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Women and Politics in Paraíba, Brazil: Participation, Learning, and Empowerment

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Abstract: Life histories of pioneer female politicians illustrate instances of learning and empowerment within gender cultures and imbalance in private and public life. After transforming their personal and family lives, independent female candidates face greater obstacles located in the political and economic structure.

Brazilian women conquered the right to vote in 1932. Comprising 51% of the population and 49% of registered voters nowadays, they have attained only 7% of all formal political representation. Nevertheless, in the nineties, women's advancement within party politics has been notable, especially at the municipal level, and surprisingly in the poor Northeast Region. Moreover, in 1997, on the initiative of a female Federal Deputy representing the Workers Party-PT, a quota system (a 25% minimum for either gender within each party or coalition) was turned into law, thus expanding opportunities for women.

Very little is known about Brazilian women's participation in formal politics let alone the personal trajectories and experiential learning of pioneers. There is much to be learned about the structural position of groups, the corporate factors of political participation, the influence of individual life cycles, and how cost-benefit relations operate in the case of women, who face unequal conditions of access to political arenas and power channels in comparison to men, a history of fewer political rights and gains, as well as segmented life cycles due to maternity (Avelar, 1987). It has been noted that female politicians are frequently connected to family-party structures because oligarchies use the "women of the family" to perpetuate their power, especially in the Northeast (Tabak, 1987; Costa, 1998). Moreover, women themselves have used feminine stereotypes in their campaigns -- the loving mother, wife, or teacher -- suggesting that rhetorical manipulation of the traditional feminine identity might generate political gains (Rabay, 1996). On the other hand, change in traditional feminine roles has allowed for greater individual autonomy and political progressivism among women (Avelar, 1987), pointing at possibilities of redefining the current masculine political culture, reconstructing the political system, as well as recreating social identities (Stromquist, 1998).

Women's formal political participation involves a continual and complex theoretical and practical process of learning about and within relations and practices of power in the realms of public-party politics and private life. Moreover, it involves processes of individual and collective empowerment that are essentially educative. For women empowerment represents a challenge to the current patriarchal ideology, power structures and relations of gender inequality and female

subordination. This study explores those processes in and through the life histories of women candidates for the 1998 national and state elections in the state of Paraíba, Brazil, taken from their own narrative and informed by the concepts of oppression, subordination, conscientization, and empowerment as elaborated by Freire (1980) and feminist authors (Leon, 1997; Stromquist, 1998).

The 35 female candidates were classified in 3 groups: heiresses of a family already established in politics; male candidates' helpers without electoral chances themselves; and 'independent' candidates. Independence is practically impossible in politics; furthermore, in poor regions such as the Northeast, electoral success is dependent on economic capital for "buying votes" -- those holding positions in the political machine not only exchange favors (social assistance and public jobs) for political loyalty but buy last minute adherence of poor voters through the distribution of material goods. However, the so-called independent candidates have at least one of the following disadvantageous traits: they do not belong to a politically powerful family; they have developed their own practice of political militancy in social movements, grassroots organizations, professional associations, unions, or through the media; they are in small opposition parties or they have fought their way into a traditional party; they have a professional identity; they personify moral autonomy. In effect, only one of them was elected whereas, in contrast, six relatives of male politicians conquered seats in the State Assembly.

How do women understand and experience politics and power as they begin to reverse their historical exclusion? To what extent and in what forms have they struggled against the patriarchal order during their life courses? What are their motives for entering formal politics? What singular forms, as yet unknown, might their participation in politics reveal? What obstacles have they confronted and which strategies and resources have they used? In what sense are they supported or unsupported by traditional male dominated political parties and interest groups, or by other women? What individual and gender gains do they perceive? In what ways do public visibility and political commitments affect their private life? To what extent do they represent feminist interests? To what extent is experiential learning more important than formal education? These questions guided the inquiry and helped to put in context the conversations with the candidates.

Twelve women with significant electoral performance, both elected and non-elected, were interviewed on their family history and current situation; formal and informal education, including prior political activism, experiences within parties, elections, and official posts, stressing personal motivation, learning within and about politics, and commitment to gender issues. From the tape-recorded interviews, life histories were written and then discussed with and validated by the subjects, who discarded anonymity. This paper explores the life histories of the five 'independent' candidates.

The independent female politicians

Aracilba Rocha, 46 years old, is a very assertive and witty civil engineer, a widow and mother of a 25 year old son and an 18 year old daughter. A longstanding member of PMDB, the only opposition party during the military dictatorship in the center-left nowadays, she now ran for the first time for the Federal Chamber and obtained insufficient 9.251 votes.

Coming to the capital from a small rural town when she was ten, *Aracilba* was found illiterate and helped by her third grade teacher. The youngest of nine children, her father was a tailor, but her mother was the one who supported them by sewing the shirts he cut during all her waking hours. Strong and distant, the mother let the children free, and *Aracilba* spent her free time reading in the library, thus developing her writing skills. Soon she started a full time job and transferred to night school. Spontaneous and self-confident she approached the male revolutionary students of the late sixties and wrote their pamphlets, hence meeting her husband-to-be. As the student association president, though not moved by ideology, she joined the secondary student movement and was even arrested at sixteen. Because she was a show-off, but poor and unattractive, she had to know things; when she arrived home from school at 11, she lit two candles (to save electricity) and studied the next day's topics. Successful in Math, she made money by teaching other students on weekends. Following an older brother, she entered the public (free) university to study Engineering, by then already married and pregnant. Her husband died in a car accident after her daughter was born. To survive the pain, she moved to São Paulo, where she entered the state civil service, joined PMDB, quickly becoming her neighborhood board president, and worked hard in two electoral campaigns. In seven years, she built prestige, advanced professionally, expanded her political network and worked out her transference to a position in her home state government in 1987. After 18 years serving PMDB, working to elect others in exchange for her jobs, surviving political instabilities due to her technical competence, postponing her aspirations to run in 1994 and 1996, she finally set out as a candidate. She presented herself as a competent candidate -- just as any man and superior to most -- to represent people's interests. Asserting that she never found obstacles as a woman, she recognizes no man would have waited so long; yet she does not feel used by the party because she knows money and powerful allies are vital to be elected.

Cozete Barbosa, 42 years old, divorced, two late-teen-age sons, is a system analyst, a member of PT, the biggest left-wing party, and a Councilor of Campina Grande, the second biggest city in the state. She ran for the Senate against two traditional male politicians and, though not elected, received 216.006 votes (19,75% of the total).

Growing up in an upper-middle-class family, attending a catholic female school, *Cozete* was oppressed and repressed as a child by an authoritarian mother, who nevertheless was a model of an independent woman in her time. School offered the chance to break with family restraints by participating in sports and theater, and representing the student association. Soon she became a political militant against the military dictatorship, first in the university student movement, and later, upon taking her first job, in the movement for the reorganization of the local Public Servants Association, becoming their first president and leading their first strike. She also joined a feminist group, presided the local Human Rights Committee, and got involved with the Landless Movement. Her political militancy paralleled the construction of PT, which she has represented in four elections since 1988. Becoming a leader was a very difficult and painful process for her. Her aggressiveness shocked the town as she confronted the police in the streets. She suffered anonymous threats and sabotages, as well as media attacks on her private life and femininity. Her parents, husband and in-laws did not accept her political militancy and her persistence implied emotional attrition and a divorce. She reports having felt more violated at home than on the streets, but the struggles in the public sphere made her stronger in the private. She has a good relationship with her sons, however, who are very supportive of her political career. She feels

frequently constrained by her male colleagues, both as a party member and a representative in the City Council: as she says, PT is patriarchal, the left is patriarchal, and society is patriarchal. As a declared feminist she is in favor of the legalization of abortion and the civil union of homosexuals, contradicting the party's catholic supporters, and says that her commitment is first of all to herself. Albeit stressed, and not so much moved by passion as in the past, she recognizes her contribution to changing the local political culture.

Nadja Palitot, 41 years old, three daughters, one grandson, divorced and re-married, is a criminal lawyer. Affiliated to left-wing parties, she was a Councilor in João Pessoa, the State capital and largest city, from 1992 to 1996, ran for the Federal Chamber in 1994 and for Mayor in 1996. She almost reached the State Assembly with 9.119 votes.

The third among an older brother and two sisters, *Nadja* acquired her social sensibility from her father, a physician who assisted the poor, and her mother, a housewife who taught their illiterate domestic servants at night. Married at sixteen, she studied Law and Journalism and, while bearing her three daughters, remained distant from student politics. She thought she disliked politics and was fond of anarchist literature. Her concern for social justice grew when she visited prisons as part of her coursework. As a criminal lawyer, she joined the Human Rights Committee of the local Lawyers' Guild. Due to a job in the state bank, she got involved with the union movement against lay-offs during a process that resulted in its bankruptcy. By then her leadership and eloquent rhetoric were evident and invitations to join party-politics appeared. Reluctantly, she followed a veteran female politician in her visits to poor neighborhoods and fell in love with the work. In 1992 she joined PDT and ran for the City Council, with little money and help. She did not win a seat with 1.150 votes but, as a proxy, substituted a party member who renounced early in the term. Running for the Federal Chamber in 1994 she received 17.000 votes, no sufficient to win but important for her prestige. However, she felt unsupported by PDT and joined PSB. Her most dramatic experience, seen both as empowering and disappointing was her successful but dreadful fight against a project to increase the Councilors' stipends. All her colleagues, even those on the Left, threatened to impeach her. Though saved by a spontaneous mass movement and later winning the case, she almost gave up politics. In the 1996 Mayor run, she saw her second position drop to fourth because she was considered too aggressive with the main candidate, a supposedly more competent male, who had financial and political support. She says politics is a machist camp and believes that women have a better chance to enact their ideas when they whisper them into male ears who, then, voice them as their own.

Narriman Xavier, 33 years old, divorced, three children from multiple relationships, is a popular radio anchor. Councilor of Guarabira from 1992 to 1996, she was re-elected in 1996 but could not occupy the chair due to a criminal process resulting from political persecution. Declared elected for the State Assembly with 12.292 votes, she then lost her position as the result of a recount, remaining as a substitute. Though she is now in a center-right party (PFL), she declares that she has no commitment to parties.

Narriman was born in Campina Grande because the town where her family lived had no hospital. The eldest, followed by two brothers, her father was a Census collector and her mother a housewife. At twelve she moved to Guarabira, a small town, and later to her grandmother's house in the capital, where she attended a private school with a scholarship. She returned to

Guarabira to study Languages at a community college. Encouraged by a colleague to do a test for a radio job, she crossed the first gender barrier by showing that she could act as a creative reporter. But she aroused the envy of her colleagues and their wives and soon lost her job. Meanwhile she got married, had a son, got divorced, finished college, and lost her father and brother. Returning to the radio, she started a successful career as anchor of a Monday through Saturday, three-hour variety-interactive program, in which she exercises human rights militancy. Her witty and humorous style in addressing the needs of the poor mass rendered a 95% audience rate. In 1992, stimulated by fans, she ran for the City Council and was the champion with one thousand votes thanks to her courage and voice. Extremely independent, during her first mandate she felt not only isolated in opposing and denouncing wrongs, but also gained enemies. Being the only opponent to the town's political patron (himself a State Representative, his wife the town Mayor) she got a community service sentence for disobedience to a court order (delayed the prompt delivery of radio tapes) and, though re-elected, could not assume her second mandate. In the 1998 campaign she suffered heavy attacks on her private life, targeting even her children. Despite all, she finds beauty and strength in the struggle and won't give it up, for she believes in its need, its justice and its possibility of success. Back at school to study Law, she defends individual freedom and feminist causes, such as women's control of their bodies and abortion choice.

Socorro Marques, a 64 years old economist and mother of eight, was one of the first women mayors in the state. Starting her political career in 1982, she practically built the small village of Desterro de Malta into the 3.000 inhabitant town of Vista Serrana, and established her descendents in power. In 1998 she was elected to the State Assembly on a (center-left) PSDB ticket with 13.932 votes.

Socorro was born in a farm, the second child among sixteen. Her mother was the daughter of the founder of the village of Desterro de Malta, and very early she became acquainted with local power and politics. At eighteen she got married and moved to the nearby town of São Bento, where she taught there with a primary education certificate. Later, when she had seven of her children, she moved to Pombal, and attended a night high school where she got an accounting certificate. She went on to college to study Economics, first in the city of Patos and later in the capital, "gently" pressing her husband to move the family in pursuit of her education. There she headed an accounting office, taught, and took care of her home and eight children. Pursuing a career as an economist in the state government, she ended up as sub-coordinator of the State Development Fund, acquiring more knowledge and influence. In that position she was invited to become the Mayor of her home village, a "dry pasture," with the smallest budget in the country. Sorry for its people and conscious that no one else would do it, she confronted her husband, left her comfortable position in the capital and returned home to accomplish her mother's dream. When she assumed office, she heard from her male relatives: "If the men here did not make anything of this town, what will a women accomplish?" She answered: "You wait and see." In sixteen years, twice as mayor, and through her young relatives acting as surrogates, she built the infrastructure, education and health systems, established a textile industry, a commercial network with the South, and even changed the name of the town. In this way, making her work heard in the surrounding towns, she prepared her path to the State Assembly.

Motivation, preparation and access to politics

For all these women, apparently less in the case of Aracilba, motivation for and persistence in politics originate from feelings for the socially excluded and oppressed. Their preparation and access came through formal education and professionalization, i.e., the conquest of technical competence and social recognition, i.e., symbolic capital. But the role of informal education and experiential learning, albeit difficult to estimate, was paramount. Opportunities to develop public speaking, leadership and constituency representation came early through school for Aracilba and Cozete, later through professional practice for Nadja (as a lawyer), Narriman (as a radio anchor), and Cozete (as an union president), whereas for Socorro they came in childhood amid her family culture. In Aracilba's case, serving the party was crucial preparation; grassroots and party organization was part of Cozete's history and identity; however party militancy is not enough to

gain its support for electoral positions and campaigns. For all these women, in sum, access has been preceded by a long, difficult, doubtful and uncertain way.

Resources, strategies, learning and empowerment

Totally lacking economic capital, mostly lacking party support, partly lacking symbolic capital (a family name, gender recognition), and in some cases (Cozete, Socorro) lacking family support, these women had to develop extraordinary strength, self-sufficiency, and skills. Educational qualifications, rhetoric and social capital are helpful resources. Sometimes taking the soft but astute stance (Socorro), pragmatic (Aracilba), constantly aggressive and confrontational (Cozete, Narriman), or alternating (Nadja), they use diverse strategies to either to push forward or create their space. They learn that politics is tough, competitive, frustrating, but also stimulating, gratifying, and above all necessary, and that it involves high personal costs (Cozete, Narriman, Nadja). Because the struggle is incessant, empowerment is mostly an unconscious process -- "all of a sudden" they find themselves fighting or leading ... In this way, doing politics comes as an inescapable consequence, and changing their personal lives follows. Yet, for middle class urban women both empowerment and defeats seem more painful for they experienced more family repression (Cozete) or are more concerned with their public image (Nadja).

Identity and commitment

While all of the five women married and mothered their children (though Narriman counts on her mother's help), only the oldest (Socorro) remains married (though her husband is very ill). Family obligations were not a hindrance for them. They are aware of their personal gains and social contribution both as individuals and gender as they build their multiple identities and diverse political trajectories. While Cozete and Narriman adopt a feminist discourse and practice, Nadja and Socorro are frankly moderate and conciliatory, and Aracilba ignores gender as an issue. Social class and urban versus rural origin (more than age) are differential factors in this respect. Cozete is the only one who joined a feminist group, but Aracilba and Narriman do not submit to traditional sexual morality. Aracilba declares her commitment to the state and the party, Socorro to her town and region, Nadja to human rights and public ethics, Narriman to justice and liberation, and Cozete to the party, the excluded and the oppressed, among which explicitly women.

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