

**WHAT WE HEARD:**

**SURVEY OF  
CARIBBEAN WOMEN'S  
ORGANISATIONS ON  
THEIR ENGAGEMENT  
WITH PARLIAMENTS**





ParlAmericas is the institution that advances parliamentary diplomacy in the inter-American system. Convening the national parliaments of the Americas and the Caribbean, ParlAmericas promotes cooperative political dialogue, facilitates the exchange of good legislative practices, and produces tailored resources to support parliamentarians in their work. Core pillars of ParlAmericas' work involve advancing civil society participation in legislative processes, supporting parliamentary stakeholders in mainstreaming a gender equality perspective in their work, and advancing women's political empowerment.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civil society organisations and parliaments play vital and interdependent roles in advancing gender equality. However, the nature of the engagement between these two groups remains insufficiently explored. A better understanding of the scope of participation and of the views of women's organisations in relation to parliamentary processes can illuminate new entry points for coordinated action on gender equality goals in particular.

This report presents the findings of a survey about engagement with parliaments that was undertaken by ParlAmericas in 2022 and completed by 63 women's organisations across 12 Caribbean countries. The survey respondents provided valuable insights on the current status of parliamentary engagement efforts by women's organisations in the region, their policy objectives, and challenges faced.

The findings underscore that women's organisations working on diverse gender equality issues in the Caribbean see value in advancing their policy objectives through engagement with their national parliament. The surveyed organisations identified numerous barriers to effective parliamentary engagement, however, ranging from internal capacity constraints to low awareness or availability of information about legislative processes and/or institutional mechanisms for citizen participation in legislative work, among others. When solicited on strategies to navigate these barriers, respondents highlighted the importance of fostering a greater sense of collaboration, rather than competition, both between civil society organisations and parliament, and among civil society groups themselves of different sizes, mandates, and capacities.

Responses indicate that building open communication pathways with trusted allies is likely to increase the engagement of women's organisations in parliamentary processes. Areas for capacity building proposed by the survey respondents included development of strategic, evidence-based messaging; effective lobbying strategies; and getting issues on the legislative agenda. Addressing these types of knowledge and capacity gaps – in tandem with strengthening the mechanisms offered by parliaments in the region – is expected to increase the willingness, enthusiasm, and quality of contributions to the legislative agenda by women's organisations.

These survey findings and related consultations will inform the development of ParlAmericas' trainings and learning exchanges for both civil society stakeholders and parliamentarians, with the aim of further strengthening their collaborations. It is furthermore hoped that the findings will be beneficial to practitioners working in various fields to realise gender equality through social and legal change.



## BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

### Survey Purpose

In June/July 2022, ParlAmericas carried out a consultation with women's organisations operating in the Caribbean through the use of a web-based survey. Its purpose was to collect regionally-specific data that fills knowledge gaps on civil society-parliament interactions as they relate to gender equality advocacy.

The main objectives were:

- 1) To better understand the current level of engagement that Caribbean women's organisations have with parliamentarians and parliamentary processes to advance their gender equality-related goals, and
- 2) To inform the design of future ParlAmericas workshops and trainings that are responsive to the needs and interests of women and marginalised populations seeking more effective parliamentary engagement strategies.



## SURVEY METHODOLOGY

### Sample Design and Distribution

The survey was administered through an open web-based survey that was also accessible in a mobile format (see Appendix A for a copy of the full questionnaire).

ParlAmericas began collecting responses on June 28, 2022, and the survey remained open until July 10, 2022.

Eligible survey participants were individuals associated with one or more women's organisations in the Caribbean region, whether as a member, employee, or volunteer. For the purpose of this study, ParlAmericas considered women's organisations to be non-governmental, civil society organisations that are women-led and/or work from a feminist lens primarily on gender equality issues. The data from respondents who did not fit this criteria were excluded from the data analysis.

In order to gather information from a broad range of respondents aligning with this criteria, ParlAmericas first conducted research to map key women's organisations advancing gender equality in the Caribbean region. Using this information, direct communication was made with organisations through email to invite their participation in the research. Additionally, ParlAmericas relied heavily on its existing networks and contacts in the region – including gender bureaus and regional organisations – for relevant stakeholder identification and to support the survey's dissemination. Promotion of the survey was done through direct communication, as well as through social media channels, including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Responses were therefore also received and welcomed from organisations that matched eligibility criteria but were not identified in our initial mapping.

Respondents were informed that the data collected would not be publicly tied to them in any way, and they were given the option to remain anonymous. This was done to create an online environment rooted in confidential participation, whereby participants would feel more comfortable to disclose potentially sensitive professional and personal experiences or opinions.

## Survey Limitations

ParlAmericas recognises that the respondents do not necessarily form a complete or representative sample of women's organisations. The databases compiled of individuals or organisations advancing gender equality in the region was robust but not exhaustive. The web-based administration of this survey also means that women's organisations operating in the Caribbean region with limited exposure or use of online channels will be underrepresented in our data collection efforts. Similarly, the decision of women's organisations to participate in our survey may reflect a sample of stakeholders with an already vested interest in parliamentary engagement. We recognize the diversity that exists within gender equality movements, and these findings therefore provide a snapshot of views, experiences, challenges, and opportunities that exist on the ground, from the perspective of some women's organisations. The trends that emerge in this data can serve as entry points to facilitate further dialogue about strengthening the parliamentary engagement practices of Caribbean women's organisations.

To request more information about ParlAmericas' work on this topic, please visit [www.parlamericas.org](http://www.parlamericas.org) or contact [info@parlamericas.org](mailto:info@parlamericas.org).



## SURVEY RESULTS

### Respondent Profiles



The respondents held a variety of positions at their identified organisations, such as:

**President** | **Founder** | **CEO** | **Chair** | **Member** | **Executive Director** | **Treasurer** | **Coordinator**

## Geographical Reach



The survey was completed by **74 individuals** who met the participant eligibility criteria; they were affiliated with **63 unique women's organisations** in **12 countries**: Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.

▶ In their survey responses, a number of participants commented on the interconnectedness of the region's women's organisations, in that like-minded individuals and groups often work together across countries and territories to build Caribbean-wide coalitions. While their mobilisation efforts may be concentrated on a specific jurisdiction, some organisations indicated that they remain cognisant of the regional and international impact of their work.

These interconnections are also evidenced by the presence of country-specific chapter organisations that are part of larger, umbrella organisations within the region, as well as globally. Mention was similarly made of the influence of regional and international bodies, such as the ACJA (Atlantic Climate Justice Alliance) and the ILGA (International Lesbian and Gay Association).

*“Connections' are everything in most of our small island states, and many are afraid to sever them by simply advocating for an issue they believe in.”*

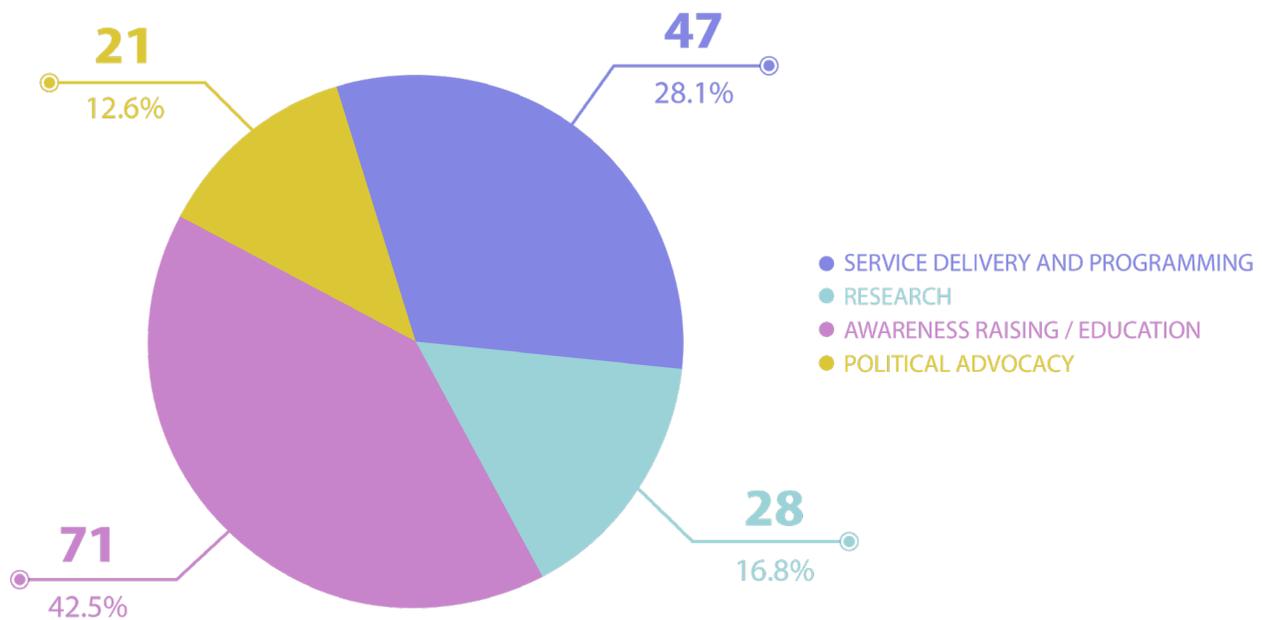
- Survey respondent

Number of Respondents by Country			
5	Antigua and Barbuda	9	Jamaica
8	The Bahamas	4	Saint Lucia
8	Barbados	4	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
8	Belize	3	Saint Kitts
2	Dominica	4	Suriname
5	Guyana	22	Trinidad and Tobago

## Organisational Focus

With respect to the types of core activities carried out by the organisation they are affiliated with,<sup>1</sup> nearly every respondent (71 of 74 / 96%) selected “awareness raising and education” (Figure 1). In contrast, only 21 respondents (28%) identified political advocacy as part of their organisation’s main activities.

Figure 1. Main Activities of Organisation

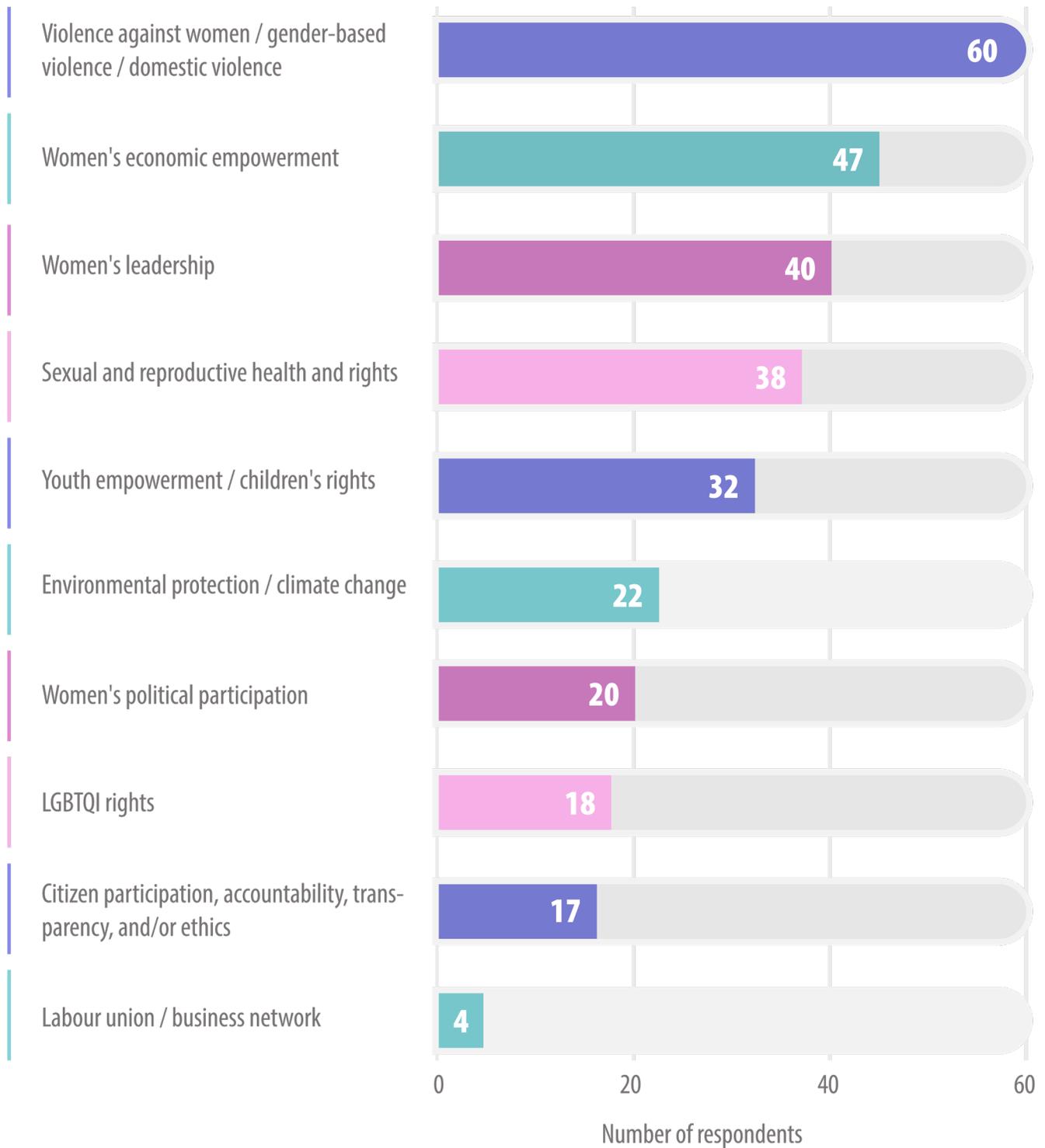


In terms of the organisations’ issues of focus, the responses were wide-ranging (Figure 2, following page). However, more than 80% of respondents identified the subject of violence against women / gender-based violence / domestic violence as central to their work.

▶ The data suggests that in the Caribbean, even when organisations have multiple areas of thematic focus, their work is often intrinsically linked to the threat of gender-based violence. The focus on the problem of violence is referenced by respondents in other parts of the survey as well.

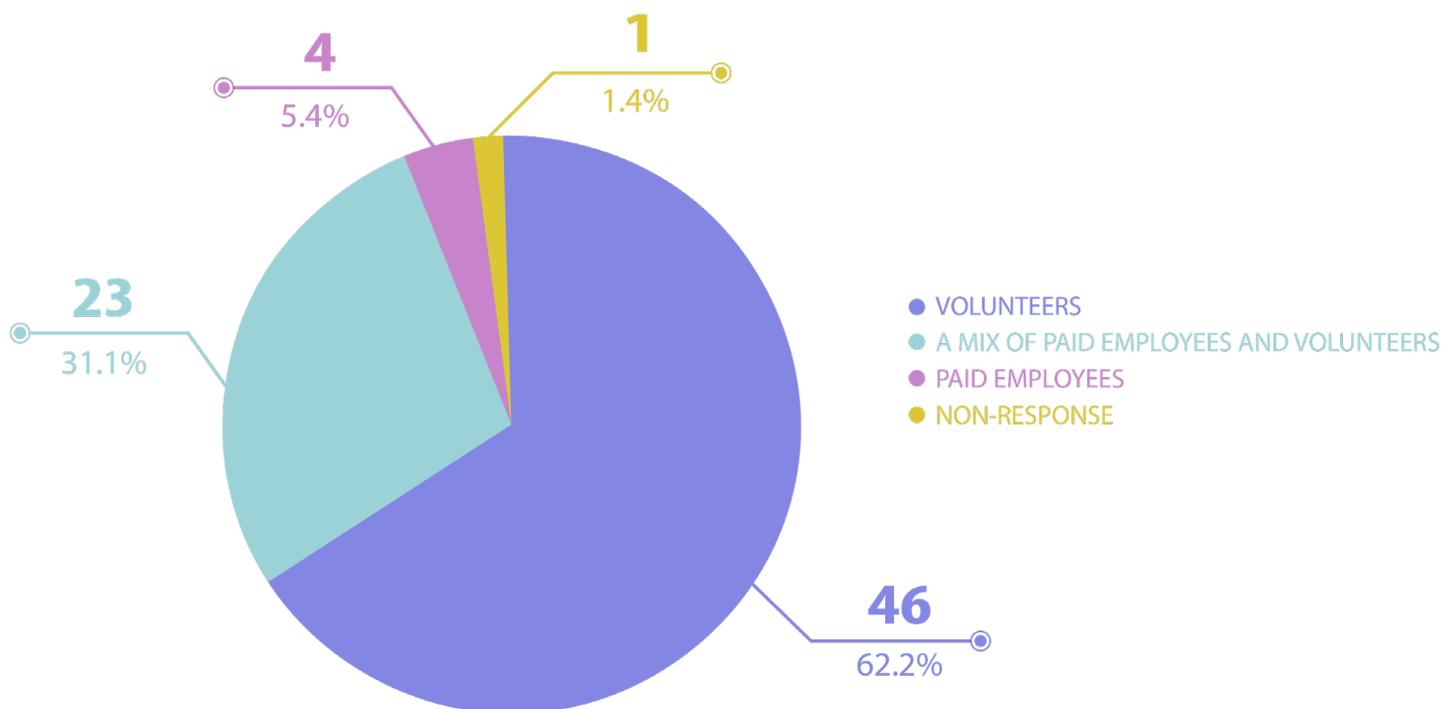
<sup>1</sup> Knowing that many individuals may actively contribute to multiple women’s organisations in the region, ParlAmericas requested that respondents complete the survey with only one organisation in mind as reference.

Figure 2. Issues of Focus



As seen below (Figure 3), the majority of respondents (93.5%) indicated that their organisation's activities were run primarily by either volunteers (62.2%) or a mix of paid employees and volunteers (31.1%).

Figure 3. Employment Structure



▶ The predominance of responses from volunteer-run women's organisations speaks to the important role of unpaid organising in the landscape of Caribbean movements for gender equality. It also recalls the resourcing constraints faced by women's organisations around the world, including a lack of financial and human capital, as well as the overall capacity of an organisation managed by individuals with paid employment elsewhere and/or care responsibilities.

Improving the quantity and quality of contributions by women's organisations to legislative processes therefore necessitates the encouragement of parliaments to recognize this organisational leadership and adapt engagement strategies accordingly. For example, outreach to obtain inputs and expertise on issues on the parliamentary agenda cannot focus solely on paid employees of organisations, but rather could be suitable to other professionals who contribute in a volunteer capacity.

Parliamentary participation mechanisms can benefit from a greater diversity of voices by accounting for flexibility and accommodation needs in their design. Such inclusion strategies can help to enable meaningful participation by organisations with differing sizes and employment, membership, and governance structures.

## Parliamentary Engagement

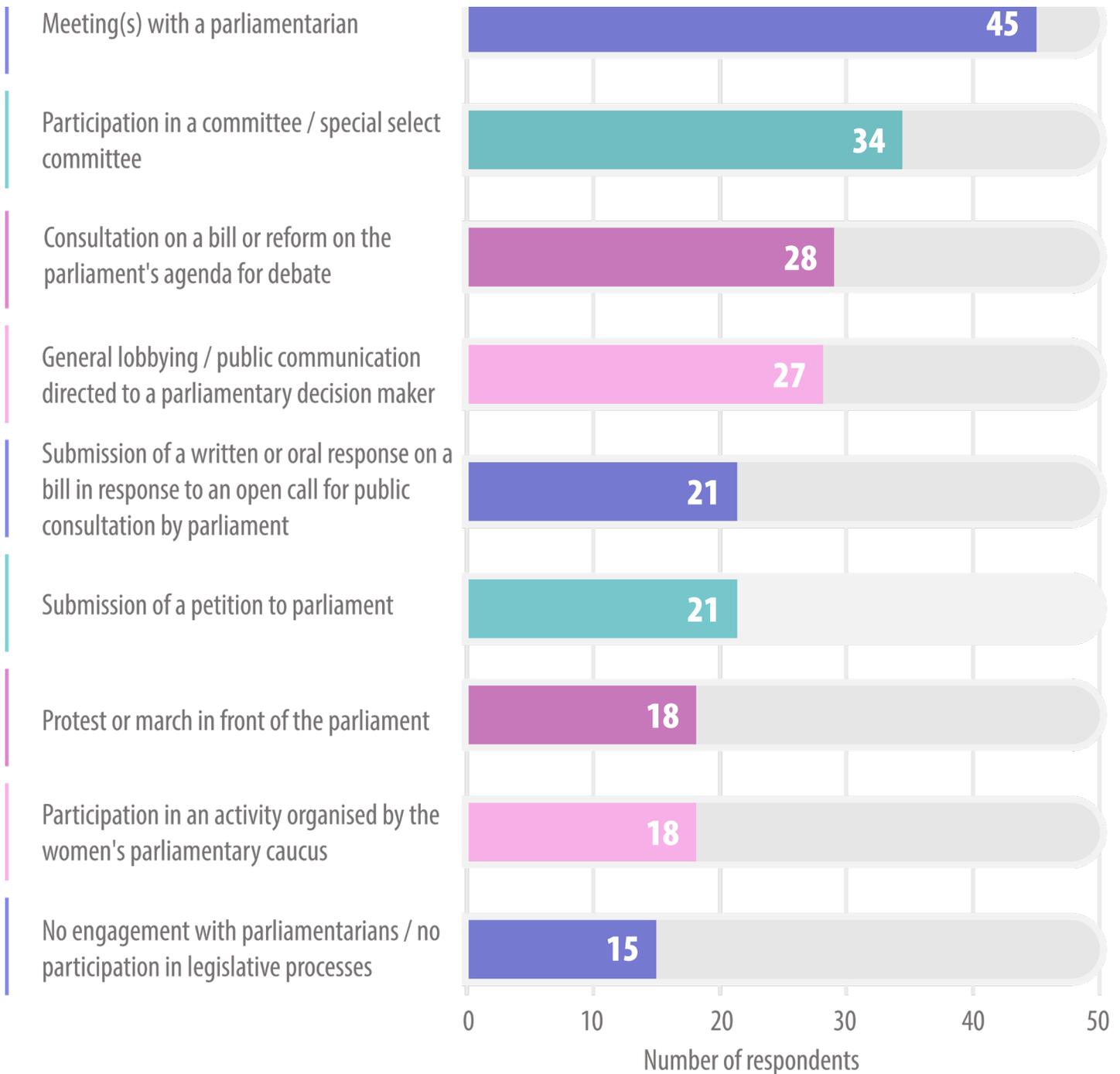
In order to gain a better understanding of respondents' prior parliamentary engagement experiences, the survey invited individuals to share:

- 1) Their awareness of formal channels for public participation with parliament, and
- 2) Their organisation's history of parliamentary engagement.

When asked to list any formal channels for public participation with parliament they were aware of, 56.8% of respondents (42) said 'none.' For the 43.2% (32) that were aware of channels of participation, some of the examples mentioned included town hall meetings, letter-writing, consultation on bills, liaising with policy makers, and social media and news media (such as the radio or television).

The survey then provided a list of engagement practices and asked respondents to identify any and all practices that their specific organisations had undertaken in the past. When provided with specific examples of parliamentary engagement, 82% of individuals (61) responded that their organisation had engaged with parliament in the past through one or more of the listed channels (Figure 4, following page). 14.9% of respondents (11) did not cite any past experiences of parliamentary engagement and noted they were unaware of any formal channels. 41.9% of respondents (31) were able to identify past instances of parliamentary engagement, despite their noted lack of awareness about formal channels in the previous question.

Figure 4. Past Parliamentary Engagement Practices



▶ The survey responses suggest that it would be valuable to promote further dialogue and a shared understanding among women's organisations regarding what type of actions constitute parliamentary engagement opportunities. It may also indicate a potential communication gap in how existing channels are being promoted for public use. As one respondent noted, the existence of these channels is one thing; awareness of and engagement with them is another.

## Key Issues

The survey results show that, for those organisations with past parliamentary engagement, the matters for advocacy to parliament in the past have been wide-ranging. The following 3 areas of advocacy were identified most frequently:

- 1) Supporting survivors/victims of domestic violence and gender-based violence (27 mentions)
- 2) Child protection, including the topic of child marriage (13 mentions)
- 3) Rights and freedoms of sexual minorities (10 mentions)

Other areas of advocacy mentioned were sexual and reproductive health and abortion rights, national gender policy reviews, employment and entrepreneurship, sexual harassment in the workplace, religious rights and freedoms, legal justice, disability advocacy, sustainable development, and youth development and empowerment.

*“The issues we work on have domino effects and impact every aspect of the country's development.”* - Survey respondent

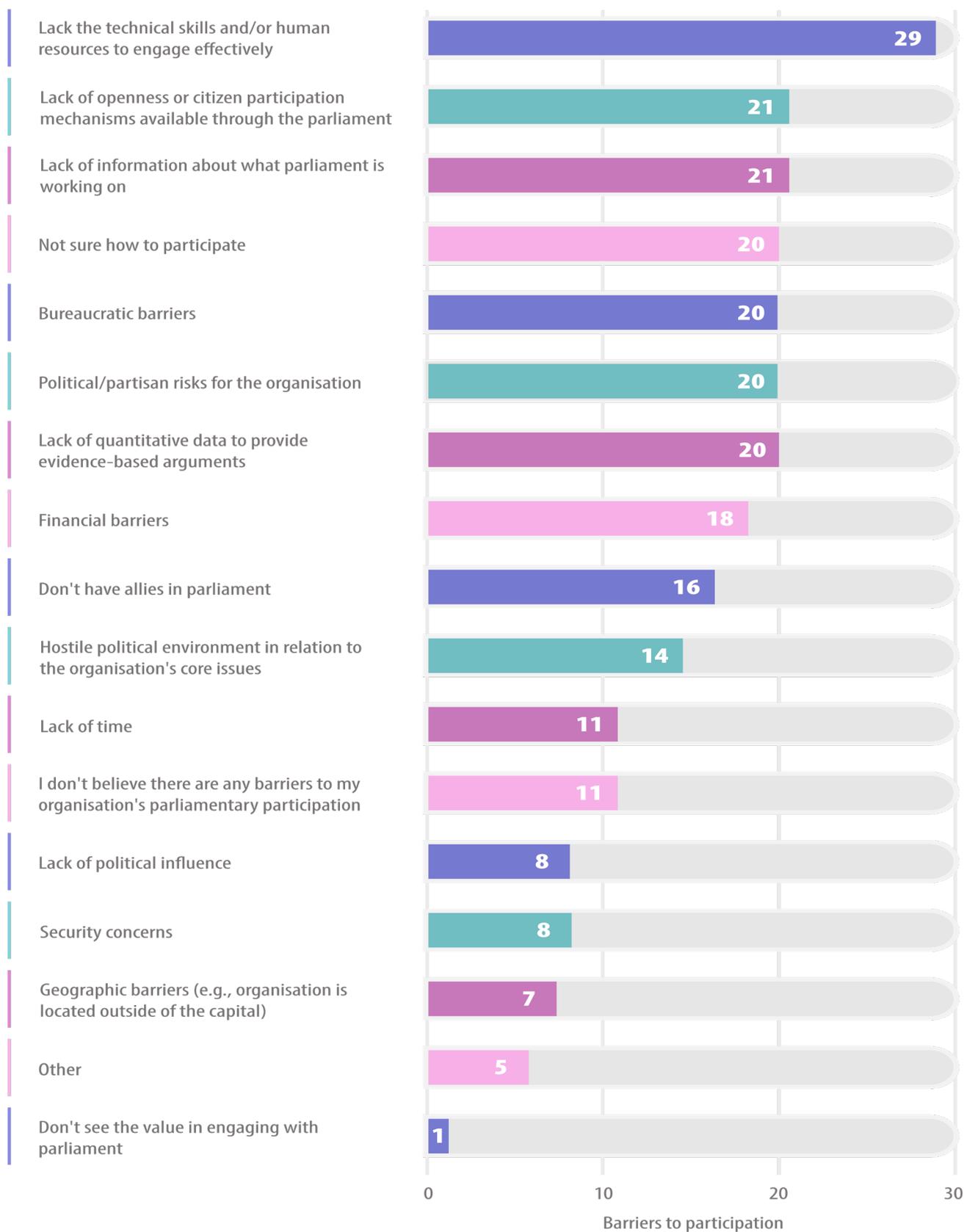
*“[F]or decades we have been saying ‘1 in 3 women experience violence.’ This constant statistic shows that the needle is not moving, and doing internal work with all organizations is critical as the world moves into 2023 and beyond.”*

- Survey respondent

## Barriers to Participation

With their particular organisation in mind, respondents were asked to select all that applied from a list of potential barriers to effective parliamentary engagement (Figure 5, following page).

Figure 5. Identified Barriers



Participants were also asked, in an optional open-ended question at the end of the survey, whether there was other information about parliamentary engagement they wished to share. Most of these responses related to perceived barriers to participation, providing additional qualitative data to contextualise the survey findings in this area. The three barriers outlined below were most frequently selected.

1

### Lack of technical skills and/or human resources to engage effectively

As shown in this survey's data, many women's organisations in the Caribbean are volunteer-run, which may impact the time and capacity of their leaders and membership to prioritise parliamentary engagement efforts. Furthermore, stretching resources (of all kinds) to invest in developing new capacities – such as technical skills to influence the legislative sphere – can present challenges, especially for smaller organisations. This may imply trade-offs that weaken existing work to deliver on the organisation's mandate.

2

### Parliament lacks openness or citizen participation mechanisms

An organisation's engagement practices can be prominently impacted by the perception that their parliament lacks openness to citizen participation. Indeed, many respondents communicated a sense of distrust and dissatisfaction with the accessibility of parliamentary processes. It is worth noting that the survey results show that there is already some level of participation through existing mechanisms.<sup>2</sup> However the data also suggests that women's organisations may have incomplete awareness of existing citizen participation channels for interacting with Caribbean parliaments and parliamentarians.

3

### Lack of information about what parliament is working on

While related to the above, this barrier speaks to a potentially broader lack of accessible sources of information about the parliamentary agenda. This could relate to gaps in information available on a parliament's website or through the local media, or to a culture of minimal knowledge-sharing among stakeholders, including other civil society organisations. It again underscores a desire among women's organisations for more open communication channels in order to disseminate information about what the parliament is debating, and how to have one's voice heard on the legislative agenda.

<sup>2</sup> Consult the ParlAmericas publication [Regulatory Frameworks for Citizen Participation in the Legislative Process in the Americas and the Caribbean](#) for examples of legal mechanisms that invite members of the public to serve as witnesses or provide comments/evidence before Select Committees.

The survey additionally allowed respondents to identify barriers not listed or to provide further context on their selection(s). From these responses, as well as those in the general open-ended question referenced earlier, a recurrent theme emerged around social privilege being a perceived determining factor in accessing parliament and parliamentarians. For instance, some respondents felt that political participation was accessible to individuals based on family ties or personal histories, rather than an opportunity for all. This may be especially pertinent due to the smaller-sized nature of the jurisdictions where many of the organisations operate, in which personal relationships and connections may be more difficult to separate from organisational reputations, leadership, and undertakings.

These circumstances also influence the competition among women's organisations that respondents identified as a challenge, as well as partisanship, which ranked among the most frequently selected barriers. Respondents from certain smaller, grassroots organisations were more likely to express that they are left out of political decision-making processes, and that medium or large organisations with more documented influence, political party affiliations, or more resources are more likely to be able to engage in parliamentary processes.

Only one respondent selected from the list of barriers 'Don't see the value in engaging with parliament,' indicating that the vast majority of respondents consider some sort of parliamentary engagement to be beneficial to their organisation.

***"There have been several interactions primarily by other organizations based on their personal association with individuals within the parliamentary system."*** - Survey respondent

***"Parliament does not have the capacity to develop and implement participatory processes, and there is distrust as CSOs are seen sometimes as partisan."*** - Survey respondent

***"The value of the work done by civil society as a whole is often undervalued unless of course it coincides [with the] government's agenda which is not often beneficial to all."*** - Survey respondent

***"Sometimes it feels like you are competing with the government and there is no financial support."*** - Survey respondent

## Opportunities Moving Forward

This research provides data that contextualises the extent and nature of parliamentary engagement by Caribbean women's organisations. ParlAmericas is committed to using this data, and other sources of firsthand knowledge, to help address some of the barriers to engagement identified by the survey respondents (Figure 6, following page). Through its upcoming programming, ParlAmericas will provide opportunities to support women's organisations' capacities to participate effectively in parliamentary advocacy. The development of workshops and trainings materials targeted to these Caribbean civil society stakeholders will respond to the top areas of interest, as identified by respondents in the final section of the survey:

- 1) Building coalitions with other organisations (for joint political advocacy)
- 2) Developing strategic, evidence-based messaging
- 3) Getting issues on the legislative agenda & Implementing effective lobbying strategies

Likewise, the valuable expertise of these organisational stakeholders, and the information that we continue to garner through future consultations, will provide ongoing and essential inputs into ParlAmericas' engagement with Caribbean parliaments and parliamentarians on gender equality and legislative openness.

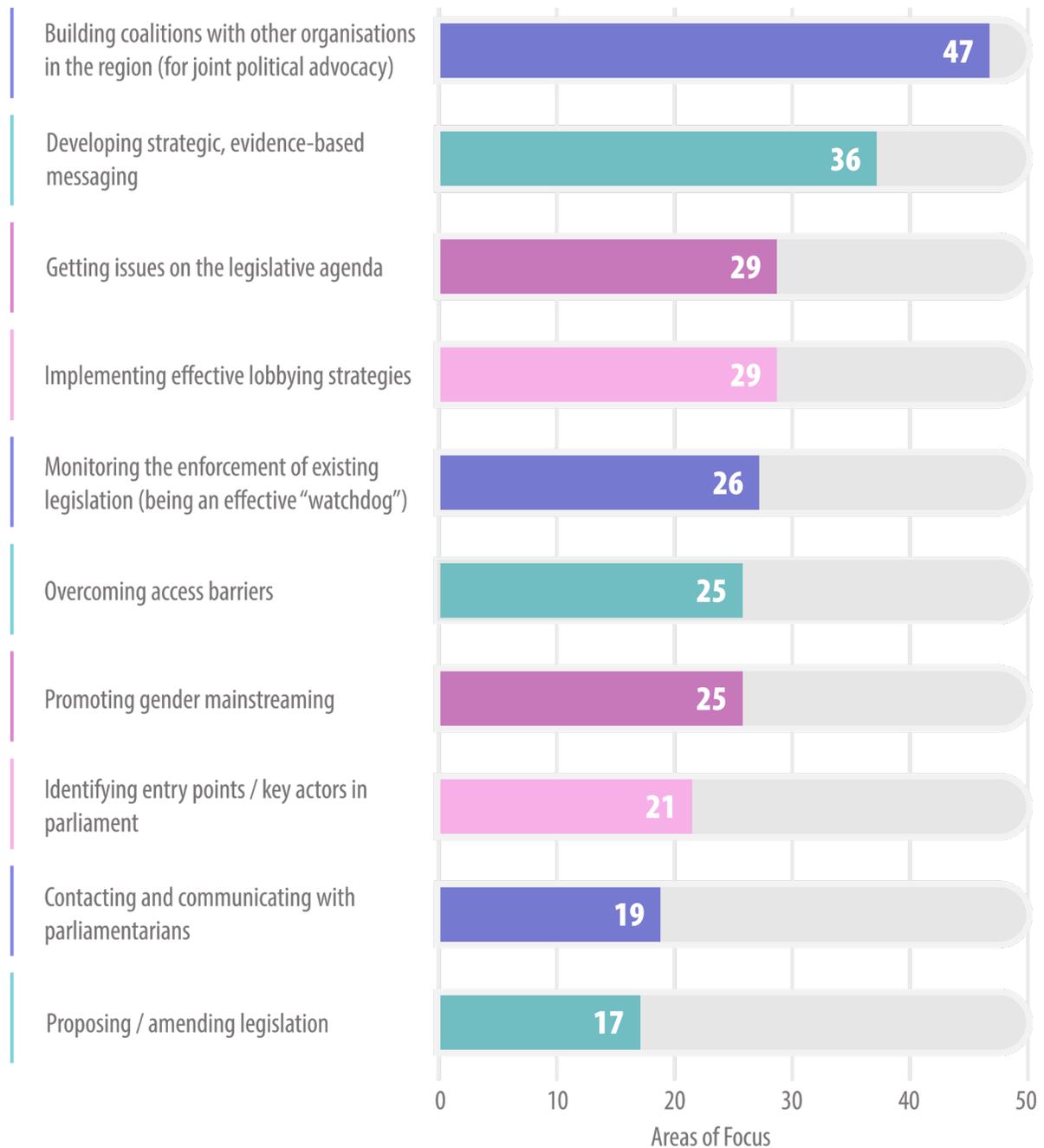
*"We've had a few opportunities that we used to our advantage, but we don't necessarily have allies and associates within the system as compared to others."* - Survey respondent

*"At present, the opportunity to interact and contribute to the parliamentary process seems closed off, open to a particular group of individuals if at all. Learning more about the opportunities to engage in the process will be most beneficial to our organisation."*

- Survey respondent

*"It is striking what groups share, especially when trust is built."* - Survey respondent

Figure 6. Interest in Trainings and Knowledge-Exchange Activities



## Acknowledgements

ParAmericas extends its gratitude to everyone involved in this data collection. Thank you to our regional partners for their support disseminating the survey. Our sincere appreciation to the respondents who took time out of their schedules to complete the survey.



## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire



#### Consultation with Caribbean women's organisations on engagement with parliaments

ParlAmericas is undertaking a new project in the Caribbean that aims to strengthen pathways for gender equality in parliamentary processes and centre the needs of women and marginalised populations in legislative work. In order to carry this out effectively, we rely on the invaluable insights and guidance of women's organisations garnered from our ongoing partnerships and consultations.

This short, consultation survey should take approximately 5 minutes to complete. We are so grateful for your time and contribution to this project.

#### About ParlAmericas:

ParlAmericas is the institution that convenes the national parliaments of the Americas and the Caribbean. We facilitate the exchange of legislative good practices, and promote cooperative dialogue between parliamentarians and civil society from across the Americas and the Caribbean. An important part of ParlAmericas' work involves supporting parliamentary stakeholders in mainstreaming a gender equality perspective in their work and advancing women's political empowerment.

Please visit our website and social media channels for more information on what we do:

Website - [www.parlamericas.org](http://www.parlamericas.org)

Twitter - [www.twitter.com/ParlAmericas](https://www.twitter.com/ParlAmericas)

Facebook - [www.facebook.com/ParlAmericas](https://www.facebook.com/ParlAmericas)

YouTube - [www.youtube.com/ParlAmericas](https://www.youtube.com/ParlAmericas)

## Survey objective and instructions

This survey aims to collect data to inform our work over the coming years, specifically as it relates to providing support to women's organisations in accessing and navigating parliamentary processes in order to advance advocacy objectives.

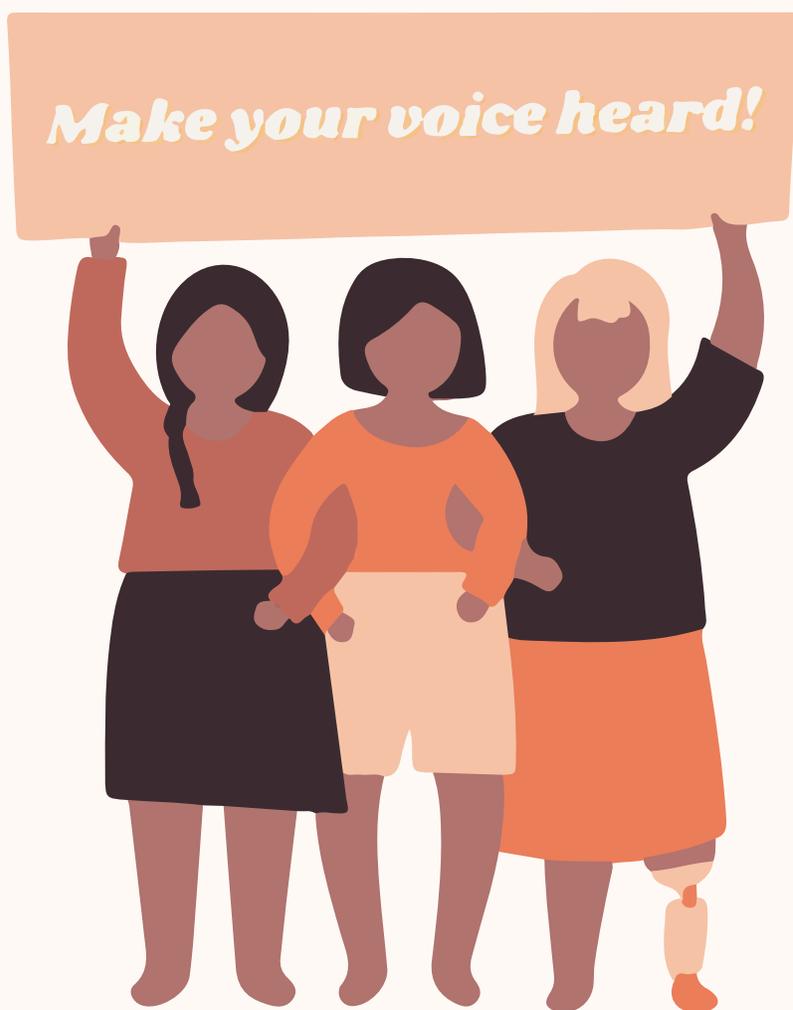
The survey is designed to collect data from an organisational perspective, but it also includes some questions drawing on your personal perceptions.

The information you provide will remain confidential and will not be tied to you as an individual or organisation in any published materials.

If you are an active member of multiple organisations operating in the Caribbean region, please select one of them to have in mind as reference when answering the survey questions. We also welcome separate responses from different individuals within the same organisation, if desired.

Lastly, please share this survey with your professional networks of women's organisations, as you deem appropriate.

Shareable link: <https://forms.gle/ypBobiaWZb6NyKad9>



## Contact information

Kindly note that sharing your contact information is optional, but we welcome you to provide as much information as possible - including your organisational role. This will support the identification of trends in the survey results and allow us to keep you informed on opportunities for collaboration, including relevant trainings.

Your first name(s)

Your answer

Your last name(s)

Your answer

Gender

- Woman
- Man
- Non-binary
- Not listed

Your email

Your answer

Your phone number (please include country code)

Your answer

Name of your organisation \*

Your answer

Role / position in your organisation

Your answer

## Organisation profile

When was the organisation founded?

- Pre-1990
- 1990-1994
- 1995-1999
- 2000-2004
- 2005-2009
- 2010-2014
- 2014-2019
- 2019-2022

What country or countries does your organisation work in? \*

- Antigua and Barbuda
- The Bahamas
- Belize
- Barbados
- Dominica
- Grenada
- Guyana
- Haiti
- Jamaica
- St. Kitts and Nevis
- Saint Lucia
- Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
- Suriname
- Trinidad and Tobago
- REGIONAL (Caribbean)
- INTERNATIONAL

Please use this space for any further clarification on the location(s) or specific region of the country in which your organisation operates:

Your answer

Best email for contacting the organisation (general)

Your answer

Best phone number for contacting the organisation (please include country code)

Your answer

The day-to-day activities of the organisation are run primarily by:

- Paid employee(s)
- Volunteer(s)
- A mix of paid employees and volunteers

What are the main issues that your organisation works on? Please select all that apply. \*

- Violence against women / gender-based violence / domestic violence
- Women's leadership
- Women's political participation
- Women's economic empowerment
- Sexual and reproductive health and rights
- LGBTQI rights
- Environmental protection / climate change
- Youth empowerment / children's rights
- Citizen participation, accountability, transparency, and/or ethics
- Labour union / business network
- Other:

What are the main activities carried out by your organisation? Please select all that apply. \*

Service delivery / programming

Awareness raising / education

Research

Political advocacy

Other:

## Parliamentary engagement

This final section will help ParlAmericas understand the extent to which women's organisations in the Caribbean region are presently interacting with legislative bodies. Please answer to the best of your knowledge. There is no right or wrong answer.

Which formal channels for public participation are you aware of in your country's parliament? If you aren't aware of any, please write "none." \*

Your answer

The following are ways in which your organisation may have previously engaged with parliaments and/or participated in legislative processes. Please select all that are applicable to your organisation.\*

- Meeting(s) with a parliamentarian
- Participation in a committee / special select committee
- Participation in an activity organised by the women's parliamentary caucus
- Submission of a petition to parliament
- Submission of a written or oral response on a bill in response to an open call for public consultation by parliament
- Consultation on a bill or reform on the parliament's agenda for debate
- Protest or march in front of the parliament
- General lobbying / public communication directed to a parliamentary decision maker
- No engagement with parliamentarians / no participation in legislative processes

If applicable, please list the topics or issues your organisation has engaged with parliament/ parliamentarians on, and the year this took place.

Your answer

In your opinion, what are the main barriers for your organisation to participating in parliamentary processes and/or accessing parliamentarians? Please select all that apply.

- Not sure how to participate
- Don't have allies in parliament
- Don't see the value in engaging with parliament
- Lack of time
- Lack of political influence
- Lack the technical skills and/or human resources to engage effectively
- Lack of openness or citizen participation mechanisms available through the parliament
- Geographic barriers (e.g., organisation is located outside of the capital)
- Lack of information about what parliament is working on
- Bureaucratic barriers
- Financial barriers
- Hostile political environment in relation to the organisation's core issues
- Political/partisan risks for the organisation
- Security concerns
- Lack of quantitative data to provide evidence-based arguments
- I don't believe there are any barriers to my organisation's parliamentary participation
- Other:

Would your organization benefit from training or knowledge-exchange activities in any of the following areas? Please select up to 3.

- Identifying entry points / key actors in parliament
- Overcoming access barriers
- Contacting and communicating with parliamentarians
- Building coalitions with other organisations in the region (for joint political advocacy)
- Getting issues on the legislative agenda
- Developing strategic, evidence-based messaging
- Implementing effective lobbying strategies

- Proposing / amending legislation
- Monitoring the enforcement of existing legislation (being an effective "watchdog")
- Promoting gender mainstreaming
- Other:

Is there anything else you would like to share in relation to your experiences or observations about the interaction between civil society organisations and parliamentary processes?

Your answer

Can the ParlAmericas International Secretariat contact you for a short phone interview on these topics?

- Yes
- No, I'd rather not

Phone and email for interview purposes (if not provided earlier)

Your answer



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