

Women in Politics

The last two decades have seen an increase in women's participation in social and political life in general. Researcher Esperanza Tuñón analyzes this phenomenon, examining each form of its expression in its framework of social, political and economic meanings, not only for women, but for the whole society.

Esperanza Tuñón

The subject of this article requires a preliminary discussion of some analytical categories, especially the notion of women's politics. It also requires a definition of a particular personal conception for the interpretation of this process.

In this study and as part of a more general conception, we understand politics not only, nor primarily, as the exercise of power. Nor does it refer to the involvement of formal governmental or non-governmental agencies, in the form of political parties, unions or the legislature.

We speak of politics in a more comprehensive sense that takes into account the process of assuming a collective will, of assuming life as part of a community.

In this sense we join the category of "empowerment" that different currents in gender studies have contributed to the comprehension of this phenomenon.

Professor, Political and Social Sciences Faculty, UNAM.

Thus, the notion of politics is principally understood as a process that encompasses many forms of participation. In the case of women this takes into account the introduction of some of them into the public sphere, their electoral presence, their political organizations and the demands they propose. In a second sense, supporting the first, it refers to the construction of a collective identity that allows women to become active participants in society.

The struggle of women in general and feminism in particular allows us to view the intimate relationship between these two meanings and to contribute to a new conceptual redefinition of "politics" as such.

The feminist movement states that "the personal is political". This demonstrates not only the radicalism of the feminist conception (which tends to modify extant gender relations and the type of dominant human link in our societies), but also shows that feminists incorporate a new dimension into the political reading of society by taking into account a series of subjective (personal) elements for performance in the public arena.

This has permitted the overcoming of the traditional dualistic explanation of a woman's private and public life to show her social oppression and the "why" of her assigned and assumed roles. This opens the way to a more complete vision of both worlds, where it might seem that politics and culture operate as articulating agents.

Thus, today the relegation of women to the private sphere as the preferential place for her social participation, has been questioned and denounced. Similarly, the concept of what is macrosocial determines and influences actions in everyday life.

Women are now incorporated into this broader social and political struggle and exercise specific responsibility and power in their daily actions.

Analyzing how women operate in social and political practice concretizes these two levels: public and private. This can show how and on what basis they construct (or may construct) a gender defined identity that guides their actions. How is this translated into the elaboration of demands in political programs, in long and short term objectives, in different types of organizations, in tactics and strategies as a movement, in sum, in the specifics of policy making? These are some of the questions to be answered by arduous and extensive research still to be done, of which this article is only a preliminary introduction.



Demonstration protesting violence against women. Photo by Angeles Torrejón/Imagen-latina.

What interests us here is an indication of some of the characteristics of the women's struggle in Mexico during this decade. This is contrasted with some of the movement's characteristics in the 1970s, as well as with the aims that will eventually confront the feminist movement in the future.

We can say that the 1980's, characterized in national terms by the aggravation since 1982 of the economic crisis and a questioning of political legitimacy, saw the irruption of new social actors on the public stage. These new participants have modified the dynamics of the traditional struggle of worker, farmer and urban movements in the country.

Among these actors are women from popular sectors whose participation has become so important that some political-social agencies, such as the Coordinadora Nacional del Movimiento Urbano Popular (CONAMUP: National Coordinator of the Popular Urban Movement), have even declared that women are the backbone of the organization.

And certainly, as the economic crisis has decisively affected the current generation of youth, the buying power of salaries as well as the general conditions of life for the population, women—precisely because of their assigned and assumed roles in society—have joined the social struggle.

Feminism Rising

Thus, important nuclei of women workers, farmers and above all urban residents ("colonias") have protagonized struggles over working conditions, for the implementation of productive projects in the countryside, the supply and provision of urban public services such as drainage, electricity, transportation and the opening of state subsidized stores in marginal neighborhoods in large cities.

It is worth mentioning that these women face difficulties because of their political participation. In addition to the ideological and cultural recriminations of which they are the focus on the part of the men in their families, they have to carry out a double and triple day's work load. They must also combat sexist discrimination that occurs in the heart of political and social organizations that they share with men.

Within this context, this popular women's movement was influenced by the "social contamination" that generated feminism in the 1970s and supported by groups that have maintained popular links since then (mainly CIDHAL Women's Center in Mexico City and Cuernavaca, and Women for Dialogue). This movement on the rise became dedicated to the establishment of their own organic struc-

In addition to the ideological and cultural recriminations of which they are the focus on the part of men, women have to carry out a double and triple day's work load

The interest and need to maintain contact and open communication among women's groups has brought about the formation of national networks

tures within women's organizations (Women's Commissions, Regional Women's Committees, and so forth) and of forms of communication between them. In recent years eight national, regional and sector meetings have been held of women in popular movements.

In this process a grass roots feminism has been growing. Women of different sectors have stamped their class demands with a feminist responsibility and an awareness of gender, while feminist groups linked to them have also succeeded in incorporating the dimension of the country's sociopolitical reality into their own perspective.

With respect to the feminist movement as a whole, we can say that during the years of the 1970s, with groups of consciousness raising and later with more consolidated agencies and attempts at national coordination, the precise articulation of a political plan was not achieved. In the 1980s, this need for developing a plan took on a new dimension.

In the first half of the 1980's, the feminist movement opened up its channels of expression, and became dispersed in different circles. Confronted by difficulties of political and organizational unity experienced in previous years, the

movement sought new forms of expression and social participation to give it new life. At the same time this provided elements to consolidate its own identity.

In this vein, many groups oriented their activities to the academic field and to the dissemination of the specific problems of women in the mass media.

Training programs and research centers dealing with women acquired greater presence in the country's main institutions of higher education, such as the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM), the Mexico College and some universities in the provinces. Similarly, important television and radio space opened for debate and feminist exchange.

Academic and political participation has also changed dramatically in the provinces and numerous women's groups have emerged in the states of Nuevo León, Sinaloa, Colima, Michoacán, Oaxaca, Morelos, Puebla and Chiapas.

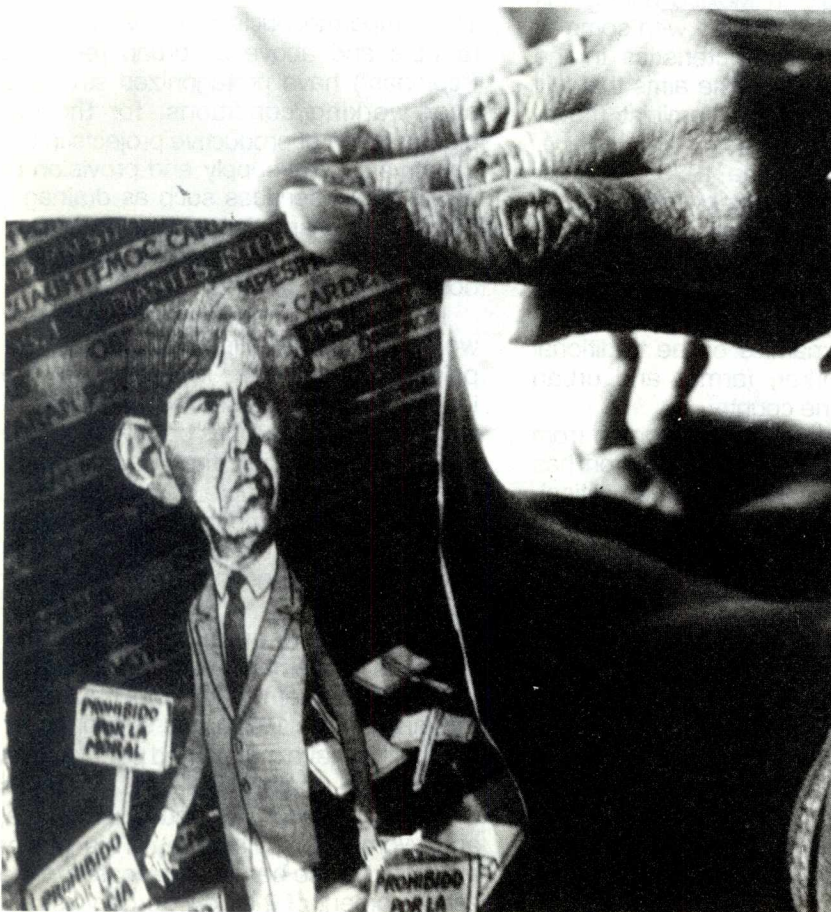
The interest and need to maintain contact and open communication between these groups brought about the formation of first the Coordinator of Autonomous Feminist Groups (1982) and later, the National Women's Network, with the strictly operative purpose of maintaining contacts between groups working totally independently.

The part of the movement linked to women from lower income sectors also acquired great strength in this period. Between 1980 and 1984 five groups arose, which pooled with those already in existence, and formed an important current in the movement.

The formation of women's support groups for lower income sectors and as part of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO'S) that rely on financing from international agencies, has allowed women's groups to make important incursions into and to work with these sectors. Nevertheless, it is necessary to note that difficulties have also been generated in political relations between women's groups and social organizations. These difficulties put the issues of power/alliances/autonomy and of the political plan/welfare work on the debating table.

An important landmark in this process was the earthquake that shook the country in September, 1985. Both a consciousness and a solidarity of citizens arose from the tragedy and rubble of the quakes. These new sentiments modified the political and social identity of the great metropolis, as new groups of homeless women were incorporated into the

Expressing political preferences. Photo by Patricia Aridjis.



general democratic struggle from their specific conditions of life, work and gender.

An outstanding example of this process has been the seamstresses guilds. From the ruins of the clandestine sweatshops where they worked, they constructed a nation-wide, independent, democratic union with feminist orientation.

The magnitude of misfortune altered the political logic and the very dynamic of social movements and political groupings as well as of the government itself. The spontaneous response of the majority of the population in the face of state inefficiency and authoritarianism generated what has been called a counterpart to the physical phenomenon of the earthquake, the political phenomenon of the rise of civil society.

We believe that the capacity to organize themselves demonstrated by the inhabitants of the city on that occasion is linked with and present in political events following 1985, such as the electoral race of July 1988.

Women in Mass Movements

The second half of the 1980's thus condensed different elements of the process undergone by the nation: the already mentioned economic crisis; the political crisis of legitimacy of the governing party that makes the development of other new political options possible; and the growth and consolidation of social movements, among which the women's movement occupies an important place.

Between 1986 and 1988 the country lived very intensively the broad political eruption of the masses. Here, the common line of action was the search for a democratic alternative that would establish limits to institutional power and create a system to counterbalance this.

There was a profound internal crisis in the official party expressed at that moment, both in its structure and composition as well as in its historical capacity to generate the needed social consensus to be able to govern. On the other hand, conservative and militant rightist positions developed considerably through the National Action Party (PAN) while spectacular growth in influence and organization was seen in the country's liberal, leftist opposition.

This opposition, overcoming a tradition of deeply rooted sectarianism and division, gave rise in that period to a broad popular alternative front for electoral participation: the National Democratic Front,

which gathered together five political parties and multiple social movements.

The official results of the presidential and legislative elections (which gave 51% to the PRI, 30.5% to the FDN and 18% to the PAN) made evident the changes in Mexico's contemporary political profile.

In the case of women it is interesting to note that this democratic political opportunity presented them with the need to define their political plans. Now these plans had to be defined in reference not only to themselves or to the sectors in which they participated, but rather in more general terms of a long term political movement.

Possible social and political alliances, democratic perspectives, the particular ways in which these may be articulated with feminist demands and even the specific partisan preferences of women in the recent political context, have all been incorporated into the debate.

In reference to this latter aspect, there are few studies that focus on the issue of women's electoral participation. This makes any follow-up of their participation in this area difficult. Furthermore, polls and estimates of electoral behavior have begun only very recently in Mexico.

This is due, we believe, to the fact that the political hegemony of the governing party has been unchanged throughout the 60 years of the PRI government. Furthermore, only recently have specific experiences of political participation in some regions of the country resulted in the development of local electoral studies.

From this information, which we believe is exclusively valid as indicators (since the biases of different polls do not permit the generalization of their results and only through follow-up of these in later studies will guidelines of electoral preference be truly shown) we may note the following:

In regional experiences where the opposition has succeeded in altering traditional, national partisan logic, the sex variable seems to have had particular importance.

Both in the states of Chihuahua and Baja California Norte where the PAN has strong support, as well as in Oaxaca where the COCEI (Isthmus Coalition of Workers, Farmers and Students) is an important political force, the opinions and electoral preferences manifested by women polled correspond to these new tendencies.

But by contrasting the national level of the distribution of general electoral preferences and preferences by sex for the major presidential candidates in June of 1988, the following is reported:

It is also interesting to note the new rise over the last years of old demands for penalization of rape and legalization of abortion

Candidate	General Preference	Preference by sex
Cárdenas (FDN)	32.4%	31%
Salinas (PRI)	32 %	37%
Clouthier(PAN)	13.3%	12%

Nevertheless, the fairness of this appraisal, its statistical validity and its eventual analysis may only be carried out as new electoral opportunities allow the evaluation of these variables of information.

Growing Gender Organizations

As for women organized on gender issues, the need to give the movement a clearer political profile and outlining guidelines for participation in this democratic search, explains the emergence over the last few years of three women's organizations:

Women in the Struggle for Democracy (Mujeres en Lucha por la Democracia) which joins close to 400 professional, intellectual, feminist and political women.

The Benita Galeana Coordinator (Coordinadora Benita Galeana) which assembles 33 women's union organizations, neighborhood groups, feminist groups and political parties; and the Network against Violence and for Women's Rights, (Red contra la violencia y por los derechos de la mujer) which, reviving specific gender demands, also calls together many of the participants of the two other groups.

Women of different socio-economic backgrounds and diverse politics meet in these three organizations. Nevertheless, they have succeeded in generating accords and commitments for actions.

It is also interesting to note the new rise over the last year of old demands for penalization of rape and legalization of abortion.

With reference to abortion, today's legal initiative elaborated by important sectors of the movement is outstanding. It has been approved by social organizations and political groups and has been presented to the Nation's House of Deputies by legislators of different parties represented in this chamber.

This initiative again takes up what was presented in 1979 but it constitutes an advance, because of the greater public presence of women today, and to the con-

Looking to the future. International Women's Day. Photo by Angeles Torrejón/Imagenlatina.



Time passes. Photos by Patricia Aridjis.



solidation of their organizations and the consciousness-raising that has occurred in important sectors of public opinion.

New Openings for Women

As a result of its electoral difficulties, the government has begun to respond to popular demands. In the case of women—who have lived an especially extreme

form of poverty and have seen the deterioration of their way of life due to the economic crisis and governmental policies— new public policies take into account:

The presidential initiative to increase the sentence for rape to 20 years;

The creation of Support Centers for Raped Women as well as three Investigative Agencies for Sexual Crimes in the metropolitan area;

The creation of forums for public discussion of women's issues;

The consideration of underground abortion as a public health problem and its debate in the highest governmental circles, especially those responsible for the administration of health and justice and the possible creation of the Women's Public Prosecutor as the specific agency where women could denounce and make their rights count in the event of any type of aggression or discrimination.

The possibility of the State's implementation of these policies as part of their modernization plan has thrown into the arena of political debate the positions of women who support these measures in different ways and those of conservative and ecclesiastical sectors who beligerently oppose them.

Among these latter groups, notable is the performance of the group Prolife (Provida) that has come out against abortion and against any type of sexual liberalization. There have even been acts of violence in cultural contexts, such as forceful closures of art exhibitions.



Various women's groups linked with workers have formulated alternative proposals for an eventual democratic exercise of power in the Mexican capital in the areas of safety, health and basic supplies

These attitudes of the State mean the women's movement is again discussing its political plans and the alliances and possible strategies necessary to achieve their aims.

Thus today, the discussion takes place among women who support and see the advantages of governmental measures (among them prominent members of the official party who have endeavored for years to open partisan organizations and to promote women's demands, among them Beatriz Paredes and Gloria Brandenfer) and women from feminist or leftist traditions, who fear for the movement's future autonomy in the case of these policies being implemented.

Between these extremes there are also sectors of women who consider it relevant that the movement itself present proposals for public policies with a clear sense of feminist responsibility. This is because they believe that an essential condition for the maintenance of autonomy is the consolidation and achievement of demands that give life to the movement.

Thus various women's groups linked with workers have formulated alternative proposals for an eventual democratic exercise of power in the Mexican capital in the areas of safety, health and basic supplies.

These proposals reflect years of accumulated political labor, which include support centers for raped women, abortion and mother-child medical attention as well as community level mechanisms for price controls on basic articles and for the creation of consumption cooperatives.

The idea is that these proposals be submitted to debate in the capital's legislature: the Assembly of Representatives in Mexico City. However, several of its postulates have already been taken up again in presidential initiatives and in the designing of public policies which we mentioned earlier.

On the other hand, what stand out are the size and relative consolidation of the movement in recent years. This is made evident in several ways, ranging from the annual Women's Day celebration on March 8, when large numbers of women from all classes gather in downtown Mexico City, to the broad support for abortion and against rape in public petitions gathering more than a thousand signatures, many of them of personalities recognized in political and cultural spheres.

Likewise, this process of discussion generated in different social, political and academic circles (union organizations, neighborhood groups, political parties in-

cluding the PRI, and teaching and research centers) expresses the coming of the eventual need for women to cease to be exclusively situated in specific, otherwise limited organizations. They will have to move on to being more integrated and to having a greater presence and responsibility in the overall processes of the organizations in question.

Some sectors call for doing away with or for increasing the functions of Women's Committees in social and political organizations. On another level, there are sectors that advocate introducing greater interdisciplinary elements into women's studies.

Future Goals...

Within the political panorama described above and with the tradition generated by the movement itself, women organized around gender demands in the country face different aims for the future, among which may be mentioned:

The real possibility for growth and development even more as a broad social movement and for influencing, from its specific, women's orientation, the democratizing process that the country is experiencing;

This will be possible in terms of what demands may be formulated and developed in accord with the collective feeling of women and what broad political plan may be delineated that attends to their public participation;

This design, both in the articulation of the axes of the struggle as well as its short, medium and long term political objectives, although they exist, must be delved into more deeply and extended in the coming years;

This task implies the generation of a wide political-ideological debate that permits the articulation and planning of possible social and political alliances, along with democratic participation;

It also implies, within the movement itself, valuing the different expressions of the struggle, developing tolerance in the face of political and personal differences, recognizing leadership and allowing the imagination to develop.

The path taken, the experience accumulated and the resolution of these goals among others, permits one to suppose that in the coming years the women's movement in Mexico will be consolidated, it will make advances in its demands and it will contribute to modifying social relations defined by gender. ■

There are women who consider it important that the movement propose public policies with a clear feminist perspective.