



# **Women and Politics in Latin America**

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Nikki Craske

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Nikki Craske

# Acronyms

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## 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
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## 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
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**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
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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
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**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

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# 1

## Argument

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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.