



Women in Latin America

BY LAURA MACDONALD

Laura Macdonald earned her PhD from York University (1992) and is a professor in the Department of Political Science at Carleton University.

Since its inception, one of the key interests of York University's Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies has been Canada's position within an evolving global system, with a particular focus on Canada's role in the Americas—particularly in Mexico, because of Canada's shared membership with Mexico in NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) and now CUSMA (the Canada–United States–Mexico Agreement). However, this interest seldom involved an in-depth engagement with understanding the role of women, since Latin American women were commonly assumed to be largely confined to the private sphere, and victims of entrenched patriarchal relationships with little opportunity to engage in international relations or even domestic politics.

This perspective was problematic even at the time the Centre was launched, given women's longstanding, diverse forms of incorporation into the economic, social, cultural, and political contexts of Latin American countries. Moving forward, however, it is becoming ever more important for Canadians to incorporate a gender analysis into their understanding of and interactions with countries south of the United States. Latin American women's participation in public life and in the international system has expanded dramatically in recent years. Many countries have dramatically increased the formal representation of women in politics, and there has been an explosion of women's and LGBTQ+ protest movements, advocating for diverse causes such as reproductive rights, gay rights, environmental rights, Indigenous rights, and opposition to violence against women and feminicides. Canada can also engage with Latin American states in a new way because several of them have, as Canada has under the Justin Trudeau government, espoused feminist foreign policies. The time is ripe for new forms of inclusive engagement between Canadian and Latin American women on how to construct a better region and a better world based on feminist principles of inclusion, peace promotion, equality, and human rights.

PROGRESS AND SETBACKS ON GENDER AND POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA

One of the most obvious areas of progress for Latin American women has been in their formal representation in legislatures and as heads of state. Women now make up 34.9 percent of the representatives in national legislatures in the region, which is a significant increase from the average rate in 2000, when it was just over 15 percent. This dramatic progress was partly the result of young Latin American democracies' willingness to experiment with the rules of the game by adopting gender quotas. Beginning with Argentina in 1991, 17 countries have adopted a form of gender quota. A few countries like Mexico now have gender parity in their legislatures, while others like Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, and Peru have rates of over 40 percent female members.

Other countries show little progress, partly because of the way in which the laws are designed and enforced, persistent patriarchal attitudes in political parties, the risk of violence against women leaders, and weak civil society organizations pushing for change (Freidenberg & Gilas, 2023). Rates of representation are much lower at the municipal level, where only 15 percent of mayors in Latin America and the Caribbean are female (Observatorio de Igualdad de Género de América Latina y el

Caribe, 2023). As of December 2021, however, 32.7 percent of elected city council positions were held by women (CEPAL, 2023).

Increased political representation of women does not necessarily translate into more gender-sensitive policies. Latin American women have achieved some notable successes, however, particularly around reproductive rights. In February 2022, for example, Colombia, which has been an extremely conservative country, decriminalized abortion (up to 24 weeks of gestation). Earlier, Uruguay legalized abortion up to 12 weeks, and in 2020 Argentina's parliament legalized abortion up to 14 weeks. In 2007, Mexico City legalized abortion, a few other Mexican states followed suit, but other states tightened up their restrictions on women's reproductive rights. However, in 2021, a historic decision by Mexico's Supreme Court ruled that criminalizing abortion is unconstitutional. This decision has yet to be implemented in all the states, but it means that Mexican women have achieved progress in this area that American women have been denied with the US Supreme Court's recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022).

A GREEN WAVE

Victories like these, part of what feminists call a "green wave," as well as new policies around child care and violence against women in many countries, reflect the growing power and militancy of feminist movements. Women across the region have mobilized to denounce the rise of feminicides and other forms of violence against women. The slogan #NiUnaMenos (Not One Less) has been adopted by feminist groups from Argentina to Mexico, and tactics like a feminist strike on International Women's Day and flash mob protests like the one that originated in the feminist collective Las Tesis Chile spread throughout the region and around the world before the pandemic (*Un violador en mi camino*, "the rapist in my path"). However, women's movements have also suffered from a right-wing backlash and from the impact of COVID-19 on women, particularly marginalized women.

In this context, several countries in the region have adopted the idea of a feminist foreign policy (FFP), an idea that originated in Sweden. Mexico, Costa Rica, and Chile now have FFPs, and other countries, including Argentina and Colombia, are considering adopting it. There is no clear consensus on what a feminist foreign policy would look like, but as UN Women says, "In its most ambitious expression, this movement should aspire to transforming the practice of foreign policy to the greater benefit of women and girls everywhere, impacting a country's diplomacy, defense and security cooperation, aid, trade, climate security, and even immigration policies" (2022, p. 1).

Global Affairs Canada also has a feminist international assistance policy and adopts an "inclusive trade agenda," and has made commitments to the Women, Peace, and Security agenda. While the Trudeau government launched a consultation process in 2020 to develop a policy statement about its broader vision for FFP, it has yet to publish its statement. Mexico, Chile, and other countries in the Americas are ahead of Canada in this respect and could inspire our government about what such a transformative policy could look like.

Over the last 40 years, Canadian academics have developed rich and diverse ties with Latin American feminist and Indigenous scholars. The next 40 years will offer many opportunities to develop these ties and joint analyses, taking the lead from our Latin American colleagues. ■

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