

Democratization



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The 1935-1945 decade not only saw the rise of party formation and its electoral performance; it also set the stage for the struggle towards female suffrage, an aspiration fully materialized in 1947. Evoking such scenario entails recognizing the actual beginnings of the political demands of women in our country. It also broadens the debate around the rights built by the hand of each of the females who had to confront a world contrary to their demands. Let us review some of the insights developed in the course of the national discussion on the right to vote for women in Venezuela, a core element in understanding the construction of female political participation in Venezuela.

Venezuelan women and the epic of suffrage

In the course of the 19th century, the academic José Gil Fortul became a true pioneer by establishing important observations regarding the characteristics of civil laws and the disadvantageous situation of women in the Venezuelan legal system: “[women] (...) could be a witness for the verification of a crime and the

determination of the guilty. However, their participation in matters of political nature constituted a chimera"¹.

However, it was only during the period of 1935-1945 when the discussion became significant, particularly during the government of Isaías Medina Angarita. A letter sent by a group of women on December 30, 1935, addressed to General Eleazar López Contreras can be considered a first stepping stone. They did not request the right to vote, however, they did contemplate some elements linked to the vindication of women, among them, demanding to be hired in factories and workshops.

Such a novel request was not considered in the February Program², which would have really demonstrated a true political and social openness in General López Contreras's early government. This was not the only female intervention in the post-Gómez era. Two groups were established in less than a year: the *Agrupación Cultural Femenina* (1935) and the *Asociación Venezolana de Mujeres* (1936). Their main objective was the protection of the mother and the child and not so much the claims of civil and political rights³.

1 Own translation from Jaime Ybarra, "José Gil Fortoul: defensor de los derechos políticos de la mujer". En Yuleida Artigas Dugarte, Jean Carlos Brizuela, José Alberto Olivar (coordinadores), *La Venezuela perenne. Ensayos sobre aportes de venezolanos en dos siglos*, (Caracas: Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertador, 2014): 137-150, 142.

2 Likely the first "Plan País", a reorganization project which dedicated itself to rethinking the nation while holding in consideration the demands of the 20th century. Basically, the February Program presented by Eleazar López Contreras in 1936 was a diagnosis of the country, an evaluation in order to offer solutions in those areas which demanded immediate action.

3 Carolina Coddetta, *Mujer y participación política en Venezuela* (Caracas: Comala.com, 2001): 99.

As early as 1936, the *Agrupación Cultural Femenina* overwhelmingly exposed the most urgent requests for Venezuelan women through its main spokesperson, Mercedes Fermín:

Free elections by 1936: that is the slogan of the *Agrupación Cultural Femenina*, interpreting popular sentiment. For them we will fight, against all rising contingencies. The Venezuelan woman, aware of her duty, asks [to vote] to be able to build our Homeland, crushed by the beasts and stooges of servility and barbarism⁴.

The efforts of those organizations reaped notable successes when achieving the reform of the Civil Code in 1942. The event greatly inspired the already large group. Through the organization *Acción Femenina*, they lined up towards achieving the vote, but not before staging intense parliamentary debates in the Senate and being harshly criticized by even well-known academic figures.

High sounding and of historical value, May 8 of 1943 should be remembered as the day a representation of several ladies attended the Senate Chamber in a special session to propose their concepts and criteria regarding the importance of women's suffrage for the democratic and political development of the country. The proposal consisted of six arguments that supported the central petition: to reform numeral 14 of article 32 of the Constitution, which specifically established⁵ the legal impossibility of women to exercise the right to vote:

4 Own translation from Mercedes Fermín, "La mujer venezolana y la disolución del congreso", 1936. En *Pensamiento Político Venezolano del Siglo XX*, Ediciones del Congreso de la República, n° 14, Tomo VII, Volumen I (1985): 567-570.

5 The aforementioned article literally reflected the reservation of suffrage only for male Venezuelans: Own translation of number 14, article 32 of the Constitution of the United States of Venezuela of 1936: "The right to vote, and, consequently, male Venezuelans, over twenty-one years, who

Such refusal, by restricting their civic responsibility, has a direct impact on national life, since by preventing them from exercising the most transcendental of political rights, it also inhibits them from the performance of certain positions in which they could usefully act, as they do since long ago in other countries⁶.

Venezuela was clearly lagging in comparison with other nations of the Southern Cone, which had already approved the female vote. Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador and Uruguay were among those nations. Necessarily, national political progress had to point in an unavoidable way towards the consummation of suffrage for women if it really wanted to head towards the transformations that were progressively taking shape all around.

In the heat of debates, Senator Jóvito Villalba offered a significant intervention supporting the motion made days before by the group of ladies. According to the interpretation of the subtle politician, the country was located in a totally different scenario from the one staged in 1936, and, consequently, the Constitution in force [1943] was not congruent with the political-social context, in addition to presenting itself as an insurmountable wall in the face of requests from different sectors, especially women.

know how to read and write and who are not subject to interdiction or criminal conviction involving political disqualification, are eligible to elect and be elected, with no restrictions other than those established in this Constitution, and those derived from special conditions of competence or capacity that the laws require for the exercise of certain positions”.

- 6 Own translation from Ana Julia Rojas, Ada Pérez Guevara et al., “Representación de damas ante la Cámara de Diputados, pidiendo se asuma el estudio del derecho al sufragio para la mujer venezolana”, 1943. In *Pensamiento Político Venezolano del Siglo XX*, Caracas. Ediciones del Congreso de la República, n° 35, IX, Volume XIX, 1985, pp. 301-303; p. 302.

Villalba stated that the current winds, different from those at the end of the dictatorship, forced a change of thought: "The time has passed when some would consider *Gomecistas* all those who disagreed with their ideas, and others would consider all dissenters communists. That moment has passed"⁷. From the perspective of Senator Villalba, the different actors participated openly and without fear; communists, liberals and conservatives are part of the political universe, their voices have resonance. However, the female voice continued to be eclipsed; their action still remained inert by the precepts of an already fossilized Magna Carta.

The senator closed his speech by calling for the need for constitutional reform, driven primarily by the initial courage of Venezuelan women:

I consider it a happy omen for the cause of constitutional reform that its first announcement, in the chamber of the Venezuelan Senate, comes through the pure hands and the noble voice of our women. Our women are the godmothers of the constitutional reform, the godmothers and the mothers of our democracy⁸.

Ada Pérez Guevara's words could also be brought to mind. As one of the main promoters of the female vote in Venezuela, she considered it a decisive factor in the realization of a true and full democracy. To the extent that women had the opportunities and were legally allowed to abandon that hateful position of inferiority where she had been placed, they would be able to

⁷ Own translation from Jovito Villalba, "Intervención del senador Jovito Villalba en relación al voto femenino", 1943. In *Pensamiento Político Venezolano del Siglo XX*, Caracas. Ediciones del Congreso de la República, N° 35, IX, volumen XIX, 1985, pp. 305-310; p. 308.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 309.

effectively contribute to the nation-building process, as Pérez Guevara, quoted by Huggins Castañeda, expressed it:

In no case can true and comprehensive democracy be achieved until political equality is decided between Venezuelan men and women, different in sex, but similar, because we are all human. If this does not happen, democracy will be unstable, elusive, intangible⁹.

The session in the Senate on May 19, 1943, would show two sides of the same coin, two interpretations around the female vote. The interventions of Senators Andrés Eloy Blanco and Carlos Ramírez Mac-Gregor demonstrated the existing duality in the face of the issue: acceptance and support for the constitutional reform on the one hand, while the other extreme the thesis was met with resistance, rather suggesting following a natural course without constraints and premature results. In this order, Eloy Blanco, in the context of World War II, stated that:

The situation of the world in struggle is a warning. The suffrage of women must come before peace. Suffrage and other conquests, as the Commission's Report says very well. Peace must be a peace of the peoples; it must be an hour of repairs. One of those reparations we owe to a woman; every day she shows us her self-improvement (...) ¹⁰.

9 Own translation from Magally Huggins Castañeda, "Re-escribiendo la historia: las venezolanas y su lucha por los derechos políticos", *Revista venezolana de estudios de la mujer*, Caracas, 2010, n° 34, volume 15, Jan-July, 2010, pp. 163-190; p. 177.

10 Own translation from Andrés Eloy Blanco, Carlos Ramírez Mac-Gregor "Informe de la comisión permanente de Relaciones Interiores de la Cámara de Diputados respecto a las sugerencias de un grupo de damas sobre el voto femenino", 1943. In *Pensamiento Político Venezolano del Siglo XX*, Ediciones del Congreso de la República, N° 35, IX, volume XIX (1985): 341-349.

For his part, Ramírez Mac-Gregor, who at no time seems to have doubted his statements even in the presence of the group of ladies that filled the legislative precinct, defended two main arguments. First, any significant change had to wait for the culmination of the war, openly contradicting the criteria of Andrés Eloy Blanco. Secondly, that his assessment implied delaying but not denying women the right to vote. Ramírez Mac-Gregor considered that the vindication of women should be developed in prudent time:

If women cannot be separated from the home, without the consent of her husband, how can she be granted the right to vote? If our Civil Code consecrates this still feudal principle, I do not understand how it can fit within that interpretation that women can vote (...) The experience of other peoples teaches us that this process of vindication of women must, like any process, maintain a rhythm, otherwise it is premature¹¹.

The horizon seemed opaque and uncertain. There was a notable group of senators who bet on the female vote, however, there was another representation opposed to it. For its part, the commission in charge of analyzing the request for the female vote, considered the issue at the time as a problem of a political nature and not only a legislative one. It was not exclusively a matter of reforming the Constitution, but of interpreting and discerning around the “political maturity” of Venezuelan women in the 1940s.

Thus, the permanent commission of internal relations of the Senate chamber concluded on June 17, 1943, to delay the issue of

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 353.

constitutional reform as well as postponing granting the right to women:

(...) The Commission considers that it would be inoperative to establish from now on, as requested, a Special Commission to study the possibility of the aforementioned reform, since it could not be carried out immediately but only when the country is presented with the need to carry it out by the competent organs, which will be the only truly opportune moment to judge the political capacity of Venezuelan women and recognize or not their right to vote¹².

When exactly one year had elapsed since the request was made in 1943, the debate was brought again upon the Senate Chamber. The group of ladies inevitably reaffirmed their arguments. The revision of numeral 14 of article 32 of the Constitution had been promised, and the activists would not allow the issue to dissipate in eternal discussions under the roof of the Senate.

After the reform of the Civil Code, obtaining the vote had become a crusade. That factor would constitute a true example of progress. Gender parity, at the time of going to the electoral polls, could no longer be a chimera:

(...) Venezuelan women today consider that the only political right that they lack –that is, to vote– unjustifiably inhibits and humiliates them, placing them, globally, before all the

12 Own translation from Pedro Silva Carranza, Manuel Gimón Intriago, “Informe de la Comisión permanente de Relaciones interiores de la Cámara del Senado sobre el voto femenino, sesión del 17 de junio de 1943”, 1943. In *Pensamiento Político Venezolano del Siglo XX*, Ediciones del Congreso de la República, N° 35, IX, volumen XIX (1985): 311-313.

nations of the civilized world, among the minors, illiterate, interdicted or criminally convicted¹³.

This is how female representation expressed itself before the Senate Chamber on April 18, 1944. That statement gave birth to a new discussion, which would finally converge in the promulgation of the constitutional reform of May 5, 1945, which contemplated the vote of women to elect councilors. Undoubtedly it was a significant achievement. However, a closer reading shows us, firstly, that General Medina's government refused the public the right to a universal, direct and secret vote, and, secondly, that women were once again diminished since their electoral participation was reduced to the municipal line. Perhaps on account of the premise that Senator Ramírez Mac-Gregor outlined in 1943.

The events that occurred after October 18, 1945, the overthrow of Isaías Medina Angarita, and the first democratic exercise in Venezuela, would end up setting the stage for the consecration of unrestricted voting for women in our country.

The role of democracy

The significant advances in the field of political rights for women constitute a remarkable achievement of Venezuelan democracy. Starting in 1958, just when the last dictatorship of the 20th century closed its dark doors¹⁴, the country would head towards the consecration of a series of demands, public policies

13 Ana Julia Rojas, María Teresa de Rolando et al., "Debate en la Cámara del Senado en torno al voto femenino, sesión del 8 de mayo de 1944", 1944. In *Pensamiento Político Venezolano del Siglo XX*, Ediciones del Congreso de la República, N° 35, IX, volumen XIX (1985): 315-318.

14 I refer to the military dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez, who ruled Venezuela from 1953 to 1958, right after the 1948-1952 period when a

and the reconstruction of the democratic foundations laid with the elections of December 14, 1947, when Rómulo Gallegos was elected by Venezuelans of legal age, an undoubtedly unprecedented event in the country. The consecration of the female vote in national elections must be seen as one of the most precious assets achieved by democracy.

According to the Venezuelan historian Manuel Caballero, democracy was definitely marked mainly by the women who took the streets¹⁵, meaning women who became an active part of building the country, who took part in decision-making and participated in core actions of the republican project. "Put simply, women decided to look for their own sustenance in the street and to equate themselves to men, that is, to cease being dependent"¹⁶. Naturally, for this to come to fruition, an ideal political panorama was essential in the first place and, secondly, the persistence of the organization of women who did not abandon the gained terrain during the 1940s. As we appreciate the path traveled, we find encouraging results.

The years marked by the democratic project allowed participation and inclusion, reflected in the favorable rates, palpable in different spaces, but mainly in educational settings: "In 1961 the proportion of girls in high schools barely reached 38.6% of enrollment, however, in 1975 the proportion was reversed, out

Military Junta and a Government Junta jointly administered power after the coup d'état against President Rómulo Gallegos.

15 Manuel Caballero, "El siglo XX venezolano conversado con Manuel Caballero" in: Asdrúbal Baptista (coord.) *Venezuela siglo XX, visiones y testimonio*, Fundación Polar, Tomo III (2000): 458.

16 Idem. Own translation.

of a student population of 660,200, 52.6% were women, while in 1989 the figure reached 54.6%”¹⁷.

Political spaces would also show a marked distance between the “years of silence” and democratic determination. Women became important actors in the partisan debate and in the formulation of the legal body focused on creating better conditions, plurality and equity. Although it is true that most of the women’s organizations formed in the 1940s and 1950s ended up merging into the political parties themselves, it is important to point out the birth of new forms of participation, unions, associations and movements that were inspired by the context of women’s liberation of the 60s from all over the world. The country witnessed the birth of the Ministry for the Participation of Women in Development, predecessor of the Ministry of the Family. Likewise, the Ministry of State for the Promotion of Women gave way to the creation of the National Council for Women in 1992, classes and even master’s degrees dedicated to the study of the problems of inclusion and rights not granted to this important sector of the society.

The political participation of women in Venezuela constituted an effort propelled by female Venezuelan themselves. When they understood that the death of Juan Vicente Gómez was a propitious space for a very important national transformation, they began travelling the path that would lead to consecrating the vote, followed by new forms of participation. However, this scenario is not sustainable without democracy, without a real and effective system that allows the guarantees and rights already acquired to have validity. The current Venezuela does not have the sufficient (and necessary) institutional apparatus to guarantee the free

17 Own translation from Inés Quintero, “Itinerarios de la mujer o el 50 por ciento que se hace mitad” in: Asdrúbal Baptista (coord.) *Venezuela siglo XX, visiones y testimonio*, Fundación Polar, Tomo III (2000): 262.

participation of its citizens, which implies a deconstruction of the historical and democratic legacy of our past.

Conclusion

The fourteenth issue of *Democratización* comes to an end with the compilation of five articles that show how Venezuelan women have been opening spaces in society –and what is still to be done– to achieve equal conditions that allow their inclusion in public life and the end of serious injustices such as gender violence.

In the precarious social, political and economic context in which Venezuela finds itself, talking about feminism, gender equality, violence against women and women's participation in politics is not only a necessary act, but an indispensable one. The purpose of this issue is to contribute to the debate that is increasingly present in our society.

With this in mind, there are three ideas that can summarize and conclude this issue:

1. These texts reveal figures of inequality and violence against women. In this sense, we can conclude that the road ahead is still long and that we must continue working day by day for a more equitable and just society.
2. The fight must not be solitary or individual. We must work to join forces, to make our struggle visible, and to make both men and women aware of what we have achieved and what we want to achieve.
3. We must not be afraid to raise our voices, to express our opinions, to participate and to seize. There are many women in our democratic history. Their example and their struggle have helped to plow the field so that new

generations of women can have more rights and spaces for participation. Like Gloria Lizárraga de Capriles, let's not be afraid to take on new challenges, no matter how big.

4. Women must be an example and a sisterhood. An example for all those girls who are born, who grow up and who have big dreams every day so that they see in us the will, empathy, power, responsibility and courage that inspire and encourage them to fulfill their dreams. And a sisterhood, so that we help each other grow, supporting each other in whatever field we work in, as Adriana Boersner Herrera, Maryhen Jiménez and María Corina Muskus do with the 101 women who are part of the Venezuelan Investigan network.
5. And finally, in the words of Paola Bautista de Alemán, let us embrace our femininity and the benefits of our gender, turning them into an engine that drives us to continue fighting, breaking through and taking down barriers that exist in our society, because “it is wonderful to be a woman”.