

# 1 ❁ Different Times, Women, Visions

## The Deep Roots of Costa Rican Feminism

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The roots of feminism in Costa Rica can be traced back to women who claimed the right to be individuals even though their behavior failed to conform to the standards that custom considered suitable for a woman of their era. The next stage of feminism included women who defended democratic rights, although these rights applied only to men and not to the women themselves. This period was followed by one in which women consciously demanded their own rights as citizens. Today, the feminist movement encompasses women who with increasing awareness insist on freedom from domination and freedom to participate in all spheres of life.

### **Nineteenth-Century Unconventional Women: Precursors of Feminism?**

Considering the invisibility of women in Costa Rican history, it is not surprising that we know amazingly little about some highly unconventional women who lived in the nineteenth century and who, by today's standards, would be considered feminists. Knowing so little, we wonder what caused them to disobey the rules of behavior of their time. Here are the stories of two of such women.

Manuela Escalante, considered the "first feminist" of Costa Rica, died on May 26, 1849. At her death, the lavish praise of the nation's press converted her into a new "wise woman," in the style of Molière. Her obituary in *El Costarricense* (cited in Acuña, 1969, 1: 113) lets us imagine her in the drawing room of her illustrious family's home in the city of Cartago, holding the center of attention during gatherings of high society, surrounded by political emigrés famous for their intelligence and wisdom.

At such gatherings, Manuela displayed her great learning, showing her knowledge of forms of rhetoric "from antithesis to prolepsis, from apostrophe

to personification” (Acuña, 1969: 1). When she was not reciting the eclogues of Garcilaso, the odes of Fray Luis, the songs of Herrera, or *The Moral Epistle* of Rioja, she was discussing metaphysics, practicing rhetoric, or challenging the latest findings in geology. In short, learned gentlemen gaped in surprise when they met Manuela. Her erudition and poise were truly exceptional during a century in which Costa Ricans believed that to safeguard their chastity, girls should never handle pencils (which were tools for intellectual pursuits), or have access to mirrors (which would reveal to them their own beauty), or approach windows (which might give access to potential lovers).

Of Manuela’s learning there is no doubt, but was she a feminist? The answer to that question is more difficult to establish. Whether she was inhibited because of a respect for the restrictions placed on women’s pursuits or was simply too busy because of her desire to learn, Manuela apparently did not record her beliefs and views—at least nothing written by her has yet been found. Apart from the reports of her vast erudition, we know nothing of her except that she was a kind of scandalous figure for her time because of her intellectual gifts and that she died a “spinster” at age twenty-six (Acuña, 1969: 1).

Even if Manuela was not a feminist in her thinking, she at least was a woman who lived her life in frank opposition to what was expected of women of her time. For this alone she deserves a prominent position in the history of the Costa Rican feminist movement, for she was isolated and unrivaled in her century. Manuela is also a symbol of the loneliness and near-anonymity in which the lives of women evolved in Costa Rican history.

Next to the image of Manuela in high society rises that of a weatherbeaten woman of the people—Pancha Carrasco (Acuña, 1969: 1). In 1856 Pancha enlisted as a cook in the Costa Rican army of President Juan Rafael Mora to fight against the invasion of William Walker, who attempted, with U.S. backing, to convert Central America into a territory with slavery (see Obregón, chap. 7 below). Although it was most unusual during the 1850s, this simple woman could read and write, and she served as President Mora’s secretary (Calvo, 1991b). Tempted more by the smoke of combat than by the hearth’s fire, she abandoned her cooking pots in Rivas, southern Nicaragua. Gathering munitions for the combatants in her apron and verbal threats for the enemy in her mouth, she went into battle.

In the Battle of Rivas on April 11, 1856—a glorious date in Costa Rican annals—Pancha and a German doctor simultaneously shot at an enemy soldier who was manning a cannon. With his battle companions, the soldier fled from

the shots, leaving the cannon behind. Amid cheers, Pancha was carried in triumph on the shoulders of her companions. Though her actions were confirmed by veterans of the 1856 action, no mention of the incident appears anywhere in the documents of the time—another instance of the cloak of invisibility with which historians have shrouded women.

In February of 1857, Pancha was present when Costa Ricans destroyed four steamships of the enemy on the San Juan River. There she worked at the bedside of soldiers sick with cholera, helping to give comfort and dignity to their deaths. During this time she also compiled lists of the dead and transcribed messages, news, and orders of the president.

After the war, President Mora decorated Pancha with a medal for heroism. When she died thirty-four years later, she received the military honors of a general at her funeral, attended by high dignitaries of government and church.

Although neither ever heard of feminism, both of these intrepid women— young Manuela Escalante in her high society drawing room and forty-year-old Pancha Carrasco with her apron loaded with bullets—dared to transgress the limits imposed on women of their time. Their actions encouraged a later generation of Costa Rican women who, still without any gender conscience, joined with men in public protests in the early nineteenth century. These protests were not in pursuit of their own rights but were an effort to safeguard institutions from which only men would benefit.

## **Women Defending Institutions That Excluded Them**

In their battles for others, women in the first decades of the nineteenth century defended the freedom of the press at a time when they themselves barely aspired to the right to read and write (Junta de Protección Social, 1989). Later in that century, in 1889, women turned out again, this time to defend men's right to vote; much time and effort would still be required before women themselves would be permitted to vote. Led by teachers, women returned to the streets in 1919, protesting a government coup even though Federico Tinoco, the deposed president, still wanted to fire married women teachers because he deemed them impure. In 1943, in response to a new threat to the legalization of men's vote, women again united with them in a public demonstration under the cry of freedom. Their action was decisive in turning the course of events, but their own right to vote continued to be denied even by those for whose rights they had demonstrated. Four years later, in 1947, thou-

sands of women held a protest march when democratic liberties were threatened even though, once again, those liberties could be exercised by men only (see Sharratt, chap. 8 below).

## **Women Fight for Their Own Rights**

During the nineteenth century and up until the middle of the twentieth, Costa Rican women supported male citizens' political freedom and their right to vote. The explicit fight for their own rights dates only from the twentieth century, and it moves slowly from a clamoring for general civil rights to a focus on political rights, primarily the vote. On July 19, 1914, Angela Acuña aroused a storm when, in one of her first public actions at the Sociedad Federal de Trabajadores, she referred to Costa Rican women's right to work. Acuña, then a student at the Universidad de Costa Rica, was pioneering a struggle that would be greeted with jeers and contempt in the newspapers of the country. Journalists made jokes at her expense and exuded ill will when she succeeded in having the Civil Code changed in 1916; the code was revised to permit women lawyers to carry out all functions of the legal profession except that of being notaries (which required the lawyer to be an active, i.e., voting, citizen). Nevertheless, the measure stood and she remained firm in her conviction; her next goal would be the political rights of women (Calvo, 1989: 79ff; 1991a: 21).

Several years of frustration and failed attempts convinced Angela Acuña of her need for allies. In the 1920s, support was growing throughout the Western world for women's claim to their voting rights (Portugal, 1991). On October 12, 1923, Angela founded the Costa Rican Liga Feminista (Feminist League) as a subsidiary of the Liga Internacional de Mujeres Ibéricas e Hispanoamericanas (Iberian and Hispano-American Women's International League) in Madrid (Acuña, 1969, 2: 353). With that, the first serious steps in the struggle for women's rights had been taken. As president of the Feminist League, Acuña initiated action with a care that seemed almost timid, requesting the president of the republic, Julio Acosta, to give women the right to vote in the coming elections (Calvo, 1989: 102).

In the same year, the Fifth International American Conference met in Chile. Although all the discussants were men, the members adopted a resolution that future conferences should study the means of abolishing constitutional and legal restrictions on women's political rights. Then, during the sixth conference in Havana in 1928, which is now remembered as the first International American Conference to allow women to speak, Doris Stevens, a North American,

expressed her disagreement with laws written for the well-being of women without their consent. Because “no man,” she said, “no group of men, no government, no nation, nor any group of nations ever had the right to rob us of what we claim today. We ask for the restoration of the rights which were taken from us, our human rights” (cited in Acuña, 1969, 2: 363). Despite pressures exerted by an international group of women to have educator Lydia Fernández represent Costa Rica at that conference, the government had followed tradition and sent a man, Alejandro Aguilar Machado, who participated in the creation of the Comisión Interamericana de Mujeres (CIM) (Inter American Commission of Women). The commission was originally composed of seven members named by the Unión Panamericana, the precursor of the Organización de Estados Americanos (OEA) (Organization of American States), and later by representatives of each country of the continent. Costa Rica has always been represented, just as she has always been represented in the Unión de Mujeres Americanas (Union of American Women), the organization that traditionally names the Woman of the Americas of the Year. (In 1957, at age 79, Angela Acuña was given this award [Calvo, 1989: 212].)

But the suffragist struggle in Costa Rica was associated fundamentally with Acuña’s Feminist League. After their first timid request, the women realized what they would be facing. They were not so dismayed by President Acosta’s refusal of their request. Rather, what perturbed the league members was the reaction of the media, which hurried to remind them that, according to the law, women, children, and the insane could not vote (Calvo, 1989: 103).

From then on, the league dedicated all its efforts to ensuring that women would no longer be grouped with children and the insane. In 1931 they proposed to the Costa Rican Legislative Assembly a bill granting the vote to a limited group of women who, because of intellectual capacity demonstrated by titles and professions, could prove their good sense, wisdom, and maturity. They also asked the representatives to explain what other credentials women would have to present to win the vote, stating that they would be willing to obtain them. But their voices made no more impression on the assembly than did the sounds of the falling rain (Sharratt, chap. 8 below).

Thereafter, the Feminist League sent a new petition to the Legislative Assembly every year, and each year the representatives answered with the hackneyed story that a woman in her home occupies a throne to which she, like a queen, should devote all her time and interest. The controversy was enervating and at the same time amusing. Members of the league went to the press in 1934 and said that such kingdoms of the home were “fairy tales for the golden times

of yore” (Calvo, 1989: 154) and that women were queens only in ballads and verses. Men then answered more forthrightly; they admitted frankly that a woman’s role as reproducer of the species tied her to the home to such an extent that this should be her permanent place. The suffragists accepted the obligation of women to be mothers, but they differed in their interpretation of the role, giving it a social and political scope “that requires a moral-ethical quality which is infinitely superior to the one needed for the exercise of the vote” (Calvo, 1989: 159). In the end, the suffragists’ reasoning mattered little: lawmakers merely raised their eyebrows and continued to reject women’s claim to the vote. The year was 1934.

Almost ten years later, after their participation in the public protests of May 15, 1943, in which they defended the legality of Costa Rican men’s right to vote, the members of the league believed their hour had finally come. Thousands of citizens, women and men, had given public evidence of their civic conscience, showing their disagreement with the government’s disrespect for the popular will. For the first time, it seemed that the women’s campaign was evoking respect and sufficient recognition and that public awareness of the repeatedly refused request for the vote was on their side. Presidential candidate León Cortés declared, “The nation must give increasingly more tangible proof of its confidence in Costa Rican women, giving them legally the civil rights they so nobly have won” (Calvo, 1989: 186). As a result, a bill presented to the assembly on May 20, 1943, proposed a modification of the election law to reflect the idea that the vote must be exercised “by male and female citizens for whom it constitutes a duty and a right” (Calvo, 1989: 187).

But women were not yet to have the vote in Costa Rica. The argument was raised that the bill had been proposed in a pre-election period and had come from the Democratic party, the same party that had benefited from the women’s demonstration. Thus, the bill was killed by the accusation of political opportunism and election campaign manipulation. Then, on August 2, 1947, several thousand women, organized by a large number of women teachers, took to the streets to demonstrate in favor of the right to vote in the next election. As earlier, and building on the demands Stevens had voiced at the Havana conference, in 1943, they did not ask for the right to vote but they again protested that they had been deprived of the right to vote. This time, the demonstration was a deciding factor in achieving the concession of the political rights to women in the 1949 Constitution. One of the decisive arguments was that women’s participation at that moment had been sufficient proof of their patriotism (Sharratt, chap. 8 below).

Costa Rican men seem to have been unaware that women, as a group, had proved their patriotism from at least the time of their protests during the first decades of the twentieth century. And given that women expected for themselves few of the “democratic” liberties they were defending, the women’s efforts were perhaps more patriotic than the similar efforts of Costa Rican men. Women were always ready to give aid in critical moments to protect rights whose enjoyment was beyond their reach.

### **More Than the Vote**

Recognition in the 1949 Constitution of women’s right to vote closed the chapter of suffragism. The loud voices raised by the feminists of the 1930s and 1940s softened in later decades because they were satisfied that their wish had been granted. The younger women, though, came to understand that they had barely won a first battle and the vote was only the beginning of new struggles about to start.

Now that the phase of suffragism has been overcome, we women have become aware that by gaining the right to vote we have attained only half of our political rights. The other half is our right to be elected, and that we have not yet achieved. Since 1949, the year in which the Constitution gave us the vote, the female representation in the Legislative Assembly has reached barely 6 percent. Only 10 percent of labor union jobs and 11 percent of municipal positions are held by women. In some presidential administrations, women have not occupied a single ministerial post; in others, such as the one of President Oscar Arias Sánchez, whose election campaign slogan spoke of a “Costa Rica with the soul of a woman,” the highest post for which a woman was named was vice minister. In the following administration, that of President Rafael Ángel Calderón (1990–94), the cabinet included two women ministers. When the *Proyecto de Ley sobre la Igualdad Real de la Mujer* (Bill for Women’s True Equality) suggested that in the decade of the 1990s at least 30 percent of high political posts should be occupied by women, the argument was raised that such a measure would be discriminatory against men (see Ansorena, chap. 12 below, and Badilla, chap. 13 below). Yet, very few seem to understand that a Legislative Assembly in which 94 percent of the members are men constitutes solid proof of the discrimination against women.

The feminist movement of today must therefore set itself other goals. We want, exactly as Doris Stevens announced in 1928, the restoration of the rights that were taken from us. And we are not willing to give one inch in this long

battle to recover what belongs to us. The goal is no longer one of voting or not voting. What we are insisting is that we shall make our mark, in whatever field we choose to do so.

### *Biodata*

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