Latin Women Take the Helm

SILVIA VIÑAS

MICHELLE BACHELET, PRESIDENT OF CHILE

UN WOMEN GALLERY

SANTIAGO, Chile—Feminist sociologist Teresa Valdés was among a crowd of 200,000 men and women who turned Santiago's main avenue, the Alameda, into a party when Michelle Bachelet was elected Chile's first female president on January 15, 2006. "The Alameda was full—full of people, full of women and little girls wearing presidential sashes," she recalls. "It was glorious, like a party." And Bachelet's speech was inspirational—particularly when she asked the crowd, "Who would have thought… 20, 10, or five years ago, that Chile would elect a woman as president?"

Although critics suggested Bachelet's election would mean little for gender equality, many Chilean women were still hopeful.

"But then you realize there are other political realities," Valdés explained last year, sitting in a café in Santiago. When Bachelet became president, many doors closed for women because male politicians took the attitude of "you already have a woman in the presidency, why would you want more?"

"Our patriarchs resented [Bachelet's win] and the fact that she followed through with her campaign promise to appoint a Cabinet with gender parity," Valdés continued. "She also appointed women [to the Cabinet] that the political parties didn't want. They resented it, and they made us pay for that."

A FEMALE PRESIDENT WAS NO LONGER A UTOPIAN IDEAL OR AN UNACHIEVABLE ASPIRATION. SHE WAS A REALITY.

In such an environment, Valdés wanted to follow up on what it meant to have a woman in the presidency, so she pushed for the creation of an Observatory on Gender and Equity when Bachelet took office. Scholars, activists, and experts on gender equality have contributed research, analysis, and concrete proposals on the topic since the creation of the Observatory in 2006. Fast forward to 2014, and Valdés is still working closely with women and men who are pushing for women's rights in Chile. She even ran for office herself in 2013 to represent the left-leaning Party for Democracy as a deputy for Santiago's La Reina and Peñalolen neighborhoods. She lost the primary election to a man, but by a very close margin.

Still, Valdés points out that when Bachelet beat her conservative female opponent, Evelyn Matthei, in the December 2013 election, the Alameda was not the same party welcoming Bachelet's first term. Bachelet finished her presidency in 2010 with a record 84 percent approval rating, and her popularity remained significantly strong in Chile while she worked as the founding executive director of UN Women. So she was clearly the center-left New Majority coalition's best candidate to defeat the right. Notably, Matthei's nomination as Bachelet's opposition had more to do with the current political climate in Chile than with advances in women's political participation, an area where Chile lags behind many other Latin American countries.

BEYOND MACHISMO

There are more female heads of state in South America than in any other continent, but progress to curb sexism and discrimination in all spheres of society—from politics to the work force to the home—has been slow. Yet, despite the culture of machismo that haunts the region, women have been emerging as political leaders at a remarkable and unexpected rate. Eight of the more than two dozen women in the world elected as presidents of their countries since the 1970s come from Latin America and the Caribbean—indeed, four are in power today in this region.

In 2007, Cristina Fernández became the first elected female president of Argentina, coasting to a 22 percent victory over her closest rival, Elisa Carrió. Women's issues played little role in the campaign. Argentina had already made substantial progress

Silvia Viñas is assistant editor at Radio Ambulante and Latin America regional editor at Global Voices Online.

during the previous government of Nestor Kirchner, Fernández's husband. Still, despite advances in women's political participation and in laws on gender violence and equal marriage, Argentine journalist Alejandra Waigandt believes the nation "was not at all ready to receive a woman. The ferocity with which she was treated [during the campaign] has to do with politics and ideology, but also because she is a woman and we were not used to that at all." Waigandt traces a substantive shift to Fernández's landslide 54 percent victory in 2011. Now it has become routine to see a woman lead the country. A few years earlier, "It was difficult," she says, "and symbolic."

In neighboring Chile, Maricel Sauterel from Comunidad Mujer, an organization that promotes policies to achieve greater participation of women in the public and private spheres, also referred to Bachelet's 2006 victory as symbolic: "Bachelet's presence marked a milestone, a historic change in our country." A female president was no longer a utopian ideal or an unachievable aspiration. She was a reality. For Sauterel, it's not a coincidence that after Bachelet took office more women began to lead important organizations like student federations and labor unions.

Carolina Tohá, mayor of Santiago and former Secretary General of Government under Bachelet—the first woman to hold such posts in Chilean history—goes even further in assessing the impact of Bachelet's presence. She says Bachelet's 2006 victory raised women's self esteem and erased numerous myths and prejudices about Chileans, especially among Chilean men.

Tohá argues that Bachelet's popular appeal shows that voters are tired of old politics with men at the helm, "so when they see a woman who speaks differently, who faces issues in a different way, who relates to people differently, they appreciate that. They see it as hopeful, as a possibility for something different." Women are easier to relate to, according to Tohá, because even while they are leading a country they are still connected to the most fundamental concerns of voters—family, children, food, transportation, education, and health. Tohá emphasizes that even if women's influence is not visible in traditional public spaces in Latin America, their decisions have a strong impact on society.

Female politicians understand the subtle but signficant influence of women in Latin America. Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla made an effort to relate to women during her campaign. "I come from a working class family. I went to a public school. I spent time with people in my neighborhood," she told the newspaper *La Nación* before the 2010 elections. "I've succeeded with my family's support, and mainly, due to a great desire to excel, as it happens to most women." The strategy worked. A January 2010 poll by the newspaper *Al Día* showed that female support for Chinchilla, who would become Costa Rica's first female president the following month, stood at 57 percent. Another poll by *La República* showed two out of three Costa Ricans were ready for a female president.

But not all Costa Rican women were cheering for Chinchilla, a staunch social conservative who openly opposes abortion and other reproductive and sexual rights. A group of Costa Rican feminists issued a statement shortly before the elections, detailing why Chinchilla doesn't represent them, including her relationship with the Catholic hierarchy in Costa Rica. The group concluded that, "although we work daily, each in our own space, so that all of us women, without any type of distinction whatsoever, can construct and exercise full citizenship,

LAURA CHINCHILLA, PRESIDENT OF COSTA RICA

GOBIERNO DE ÁLVARO COLOM

in conditions of equality and justice, we do not believe that a woman, by mere virtue of being one genetically and biologically, necessarily commits herself to the causes of equality and justice that the feminist movements have been raising for centuries."

Meanwhile in Brazil, South America's largest nation and the seventh largest economy in the world, Dilma Rousseff won the 2010 presidential elections running as a candidate for the center-left Workers' Party. During her acceptance speech, she promised to "honor Brazil's women so that today's unprecedented result becomes a normal event and may be repeated and enlarged in companies, civil institutions, and representative entities of our entire society." Under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva—who referred to her as "the mother of the nation" during her presidential campaign—Rousseff served as energy minister and then chief of staff. Like Bachelet, Rousseff has openly mentioned the historic significance of her election. In her acceptance speech, she said that being elected was "a demonstration of the democratic development of our country, because for the first time a woman will rule Brazil." In a country where women are especially vulnerable to social and economic inequalities, Rousseff's vision marked a major milestone for women's rights.

PRESENCE VS. EMPOWERMENT

The rise of Latin American female leaders is not a coincidence. The region has been at the forefront of passing quota laws, allowing more women to participate in national legislatures and other electable positions. Across Latin America, women are heading ministries and legislatures and running for local and national office in unprecedented numbers.

Costa Rica and Argentina were pioneers on the issue of political representation. Argentina was the first country to establish quotas in Latin America in 1991, after ongoing pressure from women's organizations. Argentine law requires that party electoral lists have at least 30 percent women among

their candidates. The law, at least at first glance, has worked. In 2011, women made up 37 percent of Argentina's Chamber of Deputies and 39 percent of the Senate. Costa Rica established its own party quotas shortly afterward. In 1998, a Costa Rican quota law established that women must occupy at least 40 percent of party electoral lists. And Costa Rica has gone further in setting structural changes to increase women's participation in politics. More recently, the Costa Rican Senate approved a constitutional reform to incorporate gender parity in federal, legislative, and local contests.

Today, one in four legislators in Latin America is female and 16 countries have some sort of regulation setting quotas, like Bolivia, where women make up 47 percent of the upper house and 22 percent of the lower house. Greater participation in the legislature seems to have paved the way for other advances in Bolivia. Ana Maria Romero was elected President of the Senate for the first time in 2010, and President Evo Morales appointed a cabinet made up of the same number of men and women at the start of his second term. Although analysts point to these laws as a key factor in propelling women's participation in the region, in some countries the effect of these laws has been slow. Brazil, for example, has a law requiring electoral lists for the legislature contain at least 30 percent female candidates. Still, women hold only 9 percent of seats in the lower house and 16 percent in the upper house—suggesting that the broader electorate itself still must be sensitized to the value of women in their nation's political landscape.

Despite the slow and irregular implementation of quotas in some Latin American countries, Chile's case illustrates the importance of these laws. In a country where women comprise 53 percent of the electorate, many—including Tohá and Bachelet herself—believe a quota law is essential to advance equality in political participation in Chile. In 2013, the human rights group Corporación Humanas reported women in Chile hold 13 percent of all Senate seats and 14 percent in the Chamber of Deputies. The average in Latin America is 20 percent. Moreover, Chile has an 80 to 85 percent re-election rate among members of parliament, the highest in the region, leaving little space for women and other new voices that want to participate in the country's legislature.

FEMALE LEADERS STILL MUST CONTEND WITH A PERVASIVE PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURE RELUCTANT TO MAKE ANY FURTHER CHANGES ON LEGISLATIVE AND CULTURAL LEVELS.

During her first presidential term, Bachelet tried to press legislation that would finally set quotas in Chile. In October 2007, she introduced the Equal Political Participation of Men and Women Bill, which sought to "facilitate access of women to positions of political representation by setting that either gender (male or female) may not exceed 70 percent of the internal positions of the political parties, of the lists of candidates and of the municipal and parliamentary elections," as the Quota Project explains. The bill made no progress in the legislature, but the fact that Bachelet led the initiative legitimized the discussion over the importance of adapting the system to facilitate female participation in politics.

Chileans can look beyond Latin America for evidence that electoral reform equalizes the political playing field. The Inter-

Parliamentary Union has ranked Rwanda as the country with the greatest percentage of women in a lower or single house. The new constitution, adopted by this African country in 2003, established a minimum 30 percent gender quota in all decision-making bodies. Today, women make up 64 percent of the lower house. This progress in women's political participation is credited to electoral measures and other laws that promote gender equality. Of course, another element is the genocide during the Hutu-Tutsi wars of 1994, when vast numbers of men were slaughtered.

But quotas are also controversial, causing countless debates wherever they are implemented or even discussed: Do women win political office simply because they are women? Does it matter if their victories level the playing field? As Mala Htun and Jennifer M. Piscopo point out in a 2010 paper for the Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, "though the effects of quotas are strong, they are not a panacea." Presence alone does not translate into empowerment. And this is where machismo rears its head in Latin America.

Waigandt, who has covered women's participation in politics extensively, says that women rarely lead electoral lists in Argentina, and the current law does not require a quota inside political parties. In this scenario, men usually hold the highest positions. Moreover, Htun and Piscopo cite research showing that, "across Latin American countries, women tend to be clustered in the legislatures' less prestigious committees, which are those dealing with social issues... The connection between women's presence and their empowerment depends not only on having a 'critical mass' in political office but also on the social beliefs and institutional arrangements that structure their opportunities to act effectively."

PATRIARCHAL & SEXIST

Though South America may boast more women in the highest political office than on any other continent, its female leaders still must contend with a pervasive patriarchal structure reluctant to make any further changes on legislative or cultural levels.

Carolina Tohá, whose father José Tohá served as Chilean President Salvador Allende's first Minister of Interior and Vice President, began her political career when she joined the University of Chile's student federation. She later became the first government spokeswoman in Chilean history when Bachelet named her Minister Secretary General of Government, then the first permanent female president of the Party for Democracy. In 2012, she ended the right's 12-year control of the Santiago municipality, winning the election as the municipality's first female mayor.

In all these positions, Tohá has lived with the complexities of being a woman in what she describes as a hostile and unknown environment for her gender, observing "the whole dynamic in politics considers men's needs, their schedules, their time." Men are not expected to care for children as women are in Chilean and other Latin American societies. Tohá says raising children and holding high political leadership roles is difficult, so many women step down voluntarily when opportunities arise for political positions that demand more time away from their traditional responsibilities.

As to why she hasn't stepped aside like other women, Tohá admits that politics are an inalienable part of her identity. "I've grown up with this interest, this motivation for politics and for public issues, for the country we are building, and that is a central part of how I identify myself," adding she has always understood that like women in other fields, she needs to find a way to

harmonize her professional and personal life, a balance which she admits is never perfect. "Every day you give up something, every day you generate a debt at work or with your family or with your friends. It's hard, but I have accepted a life with these complexities. For others, that's a price they are not willing to pay."

Given the prevalence of sexism, it is essential that Latin American countries continue adapting their political structures through electoral reforms that promote women's participation, while allowing elected female leaders to advocate for their gender once they reside within the halls of government. This alone will not fix deep-rooted inequalities, of course. But the powerful effect of female presidents in the region, coupled with the work of women's organizations, can make this surge in political participation a sustainable phenomenon—effectively the new normal—and lead to significant changes for women across society. This is not just an idyllic scenario. It's already happening.

MOVING WOMEN

When Bachelet first took office on March 11, 2006, Chile was very much a laggard in women's rights. And after her first four-year term, it still lags. But her presence had an effect that cannot be ignored, and it could set the stage for more substantial changes during her second term. Selecting a cabinet with gender parity—the first in Latin American history—was a major milestone cited by women as Bachelet's principal accomplishment during her first term. But her other initiatives did not win enough support, even from her own coalition, to become law.

Still, during her first term domestic workers, did gain the right to earn minimum wage. Pension reform granted women financial assistance for each living child, and the principle of equal pay was incorporated into the Labor Code. But there is a long way to go. The wage gap between men and women in Chile has grown in recent years, according to a survey by the University of Chile. Furthermore, Chile retains one of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world, which bans all forms of abortion, even therapeutic.

During the campaign for her second term, Bachelet presented a strong program to foster gender equality. She promised to send a bill to Congress during her first 100 days to create a Ministry of Women's Affairs, replacing the National Women's Service. She also pledged to modify the Intrafamily Violence Act to include all forms of gender violence, strengthen oversight of existing rules against gender discrimination in the workplace, and modify the equal pay law to make it effective. She further vowed to promote the design and implementation of a National Care System, which will help women in their multiple roles as traditional primary caregivers of children and the elderly—an overwhelming responsibility considering the growing number of women entering the workforce in Chile. According to a survey carried out by the Ministry of Social Development, women's participation in the labor face grew from 32 percent in 1990 to 43 percent in 2011, while households where women are the main economic support tripled in the last 20 years.

> IN A COUNTRY LIKE CHILE, WHERE THE NUMBER OF WOMEN IN POLITICS IS STILL LAGGING, WOMEN WILL NEED TO PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE.

Bachelet certainly has the political will to move forward, and she made gender

equality one of the focal points of her first term. Sauterel, from Comunidad Mujer, believes it's not a coincidence that Bachelet was asked to be the founding executive director of UN Women. In the First Regular Session of the Executive Board of UN Women in January 2011, Bachelet laid out the organization's vision as one "where men and women have equal opportunities and capacities and the principles of gender equality are embedded in development, peace, and security agendas." She defined the organization's key objective: "to build national capacity and ownership to enable national partners to formulate gender-responsive laws and policies and to scale up successful strategies to deliver on national commitments to gender equality."

Bachelet was not only an advocate of women's rights during her first presidential term in Chile, "she was very different from the other women who had been president [in Latin America]. In general, the women who had been president or who had held important roles had a male sponsor. But Bachelet had no male sponsorship. And furthermore, she was an atheist. She had children from different partners and practiced a liberal profession, so it was easier to identify with her. For a lot of women, the fact that she was president of Chile also meant she was the president of all women in Latin America," Sauterel points out.

Sauterel worked for the International Relations and Cooperation Department of the National Women's Service during Bachelet's first term, allowing her to see first-hand the impact of Bachelet on other Latin American countries she visited: "We would arrive, and it was like she was a super star. People were anxiously waiting for her. She filled rooms. There were lines to greet her. She had an effect here, and she had an incredibly important effect in other countries."

Tohá is similarly optimistic that in her second term Bachelet will have an easier time advancing female political participation and other urgent gender-related issues.Valdés says she is committed to continue pushing for women's rights, and will work alongside other women and men from across the political spectrum to make sure that an agenda for gender equality can move forward. In a country like Chile, where the number of women in politics is still lagging, women will need to play an active role, lobbying for specific initiatives that affect women's rights. Forming strong alliances is critical to move forward, especially where female political representation is low. Women who have dedicated their lives to pushing for more gender equality, like Valdés, are closely connected to voters and work actively to educate men and women about these issues. They are eager to work with legislators to turn proposals into reality.

COLLABORATING

Chile can look to Brazil as an example of effective collaboration between women's movements and state actors. Ana Alice Alcantara, a political scientist and Cecilia Sardenberg, an anthropologist, both at the Universidade Federal de Bahia, acknowledge a paradox faced by Brazilian feminists, which can be applied equally to Chile: "On the one hand, the presence of a wide and well articulated women's movement, and on the other, a notorious absence of women in decision making positions, in spite of having a woman, Dilma Rousseff, as president of the country." So the demands of women and pressure by organized women's movements are actively being used to craft legislation and public policies, and jam them through the legislature.

Brazil has held three National Conferences for Public Policies for Women, bringing together more than 300,000 women to discuss policy and create a national plan based on a Feminist Political Platform, which was presented to all candidates in the 2002 presidential election. "This platform voiced feminist perspectives on issues of general interest and proposed the construction of a more equitable society on the basis of the principles of a non-racist, non-homophobic, and anti-capitalist feminism," Alcantara and Sardenberg explain in an article for Open Democracy. Luis Inácio Lula da Silva won the 2002 election, created the Special Secretariat of Public Policies for Women, a cabinet-level position, and convened the first national conference. Two other conferences were held in subsequent years, launching the Pact Against Violence Against Women and working toward the passage of comprehensive legislation to combat domestic violence. The demand for the legalization of abortion was also reaffirmed, though not yet implemented.

Brazil lags behinds its neighbors in women's political participation, with women making up only 9 percent of seats in the lower house. So in this scenario—which is similar to Chile's—"participative state feminism has thus made it possible for feminists to take a greater part in the formulation and monitoring of public policies that respond to women's demands in building a more equitable society," Alcantara and Sardenberg believe.

Chile and other nations seeking to advance women's rights would do well to follow Brazil's example and set up formal spaces where civil society and the state may gather to discuss and plan policies that affect women—providing a clear sign that the country understands the importance of tackling women's issues, while actively including women in policymaking. Like quotas, this is not a panacea. But coupled with electoral reforms that allow more women to enter politics, Brazil's example of "participatory state feminism" is another way to help level the playing field for women while employing diverse feminist movements that have thus far been so instrumental in propelling women into politics.

With Chinchilla finishing her term and Bachelet beginning her second this year, and with Rousseff and Fernández still in power, it is too early to assess the full effect this surge in female presidents has had on women's rights in Latin America. Violence and inequality are still major problems affecting women in the region. However, the momentum this growing number of female leaders has created is already evident. Seeing women running for office at national and local levels is becoming all but routine. Many attribute a record number of women running for mayor in Brazil in 2012 to "the Dilma effect." Rousseff's leadership is motivating other women to run for office. Meanwhile in Honduras, Xiomara Castro—wife of ousted President Manuel Zelaya—came in second in a close and decisive election in 2013. In Panamá this year, four out of the seven presidential candidates have nominated women as their vice-presidents. Popular female leaders, like Bachelet and Rousseff, are setting a positive precedent. Voters seem to trust women—Tohá points out—and men are noticing. There is much work left to be done in Latin America, but however slowly, change is coming, and it is being orchestrated directly by women. ●