

## **Lessons from the participation of women in politics**

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The growing participation of women in political and economic decision making has brought up new questions, enlivening the debate among feminists in particular, and those interested in politics throughout the world in general. What effect, if any, does the increased percentage of women in positions of power and influence have on the issues of non-discrimination or democracy? In other words, do women really help bring about less discrimination and more democracy? Do the increased numbers of women in positions of power and influence in the Legislative, Judicial, and Executive branches of government, in boardrooms and executive suites and in social institutions, enhance the possibilities of achieving conditions of equality among men and women? Do "feminine interests" exist in opposition to "masculine interests" and, if so, are these comparable to the interests of ethnic groups, children, or the disabled? Do women constitute a representative social group? Don't women have ethnic, political, economic and social differences among themselves?

These questions, among many that beckon in these times, highlight two central issues: that of essentialism, that is to say, how do feminine specific issues correlate with the bias toward the search for consensus, cooperation, altruism, and political representation by women as women. This paper will deal with these issues. I hope to illustrate some of the challenges facing women involved in the current Latin American political environment using three examples culled from the Peruvian political arena.

Domestic Violence Legislation was enacted in Peru in 1993 and later modified and improved following a series of discussions in 1996. The nation's congresswomen played a key role on both occasions. The subject would not even have come up for debate were it not for the efforts of these women, who also counted on the support of feminist organizations. Additionally, putting aside any differences, the congresswomen voted unanimously to approve the proposal. The issue, directly linked to "matters of interest to women", displayed the ideal characteristics to fuel a feminist essentialist debate, plagued with stereotypes: women are capable of coming to an agreement and set aside political, ideological and other differences. The number and enthusiasm of the comments went in crescendo, going so far as to say that such a feat was possible because they were women, because women don't fight, because they solve their differences and conflicts with dialogue and because they have different ways of acting in politics. In other words, because they are essentially peaceful and consensus oriented in contrast with men that are conflictive, aggressive, competitive and unable to forge an agreement. Over the years, these concepts have become increasingly relative and many women have moderated this perception of feminine virtuosity. Nevertheless, the fujimorist women who voice the "official rhetoric" and who have, more than ever, an overwhelming presence in the media, make indiscriminate use of these notions to represent themselves as champions of democracy, the feminine vanguard and national unity. This cartoonish depiction of feminine perfection can prove to be counterproductive to the processes of democratization, reinforcing, instead, historical forms of feminine discrimination.

When in 1998 a proposal for a Quota Law was presented, (25% of candidates' lists had to be women) the situation was not so exemplary, although the outcome was. While the opposition congresswomen and some of those affiliated with Fujimori's 'official' party supported the proposal, pointing out that it would be the first step in correcting the serious problems of discrimination towards women in politics, there were other voices among the men and fujimorist women that openly opposed the Law. A harsh debate ensued with the opposition pointing to the irrelevance of a regulation that, in principle, treated women as inferior beings incapable of competing on their own merits with men on a level playing field, and thus requiring of protective legislation to give them an unfair advantage. The fujimorist women opposing the Law felt particularly threatened by the proposed legislation and demonstrated their dissatisfaction by arguing their position. The debate ended there. Nevertheless, in the following congress, and to the surprise of the plenary session, the proposal for a Quota Law was again presented and both the male and female representatives of the 'official' party voted massively for its passage.

Miraculously, the differences had vanished and the erstwhile opposition congresswomen suddenly supported the Law, and it was approved without reservations. They might have changed their minds upon further reflection after the initial debate, providing a desirable explanation for this change of heart, sold on the positive aspects of this reverse discrimination and in an act of unusual flexibility, voted for passage. The reasons, however, lay elsewhere. The supreme leader, President Fujimori, had called them to order and in a clear expression of authority, forced his party members to vote in favor of the Law. His interest and his strategy were clear. The capture and control of women is considered prized booty in the contemporary political market. This type of measures, added to other patronage maneuverings directed at women of impoverished social segments was calculated to expand the president's social base.

In this second case, it could again be said that the issue was one of "feminine interest", albeit with divergent postures, as turned out to be the case. The areas of agreement or disagreement were not centered, however, on the relevance or acceptance of these issues, but rather, on the will and the interests of the leader and the party. The women opted for loyalty to the chief rather than speak out their disapproval, they silenced their position and subordinated themselves in the face of authority on an issue that, apparently, relates directly to them as women. That is to say, for one reason or another, women's issues are not necessarily treated as such, or put another way, not all that affects women is of equal interest to women in politics.

It is pertinent to take note of a manifest dilemma as we survey the landscape beyond the behavior of the Fujimori women. It is one thing to contemplate the intentions of those who seek to manipulate this type of measures, as in the case of the Quota Law and many other laws as well, using social policy to "capture" social groups for political gain. It is something else again to consider the consequences and the effects of these policies on the population. Although the intention was to make them beholden for favors rendered, in practice, the capacity to control and patronize women could be eroded. This specific issue was debated widely, spawning much controversy among the many different feminists groups in Peru. Some thought that the opportunity to expand and democratize the condition of women should be seized, in spite of the recognized differences with the government.

Others, standing on principle and core democratic values, argued that this type of Machiavellian alliance would most likely be a hapless one in the long run; they would be "washing the face" of an authoritarian régime, and given the context in which this legislation was obtained, there were no guarantees of major changes in the medium and long term.

In addition, the nation's political environment had varied considerably from 1993 or 1996 to 1998, by which time the régime had become openly authoritarian. The polarization became increasingly evident. On one hand, the executive's party apparatus, through an assortment of legal chicaneries, had gained increasing control of the other branches of government and its main institutions, and routinely imposed its decisions in an arbitrary way, while, on the other hand, the opposition fought to preserve minimal democratic enclaves. Thus the need of the fujimorists to act as a monolithic group in which any discrepancy would be viewed as personal disloyalty to its chief; and of the democratic feminine sectors to keep their distance, having reservations, as they applauded the government's reforms, even when these seemed favorable.

Finally, the third case unfolds in the year 2000 on a political stage fraught with confrontation and a crumbling authoritarian régime.

After the fraudulent elections of May 2000, and ignoring the clamoring voices of broad segments of society as well as national and international political institutions, President Fujimori was sworn into office and began his third term with a very special and novel Congressional Directive Council. For the first time in the history of the country and of Latin America, the congressional leadership was in the hands of four women. The decision was made by the President himself, who bypassed constitutional hierarchy and protocol and hand picked its members over the serious objections and roadblocks put up by the different groups of his own political party.

The monolithic fujimorist block was cracking, and the unashamed power plays by the leaders of each sub-group within the fujimorist camp were becoming increasingly more apparent. Faced with this situation, the President opted to put the women of each faction - not the men who were their bosses - in charge no less, as a way to appease the conflicts and to solve the situation quickly, and as a way of teaching the wrangling men a lesson and of convincing public opinion that his Front was united and that women are an example of consensus who do not participate in divisive games. Indeed, they smiled, accepted the responsibility and, with their hands raised high in celebration, played the game of communion and feminine fraternity.

While the official rhetoric delighted from so creative an exit to the crisis, exalting the virtues of the "ladies" as they were repeatedly refereed to, praising the novelty of the Peruvian situation and the importance of having a modern and forward looking government able to recognize the value of women, the differences among the women were deepening. The non fujimorists, and I would dare say that many of the fujimorists also, didn't display enthusiasm or pride over the "promotion", rather, a clear sensation of discomfort or an unraveled declaration of uneasiness could be gleaned in the different public forums of many of the opining women. Women's groups, increasingly more organized and cohesive in

their defense of democracy, such as the Women's Movement for Democracy (Movimiento de Mujeres por la Democracia -MUDE) among others, showed their indignation at the coarse use of gender, relegating the women of the régime to the defense of feminine fraternity. But, since in politics as in life, situations are rarely clear-cut or linear but most often multifaceted, there were women's voices, albeit a minority, that said they preferred four authoritarian women to four authoritarian men. It is clear that both the congresswomen of the Directive Council and the "gender rhetoric" were pawns and that, in spite of the political clout that they had acquired in previous years, they were also lending themselves to this disgraceful if picturesque performance and in consequence, were being used. Naiveté was not the operative principle at work here, but rather an expedient exchange of conveniences: political capital to be cashed in for a key role or opportunity later on. They displayed the same pragmatic attitude that has characterized the politics of this régime.

The situation might have been contained had the virulent practices of the government not been brought explosively to light: corruption, arms trafficking, the blackmailing of high ranking officials and politicians to assure a majority in congress and to perpetuate power, compromising top government officials, including the armed forces and accelerating its decomposition. A motion to censor the Congress' Directive Council tested the correlation of forces between the pro-government and the pro democracy factions, and in passing, between the women and the men. Without a doubt, the vote was cut short for political reasons, not because of the gender issue. None of the opposition women even considered the possibility of a non-censure vote based on gender. Is political power gender blind? Or, is democracy not assured simply because those who hold power are women?

With an extremely weakened stage director (Fujimori) and without an assistant director (Montesinos) the authoritarian montage in Peru is in free fall, the stage self-destructs and the actors and actresses fight without any pretenses of fraternity or affinity based on ideology or gender. In these last days, Peruvian men and women have witnessed, with debilitating effort, the worst accusations among the militant fujimorists, led, paradoxically, by the women of the régime. Exalted declarations of loyalty to the President, competing for truest believer status, are common to them all. This, while the President lasts. Could we add, then, the question on the pacifism and the sublime capacity to forge consensus among the women?

By way of conclusion, I want to focus on some of the lessons that condense from these stories.

1. I believe that today more than ever, we need consider the true relative nature of "absolute truths", the identities, fraternities and absolute loyalties, the sweeping and grandiloquent enunciation. Ambiguity is a refined value of these times. The woman half of humanity as Elena Soriano, the Spanish writer, refers to the feminine 50%, is not a homogeneous group and is therefore not, in itself, representative. One cannot speak on behalf of women, because women are legion: Negro or Indian; illiterate and professional; from Quispillacta in Ayacucho or from Prague and Cairo; Quechua, gypsy or Maori; because they are democratic, authoritarian, indifferent; we could continue pointing out differences and distinctions endlessly. In that sense, women, as such don't constitute a group, but as many

as their different interests lead them to associate, coordinate demands and elect representatives, alone or with other members of the society to which they belong and with which they share their dreams and realities, histories and futures.

2. The single fact that there is a growing number of women in positions of power and influence, that they have lost their fear of power, has positive connotations, independent of the achievements that their presence may have gained in favor of women's issues or democracy. It is part of a new common sense in society by which no one is surprised to see women in positions of authority, or as artists or refereeing a soccer match.

In symbolic terms, new "woman" paradigms with the attributes of power and decision making ability are constructed and diffused through the roles that women carry out in politics, even those that are associated with Fujimori, appearing in the mass media and advocating their positions on very different issues with great aplomb and conviction. This contributes to the enlargement, diversity and enrichment of role models of what it means to be a woman, but, perhaps more importantly, to be a woman with personal power in the conceptual universe of feminine and masculine imagery and imagination. The old stereotypes that pigeonhole women exclusively in their traditional roles as service providers to husbands, communities or the nation, are breaking down. The variety of feminine participation today, often taking on very controversial issues or positions, humanizes the feminine figure and highlights the differences that exist among women. The different positions that they can and do advocate in the exercise of power thus contribute to dispel the myth of the idyllic "feminine fraternity."

In practical terms, the presence of many women, though not all, promotes the discussion of issues and the proposal of laws that defend women's rights. Without a doubt, much of today's legislation benefiting women would not have gained consideration, let alone passage were it not for the presence of women in the corridors of political power. Curiously, this interest in the feminine question is not associated with nor does it suppose a feminist or democratic affiliation. Precisely, because we now understand the heterogeneous nature of women.

3. Beware the resurgence of "womanism" and of the "hurray for women" mindset. Not all women are the same nor are they sisters, therefore, the WOMEN category as a homogeneous force that hides ethnic, social, political and economic differences must be avoided. There are honest and corrupt ones, pragmatists and idealists, authoritarian and democratic, poor and rich, each one with well-differentiated interests. In addition, not all women are good, honest, loyal, worthy and sensitive. In fact, one of the contributions of the feminist movement is the acknowledgement of difference; we must not lose this perspective.

4. There are issues that bring women together, because they are of common interest to society and that for a variety of reasons best explored at another time, have been historically excluded from the political agenda. Family violence is one of these issues, reproductive health is another that correlates closely with female sexuality: abortion, maternity and child rearing. All of these have an impact on the relationship of women to the labor market and on economic emancipation. Other issues on the feminine agenda are those

linked to discrimination and decision making in general, due to gender based unequal access and treatment. And finally, those issues linked to the conditions of poverty that, though not exclusive to women, are aggravated by entrenched patriarchal systems that often generate situations of inequality and discrimination.

Finally, I want to pose what I consider to be pivotal questions in both the debates on the presence of women in politics and of the policies targeting the female population. To what extent do quota laws and other targeted legislation and policy initiatives favoring women, serve to contribute to a change in the 'formal' aspects of democracy, without these changes necessarily improving the realities facing women? Why are so many women still the poorest of the poor and who, even now, have the highest probabilities of staying poor, in spite of the changes in legislation, targeted policies, and of a media presence that does not always dignify them as people? In short, how do we bridge the chasm, common in our countries, between 'formal' democracy and real democracy, the one in which we all live our daily lives, and not just during electoral periods or within the confines of Congress?

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