

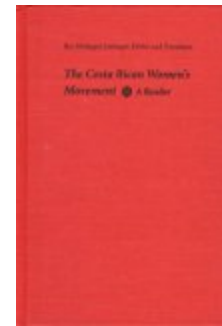
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ilse Abshagen Leitinger, ed. *The Costa Rican Women's Movement: A Reader*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997. xix + 366 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8229-5543-6; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-3862-0.

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## A Reader on the Process of Organizing and Empowering Costa Rican Women

Ilse Leitinger's *Reader* shows us how, thanks initially to the work of a few pioneers, information and consciousness about women's condition developed into a growing crescendo in Costa Rica over the twentieth century. This in turn played out in legislation and increased space for women.

The *Reader* demonstrates that the development of the Costa Rican women's movement is owed to a complex interplay of domestic and international factors. Inside Costa Rica, a whole range of state institutions from the universities to government bureaucracies nourished a variety of women's groups, which in turn were influenced by Ticas educated abroad—often in U.S. universities—and by foreign residents like the author, the comparative sociologist Ilse Leitinger. Outside assistance to the movement from NGOs and nations like Holland also made its contribution.

This reader presents thirty-four short essays by feminists who have been active participants—"true insiders"—in the process of organizing and empowering Costa Rican women. The theme is "investigación-acción"—and the focus is particularly on the past two decades. Beginning with an overview, the essays, which range from three to eighteen pages in length, are divided into sub-sections which focus on the history of the women's movement, the quest for equality, discrimination, women's organizations, the arts, and the evolution of women's studies. Each essay ends with considerable "biodata" on the author(s).

In her introduction, Professor Leitinger defines Costa Rican society as deeply patriarchal, family oriented, and not given to "disciplined cooperation." At the same time, Ticos, she says, are pragmatists who seek "to avoid conflicts and extremes of violent confrontation." Women's progress would be determined by the interplay between these competing national characteristics. In the end, when the pressure became too intense, men would grudgingly yield to women's advance.

In "The Deep Roots of Costa Rican Feminism," Yadira Calvo Fajardo outlines the history of Ticas struggle to achieve "freedom from [patriarchal] domination." Interestingly, one of the first women to make her mark nationally, Pancha Carrasco, did so as a fighter against the Yanqui filibusterer William Walker in the 1850s. Half a century later, the young lawyer and head of the Feminist League, Angela Acuna, would lead the charge for women's right to vote. The Costa Rican legislature responded with inspired foot dragging over decades. Their principal argument was one familiar throughout the Americas: women were the queens of the household ... and ought to stay there. Politics, a dirty business, was best left to men. Finally, following the liberal revolution of 1948, the constitution of 1949 gave women the vote.

Costa Rica's Centro Feminista de Información y Acción (CEFEMINA) is the subject of an essay on "Improving the Quality of Women's Daily Lives." CEFEMINA, which works with poor women, has sponsored self help projects which have built two thousand houses. It loans

money to small businesses, runs a number of clinics, and helped to organize Costa Rica's first women's trade union.

In "The Alianza de Mujeres Costaricenses, A Popular Movement," Ana Hernandez discusses how this grassroots organization, with operations in fourteen provinces, has pursued local projects like winning bus service for isolated communities and counseling women on domestic violence.

In Chapter Five, the well known Costa Rican writer Carmen Naranjo presents an overview of the arguments for women's liberation: "the core problem of women lies in the human servitude to which they have been subjected throughout history."

Chapter Six, "Women in Colonial Costa Rica," is based on a study of over two thousand documents from the archives of the Catholic Church. The records, a number of which deal with property rights and marriage, offer some useful—if not novel—insights. The authors note that the documents reveal "the fusion of three patriarchal systems": church, state and indigenous cultures.

In Chapter Seven, Clotilde Obregon Quesada investigates women's history in the nineteenth century, tracing the educational advances for women during that era. These advances coincided with the arrival of material modernity: railroads and electricity. Obregon notes also women's growing role in commerce, particularly as owners of liquor stores!

Perhaps the most informative chapter in this section is Sarah Sharratt's "The Suffragist Movement in Costa Rica, 1889-1949." Sharratt, a Californian, gave the first graduate courses in women's studies in Costa Rica. Her essay, the longest in this section, provides substantial detail on a number of issues discussed in the preceding chapters.

Chapter Ten, "Peasant Women's Autobiographies" analyzes the lives of five women taken from the compendium *Autobiografias Campesinas*, which offers "rich sources" on many aspects of peasant life in Costa Rica. The chapter deals largely with economic matters, such as the gender division of labor, child labor, the double day, and the gradual movement of women towards doing paid labor outside the home. The essay notes a familiar dilemma: that women's agricultural labor goes largely unrecognized by economists, bosses and family patriarchs, and that women often fail to receive the appropriate financial benefits for their work.

In the "Law and Women's Lives," Tatiana Soto Cabrera argues that while women have made considerable progress in terms of legislation in the twentieth century, laws benefiting women are often not implemented. This is owed in part, she argues, to maladministration and to the ignorance of women, particularly the poor, about their rights.

In Chapter Twelve, "Negotiating Women's Legal Equality," Aixa Ansorena Montero discusses the history of a law, proposed in 1988, to bring "real equality" for women. The draft law included increased political participation by women through the controversial notion of "gender proportionality," as well as mandatory child care and protection against sexual abuse. A useful chart shows how the bill was changed as it proceeded through the legislature. While it was watered down in almost every particular, it did stimulate a national discussion of the issues involved, and, in a sense, was a success. Further details on the struggle for this bill are presented in Alda Facio Montejo's essay on "Redefining Political Equality."

In Section IV, which deals with discrimination against women, Eugenia Lopez-Casas reviews the situation of "Women Heads of Household" in Limon province. She notes that the economic crisis of the early 1990s depressed wages to the extent that only 40 percent of Costa Rican families could afford the "canasta basica," or minimum food requirement. In Limon, a city on the Caribbean coast which depends on banana and coffee exports, the crisis was particularly intense for single mothers. This resulted in survival strategies which included emigration to New York, putting minor children to work, hidden prostitution, and intensification of family networking and neighborhood solidarity.

In Chapter Sixteen, Paquita Cruz's "The Lesbian Feminist Group Las Entendidas" discusses the early organization of a support group for gay women in Costa Rica. The women, who met at the "La Avispa" bar in San Jose, gradually won some social space in Costa Rica: "We marvel every day at what ... we have achieved."

The subject of Chapter Eighteen is violence against women. Author Ana Carcedo notes that in the early 1980s, graffiti demanding "Death to Rapists" began to appear in the capitol and thus helped to bring a tabooed subject into the light of public discussion. One approach to the issue of domestic violence was legislation to assure that Costa Rican women could get full title to their houses. This enabled women to eject husbands guilty of domestic abuse. This theme of domestic violence is further explored in the essay "Father-Daughter Incest."

Section V deals with women's organizations and includes separate chapters on the cooperative movement, housing, crafts cooperatives, and the role of the Peace Corps.

Section VI, "The Women's Movement and Feminism in the Arts," offers an illustrated essay on the work of four women artists in Costa Rica, as well as an intriguing essay on the myths and stereotypes of popular music in Costa Rica. This latter essay offers a content analysis of popular Costa Rican songs which make women out to be passive victims whose lives depend on love for their man.

Section VII, "The Constantly Evolving Status of Women's Studies" reviews the revolutionary growth of women's participation in Costa Rican universities as well as the powerful development of women's studies at a variety of Costa Rican universities over the past two decades. At the Universidad Nacional in San Jose, the Instituto de Estudios de la Mujer (CIEM) offers courses to graduates and undergraduates ranging from the Psychotherapy of Women to Women's Economics along with a broad based research program.

The power of this reader lies in its immediacy and directness: the dramatis personae of the Costa Rican

women's movement are speaking their minds, with considerable clarity and a lack of ideological fogosidad. If there is a weakness here, it lies in a certain repetition and the lack of a more critical overview which might establish more precisely how successful the women's movement has been. For example, the book provides insights into many women's organizations, but rarely indicates the number of members or gives other data which would enable a more exact measurement of their power and success.

Women clearly ARE becoming a political force to be reckoned with as is evidenced in the recent (1998) nominations for the forthcoming presidential elections. Three of the eleven candidates are women, as are two of the vice presidential candidates of the most powerful parties.

At the end, this reader is in a way, a double tribute to Professor Leitinger, first for having pursued its publication for a decade and secondly because many of its writers were once her students.

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