

Democratization



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Politics and women

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Joyce Marie Mushaben is an American academic who has dedicated her intellectual life to gender studies. In “Becoming Chancellor: Angela Merkel and the Berlin Republic”¹ she offers a comprehensive analysis of the leadership of the woman who has contributed the most to Western politics in recent decades. It is an extraordinary book. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of this publication is its dedication. The author dedicates her efforts to her late husband, Harry F. Few, “who had a hard time understanding why his wife insisted that the words «same» and «equal» are not synonyms, and that sometimes we actually need to be treated «differently» to achieve equality when it comes to reconciling family and career”.

I feel identified with this testimony. I am a wife, a mother, a politician and a student of political science. I have formed a family and have developed myself professionally in Venezuela, in a particularly complex environment. Like Professor Mushaben, I have experienced how this desired conciliation is possible when personal effort comes together with institutional structures that are open to this reality and with the solidarity of those around us. This essay is a reflection on the participation of women in politics. I do not pretend to offer universal solutions. These are approaches that arise in a specific context and seek to contribute

1 Joyce Mushaben, *Becoming Madam Chancellor: Angela Merkel and the Berlin Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

to the debate. *Politics and women* is divided into four parts. Firstly, we will overview some ideas on philosophical anthropology; next, keys on the meaning of the political vocation; then, some considerations on the challenges we face and, to finalize, some tools to take them on.

Back to anthropology

I will begin by sharing some ideas on philosophical anthropology. I have decided to start here because I understand that politics must be at the service of others and, in this sense, it is necessary to better know the subject-object of political efforts. Reflecting on the human person, our social dimension, our sexual nature, our abilities, the purpose of exercising them and reaching the full scope of our capacities is essential to deepen the participation of women in politics. I consider that this honest purpose of discovering our anthropological dimension is perhaps the best antidote against ideological vices that can sometimes limit debate and consensus². The subject is extensive and I will not

2 In “Reactionary feminism”, Mary Harrington distinguishes feminisms according to their ideological inclination: right and left. She finds that both are limited because they do not consider the anthropological dimension of the human person. The author explains: “A reactionary feminism seeks to honor women by accepting as givens the things that make us human: our bodies and our relationships. It asks how we might frame our obligations justly, between the sexes, in the interest of the common good. Women must negotiate new social and economic conditions, not in a spirit of zero-sum conflict with men, but alongside our friends, husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons. The aim is not to return to some imagined perfect past, but to reach a future unshackled from the dystopian pursuit of progress. The only escape from a nightmare of atomization and war between the sexes is the recognition that we are embodied creatures, and that interdependence is not oppression but the very thing that makes us human”. Taken from: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/06/reactionary-feminism>

exhaust it in this section. But I will offer a few notes to encourage curiosity and intellectual appetite.

These issues have been pondered about since ancient times and from different perspectives. At the risk of simplifying the following approaches and understanding that between the two there is a wide spectrum of shades of gray, I can distinguish between two types: (i) those that propose that we are a social construct without a natural substrate and (ii) those that recognize the existence of an intrinsic nature which includes a social dimension that conditions it but that does not determine it. The latter strives to acknowledge our anthropological dimension, as well as a fundamental issue: that we are all bearers of a dignity given to us by the mere fact of existing and, in this sense, we are above any material good.

Considering, then, that we have a nature that deserves to be explored, I will dwell on what Thomas Aquinas called “powers of the human”. Powers of the human are “the proximate principle of the soul’s operation”. In addition to having dignity, we possess three qualities that feed our spirit and can pave the way for the world around us: intelligence, freedom and will. These three powers may or may not be oriented towards goodness. With intelligence, we can be able to discover and know the truth of things. With willpower, we can control our impulses and instincts and guide our actions towards what generates some kind of good for us. And with freedom, which must be instructed by intelligence, we can activate our will and decide for what most satisfies or suits us. But we could also not use our freedom the way intelligence dictates is good for us. Intelligence could tell us something and maybe we would not be able to properly use our freedom because we lack the necessary self-control. Our judgment could also be clouded, preventing us from making the right choices.

The interaction between the powers is an extensive field of study and its right exercise transformed into good operational habits is what Aristotle identified as the cardinal virtues: justice, fortitude, temperance and prudence.

People, in addition to being spirit, are matter. Far from being a duality in conflict, we are a unified whole. It is also important to highlight that we should acknowledge sexuality as an inseparable reality from our human condition. It is not an accessory, but rather a constitutive part of our being. It is something that we cannot rid ourselves from. Our sexuality permeates our humanity in a transversal way. In this sense, it is not merely biological data. Human sexuality is far from animal sexuality, which is instinctive and is determined by physical and sensitive aspects. In the development of our sexuality –human sexuality– the powers that I referred to in the previous paragraph can and should intervene: intelligence, freedom and will. In this sense, the place where we are born and where we display our talents can condition –but not determine– our development.

In previous paragraphs, I reviewed the foundations of the dignity of the person, their powers and their sexual nature. It is now convenient to focus on the cornerstone of this essay: women. Each sex has psychological, affective and cognitive traits that are its own and are complementary to each other. Women are usually more open to developing and expressing their affections. We are easily moved, touched. We are intuitive. In the words of Guerra:

It seems that women tend to have a particular ability for concrete intellect-sensitive understanding, that is, to take in, in a quasi-immediate way, the intelligible contents in concrete situations of daily life. This phenomenon is often called «intuition». By intuition, we do not want to point out a kind

of irrational dynamism that in a more or less arbitrary way points towards certain contents. What we want to express is that, in women, the intellectual activity is much more fused with sensitivity than in men. This allows an apprehension of what is real in a more holistic and immediate way³.

Considering this section, I think back to Professor Mushaben's dedication. The aforementioned anthropological keys nurture her experience (and mine). It certainly seems that "the same" and "equal" have different meanings. Perhaps, recognizing our particularities and opening ourselves to the complementarity between the feminine and the masculine can be a good starting point to correct injustices and alleviate inequalities that, even now, in the 21st century, can affect us.

Political vocation and service

A few months ago I was invited to a political training course for women. I had never attended one. I have dedicated myself to the study of other subjects. I found space in my agenda and participated. I was struck by the fact that in the first session they invited me to reflect on "my vocation of power". I stopped to think of those two words: "vocation" and "power". In this section, I will share some considerations regarding this exercise.

I understand by vocation the call or the disposition to something. When a person identifies that they are called to any particular something and responds generously, they find human fulfillment and may even experience deep joy. Political vocation

3 Rodrigo Guerra, "Identidad femenina y humanización del mundo. Aproximación de la determinación de la especificidad femenina como parámetro antropológico-normativo", *Revista Panamericana de Pedagogía* 7 (July 2005): 101-136, p. 113 <https://revistas.up.edu.mx/RPP/article/view/1840>.

is the dedication to the public and the search for justice. Now, this radical devotion requires effort and personal virtue. As Marco Tulio Cicero warned, it is a thorny path that can be full of temptations⁴. And to walk through it, without falling off the road, it is necessary to reflect on its reason for being. The question about my «vocation to power» led me to think about that: the ends. More specifically, I asked myself, what are the implications of associating my political vocation with power?

Power is a means, it is not an end. Tolkien gave this human reality a literary form in *The Lord of the Rings*. Let's remember how the ring had the ability to overcome the spirit of those who were not prepared to wear it. And the ability to have it did not lie in technique or accumulated material goods, but in the human quality of the wearer. That is to say, those who could wear it without consuming themselves inside were not the most enlightened or the richest. Those who could wear the ring without seriously injuring themselves were the simple and big-hearted people.

I have seen that associating a political vocation with a specific position imposes a very demanding personal itinerary because it places wielding actual power as an indicator of success. That is to say: the dedication and the sacrifices demanded by the vocation –which are not few– would only have ultimate meaning if they bear fruit in those terms. In a democracy, it would be to win an election to rule, and in a dictatorship, to gain space to dominate. It is a standpoint that I can understand, but I consider it risky

4 Marco Tulio Cicerón explained how male and female politicians face three temptations in the path towards fulfilling our vocation: *libido pecunia*, *libido dominandi* and *libido venerea*. The first means administrative corruption; the second, the overwhelming desire for power; and the third, disorders of affections and feelings.

because it can take away our freedom. Without wanting to, we could become slaves of ambition. Let us consider for a moment that, despite our efforts and talents, we will never reach the desired position of power. Maybe the context is adverse, injustice prevails, or simply the will of the electorate does not accompany us. Then, we would not have reached the measure of success that we set for ourselves and we could think that our efforts have been in vain, fruitless.

I have devoted hours of reflection to this topic. Venezuela has suffered a serious erosion of democracy for more than twenty years, which has turned today into a dictatorship. The Chavista revolution came to power when I was 17 years old. I have dedicated my life to this fight. It is a personal –and a family– decision that involves risks. Certainly, I wish to contribute to democratic liberation and later reach a position that allows me to contribute to the transformation that Venezuela demands. I have strived and prepared for it. However, I don't know if that moment will come. This vital uncertainty is demanding. So, faced with this undesirable –but possible– scenario: What would happen to the meaning of my sacrifices? Would I have wasted my time? Would my efforts have been in vain? No. It would all have been worth it because the meaning of my vocation is not power, but service.

When the fruits of political vocation are associated with service, the indicators of success are the commitment and the good that we have offered to others with our generous dedication. In this sense, reaching a position of power is desirable, but irrelevant in terms of personal fulfillment. This does not mean that we abandon healthy ambition, which must be imbued with magnanimity. Quite the contrary, it is a question of their arrangement according to the true purposes of our donation. Reaching a position of power is desirable because a lot of good

could be done from there, but it is irrelevant because it does not determine –nor condition– the direction of my efforts. This matter is human and complex. The pressures and temptations of everyday life require constant rectification of intention. We must train our interior so that mere donation is enough and so we may close the doors to the disorderly search for power. Surely, during political life, «recalculating» the course should be necessary.

About the challenges

In the last hundred years, Western civilization has made significant progress in terms of inclusion. In the second decade of the 21st century, it is common to see extraordinary women who participate in public affairs and contribute to decision-making processes. Still, there are pending tasks and challenges that we must reflect on and address. In this section, I will approach three: cultural, operational and existential.

By cultural challenges, I understand the structural configurations that can hinder the inclusion of women in public affairs. For example, the perception of politics as an eminently masculine sphere or the institutional structures that punish motherhood. There are two aspects that I consider fundamental for the analysis of these issues: first, to identify the uniqueness of each case, and second, to recognize the difficulties inherent to cultural changes.

First, the uniqueness of each case will be identified. Each society has its own characteristics. History, political culture, tradition, economic system and even geographical location can determine –and explain– ways of being⁵. In this sense, it is convenient to address the issue of the inclusion of women,

⁵ In my opinion, one of the most outstanding contributions of German authors to Political Science is to highlight the importance of context in

matching global considerations with local realities. I have seen that sometimes ignoring the singular can lead to problems that can later hinder consensus. In addition to this, efforts to identify the particularities of each country must be accompanied by the application of scientific methodologies led by the intellectual rectitude of researchers. Only in this way can we avoid being instrumentalized or our just demands being exploited by ideological tendencies⁶.

Let us now look at the difficulties inherent in cultural changes. Culture configures the political DNA of the people. Changing it takes time and effort. For this reason, achieving stable transformations that overcome real injustices without creating new tensions is a great challenge that requires expertise,

analysis. I recommend reviewing the contributions on social research methodology published by Dieter Nohlen and Wolfgang Merkel.

- 6 When reviewing the United Nations data on the inclusion of women in political spaces, I found that the countries that stand out in this indicator are undemocratic regimes (UN Women, 2019). Let's look at this reference. The countries with the highest female presence in Congresses are: Rwanda, Cuba and Bolivia. Rwanda registers 61.3% of women and, according to the democratic index of The Economist, it is an authoritarian regime and is located in 129th place. Cuba registers 53.2% of women. And according to the same index, it is an authoritarian regime and is ranked 143rd. Bolivia registers 53.1% of women. And according to The Economist, it is an authoritarian hybrid regime and is ranked 104th. By presenting this correlation –the presence of women in parliaments and the democratic index– I want to warn about a reality that I have suffered in my country: the political instrumentalization of women with purposes of autocratic domination. I will break this reality down in three concrete ideas. First, the data on women's participation must necessarily be accompanied by other indicators because, in itself and in isolation, it is not an indicator of democracy. Second, the issue of inclusion is complex and transcends pre-established slogans. Inclusion indicators should more accurately describe reality. And third, the political participation of women can benefit a system of justice and freedom if that person's normative preference is democratic.

intelligence and patience. As a Venezuelan, I am familiar with the effects of the imposition of radical projects that put aside real dialogue. In this sense, I believe that all social struggles –including ours– must be leveraged on human and almost artisanal political work that promotes the creation of consensus that benefits us all. In this way, I consider that the cultural challenges imposed by the struggle for the inclusion of women must be assumed with great realism and political maturity.

Operational challenges would be those aspects that limit the reconciliation of work and our family life. Women must juggle to tend to our responsibilities. Reconciling family, children, our intellectual concerns and our professional vocation is a daily challenge. For this conciliation to be a reality in our lives, there must be informal and formal solidarity structures that allow us to advance harmoniously in each of our areas. Informal or private solidarity structures are our families and friends: partners who accompany, children who understand, siblings who support, friends who encourage us to go far. They are the strongholds where we rest and recognize ourselves as loved for what we are and not for what we can give. In them and with them, we fully live gratuitousness. There is an important aspect about this area. Although it may be conditioned by chance, it demands effort. We must dedicate time to cultivating these shelters where we always win and become better.

Formal or public solidarity structures refer to those state initiatives that favor conciliation. The main obstacle to conciliation is poverty. A woman who must dedicate most of her efforts to survive⁷ sees her ability to develop her talents severely limited.

7 I recommend reviewing the analysis that CEPAZ offers. The organization indicates that “the effects of the emergency situation added to the pre-existing multidimensional crisis that exists in Venezuela are markedly

In this sense, it is essential to overcome material misery and have a responsible State that guarantees conditions for the common good. To achieve this end, we must necessarily include: fiscal aid for families, for single-parent homes, for “family-friendly” companies, quality public education, an efficient health system, maternity and lactation leave, nurseries, public spaces for entertainment, among others.

I will now turn to existential challenges. I understand existential challenges as those that Isabel Sánchez calls “suppressors of positive ambition”⁸. I am referring to the struggles we wage in our inner world that affect our performance in the public sphere. The author identifies the following: lack of self-esteem, exacerbated narcissism, and the need for continuous recognition or self-validation or validation from others. To overcome these and other difficulties of this nature, we must carefully take care of our affective and emotional stability. Self-knowledge helps a lot, as well as to establish self-assessment routines that allow us to rectify the course. Dedicating time to these tasks will make us better leaders because they will make us grow in self-knowledge and empathy.

About our integral development

We have reflected on philosophical anthropology, the sense of the vocation of service, and the challenges we face in the exercise of politics. It is now convenient to ask ourselves about the mechanisms that we have at our disposal to advance towards the fullness of our vocation of public service. I want to share three

different between women and men” <https://cepaz.org/articulos/mujeres-el-impacto-diferenciado-ante-la-crisis-de-la-pandemia/>

8 Isabel Sánchez, *Mujeres Brújula* (Madrid: ESPASA, 2020).

issues that I consider important for our integral development: training, empathy and generosity.

Let's start with training. To compete fairly and efficiently, we must –among other things– enhance our capabilities. The best way to achieve this is to grow politically and intellectually. Angela Merkel is perhaps the woman who has contributed the most to Western civilization so far in the 21st century. It is said that she has incredible mental agility. “While everyone is analyzing, she already has a solution”, say those who know her⁹. And that is not incidental. Besides being talented, she has a trained mind. She has a scientific structure. She has developed strengths such as order, effort and virtue. She cultivated her academic streak and then supplemented that dimension with political technique when reality required it. She knew how to humbly acknowledge her limitations at certain times. For example, when she came to Congress, she realized that she needed to improve her diction and did not hesitate to take public speaking classes to make herself understood better. She was aware of the importance of continuous training. Ms. Merkel –and her peers– teach us that the best way to be competitive is by preparing ourselves to serve more and better in public.

Dedication comes next. We live in accelerated times and many times we think that meteoric ascents are the best. Venezuelan culture is especially poor in that sense: we overestimate initial impulses because we have a hard time being consistent. It is what Rafael Tomás Caldera calls: “Pessimism and presumption”¹⁰. It is a vicious circle: the presumption of those who believe

9 Joyce Mushaben, *Becoming Madam Chancellor: Angela Merkel and the Berlin Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

10 Rafael Tomás Caldera. *Ensayos sobre nuestra situación cultural* (Caracas: Fundación para la Cultura Urbana, 2007): 63.

in entrepreneurship and the pessimism that comes from not reaching our goals. The itinerary and leadership of Merkel, Christine Lagarde, Ursula Von der Leyen, Madeleine Albright, Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, among others, shows us the importance of sustained commitment over time. It is important to bet firmly on dedicated and patient effort; on bold and institutional delivery; to work with detachment and without complexes; to refine our gaze in order to notice difficulties and to find ways to overcome them with integrity and discover the good in each circumstance. As time passes, I understand the importance of overcoming wounds and creating paths of empathy that allow us to move forward.

Finally, generosity. Between 2001 and 2005 –as “Angie” rose through the CDU– journalists in Germany began to talk about the “Merkel Factor”. She earned the respect of the press. The journalists highlighted: “her lack of vanity, her ability to work behind the scenes, her patience to watch events that occurred inadvertently and her ability to outperform her rivals”¹¹. This description amazes me. It shows boldness and intelligence. It is evidence of a self-confident person who does politics and opens up to the world without complexes. She is a State woman.

That spirit was translated into solidarity once she came to power. Ursula Von der Leyen –current president of the European Commission– says that in 2005 Merkel called her to be part of her cabinet. Von der Leyen¹² hesitated when accepting the invitation. She feared that her family responsibilities would make the

11 Joyce Mushaben, *Becoming Madam Chancellor: Angela Merkel and the Berlin Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 22.

12 I recommend listening to the podcast: *Fighting biases and empowering women: A conversation on female leadership and gender equality*. In: https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/tvservices/podcast/html/ecb.pod210308_episode15.en.html

desired conciliation impossible. When she expressed her doubts, the chancellor told her: “You must accept because you are ready and you will be an example for everyone”. And so, Von der Leyen joined the government, and Germany had a Family Minister who was the mother of seven youngsters.

With these lines I’ll conclude this essay in which I wanted to organize and present ideas that seek to contribute to the reflection on issues that I consider to be fundamental for the development of our political vocation. I admire and am moved by the strength and tenderness displayed by so many women who seek to build a better world for their families and their communities. In moments of necessary demands, I see it necessary to return to the anthropological perspective and rediscover the benefits that our feminine condition offers us. The horizon is open and we are called to travel through it with joy, pride and optimism. Being a woman is wonderful.

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”.