Power to the People?

(Con-)Tested Civil Society in Search of Democracy

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Since the beginning of 2000, Bolivia has been going through a process of re-structuring of the state that is intimately connected to the organisation of civil society. Bolivia has had a remarkably gender unequal official political sphere. However, women’s participation in party politics and government structures has increased during the last decade due to different factors: the introduction of new contexts of participation, for one, such as the new local political governments introduced through the decentralisation reform in the mid-1990s, and the constituent assembly of 2007/2008; and the increasing political influence of the MAS (Movement Towards Socialism), through which women active in the social movements have been able to enter party politics.

In this paper I discuss the experiences of female Bolivian politicians of social movement and indigenous background, in order to analyse the possibilities and restraints of female participation and influence on decision making processes. The paper is based on anthropological research conducted in La Paz and El Alto during the period of 2006–2009. Its focus lies on interviews conducted with female leaders active at different levels of Bolivian society: within formal political structures and/or within NGOs and social movements.

**Experiences of participation among female leaders of indigenous background**

Bolivian legal framework supports equal representation of women and men, and the legal framework has been developed further with the country’s new constitution, but the problem with the introduced gender quotas has been the quality of participation. Several obstacles make female participation more difficult.
The discourses of indigenous female politicians generally show loyalty to the movement they represent, as in statements such as “Our goal is not to work against our men and the unified struggle”. The relation between discourse and practice reveals a more complex picture, however. In interviews conducted with female leaders of Aymara background – active at the level of parliament, municipality and neighbourhood committees in the department of La Paz – I explored the way they experienced their political participation. In general, and contrary to the common discourses referred to above, none of my interviewees denied difficulties for female leaders, and experiences of discrimination were common. I will discuss three aspects that influence these women’s participation: the way they entered politics; their possibilities to exercise leadership; and the way active women are looked upon.

Hurdles for women’s political participation

To fulfill the quota reforms from the 1990s, parties have had to find female candidates for an arena highly dominated by men. Political conviction or the desire to exercise leadership were not always the reasons behind women’s participation. Most women seemed to have entered politics on other grounds: a) they were pressured to take on a certain task, with reference to the need to fulfill obligations within their community and to display solidarity with their place of origin; b) they were appointed due to their level of education; or c) they had a male relative who had been involved in politics (particularly the women who became more important leaders). The representatives were elected in order to fulfill the expectations of the base organisations (*cumplir*), to serve in loyalty to the people they represented. In several cases, fulfilling expectations was not possible, and participation implied a cost, which in many cases was higher for the women than for the men.

A second aspect concerns the possibility for women to actually exercise political leadership, once elected. It is well known that the female quota at the municipal level has been difficult to fulfill; nor has it led to results of acceptable quality, that is, the elected women have not been able to exercise their political tasks (Costa Benavides 2003). Many of my interviewed women testified to a strong resistance to female political
participation, especially in the rural areas (see Michao Barbery 2007). Women have, once elected, been harassed and pressured to resign to the benefit of the male person next on the list. The Bolivian Association of Female Councillors (ACOBOL) reported 200 cases of abuses and harassments between the years 2000 and 2008 (Chávez 2009). There is also competition between different ministries. Together with a tradition of clientelism and corruption, this makes coordination between the ministries and state secretaries difficult, and it hampers the creation of networks between female parliamentarians and state secretaries. Several interviewees brought up how difficult it has been for the Secretariat for Gender Issues to get the President’s and other governmental bodies’ ear. It was also difficult for individual female parliamentarians to get support for their ideas. The female parliamentarians I interviewed had their roots in Aymara base organisations promoting women’s issues. All of them continued this work alongside their parliamentary tasks.

The third issue hindering female participation was found in the way politically active women are seen. The political sphere belongs to the men. According to the complementary views on gender relations in the rural areas, it is the male head that should represent the household in the communal assembly. If women participate they are not supposed to talk very much but wait until consulted. An active woman breaks these rules. A female unionist leader who has to travel a lot is not well seen in her local surroundings. Furthermore, most of the testimonies proved it very difficult for women with an indigenous background to combine active leadership with the role of wife and mother.

Working ‘outside’ or ‘inside’ political structures?

Due to the strong male-dominated and clientelistic structures within official politics, the experiences of many of my interviewees suggest that – for women – working on the ‘outside,’ in civil society organisations, is more effective than working ‘inside’ the political structures. The pattern that evolves in the interviews is one where women are often pushed into participation in a political sphere that is competitive, corrupt, demanding and male-dominated. They find themselves in hierarchical relations of conflict and alliance – between women and men, among women them-
selves, and between different groups of women. It is very difficult for them to live up to expectations (Widmark 2010). If they want to promote feminist issues or respond to women’s interests it is more effective to work in civil society organisations, trying to influence politics from the outside. However, since civil society organisations are also often male-dominated, most of the interviewed women opted for a continued work within women’s organisations.

As demonstrated by Bjarnegård (2009), a context with much corruption will also see many male-dominated networks, building on male loyalty. The high level of political harassment against women in Bolivia could thus be understood as a clash between a male-dominated political system and newly introduced quota laws. Most incidents of harassment toward female politicians are reported from the municipal level. Many women are active at that level, and this is also the level where gender quotas were first adopted. The interviews seem to indicate that the higher the women climbed up the political ladder, the less harassment they experienced. However, they found it as, or more, difficult to get their voices heard. Female parliamentarians and councillors that I interviewed had not found it possible to promote specific gender issues in relation to their parliamentary tasks, and they had experienced difficulties in forming female networks within this sphere, despite the fact that two out of three were active within base organisations promoting Aymara women.

A quantitative gender equal participation, then, does not automatically imply a qualitative improvement of gender issues. My interviews suggest that even though female participation has increased considerably within official structures in Bolivia, gender issues are not necessarily on the agenda. Due to the tough and resilient structures of male dominance, it seems necessary to work ‘outside’ official structures – in civil society organisations – in order to make gender issues and women’s rights issues visible.

References
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