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LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN. WHAT STRATEGIES HAVE LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN
USED TO ESTABLISH A STRONG POLITICAL VOICE DESPITE THE PERSISTENCE OF
GENDER BIAS?

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Throughout the 20th century, women in Latin America fought valiantly for a say in the political space. Eventually, over the last fifteen years, they have gained more power in the government, where they influence decision making. After a period of social revolutions, which advocated for equal rights in Europe and North America, Latin America would soon witness the same. During this period in Latin America, women started questioning their roles in the political arena, hence pushing for equal opportunities. In addition, upon the end of the push for independence from foreign powers, women in Latin America further pushed for equal representation in their newly formed independent nations. Whereas, men continued to deny women rights, they had to adopt strategies that would enable them to establish a strong political voice as discussed in this paper.

A key aspect used to drive the women's agenda in Latin America was the use of motherhood to mobilize women. This is the case of the mothers who pushed for reforms in Latin America in the 1970s. For instance, in the 1970s a dozen women gathered to protest in Buenos Aires. This action would later become a full-blown revolution, which changed the way the world viewed motherhood.¹ This act of defiance shows that motherhood is a radical force that can lead to changes in the politics of a country. In 1977, about a dozen women gathered in the Plaza de Mayo, outside the president's official residence. The government outlawed mass gatherings, but these women were protesting the loss of their children, which was occasioned by Argentina's military activities. During that era, more than 30,000 children and youths were abducted by government forces across the country. A year after the first assembly at the venue, the protest

¹ 1. "The mothers who started a revolution in Latin America." ELEPHANT. Last modified June 29, 2020. <https://elephant.art/mothers-started-revolution-latin-america/>

had grown in numbers and was becoming a political force to reckon with.² Though the three founders of the protest were kidnapped and murdered, the movement did not stop as they were demanding answers from the state. The activities of this group continued until 2006, and over the years, it led to prosecutions against the junta members, the remains of the missing children were identified, and the remains of those murdered were recovered.³ The motivation of the mothers was their emotional strength. By coming together they managed to challenge their role in a patriarchal society.

The Latin American women also advocated for special opportunities in the political landscape, by advocating for some seats reserved for them in a political contest. By 2014, sixteen out of the twenty Latin American nations had embraced quota laws for the national assemblies. Virtually, this move also applied in the lower tiers of administration, like the local and regional assemblies. In some areas, the quota rules applied in the executive and judiciary as well, though it was uneven.⁴ Besides, women in Latin American countries, who have been elected into office have formed women parliamentary groups that helped in raising awareness and also presented proposals advocating for human rights. Due to the mobilization of women in parliaments and the civil society, changes have been witnessed regarding policy decisions that give women a voice in decision making. For instance, by coming together, women have managed to shape policy and the political agenda in Latin America. A particular example of how they influenced change is in the late 1990s when women in Latin America successfully managed to push for legislation, making it mandatory for the government to assist the victims of domestic violence. During this

² Htun, M. "Women in Political Power in Latin America." 2002.

<https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/chapters/women-in-parliament/mujeres-en-el-parlamento-mas-alla-de-los-numeros-2002-EN-chapter-1.pdf>

³ *Ibid*

⁴ Htun, "Women in political Power," 2.

era, Latin American countries adopted measures to improve reproductive health, family planning, and different AIDS control programs.⁵ This was possible because women pushed the agenda. Furthermore, countries that embrace the quota laws have more women in power.

Political activism is not the only strategy women use to establish a strong political voice. Women in Latin America have engaged in hunger strikes, work stoppages, and protests, and in various instances armed insurgency. However, in past years, women across have embraced grassroots politics interactions focusing on realizing social as well as political justice in this region. Documentaries are being made to recount the role women played in society in advocating for political and social space. For instance, The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo exists today to remind women where they have come from. Additionally, similar movements that happened in countries like Chile in response to the Pinochet Dictatorship is available.⁶ This documentary not only shows the struggles of women when pursuing justice but presents the female agenda in Chile's political situation in the late 1980s. However, the best-remembered story is of Rigoberta Menchu, a Guatemalan Nobel laureate whose story is best told in her autobiography compiled by Elizabeth de Burgos. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for highlighting the atrocities meted on the native Guatemalans by the military regime.⁷ As a result, her move led to international criticism that resulted in the peace process. In addition, In Cuba, the Feminine Club of Cuba was established in 1918, and in 1921 the National Federation of Feminine Association of Cuba was formed. In its first meeting in 1923, they resolved to campaign for equal political, social, and economic rights of women.

⁵ Zimmerman, L. "Women in Latin America." *Latin American Resource Center Resources Focusing on Women in Latin America* (n.d.), 1-8. http://stonecenter.tulane.edu/uploads/Women_in_Latin_America_updated-1352754376.pdf

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ THE NOBEL PRIZE. "The Nobel Peace Prize 1992." NobelPrize.org. Accessed December 10, 2020. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1992/tum/lecture/>

One of the hurdles women in Latin America face is attaining an influential position in a political party. The political parties produce candidates through nominations. Depending on how a party decides to come up with its election list depends on many factors, one being their commitment to equal opportunity for women in the political space. Sadly, the low number of women in leadership positions indicate that political entities in Latin America are still structures with sexist tendencies. Even where there is legislation on quotas, some parties still ignore it. In nations like Panama, Chile, El Salvador, Paraguay, and Guatemala, the number of women in leadership positions does not surpass 20%. Furthermore, Chile, a country that is yet to legally adopt the quotas rule had 9.7% of female candidates between 1989 and 2005.⁸ However, the trend is changing. Political parties in Latin America are starting to embrace the aspect of training women and offering them financial support to develop their political careers. This is largely driven by women leaders who are determined to increase their numbers in influential positions. For instance, in Mexico, the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) has 53.2% of women registered in its ranks, while the National Action Party (PAN) has 46.7% active women in its activities. The Christian-Social reformist Party (PRSC) in the Dominican Republic has a registration rate of 44.325 among women politicians. By having increased membership in the political parties, Latin American women end up having equal opportunity to vie for political seats in a free and fair manner.

The media plays a huge role in pushing the gender idea in Latin America. Unfortunately, for a long time, women have not been given the same platform as their male counterparts in Latin America. Women have been pushing for equal coverage of their election campaigns. This

⁸. Llanos, B., and K. Sample. "FROM WORDS TO ACTION: Best Practices for Women's Participation in Latin American Political Parties." *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance*, 2008, 1-62.
<https://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/from-words-to-action-best-practices-for-women-s-participation-in-latin-american-political-parties-pdf.pdf>

is because the media offers them the public space needed to debate and compete, and acts as the main source of information for the masses. Notably, women watch groups continue to push for a correction in the disparity between the coverage of women and men campaigns, as they tend to focus more on the men. Ofelia Dominguez Navarro, a Cuban writer, lawyer, and feminist was at the forefront in pushing for the rights of women. Through her work as a journalist, she published her views in different newspapers, and in 1935, she became the first woman to head the newspaper division in the country.⁹

In conclusion, political activism is not new to Latin America. In several Latin American countries, women fought for voting rights in 1940s and 50s. Since then many women across have ascended to the highest leadership positions. A perfect example is Isabel Martinez, who became the first female president in Argentina, following the death of the incumbent and her husband president Juan Peron. Chile has also had a female president called Michelle Bachelet, who served from 2006 to 2010. Or that reason, the conditions are changing, but there is still work to be done in most countries, not only in Latin America but in the world. In Latin America, the political, economic, and legal rights of women have changed, but a change in mindset will take longer.

⁹ Beezley, W. H., & Ewell, J. (1997). *The human tradition in modern Latin America*. Rowman & Littlefield.

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