

MUJERES LATINOAMERICANAS
WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICA: A
PERSPECTIVE THROUGH OUR EYES

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Introduction

From the high mountains of the Sierra Madre in Mexico and the pristine beaches of Costa Rica, to the jungles of Colombia and the Galapagos of Ecuador; from the Incan highlands of Peru and Bolivia to the Brazilian Amazon waters; from the Chilean Andes to the bright blue icebergs in Argentina; these areas create the rich mosaic of what is now the region of Latin America. Despite its vibrancy, Latin America houses some of the greatest social and economic inequalities in the world. Poverty and inequity mark the everyday lives of its people.

The situation of Latin American women is quite unique in nature. Due to the predominant social, political and economic gaps between the rich and the poor, and between the rural and the urban, the role of women and their empowerment varies significantly throughout Latin American countries. On one side, many women that belong to the elite are becoming more independent. They enjoy the privilege of attending higher education systems and are highly influenced by the modern attitudes and beliefs of the modern North. As a result, these fortunate women might live on their own, won't submit to patriarchal rules, are knowledgeable about the issues they face, and are empowered enough to make decisions that influence their ability to reproduce, vote, and exercise their human rights. On the other hand, the rural women and those restrained by poverty, even within the urban areas, experience a different side of Latin America, one that embraces more than 220 million of its inhabitants. These women are subject to social structures that many elite can escape or are empowered to fight against. The poor women in Latin America are subdued by their husbands and by roles that are dictated by them

and their families. This is a woman that can't complain and must be strong enough to work long hours under conditions that are unconceivable to the first world. Many times they are faced by the triple burden, not only caring for their children, but also their strenuous work and entire household.

Even though the disparities between the rich and the poor are clear between women living in these social classes, there is one theme that is prevalent for all women in Latin America without discrimination of social status. Currently, Latin America suffers from extreme violations of human rights to all man, woman and child. The issue of creating a safe environment for women relies on basic women's rights, which are marginalized in human rights. In Latin America, most countries are stuck in traditional ideologies within a patriarchal system. After colonization, these systems continued to play family roles where men dominated women. Discrimination and inequality against women created these unsafe environments within the home and workforces. The solution to these problems is expected to come from state parties who are required to follow United Nations laws for women's rights. The state parties are required to ensure women equality with men before the law and, in civil right matters with the same opportunities. It is the state priority to eliminate prejudices and customary practices of men superiority and stereotypes of roles (CEDAW, 2007).

Even though laws exist that protect the rights of women and children, violations to these happen cynically on a daily basis. The impunity of those that abuse human rights goes often without punishment and sometimes protected by corrupt systems and governments

that only aggravate the status of human rights. As a result, women face innumerable violations at their own homes, places of work, and the public sphere often without the ability to take reprisal, resulting in constant violations of Articles 1, 2 and 3 of the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women, as states fail to guarantee the exercise and enjoyment of the women's human rights in equal conditions with men. For those who do demand their rights, the only thing they receive is mockery. Fortunately, there are a wide variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) throughout the continent that help ameliorate this situation and raise awareness of the issues. In addition, one of the most important documents that guarantee women around the world the effective protection against discrimination; the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women, from herein CEDAW, has been ratified by all the Latin American countries. The Optional Protocol, through which individual women or groups can denounce national violations of CEDAW directly to CEDAW has been ratified as of 2007 by all Latin American countries with the exception of Honduras and Nicaragua. Despite these signs of improvement and partial support of the governments to ratify CEDAW, there are still many areas where improvement is desperately needed.

Evidently, the successes and failures of the rights and empowerment of women vary widely across each state. In states, which are predominantly impoverished and rural in nature, such as Guatemala and Bolivia, the role of women is blatantly different than those in the emerging economies of Brazil and Mexico. Because of these differences, it is difficult to generalize issues throughout the vast region. As a result, the challenges of

implementing CEDAW in Latin American countries are infinite. In the following pages, the most prevalent issues facing Latin American women will be addressed, illustrated by country examples as well as valuable information that will help the reader understand the status of women in the region.

Education

During the 1990's the progress made in the educational situation of women has been attributed to the improvement of their educational levels and the rise of female enrollment in relation to male enrollment. However, this has taken place against the backdrop of a general deterioration of the education system and the historical gap between what the system teaches and the drive behind the needs of the labor market.

At the primary level, education attainment of girls has far surpassed that of boys. In nine out of ten countries in Latin America, the proportion of girls completing the fourth grade of primary education remained steady or increased. The same happened in eight out of twelve countries with respect to the percentage of boys and girls completing a minimum of seven years of primary education (Rico, 1997). This development is now feeding through to the secondary and higher levels and has proved to be a positive factor in the growing participation of women in the labor market.

Urban and Rural Education

Throughout Latin America between 15 and 25 percent of young women in urban areas and between 25 and 50 percent of young women living in rural areas were neither attending school nor were employed because they devoted all of their time to domestic tasks in almost half of the countries in Latin America (ECLAC, 2005). The status of indigenous women in this respect is of particular concern, since as a group they have the lowest literacy rate in Latin America. In most of the countries, there are substantial differences between the education received by indigenous girls and non-indigenous girls

and between schooling of indigenous girls and boys belonging to the same ethnic group. According to Article 5 of CEDAW, the goal is to “modify social and cultural patterns ... to achieve elimination of prejudice...and inferiority or superiority of either sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.” The same emphasis is not given to women and schooling as compared to men. In addition, literacy campaigns for women do not appear to have been made a priority in any country of the region. This state of affairs placed middle aged, indigenous and rural women in a vulnerable position. In Guatemala, for example, data for 1998 showed that indigenous girls completed an average of one year of schooling against 1.8 for boys, 4.0 for non-indigenous girls and 4.5 for non-indigenous boys (WID, 1998).

Effects on Labor Market

Article 16 of CEDAW emphasizes the importance of upholding equal rights between men and women. However, it is difficult when the socialization of women in these countries emphasize a specific sector of labor which they must pursue. In both secondary education and higher education, the vast majority of women choose to study subjects that are a continuation of their traditional work and “fail to change the gender-based division of labor from the symbolic viewpoint or to influence the hierarchy established between the sexes effectively” (Rico, 1997).

Devaluation of Women in the Educational System

Latin American education systems are still structured on the basis of the production model inherited from the industrial society of the nineteenth century. This discrepancy

affects the idea of what is good school curriculum. This problem does not share the same characteristics and is not as acute for men as it is women. The effect of this model is an “ideological gender system that deepens inequalities between men and women which justify the social asymmetries between the labor market and education” (Rico, 1997). For this reason, in the education sectors across Latin America, specifically in countries such as Guatemala, Ecuador, Colombia, and Bolivia, the male is overvalued and the female is silenced and undervalued. This concept of devaluation of women is manifested within the classroom in the style of teaching, the neglect of female students, failure to interest them in science and technology subjects, and the limited range of career options available. Ecuador is actively trying to change this discrepancy by running pilot programs in gender studies, seeking to implement programs to promote non-sexist education. Ecuador has also published, produced and distributed over 90,000 copies of the primary school teacher handbook, entitled “Gender Equity in the School” (CEDAW, 2007).

Article 15 of CEDAW emphasizes the upholding of women’s rights. Section two states, “State Parties shall accord to women in civil matters, a legal capacity identical to that of men and the same opportunities to exercise that capacity”. Since education is a factor for future development and capital, it is important to understand that reforms within the government need to keep women and education a priority. Within Bolivia, Cuba, Chile and Peru “particular prominence has been given to striking a proper balance between administrative and curricular reforms at the national, departmental and municipal levels” (Rico, 1997).

Poverty

The analysis of poverty has changed over the past decades from determining it in regards to annual incomes and consumption rates, to acknowledging the multiple intersecting factors that constitute. The discrimination and violence against women in general (in the domestic, educational and employment sectors) are key contributors to women's poverty in Latin America. Further, there is a lack of social services geared especially for rural communities and women living in poverty.

Formal and Informal Sector

Discrimination and violence toward women has historically been tolerated with little social services and human rights support. This has lead many women to work in the informal sector who are “hampered either by low marketable skills to their credit or by other obstacles such as lack of mobility and the need to combine work with childcare and domestic activities” (Benería, 2003). This could include street vending of food and crafts, domestic service, subsistence farming, prostitution, or microcredit loans for small businesses. This sector offers little or no job security, workers rights, or dependable pay and usually consists of long working hours. Currently, in Argentina 46 percent of women work in the informal sector of the economy; this is an average rate among other Latin American countries (CEDAW, 2004).

Some subsistence farmers have organized cooperatives or grassroots organizations to improve their bargaining ability with both buyers and the government. For example, rural Peruvian coffee farmers are launching a project with Café Femenino to switch to an

organic Fair Trade market, instead of neoliberal Free Trade that exploits their local coffee growers. The Fair Trade premiums were designed by rural women coffee farmers to improve their own lives, in terms of better diets, improved sanitation, new wet-processing mills, and many miles of new roads (www.cafefemeninofoundation.org). These women are making a difference, despite the harsh realities of abuse, poverty, and socio-economic repression they face.

More recently women are being hired in the formal sector, into global assembly lines by transnational corporations, or shuffled into the growing tourism and service industries. Costa Rica is fairly progressive in terms of women's access and participation in the formal market place, with 81 percent involvement of the urban population (CEDAW, 2003). Article 11 of Costa Rica's state party initiatives declares equal employment opportunities, the right to social security, the right to safe working conditions, as well as the narrowing of the wage differentiation between men and women (CEDAW, 2003). In addition, the proposal of paid maternity leave, without the loss of employment, and wage earning domestic work are on the forefront of employment reforms.

Immigration

Migration due to poverty is the leading cause of migration into neighboring countries. In Costa Rica the "conditions of disadvantage are severe [for] Nicaraguan women, who are mostly employed in domestic service; their illegal status and ignorance of labors rights encourages their employers to disregard the legislation (CEDAW, 2003). However, institutional initiatives are underway, such as the Costa Rican *Creciendo Juntas* national

program that encourages labor market participation, technical labor training, access to housing, and personal as well as collective strengthening for the immigrant community.

Urban and Rural Conditions

The participation rate of women in the workforce is increased throughout Latin America, particularly in urban regions. In Chile, urban women make up 37.8 percent of the GDP, although households headed by women are also growing at 24 percent in urban areas. Rural women are some of the most severely affected by poverty, considering over 80% of the rural population in Brazil, Argentina, Honduras, and Mexico are living in impoverished conditions (ECLAC, 2006). In Argentina, rural women's main concerns are; access to land, quality healthcare, education, work, social identity and women's rights. In 2000, Argentina signed the Optional Protocol, and ratified it in 2007 with the obligation to make progressive change. Therefore, the Ministry of Agriculture now runs the Rural Action Network, which funds the repair and construction of rural schools, training for rural women in agricultural projects and the violence elimination workshops. In March 2002, Rural Action Network signed an agreement with the Argentinean Union for Rural Women's Rights and Protection (CEDAW, 2004).

Gender Equality

In recent years, the number of women laborers in Latin America has been increasing. The book *Major Changes and Crisis*, by the ECLAC, reports that "[t]he female labor force increased threefold in Latin America between 1950 and 1980, and rose from 10 to 32 million" (1992). The majority of women in Latin America still belong to the informal sector, in particular to agricultural work and street vending. Women are often unable to

work in the formal sector because they lack education, language skills, and have low economic positions.

Impediments to Women in the Workforce

One of the biggest differences between Latin America and other regions of the world is the existence of *machismo*. This term relates to the concept of men having the right to control women in most aspects of their daily lives. As a result, many women do not enjoy the opportunities and liberties that women in the other countries have such as the ability to have a job, obtain education, achieve personal independence, and engage in society. *Machismo* has also prevented women's rights movements from occurring, which would improve women's education and political participation.

Family is the most important social institution for people in Latin America. In many cases, family responsibilities such as domestic work restrict women's participation in the workforce. According to CEDAW sixth and seventh periodic reports of Ecuador, “[w]omen represent 95 percent of total workforce in the domestic service sector” (CEDAW, 2007). In order to reduce the quantity of domestic work for women, Ecuador reports by CEDAW state that the government should provide full-time child day care services (CEDAW, 2007).

The Triple Burden

Women in Latin America are responsible for childcare, housework, and hospitality for their husbands. Even though the majority of women who participate in workforce suffer the effects of the triple burden, there are initiatives that are being put forth in order to lift weight off this burden. The CEDAW sixth periodic report on Peru focuses on the

father's role in raising children and highlights programs that have been done to improve it (CEDAW, 2003). For example, a project called *Allyn Tayta* "Happy Dad" encourages fathers to participate in the raising of their children, which would likely reduce the amount of domestic work for women. This helps women in sharing the responsibility of childcare, but also provides them more opportunities to work outside of their house.

Discrimination of Women at Work

The number of women working in factories of transnational corporations is increasing, although many women still spend their entire day doing domestic work. Women earn higher wages in factory jobs than at home. Compared to men, women face discrimination regarding income, types of jobs available, and number of hours required. The CEDAW sixth and seventh periodic reports of Ecuador states that "women's wages are on average 22 percent lower than men's wages due to their level of education" (CEDAW, 2007). These are not only directed to protect women labor from discrimination but also to protect women from domestic violence.

Activities in the Informal Sector

According to the CEDAW sixth and seventh periodic reports of Ecuador, 37 percent of women work in the informal sector (CEDAW, 2007). Women are often seen on the street with their children. Many women spend their entire day at home creating handicraft clothes that they sell on the street or at the market. In addition, Article 6 of Peru's state party states that sexual tourism of not only adult women, but also children and adolescents, is a major part of the informal sector (CEDAW, 2003).

Health Care

CEDAW and Healthcare

The elimination of discrimination in the sphere of healthcare varies due to the scope, size, and diversity in Latin America. The topic of healthcare is covered under Article 12 of CEDAW, yet the subject is also discussed in Articles 5 and 16. Reproductive health is one of the most pressing issues for women in Latin America, including fertility, maternal and infant mortality, and contraceptives for adults and adolescents. Under Article 12, access to free maternal and infant care is mandated. Programs to promote responsible parenting, better nutrition, and knowledge of health rights have been put into practice. Specific attention is needed to address the spread of diseases affecting women, including sexually transmitted diseases, HIV-AIDS, and cervical and breast cancer.

Maternal Health

Article 12 of CEDAW mandates that states parties need to ensure equality between men and women in terms of access to health care. This includes family planning services “in connection with pregnancy, confinement and the post-natal period, granting free services where necessary, as well as adequate nutrition during pregnancy and lactation” (CEDAW, 2005).

High rates of maternal and infant mortality throughout South and Central America, is of top concern for most nations and CEDAW. Most maternal deaths occur because of complications arising during pregnancy and birth, illegal or ineffectual abortions, and a basic lack of accessibility to health care. In Peru, it is estimated that 65 percent of

women do not receive health care in a hospital, and in the rural and poorer parts of the nation more than 90 percent of women do not receive health care (CEDAW, 2004). Complications during abortion are one of the leading causes of maternal mortality.

In order to combat these problems, many nations are attempting to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies. Free contraceptives in many forms are made available to distribution centers in both urban and rural locations. Programs on responsible parenthood, sex education, and the improvement and accessibility of basic health services are beginning to materialize. In Argentina, the Ministry of Health, CMN, and the Ministry of Social Development are working together to implement the National Plan, which covers all of these issues and was ratified in July 2000 (CEDAW, 2002). To reduce the rate of infant mortality, nations are guaranteeing access to basic educational skills for women of childbearing age, adding social programs to support mothers and pregnant women, encourage breastfeeding and supply basic nutritional foods. In the Andean region, 56 percent of children are born anemic, and the government provides an iron sulphate protection to many women (CEDAW, 2002). There is also a broad media campaign to educate women about their health rights. More developed, wealthy nations such as Mexico and Argentina are putting efforts into democratizing the healthcare and providing compulsory, universal health coverage, especially for pregnant women and infants. In countries like Peru where most of the population is poor and lives in rural areas, the government cannot cover all of the cost for pregnancy and childbirth. Also, most of the women living in the Sierra (Andean Mountains) prefer to give birth at home, but improvements in pre-natal care and educational programs and shelters for pregnant

women have helped decrease the rate of infant and maternal mortality, (CEDAW, 2004). It is important to note that when a country cannot provide universal, compulsory health care any person who is about to give birth or is in an emergency situation is guaranteed care in both government and private facilities.

Diseases Affecting Women

The prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV/AIDS, has been increasing in Latin America. More women than men are diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, and the increase is specifically noted for women less than ten years of age and for heterosexual women in their thirties. Organizations have come together to help fund different projects proposed in different areas, such as Project LUSIDA in Argentina, (CEDAW, 2002). Proposals include the proper treatment and diagnosis of STD's, as well as a further training for health personnel.

Breast and cervical cancer are prevalent in this region, and occurrences have been increasing for women. In Argentina, breast cancer is the cause for 20 percent of all female deaths (CEDAW, 2002). It is difficult for rural women, migrant workers, or women in poverty to know of the risks of these types of cancer and to receive testing and treatment. More developed nations are putting forth an effort to modernize the information system, and educate staff in a more technical, humanistic approach in the fields of prevention, detection, diagnosis, and treatment. In Mexico, early detection of this cervical-uterine cancer has risen from three percent to 60 percent (CEDAW, 2006).

Safety and Violence

Violence within the home

Global statistics state that the most prevalent and pervasive form of violence and human rights violations against women occurs within their own homes. Over half of all Latin American women have been subjected to violence at their own home. 33 percent of women between the ages of 16 and 49 have been victims of sexual abuse, and at least 45 percent have been threatened, insulted, or had their personal possessions destroyed. 60 percent of couples reported suffering from partner abuse. In Mexico, public defender's office estimates that an average of 82 women are raped every day (CEDAW, 2005).

Violence within the Workforce

Abuse suffered by women in the formal workforce is the central obstacle in achieving economic independence. Sexual harassment, pregnancy-based discrimination, and gender-based violence in the workplace are common threats to women in Latin America. Migrant workers are especially vulnerable to abuse, such as trafficking and forced labor. In countries like Mexico and Guatemala the laws fail to protect women workers rights. Domestic violence is classified as a misdemeanor rather than as a felony. Law enforcement officers, prosecutors and judges have discriminatory attitudes towards this matter and consider it a private matter where the law does not apply.

Challenges

In an effort to fight against these acts of violence, the 1998 - 1999 UN Agency Campaign on Women's Human Rights in Latin America discussed ways to eliminate all forms of violence. The campaign is co-operated by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). It is sponsored by eight UN agencies and has received formal endorsements from twenty-two governments, with Latin American, as well as active participants of NGO's public and private institutions. Civil society has also contributed to sources and dynamics of national campaign (One World, 2008).

Additional common problems in Latin America include the idea that a woman's body continues to be owned by the state through social norms that ignore women's rights. In Chile, judges ruled they cannot intervene in domestic violence cases unless there is evidence of physical violence. One court found that violence within the home was not a crime. In Peru, the government declared that a victim's sexual past is admissible evidence used to discredit allegations of abuse. Although these problems have not changed in these countries, CEDAW has made a difference in others. Colombia created protection laws for women who were abused by husbands and partners. The laws declared that absence to legal resources for victims of domestic violence violated women human rights. Costa Rica is now authorized to order abusive spouses to leave home and continue providing economic support for partners they abuse. Since the ratification of CEDAW in this country, programs training to fight sex crimes have taught women officials how to handle rape investigations (CEDAW, 2005).

Countries at a Glance

Argentina: Madres de la Plaza de Mayo

Social movements have become increasingly popular and effective throughout Latin America. These movements can be outlets for marginalized parts of society, such as women, to be recognized. The Madres (mothers) de la Plaza de Mayo was formed in 1977 in response to the “disappearances” and murders under the Argentine military dictatorship in 1976-1983 (“Madres de la Plaza de Mayo”). Women have gathered in a plaza in every Thursday to mourn and protest their lost children. Still, thirty years later they wear white scarves and march around. The solidarity and resistance shown by these women has changed women’s roles and societal views. This organization of mothers has transformed into an international human rights fight against injustices and has given hope to women all over the world.

Guatemala: Violence without Justice

One of the countries dealing with the most significant violence against and safety issues is Guatemala. The authorities and government do not respond the high rates of homicide and kidnapping. Since 2001, it is estimated that more than 2,500 women and girls have been brutally murdered in Guatemala, with only three percent of the cases making it to court. Reports claim that they are also victims of rising gender-based violent crimes. There is a common quote known among the reports, “Guatemala: no protection, no justice: killing of women in Guatemala”. Most of the victims were young and poor, and in many cases they were raped and tortured. The shortcomings of fighting these crimes are due to lack of technical capacity to preserve crimes scenes, interrogate witnesses, as

well as a political will to resolve the murders. There has been failure from the Guatemalan authorities in detaining and bringing to justice those responsible for the violent acts. Women feel there will never have access to truth and justice to the crimes. (One World, 2008).

Mexico: Maquiladoras

For many years women have been the target for working in free trade zones or *maquiladoras*. These factories are most prevalent in Mexico and Central America. Although working outside the home allows these women to earn a wage, it is often incomparable to the conditions and abuses they face. Multinational corporations (MNC's) move their factories across borders to find cheaper labor with little regulations. Women are subjected to working 12 hour or longer shifts, six days a week with few bathroom breaks. They do tedious work, breath dirty air and are more susceptible to lung diseases. Shoulder and back pain is common because of repetitive work or long hours of sitting. Factories are often hot and noisy and overtime is unpaid. Their male superiors also verbally and sexually assault many women. Mandatory pregnancy tests are given and women are examined and questioned about their sexual activity. The governments of these countries often ignore the injustices to these women and allow the abuses to continue. Although the unethical practices of MNC's would never happen in the United States, they are common through out the free trade zones of Latin America. Zenith Corporation and Tyco International continue to defend their discriminatory practices, in agreement with the Mexican government, as legal in Mexico.

Concluding Remarks

Policymakers still need to understand gender issues and implement policies to effectively interlock gender and development while respecting the rights of all women in the Latin American region. But, there are signs of improvement and rays of hope. This year, for example, Mexico established the first “pink bus” route where only women can ride in order to reduce sexual harassment and abuse from other male users. Also in Mexico, the very first man to receive parental leave was able to enjoy 10 paid work days with his wife and newborn without fear of being fired. Furthermore, an increasing amount of women are entering the public service arena without any social impediments such as the case of Chilean President Michele Bachelet and Argentinean President Cristina Fernandez de Kitchner, both the first women presidents of their respective countries.

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