Gender Dynamics in Politics: A study of Latin America

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Abstract:

Latin America and the Caribbean went from a region at the top of the World's Female Leader Index in 2014 to a region with no female heads of state in 2019. As the region displays a major shift towards the conservative side of politics, the gender, race, and class divide has never held more prominence in the politics of Latin America. The interaction between the gender, race, and class has meandered in interesting and unexpected ways; however, an overall diminishing the percentages of women in politics at the local, provincial, and central level has become apparent. Even after the implementation of special quotas for women, the numbers have steadily declined as the nature of politics in the region made a shift towards the right. As the politics of the region changes, women have also begun to make a mark among conservative leaders however; it is still unclear what their future would be. This article takes cues from the recent shift in Latin American politics to assess the nature of women participation and the conflict of gender in politics of the region and its larger impact on the society.

Key words: Latin America and Caribbean, gender, women in politics, gender conflict,

INTRODUTION

Politics has long been a widely contested entity of the modern-day nation – state, when a phenomenon enraptured in its own complexity, is read in the context of gender divide and conflict and relations; an equally convoluted entity in itself, no parsimonious conclusions should be expected. The interaction between politic s and gender divide can often yield complicated and long – winded denouements. This article attempts to juxtapose this discussion on the geographical territory of Latin America and the Caribbean; a region that is considered unique in a myriad of ways, both political and social. The study of gender politics in Latin America is important not only because the gender divide in its politics is an interesting reflection of larger Latin American societal norms but also because Latin America counter intuitively has also been the home to women leaders more than most other developing regions of the world. Before, beginning the article the author would like to emphasise that word gender used during the article denotes the sociological construct of masculinity and femininity.

The Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region has statistically registered above average performance in context of women leaders or women in positions of political power. In the past forty years, the region has elected and been ruled by a total of ten women Presidents. When compared to their neighbours to the north both US and Canada, who have both done abysmally in the aspect of

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women heads of state with the US which has never elected a woman as the President and Canada who have only ever had one woman as their Prime Minister, it is apparent that Latin America and the Caribbean are not only open to the idea of women as heads of state but is also a society that has displayed a readiness to accept a woman leader albeit during a favourable mix of socio- economic, and political conditions.

Contextualising Gender in Society of Latin America

The Latin American region has an intriguing relationship with gender relations, social capital and gender divide. The Latin American society, polity, and economy suffer from the same ailments as most other previously colonised nation- states of the developing world. The continent of 'Latin America' was largely colonised by the Spanish and the Portuguese who mostly remained limited to Portugal. While the Latin American countries were some of the first in the world to attain independence form their colonial masters, these are also countries that experienced not only colonisation and the socio-economic dismantling quite characteristic of the process, it also witnessed complete wiping out of its native population and also an introduction of slaves from Africa (Bonilla et.al 2018). The region has been a witness to several waves for immigration, while those from Africa were engineered by the colonial masters, the has also received waves of European, Chinese, and Japanese immigrants who are now a part of the Latin American society (Kuznets 1955).

Such diversity of racial fabric has led to many a theory about the region's racial structure. It even prompted Jose Vasconcelos to write the La Raza Cosmica or The Cosmic Race (Ventulo, 2012). However, this existence of multi-racial society must not be mistaken for an absence of racial conflict. Deep schisms between the European descendants and the non- white counter parts still exist. This divide became more apparent in the past half a decade. As the world took a turn towards conservative shades of politics so did Latin America. As populist leaders from centre right to the far right campaigned for a brand of politics that was rooted in conservatism, exclusivity, marginalisation, and religious and cultural orthodoxy; Latin America displayed the fault lines in its racial terrain clearly. It was also the moment when Latin America along with the rest of the world saw a widening gender divide in its society (Pedraza, 1991).

Browne and Misra (2003), opine that gender an issue as complicated as race became the proverbial bone of contention not only between the conservatives and liberals fighting for the supremacy of their political ideology but it became intertwined with the fabric of a society that is rapidly changing. As the feminist demands evolve from the basics of being a part of the work force and the right to vote to more nuanced like wage parity and agency of their own reproductive rights around the world, Latin American women also find themselves in the midst of political suppression and a battle for equality and justice, along with parity and the final aim of a change of mind set (Rumbaut,1994). This is not to say that racial and gender conflicts are new to the Latin American continent, these conflicts are woven into the very foundations of the region; however, during the regime changes in the past half a decade, gender conflict has most decidedly taken centre stage in the region. While racial conflicts also are important; it is imperative to highlight that, gender divide has a proclivity to be found across the societal cross section irrespective of the racial variable. It is true that the manifestations of the gender conflict vary across racial and economic classes, but the presence of the conflict remains unquestioned (Babb, 2012).

As the region moves towards the right and the social influence and legacies of colonial social structure incarnate themselves in the social structures of the present era, it is easy to trace the linkages between present and the past and also gauge the depth of these impressions. Contrary to the statistics that celebrate the perceived abundance of women in positions of political power and the deduced discernment of greater gender parity, the reality of Latin America could not be more different. The Latin American social norms are rooted in traditional gender roles, a notion borrowed from the social structure of their erstwhile colonial masters (Gobat, 2013). The Spanish and Portuguese colonizers or *conquistadores* brought along with them the Iberian[2] philosophy of society; a structure that had been derived from centuries of deep religious faith and principles of the church among other things. It would be unfair to believe that church and colonisation alone are responsible for the deeply patriarchal nature of Latin America, but it can be conceded that religion did play a pivotal role in the development of the Latin American society of the present (Finn and Hanson, 2017).

The Latin American society has for long regarded gender as a polar dichotomy; echoing the patriarchal notion of an evolutionary difference in the roles of men and women. Patriarchal thought processes relegate women to the hearth, reinforcing the notion of them being nurturers and the assign men the role of traditional hunter – gatherer or that of the bread winner (Wilson, 2104). Latin American societies mirror this notion and exponentially expand such a notion even further. The region has built ideal images of men and women. This archetype of masculinity and femininity while originating in the concept of patriarchy has become a defining characteristic of Latin American societies across the continent. The word Macho or the term Machismo is often used to describe a somewhat overly masculine man (Guy, 1994).

The term is a collective term for all attributes attached with masculinity; aggression, flamboyance, physical prowess and perhaps most importantly a supremacy over others especially women. Machismo not just celebrates the masculinity of men; it cements their superior position in the social hierarchy as compared to their counterparts (Holz, 1994). While such notions are not unheard off in other parts of the world, Latin American societies for long have not only accepted and celebrated such an ideal, these societies have also expected the men to live up to such an archetype. Men who are unable to imbibe these characteristics often face ridicule and marginalisation for a social construct that has based itself in the dichotomy between men and women. While the philosophy of Machismo as has been discussed does also oppress men in some cases, it does provide them with a wonderful social security net (Ingoldsby, 1991).

The widely accepted ideology of machismo provides men of all sections of society regardless of racial or economic barriers an immunity from societal judgement based in morality. It's a privilege that all men enjoy in Latin American societies irrespective of their condoning or condemnation of the philosophy. Societal acceptance and disapproval of individual actions are most often a function of the combined social morality. A blanket acceptance of acts of aggression, violence, ruthless ambition, a disregard for ethics, at times even acts of harassment sexual or otherwise are given a

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[2] Iberia is defined as the geographical territory encompassing the Iberian Peninsula of Europe, concerned with the countries of Spain and Portugal.

convenient veil of machismo in most Latin American societies. This provides most men with not just an undying social support but also a life bereft of social judgement. When this yardstick of social expectations is applied elsewhere, especially politics; men tend to come from an inherent position of power and privilege over their female counterparts. The consequences of such systemic inequality are apparent in various realms of the society. The work force in general, specialised domains like politics, security, academics, sports to name a few are areas where the gender gap is effortlessly observable (Mensa & Grow, 2019). This divide and the consequent conflict will be discussed in greater detail ahead in the article.

While Machismo is the male archetype, Latin America also has a feminine counterpart to this concept. The archetype of quintessential female characteristics is defined by the term; Marianismo. Derived from the religious concept of the holy mother, Marianismo is a collective term encompassing the fabled qualities of a woman that are almost embedded in mythology. According to the philosophy of Marianismo, womankind is the earthly embodiment of purity and benevolence. The demure, submissive, chaste, and righteous aspects of humanity supposedly find manifestation in women. Marianismo needs to be understood in the context of its two-pronged approach about quintessential qualities of femininity (Cowan, 2017).

The ideology of Marianismo places women on a pedestal that is supposedly, fundamentally above a decrepit, contaminated, corrupt, and polluted society. Such a pedestal of purity and righteousness however is unachievable in most circumstances, thereby setting most women up for an almost immediate failure. The ideology simultaneously manufactures labyrinths in social constructs that ultimately lead to traditional gender roles for women. An ideal of Marianismo would be women who follow traditional gender roles and usually any variation from the norm brings with it, societal unacceptance and judgement based in morality (Paxton, et al. 2007). Women face harsher critique for their actions and fickle loyalties from their supporters. While Machismo provides men with a social security net often saving them social and moral verdicts and possible opposition from the society, Marianismo on the other hand exposes women to greater trials and ostracization. It makes women fragile depictions of unattainable values and sets them up for an eventual and proverbial fall from grace (Espinal & Zhao, 2015). The interplay of Machismo and Marianismo is often witnessed at the workplace and in such complex meanderings, men often are placed in a position of advantage over women. A greater and more detailed discussion of this conflict of gender and its manifestation in the realm of politics is done further in the article.

Gender and gender relations are constantly evolving phenomena as they respond to the transformation of socio- economic structures around them. Latin America is also witnessing a rapid metamorphosis in the concept of gender, conventional gender norms, and also the conflict between the perceived and accepted ideas of masculinity and femininity. While the concept of Machismo and Marianismo are antiquated, they are not yet redundant, and continue to influence the thought processes and ideologies of a significant part of the Latin American population across the continent. However, such conventions face growing resistance continually. As the society transforms itself and women fight for parity and equality; one notices the conflict reflecting itself in the politics of the region. Greater participation of women in politics is not just the foundation of greater parity in society, it also signifies the embarking on a new leaf in the very nature of politics itself in the region. Therefore, to understand the gender conflict in Latin American politics and its manifestations in

society and vice versa, it is imperative to study the politics of Latin America through the paradigm of a gendered lens (Desposato & Norrender, 2017)

POLITICS OF LATIN AMERICA THROUGH A GENDERED LENS

It has been established that much akin to the rest of the world Latin American societies are also not egalitarian in terms of gender and gender representation. However, the semiotics of statistics often paint a much rosier picture. As mentioned before, the region has elected ten women heads of state in the past forty years. Even till 2015, the Latin American continent was home to four women presidents, a per capita representation of women in politics higher than any other region in 2015 and even later (Bayes, 2012). The Latin American continent during the time was ranked in the highest positions in various gender equality scales mapped by international organisations. While the statistics were certainly favourable in till the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015; the socio-political scenario of Latin America changed drastically and by 2018, it was a region with no women heads of state, as well as minimal women representation in presidential cabinets, senates, and provincial level governments. Such a stark shift needs to be researched in further detail so as to gain a better understanding of the interplay of politics and gender (Bayes, 2012).

A previous attempt at unwrapping the enigma of gender within the Politics of Latin America had been made by Maria Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson published in 2009. A research conducted by Escobar-Lemmon, endeavoured to understand the fundamental nature of presidential cabinets across democracies in Latin America in context of gender (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor Robinson, 2009). The research examined a total of four hundred and forty-seven politicians across the presidential cabinets of the continent. The study focused on their beginning, their credentials, and traced their over all political careers. The study covers a time period from the 1990s to the early 2000s (Falleti, 2006).

During the research Presidential Cabinets were found to be mostly gendered institutions. The term gendered institutions signify that such institutions are bodies that have inherent biases against women. They are structures in patterns that are intrinsically discriminatory against the female gender. To scrutinize the nature of Presidential Cabinets, they have assessed on four broad parameters based on longevity of careers, credentials of politicians, their political mobility, and finally on the nature of their political portfolios (Kittilson, 2010). These four parameters were chosen to not only examine the beginning for the political careers of the participants but also their success and the eventual culmination of their political careers. The criterion of assessment gave Escobar – Lemmon the ability to also track the trajectory of participating politicians, as well as the societal perception of the various aspects of politics that suit politicians of the masculine and feminine gender (Barnes and O'Brian, 2018).

The first parameter assessed the length of the tenures of male and female politicians within Presidential cabinets. Contrary to common opinion empirical research concluded that there was little to no difference between the lengths of political tenures of men and women politicians within their position in presidential cabinets. In some countries like that of Paraguay, women tended to serve longer tenures than their male counterparts. While the research based on this parameter concluded in some semblance of gender parity, it would be interesting to see how this contrasted with the analysis based on the rest of the criterion (Olmeda and Armesto, 2017).

The second parameter evaluated the credentials of the male and female politicians with the Presidential Cabinets. Their accomplishments that attributed them to the field of politics were categorised either as academic qualifications or as work experience. Upon examination it was found that the women who were members of the cabinets usually possessed either academic qualifications or previous experience in the field of politics and in some cases both (Escobar-Lemmon, 2003). Their past accomplishments made them suitable for their position in the presidential cabinet. However, when the male politicians were gauged on the same scale it was found that most men had neither the qualifications nor the relevant work experience in most cases and in some cases the politician possessed none of the credentials that would make him an obvious choice for their position in the cabinet (ibid). The discrepancy between academic qualifications and work experience did not exist in isolation. The expectations at work from men and women were vastly different. While it is tricky to quantify expectations, the Escobar – Lemmon study found that women had to work harder and succeed more frequently at the office to be considered worthy of retaining their position at the cabinet. They were judged harshly for failures and their failures and/ or successes were also often attributed to their gender and not their individual efforts. The men who served as politicians on the cabinets however, were judged by a different yardstick. They were often considered deserving of their position and success without much regard to their qualifications or their work ethic. the discrepancy between the eligibility requirements and also expectations at work for women and men has also dictated the respect and regard that women receive in positions of power vis-à-vis their male counter parts (Vinas, 2014).

The next two parameters were examined together as they were considered complimentary to each other. The parameters measured the portfolios of men and women in the presidential cabinets, as well as their political mobility throughout their careers.

At first instance most would concede that politics as a phenomenon could not be divided on the basis of gender or that political positions and / or portfolios are not gendered entities. However, upon closer reflection one notices that politics is in reality perceived with a deep and embedded sense of gender norms and relations which is often extended to and juxtaposed on the men and women who embody those political portfolios. The Escobar – Lemmon study also reached a similar conclusion. The Latin American societies echo the gender associations that the rest of the world also makes with politics and its dimensions. Across Latin America and also the Caribbean, politics is perceived as masculine or feminine (Sanbonmatsu, 2002). Sectors like security, economy, foreign relations, trade, infrastructure, energy, law and order are perceived as masculine where as sectors like public health, social assistance, education, environment are considered feminine. Some sectors like agriculture remain ambiguous but do have the tendency to tilt towards the feminine side of politics in case clear dichotomies are made. While there is absolutely no factual connection between dimensions of politics and gender roles, the societal perception ties them together in a manner where they can't be unlinked (Acker, 1992).

It was found in the study that that both men and women politicians were conventionally appointed to perceived masculine and feminine domains of politics, although at times the portfolio selections did vary at times. While women were over represented in feminine domains of politics, they were under represented in masculine sphere of politics (ibid). A similar patter of representation was followed with political portfolios of male politicians. However, such a division transcends the

boundaries of normative bounds into the realm of probematique as such divisions and perceptions have a direct impact on the upward political mobility of politicians. Men who traditionally chose to represent masculine sectors, move upwards in their career quickly and with general ease. They also come to be associated with efficiency, success, and masculine prowess; these characteristics can easily be attributed to the Latin American penchant for machismo. As men move quickly through the corridors of politics, climbing the ladder; women tend to get stuck in feminine roles. Their associations with softer domains of politics has an antipodal impact on their career, where they are often considered inadequate for realms of politics that are bereft of social welfare and a general concept of nurturing and maternal emotions (Connell, 2005).

The study through its meticulous examination of the beginning, trajectory, and culmination of political careers found that presidential cabinets in the region are indeed gendered institutions. Women usually find themselves fighting an uphill battel in the domain of politics.

Latin American Women of Politics

While it has been established that the relationship between gender and politics in Latin America is estranged to say the least; the region has seen its fare share of women leaders. Names like Michelle Bachelet of Chile, Dillma Roussef of Brazil and Kristina Kirschner from Argentina are some of the most recent examples of women Presidents of the region. While women leaders have ruled in the past and have been whole heartedly accepted by their people on occasion; it is imperative that their relationships with their voters, their peers, the media, their mentors, and their opposition be examined in greater detail. (Mendoza, 2012)

Women even after becoming leaders tend to face harsher judgements, and fickle loyalties. Their own political parties and their own political allies are usually quick to abandon them at the slightest glimpse of political opposition. An apt example of such fleeting support and political surrender was demonstrated in 2016, when the former Brazilian President, Dillma Roussef's lost the support of her own party amidst rumours of misappropriation of funds. She was later impeached from office (Ramos, 2020).

Women Presidents and politicians in general tend to be judged much more harshly upon issues like corruption, deceit, or misappropriations of funds. Such verdicts based in morality are often a function of the larger social influence of marianismo and women politicians tend to often pay a rather steep price for it. Their deviances are often considered an assault on Godly righteousness and the unnecessary interference of religion inspired doctrines and social norms makes an already perilous situation more precarious. The norms of marianismo make it infinitely more trying for a woman to succeed in politics even more so after once being disgraced on any occasion (De Barros, 2019).

The society also tends to always see women politicians in associations with the men who are related to them. Their advent in politics and their eventual success is also often attributed to the men they are closely associated with in the field. Both Presidents Kirschner and Rousseff were often only discussed in relation with the men who were close to them. While President Kristina Kirschner who is the former President of Argentina and the present Vice President of the nation is still often referred to as Mrs. President as she had been the First Lady during her husband – Nestor

Kirschner's presidential regime. The title of Mrs. President used by the media is an ode to her husband's presidential tenure more than a title for her longer political career (Pollmann, 2017a).

Dillma Roussef on the other hand is closely associated with her political mentor; former President Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva; a wildly popular President himself, he was often just called just Lula. Lula had been President Roussef's mentor during her political career and was one of her most trusted advisors during her presidential terms (Mendoza, 2012). The media rarely if ever, mentioned Rousseff in isolation and almost all of actions found their way back to her association with Lula. This inability of the society and the media to isolate a woman President or politician from her close male associates can be traced back to a fixation and negotiation with the adherence to traditional gender roles of society; where in women even as Presidents and/or politicians are closely dependent on a masculine support system (Pollmann, 2017b).

It has also been noticed that the societal acceptance of women in politics is directly based on the government's attitude towards women. Centre left and left governments have traditionally been pro-feminist governments (Piscopo, 2015). Such governments tend to favour egalitarian societies and also see women as a traditional voting base. On the other hand, right and centre – right governments usually tend to base themselves in convention, religion, preserving of tradition (Gomez et.al, 2013). In extreme cases such governments and politicians partake in hateful rhetoric and violence; at other times such governments tend to focus on right wing protectionist agenda. In both cases however, women and feminist movements tend to bear the brunt of government ridicule and dismissal (Valencia-Garcia et al., 2008).

The Society tends to mimic the behaviour of the political elite and often models its responses to women, women movements, and feminist demand on that of the government's response. The state socialisation theory by Cameron Thies (2003) does bolster these simplistic yet true and observable behavioural patterns of society. This pattern was highlighted and present centre stage in recent Brazilian elections, where President Jair Bolsonaro and his hateful rhetoric against women not only won him the election but also found supporters and sympathisers in the Brazilian society and women faced moral judgement and modern- day witch hunts (Krook, 2019).

It has also been noticed that women leaders and politicians tend to lose favour in times politico – economic instability. Much of Latin America has been suffering from political instability catalysed by an economic slowdown since middle of the ongoing decade (Khullar, 1997). In these conditions, the society tends to find solace in tradition and convention almost immediately turning to male leaders who come across as aggressively masculine often embodying machismo and the stereo – type of economy and security being masculine domains of politics comes into play (Goetschel et. al, 2018). A similar pattern has been followed in Latin America in the past round of elections. However, most countries of the region are continuously facing protests from a frustrated and disillusioned population (Barker and Jurasz, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Latin America is a region that has interesting notions of gender and politics. This makes the dynamics between the two, complex to say the least. This complexity when juxtaposed on a rapidly changing society and social norms, it becomes unpredictable. While it is interesting to understand the relationship between gender and politics and its manifestation in the politics of the region till

present; it is imperative to highlight that moving forward as women become an irrevocable part of the work force and a demand for gender – equality and egalitarian societies grows the dynamics of gender and politics are bound to transform. It would be interesting to see if political gender – indices are one day able to gauge and truly reflect the equality between gender in Latin American societies and its manifestations in the region's politics.

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