for observable characteristics can reduce some bias, unobserved factors may still confound results. To address this, we employ a difference-in-differences (DiD) design, which identifies causal effects under the assumption that treated and control municipalities would follow parallel trends in the absence of treatment.

Because municipalities elect women mayors at different points in time, we use a staggered DiD and estimate event-study (dynamic) treatment effects ([Callaway and Sant'Anna, 2021](#)). This design aggregates effects over the length of treatment exposure, facilitating the interpretation of results. We focus on ten pre- and post-treatment periods, which allows us to evaluate parallel trends a decade before treatment and track how effects evolve over time. We collected electoral data from four municipal elections (2005–2020) and used candidates' self-reported gender to identify women mayors.⁶

⁶ In a staggered DiD design, once a municipality is treated, it remains treated. Thus, when a municipality elects a man after previously electing a woman, we drop those municipality years to maintain the staggered structure (though the municipality is retained in previous years). Municipalities that have continuously had a woman mayor since 2004 are excluded because they lack pretreatment observations (see Appendix B). As a robustness check, in Appendix C, we also retain municipalities that switch from a woman mayor back to a man mayor. As expected, this contaminates and attenuates the estimated effect, given the inclusion of men mayors.

Therefore, our design defines treatment as the first election of a woman mayor, compares treated municipalities with those that never elect a woman, and accounts for staggered timing. As an additional robustness test, we complement this analysis with a regression discontinuity design in close elections (Appendix D).

The second challenge concerns measurement. An observed increase in domestic violence can be interpreted in two ways. It may indicate that more acts of violence are occurring in a given municipality-year, or it may reflect greater willingness by survivors to report incidents. To distinguish between these possibilities, we leverage detailed administrative data from Chile, where domestic violence cases are classified into two categories: (1) cases reported to the police by a survivor or witness, for example, when a woman calls the police and asks for food, used as a code for domestic violence (Prieto, 2022); and (2) cases identified independently by the police, for example, during a national police round resulting in multiple detentions for domestic violence (Hansen, 2023). These two indicators allow us to assess whether an increase in recorded cases reflects greater reporting or a higher incidence of violence.

Police data provide a particularly useful benchmark or placebo test because, as discussed in the previous section, Chile's police force is autonomous from local governments. Consequently, even if mayors request that police focus more attention on certain crimes, the police are not obligated to comply. Moreover, because of protocols derived from the 2005 domestic violence law, cases are processed uniformly by the police across the country. As a supplementary check, we examine whether women mayors are associated with changes in common offenses using the same DiD framework as our main analysis. We also examine two measures of municipal security infrastructure (security cameras and booths), which are available only beginning in 2016, and therefore, we analyze them descriptively.

In summary, the structure of our dataset is as follows: the unit of analysis is the municipality-year. For each observation, we identify its treatment status (woman mayor or not) and the length of treatment (number of years with a woman mayor). The outcomes are domestic violence against women reported by citizens and domestic violence against women identified by the police (both

standardized). We also include relevant pretreatment covariates (e.g., local development indicators, population, and vote share) in the DiD design.

Before presenting the regression framework, it is useful to visualize the distribution of women mayors across the country. Using data from 2005 to 2020, Figure 1 shows municipalities that have had a woman mayor in red and those that have never had a woman mayor in blue. Women mayors are distributed across the country rather than concentrated in one region.

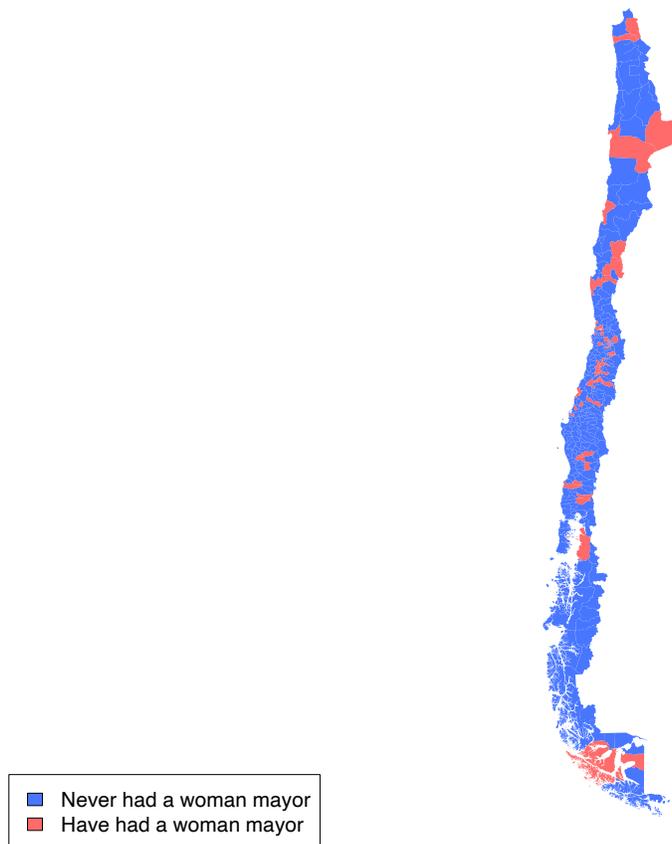


Figure 1: Map of Chile showing municipalities by mayoral gender history, 2005–2020. Red: municipalities that elected a woman mayor at least once; blue: municipalities that never elected a woman mayor.

To estimate the causal effect, we implement the event-study difference-in-differences model proposed by [Callaway and Sant’Anna \(2021\)](#), which we approximate for illustrative purposes with

the following regression specification. Let g denote the first year in which municipality i elected a woman mayor. The specification is:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \sum_{k=-10}^{10} \beta_k \cdot 1(k = t - g) + X_i \theta + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

where Y_{it} is the outcome of interest (e.g., violence against women in standardized units) for municipality i at year t ; α_i are municipality fixed effects that control for time-invariant differences across municipalities; and γ_t are year fixed effects that account for common shocks affecting all municipalities in a given period. k represents the time relative to when a municipality was first treated with a woman mayor. β_k captures the treatment effect at event time k , allowing for dynamic treatment effects. X_i corresponds to pretreatment municipal indicators: local development indices (2003), population (2002), and presidential vote share (1999 and 2005), and ε_{it} is the error term.⁷

Results

Main Effects

We implement the difference-in-differences estimator proposed by [Callaway and Sant’Anna \(2021\)](#) and present the results in an event-study format. This approach estimates treatment effects based on the duration of exposure, up to ten years after a municipality first elected a woman mayor. Some municipalities never elected a woman mayor, which allows us to construct a control group for comparison. This empirical strategy directly evaluates our core theoretical claim: if increased representation enhances institutional responsiveness to women’s concerns, then electing a woman mayor should alter citizens’ engagement with local institutions. Moreover, because our argument centers on reporting behavior rather than underlying crime incidence, we expect effects to emerge specifically in citizen-initiated reports and not necessarily in police-identified cases.

⁷As an additional robustness check, in Appendix E, we report [Sun and Abraham \(2021\)](#) event-study estimates, which closely mirror our main dynamic results.

Figure 2 presents the main results of electing a woman mayor on domestic violence rates against women: (a) cases reported by citizens and (b) cases identified by the police. The grey markers represent the pre-treatment period. The absence of statistically significant effects for either outcome during this period supports the parallel trends assumption (i.e., treated and control municipalities followed similar trajectories prior to treatment). In other words, the pre-treatment coefficients (event times < 0) are statistically indistinguishable from zero and show no systematic pattern before the election of a woman mayor.⁸ The black markers represent the post-treatment period, reflecting the estimated effects of electing a woman mayor over time.

We also report the overall post-treatment effect with its 95% confidence interval inside a box. This overall average treatment effect is our main piece of evidence, as it provides a stable and interpretable summary of the impact. The dynamic effects illustrate how the impact of electing a woman mayor evolves across years of exposure, allowing us to assess not only whether representation matters, but whether its influence builds gradually, stabilizes, or fades, as our theory of institutional responsiveness would suggest.

⁸In Appendix F, we provide additional diagnostics: (i) a global joint test that all pre-treatment event-time coefficients equal zero for each main outcome and (ii) pre-treatment covariate balance comparisons between treated and never-treated municipalities.

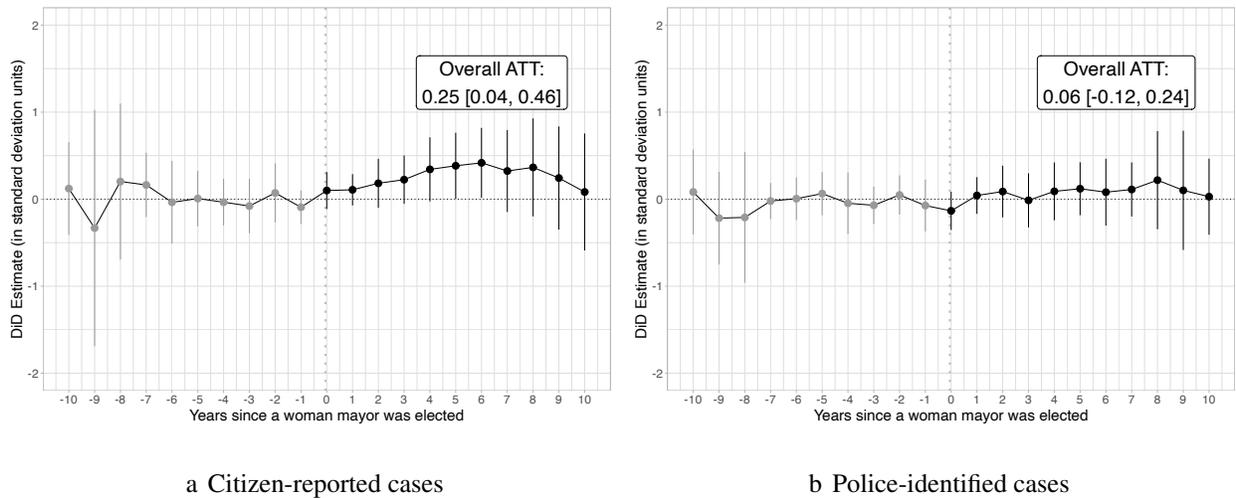


Figure 2: Average effect of having a woman mayor on violence against women by length of exposure. A length of exposure of -1 refers to the year before the first exposure, 0 to the first exposure, and 1 to the second exposure. The overall treatment effect and 95% confidence intervals are reported. $N = 5,042$ municipality-year observations.

When examining domestic violence reported by citizens (Figure 2a), the average of the post-treatment coefficients indicates that a woman mayor has a positive effect on reports. On average, women mayors increase the number of domestic violence reports by 0.25 standard deviation units (95% CI: [0.04, 0.46]). This represents an increase of about 51 reports per 100,000 people in a given municipality-year. Consistent with our argument that women’s leadership enhances survivors’ willingness to engage with local institutions, this effect appears in citizen-initiated reporting behavior rather than in administrative detection.

When disaggregating by length of exposure, Figure 2a shows a statistically significant effect five years after the first election (95% CI: [0.00, 0.76]). This delayed peak is consistent with a representation-based mechanism that operates through policy prioritization, signaling, and constituency mobilization, processes that may require time to generate institutional trust and awareness. The impact diminishes over time, vanishing after ten years when the point estimate approaches zero (95% CI: [-0.59, 0.76]). This pattern aligns with our expectation that gains in reporting may erode if reforms are not continuously reinforced or embedded in bigger structural

change. Detailed results are provided in Appendix G.⁹

For domestic violence cases identified by the police (Figure 2b), the average of the post-treatment coefficients shows no evidence that women mayors affect this outcome. The results indicate a small, non-significant increase of 0.06 standard deviation units. When disaggregated by exposure length, Figure 2b shows no instance in which the election of a woman mayor has a significant effect. The absence of effects on police-identified cases strengthens our interpretation: women’s representation appears to alter citizens’ engagement with institutions rather than the underlying incidence of violence itself. This distinction is central to our conceptual framework, which emphasizes institutional accessibility and responsiveness as the mechanism linking gender representation to reporting outcomes.

To further validate our findings, we also implement a regression discontinuity design (RDD) in closely contested elections (Appendix D). The conclusions align with those from the DiD analysis: we observe a significant increase in citizen-reported cases but no significant effect on police-identified cases. The convergence of results across identification strategies reinforces the coherence of our representation-based explanation and supports the broader claim that women’s executive leadership shapes how institutions are perceived and used by survivors.

Persistence of Effects

As shown in Figure 2, the positive effects of women mayors on reporting are not permanent. Reports of domestic violence rise about five years after a woman is elected, but the impact disappears after roughly a decade. This temporal pattern is substantively important for our broader argument. If women’s substantive representation and constituency effects enhance institutional

⁹In Chile, mayoral terms last four years. Effects observed beyond this period usually reflect reelection, which accounts for most cases of municipalities with more than four consecutive years of women’s leadership. Term limits were first applied in the 2021 elections, so during most of our study period, reelection was possible and common. In 2016, 83.8% of incumbents ran for reelection, of whom 72.7% were successful (Cádiz, 2016).

responsiveness, then we should expect effects to build gradually as policies are implemented and trust is cultivated. At the same time, if these changes are not embedded in deeper structural transformations, their influence may weaken over time. Why, then, do these effects diminish?

Two plausible explanations stand out. First, municipalities led by men may have caught up following a highly salient national discussion on domestic violence in 2010, which culminated in Congress passing a femicide law (Vásquez Mejías, 2015). If this is the case, the initial responsiveness associated with women's leadership may have diffused more broadly across municipalities, reducing differences over time. Second, policies that facilitate reporting may fail to address the deeper structural dynamics of violence against women, and thus have only limited durability (Franceschet, 2010). Because gender-based violence is rooted in longstanding cultural and religious norms (Merry, 2009), policy interventions may generate medium-term improvements but lose force unless reinforced by deeper structural or cultural transformations. The persistence of effects, therefore, depends on whether substantive and constituency representation is translated into more enduring institutional and normative change.

To assess these explanations, we divide the sample based on the first year of having a woman mayor (i.e., 2009, 2013, and 2017), which allows us to examine whether patterns differ across cohorts (supporting the first expectation of contextual catch-up) or remain similar across cohorts (supporting the second expectation rooted in structural limits). Importantly, the dynamic estimates at later years should be interpreted with caution because sample sizes are smaller in this part of the analysis. As a result, confidence intervals widen, and estimates become less precise. Thus, results based on the length of exposure for subgroups are useful for examining trajectories but should be interpreted in light of reduced statistical power.

Figure 3 shows consistent patterns across the subgroups. First, effects are not immediate for any of the three groups, reinforcing our earlier finding that representation operates through gradual processes rather than instant change. Second, the increases appear after a few years for the groups with available data (those first treated in 2009 and 2013), consistent with the idea that institutional signaling, policy prioritization, and constituency mobilization require time to translate into report-

ing behavior. As mentioned above, the wider confidence level reflects the increase in uncertainty resulting from smaller sample sizes when the data are partitioned into multiple groups. Finally, effects disappear for the group first treated in 2009 and begin to decline in the last period for the group first treated in 2013.

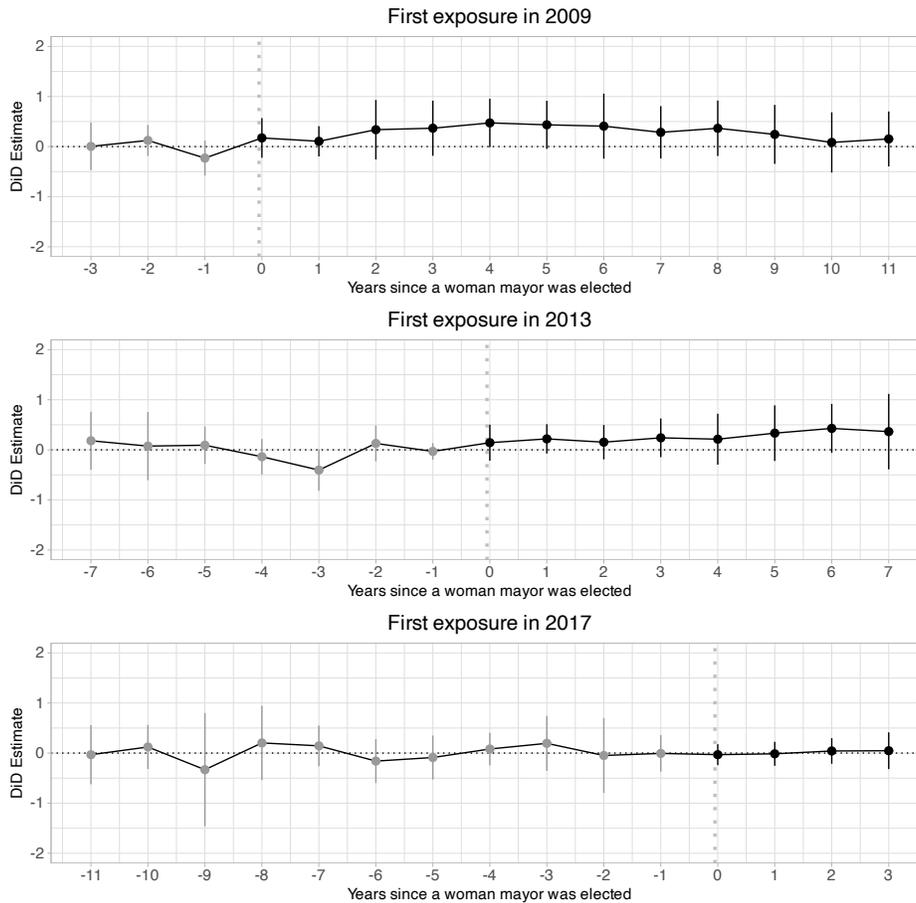


Figure 3: Average effect of having a woman mayor on violence against women by length of exposure and by group (first exposure in 2009, 2013, and 2017). A length of exposure of -1 refers to the period before the first exposure, 0 to the first exposure, and 1 to the second exposure. $N = 4,361; 4,333; \text{ and } 4,240$ municipality-year observations, respectively.

The similarity across cohorts suggests that the length of exposure, rather than specific contextual events, explains the observed pattern: the effects take a few years to appear, emerge at the beginning of the second term of a woman mayor, and fade roughly ten years after the first exposure. In theoretical terms, this pattern aligns more closely with the structural explanation. It suggests

that women's substantive representation can enhance institutional responsiveness in the medium term, but that without broader transformation of gendered norms and institutional practices, those gains are difficult to sustain. The fading of effects, therefore, reflects the limits of representation alone in reshaping deeply embedded social dynamics.

An alternative explanation is antifeminist backlash. Chile has witnessed visible mobilization around gender issues in recent years, including the politicization of feminist demands during the 2019 social uprising and pushback from conservative actors (Miranda Leibe, 2023), which is consistent with broader patterns in which crises can undermine progress toward gender equality (Forester and O'Brien, 2020). Such dynamics may reinforce or accelerate the erosion of earlier gains. However, given that this phenomenon is more recent, our data do not allow us to test the effect of antifeminist backlash.¹⁰

In short, our findings indicate that the positive effects of women mayors on reporting tend to fade with time in office. Interpreted through our broader framework, this suggests that women's representation can improve institutional accessibility and engagement in the medium term, but that sustaining these gains likely requires deeper and more durable structural change. While contextual factors may contribute to this decline, the similarity across exposure cohorts suggests that the challenge lies not only in specific events or laws but also in sustaining long-term changes in gendered norms and reporting behavior. Future research should examine whether and how the long-term effects of women's leadership can be consolidated.

¹⁰Another possible explanation for the decrease in reports is that incidents of domestic violence are actually declining, making victims less likely to report. However, since we do not observe any change in police-identified cases, this explanation lacks empirical support.

Mechanisms

Security Plans

A possible mechanism linking the election of women mayors to domestic violence reporting is substantive representation, namely, the prioritization of women’s issues and policies. Our broader theoretical argument posits that descriptive representation enhances institutional responsiveness by shaping policy priorities (e.g., substantive representation) and signaling to constituents that their concerns are recognized. If this mechanism is at work, we should observe evidence that women mayors more explicitly incorporate gender-based violence into official policy documents. Such prioritization constitutes one observable channel through which representation may translate into greater institutional accessibility and, ultimately, higher reporting.

To analyze this, we collected 110 security plans from 95 Chilean municipalities spanning 2011 to 2024. Security plans are official documents summarizing each municipality’s main goals and strategies regarding public security. Appendix H details the processing of these plans, including the list of municipality-years included and the variations of keywords analyzed. At both stages, we counted the frequency of the following keywords: *woman/women*, *gender*, *domestic violence*, *gender violence*, and *femicide/s*. The final dataset includes each municipality’s name, the year of the plan, the number of pages, a count of keyword occurrences, and the gender of the mayor for that year.

Our main outcome for this analysis is the total number of relevant keywords mentioned in each plan. As a robustness check, we divided the total number of mentions by the number of pages, creating a weighted outcome. To evaluate whether having a woman mayor influences the frequency of these mentions, we estimate the following linear regression model with province fixed effects:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{WomenMayor}_i + \mathbf{X}_i' \beta_2 + \gamma_r + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

where Y_i is the outcome for unit i (total mentions or mentions per page), $WomenMayor_i$ is a binary indicator for whether the mayor is a woman, \mathbf{X}_i is a matrix of pretreatment covariates (local development indicators, population, and vote share), γ_j are province fixed effects, and ε_i is the error term. The coefficient of interest is β_1 .

Table 1: Regression results for security plans

	Keywords	Keywords per page
Women mayor	33.41* (14.33)	0.65* (0.29)
Controls	Yes	Yes
Province Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Observations	110	110

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$.

The results indicate that security plans under women mayors contain, on average, 33 more references to gender-related issues, or 0.65 additional mentions per page, compared to plans under male mayors. Substantively, this pattern is consistent with our representation-based account: women mayors are more likely to prioritize gender-based violence within formal policy agendas. By embedding these issues in official security planning, women leaders may signal institutional commitment, mobilize supportive constituencies, and create clearer pathways for engagement. In this way, substantive representation provides a plausible mechanism linking to increased reporting.

Community Organizations

To further evaluate our argument that combines substantive and constituency representation, we analyze the effect of electing a woman mayor on spending directed toward community organizations. In our broader framework, descriptive representation enhances institutional responsiveness not only through formal policy prioritization but also through the activation and strengthening of intermediary actors that connect citizens to the state. Community organizations are particularly important in this regard, as they can function as trusted bridges between survivors and formal institu-

tions. If women mayors increase reporting by making institutions more accessible and responsive, one pathway should operate through greater investment in these community-based networks.

From a substantive representation perspective, women mayors are expected to prioritize resources that directly address women's needs, including expanding support for organizations that provide services or alternative avenues for survivors of domestic violence. From a constituency representation perspective, women mayors are incentivized to respond to women voters and feminist networks, which often pressure local governments to fund grassroots organizations that support survivors and amplify women's voices. These organizations may lower informational, social, or psychological barriers to reporting. For instance, women mayors might prioritize funding for mothers' groups or neighborhood associations, which can function as alternative reporting mechanisms or referral channels outside traditional police structures.

Figure 4 presents evidence for this mechanism, using municipal spending on community organizations and the number of community organizations as outcome variables.¹¹

¹¹While there are different types of community organizations in Chile, a relevant share of them work directly on gender-related issues, such as women's associations and grassroots groups working to end violence against women. Other organizations, although not centered exclusively on gender issues, can also play an important role in facilitating reporting and support for survivors, such as neighborhood associations and parents' associations. See [Irrázaval and Streeter \(2020\)](#) for an overview of community organizations in Chile.

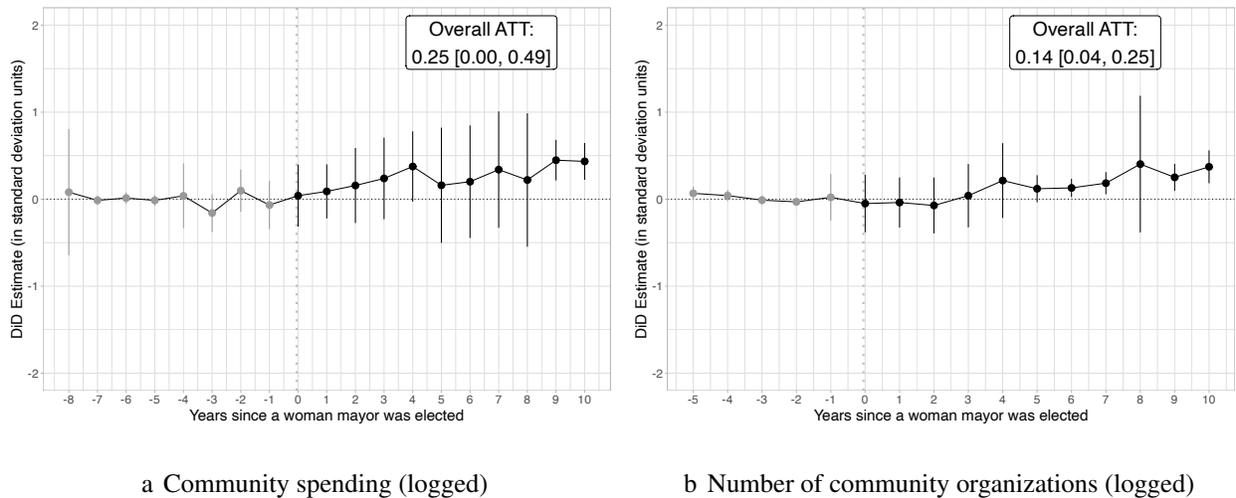


Figure 4: Average effect of having a woman mayor on community organizations. Panel (a) shows spending on community organizations; panel (b) shows the number of community organizations. A length of exposure of -1 refers to the period before the first exposure, 0 to the first exposure, and 1 to the second exposure. The overall treatment effect and 95% confidence intervals are reported. N = 5,042 municipality-year observations.

The results show a positive and significant effect of electing women mayors on both outcomes, indicating that women’s leadership increases community spending and the number of community organizations. The findings suggest that women mayors progressively invest more in community organizations, and that after a few years, these investments translate into a greater number of organizations. This pattern makes sense, as creating and consolidating organizations takes time. Interestingly, these effects persist over time, providing additional evidence that the fading effects on domestic violence reporting are driven by the persistence of social norms and the lack of deeper cultural change.

Alternative Explanations: Security Outcomes

An alternative explanation for substantive and constituency representation is that women mayors are better at providing and enhancing security, leading to a general increase in reports of other offenses that affect citizens’ quality of life. Women mayors might improve reporting avenues

broadly, resulting in more complaints about different types of crimes. To test this possibility, we examine two common offenses in Chile that are typically reported by citizens: public intoxication and disturbing the peace. If women mayors enhance communication between citizens and the government, we would expect to see increases in reports of these offenses.

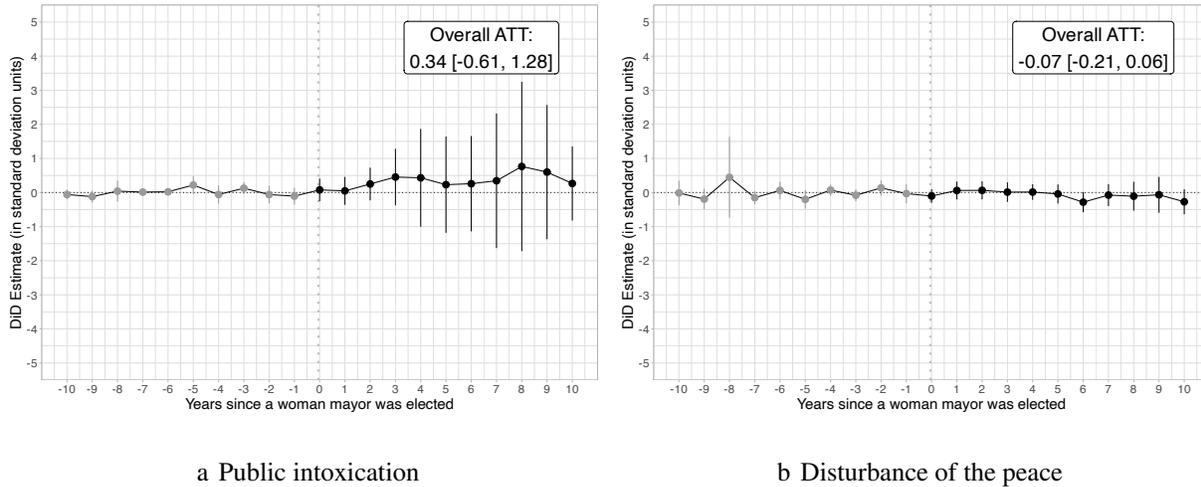


Figure 5: Average effect of having a woman mayor on citizen-reported alternative offenses. A length of exposure of -1 refers to the period before the first exposure, 0 to the first exposure, and 1 to the second exposure. The overall treatment effect and 95% confidence intervals are reported. $N = 5,042$ municipality-year observations.

Figure 5 presents the results. We do not find evidence that women mayors produce either overall or dynamic effects on these offenses. The absence of effects on alternative citizen-reported crimes strengthens our representation-based interpretation. Rather than reflecting a general improvement in reporting systems, the effects appear specific to violence that disproportionately affects women. This specificity is consistent with our theoretical claim that women’s representation operates through substantive prioritization and constituency engagement around gendered issues, not through across-the-board administrative improvements.

We also investigate whether women mayors enhance the security performance of municipalities, which could have two possible implications. First, improved security might explain changes in reporting. Second, and more importantly, it could influence our primary outcome: police-identified

cases. In other words, if women mayors improve security measures, our benchmark would no longer serve as a baseline but instead become another outcome of electing women mayors. To examine this possibility, we test the impact of electing a woman mayor on two security-related outcomes: the number of security cameras and the number of security booths. These variables are available starting in 2016, which means we lack information on pre-treatment trends and can only observe one mayoral term. Therefore, we cannot implement our main DiD design. Consequently, we use the same province fixed-effects specification employed for the analysis of security plans, but with different outcome variables. The outcomes are logged and standardized to facilitate interpretation and comparability. We treat this analysis as descriptive; even after conditioning on baseline political and socioeconomic covariates and including province fixed effects, the estimates may still be subject to omitted-variable bias.

Table 2: Regression results for security outcomes

	No. of security cameras	No. of security booths
Women mayor	-0.02 (0.10)	-0.02 (0.13)
Controls	Yes	Yes
Province Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,725	1,725

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$.

Table 2 shows no association between electing a woman mayor and the number of security cameras or booths. Given the limited time coverage of these measures, we interpret this result as suggestive and consistent with the view that our main findings are not driven by broad investments in security infrastructure. This further reinforces our interpretation that police-identified cases remain a valid benchmark, since women mayors do not appear to influence policing capacity or infrastructure.

Conclusion

Prior research has shown that women in office often behave differently from men, especially in national legislatures, but there is less evidence on whether and how these differences manifest in local governance. This gap is notable given that local governments play a crucial role in service delivery, particularly in areas related to safety, welfare, and social support. Among these, domestic violence remains as one of the most socially harmful problems, affecting millions of women worldwide. Importantly, although domestic violence typically occurs in private settings, it has profound social consequences, shaping victims' ability to engage in public life. In this context, this paper seeks to provide a better understanding of how gender dynamics influence local responses to domestic violence.

Using administrative data from Chile, this study addresses this gap by examining whether electing women mayors affects reports of domestic violence against women. While most prior work has focused on broad rates of violence against women, we distinguish between citizen-initiated and police identified cases, which allows us to separate reporting behavior from crime incidence. Applying a difference-in-differences design, we find that women mayors positively influence domestic violence reporting, with significant increases occurring around the fourth and fifth years in office. Importantly, we do not find evidence that women mayors affect cases identified by the police. These findings suggest that survivors are more willing to report incidents under women's leadership, with no evidence that actual crime rates change.

Electing a woman mayor may influence domestic violence reports through different mechanisms, but we focus on the role of substantive representation and the constituency theory. Women leaders often prioritize public policies addressing women's issues, while their constituencies – women voters and feminist networks – sustain, amplify, and monitor these efforts. These policies can include public security measures such as domestic violence hotlines, safehouses, and educational programming (e.g., media campaigns or community-wide initiatives). In the context of domestic violence, we find evidence that women mayors prioritize women's issues in their security

plans and direct more spending to community organizations (e.g., their constituencies), creating accessible resources and avenues for reporting.

We also find that these effects are not immediate, tend to peak after several years, and then diminish over time. This temporal pattern suggests that reforms lose strength unless they are accompanied by deeper structural or cultural transformations. Because gender-based violence is rooted in slow-moving cultural and social norms, interventions that increase reporting may only have medium-range effects when not sustained by broader institutional or cultural change. Moreover, antifeminist backlash and political resistance may further erode the durability of reforms, as recent mobilizations in Chile have shown.

The core implication of our findings concerns representation and institutional responsiveness. If women's presence in executive offices increases reporting of gender-based violence, this suggests that political representation can shape whether victims feel able and safe to engage with public institutions. From this perspective, the normatively desirable condition is one in which political institutions are broadly accessible, trusted, and responsive to those most affected by domestic violence. Our findings, therefore, speak to the value of gender parity and inclusive representation rather than advocating for exclusive female leadership. In this sense, improved reporting is not simply an outcome of descriptive representation, but a signal of enhanced institutional accessibility and more accurate measurement of violence.

Future research should examine whether women's leadership influences the types of cases reported by using detailed incident-level data. Such data would allow scholars to assess whether women mayors primarily uncover less severe but previously hidden forms of abuse or also affect the reporting of more severe cases. This evidence would offer a clearer understanding of how women's leadership shapes reporting behavior and interacts with the underlying dynamics of domestic violence. Further comparative work is also needed to explore why effects appear to diminish over time and how they might be sustained through institutional or cultural entrenchment. Incorporating the impact of women mayors on violence against women will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of both the causes and the consequences of women's political

representation.

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