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THE IMPACT OF GENDER ROLES, POLITICAL ENVIRONMENTS, AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS ON WOMEN ACTIVISTS IN PERU FROM THE MID-1800s TO THE MID-1900s

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ABSTRACT:

Going back into the colonial era, and certainly post-independence, women in Peru were discussing their political and civil rights, and questioning not only their status, but the status of workers, indigenous people, and those in poverty. In fact, within the handful of names that have appeared as well-known Peruvian women activists, they all concentrated on class as well as gender, and incorporated race in terms of indigeneity as well. In doing so, the women involved in working for increased equality created or joined different organizations over time. What led women to join one group versus another, and were there groups with staying power that lasted long enough to gather a large base? It seems that any momentum may have been difficult to sustain, but each manifestation of the women's movement influenced that which came after. Throughout this work, gender roles, political environments, and social environments impacted how women sought to affect their legal and social rights, and their successes.

The experience of women in Peru has been characterized by a long and halting path toward the expansion of their civil rights. After Peru's independence from Spanish colonial rule in 1821, only a small portion of the population gained access to political rights and economic opportunity. Enlightenment ideas about liberal government, written almost entirely by male European political theorists, were taken up enthusiastically by the elites in independent Peru as a model for their new nation. This had wide-reaching consequences. Left out from these internationally embraced ideas of "citizenship" were women, indigenous people, enslaved people, and the free Black population, as well as various individuals of mixed race. These identities intersected with each other, leading to an uneven but extensive web of oppression that impacted nearly every realm of people's lives. This oppression was not unique to Peru, given the international influence of Enlightenment ideas. The presence of women cut across every other demographic group in Peru, and outside of it, meaning gender roles and expectations had a massive impact not only on the women themselves, but on entire nations. In examining the narrow definition of citizenship in early independent Peru, and agitation from those wanting to expand it, several questions arise. First, who wanted to expand citizenship? This paper focuses primarily on women looking to expand their own legal and political rights. However, in the vast majority of cases, their fights were inextricably linked to activism relating to race and class as well. In fact, some women, such as Magda Portal, a high-ranking member of the radical left American Popular Revolutionary Alliance, prioritized class revolution over gender equality. However, even Portal believed in and expected to see women's equality.

Once the "who" has been identified, questions about the why and how come to the fore. Female activists pushed against boundaries in different ways over time, particularly moving from

the mid to late nineteenth century into the early to mid-twentieth. What led to the different approaches taken by these women. What similarities were there between them? I argue that the normative gender roles and expectations within Peru, as well as the overall political climate nationally *and* internationally, shaped the approaches various women took at different times. They were able to evaluate and use agency where it could be found in order to navigate a difficult and risky path. Though their particular roadmap was specific to Peru over an approximately one-hundred-year time frame, the implications can be applied much more broadly across the globe when looking at agitation for equal rights, and what leads to successes and failures in that realm. It is both and one highlighting specific women's direct involvement in developing the trajectory of their lives, communities, and countries. The women involved deserve to have their story heard, liberating their history from where it spent so many years brushed aside and ignored in favor of that of powerful, elite men.

The scale of this paper will vary between macro, mezzo, and micro histories. Many women worked within these movements for the expansion of rights, with a smaller number in the vanguard and in leadership roles. Looking at their lives, and how representative or not they were of other women who also hoped for full citizenship and economic opportunity, helps us understand the causal links in the story of gender, race, and class politics. However, leaving it at the individual level would omit the critical story of women's organizations, from the local level all the way up to international associations. Women were able to come together outside of official political channels, and later within them, and used these groups to advocate for change. Finally, the national and international climate is clearly important to consider, as the interaction of women, their organizations, and the broad political and social mood all held interdependent casual factors that are impossible to unravel when looking at the ways women chose to protest their status, and what the outcomes of those protests were.

A note on the historical consciousness of this writer, readers of this paper, and the people whose stories are addressed here. It's quite clear that the women of Peru in the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century had a very different experience than most of us looking back from one or two hundred years distance and situated in an entirely different culture, at least in terms of this writer. We may have ideas about the "rightness" of their stances, or questions about their periodic acquiescence to patriarchal norms (as, certainly, feminist scholars in the United States researching them in the 1970s did), and we need to be fully aware of these and how they may impact our interpretation of the history. All the women involved had reasons for what they did and why or how they chose to do it that we are unable to fully understand as we can never truly put ourselves in their place. However, we can take it in and use it to expand our perspective of what it means to be an equal rights activist.

Related to our respective positions in location and history, separation of time, space, and language provided some challenges in obtaining primary source information. The biggest challenge was this writer's lack of fluency in Spanish, which many of the primary and secondary sources were written in. For example, the University of Austin has a significant collection of Maria Portal's papers available digitally, but all are in Spanish. However, since several of the women were more linguistically talented than this writer, there is correspondence and other writings in English, as well as works of their literature that have been translated into English. Maria Portal, in particular, had wide correspondence with activists in English speaking countries, and letters from her are in the archives of Anna Melissa Graves and others. Sadly, those are not digitized, and are located in various repositories within the United States that were inaccessible to this writer. This

was also the case with State Department records relating to Magda Portal and her political party (the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance), housed at the Library of Congress.

However, there *were* accessible primary sources. The international nature of women's groups meant that correspondence and other documents of their conferences and organizations are in digitized collections of English-speaking women's papers, such as May Wright Sewall's and Carrie Chapman Catt's, including Catt's diary entries about her trip to Latin America. An awareness that these sources are written from the perspective of white women from the United States is important when evaluating their reports on Latin America. The sources highlight the legacy of imperialistic tendencies within the international movements and speak to what the women from Peru and other Latin American countries had to address and navigate while trying to build international coalitions.

Other available sources included articles in the English-speaking press, including the New York Times, about developments in Peru or about women's conferences. Articles included a letter to the editor written by Magda Portal and another APRA party member. Further, because many of the women highlighted in this paper were published authors, there are some English translations of their work. Although not autobiographical, the themes woven through their writings are connected to their political and activist work in many cases. These sources also allow for interpretations related to the dissemination of these ideas, and women's ability to use avenues available to them to bring attention to their cause(s). Lacking still are sources relating to lesser-known women, and for this, secondary sources were relied upon, though even they often had little to say. This is an area that needs further study, but due to practicalities, extensive interpretation is beyond the scope of this paper. We are forced to rely upon the women whose writing is available for their perspectives on the intersection of women, race, religion, and class.

At least two main historiographical themes emerge when exploring these questions: women's or gender history (including patriarchal notions), and transnationalism. In addition, colonialism and liberalism, race, and class are critical themes, with no small amount of cultural history involved as well. Much of this narrative is not a political history in the traditional sense, as most of the actors had little to no power in the political system or establishment. However, it does discuss the impact of government and efforts by women to secure political rights, and also delves a bit into governmental politics in the 1920s-50s.

When looking at women as agents of history and historical change, "women's history" as a historiographical theme is unavoidable, and gender theory becomes part of the methodological and theoretical basis for evaluating information. Women's history is a field that has been closely tied to feminist theory and gender theory, changing and evolving over the years. Early women's history was focused on women as victims of a system of oppression, seeing them as sad figures who were not able to participate in political history except as being left out. Later women's history widened this to show that women *were* involved in history, but it generally focused on biographies, typically of elite women, and didn't explore how these women were able to take the actions and have the impacts they did. As scholarship progressed, so did the understanding of power differentials between men and women, but also other identities such as race and class.¹ These ideas are applicable to Peruvian women's rights advocates, whose experience was always intertwined with race, class, colonial legacy, and religion. However, gender roles still have a crucial impact.

¹ María Luisa Femenías and Amy Oliver, *Feminist Philosophy in Latin America and Spain* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 99.

At its core, gender theory posits that women's and men's experiences are relational, meaning therefore that gender is defined relationally, and is classified as a social construct.²

In this context, looking at gender in the broader social and political context in Peru is necessary. This includes colonialism and its legacy, as well as the new ideas of liberal government that followed independence, and the political instability that was often experienced. Stasiulis argues that Spanish colonizers brought gender roles from Europe and imposed these on the population. Society was patriarchal, and wives were expected to be in charge of the domestic arena, and only that arena. Catholicism was a strong piece of this hierarchical expectation, and it dictated morals for women as well. The spread of Catholicism was a key part of colonialism, and, in addition to gender hierarchy, it also brought over racial hierarchy in the idea of white Catholic racial purity that was lifted up during the Inquisition.³ The racial hierarchy of rule had Conquistadors and their descendants at the top, followed by peninsulares (people born in Europe), then merchants, all of whom were above the indigenous and Black population. In every group, women were seen as subordinate to men. The women most at risk of mistreatment were those at the bottom of the racial hierarchy.⁴

During the colonial era, indigenous men were used for forced labor, as were Black enslaved people on sugar and cotton plantations. Indigenous women interacted with those of European descent in the highlands, and later in the city, where they were domestic servants. This position left them vulnerable to sexual violence and some were taken as concubines by Spanish men, due to the dearth of Spanish women in Latin America and the men's inability to see indigenous women as anything other than objects for their use. Enslaved women of any race were also subject to this type of violence. White fathers of children with enslaved women could choose to either acknowledge their children or sell them as slaves.⁵ Biracial or multiracial children's "rank" in the racial hierarchy, which became even more detailed through the *casta* system in the eighteenth century, was higher than their mother's, but lower than their father's. The fact that the mother's rank was always lower than the father's was due to the dictates of gender norms which said Spanish women were not to have sexual relationships with non-white men, though Spanish men were expected to have sexual relationships with non-white women.⁶ The gender and racial hierarchies brought from Catholic Europe, and their focus on procreation, dovetailed to keep the *casta* system workable during the colonial era.

However, in the early nineteenth century, revolutionary rumblings escalated into war and provided a brief period of relative flexibility for women. The revolutionary era and shortly after saw an expansion of women's roles for women of all groups and classes. *Rabonas*, a term that could loosely translate into camp followers, but with a meaning beyond the typical one of prostitutes and laundresses, played a key role in revolutionary fights. Bourgeois women were involved in planning, spying, and hosting meetings for revolutionaries, as well as raising money for the cause. Women who were involved in the war had much wider experiences than they would

² Nara Milanich, "Women, Gender, and Family in Latin America, 1820–2000," In *A Companion to Latin American History*, ed. Thomas M. Holloway (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 517.

³ Daiva K. Stasiulis, and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class* (London: SAGE, 1995), 192, 195.

⁴ Stasiulis and Yival-Davis, *Unsettling Settler Societies*, 190-91, 194.

⁵ Stasiulis and Yival-Davis, *Unsettling Settler Societies*, 194, 193.

⁶ Stasiulis and Yival-Davis, *Unsettling Settler Societies*, 192-195.

have in the domestic arena, stepping into the public sphere in significant and noticeable ways.⁷ In fact, their activities were so significant and noticeable, they were perceived as a threat, and men responded by trying to narrow their movements and activities again.⁸

After the revolution, the gender norms that had been established in Peru during colonialism reemerged from the dust of battle, ready to reclaim their place in the new republic. As mentioned, Enlightenment ideas about liberal government and citizenship were embraced in many new countries across Latin America. Nineteenth century Peru, where the Positivist idea that progress moved forward, logic was the basis for knowledge, and humans could achieve perfection, was no exception.⁹ In looking more closely at Positivism, which imagined human behavior to be governed by reason, and was blissfully unaware of bias, we can see the danger to women and other marginalized groups within the social systems of Peru.¹⁰ If the idea is that human behavior is based on logic, and laws are based on logic, then we can imagine how both men *and* women exposed to these ideas would be drawn into adherence to and support of the gendered hierarchy. If humans act logically, and logic is the only important criteria, then the mentalité of the moment must be based on logic and therefore correct. Why else would men be in a position of power over women, and people with a bigger percentage of European ancestry be in a position of power of those with less? There is a circular logic that can be used to justify whatever one believes, under the guise of rationalism.

Political theorists such as Locke wrote about liberalism in terms of individual rights and citizenship. They believed education was a key piece in creating citizens, in order to have a knowledgeable political base. However, these theorists saw women as fundamentally different than men. In their belief system, citizenship was related to being the patriarch of the family, and women were *only* related to the state through their husbands, fathers, or brothers. Gender was “arguably the most important factor in defining a person’s social status” as women were seen as “adjuncts” of male relatives, not individuals of their own. While men had military and legal arenas to define their citizenship, women were limited to family to define theirs.¹¹

The only voices of dissent amongst European political writers of the era came from Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft. They saw women as individuals with rights that were independent of their connection to men. Unfortunately, there was a paucity of men who agreed with them, and women were left out of politics, in Peru and elsewhere. That independence in Peru did not bring citizenship to women was both expected and accepted by the vast majority of women, as men were not the only ones who saw the contemporary iteration of gender roles as natural.¹²

To this point, we’ve generally seen what women were excluded from, and the causal factors leading to this social construction of gender roles. However, what exactly *were* women supposed to do? The establishment of Peru as an independent state did not lead to political stability. In the

⁷ Nancy LaGreca, *Rewriting Womanhood: Feminism, Subjectivity, and the Angel of the House in the Latin American Novel, 1887-1903* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 88.

⁸ LaGreca, *Rewriting Womanhood*, 84.

⁹ LaGreca, *Rewriting Womanhood*, 79-81.

¹⁰ Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (New York: Cornell University Press: 2001), 13-14.

¹¹ Milanich, “Women, Gender, and Family in Latin America,” 519; Catherine Davies, Claire Brewster, and Hilary Owen. *South American Independence: Gender, Politics, Text* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 20.

¹² Davies, *South American Independence.*, 4, 16, 19.

decades immediately following the war, there were thirty different leaders and accompanying economic unpredictability as foreign investors stopped their influx of money.¹³ At this time, any women who had ventured out of the private sphere during the revolution were returned to it, while men remained in the public sphere. The mentalité that kept women ensconced in domesticity is encapsulated by the phrase “The Angel of the House.” Women’s worth was defined by their dedication to their family and home. Women were defined by their selflessness. La Greca identifies this piece in particular as a barrier to agitation for women’s rights. Keeping women devoted to others prevented them from thinking of themselves or their own situation.¹⁴ It certainly kept them from thinking they should be able to prioritize their own wishes and needs. Instead, their highest purpose was to take care of their family, and that was how they contributed to the greater good.

Mothering was specifically connected to the forming of the nation, not only in Peru but in Europe as well. Given Peru’s instability and the ongoing threat of war, this was emphasized quite strongly there. The success of republican citizenship was heavily reliant on women in their role as wife and mother. As Davies writes, “[o]rder in the home helped guarantee order of the polity as a whole.”¹⁵ Mothers had the responsibility of teaching the next generation of citizens, their sons. As the century continued, this idealization of women as mothers and wives expanded to all classes. For poor women who had primarily been seen as domestic servants for generations, it actually *was* a progressive shift for them to be seen as part of this system, though it was still within patriarchal dependency.¹⁶

A note about men who had sex with men, and women who had sex with women, as well as those who did not identify with their assigned sex. There was no mention of anyone who fell into these categories within the literature on gender roles in Peru consulted for this paper, though certainly they existed. We know that there were, in fact, same sex sexual interactions during the Colonial Era, because archives from the Latin American Inquisition courts reflect this.¹⁷ It seems unlikely that would disappear with independence. Gender identity is a much trickier area to assess since gender is a social construction. Therefore, a Peruvian woman in the 1800s who wanted to wear pants, not marry, and go to school may have been described as acting entirely outside of their gender at the time, though modern gender norms would place this well within the scope of being a woman. This is an area of research beyond the scope of this paper. What we can say based on sources cited here is that it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, for two men or two women to set up a household together, at least in the more populated areas of Peru. The same would be true of a couple with one partner identifying with a gender other than what they were assigned. The social risk, not to mention risk to safety and life, of any such arrangement would have been extremely high.

It also would have been shocking and potentially incomprehensible to those who discovered the arrangement, particularly if women were involved, since another facet of “the Angel of the House” narrative was that women were more moral and religious. In fact, morality

¹³ LaGreca, *Rewriting Womanhood*, 82-83.

¹⁴ LaGreca, *Rewriting Womanhood*, 11.

¹⁵ LaGreca, *Rewriting Womanhood*, 3, 6, 7; Davies, *South American Independence*, 18.

¹⁶ Milanich, “Women, Gender, and Family in Latin America, 524.

¹⁷ Zeb Tortorici, *Sins Against Nature: Sex and Archives in Colonial New Spain* (North Carolina: Duke University Press: 2018).

was seen as the only virtue they had in higher amounts than men, yet it was also enforced as a form of control over them, a reflection of the still-formidable power of the patriarchal Catholic Church.¹⁸

Although the social system was heavily invested in the idea of women as moral, domestic angels, as the nineteenth century progresses, we begin to see women pushing for more rights for themselves and others. One avenue that opened was precisely because of their perceived moral goodness. Women, particularly middle and upper class, were able to engage in some work through the church, including charity work. As these women began to involve themselves in helping the poor, they “began to question the legal and social bases of the patriarchal household and their own subordination in it.”¹⁹ There was an expansion of women’s rights activists in the nineteenth century, and as years passed, they began to develop a more cohesive program for reform that included addressing property rights, educational rights, and employment rights. At this time, the right to vote wasn’t a major focus, as even men did not have universal suffrage and politics continued to be unstable.²⁰

In addition to the wives and mothers entering the realm of activism through public sphere morality-based endeavors like charity, another group of women with less traditional home lives agitated for change during this time. It is certainly possible that this second group influenced the first, as they were all published authors whose work had political themes. Flora Tristán was potentially the earliest of these women, well before the widespread movement, in the 1830s. She wrote about the poor state of education, while also becoming an ally of the working class.²¹ Like the writers who came later in the century, her activism encompassed both economic rights and women’s rights, seeing them as related. Patriarchy and the economic system were both responsible for oppression.

Moving forward several decades, to the 1870s, writing remained one of the professions open to women at the time, because it could be done in the house. Women writers crashed into the public sphere, demonstrating through their writing that they already had some knowledge of it, and were clearly doing something beyond their domestic duties. They used their writings to contribute not only literary but also political ideas.²² Political ideas were also discussed at their revivals of the colonial salon, *veledas*, or meetings, which they held in Lima through the 1880s. Both men and women gathered to talk about women’s rights, religion, and issues affecting indigenous groups and the poor, all while finding a community that shared their perspectives and believed they had a right to voice them.²³ This was a hybrid public/private sphere which allowed them to not only discuss ideas beyond gender roles, but practice pushing those boundaries themselves.

Three of the best-known women writers in Peru during the second half of the nineteenth century were Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera, Clorinda Matto de Turner, and Argentine writer Juana Manuela Gorriti, who lived in Lima. Cabello de Carbonera was a Peruvian writer who portrayed strong female characters in her work, setting them in a world that did not yet exist. She

¹⁸ LaGreca, *Rewriting Womanhood*, 12, 87.

¹⁹ Davies, *South American Independence*, 20; Milanich, “Women, Gender, and Family in Latin America,” 525.

²⁰ Milanich, “Women, Gender, and Family in Latin America,” 525-6.

²¹ LaGreca, *Rewriting Womanhood*, 86-87.

²² Elsa M. Chaney, “Old and New Feminists in Latin America: The Case of Peru and Chile,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 35, no. 2 (1973), 333.

²³ Chaney, “Old and New Feminists in Latin American,” 332-333; LaGreca, *Rewriting Womanhood*, 15.

wrote about women's place, upper class excess, and education, advocating for its expansion to more rigorous academic subjects. Both she and Matto de Turner used Positivist language to argue for women's rights, with Matto de Turner connecting women's advancement to the nation's advancement. Another writer, Teresa Gonzalez de Fanning, also used her writing to advocate for women's education, later going a step beyond and founding a school herself.²⁴ Numerous women followed, with Maria Trinidad Enríquez (who attended the University of San Antonio Abad in 1874), María Aragón de Rodo, Luisa Rausejour, and Magdalena Chávez all opening schools for girls in the 1870s.

Gorriti was a “driving force behind...meetings [*veledas*],” in Lima, but also ran a periodical for women, *El Album*, with Carolina Freire de Jaimes (another writer) in 1874, and “criticized Positivist views of history and society that excluded women and racial minorities.”²⁵ Matto de Turner held similar views and did not hold back in her writing and publishing either. She edited *La Bolsa* in 1883, and *El Peru Ilustrado* in 1889.²⁶ This same year she published *Aves Son Nido/Birds Without a Nest*, which tells the story of hardships faced by indigenous agricultural workers exploited by landowners. The beautifully written story portrays indigenous characters with sympathy and questions actors within the church.²⁷

Not surprisingly, there were consequences for her work. She had to resign from *El Peru Ilustrado* after it published a piece about Jesus being in love with Mary Magdalene. Not only was she excommunicated, but in 1895, due to her political writing, her home was ransacked by the Peruvian military. She left for Argentina, where she founded a publication focused on women's writing.²⁸ Her experiences demonstrate the continued power of the Catholic Church, and the danger of challenging the hierarchies around race, class and gender.

The women writers who were able to enter the environment of political discourse were not representative of Peruvian women of the time. They tended to be unmarried, often widowed when young, had no children, and either had money or were able to support themselves. These unique conditions allowed them the freedom to pursue activities out of reach of most women. However, their founding of schools, and dissemination of their ideas through print, had a wider impact, including influencing future generations of women.²⁹

As the nineteenth century progressed, there was expansion of legal protections for women, as well as some basic liberal reforms abolishing slavery and eliminating a tribute tax paid by indigenous groups. Continued racial mixing made race less important than culture and class, though indigenous groups remained identified as “different,” likely *because* of culture and class, and were still at the bottom of the power hierarchy. As the century came to a close the mentalité also indicated an *increase* in the strictness of gender roles through social norms, despite increased legal protections. The domestic sphere continued to be pushed as the appropriate place for women.

Gender and class roles came together around the turn of the century, as the “family model” of the working class was advocated for. This consisted of a male breadwinner and domestic mother

²⁴ La Greca, *Rewriting Womanhood*, 2-3, 14, 16, 90, 99.

²⁵ LaGreca, *Rewriting Womanhood*, 89.

²⁶ LaGreca, *Rewriting Womanhood*, 16-17.

²⁷ Clorinda Matto de Turner, J.G.H., and Naomi Lindstrom, *Birds without a Nest: A Novel: A Story of Indian Life and Priestly Oppression in Peru* (University of Texas Press, 1996).

²⁸ LaGreca, *Rewriting Womanhood*, 16-17.

²⁹ LaGreca, *Rewriting Womanhood*, 15.

raising future workers. It continued the primary role of women as “Angel of the House,” but adapted it to new economic realities. The increasing working class and the issues faced by them would be addressed by women like Magda Portal and Maria Jesus Alvarado Rivera during the twentieth century.

At the same time, those working for women’s rights increasingly began to support women’s suffrage. There was backlash from both the Catholic Church and the political establishment, as suffrage not only impacts who can affect decision making, it also “has broader consequences for social hierarchies,” which those institutions did not want.³⁰ Still, women continued to speak out. An early advocate was Maria Jesus Alvarado Rivera, who combined her advocacy for workers, students, and indigenous people with the suffrage fight prior to World War I, attending the Primer Congreso Feminino (International Women’s Congress) in Buenos Aires in 1910, and speaking on “the woman question” in 1911 at the Geographic Society of Lima. At the International Women’s Congress in Buenos Aires, delegates attended from Peru Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Argentina. The agenda included discussions on education, women’s rights, and divorce. The group also tried to establish a Latin American Women’s Federation, but this never came to fruition.³¹ Maria Jesus Alvarado Rivera then founded Evolución Femenina/Feminine Revolution in 1915. She worked closely with Maria Irene Larragoytia to organize the group’s meetings and advocate politically for their causes. Although Chaney states that Alvarado was more forward thinking than others, so they wouldn’t work with her, Alvarado is clearly able to find allies both within her own organization and internationally.³² Given that Chaney’s work was published in 1973, it is possible that new scholarship has expanded understanding of Alvarado’s work.

Alvarado’s work was often met with significant pushback. In one instance, the group was declared “Protestant” by those who opposed them. Given the continued power of the Catholic Church, this was a serious accusation that required defense. In 1925, she was jailed for three months and then exiled to Argentina for twelve years for printing political pamphlets on a number of social justice issues, such as worker and student rights, as well as for printing accusations of wrongdoing, including violence, against then-president Augusto Leguía.³³

In the years between 1915 and 1925, numerous transnational alliances between women’s rights activists were forged, and Alvarado was involved in these events. Offen notes that the word “transnational” began to be used in the 1950s and asks if it is an anachronism to use it for earlier connections, as women of the time would have said “international.” However, she states that women’s description of the organization she focuses on, the International Council of Women, fits the definition of transnational, so she is comfortable using it as long as it is defined.³⁴ Therefore, this writer is following her lead and using the word transnational, defined as the cooperation of people across national boundaries in pursuit of common goals. Offen also posits that transnationalism proliferates more before women have the vote, because after suffrage they are

³⁰ Isabel Castillo, “Motivation Alignment, Historical Cleavages, and Women’s Suffrage in Latin America,” *Perspectives on Politics* (2022), 1.

³¹ Corinne A.A. Pernet, “Chilean Feminists, the International Women’s Movement, and Suffrage, 1915-1950,” *Pacific Historical Review* 69, no. 4 (2000), 666.

³² Chaney, 334-335.

³³ Chaney, 335-336.

³⁴ Karen Offen, “Understanding International Feminisms as ‘Transnational’ –an Anachronism?: May Wright Sewall and the Creation of the International Council of Women, 1889–1904,” *Gender History in a Transnational Perspective: Networks, Biographies, Gender Orders*, ed. Oliver Janz and Daniel Schönplflug (New York : Berghahn Books. 2014) 26, 34, 38.

drawn inward by governments trying to “nationalize” them.³⁵ This is possible, and certainly seems intuitive, though there are examples of women participating in transnational conferences several years after receiving the vote. Nonetheless, the transnational fervor does seem to die down as more and more countries extend suffrage to women.

An early transnational organization founded by Latin American women was the Pan American Association for the Advancement of Women, created in 1922. Their focus, much like other such groups, was education, married women’s property rights, peace, and education about suffrage.³⁶ Several of these causes dovetail with women’s expected gender roles and the extension of maternal and moral identities, so we should not be surprised to see them as initial priorities of women entering the public sphere. The Pan American Association for the Advancement of Women was followed by a flurry of new or growing transnational organizations, conferences, and contact between women across Latin America, as well as beyond.

One of the largest and most well-known international women’s organization was the International Council of Women (ICW), which had been founded in 1888 in Washington, DC. May Wright Sewall, from the United States, was a key figure in the expansion of the Council and became its president in 1899. She was interested in women’s education and work, suffrage, and peace.³⁷ These themes come up again and again in both national and transnational women’s organizations. Like the Peruvian women profiled in this paper, Sewall wanted women to discuss not only issues directly related to their rights, but also other concerns. Despite these commonalities across nations, the ICW had a rocky start, initially struggling to get people in England and Europe on board with the idea. It gained traction as international politics and transnational sensibilities shifted, though it, and other burgeoning transnational women’s organizations, continued to struggle with implicit and explicit imperialist bias.³⁸

Some progress toward dismantling this bias was made prior to World War I, such as when well-known United States based suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt’s suggested in 1913 that the constitution of the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance be changed so national groups could join even if they were in places where suffrage could not be fought for.³⁹ However, it was really in the 1920s, after the destabilizing influence of the war highlighted a distinct lack of European superiority, that the ICW and other organizations began to slowly expand their outreach and connections to additional areas, including Latin America. In 1923, there was still only one chapter of the ICW outside of Europe and Anglo North America, but challenges to the Euro and Anglo-centric nature of the ICW were growing.⁴⁰

The International Women’s Suffrage Association was another transnational effort that had many ties to the ICW and was also looking to grow their international connections. In 1923, IWSA president Carrie Chapman Catt and activist Rosa Manus visited Peru and other Latin American countries to organize María Alvarado’s *Evolución Feminina* and additional women’s groups into an “affiliate” of the International Women’s Suffrage Association. However, Catt only agreed to

³⁵ Offen, “Understanding International Feminisms,” 29.

³⁶ Pernet, “Chilean Feminists,” 674.

³⁷ Offen, “Understanding International Feminisms,” 27, 30, 31.

³⁸ Offen, “Understanding International Feminisms,” 31-32; Leila J Rupp, “Challenging Imperialism in International Women’s Organizations, 1888-1945,” *NWSA journal* 8, no. 1 (1996), 8.

³⁹ Rupp, “Challenging Imperialism,” 12.

⁴⁰ Leila J Rupp, “Challenging Imperialism in International Women’s Organizations, 1888-1945,” *NWSA Journal* 8, no. 1 (1996), 11.

do so if Alvarado would serve as the new group's secretary. Alvarado acquiesced to the ultimatum.⁴¹ Catt questioned whether Latin American women were able to organize, amongst other racist and patronizing comments made in her diary.⁴² Somehow, the women of Peru were able to tolerate her attitudes in order to reach their collective goal. The resultant organization, the National Council of Women in Peru, was created later that year.

As expected when creating a new, broad coalition made up of previously independent groups with their own agenda, disagreements arose. The women's groups that had joined together focused on issues common to such organizations, such as children, health, and education. Some women involved only wanted suffrage and not further equality, while María Alvarado wanted broad civil rights for women and equality before the law.⁴³ The group ended up joining the ICW in 1926 but, according to Chaney, continued to have difficulty working as a cohesive unit, though her article has a distinct tinge of impatience with Peruvian women and does not highlight that the arrest and exile of one of its most passionate leaders almost certainly had an impact on the group's effectiveness.⁴⁴ However, the evidence cited in this paper points to the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the different political systems in the countries participating in these transnational alliances, leading to ongoing challenges. After the activity of the 1920s, meetings decreased. Whether this was due to Latin American women becoming disillusioned with Anglo-led organizations, to national interests and threats becoming more critical, and/or the beginning of the Great Depression is unclear.

In Peru, the early 1930s was a time of significant political change. While transnationalism around women's rights was flourishing in the 1920s, the "positivist oligarchy" run by President Augusto B. Leguía was firmly running the country with "colonial-style relations of rule," which led, in turn, to increased agitation on the left and transnationalist revolutionary influence.⁴⁵ This was due in no small part to the tendency toward exile of dissidents in Latin America. Because of the commonness of this practice, people who were exiled were able to find community and support in other Latin American countries. These international networks of intellectuals allowed for transfer and proliferation of political ideas.⁴⁶

One such intellectual was named Victor Raul Haya de la Torre. While exiled in Mexico, he corresponded with leftist writer Jose Carlos Mariátegui, whose work reflected his political philosophies and likely influenced de la Torre's beliefs. In addition, the Mexican Revolution and the University Reform Movement in Argentina influenced Peruvian radicalism. It is not hard to imagine a direct line from the Mexican Revolution to Haya de la Torre. In 1924, he founded the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance, a leftist organization that "rose in response to imperialist, clerical, and feudal land traditions in Peru, wanting worker's rights as well as the

⁴¹ Chaney, "Old and New Feminists in Latin America," 335.

⁴² Chaney, "Old and New Feminists in Latin America," 335; Carrie Chapman Catt, *Carrie Chapman Catt Papers: Diaries, 1911-1923; Europe and South America, 1922 to 1923; 2 of 4. Manuscript/Mixed Material.* <https://www.loc.gov/item/mss154040024/>.

⁴³ Chaney, "Old and New Feminists in Latin America," 335.

⁴⁴ Evelyn G Schipske, "An Analysis of the Consejo Nacional de Mujeres Del Peru," *Journal of inter-American studies and world affairs* 17, no. 4 (1975), 427-28; Chaney, "Old and New Feminists in Latin America," 336.

⁴⁵ Melisa Moore, *José Carlos Mariátegui's Unfinished Revolution: Politics, Poetics, and Change in 1920s Peru.* Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2013.

⁴⁶ Iñigo García-Bryce, "Transnational Activist: Magda Portal and the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA), 1926-1950," *The Americas* 70, no. 4 (2014), 682-83.

“incorporation of Peru’s Indians into political life.”⁴⁷ It was conceptualized as “an alternative to the international communism supported by the Comintern in the Soviet Union.”⁴⁸

In the late 1920s, APRA became the political home of a ground-breaking political figure named Magda Portal. Portal was a well-known poet in Peru, receiving first prize in a national poetry contest in 1923. Her political passion was made known at that time, as she wouldn’t take part in the award ceremony once she learned that President Leguía was to present her with the prize.⁴⁹ She continued to write poetry, published an avantgarde journal, and became increasingly aligned with workers. In 1927, she published her first collection of poems, but in the same year, she was exiled to Cuba and Mexico due to suspicions about her political beliefs. It was in Mexico that she met Haya de la Torre and soon joined APRA, becoming an *aprista*, as followers were called, and helping to cofound the Mexican cell with him.⁵⁰ The international cells of APRA were small, but they used print and the press to spread their message effectively.⁵¹ Portal traveled to various Latin American countries in 1929 to make speeches spreading the word about APRA. Being a political orator was traditionally a male role, but the radicalism and internationalism of APRA “allowed her to escape many of the constraints of gender” and her exile enabled her to speak more freely on politics than she otherwise would have been able to.⁵² In addition, she, and APRA as a whole, believed in and used transnational networks to support their cause. They advocated strongly for a Latin American identity separate from Europe, cutting the ties of colonialism’s legacy.⁵³ De la Torre specifically separating APRA’s left leaning politics from the communist philosophy coming out of the Soviet Union, and drawing on Latin American revolutionary activities, exemplifies this.

As the 1930s began, APRA became more focused on Peru specifically. After the overthrow of Leguía in 1930, Portal was able to return to Peru, where she cofounded the Peruvian chapter of APRA. As the head of the Feminine Division and the Foreign Representative of the National Executive Committee, she was the most powerful women in any Latin American political party at that time. Portal tried to use her position to bring more women into the party but as APRA solidified as a Peruvian party versus a transnational one, the opposition to this increased.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, it was still the first political party in Peru to actively include women as members. Portal believed that, as an oppressed group, women who joined APRA would be enthusiastic members of the party. She continued to write widely on women in the party papers.⁵⁵

Portal aligns with her nineteenth century predecessors as well as her contemporaries in her social justice interests. However, she ranked suffrage and other civil rights for women *below* the

⁴⁷ María Elena Moyano, Diana Miloslavich Túpac, and Patricia Taylor Edmisten. *The Autobiography of María Elena Moyano: the Life and Death of a Peruvian Activist*, ed. Diana Miloslavich Túpac, trans. Patricia Taylor Edmisten (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 4.

⁴⁸ García-Bryce, “Transnational Activist,” 684-5.

⁴⁹ Moore, *José Carlos Mariátegui’s Unfinished Revolution*, 213.

⁵⁰ Moore, *José Carlos Mariátegui’s Unfinished Revolution*, 213; García-Bryce, “Transnational Activist,” 689.

⁵¹ García-Bryce, “Transnational Activist,” 687.

⁵² García-Bryce, “Transnational Activist,” 686, 679.

⁵³ García-Bryce, “Transnational Activist,” 692; Geneviève Dorais, “Coming of Age in Exile: Víctor Raúl Haya de La Torre and the Genesis of the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance, 1923–1931.” *The Hispanic American historical review* 97, no. 4 (2017), 652.

⁵⁴ García-Bryce, “Transnational Activist,” 678, 680, 691.

⁵⁵ García-Bryce, “Transnational Activist,” 692, 690.

class struggle in terms of importance, believing that the class revolution would bring equality to women.⁵⁶ On the other side of the same coin, she didn't believe that women's equality alone would do enough to address the oppression of indigenous groups, workers, and others. In what was at least partially a product of her experiences coming of age in the economic and political climate of the early twentieth century, she believed class should be the primary lens through which society was analyzed, not gender. In fact, she initially wanted to limit women's right to vote until they were more educated on class issues, fearing that universal women's suffrage would advance conservative causes.⁵⁷ However, her own example and her advocacy in favor of women joining the political sphere directly challenged the prevailing gender roles and expectations in Peru. Although other women writers had been in the public sphere discussing political causes, none had been involved directly in politics in the way she was. Her presence alone advanced women's rights.

During the 1931 presidential campaign, Magda Portal traveled around the country, making speeches in support of Haya de la Torre, who was running for president. Again, this a significant role for her and well outside the expected activities for women. She saw women attending her speeches, directly involving themselves in politics in a wider way.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, on the campaign trail, Haya de la Torre was saying that women should have the vote.⁵⁹ This period of change and political instability brought about by the overthrow of Leguía offered an opening for the advancement of women's rights, as well as APRA's platform of worker's rights.

Haya de la Torre lost the election, beaten by José Miguel Sanchez Cerro, the officer responsible for the military coup that overthrew Leguía. A constitutional congress was elected, with Sanchez Cerro's party, Unión Revolution, receiving the majority of the seats. However, APRA also won a significant portion of seats and was involved in the constitutional debates.⁶⁰ The potential that ongoing advocacy from women activists on questions of indigeneity and class contributed significantly to APRA's increased power cannot be dismissed.

The new political opportunity presented by Leguía's overthrow, combined with Peruvian women's advocacy regarding suffrage over the approximately two decades preceding this realignment of power, had spurred a shift in the conversation about women's rights and Peru took a vote on national women's suffrage in 1931. Zoila Aurora Cáceres, daughter of a former president, yet another writer, and, interestingly, a conservative Catholic who spent most of her life living abroad, led a group that advocated to have women's suffrage included in the draft of the new constitution in 1931.⁶¹

The question of national women's suffrage was debated at the constitutional congress, and although eventually defeated, women gained the right to vote in municipal elections. The fact that it was brought up for debate must still be taken as a step toward expansion of suffrage. This step would have been unimaginable when Clorinda Matto de Turner and Juana Manuela Gorriti were

⁵⁶ Iñigo L. García-Bryce, *Haya de La Torre and the Pursuit of Power in Twentieth-Century Peru and Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 166; ⁵⁶ María Elena, Moyano, *The Autobiography of María Elena Moyano*, 4-5.

⁵⁷ García-Bryce, "Transnational Activist," 692-3; Moyano, *The Autobiography of María Elena Moyano*, 5.

⁵⁸ García-Bryce, "Transnational Activist," 687.

⁵⁹ Iñigo L García-Bryce, *Haya de La Torre and the Pursuit of Power in Twentieth-Century Peru and Latin America*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018, 165.

⁶⁰ Isabel Castillo, "Motivation Alignment, Historical Cleavages, and Women's Suffrage in Latin America." *Perspectives on Politics* (2022), 8. doi:10.1017/S1537592722000147.

⁶¹ Castillo, "Motivation Alignment, America," 8.

holding *veledas* in the 1800s. And yet, the incredible stability of patriarchal gender expectations they experienced was still strong enough to impact the women suffrage vote.

In her 2022 article on Latin American women's suffrage, Isabel Castillo argues that for women's suffrage to be granted, "electoral and social order motivations need to align."⁶² This means that the political party in control must feel both that they would benefit from the women's vote and believe that women are entitled to the right to vote. In Peru, there was an oligarchic and anti-oligarchic split amongst the political parties in control of the government at that time. The oligarchic party, Unión Revolucion (UR), had the highest percentage of seats in the constitutional congress. Oligarchic parties were typically aligned with the church and its limited gender roles, but would benefit electorally from women voting, as women tended to be conservative. In the case of the UR, there was a split within the party on whether they should agree to woman's suffrage. Supporters didn't see suffrage as a major shift for gender roles and noted women already doing "political" activities in church and charities. The supporters also tended to be closer to the party locus of control, and they wanted electoral votes to continue growing their power. On the opposite side, those UR representatives who were opposed to suffrage weren't as close to the party core and therefore not as invested in electoral votes, so gendered ideas about the inappropriateness of women voting dominated.⁶³ The Anti-oligarchic party typically had the opposite situation in terms of electoral benefit and belief in rights, and such was the case in Peru, where APRA filled this role.⁶⁴ Their leadership, including Magda Portal, expressed support for women's suffrage both publicly and privately. However, they also had concerns about women's conservatism and the Catholic Church's influence over them. They tried, unsuccessfully to introduce a more limited women's suffrage measure, which would allow women to vote only if they were economically independent. Although they believed in the right of women to vote, they did not support the measure because of the electoral consequences.⁶⁵ Finally, the Decentralist Party, the other of the main three in power, was closely aligned with the Church, and some members feared that women voting could lead to the collapse of family and home due to marital strife. They generally believed that there was not enough electoral benefit for them to go against their views on gender roles.⁶⁶ National women's suffrage was defeated by a vote of seventy to forty-five. It would take over twenty more years for it to be achieved.⁶⁷

In the years immediately following this defeat, the road became untenable for APRA in Peru. In a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* from January 1, 1933, Magda Portal, in her role as Foreign Secretary for the National Executive Committee, along with Luis E. Heysen, General Secretary of APRA, detailed the increasing oppression against the group by the dominant party, including the arrest of Victor Haya de la Torre. APRA was blamed for uprisings and violence.⁶⁸ Her involvement in this letter bringing attention to the plight of the political party, and democratic norms in general, as well as the fact that her name is listed first, is testament to her continued power in the party. Unfortunately, her position meant she was also caught up in the anti-APRA sweep, being arrested in 1934. She was released after an extensive campaign by supporters and eventually landed in Chile, where the fame and admiration she engendered allowed her to

⁶² Castillo, "Motivational Alignment," 1, 8.

⁶³ Castillo, "Motivational Alignment," 9, 11.

⁶⁴ Castillo, "Motivational Alignment," 8.

⁶⁵ Castillo, "Motivational Alignment," 9.

⁶⁶ Castillo, "Motivational Alignment," 9.

⁶⁷ Castillo, "Motivational Alignment," 9, 11.

⁶⁸ Magda Portal, and Luis E. Heysen. "Peru's Politics and the Results." *New York Times*. January 15, 1933.

settle within the transnational community of Latin American exiled intellectuals. She worked with their Ministry of Education, joined the Socialist Party, and continued organizing for APRA.⁶⁹

This period did not see any notable advances for women's rights in Peru. In fact, in 1945, APRA negotiated with the party in power in order to be part of the coalition government. However, their platform changed dramatically as a result. Not only was advancing women's rights not a part of it but during the First National Congress of Aprista Women, in 1946, Haya de la Torre said women's role was in the home. In 1947, Portal's daughter committed suicide, causing Portal to withdraw from the party for several months. She tried to reengage at the Second Aprista Party Congress in 1948, requesting women be given a vote within the party, but her request was ignored.⁷⁰ That same year, after an Aprista uprising, Portal denounced APRA party leadership and its shift from the original principles, then left the party.⁷¹ In the years immediately preceding Peruvian women finally obtaining the vote, she retired from political life.

By the time they received the vote in 1955, women had already become more involved in public life, educationally and professionally. This existing involvement and influence in the public sphere may have meant the vote didn't seem anathema to the patriarchy.⁷² Another reason the vote may have been extended at this point was optics. Peru was under the control of an authoritarian government. Castillo argues that sometimes such governments use suffrage to gain legitimacy from both international governments and their own population, so this cannot be ruled out as a factor.⁷³ In all likelihood, it was the combination of many factors, all of which were reflected in the political atmosphere that led to women getting the vote.

So, what happened after the vote? According to Chaney, not much. She argues that gender roles and expectations kept the vote from bringing about dramatic change.⁷⁴ Although entrenched gender norms were not going to evaporate overnight just because women could now vote, we again must be mindful of Chaney's pessimistic view of Peruvian women's activism overall. The expansion and exercise of various women's rights, including the right to vote, moved in tandem with the overall environment. Other causes championed by women activists like class equality and indigenous rights likely also saw uneven progress for the same reason.

What does it mean if from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, progress was slow and uneven? Does that take away from the advocacy of the women profiled in this paper? Not at all. Though many of the activists suffered disappointments, fear, and disillusionment, their fight was worthwhile. Navigating the legacy of colonialism, ongoing imperialism, domination of the Catholic Church, and the confluence of all of these on gender roles, racial attitudes, and economic opportunity, was an incredibly complex task for these women. Their expectations and the prevailing mentalité contributed to the varying forms their advocacy took. But they were united in their ability to imagine a different society than the one they lived in. Not only to imagine it, but to believe that the difference can be achieved, demonstrates the agency and creativity of Peruvian women activists. Their work inspired many and their passion changed lives.

⁶⁹ García-Bryce, "Transnational Activist, 699.

⁷⁰ García-Bryce, "Transnational Activist," 702.

⁷¹ García-Bryce, "Transnational Activist," 703-4.

⁷² Chaney, "Old and New Feminists in Latin America," 338.

⁷³ Castillo, "Motivational Alignment," 9, 11.

⁷⁴ Chaney, "Old and New Feminists in Latin America," 338.

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