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Costa Rica’s Big Strides in Gender Equality Come with some Controversy

by George Rodriguez

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Gender equality in Costa Rica reached an unprecedented high six years ago, when Laura Chinchilla became the nation’s first woman president. When she was sworn in in 2010, Chinchilla, a sociologist with a public career as security vice minister, legislator, vice president, and justice minister, gave hope to women fighting for equal opportunities (NotiCen, May 13, 2010).

Six years later, another gender breakthrough occurred when Costa Rica nominated a woman to become secretary general of the UN. The nomination of Christiana Figueres—a daughter of José Figueres, three-time president of Costa Rica (1948-1949, 1953-1958, 1970-1974)—was announced during a solemn ceremony held at the Teatro Nacional (National Theater) in downtown San José, the nation’s capital.

Costa Rica’s only astronaut Franklin Chang made the announcement on the morning of July 7.

“Today, I have the immense honor to present Costa Rican Christiana Figueres Olsen as a candidate to the post of Secretary General of the United Nation,” said Chang. His words were immediately followed by a lengthy ovation.

World leader

Christiana Figueres gained international renown as she successfully served as executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) between 2010 and July of this year. During her tenure, she presided over the 21st session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 21), held in the Parisian suburb of Le Bourget Nov. 30-Dec. 12, 2015. Considering the diverse positions of the participants, the fact that COP 21 resulted in major agreements projected her image as an able international negotiator (NotiSur, Dec. 18, 2015, Jan. 7, 2016, Jan. 8, 2016).

During the nomination ceremony, Costa Rica’s President Luis Guillermo Solís, a promoter of UN reform, said “the United Nations and the world need a secretary general with the ability to construct bridges, who is able to consult and to listen, ready to settle disputes, construct agreements and anticipate problems. Christiana Figueres has proved to be that person.”

Figueres called the nomination “a great honor and a great responsibility.” She added, “Costa Rica is a small country but with a dignified history of pride, and I thank the president and my country’s government for this nomination.”

Figueres became one of 12 candidates considered by the UN Security Council to replace the current secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, when he leaves the post at the end of this year. The 15-member Security Council sends its recommendation to the General Assembly, which ultimately selects the nominee. Argentina’s Foreign Affairs Minister Susana Malcorra (NotiSur, Dec. 4, 2015, and Jan. 29, 2016) was the other Latin American contender. Figueres and Malcorra, however, were virtually eliminated during the first straw poll taken by the Security Council on July 21, according to the Associated Press.
The nomination of Christiana Figueres was in line with Costa Rica’s promotion of equal opportunities for women, and with the country’s history as a staunch defender of human rights (NotiCen, July 28, 2016). Nevertheless, the announcement was framed by some linguistic and gender controversy generated by comments made during the July 6 meeting of the Asamblea Legislativa (Legislative Assembly), Costa Rica’s single-chamber legislature.

It began when a conservative deputy lashed out against the trend to use the phrase “las diputadas y los diputados”—both the feminine and masculine Spanish versions of “the deputies”—as an expression of gender equity during legislative debate. The trend sidesteps the Spanish-language rule that calls for the use of the masculine form—in this case “los diputados”—when referring to both genders. The rule has increasingly been rejected by feminists and other gender-equality activists as discriminatory because it renders women invisible.

During the legislative meeting, Oscar López, co-founder of the rightist Partido Accesibilidad sin Exclusión (Accessibility without Exclusion, PASE) and its only deputy, began mocking the use of “las diputadas y los diputados,” insisting that the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language—the top authority for the Spanish language—was against it.

He also criticized the Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (Women’s National Institute, INAMU), using words that were later labeled as offensive and misogynistic.

“That nonsense—promoted, among other entities, by INAMU—to persist in the use of … ‘las y los’ and all that sexualization of the language, that feminization of the language, has no reason to be from the perspective of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language,” he said. “And why do I say INAMU? Well, because INAMU, in Costa Rica, is a shame.” He then pointed to an incident where a woman allegedly insulted another woman on live television, and to the recent homicide of a man by two women about which, he said, “INAMU remains silent.”

López charged that INAMU is “an institution that smiles when the sexual diversity march is staged here, when people boast their sexual preference, but remains silent before such things.” He then suggested that the organization’s name should be changed from Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres, to “Instituto Nacional de las Lesbianas” (National Lesbians’ Institute) “because any man is frowned on by INAMU, and I face the consequences, and I run whatever risk. In any case, I don’t care and am not interested in what INAMU may think of me.”

A day later, INAMU president Alejandra Mora told reporters that the legislator’s attitude “is very aggressive, is very disrespectful, but it needs to be placed in its exact dimension of a minute of fame.” She said his speech, a video of which was played by television newscasts, “sums up, in three minutes, all the anti-values of inequality.” She said López had disrespected women. “While he was speaking, a woman was killed,” in the northwestern province of Guanacaste, she pointed out, and that another woman was also murdered. She said INAMU is “a place that understands diversity, that has opened the doors to women with different sexual options.”

**Demands for an apology**

Two days after his statements, López faced colleague Patricia Mora, president of the leftist Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA), in a heated debate on an early-morning broadcast of Telenoticias, on the local Channel 7.
“I’ve come to demand of Don Oscar—not to ask him, no, I demand of Don Oscar—that he apologize before the country,” she said, adding, “This is not a game of whether the Royal Academy has said or hasn’t said certain things … We women have been made invisible … You should apologize before the citizens for being, let’s say, so enormously ignorant in this field.”

Referring also to the fact that López is blind, the FA president said, “I understand that it’s more difficult for you, because of a physical condition, to acquire knowledge of some theoretical points which you … absolutely ignore.”

And she added, “We women have historically been relegated. It offends my intelligence to be, at seven in the morning … trying to explain to a deputy what this is about,” she said. “Your offense is an offense to intelligence … your language is language fit for a saloon.”

Repeatedly stating that Mora was not being precise in her reasons for demanding an apology, López told her, “Not all women think like you and Frente Amplio and INAMU. Most women think differently in this country.”

López continued, “INAMU even gives scholarships to transsexuals in this country. It calls them, it trains them, and it even gives them scholarships. Costa Ricans’ money, [is going] to transsexuals … Men who dress like women, and go and stand on the streets to allegedly work as prostitutes, are called and even granted scholarships by INAMU.”

López charged that the institute’s budget runs at 20 billion colones (close to US$36.7 million) “for not doing anything for women in this country.”

The day after López’s speech in congress, INAMU rebutted the legislator’s statements in a 14-paragraph press release detailing the institute’s achievements. Among other things, it pointed out that “6,236 women benefitted by INAMU’s programs nationwide in 2015. Of that number, just over 1,300 women were trained in gender and entrepreneurship, and some 4,800 others, all living in poverty, took part in programs that included access to seed capital to start their own economic activity, it said.

The press release also noted that, thanks to INAMU, some 260 unemployed women attended workshops where they were trained in job-seeking skill and received help in understanding their labor rights, and just over 2,400 public sector employees were trained in implementing a gender-neutral approach in their work, thus contributing to reduce the gap between women and men regarding access to services.

In the press release, Alejandra Mora was quoted as saying, “There are people who like to call attention and speak without basis … those people do not affect us.”

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