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**WOMEN AND POLITICS
IN LATIN AMERICA
AND THE CARIBBEAN**

**SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT DIVISION
WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT UNIT**



ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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UNITED NATIONS

September , 1989

Santiago, Chile

LC/L.515
September 1989

This study was prepared by Women and Development Unit, Social Development
Division of ECLAC.

CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION	5
I. THE CONTEXT OF PARTICIPATION	7
II. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BY WOMEN, OR PARTICIPATION BY WOMEN IN POLITICS	11
1. General considerations	11
2. Political participation by women and social class	13
3. Women's participation in politics	16
4. Participation or survival strategies?	23
5. Latin American feminism: political participation or other forms of political involvement?	25
III. SOME FINAL OBSERVATIONS	29
BIBLIOGRAPHY	31

INTRODUCTION

Observations about the limited extent of political participation by women have become almost commonplace. Nonetheless, contemporary history provides more than one example that belies this idea:

In 1789 in Paris: "The fifth of October dawned with a demonstration in front of the town hall by women from les Halles and the surrounding area. However, their leadership was soon taken up by high-ranking cadres, such as Maillard, who had been one of the leaders of those who stormed the Bastille. The women, who numbered five or perhaps ten thousand, decided to march on Versailles, thereby giving the demonstration a completely different character, particularly because it sparked off another march by the men of the armed national guard, who had gathered around midday and who followed the same route, with their general, Lafayette, at their head" (Vovelle, 1979, pp. 147-148).

Women do not participate?: "The Russian revolution was begun by women. On International Women's Day in 1917, women textile workers went out on strike in Petrograd and called on all workers to support them. Their watchwords were modest: higher wages, down with autocracy and down with war" (Lund, 1977, p. 5).

Another example: on 8 March 1908 women organized a march in the streets of New York to commemorate the 1857 protests of women textile workers.

And yet another: "women have not been quietly standing by. They have been at the barricades, they have been taking part in strikes, in protest marches and in the hunger strike too. I have been on it for six days. We want to value ourselves as women, as people, as well as this democracy, that hasn't been won easily; we are not saying that, now that we have democracy, 'just go on and live your lives in peace', no, we have been calling out loud and clear that we are not going to be belittled just because we are country women. We have to respect ourselves and we have to teach our children to do the same; that is where we have to start to organize. These are the peasant women's demands" (Mejía de Morales and others, 1985).

And finally, in the course of the effort to achieve greater democracy in Latin America, a vast social base has arisen: women. "Women miners speak for all miners in Bolivia; mothers speak for their politically active children in Argentina; women heads of

household speak for their barrios in Mexico; women political leaders stand side by side with men in most of our countries. And, along with the demands made by different classes, ethnic groups and other sectors, attention is being drawn to the specific demands made by women: equity, equal pay for equal work, State support for domestic work, control over their own bodies, and visibility" (Arizpe, 1988, p. 7).

Since the turn of the century, women have come a long way as regards political participation. The swiftness with which they have emerged as a force and voiced their demands, their increased visibility, acquisition of full citizenship and greater education make it impossible to conceive of building a long-term future without their participation.

The issue is not just one of women as a group or as individuals, but of changing our society. The analysis of participation by women sheds light on many other subjects: social movements, cultural change, the incorporation of marginalized groups, the extension of citizenship, the new relationship between the private and public spheres, political parties, power relationships, democracy.

Some of the many images of this kaleidoscope are explored in the following pages. This examination of participation by women is set within the framework of the general outlook in Latin America and the Caribbean as viewed by ECLAC and the United Nations.

The question of women's participation is approached from a variety of different angles: their membership in specific socio-economic groups, their links to traditional parties, the feminist perspective and participation as a survival strategy.

The following discussion includes no categorical statements --only possible approaches as we seek to sift through the vast, albeit still insufficient, body of knowledge that has been accumulated. There are many gaps. Nonetheless, the material that is reviewed here reflects a special sort of vitality, that of societies whose fabric is interwoven with different voices --joyous, dramatic, hopeful voices-- which we hope to recapture.

I. THE CONTEXT OF PARTICIPATION

Within the United Nations, the idea of participation is seen within the context of the quest for equity as an intrinsic component of the type of development sought by Latin America and the Caribbean. It constitutes an ethical stance and a commitment to action whereby the elimination of poverty and the creation of equitable societies are viewed as being inherent in the values of contemporary society.

The subject of participation has a well-established place among the concerns of the United Nations in respect of its various areas of activity, especially during recent decades. Ever since the initial discussions on this issue were held at the first meetings organized by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) (UNRISD, 1981), it has been clear that, far from being an isolated term, participation is a value which has to do with relations among different social groups and that the extent to which this value is upheld depends upon the nature and functions ascribed to the State, our concept of government and, in broader terms, our concept of society as a whole. The issue involves ideological choices and political commitments much more than it does technical definitions or organizational problems. Indeed participation has come to be seen as an essentially ethical question, in that it is based on the idea that the creation of a society is an ongoing process in which all should take part. Clearly, if this is to take place, then all members of society should, in principle, have an equal opportunity to participate. Because existing patterns of dependence and inequality are, by their very nature, obstacles to such participation, society is fragmented and decisions are often taken on the basis of the consent or dissent of various sectors depending upon the amount of power they wield. Participation has thus become one of the goals and objectives of development, and this is expressed in the increasing involvement of the most underprivileged groups in the formulation of policies which affect them and society as a whole.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the subject of participation has been closely linked to the concept of integral development since the 1970s (ECLAC, 1975). Ever since that time the idea has consistently been upheld that development should be viewed as an effort to achieve well-being, social justice and participation. This idea has become even more firmly entrenched in the 1980s as efforts are

made to promote the genuine participation of the population in the process of economic, social and human development (ECLAC, 1981).

Viewed in this light, participation is a collective activity entailing an organization, a strategy and a course of action aimed at changing the distribution of property or of social power.

The success, the continuity and the effects of the action taken by the groups participating in social movements therefore depend upon the prevailing political model and the role it assigns to these groups. Broader participation presupposes changes in existing power relations, and the political dimension is hence a fundamental consideration in gaining an understanding of specific social situations. Political encouragement and tolerance of participation, or, on the other hand, its political restriction or repression, establish the boundaries within which the various social groups define their strategies.

The subject of participation also figures in the current debate concerning the democratization of Latin America and the Caribbean. A democratic system is, by definition, more open and more participatory than an authoritarian system is. Although there have been models in Latin America involving little political participation and yet a great deal of social mobility, these models have not become consolidated or produced lasting change under either military or civilian populist régimes. Effective participation is only possible when it arises out of a strengthening of civil society, when collective action is both taken and valued, and when the prevailing development styles are open and equitable rather than concentrative (ECLAC, 1982).

"The recent resurgence of concern about social development has, in many cases, not been coupled with a proper interpretation of the causes of social development problems or with proposals for action based on such an interpretation. Indeed, many current social development proposals are confined to the area of social services and thus sidestep the basic fact that unequal access to such services is only one, and perhaps not the most important aspect of the overall inequality which exists (ECLAC, 1988a, p. 4).

A wide spectrum of participation options exist in the region: participation in political parties, short-term social mobilization, social movements, pacts or agreements which in many cases take the form of social or political coalitions, issue-specific neighbourhood campaigns, and various combinations of the above. All forms of participation, however, involve two different forces which sometimes run counter to one another and other times are mutually complementary. In one, the emphasis is on inward-directed participation within the organization, while in the other, participation is articulated within the organization but is directed towards society or towards other social sectors. The relationship between the two is complex, since, on the one hand, social participation efforts often serve to resolve local, internal problems and, on the other, participation within a limited sphere, if it is well organized and has a broader purpose, may transcend its origins and achieve a social impact. When speaking about the agents of participation in Latin America and the Caribbean,

reference is usually being made primarily to workers and peasants, even though many different types of participatory processes are occurring simultaneously within the region, including everything from voting for political representatives or the formation of specific labour coalitions, to violent struggles by workers or peasants to assert their basic rights. Many different sorts of participation demands have been made, some of which have grown into broad-based social movements, while others have remained confined to the local community level.

The subject is even more complex because the authoritarian origins of Latin American ideological constructs are reflected in the varying degrees of difficulty which all the models have had in opening themselves up to new social groups and incorporating new ideas. This situation has been exacerbated by the governments' long history of instability and by the constant changes occurring in the balance of forces among major social sectors, since this has inevitably caused them to harden their positions and has sharpened the conflicts among them. Furthermore, the individual countries' internal social, economic, ethnic and cultural heterogeneity has led to striking contrasts in lifestyles and great inequality in the people's objective living conditions, which in and of themselves promote margination and exclusion rather than participation.

II. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BY WOMEN, OR PARTICIPATION BY WOMEN IN POLITICS

1. General considerations

Ever since its founding, the United Nations has played a particularly active and influential role in promoting participation by women in development and in economic, social and political life. A number of United Nations agencies have promoted initiatives and carried out activities aimed at encouraging women to participate in various aspects of development. An increasingly solid foundation has been provided for these activities by the successive reformulations of the concept of development introduced by the International Development Strategy, which emphasizes development's social aspects and focuses more explicitly on the people who are its agents and beneficiaries. Numerous studies and research projects have continued to delve further into these questions. In the context of these efforts, the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies constitute a particularly notable milestone (ECLAC, 1982).

When discussing the participation of women and young people as social actors in Latin America and the Caribbean, the main focus is usually on their potential for becoming social actors through such participation. In very general terms, women's social participation can be said to be subject, in the first instance, to limitations similar to those affecting men: the style of development that has been adopted, the existence of a democratic societal model or the lack thereof, and the encouragement, discouragement or repression of participation. At the same level of generality, however, other factors come into play in the case of women: the prevailing cultural model, the socially-accepted role of women, and the society's degree of traditionalism all of which is primarily expressed in the country's level of development and degree of modernization. Within this framework, women usually participate less than men do in areas where they share labour-related or political grievances with men. Although movements which include both sexes do exist, they are usually not the ones that elicit the greatest response from women.

In very general terms, it may be asserted that traditional democratic models tend to foster a modernization of women's roles rather than genuine participation on their part. Their entry into the labour market is accepted, but the central element of such

participation is seen as being that they are working in order to benefit their household and family. In this model, their participation is confined within clearly-drawn boundaries and is subject to a great deal of control.

In authoritarian models, the State's attitude towards participation is negative. It usually promotes a woman-as-housewife model, although some women may occupy senior government posts.

Urbanization has had an impact on women's participation in the region, partly because in the cities the family exercises less control over its members and because other agents of socialization are present. Religion has also been a highly influential factor in the region as regards participation by women.

The incorporation of many social actors as active participants in Latin America has been a long, conflict-ridden process which is still not complete, and the incorporation of women has by no means been among the easiest of these processes.

In addition to the legal barriers (women's suffrage is quite recent), until the Second World War political participation by women was seen as being unacceptable, despite the fact that some women held positions of power. For that matter, throughout history not all women in positions of power have been in favour of participation by women. In 1871 Queen Victoria stated that she would do everything in her power to put a stop to "this nonsense" of women's rights, which she saw as being an offense against the whole idea of femininity and demeanour. She maintained that women would become disagreeable and heartless if they were allowed to "forsake their gender", and she asked what would become of the protection which men were supposed to give to the "weaker sex" (Strackey, 1941). From the very start women's struggle to participate has not been embraced by all women, nor has it been for the sake of all. While some women have sought political power on behalf of the groups to which they belong or their own interests, not all of them have furthered the cause of participation by the citizenry or promoted specific women's demands within the framework of broader social demands.

The issue has not been an easy one to address, and its analysis is made even more difficult by the fragmentary and imprecise nature of the available information. It was not until the last decade (and the United Nations Decade for Women has inarguably made an extremely valuable contribution in this respect) that more rigorous analyses began to be systematized and a large number of studies and research papers started to be produced that constituted the beginnings of a body of theoretical and practical knowledge concerning participation by women. It is a controversial subject having many subjective aspects and emotional overtones, and at times it is therefore impossible to ascertain in whose name the studies are written or how representative are the various opinions that are expressed.

Be this as it may, within the context of the democratization processes of Latin America and the Caribbean, women have been involved in many social movements, grass-roots organizations and co-operative efforts and have brought pressure to bear in respect of labour

grievances and other demands. They have in some way collectivized many private and individual experiences and have made progress towards the objective of participating in their societies as full citizens.

2. Political participation by women and social class

Women's participation and the form it takes are strongly influenced by the class to which the women belong and their organizational opportunities and capabilities. "Insofar as most aspects of participation are concerned, the self-identity of women as such probably remains subordinate to their identity as members of privileged or underprivileged classes" (Wolfe, 1975, pp. 11).

This idea is in keeping with the fact that, in addition to her identification with a given class or social group, a woman's status is also defined by her economic situation, the powerfulness of the class to which she belongs, its average educational level, cultural traditions and the ideology it is capable of generating.

The indications are that upper-class women tend to participate politically by voting, see themselves as defending their privileges and, in critical situations where those privileges are endangered, try to mobilize larger middle-class sectors, which are often receptive to such efforts (Barbieri, 1986).

Middle-income urban women display a variety of modes and degrees of participation since they are a more heterogeneous group. Their participation depends upon the access they have to consumer goods and to education and, at times, upon whether or not they are members of the labour force. Their political options are generally quite limited and their votes are often manipulated. Typical exceptions to the above include social campaigns by teachers, most of whom are female, and human rights movements, in which external guidance has played a crucial role.

Housewives of the upper middle class usually tend to express political views similar to those of their husbands and are often opposed to any form of change. Those of the lower middle class are generally more devoted adherents of the ideology of consumption, defend the status quo and reject the idea of the equality of the sexes, and their votes are often easy targets for manipulation.

Some studies indicate that the women belonging to the very heterogeneous low-income sectors in the region mobilize in response to some types of objective situations which may have the effect of increasing their awareness and, frequently, radicalizing them in the course of social struggles. Four main factors appear to come into play in these largely spontaneous movements, which are often sparked by a specific act of repression: a) a gathering, whether in the workplace or home, of many women who have the same immediate interests; b) some specific event which both aggravates certain problems and prompts these women to regard them as collective problems; c) the existence of some type of neighbourhood or community

organization; and d) the existence of some sort of external mobilizing force (a political party, trade union, etc.).

Usually, once the emergency situation has passed, the women's participation in such movements either diminishes or ceases altogether. The main causes of such demobilization are related to the women's material living conditions as well as to ideological factors associated with their role within the gender-based division of labour (León and Rothlisberger, 1978).

The economic activity of lower-income sectors is probably one of the most influential factors in determining these women's opportunities for organization and participation. Since the market is the main resource-allocation mechanism in modern class-based societies, women's disadvantageous position vis-à-vis the market, even in comparison to that of men in the same class, is one of the major obstacles to their participation. A typical example of popular participation in Latin America is the pressure brought to bear in order to obtain proper housing, and women have played a leading role in land take-overs in the region. Another common form of participation by housewives in lower-income sectors is seen during labour crises involving their husbands, such as strikes, trade-union conflicts, etc. In such cases women often participate actively in watchdog committees, conduct marches and demonstrations, and form support committees. Women workers only seem to have more opportunities for participation than housewives. The impact of the predominant ideology, their disadvantageous position with respect to the market, the burden of domestic work which leaves them very little time to participate, and the responsibilities as head of household which they often must shoulder all militate against their mobilization. In extreme situations they become very active, but their participation in these instances essentially relates to the general objectives of the sector. It would seem that, in order for the women in lower-income sectors to participate on a more continuous basis, a more comprehensive and integrated forward-looking political strategy is required that would permit them to visualize longer-term objectives.

Participation by lower-income women differs according to whether they live in urban or rural zones as well. In urban areas, women workers generally delegate their union representation to men, whether because of the incompatibility of their roles as worker-housewife-wife-mother, fear of reprisals by their employers, a desire to retreat into their private lives or fear of ridicule. They are more fearful of being unemployed or of being dismissed than men are, and are often used as strike-breakers. They are active in the unions on an ongoing basis and occupy leadership positions only in certain small sectors. They become active participants during times of crisis, but their efforts in such instances are on behalf of the workers in general rather than specific women's demands. Recent studies by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) indicate that some changes are taking place in the unionization of women, which appears to be on the increase.

No participation is usually seen among women domestic workers, and domestic servants have voiced very few collective demands. They have no organizations and share the problems of other lower-income working women.

The lower-income women who do not work outside the home generally belong to traditional working-sector families (employment in construction, industry, transport, extractive activities of high-productivity enterprises and in enterprises having large capital investments). As noted earlier, their participation revolves around their neighbourhood or their husband's work.

Lower-income rural women, who constitute perhaps the most vulnerable and disadvantaged sector, mainly participate in cases of group conflicts, especially on behalf of the demands of peasants and farmworkers (Barbieri, 1986).

In sum, participation by women is influenced by the group to which they belong, requires outside training and stimuli, and is self-reinforcing. Although no exhaustive studies have been done on the subject, it would appear that their fathers exert a powerful influence over these women's political education.

As mentioned above, the differing motivations for women's participation are linked to the living conditions of the groups to which they belong. Thus, women in the lower-income sectors are motivated by their desire to improve their family's or community group's situation. Their participation must necessarily take a collective form and often serves as a survival strategy. Women in middle-income groups are often mobilized by more personal motivations and by political or labour-related factors or by a desire to redress women's grievances. Women in upper-income sectors do not participate a great deal and instead tend to modernize their traditional roles, with the exception of those small groups that enter into conflict with their own social class. Nonetheless, in general the participation of women in organizations also appears to depend, perhaps primarily, on the cultural values which define their role and on the extent to which they learn to undertake participatory action. The latter element is extremely important for women, since they usually do not learn very much about participation from their life experiences, and their involvement in organizations therefore gives them a new perception of their own potential (ECLAC, 1986).

3. Women's participation in politics

"My interview is all about politics, but I don't understand politics at all. I don't know, its just something that doesn't have much to do with me. I don't know, I thought that my interview would be completely different I thought that our talk was going to be, well, a conversation among women, and it never occurred to me that it was going to be about politics ... I don't know anything about politics" (Pires do Rio de Caldeira, 1987, p. 89).

The way in which women relate to politics is, even at first glance, both complex and ambivalent. Even though women have a more visible presence in political parties than in other forms of participation, there is very little literature on the subject. Of all the studies on women done in recent decades, very few deal with their participation in political parties.

In the 1970s and especially in the 1980s, however, more such studies have begun to be produced. The first writings on women in politics have two main characteristics: their focus is historical and most of them are written by women who played a leading role in the events in question.

A number of books dealing with women's involvement in politics are a blend of history and literature and are, in fact, historical novels about women. Others are a combination of history and sociology and their object is to help improve the status of women in society. This school of thought tends to view women's political behaviour as being closely related to their involvement in production processes.

Another school which arose early on has focused on legal questions and in particular, especially in the beginning, on the struggle to win the vote. A valuable contribution has also been made in this area by later studies which provide more academic analyses of the fight for universal suffrage as an historical event and as an important element in women's collective memory.

In the 1960s --after women's right to vote in the region had become firmly established-- the work being done on this subject (what little of it there was) moved on to discuss the problem of the quantitative incorporation of women into politics and their participation in political parties and as parliamentary representatives.

In the 1970s, during the early days of the "new" feminism, such writings began to take a critical look at politics. They include analyses of women's participation in elections and their supposed conservatism, interpretations of Marianism, inquiries into the

implications of ethnic origin and racial mixes, and research on the limitations placed on women by culture and tradition.

As a result of political conditions in the region, especially the alternating periods of civilian and military governments, attention then focused on other subjects, and a number of books appeared concerning mass movements (Viezzler, 1976 and Burgos, 1983) and specific movements such as the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" (Bouquet, 1983), as well as others based on projects or meetings dealing with popular participation by women (ECLAC, 1984 and Jelin (comp.), 1987) and literature about the participation of women in revolutionary movements (Randall, 1977).

Most of the literature on political participation by women analyses specific cases and deals with crisis situations. Broader-based, comparable data which would give a more detailed picture of women's involvement in party politics are virtually non-existent. A survey conducted in 1987 by the Inter-American Commission of Women demonstrates that women in Latin America and the Caribbean have only recently achieved full citizenship status. Of the 30 countries in the region covered by the survey, only four instituted universal suffrage prior to the 1940s, 23 did so between 1942 and 1957, and the remaining three countries did so in the 1960s.

Women's acquisition of full legal capacity came even later --and has not come yet in some countries. (In some, their vote was still optional until the late 1960s.) According to the survey, as of 30 June 1987 the percentages of women in these countries' congresses or parliaments ranged from 0% to 13.3%.

Three of the countries for which information is available (Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Lucia and Uruguay) had no women in their national legislative bodies at the time of their latest elections (1982-1984). According to another source, in 1984, when elections were held in Uruguay, no women were even running for office, even though Uruguay had two women senators as early as 1942 (CIM, 1988a).

The trend is one of increasing participation in other countries, but in most cases this process is very slow and, in some, has been intermittent. For example, in Ecuador women held only four out of the 75 congressional seats in 1984, just one in 1986 and three in 1987.

Other interesting cases include Costa Rica, where women's congressional participation rose from 0% in 1962 to 12.3% in 1986 (seven out of 57 seats); Suriname, where it increased from 5.1% in 1975 to 13.3% in 1985 (four out of 30 seats); Brazil, where it climbed from 0.5% (two out of 409 seats) in 1962 to 5.3% (26 out of 487 seats) in 1986; and Mexico, where it went from 3.8% (eight out of 210 seats) in 1961 to 10.8% (43 out of 400 seats) in 1985.

Notable decreases were seen in Nicaragua, where the proportion fell from 21.6% (11 out of 51 seats) in 1979 to 13.5% (13 out of 96 seats) in 1984; in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, where the decline was from 10.5% (two out of 19 seats) in 1979 to 5.3% (one out of 19 seats) in 1984; and El Salvador, from 11.7% (seven out of 60 seats) in 1982 to 3.3% (two out of 60 seats) in 1985. In the other countries,

the variation was less marked, the percentage rose and then fell, or women held no congressional seats until the beginning of the 1970s.

The minimum age required in order to hold public office is the same for men and women in all countries and ranges from 18 years (for posts in Colombia) up to 40 years (Uruguay, Ecuador and, for the Supreme Court and the Chief of State, Guatemala) (CIM, 1988c).

As the above information indicates, present-day political participation by women in leadership positions is very limited, although depending on the party ideology and structure, there may be differences in the middle strata and at the grass-roots level which these figures do not measure. Women are not usually found among the leaders of political parties, on the stage during party assemblies, or at the rostrum during public acts, and there are few women at the ministerial level.

Political parties' attitudes towards participation by women have varied depending upon the situation, the different parties' power relations and their ideologies. At the beginning of the century, liberal parties not affiliated with the Church, radical parties and the non-religious democratic right in general supported women's struggle to obtain citizenship. Since that time there have been many "prominent women" in the parties on the left, but few have held leadership positions.

Many different types of situations exist in the region and it is impossible to make valid generalizations. For example, in many cases women have been promoted to powerful positions by parties which are extremely conservative --both in political terms and in relation to the role of women-- as part of a party strategy. In other instances, the issue has figured in the election campaign but is not incorporated at the programme level.

Their speeches and programmes notwithstanding, the fact is that political parties of the right, left and centre have not made room for women, nor have women brought sufficient pressure to bear to make them do so. Women have been accepted as historical heroines but not as real people with an adequate technical background and sufficient political judgement to take part in decision-making and share in the power exercised in the world of day-to-day politics.

Women's relationship to the political parties is an issue which is often brought up during election campaigns, since women wield an enormous number of votes. At this point in time, "The challenge --for women as well-- in this democratic transition is to cease to be clients and to become a constituency" (Birgin, 1986, p. 40), and this is not an easy task. Nonetheless, as the various women's organizations press for greater participation, the ongoing tension thus created is --despite the contradictions and setbacks marking this process-- leading to the formation of a new identity for women. This is because the whole women's issue is a response not only to the needs and opportunities that have been denied to all citizens by the system, but also to the specific oppression of women which has come to be regarded as a cultural form. The existence

of women's movements is a manifestation of women's efforts to construct new forms of harmonious social coexistence (Molina, 1986).

Although women have been playing an ongoing and visible part in the struggles and movements for democracy in the countries of the region in recent years, women's movements do not feel that it will be easy for women to win a position as active participants in the institutional democratic structure. "Historically, efforts to articulate the social and political spheres within the national context have, in the end, given way to subordination, control or exclusion, all of which is an expression of cultural syntheses that --in the case of women-- have concealed their specific oppression and have helped to further distance women from politics. In these terms, the formation of a body of law which does not entail a change of legitimacy may result in a return to a political status quo which is by no means favourable either to women or to the whole network of new types of relationships which are arising out of the social sphere" (Molina, 1986, p. 44).

It is up to women to move into the spaces that are opening up. This will probably generate tension, competition and rivalry in the course of a process of change and adjustment whose ultimate outcome is unforeseeable.

A number of case studies of political participation by women's organizations in various countries of the region have been selected in order to illustrate, albeit only partially, the wide range of forms which participation can take and the type of issues which elicit the most forceful response from women.

a) Argentina: attitudes towards politics

"I don't understand much about politics."

An interesting look at Argentine women's view of politics is provided by an exploratory research project conducted by Estudio Prisma in March 1989 at the request of the Ministry of Health and Social Action. This study focused on a sector of middle-class women having a secondary educational level who reside in the country's capital.

This study reports that although women's first response when asked about the subject is often "there is a lot about politics that I don't understand" or "politics doesn't interest me", these women actually do have an interest in politics but take a critical view of it which they express in their rejection of corruption and a demand for honesty.

For these women, politics is a part of the "outside world" which is formed by men. In addition to asserting that a great deal of corruption exists in political parties, they criticize politicians for being primarily motivated by personal interests, for their failure

to fulfil the role for which they were elected and for an excess of rhetoric unaccompanied by action.

Political candidates are seen as father figures and their trustworthiness is judged on the basis of their achievements, style and presence when "it comes time to stand up and be counted". They feel that the laws need to be modified, that the justice system should be more flexible and should operate more swiftly, and that young people should be included in politics.

Although they are not interested in specific problems affecting women, they acknowledge the need to assert their equal rights, are concerned with lightening the excessive burden shouldered by many women called upon to play two different roles, do not want to be discriminated against in employment, and see a need for day care centres and nursery schools. They do not feel that they need to fight for these improvements because they believe that men can also pave the way for these changes.

They view women's participation in politics in terms of their incorporation in public and institutional posts. They believe that women could participate at all levels and regard the Ministries of Economic Affairs, Health and Social Action, Education and Justice and the municipalities as the most important areas.

b) Bolivia: peasant women

"We have organized ourselves really well in my province. We now know who we are, where we are and what we want."

A description of a meeting held in Bolivia in 1988 (San Gabriel Foundation and UNICEF, 1988) provides a look at one aspect of the effort being made to establish a relationship between women's movements and political participation.

The first conceptual problem addressed at this gathering was whether the women's movement is a social movement. The general view arising out of the ensuing discussion was that the women's movement in Bolivia has not really been structured as a social movement, although women have played a prominent part throughout Bolivian history. Generally speaking, the main element holding women's organizations together in Bolivia seems to be their class identity, and special emphasis is placed on day-to-day issues (campaigns for better education, housing, health services, etc.). Most of the women's organizations are not autonomous but are instead under the umbrella of a union, party, the State or non-governmental organizations.

Most of the formal institutions do not incorporate women's issues, and power does not figure among the demands or objectives of the women who participate in the women's social struggle. The organizational innovations of the women's movement become diluted

and lose their specificity when they are assimilated by mass movements.

Among the many women's organizations in Bolivia, the "Bartolina Sisa" Trade-Union Federation of Peasant Women is an especially interesting case. This trade-union organization, which now exerts a certain amount of public influence, primarily grew out of mothers' groups, the Departmental Association of Peasant Women of Oruro (ADEMCO) and the Katarist movement, and the participatory experience of its members contributed to its consolidation as an organization. At the urging of the Peasant Confederation, which saw a need for the organization of trade unions by women, a first congress was held in 1980, and it was at that meeting that the Federation was born. The ethnic consciousness existing in Bolivia played a central role in the founding of this organization. Despite its active participation, however, the Federation has not exerted a great deal of influence within the Confederation under normal conditions. The women of the Federation have accounted for this in the following way "... the men always win out over us; at the joint meetings we are afraid to speak. But when the women hold their own meetings, we have good discussions and are not afraid to bring up new ideas. We understand each other more quickly, without having to use so many words, and we also talk about things that concern women which we cannot talk about when men are there. But when we meet with the men, we keep quiet" (Mejía de Morales and others, 1985).

c) Ecuador; women's votes

The analysis of the women's vote in Quito carried out in 1984 by the Latin American Institute for Social Research (ILDIS) makes a valuable contribution to the effort that is being made to compile more solidly based and precise information about women's political behaviour (ILDIS, 1984). While these researchers warn against using their data as a basis for generalizations, the exacting nature of the procedure they employed is in itself interesting.

The same percentage of women as men were found to be in the political centre (48.87%) and these women constituted the largest group. Of those on either side of centre, almost a third of all the women (32.04%) voted for the right and only a small percentage (9.98%) voted for the left. The political discourse and style of the right was characterized as having "cornered" the women's issue, especially insofar as it relates to the domestic sphere, whereas the centre and the left talked about structural changes without explaining how they tied in with daily family life. While the right spoke in a way that people could understand and that stressed women's self-worth as people, the left's messages were couched in ideologized terms.

Young women were found to be mainly in the political centre and left. Women workers and domestic servants tended to be centrist and students leaned more towards the left.

At higher educational levels women's electoral choices tended more towards the centre and left. Women were not found to show any greater apathy than men in the elections.

As regards the independence of their voting choices, the study suggests that a large proportion of married women voted for the same candidate as their husbands, and that most of those who did not do so opted for a candidate further to the right. In most cases young women's votes were more to the left than those of their fathers. Finally, a considerable number of women claimed that they did not know for whom their fathers or husbands had voted; this may be interpreted as an indication of the existence of other areas of socialization outside the family.

d) El Salvador: mothers' committees

"they were alive when they were taken away, and that's how we want them back: alive".

The story of the Committee of Mothers of El Salvador, which later became known as the "Comadres" (literally, "co-mothers"), is in some ways similar to that of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. In this case, however, an important role in the formation of the Committee as an organization was played by Monseigneur Oscar Arnulfo Romero, who advised these women (the mothers and wives of prisoners and missing persons) until his murder in 1980. These women have related their experiences in interviews and public statements "What happened on the day and at the precise moment when their sons, daughters, brothers or sisters were taken away is told again and again, each time with the impact and intensity of a first telling: just like pulling the trigger of a gun, whether in self-defence or as an act of aggression, the testimony of such mothers is always an intensely personal act" (Acosta and Mercado, 1988, p. 110). Most of the Salvadoran comadres are members of grass-roots christian communities. Some are workers on peddlars and others are housewives. They call themselves "mothers of the people" and their slogan, in response to the call of Monseigneur Romero, is "our children: our struggle". Their organization is not structured into a hierarchy and their activities consist of collecting food for prisoners, operating food stands, caring for war orphans, establishing small industries, and taking care of people who have been injured or tortured. Starting from basic religious precepts --to be a mother is to be Mary-- they undertake what might be described as political activities: the food markets provide opportunities for giving and receiving information and for liaison, the women provide political prisoners with a link to the outside world, and they identify and bury the dead.

These women apparently are fewer than 1 000 in number. They go about their work informally, distributing leaflets in egg cartons

and appearing in all sorts of places: vacant lots, public squares, the market, the Church, embassies.

By their actions, they call the traditional forms of political activity into question and communicate the idea that other societal issues --such as human rights-- are themselves a political programme (ECLAC, 1986).

4. Participation or survival strategies?

In recent years a large number of so-called "alternative forms" of participation or organization have arisen which have yet to be fully analysed. It is not yet known whether or not these new modes of participation, in addition to serving immediate needs of survival, will prove to be part of a long-term political learning process, but they are mentioned here because most of them include a considerable number of women. In general, these forms of participation are used by working-class sectors, they are usually either initiated or co-ordinated by an external agent, and they are frequently associated with survival strategies. Above and beyond these characteristics, however, it would be of interest to explore their implicit cultural philosophy in order to see whether it could be carried over into a broader sphere.

In more specific terms, these organizations are made up of people in lower-income sectors who, faced with some serious sort of economic situation, band together for survival. One type of project undertaken by such organizations is the construction of housing out of inexpensive materials which are readily at hand, using either traditional techniques or techniques taught to them by an external agent. Other examples include handicraft, farm or semi-industrial co-operatives. In addition to these concrete action programmes, other programmes focus on a non-conventional type of participatory popular education dealing with such varied subjects as family life, improved communication between spouses, training for unemployed youths, helping peasants to organize themselves, community-based primary health care, and personal development. In the past decade many of these organizations have been formed by women and have undertaken various types of workshops, personal explorations, efforts to improve living conditions in the community, sex education, technical training, communal kitchens, etc. Although in some countries these organizations have received State support, in general they are more likely to be linked to non-governmental organizations working in these areas or to religious institutions, and their usually quite limited resources may come from various kinds of agreements, from developed countries in the form of aid, from church organizations, etc.

The debate about this type of participation has many different aspects. Firstly, the success of small-scale initiatives of this type makes the idea of mounting them on a much larger scale a tempting one, but this would appear to be impossible without some sort of

comprehensive policy. Secondly, there is some question as to whether or not it would be possible to maintain the degrees of commitment and participation achieved by such community initiatives if they were shifted to a regional or national level. Thirdly, it is generally agreed that the type of participation achieved at the community level has its limitations and would be difficult to transfer to a broader-scope social effort. Finally, it remains to be determined whether, in terms of efficiency, it would be better for the State or for the society to take charge of such initiatives.

What is clear, however, is that these experiences are valuable ones; they open up a whole range of possibilities for personal and social enrichment and growth, they give rise to new types of relationships and they suggest new methodologies for activities and functions normally associated with the State. They also have the attributes of integrating a regard for various dimensions of daily private life into social affairs, paving the way for cultural change, and incorporating new issues, such as ecology and the environment.

Unless a suitable relationship with the State is established, however, it is unlikely that these types of organizations can play a significant role in creating truly forceful new social actors, and a certain amount of "cultural lead time" will inevitably have to pass before they can generate genuinely new forms of organization. These initiatives, many of which have taken the form of "miniature democracies" may be diluted within the framework of authoritarian systems, but they nonetheless constitute an alternative world view which a different type of State might be capable of integrating.

It would appear to be more or less generally agreed that in order for social relationships to become truly democratic, participatory efforts must have continuity over time, must be a response to actual needs felt by the population and must provide flexible and responsive channels for such participation. These alternative experiences may do more than merely challenging bureaucratic or technocratic concepts; they may also point the way to a qualitative change whereby the culture truly comes to be understood as a valid expression of a set of values, knowledge and forms of expression developed by the different groups of people within a society.

Finally, it is of the utmost importance to bear in mind that all these experiences with participatory efforts indicate that genuine participation occurs only when the people involved feel that they themselves have decision-making power and control over the actions to be taken, since this is what, in the final analysis, motivates them to assume responsibility for their own participation.

5. Latin American feminism: political participation
or other forms of political involvement?

"the heresies of turning everything upside down without remorse as we stand up in plain view: the waves of recrimination washed over us, leaving us untouched, and we were here, there and everywhere ... my determination and my hopes pinned on a utopia so vaguely defined that I will not even attempt to describe it, except to say that it has a great deal to do with the idea of universality and with the fresh air of freedom ... (Kirkwood, 1986, pp. 14-15).

The literature on feminism has grown significantly in the past few decades. As a rule, its authors are feminists themselves and much of it documents the evolution of the movement. The following discussion will be confined to a review of some very general ideas about how the feminist movement in Latin America and the Caribbean currently relates to politics and the movement's own future endeavours.

Latin American feminism, and especially what is usually referred to as "new" or second-generation feminism (i.e., feminism as it reappeared in the region in the late 1960s and the 1970s) is not a monolithic bloc, and the dividing line between women's movements and feminist movements is not always clear (Barbieri, 1986). Organized into groups, networks or study centres, these feminists have primarily been concerned with the creation of an awareness and the identification of problem areas.

Arizpe says that the women of Latin America and the Caribbean "... have given feminism a distinctive stamp. Unlike what has happened in industrialized countries, we have not wanted to distance ourselves from our community, from our spouses, from our children, from our extended family, nor to lose the sense of community which is so strong in the culture of our region and which, in the final analysis, is so profoundly human. This is what must be the basic premise of all the women's policies and women's projects in our countries. Indeed, the women themselves will make sure of this" (Arizpe, 1988, p. 9).

These differences found in Latin American feminism are due to the specific context existing in the region, whose societies are marked by deep class and ethnic divisions. Thus, the Latin American feminist movement was initially made up mainly of women from the intellectual élite of both the traditional and non-traditional left who placed a great deal of emphasis on research efforts aimed at gathering information on the daily lives of women in the lower- and middle-income sectors. Responding to what they have learned in the course of such research --the unconscionably the long workdays of domestic workers, discrimination against women in the field of

employment, the abandonment and domestic violence suffered by women and many other such facts --Latin American feminists have for the most part moved towards socialist and marxist positions, while a minority have radical or liberal leanings (Barbieri, 1986). Other studies have been done which assert that, although the movement originally identified with the postulates of the left, it has gradually developed an independent position in both organizational and ideological terms. "We had formulated a feminist position without running up against any major internal differences of opinion based on an intuitive understanding of our separate identity. This understanding is an outgrowth of the warmth we found in our consciousness-raising groups, of our reflections upon our long-standing oppression and of the individual and collective action we have taken to rid ourselves of it" (Vargas, 1986, p. 60).

A number of women authors feel that the feminist movement's relationship with the political parties on the left has, for the most part, been a difficult and highly contradictory one. One of the reasons for this is undoubtedly the fact that the objective of most Latin American feminists is not to gain power but rather to change the way power is exercised. In this respect, Latin American feminism regards itself as a revolutionary movement, since it incorporates the concept of the patriarchy and many aspects of daily personal life into the political sphere, but it also raises the possibility of re-working politics altogether and of proposing alternative forms of political theory and praxis (Kirkwood, 1986). Feminism is thus seen as having called into question the very basis for the legitimacy of consensual political systems, inasmuch as it has shown sexism to be an ongoing conflict within society and has broadened the scope of the debate concerning democracy, forms of political activity, and the exercise of power (Barbieri, 1986).

How it should relate to power as such is one of the "recurring questions which is difficult for feminism to address and answer --'feminism' being understood as political activity undertaken by women based on their own perspective as women". One of the reasons this is so difficult is because of the absence of women in the sphere of public power and their presence in the "other sphere" of power, i.e., the private world. Another reason is that women have historically not had access to the ongoing exercise of power, in other words, "ideas and action" (Kirkwood, 1986).

It appears, however, that new positions on this issue are currently being formulated within the feminist movement itself. Thus, some representatives of the movement seek to further reinforce their presence: "The time has come for feminism to maintain a more clearly defined presence whereby it will be more than just an appendage, and feminists will do more than just sit on panels at international meetings of political scientists in Latin America where political thought is debated. We are in a position to offer a coherent discourse and to enrich many people's thinking with that discourse; we are now in a position to maintain a stronger presence in all

sectors and within the broader framework of civil society" (Cordero, 1986, p. 88).

Other schools of thought, which perhaps herald the end of the movement's "utopian/romantic" period, assert that "it is at the very least a regrettable waste of time to consider any alternative form of society in which power, consubstantially with human relations, would not have a place" (Mayte Gallegos, quoted in Sojo, 1985, p. 69). "It is a question, then, of seeing power as a capacity for freedom, and ways must be found of gaining access to it, of maintaining it and sharing it. People must fight to ensure that power is exercised legitimately and transparently and to ensure that it is shared ... Women must fight to ensure that power relations between men and women will be symmetrical ... We hold that our personal lives are part of politics, but it would be an error to think that political changes can be consolidated solely on the basis of personal and individual changes. Since daily life is a continuous process, isolated changes are unlikely to lead to social transformations, since they have a limited impact on people's daily lives and may be made use of for other purposes. The consolidation of changes in people's day-to-day lives is possible provided that the changes are taking place within spheres which have an influence on daily life; in this sense, what can modify this continuity is the proposal of suitable values, norms and institutions. Politics as a breeding ground for social identities involves going beyond mere isolated "rebellions" by individuals in their daily lives.... In order for women to be liberated, it is essential that personal, individual changes be carried over into the public sphere ..." (Sojo, 1985, pp. 69, 70 and 74).

Thus, feminists are re-working and updating their positions. Perhaps what is occurring, as suggested by A. Santa Cruz, is that the movement is "seeking a measure of pragmatism;... the need to make certain concessions ... negotiations with institutions, with political parties ... to win partial victories ... to bring about small changes" (ISIS, 1986, p. 93). Perhaps, too, "our tendency to take refuge in what we have already learned, in our small consolidated world, began to sap our strength and undermine our will to move into new fields, to rediscover age-old practices, to try out new strategies, thereby running the risk of becoming irrelevant in terms of the experiences and practices of other women and of isolating ourselves from other social processes" (Vargas, p. 61).

One of the contributions of today's feminism --although it cannot claim sole credit for the change-- is a shift in focus as regards research, issues and the way we look at history. In addition to enriching the thinking on the subject by interconnecting class and gender identities, feminism is incorporating daily life and its interpretation into the great events of history. In some cases, this has involved a less precise use of data; in others, historical data are being revitalized by the incorporation of oral tradition, personal accounts, stories and legends. In many instances, the dynamics of this process also give rise to the collective generation of new information.

Another of feminism's contributions consists of the linkage of problems encountered in private life with organized action on behalf of more general social and political demands, of the search for a society that values divergence (Muñoz, 1987).

Judging from the statements of its spokespersons, the Latin American feminism of today encompasses various options, two of the most visible of which are: its consolidation as an autonomous social movement, and the forging of ties with political parties.

III. SOME FINAL OBSERVATIONS

"Curiously enough, there is no defence against the emancipation of women" (Nietzsche, 1886).

Despite the incomplete and fragmentary nature of the information on which this discussion is based, it seems safe to say that sweeping and irreversible changes are taking place as regards the participation of women in the region. These changes have to do with the extent of such participation, the forms it is taking and the way in which it is perceived (regardless of whether it is more or less accepted, tolerated or repressed). Whether, as in some cases, it is manipulated or, as in others, it is fostered, it has lost the stigma and been freed of the ridicule which surrounded its birth.

The traditional sorts of political opportunities for such participation have been quite rigidly defined. Although lately there has been greater openness to women's participation, this new attitude has mainly been in evidence with respect to electoral programmes or the design of general plans, rather than to specific and concrete activities. Women have found broader opportunities within the sphere of social movements, in many of which women and men have shared moments of boldness, fear and apathy.

There is greater breadth and scope today in this sphere in general. The democracy which people are struggling to build in the region today incorporates concepts of equity, social justice, national self-determination and individual freedom. This implies participation, genuine political participation in terms of a share of power and in decision-making. Without these elements, there is no democracy.

It is difficult to predict what direction these tendencies will take. Although democratic values and participation are espoused the world over, today's societies are becoming more and more complex and are increasingly dominated by the models of consumption touted by the mass media. Participation in such societies is becoming ever more difficult, and not only for women.

"The recent experience of the region provides no grounds for optimism, as is amply demonstrated by the difficulty the governments have had in achieving social pacts that would allow them to carry forward their policies. This is due primarily to the behaviour of social forces. Indeed, the upper strata are becoming increasingly intractable, have mounted a classist defence of their sectoral inter-

ests, and display a lack of national spirit; the armed forces continue to be guided by a conflict-oriented mentality which is increasingly irrelevant to the real challenges facing their societies; and the middle and lower strata, battered by the crisis, are struggling with all their might just to keep from losing any further ground, and often lack an overall picture and a sense of national responsibility" (ECLAC, 1988a, p. 40).

This situation is exacerbated by the political instability of the region, its lack of real autonomy and the absence of national consensuses. Thus, while we have moved forward within the realm of ideas, living conditions have deteriorated, thereby heightening the contradictions that exist in the region while, at the same time, demands have grown. For women in general, the exercise of their citizenship is no longer limited to their right to vote.

Control over reproductive processes; longer life expectancies, which mean that people are living for a longer time after their child-rearing years are over; changes in the family; greater economic independence; and the growing permissiveness of complex and anonymous societies are all opening up new spheres, a no-man's-land, into which women are moving. Nonetheless, women's double workdays, the lack of support for them as they struggle to divide their time between work and their families, continue to be very real problems.

In spite of all the problems, however, there are signs of a new type of awareness in the region. Perhaps the newest feature of the women's organizations and movements of today is not their demands as such (many of which in fact reflect long-standing grievances that have still not been redressed) but rather that these demands have become interconnected and have transcended the bounds of private life to become public demands of society. It is this type of participation, the voicing of demands that have their origin in women's day-to-day existence and the fact that this struggle has been carried into the streets, the consideration of issues relating to domestic violence on a par with human rights issues, which is causing women to become politically educated.

In this area, perhaps more than in others, the United Nations has played a fundamental role. The fight for women's legal and political rights, at the outset, and, later, for equality in terms of political participation has been supported and often furthered by the United Nations. The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies stress that "Governments and political parties should intensify efforts to stimulate and ensure equality of participation by women in all national and local legislative bodies and to achieve equity in the appointment, election and promotion of women to high posts in executive, legislative and judiciary branches in these bodies. At the local level, strategies to ensure equality of women in political participation should be pragmatic, should bear a close relationship to issues of concern to women in the locality and should take into account the suitability of the proposed measures to local needs and values" (United Nations, 1985, paragraph 86).

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