WOMEN IN POWER: HOW PRESENCE AFFECTS POLITICS

Leslie A. Schwindt-Bayer
University of Mississippi

March 28, 2007

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Prepared for the conference
WOMEN IN THE AMERICAS: PATHS TO POLITICAL POWER

Sponsored by:
Inter-American Dialogue
Inter-American Development Bank
League of Women Voters of the United States
Organization of American States

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The number of women represented in political leadership in the Americas has increased dramatically over the past thirty years. In 2006, Chile elected its first female president, Michelle Bachelet, and Jamaica its first female prime minister, Portia Simpson-Miller. Women have gained access to cabinet appointments with a regional average of 21% of cabinet ministers being female, compared to only 14% just 6 years ago in 2000. In national legislatures, the average percentage of women in office in the Americas has grown from 12.5% in 1995 to 20% in 2007, making it second only to the average proportion of women in Nordic legislatures at 41%. This growth has been particularly remarkable in Argentina and Costa Rica. Argentina's first election of the current democratic period in 1983 resulted in only 3.9% of the Chamber of Deputies being female. By 2001, women comprised 30.7% of the lower house of congress. Costa Rica, one of Latin America's longest standing democracies, had only 3 female deputies (5.3%) in the 1974-1978 National Assembly but witnessed a jump from 19% to 35% in the 2002 election. Progress has been slower for subnational governments but women are increasingly represented among governors, state legislatures, mayors, and local councils in the Americas. The growing numbers of women in politics augurs an important question – what effect do women in political leadership have on politics?

In 1979, Elsa Chaney found that women in Latin American politics were *supermadres* (Chaney 1979). When women entered the political arena, they took with them their traditional roles as wives and mothers and viewed their political identities simply as an extension of their roles at home. For her book, *Supermadre*, she surveyed women in a wide range of political positions – from national legislatures to local administrators – in Chile and Peru in the late 1960's and found that women tended to have idealistic and feminine reasons for entering politics (help women and children, fight injustice, etc.), they often doubted their abilities as politicians, they felt they had to work harder than their male colleagues, they lacked political ambition, and they worked on "feminine-stereotyped tasks related to education, social welfare, health, and cultural fields" (Chaney 1979, 133). These findings led Chaney to label women in Latin American politics as *supermadres*.

Since Chaney's study, the number of women in politics has grown significantly and women's roles in society have changed. Women in the Americas are no longer perceived solely as wives and mothers whose job is to take care of the home but are increasingly educated and working outside the home. Today, women's enrollment in higher education is equal to men's in many Latin American countries, and in some countries more students are female than male. The proportion of the paid labor force that is female increased from one-quarter in the 1950's to one-third in the 1980's and ranged from 29% to 42% across countries in 2002 (World Development Indicators 2004). Changes also are evident at the household level in Latin America (Craske 1999). An increase in female-headed households has led women to take on the role of sole economic provider in addition to traditional roles such as caregiver. At the same time, a decline in the average size of families in Latin America has made it easier for women to work outside the home and participate in political activities.

Consequently, women in Latin American politics today are different from Chaney's *supermadres* in many ways. Today's women in politics are more self-confident, more ambitious,

DRAFT

more competitive, and are motivated not only by an interest in promoting women's issues and concerns but also by the socioeconomic well-being of society, more broadly. The stereotype of women doing "women's work" and men doing "men's work" no longer holds to the extent that it did thirty years ago. Women have made great strides not only getting elected to office but in promoting women's issues and women's policies, diversifying their political roles beyond stereotypical "women's work," and participating in a wider range of political activities. Yet, while women's status in the political arena has changed significantly, female politicians still face a number of obstacles. They continue to be marginalized by male legislators at times and struggle for full acceptance by the traditionally male-dominant political leadership. The progress women have made, however, is striking. The remainder of this paper will focus on the progress and challenges that women in political leadership in the Americas face today.

Women's Presence and Political Progress

The increased numbers of women in politics has had wide-ranging effects from women in leadership being role models for other women in society to the functioning of legislative politics and the passage of women-friendly policies to higher levels of public confidence in the political system. First, the growing numbers of female presidents, ministers, national legislators, and even local officeholders, provides an influx of role models for young women in society. The election of Michelle Bachelet already has had numerous implications for women – a cabinet that is half women, female appointments to the country's governorships, and promises to implement a number of female-friendly policies. Beyond these concrete changes, however, the mere accomplishment of winning the presidency sets an example throughout the region. Not long after her election, I was interviewing female legislators in Argentina and many of them commented on the groundbreaking nature of Bachelet's election. Her election sets an encouraging example for women already aspiring to presidencies of other countries as well as those who previously would not have considered running for office.

In the legislative sphere, women in Latin American politics have made important contributions to many parts of the policy process from the policy concerns/political attitudes they bring to the agenda, to the committees on which they sit and craft legislation to the policies they sponsor and push through to passage (Jones 1997; Craske 2003; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003; Heath et al. 2005; Schwindt-Bayer 2006). For example, women bring different policy concerns to the political arena in terms of their political attitudes. Schwindt-Bayer (2006) conducted a survey of legislators in Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica in 2001-2002 and finds that female legislators place higher priority than male legislators on issues of women's equality and children/family issues. Specifically, her statistical models predict that 94% of female legislators view women's issues as "very high" or "high" priority compared to only 68% of male legislators – a difference of 26 percentage points.[1] Similarly, a predicted 79% of female legislators view children and family issues as "very high" or "high" priorities compared to 66% of men – a smaller but still statistically significant 13 percentage point difference. It is not that men find women's issues and children/family issues to be unimportant, but they do not place as high a priority on them as do women.

[1] These models adjust for the potentially confounding effect of a legislator's ideology, educational background, age, occupational background, the urbanness of a legislator's district, and the country's level of economic development.

DRAFT

Women also have successfully translated their high priority on women's issues into policy. In Latin America, female legislators are much more likely than male legislators to sponsor legislation on women's equality and children/family issues (Jones 1997; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003; Schwindt-Bayer 2006). Jones (1997) found that in 1993-1994, female legislators in Argentina sponsored 21% more women's rights bills and 9.5% more children and family bills than their male counterparts. This difference was higher than what he found in the U.S. Congress where women sponsored 14.4% more bills on women's rights and 2.6% more children and family bills. In Honduras, Taylor-Robinson and Health (2002) found significant gender differences on bill sponsorship patterns for women's rights issues but not for children and family issues. Women sponsored seven of the ten women's rights bills introduced in the 1990-1993 and 1994-1997 congresses. Schwindt-Bayer (2006) uses bill sponsorship data from the years 1995 and 1999 in Argentina and the 1994-1998 and 1998-2002 Colombian and Costa Rican congresses and finds that female legislators sponsor, on average, 11% more women's issue bills than male legislators.[2]

Female legislators also are more likely than men to speak on behalf of women's bills and defend them during floor debates. Taylor-Robinson and Heath (2002) found in Honduras that women were more likely to make speeches on the floor of the Honduran Congress on behalf of both women's rights bills and children and family bills than they were on other types of bills. Their highest level of participation was in debates over the Organic Law Code for Nursing Professionals (1997) for which women gave 36% of the speeches during plenary debates on the bill (Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2002). Given that they comprised only 7% of the legislature at the time, they were overrepresented in their defense of the bill. Using the survey conducted in Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica, Schwindt-Bayer (2003) predicts that sixty-five percent of female legislators speak "very frequently" during floor debates on behalf of women's issues compared to 23% of men.

In addition to bringing women's issues to the agenda, sponsoring bills on women's issues, and defending women's issue legislation during debate, female legislators have successfully transformed many of the women's issue bills they have promoted into law. In Costa Rica, for example, Deputy Rina Contreras López (1998-2002) was particularly effective at both sponsoring women and children bills and getting them passed into law. During her four-year term in office, she sponsored twelve women, children, and family bills, eight of which were directly targeting women and four of which were aimed at children and family concerns. Five of these twelve bills (42%) became law by the end of the four-year term – a higher success rate than any other woman achieved for women and children bills in either the 1994-1998 or 1998-2002 congress. One of these bills was the "Ley Contra Explotación Sexual de Menores" (Law Against Sexual Exploitation of Minors, L-7899), which was signed into law by President Miguel Angel Rodríguez on August 4, 1999. The law toughens penalties for sex crimes involving minors such as pornography and the child sex trade. Another of her bills that became law outlined reforms to Costa Rica's penal code to toughen penalties for those convicted of sexual assault against children or the disabled (L-8002).

[2] This is after accounting for the possibility that women may be more likely than men to sit on women's issue committees, may be more liberal than men, have less legislative experience than men, represent different districts, sponsor fewer bills overall than men, and have more seats in some countries than others.

DRAFT

Female legislators in Argentina also have been active sponsoring women and children bills and getting them passed. Three of the most active initiators of women and children's legislation during 1999 include Elisa Carrió, who sponsored 6 bills on women and 7 on children, Miriam Curletti with 5 bills on women and 5 on children, and Margarita Stolbizer who sponsored 5 on women and 4 on children. Of these bills, only one became law, but it is a major piece of legislation on women's health – the Sexual and Reproductive Health Law (L-25.673 of 2002). It was cosponsored by Deputies Carrió and Curletti who overcame significant objections from the Catholic Church and defended the bill on the floor of the Chamber of Deputies to pass the law. The main component of the law is the creation of a national reproductive health program that will work on many fronts including the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and breast/genital cancer, providing information on sexually transmitted diseases and contraceptive use, bringing contraceptives to public hospitals, offering programs on family planning, and promoting sex education in schools.

Clearly, female legislators have played important roles bringing women, children, and family issues to the legislative agenda, sponsoring legislation in these areas, and defending women's rights legislation as it works its way through the legislative process. It is important to note, however, that while the growing numbers of female legislators has had important policy implications, this does not imply that *all* women prioritize, sponsor, and promote women's issues. *In general*, women are more likely than men to represent women's rights and concerns but this is not necessarily the case for *all* female legislators. The women who do represent women's issues have helped bring about new legislation on women, children, and family issues in the Americas. The following table provides a sampling of important laws in these areas that have been passed over the last fifteen years in Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica.

[The paper continues on the next page with a table.]

DRAFT

Table: Major Laws on Women, Children, and Families in Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica

Country	Laws
Argentina	Quota Law (L-24.012 of 1991) Law on Interfamily Violence (L-24.417 of 1994) Newborn Rights to Identity Law (L-24540 of 1995) Modification to Penal Code regarding crimes against sexual integrity (L-25.087 of 1999) Law for adolescent mothers missing secondary school (L-25.273 of 2000) Sexual and Reproductive Health Law (L-25.673 of 2002) Law reforming previous law to protect pregnant and lactating women in schools (L-25.808 of 2003) Law for Integral Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents (L-26.061 of 2005)
Colombia	Law 82 of 1993 – Special protections for female heads of household Law 294 of 1996 – Prevention, remedy, and sanctions for interfamily violence Law 361 of 1997 – Mechanisms to integrate citizens with disabilities (especially children) Law 548 of 1999 – Prohibits military drafting of youth under 18 years of age Law 581 of 2000 – Quota Law Law 679 of 2001 – Prevention of Child Pornography and Child Sex Tourism Law 721 of 2001 – Reforms to the paternity law Law 731 of 2001 – Sets standards to improve quality of life for rural women Law 750 of 2002 – Law allowing house arrest or community service for female heads of households convicted of light crimes Law 823 of 2003 – Equal Opportunity for Women Law
Costa Rica	Law of Promotion of Social Equality for Women (L-7142 of 1990) Electoral Code Reform creating gender quotas (L-7653 of 1996) Law against Domestic Violence (L-7586 of 1996) Law against Sexual Harassment in the Workplace and Education (L-7476 of 1995) Law to create the National Institute for Women (L-7801 of 1998) Law to Promote Breastfeeding (L-7430 of 1994) Law against Sexual Exploitation of Youth (L-7899) Law of Responsible Paternity (L-8108 of 2001) Law of General Protection of the Adolescent Mother (L-7735 of 1997) Law to toughen penalties for sex crimes against children (L-8002 of 2000)

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The increasing number of women in political leadership has had important implications for politics beyond policies and legislative politics. First, public attitudes toward women in politics are less prejudicial in some of the countries with more women in office. In Argentina and Costa Rica, only 24% and 21% of the population still believe that men are better political leaders than women (Latinobarometro 2004). The proportions are much higher in countries with less women's representation – the Dominican Republic (50%) and Honduras (40%). Second, the growth in women's representation contributes to higher levels of public confidence in the political system (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005). This suggests that increasing women's political leadership bodes well for political legitimacy and the consolidation of democracy in the region. As citizen confidence in female politicians grows and more women get elected to political office, democratic legitimacy strengthens.

Persistent Obstacles for Women in Politics

Women have made great strides in the political arena but obstacles remain for women in political leadership. In addition to bringing women, children, and family issues to the political agenda, women in office need to diversify their priorities such that they cannot be labeled as solely "representing women." They need to be able to represent non-gender concerns and gain access to traditionally male-dominated political arenas. This is where women have had the most difficulty in recent years.

Schwindt-Bayer (2006) found female and male legislators are *equally* likely to prioritize issues such as economics, finance, employment, and agriculture in terms of the political attitudes they bring to the legislatures. However, women are significantly *less* likely to sponsor legislation in these areas. For example, in Argentina, Colombia, and Costa Rica, male legislators sponsored 23% of their bills in the area of economics. Female legislators sponsored only 19% of their bills in economics. This statistically significant four percentage point difference also exists for fiscal affairs and agriculture bills. This means that women are not successfully translating their issue preferences into bill sponsorship, and consequently, are not able to represent fully the concerns of their parties and constituents.

A similar phenomenon is occurring for committee assignments. While sitting on women's issue committees and social committees allows female legislators to work on policies that affect women, they also need to build a presence on committees that are not traditionally "women's committees." The most powerful committees in a legislative chamber tend to be those traditionally dominated by male legislators, such as appropriations, economics, foreign affairs, and agriculture committees. In Latin America, women are much more likely to sit on women's issue and social committees and are less likely to be represented on the more powerful, traditionally male-dominated, committees (Htun and Jones 2002, Heath et al. 2005). This trend not only persists but moves in the wrong direction with the growing numbers of women in legislatures. Heath et al. (2005) find that the "predicted probability that women will be assigned to power committees declines from almost 19% with only 1% of the chamber being female to only 4% when 29% of the chamber is female" (428). They suggest that the increasing numbers of women may be viewed as a "threat" to men's traditional political power such that male leaders

DRAFT

try to protect their interests by keeping women off of power committees. Women's access to powerful committees also is hindered in legislatures where party leaders or chamber presidents (who almost always are men) control committee assignments and in legislatures with a committee specifically focused on women's issues, such as Argentina's Family, Women, Children, and Adolescents committee (Heath et al. 2005). Heath et al. (2005) found that having a women's committee gives women an opportunity to focus specifically on women's issues but also gives male leaders a way to marginalize female legislators – they put women on the women's committee rather than giving them access to more powerful committees in the legislature.

These problems could be ameliorated as women gain access to positions of leadership in legislative chambers. Chamber presidents often have the power to make committee assignments, influence committee leadership elections, choose which bills will be debated in which order, and more broadly, influence the chamber's political agenda. Unfortunately, women have not, as of yet, made much headway into legislative leadership even in the Latin American countries with the largest representation of women. In Argentina, no woman has ever served as president of the Chamber of Deputies and only 4 women have served as vice-presidents.[3] In Costa Rica, only two woman have served as Assembly presidents, Rose Marie Karpinsky in 1986 and Rina Contreras López in 1999, but twenty women have served as vice-presidents or secretaries of the chamber between 1990 and 2006. The absence of women in chamber leadership means that many decisions about committee appointments, legislative leadership posts, and legislative agendas, are still being made by male leaders. Whether that will change as more women get into leadership positions is unknown.

Conclusion

The increased numbers of women in Latin American legislatures in recent years has had important consequences such as more female role models for women, bringing the concerns of women, children, and families to the political agenda, sponsoring and defending bills on behalf of women, children, and families, getting new laws on the books that protect the interests of these groups, and increasing the legitimacy of the new Latin American democracies, more generally. While this progress has been remarkable, obstacles remain. Some legislation that has been passed has been less effective than its authors originally hoped leaving many disappointed and returning to the drawing board. Women have contributed to the legislative process on women, family, and children issues, but have struggled to gain full access to legislative political power through powerful committees and leadership posts. And, while female political leaders are viewed favorably by many in society, one quarter to one half of citizens in some countries still believe that men make better political leaders than women. These obstacles must be overcome for the growing numbers of women in politics to fundamentally influence the political arena. The efforts of future female leaders in the Americas will be to tackle these remaining challenges.

[3] The Argentine *Directorio* has a president and up to 3 vice-presidents who serve for two-year terms that can, and often are, renewed.

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