

# The Timeless Battle for Gender Equity

By Julio Noboa Polanco



Not all Suffragists were white. Frances E.W. Harper, 1898. (Library of Congress; Prints and Photographs Division)

This year marks the centenary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that granted women the right to vote on August 18, 1920. Of course, they were not “given” in a silver tray; the suffragists had to fight battles on many fronts, through marches, pickets, demonstrations and a multitude of other efforts, only to start this conces-

sion of men who were not willing or accustomed to sharing power with women.

It wasn't easy being a suffragist four generation ago. Women actively struggling to obtain the vote endured ridicule, rejection, resentment and incarceration for decades. They confronted harsh accusations of destroying the home, of threatening state's rights, of being socialists, and of undermining not only the social order, but also God's divine plan.

“I do not believe that God intended woman to have control of man” remarked a Texas legislator early this century, as if the vote would give women that much power. For the men who tightly held the reins of government in the state's legislature, it was “an abnormal condition of the mind [that] has prompted the activities of those women who think they want the vote.” It's not difficult to imagine what these legislators considered to be the “normal” mental condition of women!

Yet, despite vigorous opposition, suffragists did finally mobilize the required support from enough men in the U.S. Congress and in state legislatures to achieve their goal. The Texas legislature was in fact the first in the South to approve the federal amendment.

Women have made great strides over the past ten decades in every field of human endeavor. However, every victory they have achieved has only brought their battles for equity, respect, and full participation to another level of struggle. Having had the vote for over four generations, women now exercise a higher rate of voter participation than men in the United States. Nevertheless, they are still grossly under-represented in their government.

Many citizens of the U.S. take pride in our democratic tradition, but American women do not have the same access to power as do their sisters in other nations. According to the *Inter-Par-*

*liamentary Union*, an international agency that documents world rankings, last year in 2019 the United States ranked 75th out of 173 countries in the legislative representation of women.

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**Although in 2018, American women obtained and celebrated their highest percentage ever with 23.5% in the House of Representatives. Yet that figure does not even reach the global average of 24.1% for women representatives among the world's parliaments.**

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It is interesting to note that the *Inter-Parliamentary Union* also revealed that the only three nations in the world who have a majority of women in their parliament in 2019 were relatively poor and developing, namely Rwanda (61.4%), Cuba (53.2%) and Bolivia (53.1%). Among the other Latin American nations with the highest percentage of women representatives are Mexico (48.2%), Nicaragua (45.7%) and Costa Rica (45.6%).

But beyond these percentages that could change year after year, there are many other social, economic and political conditions that characterize each nation and that profoundly affect the lives of women. Outside the strictly political sphere, women in Latin America and the entire world face formidable challenges and obstacles in their quest for equality.

Outdated and oppressive notions of divine order or “God's will” are still being used as an excuse to deny women a role as full participants in many of the most influential religions. The mullahs, the pope and other religious potentates have continued to rail against choice, family planning, and any effort that encourages women to gain control over their own bodies and their own lives.

Given these and other facts and figures and considering the increased violence against women both in the media and in reality, it is impossible for those who care about women's equality to rest on the laurels of the past.

As reported by the *United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean*, there were more than 2,500 cases of femicide in those two regions in 2017. An article published in the *Wall Street Journal* by Juan Forero, December 19,

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Suffrage parade, New York City, May 6, 1912. SOURCE: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

### Timeless Equality

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2018 stated that, *Women in Latin America Are Being Murdered at Record Rates*. And most of these crimes, which often include rape and torture, are perpetrated by men the women know.

We must promote a maturation process through which men of good conscience work diligently to challenge the violent and malignant cancer of patriarchy in every aspect of our lives. We men also need to become allies to the *Me Too Movement* and achieve higher levels of respect, communication and collaboration with women in our families, in our communities and in our nation.

That can only happen when we accept that we do not have to be identical to be equal before the law and within society. Ultimately, it's not about which gender is smarter,



Members of the executive committee of the national suffragists' convention and prominent local suffragists snapped this photo with Senator Reed Smoot in August 1915 outside of the Hotel. Photo courtesy of the National Woman's Party.

faster or stronger, but about how both genders get better results when we work together to secure a brighter future.

We need to stop acting as if we came from two different worlds in order to solve the devastating problems of our time. We must realize that men are not from Mars and women are not from Venus; we are both from this same Mother Earth.

Our undeniable obligation is to take care of ourselves, of each other, and of our planet for all the generations to come. It is an obligation that women and men share together and together can best fulfill!

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## Call for Stories & Photos Women & Activism in the Westside

Opening  
Summer 2020



August 11, 1933. Mujeres picket Finck Cigar Factory, 602 Buena Vista St., pleading for better working conditions. L-1476-A.SA Light Photo Collection. UTSA Special Collections – ITC.

One hundred years ago, on June 4, 1919, Congress passed the 19th Amendment, prohibiting the states and the federal government from denying the right to vote to citizens of the U.S. on the basis of sex. It was ratified on August 18, 1920 and became law on August 26, 1920. However, voting rights continued to be denied to people on the basis of racial and ethnic origin for years to come, making this a bittersweet victory for the many women of color who fought for women's suffrage.

In Summer 2020, to mark the centennial of the 19th Amendment, the Museo del Westside will present a new exhibit on Women & Activism in the Westside - telling the fuller story of women's political engagement despite obstacles. If you have a story of a Westside woman activist you'd like to share for this project, contact [museo@esperanzacenter.org](mailto:museo@esperanzacenter.org) or call 210-228-0201. **Deadline for photos and stories is June 30th. We can provide assistance with photo scanning and recording of oral histories.**