WOMEN IN REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS: CHANGING PATTERNS OF LATIN AMERICAN GUERRILLA STRUGGLE

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In this study I will examine the patterns of women's participation in the guerrilla struggles of Latin American revolutionary movements. Women's participation in such struggles has long been overlooked. Analyses of Latin American women's political behavior tend to be directed to conventional political processes, such as voting and office holding, reflecting gender bias, as well as the ethnocentricity of North American researchers. In the literature on guerrilla warfare, armed struggle is generally regarded as an exclusively male political behavior. In actuality, Latin American women have participated in guerrilla movements, though not in extensive numbers until recently. With the influx of women into the Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan movements, analysts have been forced to acknowledge and reconsider women's contributions to armed struggles.

Guerrillas are members of political organizations operating in both rural and urban areas and using armed warfare for the purpose of changing societal structure. According to Che Guevara, the distinguishing feature of guerrilla warfare, as opposed to regular warfare employed by large armies, is that guerrillas possess "a much smaller number of arms for use in defense against oppression." Rather than outfighting government forces, guerrillas concentrate on breaking down the legitimacy of the regime and morally isolating it from popular support. Latin American nations have occupied historically dependent positions in the world capitalist system. As a result, past revolutionary struggles have been directed at colonial regimes, as well as those of internal political elites that have risen out of each nation's specific pattern of dependency.

I will address the following questions about the nature of women's participation in guerrilla struggles. First, what factors affect Latin American women's participation as compared to men's? Second, how does class affect women's ability to participate? Finally, what roles in the division of labor are guerrilleras most likely to perform? Patterns of women's participation are delineated in light of these questions. Movements in five nations are then examined to show variations in these patterns.

FACTORS AFFECTING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Barriers to Women's Involvement

I. The Structurally Subordinate Position of Latin American Women and the Ideology of Patriarchy

Latin American women participate in nearly all non-domestic spheres of national life to a lesser extent than men. This widely documented generalization stems from their structurally subordinate position and suggests why women should be expected to participate less frequently than men in guerrilla movements. Recent Marxian and feminist theorists have compellingly argued that the sphere of reproduction must be taken into account in order to describe women's roles, women's relegation to domestic activities, and the historical subordination of women. Women, primarily, direct the reproductive activities of the household which are necessary for the reproduction of labor power. Such activities include childbearing, socialization of children, and the care of family members. Women are thus first located in the private sphere of the home as a result of the sexual division of labor, while men are first located in the public sphere outside the home.

The sexual division of labor builds upon women's subordination in the sphere of...
reproduction.12 Women are socialized not to perform, or to become expert at, tasks which are incompatible with their reproductive roles. This facilitates the channeling of women into lower status "feminine" jobs, where they do not compete with men. Further, in the occupational sphere, as well as in all areas of social organization, the energy, time, and freedom of movement available to most women is greatly limited by their role in reproductive activities.13 Most men do not face the double burden of participating in nondomestic areas while taking responsibility for the domestic area. Women's role in reproductive activities thus constitutes a major barrier toward their involvement in nondomestic political action such as guerrilla struggle.

In Latin America, patriarchal attitudes both reflect and reinforce the subordination of women and their relegation to the domestic sphere. These attitudes, which represent "ideal" configurations held by both men and women, are summarized by Schmidt:14

(1) The sexual division of labor reflects natural differences between men and women.
(2) Women's identity comes through their relationship with men.
(3) Women achieve their highest fulfillment as wives and mothers.
(4) Women are childlike.
(5) Women are apolitical.

Patriarchal attitudes operate most profoundly at the familial level and are relatively consistent across class lines.15

The patriarchal model of Latin American family structure is characterized by male control over most activities related to the outside world (calle).16 Within the domestic sphere (casa), however, women maintain considerable control through their acknowledged expertise in child rearing and discipline and other household activities.17

Traditional patriarchal models of family structure and of feminine behavior are undermined by cases of women who head households or are professionals in charge of men. However, at the national level, the formal pattern of male dominance still prevails. The legal status of women in most Latin American civil codes is based upon patria potestas, the patriarchal right of the father to control his family. Women are legally "equated with idiots and children."18

Occupational and educational statistics reveal men's predominance in public activities. In twelve Latin American nations for which data are available, an average of only 18.7 percent of women were reported as active in the labor force, as compared to 51.8 percent of men.19 ILO employs censuses and surveys from government and other sources in compiling these data. Criteria used to define economic activity may differ from country to country. In particular, low status, informal sector employment such as household service and agricultural work, part-time and seasonal employment, unpaid family labor, and petty commerce and home production, tend to be underestimated or unreported by government sources.20 Statistics on Latin American women's labor force participation is generally higher than official statistics reveal.

Educational attainment is also much lower for women than men. Female illiteracy surpasses male rates in all Latin American nations.21 Educational differences become narrower, however, at higher levels, and, hence, higher socioeconomic statuses are attained. Women represent from 24 to 47 percent of students enrolled in higher education [for which such data were recorded] and from 23 to 50 percent of university graduates in Latin American nations.22

As in education and the work force, women participate less in conventional political activities.23 Stacey and Price24 report that in 1975 the percent of women in Latin American legislatures ranged from none in Panama to 8 percent in Mexico. Even women holding public office have limited commitment to political involvement. Only 20 percent of 167 female politicians interviewed in Chile and Peru had ambitions for a political or bureaucratic career, and the majority expressed no desire to remain in public office beyond their current appointment.25 Women also tend to vote less frequently than men.26