RESEARCH ARTICLE

Understanding Equality in Mexico: Women in Politics

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Abstract

When studying gender–based practices, Mexican based research has analysed traditions and socially constructed roles of women as homemakers and children's caregivers; placing emphasis on elements such as wage differentials, access to education and health clinics, and even the differences in participation among men and women. This study tackles the issue of gender inequality looking into social biases as well, but unlike other literature, it looks into the possible consequences socially constructed roles have on women's political participation. This study employs data from the National Survey on Citizens and Political Culture and data from the Federal Electoral Institute. It also uses figures from the National Survey on Discrimination. The analysis shows that in the Mexican case, the political participation of women is restricted by a series of social factors that are embedded in an organization which structure intends to satisfy male oriented practices and to accommodate socially constructed gender roles. Based on interviews conducted, this study found patriarchal notions required women to be submissive, beautiful, domestic and dependent on men. Biased cultural values are still in place, limiting women's acquisition of political capital and political power. Nevertheless, even in a male dominated space, women's "intrusion" is disrupting long–standing traditions.

Keywords: *Participation, Gender, Social roles, Mexico, Political capital.*

Introduction

The relationship between democracy and federalism in Mexico can be traced to the transition process, which resulted in the decentralisation of decision–making power to the states. The democratisation resulted in the dissolution of power, centralized in the almost authoritarian presidential figure. The president stopped being the central figure of political power, renewing the federal pact with state governors emerging as powerful political actors, and giving state legislatures a real capacity for legislating [1-4]. Democratisation allowed other political parties to compete in an increasingly fair electoral process. Contestation meant changes in the parties' strategies, affecting the incentives political parties had to advance the representation of women. Recognising the impact of the new structures of multilevel governance open up a set of new opportunities for political engagement. With the gradual deterioration of the PRI's internal discipline and the on-going acquisition of power by the opposition, the practices within the system started to change. As soon as the elections began to seem more competitive, the political pressure to adapt the

rules according to the local and state contexts increased. Rules admitted the inclusion of minority groups as a mean of gaining more votes and the devolution of power to local groups as a mechanism for securing party loyalty.

This inclusion started to apply to women across the different government elected positions. Nonetheless, social transformations and the notion of womanhood did not follow the quick steps of other democratic transformations. The purpose of this study is to question how socially constructed roles are affecting women's political participation. Previous research has focused on women as homemakers and children's caregivers; placing emphasis on elements such as access to education and health clinics, and even the use of violence as a mean for control. However, this study tackles the issue of gender inequality looking into social biases to but it looks into the consequences that socially constructed roles have had on women's stand in political affairs. The key aspects are built upon the findings of the interviews conducted. Thirty-two interviews were conducted in total and interviewees included key

political figures on party formation and democracy transformation, taking into account the gender (women) as a desirable condition of the interviewees. The interview method was used in order to establish common patterns or themes between the respondents. Semi-structured interviews were used in order to touch a series of themes but also to allow a follow up on the themes, ideas or experiences brought up by the interviewees. The study also employs data from the National Survey on Citizens and Political Culture and data from the Federal Electoral Institute. It also uses figures from the National Survey on Discrimination.

This article is divided into two sections. The first focuses on establishing an overview of how politics is conducted in Mexico. Main elements are identified, such as clientelist networks and political capital. The existence of a significant relationship between wage inequality and economic status of men and women and access to a political career in Mexico is established. The second section looks into the existing cultural beliefs that organise social interactions. This section uses information draw from the interviews, pointing how social gendered roles have become mechanisms of exclusion that result in male domination. The importance of political capital is brought into the picture, suggesting that gendered biased roles are impeding women's access to it, therefore, restricting their weight in political decision making spaces.

Conducting Politics in Mexico

Political capital is commonly used in Mexican and Latin American research to refer to the creation and involvement of informal decentralised network groups that are based on clientelist connections and relations. The concept of political capital is closely related to the concept of political re- sources, as developed by Hicks and Misra [5] and Leicht and Jenkins [6]. Resources are used to empower actors or groups, providing extensive leverage in times of negotiations. According to Panebianco [7], 'the outcome of negotiations depends on the degree of control that the different actors have over certain resources' [7]. Controlling monetary resources and human cap- ital is important in any political struggle, even more so during campaigns. The use of political capital in political struggle is not within a context-free system. Political context, and the informal rules that control it, influence how resources are gathered and used. In Mexican local politics, the use of political capital goes beyond the employment of resources. Pippa Norris sheds more light onto the use of the concept in this region. She explains that 'political capital is all

the assets which facilitate a political career, which vary party by party, such as a record of party service, financial resources, or political network [8]. Political capital involves the creation of these groups, but also refers to the abilities resulting from a political career, the connections outside one's group, the knowledge of the system in which the actor operates, and the time available to operate; as well as monetary, intellectual and physical resources. The ability to create and gather this capital is where the inequality initiates.

The nature of the networks created within the parties reveals an unequal consideration in relation to the gathered political capital. 'There are strong tendencies for people in the same work groups to favour the participants who are most like them- selves under certain circumstances, especially to trust them more and have more confidence in them' [9] regardless of the value they bring to the group. Men favour other men, and they are evaluated differently to women. Political capital is valued differently, laying the ground for a systemic discrimination against women. The gain an individual may receive from investing political capital is sometimes not equal to what others may win with the same outlay. In the case of Mexican local parties, women make unequal profits from the invested political capital.

Women's aspirations to political positions are limited by, among other things, economic and social considerations. As far as economic considerations go, previous studies have suggested that economic independence can be created through the creation of personal resources, and this 'empowers people because resources open opportunities to otherwise unavailable lifestyle choices' [10]. Within the political dynamics of Mexico, the use of personal resources to support political activities places women in an unequal position compared to that of men.

In Mexico, in almost all cases, women's incomes are dependent on those of men. In 2000, only 38.2% of women were employed compared to 81.0% of men. By 2010, the figure had barely improved, and stood at 42.5% [11]. Even though the number of women be- longing to the economically active population is increasing [11], the difference between men and women is substantial. In 1995, women accounted for 32.0% of the economically active population with men at 68.0%. In 2010 the figure had only increased to 39.0% [11]. Moreover, men provided the main income in 79.0% of the total number of households in 2000, and 76.0% in 2005. Women's

participation in the labour market is affected by the traditional impositions of gender roles that assign men as the single provider for the household. In 2010, the National Council to Prevent Discrimination Survey on Discrimination (ENADIS) reported that 81.6% of men were employed while only 38.0% of women worked outside their homes. The majority of women, 52.0%, were dedicated to their homes.

Although economic independence is substantial, the element that particularly underpins economic dependency and income insufficiency is that of socially constructed practices and beliefs. The existing cultural beliefs that organise social interactions are related to the mechanisms of exclusion that result in male domination.

Social Gendered Roles

The debate on the effects social factors and the political culture are having on the representation of women is substantial. There have been arguments asserting the influence social factors have on the representation of women in political office [12]. The idea is that social factors experienced by women are limiting their abilities to compete in the political system. For Lovenduski, these 'social factors are the main obstacles women have to face to become politicians' [13]. Social factors, either related to education, economic independence or a defined male oriented political culture, are likely to create some of the most fundamental barriers to women's representation because they are derived from gender-biased patterns of socialisation.

Social factors studied in previous research include education, employment and socially constructed gender roles. For example, education can lead to further involvement in political affairs. Political skills, such as speaking in public, debating, or drafting coherent legislation can be acquired through education. Economic independence gained through employment could also facilitate the ability to participate in politics. Employment and education are likely to provide women with sufficient resources to become politically active. 'Unemployment, underemployment or uneven wage conditions with that of men are likely to affect women's capacity to have a political career' [13]. Iversen and Rosenbluth [14] argued that women working outside home were more likely to develop policy interests different from their husbands. Chafetz [15] asserted that wage labour increases the status of women influencing in turn women's effectiveness in harvesting power in other areas. These factors are likely to have secondary effects through political parties' perspectives on women's political roles. If more women are working and participating, women could constitute a sufficiently large group of voters to which political parties may be motivated to satisfy. Rosenbluth, Salmond, Thies [16] contend that political parties are likely to nominate women to prove that they are taking their interests seriously.

Recent transformations within the division of labour in Mexican households have been observed not only as a result of changing economic conditions but also due to cultural transformations. Rodriguez finds that in Mexico, 'the crises resulted in the entry of women into the workforce in massive numbers, changing partially the social and economic and political roles' [17]. Women's participation in the national economy has increased, although limitations are enduring. In 1995, women represented 32% of the workforce but for 2010, women's 27.7% represented 16.8 million of the 44.5 million economically active population [18]. Chant [19] found that women are becoming involved in household decisions while Rodriguez explained that urban and rural women participated more actively in organised movements, particularly in labour struggles and unions [17]. On the other hand, some studies have found that there is little connection between women's representation and women in the labour force. Oakes and Almquist [20] found little connection between female political representation and women's employment rates in agricultural economies. Kenworthy and Malami's [21] suggested this lack of connection too. They confirmed that there were more professional women in the U.S. and yet, female representation was notoriously low. As far as the developing countries, Matland suggested that subsistence–level primary sector work was unlikely to have an "empowering and consciousness raising effect" in women seeking political office [22].

Although factors such as economic independence and higher levels of education are essential, women could still struggle to become politicians. Women's role in society is different to that of men, particular in regards of responsibility for the family and other caring obligations. Women are affected differently because of social roles, which are likely to limit the time women have to dedicate to political activism as a career. Socially biased roles could create a male oriented bias that could be reflected in the political system. Lovenduski establishes that these factors could 'inhibit women from seeking political careers and also impedes the recruitment of those who come forward' [13].

Research [23-25] shows that masculinity and gendered institutions work to sustain control, more inclusively in periods of change. The organisation and party procedures, such as recruitment and selection of nominees, if biased can directly affect the changes women have of becoming elected. This "institutional sexism" as Lovenduski calls it [13] could undermine the representation of women and women's interest since it will look to protect the organisation's control by one sex in terms of personnel, outcome and practices. In fact, male oriented patterns can affect the internal decision–making process of a political party, where informal institutions could be favouring men over women.

In Mexico, political institutions are characterised by a culture of traditional masculinity. Women have traditionally been assigned a private role, such as home and children carer. Gender inequality has permeated Mexican society creating uneven conditions that cut across all social factors: 'the concept of womanhood is structured around extremely patriarchal conceptions, strongly influenced by Catholicism' [26]. These patriarchal notions required women to be submissive, beautiful, domestic and dependent on men. Biased cultural values are still in place. 'Women have described their remunerated employment as 'help' to the household budget' [27]. Moreover, men still see their share of household work as help for their wives. 'Men generally do not share equally their responsibilities, in word or deed, and the cultural division of labour between men and women is still regarded as important and therefore enforced by many' [27]. Women's work is seen as complementary to rather than competing with that of men. Women continue to struggle with their more traditional roles as mothers, wives and home carers and try to reconcile it with their work, something that has been described as 'the double day' [28]. Rodriguez found, with interviews conducted between 1994 and 1995, that 'sexisms, family opposition and the "double work shift" (*doble jornada*) were some of the personal obstacles named' [17].

When studying gender–biased practices, Mexican based research [29-31] has analysed traditions and socially constructed roles of women as homemakers and children's caregivers; placing emphasis on elements such as wage differentials, access to education and health clinics, and even the differences in participation among men and women. Zapata [32] and Benton [33] found that women face limitations in their daily activities as members of local councils in Guerrero and Veracruz.

Based on interviews conducted, it was possible to uncover some factors that are excluding women the most in Mexican states. Across the sample in the current study, women draw attention to the practices for decision-making, which they believe were originally structured to serve male purposes and to accommodate socially constructed gender roles. 'Gender bias in Mexico is fostering an ideology that magnifies women's role in childbearing as the one determinant aspect of the female identity' [34]. Women interviewed emphasized that they were expected to support their husbands, take care of their homes and raise their children. The interviews suggested that when women aspire to professional development, they have to adapt and incorporate this into their gender– specific "priorities". This multiplicity of roles limits their personal and professional development, including the time they have available for participating in political activities or in politics as a career. These socially biased roles create uneven conditions between women and men. These are relatively rigid [35] and tend to be shared by all members of Mexican society. They are affecting women because political processes, networks and decisions are structured around them. They have generated unequal access to the decision–making process, to political groups and to political capital. This is because they restrict the time women have to participate, as well as the spaces where women can take part. Furthermore, evidence suggests that men are given more and better opportunities because they are valued differently from women: they are the pillars of their homes and the providers for their families. The combination of these two factors influences women's capacities of generating political capital. This is extremely important because political capital allows both women and men to advance their political careers in a highly hierarchical clientelist system.

Women are meant to be pure, honest, simple, and innocent. Politics is supposed to be for men, and so it is viewed as the opposite to feminine characteristics. It is a fierce place, characterised by struggle and conflict. Within this system, political loyalty and political capital are privileged. These are employed to assess ones capacities to become part of the networks and to be given certain positions within these groups. The difficulty for women of accessing decision-making spaces and elected positions is related to her capacity for constructing her own political capital. It is also affected by the imbalances present within the system in terms of assessing women and men's political capital. Women's gain from investing political capital is sometimes not equal to that of men.

Conclusion

Education, income, labour status and views of gender–based social roles are pointed out as explanatory variables for the phenomenon [36, 37]. According to Norris and Lovenduski [13], these factors underpin a society and construct its institutions. By shaping the circumstances in which institutions are created, social factors are likely to affect women's presence in politics. Arguments against the assertion of institutional sexism can look to undermine the argument by contending that political institutions have change and accepted women, and that such inclusion is even reflected in positive discrimination policies like quotas. However, it is important to highlight that even if it is not possible to fully give an account of the masculinity of an entire organisation, it is possible to examine arrangements, characteristics and mainly, implicit biases in procedures and informal practices. Resistance to women's representation is likely to occur in a male dominated space where women's "intrusion" is likely to disrupt long-standing traditions. Nonetheless, this resistance and biased practices are sometimes not recognised by men and even by women, since they are judged base on long standing traditions or gender roles, where women are expected to sustain a traditional career and home role while men "provide". In fact, 'resistance does not need to be explicit' [13] nor even to be studied.

Several studies have already focused on gender roles and the effect these have on women's lives.

This study has moved beyond these aspects, and analysed the factors that were affecting women's activities in party politics and parliamentary behaviour. Women interviewed revealed that it was more difficult for them to accumulate political capital because of socio–cultural and socioeconomic barriers. These were preventing them from participating on equal terms with men in a male oriented and dominated structure. It was found that gender biased roles were creating difficulties for women. These networks were originally designed to serve male purposes and to work around socially constructed gender roles. Women were expected to remain at home, and take care of the private spaces belonging to the men. The organisation of these institutions is restricting the amount of time women could dedicate to their political careers, thus limiting their political capital and the power and position they could possible gain. The informal system may be guaranteeing benefits for men, but it also values political capital, and once this is obtained, rejecting women or minimizing women due to gender conceptions is going to become a high opportunity cost [38-41].

Acknowledgements

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