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Foreword to the Spanish-language edition

Lourdes Flores Nano

Much has been written, researched, and debated on women's political participation. No one doubts the importance of women's political participation or that it is a current issue. But why the insistence? Venturing to answer this question is somewhat daring. Even so, I would argue that the question of women's political participation will not go away because it is impossible to conceive of daily life without politics. Although the detractors of democratic forms of government have shunned political activity, political parties and the traditional leaders, they have not been able to offer an alternative to take their place. The importance of politics could well be summarized in the colloquial expression: "Bad with it, worse without it." In the context of this unavoidable acknowledgment, more and more people are asking about women's participation in politics. As this handbook illustrates, while we have made important gains, what remains to be done is vast. While the 20th century has seen women take a qualitative leap into the political arena, the objective for this new millennium must be not only to maintain this trend, but also to achieve the equitable representation of women in political decision-making bodies.

Levels of women's political participation vary widely depending on the geographic area in question. Whereas in the Scandinavian countries the participation of the two sexes in public life is almost equal, in the Arab countries grave obstacles still hamper the exercise of fundamental rights, including the right to vote. In this context, Latin America occupies a sort of middle ground.

In Latin America, despite the existence of innumerable limitations on women's political activism, the levels of women's participation in politics are close to the world average. Nonetheless, within the region, interestingly, the differences in levels of participation are striking. It is clear and beyond any doubt that the political participation of Argentine or Costa Rican women is far different from that of Bolivian, Ecuadorian or even Peruvian women. It appears that the countries of the Andean region are lagging somewhat behind the rest of the Latin American nations. This may be due to the fact that our countries are culturally and geographically divided, in a constant and dramatic search for a national identity, which makes the struggle to emerge from underdevelopment all the more arduous. Clearly, if women are to play a key role in politics, the limitations imposed by poverty and underdevelopment must be overcome.

To bridge the gap and seek greater access to politics, at least from the standpoint in the legal framework, our legal systems have tended to incorporate measures of an affirmative action type, such as quotas. Such provisions have not been equally effective everywhere. Unquestionably, the electoral system each country adopts, the level of commitment of the political groupings, and the real extent of citizen participation all play a crucial role. In the case of Argentina, adopting a quota system has been quite successful, as it has been accompanied by measures aimed at verifying its enforcement and effectiveness, and by an active, constant exchange between the feminist movements and their political representatives. On the whole, adopting and implementing quota laws has yielded positive results.

This handbook does not only expound on and list the barriers of all sorts that women must surmount to really be able to enter politics; it also sets forth specific alternatives, in light of the various socio-cultural realities, to address those obstacles.

In so doing, it offers us an interesting and exhaustive overview of women's political participation around the world. One of the most unique features of this handbook is that it includes texts by the very protagonists, women

involved in politics, in which they describe their experiences and strategies for having a greater impact in the legislatures in which they serve.

A final and interesting finding from this collection is that despite the deep-rooted legacy of machismo in our societies, the statistics show that most of the population would gladly accept electing a woman representative. It is true that bare statistical findings should be considered in light of a more extensive analysis based on these perceptions. Qualitative studies make it possible to discover that behind the assertion of the generalized acceptance of women's political participation are hidden fears and prejudices that the quantitative studies do not reveal. Turning the willingness to vote for women into actual support is the great challenge. Therefore, as this handbook concludes, we can argue that women's scant representation is due to women's lack of preparation for politics. This is due to the fact, as is correctly indicated here, that the more depressed a country's economy, the more women withdraw, almost entirely, into the domestic sphere, with which their possibilities of representation completely vanish.

Finally, this book is a valuable contribution that should be read and analysed by all of us women who participate in politics, and an invaluable resource for all persons who want to live in just societies, in which all individuals, who give of themselves to society, are heard and taken into account.

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