El Salvador's Shift to the Left a Boon for Women's Rights

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Under the leadership of second-year President Mauricio Funes, the government of El Salvador is beginning to tip its hat to the country's women, implementing legislation designed—at least on paper—to address long-ignored issues such as income disparity, underrepresentation in politics, and gender-based violence.

The government’s most recent women’s rights bill—Ley de Igualdad, Equidad y Erradicación de la Discriminación Contra la Mujer Salvadoreña—cleared the unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL) in mid-March. All 84 AL deputies voted in favor the law, which among other things guarantees women equal pay, protection from discrimination in politics, and equal access to education.

"With this legislation, women will have a tool to continue their fight for equal social, political, and labor rights," said Deputy Emma Julia Fabián of the leftist Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN). "It also serves as a base for the government to create the public policies needed for women to participate more [in politics]."

The legislation also received backing from the opposition Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), a conservative party that dominated Salvadoran politics for 20 years until Funes—with FMLN backing—finally shifted the presidency left (NotiCen, March 19, 2009). "We’re truly happy. This has been a long road. We spent a long time trying to reach a consensus," said ARENA Deputy Milena Calderón.

As part of the negotiation process, the AL agreed to eliminate from the bill a clause that originally called for a minimum 40% female quota for elected positions. Currently, only 21% (18 of 84) of the AL’s deputies are women. Female representation in city governments is even less. Just 11% of El Salvador’s mayors (29 of 262) are women.

The omission drew vocal complaints from women’s groups such as the Concertación Feminista Prudencia Ayala (CFPA), which argue that, by failing to establish real benchmarks, the law does little to dismantle El Salvador’s political glass ceiling. Also omitted from the original bill was language guaranteeing women access to "secular" education.

"In order to talk about equality there needs to be parity in politics, and that’s the part they just removed," said the CFPA’s Dysi Cheyne.

A "city for women"

Even if it is more symbol than substance, the law still serves an important role in raising public awareness about women’s rights, as did the high-profile opening less than two weeks later of the public-services center Ciudad Mujer, a project being championed by President Funes’ wife, Dr. Vanda Pignato. The Brazilian-born first lady heads the Secretaría de Inclusión Social and also has a leadership role in the government’s Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo de la Mujer (ISDEMU), a women’s right agency.
Joining Pignato for the March 28 inauguration of Ciudad Mujer, the first of seven such facilities the
government plans to open throughout the country, was former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet
(2006-2010), who now heads the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
(UN Women).

The event drew significant media attention, as did the first lady’s late-April visit to Washington,
DC, where she spoke about her project before the Organization of American States (OAS). OAS
Secretary-General José Miguel Insulza, also Chilean, now plans to make his own first-hand
inspection of the Ciudad Mujer facility in Lourdes, in the department of La Libertad.

These efforts "initiate a process of building a nonsexist culture, of building a culture of women’s
rights in all areas," said ISDEMU’s Yanira Argueta.

Deadly treatment
Divided into five sections, Ciudad Mujer offers women free consultations on basic rights, issues
related to sexual and reproductive health, and child care. It also provides counseling services for
victims of gender-based violence, a huge—and apparently growing—problem in El Salvador.

In its most brutal form, El Salvador’s culture of machismo can quite literally mean murder. A 2010
study by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) found that El Salvador has the world’s highest rate of
femicide (murder of women): nearly 130 per million women. As a point of comparison, Romania—
Europe’s most dangerous country for women—has a femicide rate of 12.9 per million women.

The UNFPA conclusions were based on 2006 figures. There is little indication, however, that
conditions have improved since. Between 1999 and 2009, said Richard Barathe of the UN
Development Programme (UNDP), registered cases of violence against women nearly quadrupled
in El Salvador (up 197%).

In November 2009, just five months after Funes took office, Salvadoran authorities addressed
the long-ignored issue of gender-based violence by passing the Ley Especial Integral para una
Vida Libre de Violencia para las Mujeres. The anti-violence law, approved by 75 of the AL’s 84
deputies, made homicide against women punishable by up to 50 years in prison. It also established
punishment guidelines for certain abusive behaviors against women, such as cruel insults and
written or spoken threats.

"We have to do away with this scourge, beginning by raising awareness of the issue so that we
can eradicate violence against women," said ARENA Deputy Mariella Peña Pinto. "Every day this
[violence] is costing the lives of mothers, workers, and wives.

"ISDEMU is doing its part by publishing annual reports on violence against women. The
government agency released the first such compendium in late November 2009, just after the AL
approved the anti-violence law. No doubt an important contribution to public awareness on the
issue, the reports are hardly encouraging.

Nearly 600 women were murdered in El Salvador in 2009, more than double the number in 2008,
according to the latest ISDEMU report. As of October of last year, the 2010 femicide toll was already
at 477. The bulk of those killings involved girls and women in their teens and 20s. Of those 477, 74
were girls under the age of 17. Thirteen of the victims were found with their hands and feet bound,
suggesting they were tortured. Eight were decapitated and 14 burned.
**Zero tolerance?**

Present for the launch of ISDEMU’s initial study, President Funes summed up his position in two words: zero tolerance. "Zero tolerance against murder; against sexual abuse, which often involves girls and preadolescents; against the economic and labor inequality that makes [women] even more vulnerable; and definitely zero tolerance against violations of women’s fundamental rights," he said.

Many observers, however, say it will take more than the good intentions of the president and his wife to really reduce violence against women—especially if perpetrators continue to benefit from a degree of impunity.

An article published last November in the Salvadoran online news service ContraPunto said that between 2008-2009 the Fiscalía General de la República (FGR) treated 6,803 cases involving sexual crimes committed against women. Of those, only 436 resulted in penal sentences. The same pattern holds for femicide cases. Only 30 of the 477 femicides registered between January and October of 2010 led to jail sentences.

In order to reduce sex crimes and femicides, the state is also going to have to invest heavily in education—to directly tackle misogynistic cultural mores, said the UNDP’s Richard Barathe.

"Remember, in 85% of the cases that are reported, the victim claims to know the aggressor," Barathe told ContraPunto. "This is happening within families, within communities. That’s why it’s so important to sensitize neighbors, to educate all sectors....The government’s policies are apparently not enough. There are good intentions. And ISDEMU has made important progress in raising awareness, but there still aren’t enough resources to attack the problem."

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