Nikki Craske
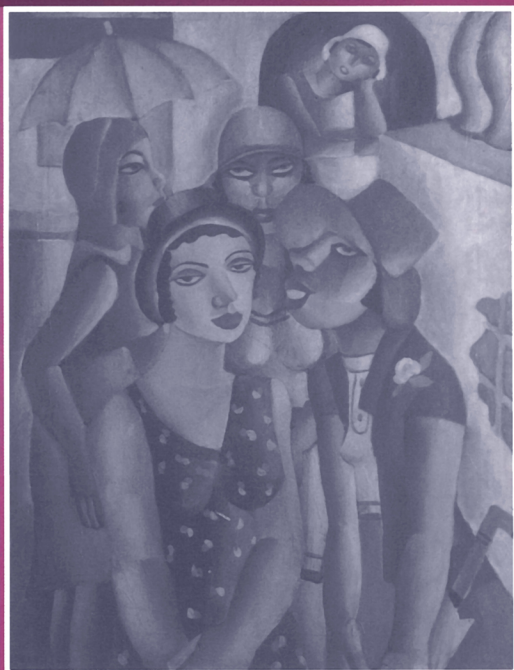
Women & Politics in Latin America

Women and Politics in Latin America

Women and Politics in Latin America

Nikki Craske

Contents

List of Tables

Acknowledgements

Acronyms

Argentina

APDH:
: Asamblea Permanente de Derechos Humanos
Permanent Assembly for Human Rights

CGT:
: Confederación General de Trabajadores
General Confederation of Workers

CNM:
: Consejo Nacional de la Mujer
National Women's Council

FREPASO:
: Frente País Solidario
Country Solidarity Front

PJ:
: Partido Justicialista
Justicialist Party (Peronists)

PPF:
: Partido Peronista Femenino
Women's Peronist Party

UCR:
: Unión Cívica Radical
Radical Civic Union

Bolivia

MNR:
: Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario
National Revolutionary Movement

Brazil

CNDM:
: Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Mulher
National Council for Women's Rights

PT:
: Partido dos Trabalhadores
Workers' Party

Chile

EPF: El Poder Femenino
               Women's Power

PD: Partido por la Democracia
               Democracy Party

PS: Partido Socialista
               Socialist Party

SERNAM: Servicio Nacional de la Mujer
               National Women's Service

Costa Rica

PLN: Partido de Liberación Nacional
               National Liberation Party

Cuba

CCP: Cuban Communist Party

CDR: Comités de Defensa de la Revolución
               Committees for the Defence of the Revolution

FMC: Federación de Mujeres Cubanas
               Federation of Cuban Women

Mexico

DIF: Desarrollo Integral de la Familia
               Integral Family Development

EZLN: Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional
               Zapatista Army of National Liberation

PAN: Partido de Acción Nacional
               National Action Party

PRD: Partido de la Revolución Democrática
               Party of the Democratic Revolution

PRI: Partido Revolucionario Institucional
               Institutional Revolutionary Party

Nicaragua

AMNLAE: Luisa Amanda Espinosa Nicaraguan Women's
               Association

AMPRONAC: Nicaraguan Association of Women Confronting
             National Problems
APMN: Alianza Patriótica de Mujeres Nicaragüenses
             Patriotic Alliance of Nicaraguan Women
FSLN: Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional
             Sandinista Front for National Liberation
OMDN: Organización de Mujeres Democráticas de
             Nicaragua
             Nicaraguan Organization of Democratic Women

Peru

APRA: Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana
             American Popular Revolutionary Alliance

General

CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of all forms of
             Discrimination Against Women
EAP: economically active population
EPZ: export processing zone
ISI: import substitution industrialization
NAFTA: North American Free Trade Agreement
NSS: National Security States
PGI: practical gender interests
SAP: structural adjustment policy
SGI: strategic gender interests

1

Argument

Women have played a central role in the development of Latin American societies and have had a substantial impact on the political systems which have emerged. This book gives an account of women's political participation in Latin America since the 1940s. As it is used here, the term 'political' includes a wide range of activities in which women have participated and through which they have had an effect on political institutions and practices. A central theme in the book is the relationship between motherhood and citizenship and the extent to which the two are compatible. Further, the book considers the political development of a region which has been dogged by authoritarianism and exclusion. By looking at women, the nature of that exclusion and the challenges to it are brought into greater focus. From such a perspective, then, it is also a book about the increasing democratization of Latin America.

In the remainder of this chapter I shall lay out the basic arguments that inform the separate chapters of the book.

Why women?

I start from the premise that women's participation in all aspects of any democratic society is crucial to the quality of democracy itself. Fundamentally, this includes their participation in political institutions. For a political system to be representative, members from all sections of society need to be brought into the decision-making community. Women's participation, therefore, is important for the interests of democracy. This does not imply that there is something

inherently unique about women that allows them a greater claim in the political sphere. Yet in many democratic societies women have specific experiences which are systematically excluded from the usual practice of politics. These experiences tend to be associated with 'private' and 'domestic' issues and as such conform to a public–private divide which, as the following chapter argues, is an arbitrary but powerful categorization. As a result, many women have come to organize and resist the constraints on their representation. Often this resistance begins from within the very same conditions of subordination: this is a key feature of women's participation in Latin America.

Politicized mothers

Not all women are mothers; nevertheless, many identify with a notion of womanhood which emphasizes nurturing and caring as 'natural' female characteristics. Women's engagement with caring can add important dimensions to the development of political institutions, and the focus on caring has certainly been a catalyst for many potent political movements in Latin America. If this aspect of life is to be valorized adequately, women have an interest in a democratic practice which ensures that 'their interests' are represented. By including women's concerns, the practice of politics and citizenship can be more sensitive to issues of difference. Yet it is important that these differences should not imply hierarchies. By examining women's increased political participation, we are made aware of how citizenship is a continually developing and dynamic concept.

The focus on women also highlights the diversity of women's experiences. In the past there has been a tendency to see women as a unitary category with specifically 'women's interests'. As a subordinate group women may have some interests in common, but, like men, they have numerous facets to their identities which can lead to a variety of different political agendas. In many cases, identities other than those of gender are at the centre of political mobilization. As Jean Franco suggests, there are moments when 'women's emancipation is bound up with the fate of the larger community' (in Molyneux, 1998: 227).

A common identity among Latin American women is that of motherhood. In Chapter 2, I discuss how motherhood is central to women's identities and cuts across class, ethnicity and nationality. It has significant cultural and political currency and as such lends

legitimacy to demands made within this rubric. Thus women often make it a strategically useful mobilizing point. Given this connection between political action and a mothering role, there has been a tendency to view women's collective action as part of the social rather than the political sphere. Latterly, however, the increased involvement of women activists in various arenas and the new research uncovering hidden histories of participation have shown that the stereotype of women's apolitical character has not always been reflected in reality. These developments have challenged some of the paradigms we use to understand political action.

As we shall see in the rest of this book, there is a growing tension between the identities that women have employed in order to gain a foothold in the political arena and the diversity of experiences that characterize their lives in society.

Political exclusion

Women's growing participation has to be understood in the context of a generalized exclusion which has characterized the region's political systems and the long-term struggle for democracy challenging this exclusion. Although political exclusion has been generalized, women have been absent from political participation to a greater degree than men. A number of factors explain these conditions: i) Latin American political systems have been largely authoritarian and have discouraged popular participation except for moments of populism; ii) gender construction in the region has decreed that politics is part of a man's world and an inappropriate activity for women; iii) this in turn has resulted in women's political involvement being ignored, since it has been interpreted as social rather than political. Yet, despite the many constraints which limit their participation in the region, women have succeeded in claiming and colonizing political spaces during the course of the century.

The predominance of authoritarianism and political corruption has had two important consequences for the development of opposition movements. One is the emphasis on autonomy and distance from the institutional political arena: it is often difficult to strike a balance between autonomy and co-optation. The other consequence, particularly for women, is the stress on moral superiority of opposition organizations. For women this becomes linked to motherhood by reinforcing ideas of self-abnegation and rejection

of self-interest, thus reflecting an idealized motherhood where women are encouraged to deny their own interests and concentrate on the needs of their children. This suffering for others is often interpreted as women being more able to 'feel' the needs of the community. Both of these factors, however, can act to constrain political activity, not only by limiting tactics and strategies, but also by restricting the possibilities for negotiation, which is an intrinsic part of the political process.

Institutional empowerment

It is my contention that contemporary political, economic and social structures have the potential to aid the empowerment of citizens by conferring and acknowledging rights, providing transparent procedures for the exercise of those rights, and providing support in demanding and claiming rights. Such structures, however, tend towards inertia and are resistant to change; pressure is consequently required to effect and maintain the momentum for change. Given women's participation in all aspects of national development, this is necessary from many sectors: feminist organizations, social movements, workplace organizations, within bureaucracies and from political parties. In my view it is important that the pressure is multifaceted to ensure against a single interpretation of women's interests.

The shifting terrain

Although the region's political systems have tended towards exclusion, there have been important, positive developments linked to women's political participation. There is a dialectical relationship between political change and women's participation, as one reinforces the other. The most salient moments are: i) the democratization struggles which dominated the region in the 1970s and 1980s and which presented new opportunities for women through their involvement in social movements; ii) the re-evaluation of political participation to include previously hidden 'women's issues'; and iii) the development of feminist debates which have an impact on political discourses. This has encouraged a more inclusive notion of citizenship in the new democracies and has stimulated women to claim more rights. This is not to say, however, that the majority of women embrace feminism.

In the following chapters I analyse different areas of social, economic and political life and the impact of women's participation in them. I demonstrate that different arenas present both opportunities and constraints for women's political participation and have different consequences for the development of women's political identities. Since women do not form a homogeneous category, it follows that the impact of parties, work and feminism will vary depending on class, ethnicity, age, access to education and other variables. Women use the resources available to them to further their aims: they conform to social norms in some moments and subvert them in others. The military governments of the 1970s closed traditional political spaces and created the catalyst for new forms of political activity where women were key participants. The transition to democracy was an important moment for making gains while the political process was more fluid. The process of consolidation, however, has resulted in the demobilization of these 'new' actors, and the continuing economic difficulties have reinforced the narrowing of political activity to electoral participation. Consequently, while important gains have been made, particularly for women, for many political participation has declined as social movements have been side-lined by political parties. Furthermore, governments continue to focus on economic restructuring rather than social provision, which was the focus of social movements.

Mothers, women, citizens: tensions

Despite the increased political participation of women over the past few decades and the development of a more inclusionary notion of both citizenship and politics, there are new challenges. I argue that there remains a gender division of labour within institutional politics. Women and men both participate to defend and promote their 'interests', and, in so doing, construct their interests in particular ways. These interests reflect gender construction in society which, for women, still privileges the identity of motherhood. Although motherhood is a key element in gender construction, women have other identities which may challenge motherhood ideals. The emphasis on motherhood has resulted, however, in women focusing more on social and domestic issues when engaging in political activity, as I demonstrate throughout the book. Although motherhood may underpin certain forms of women's political action, there is no direct relationship between

motherhood and particular political agendas, actions and ideologies: motherhood does not determine women's interests within traditional political discourses such as left–right or progressive–reactionary. Furthermore, parties and regimes of all political hues have embraced the idealization of motherhood. This idealization tends to essentialize the mothering experience, seeing it as 'destiny' for women, and reinforces the links between womanhood and social reproduction.

This book also discusses democratization and the development of citizenship in the region. Most Latin American governments today endorse liberal democratic values and, consequently, a liberal concept of citizenship. If citizenship is to be meaningful and open to all adults, it cannot be predicated on an exclusionary identity. For this reason, among others, motherhood cannot be the basis of citizenship, but some of the characteristics currently associated with motherhood, such as caring and life preservation, can inform and expand an understanding of citizenship. Mothering is a personal experience which gives rise to particularistic demands among women: citizens' rights must have universal application.

Although women have been able to forge their own spaces, organizations and agendas, there are still many limitations and constraints on their political participation. Many women still insist on an apolitical identity which removes them from long-term participation in the institutional political arena. As such, they are choosing to reject political participation. This, perhaps, is not surprising given the nature of many political regimes in the region, which have depended upon coercion and corruption to maintain control. In these circumstances, it is not unexpected that politics should remain tainted by these practices and that women should choose to distance themselves from the political arena. Other limitations and constraints reflect a number of issues: i) that old vested interests (particularly, in this case, those such as the Catholic Church, which wishes to preserve traditional gender constructions) are capable of regrouping and reasserting themselves anew; ii) that the energy needed for ongoing mobilization is great and that 'mobilization fatigue' sets in; and iii) continued economic difficulties both generate political demands and limit government options. Despite women's increased participation, particularly in social movements, it is the institutional arenas in which the longer-term consequences are likely to be felt, particularly since social movements have been on the wane following the return to elected governments in the 1980s.

Organization of the book

The discussion of women and politics in this book examines different arenas of politics in which women have participated: namely, institutional politics, the workplace, social movements, revolutionary movements and feminism. The institutional political sphere is important as the major decision-making arena and where citizens rights are conferred and defended. Women's legal rights have been established and parties and governments are quick to use women-friendly rhetoric, but they are less keen to promote women representatives. The workplace is a potential area of empowerment since financial independence has helped many women negotiate shifting gender relations. For men paid work remains a principal identity, while for women it is secondary at best. This has implications for workplace struggles and deciding which issues are seen as workers' concerns. Despite women's engagement in wage labour, to date, mainstream unions are not very attractive to women; however, women workers are having an impact in certain professions, most notably teaching. There are also interesting examples of a more holistic approach to union activity, one which does not try to separate rigidly public and private issues and one which is more appealing to women. These may have lessons for the labour movement generally in an era of deregulation.

A discussion of social movements is essential given their important contribution to the development of citizenship and democratization in the region. This is all the more necessary since women have been major protagonists in the rise of social movements. Chapter 6 demonstrates that women are successfully mobilized when their interests, however they define them, are at the centre of campaigns. Women's political education through these movements has had broad implications for the post-authoritarian settlement, but it has been difficult for women to maintain the pressure on government when economic conditions are governments' main concern.

The region has experienced a number of revolutions and armed struggles over the years, and the advancement of women has often been caught up in these struggles. In the case of Cuba and Nicaragua, the new states addressed women's concerns directly. Consequently no discussion of women and politics in the region would be complete without an analysis of revolutions. Chapter 7 shows how resilient gender discourses are, and how revolutionary regimes mobilize women around the same motherist ideals

prevalent in other political systems. Revolutionary states have provided some important opportunities and structures for improving the lot of women, but many 'women's issues' remain side issues and have been sacrificed in difficult times.

Despite the antagonism towards feminism from all types of political actors and institutions, feminist thought and activities have had an impact on political development in Latin America. The discussion on feminisms in Chapter 8 demonstrates the dynamism of women's activism at all levels. There is much tension between different women's organizations in the region, which reflects the many feminist theories that abound as well as the conflicts between 'womanist' and 'feminist' perspectives. Although the majority of women do not identify with feminism, it has had an undeniable effect on political discourses and participation by bringing new debates into the arena.

However, before we look at women's substantive, material participation, chapters 2 and 3 will review the context in which that activity occurs. Chapter 2 discusses the development of gender construction in the region. Gender relations are constantly being renegotiated at the personal level, but ideal types are much more resistant to change and are reflected in public discourses across the political spectrum. Chapter 3 surveys the social, political and economic context, as well as looking at the 'average' Latin American woman through a discussion of demographic characteristics.

Conclusions

The underlying claim of this book is that it is important to note the many changes women have effected in the development of citizenship and political structures without denying the continued problems and challenges. These challenges continue in a time when, increasingly, the Latin American political arena is narrowly focused on the electoral stage. The political arena is itself constrained by stringent economic limitations, given the costly restructuring which is ongoing in the region: these issues pose particular problems for women. I would suggest that the 1990s represents a period of consolidation and political quiescence after the years of struggle against authoritarianism. Even in the heyday of political activism, only a minority of women were involved. The gains made through women's participation can be enormous for individuals, but on the broader canvas they can be small and, regrettably, often reversible.

2

Women and Political Identity in Latin America

Introduction

In this chapter I focus on the development of gender construction in
Latin America and how this is reflected in the political identity of
women. It is important to examine the different cultural constraints
and opportunities which dictate 'appropriate' behaviour for women
and how these constructions are continually challenged by them.
Over the course of the century women have become greater players
in the politics of the region. Women's exclusion from the power
arenas must be understood in the context of highly authoritarian
and exclusionary systems (discussed in the following chapter), but
systems have been gendered in a way which leaves women in a
weaker position than men. Clearly, there are other constraints, such
as ethnicity, class, geography and age, but the main focus here is on
the constraints gender construction places on women.

Despite the difficulties, women have achieved a greater voice
and presence in the region's politics, and consequently they have
had an impact on the development of citizenship. For the majority
their political identity remains tightly linked to the mothering role.
Motherhood offers a particular entry into politics and has signific-
ant cultural value which allows a power base for women, but it
brings with it certain constraints. The discussion of gender con-
structions here includes an analysis of machismo and *marianismo*.
This is followed by an examination of the role of motherhood
within political identities, which draws on Kaplan's (1982) notion
of 'female consciousness' and Alvarez's (1990) formulation of

'militant motherhood'. Defence of motherhood roles has led to the emergence of new rights, which have been incorporated into discourses around citizenship and which, in turn, have become more sensitive to 'gender interests': to understand this, I analyse the development of gender interests and citizenship.

Constructing gender relations

Gender construction is a cultural phenomenon, inasmuch as the content and significance of being a woman (or a man) is not constant across different countries or indeed necessarily within one country. It is clear that being a twenty-year-old working-class woman in Buenos Aires is very different from being an elderly peasant woman in the Bolivian Andes or a professional in Mexico. So while there are biological distinctions between women and men, the most obvious being the ability to bear children, these do not explain the gendered power relations that exist. Nevertheless, there are trends underpinning gender relations in many societies which give rise to biological explanations for the subordinate position of women. The role of motherhood is a biological function but its value is culturally given.[1]

In Latin American societies, as in many others, motherhood is seen as the primary role for women, although fatherhood is not seen as the overriding role for men. Emphasis is placed on the complementary nature of the roles of women and men in society but with the authority of the male (Martin, 1990), which can disguise subordination. Many factors influence the development of gender relations: Latin America has many ethnicities and races, including indigenous peoples, colonizers predominantly from the Iberian peninsula, entrepreneurs (especially from Britain in the nineteenth century), slaves from Africa, and, latterly, immigrants from southern Europe (particularly Italians in Argentina). All these peoples brought with them social formations which included particular gender relations, but the dominant form was set by the colonizers and reinforced by the Catholic Church.[2] Gender relations both shape and are shaped by political structures in society; consequently there is a dialectical relationship between gender relations and political change. Changes in one lead to changes in the other, with a constant set of (re)negotiations.

Socio-political structures have been predicated upon a separation of public and private spheres. Within this model men were actors in the public, powerful world of politics and the economy, while