



A brief history of the Inter-American Commission of Women

Women's emancipation through education

The end of the century experienced an explosive population growth of the principal urban centers in Latin America. This, along with the creation of normal schools, increased educational opportunities for women and their employment as teachers, contributed to the emergence of journals advocating women's rights and a female critique of discriminatory practices based on gender. Teachers were the first generation of educated women in Latin America. Female school teachers formed the nucleus of the first women's groups to articulate a feminist critique of society, protesting the unequal legal status of women and their limited access to education, as well as political and economic power.

Women who were already organizing on the national level had come to understand that the gender inequality they confronted was not confined to their own countries, but was pervasive throughout the hemisphere. They hoped that by raising issues in the international arena they would have more leverage with their governments at home. By the 1920s, it was the view of feminist activists that their best "opportunity to effect reform [was] through the passage of resolutions that would oblige signatory governments to raise the issue within their domestic arena."

The last decades of the nineteenth century saw a blossoming of public interest in and governmental support for the education of women in the Americas. While the nature and purpose of that education was much debated, in several countries numbers of women succeeded in acquiring primary and secondary education.

A call for recognition - Santiago de Chile, 1923

Frustrated at being excluded from participation in the Second Pan American Scientific Conference (Washington, D.C., 1915-1916), a group of prominent women formed a parallel Pan American Women's Auxiliary Conference, which after meeting for several months concluded that, in order to advance the cause of women's rights in the Americas, a Pan American



Doris Stevens, in her historic address to the Sixth International Conference of American States in Havana, calling for the recognition of women's rights in the Americas (1928)



Alice Paul, leader of the National Women's Party (United States)

Union of Women was necessary. There was a support of Pan Americanism and through it, a support of women in the Americas.

The International Feminist Congress, which met in Buenos Aires in 1910, had put forward a program which, while it included female suffrage, stressed access to education and need for a wide range of social legislation to protect and support working women. By the time the first Pan American Conference of Women met in Baltimore in 1922, the legal status of women and their right to the franchise became the priority. For this purpose, the Pan American Association for the Advancement of Women was founded, and its focus was directed toward influencing the outcome of the Fifth International Conference of American States, held in Santiago, Chile, in 1923. To that end, a number of "unofficial" female delegates came to the Conference and engaged in an active lobbying campaign.

A resolution, proposed by Máximo Soto Hall of Guatemala, was eventually adopted unanimously by the Conference, mandating that future conferences study ways to eliminate constitutional and other legal discrimination of women so that the women of the Americas would enjoy the same civil and political rights as men. The Conference also adopted a resolution calling for the inclusion of women in the delegations to future conferences.

From this point on, gradually but irreversibly, feminist discourse was to affect inter-American conferences. When the Sixth International Conference of American States met in Havana in 1928, however, there were no official women delegates. The stage was then set for a historic confrontation, when women from throughout the Americas, through their persistence and presence, forced the inclusion of women and their concerns on the agendas of inter-American meetings, thus modifying the context of inter-American relations.

Creation of CIM, Havana, Cuba, 1928

Women from all the American nations came to Havana in 1928 demanding that they be allowed to participate in the Sixth International Conference of American States and that the members of the conference ratify an Equal Rights Treaty. Drafted by Alice Paul of the National Women's Party in the United States, the treaty would have moved the consideration of women's rights into political debates throughout the hemisphere. In spite of the expectations raised in 1923, not one woman was included in the delegation of any country. Representatives of twenty-one member nations argued that only they were allowed to speak on the floor and that the meeting's agenda had no room for discussion of a treaty on equal rights.

After a month of protests and active campaigning, the women were finally allowed a voice at the conference. For the first time women officially spoke at a plenary and public session of a Pan American conference. To hear the first speeches, "more than a thousand women filled the galleries, staircases, and the conference floor of the University of Havana's great hall." Although the Treaty for Equal Rights was not ratified, the decision was taken to create the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) and to charge it with conducting a study of the legal status of women in the Americas, which would be presented to the next International Conference of American States.

The creation of CIM was the product of emerging women's movements throughout the hemisphere and reflected a growing cooperation between the women of North and South America. Doris Stevens, the first president of CIM, and many other feminist leaders often evoked the notion of Pan Americanism. Addressing the 1928 conference, Stevens stressed "the necessity of action through the Pan American

Conference, not by separate countries, in obtaining equal rights for women in all the American republics."

The World's First Treaty of Equality for Women - Montevideo, Uruguay, 1933

The Seventh International Conference of American States (Montevideo, 1933) marked a major turning point in inter-American relations, ushering in an era of greater mutual respect and cooperation between the nations of the Americas. Appropriately, it was also the occasion of a major victory for the women of the Americas in their struggle for equality.

The first CIM directors were scheduled to present a study on the status of women in the Americas to that Conference. This was the first Conference to see women included in the attending delegations, thus honoring the 1923 promise.

The Conference did not approve the Treaty on the Equality of Rights for Women, although four countries (Cuba, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Uruguay) did sign it. The Conference did adopt the Convention on Nationality of Women¹ which enabled a woman to retain her own nationality in the event of marriage to a man of another nationality. This treaty was the first international instrument ever adopted concerning the rights of women. This watershed convention was a catalyst for recognition by the League of Nations of the existence and validity of the women's rights movement in the region.

The Commission achieved its objective so well that the delegates at the 1933 conference were astounded. The constitutions and the laws of the twenty-one American republics were examined, principally in regard to the inequality of rights. The Commission presented to the Seventh Conference printed monographs analyzing the legal status of women in each of the twenty-one countries. Summaries of the laws pertaining to women and their limited civil and political rights in each one of the American republics, in the official language of their respective countries, were presented in compliance with the resolution of the Fifth International Conference of American States of 1923. Prepared exclusively by women, they were the first studies of this nature in the world. The Inter-American Commission of Women also recommended the adoption of draft treaties on the equality of rights and the nationality of women.



As Doris Stevens, President of CIM, traveled to Montevideo by ship, she gathered supporters and members of the Commission who attended the Seventh International Conference of American States (1933)



CIM celebrates the ratification by the United States Congress of the Convention on Nationality of Women (1934). From left to right: Carmita Landestay (Dominican Republic); Doris Stevens (United States); Senator Key Pittman (U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee); Adela Seminario de Goodwin (Ecuador); María Z. de Arias (Panama); and Fanny Bunand Sevastos (Executive Secretary, CIM)

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CIM Promotes Public Debate on the Status of Women in the Americas

The Commission's research on the legal status of women throughout the Americas drew attention to the inequities suffered by women. During the 1930s and 1940s, the Commission amassed data on the status of women in the Americas, relentlessly published these studies, and saw to their widest distribution. In time, as the Commission expanded its membership, it served as the representative of the various women's organizations in the Americas and supported their ongoing efforts by providing a forum through which women from all across the Americas could communicate with one another in their fight to gain legal equality.

Even during World War II, when travel to Washington involved a dangerous voyage by ship across submarine-infested seas, the Commission continued to meet to promote the ideal of women's equality and the validity of inter-American action to achieve women's rights.

As part of international efforts to advance the course of women, delegates from CIM were instrumental in 1946 in securing the creation at the United Nations of the Commission on the Status of Women, and since its first session in 1947, CIM has unswervingly lent that body its fullest support. As part of the general recognition of the success of the inter-American alliance during the war—in the spirit of the establishment of a stronger framework for inter-American relations and the promotion of representative democracy—the representatives of the American nations at the Ninth International Conference of American States (Bogotá, 1948) adopted the Charter of the Organization of American States. As an essential part of this renewal of the Inter-American System and in recognition of the legitimate demand by women for the equality of rights, the Conference also adopted the Inter-American Conventions on the Granting of Political and Civil Rights to Women, as well as the Organic Statute of CIM and the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man. Once again the Americas were in the vanguard of promoting fundamental rights and liberties. Similar covenants would be adopted by the United Nations in the following decade.

Hemispheric Struggle for Women's Suffrage

Extending the vote to women was the first goal of CIM. When the Commission was first formed in 1928, the United States and Canada were the only countries in the Americas where women had the right to vote.

The reasons for which women were finally granted suffrage differed greatly from country to country, which "underscores the political diversity of the hemisphere." Supporters almost always advocated women's suffrage arguing that women would produce a "more moral society." Women themselves throughout the region understood that access to the vote was a first step toward political enfranchisement and empowerment.

Women's Suffrage in the OAS Member States			
Country	Year	Country	Year
Canada*	1918	Barbados	1950
United States	1920	Antigua and Barbuda	1951
Ecuador	1929	Dominica	1951
Brazil	1932	Grenada	1951
Uruguay	1932	Saint Lucia	1951
Cuba	1934	St. Vincent and the Grenadines	
El Salvador (limited)	1939	Bolivia	1952
Dominican Republic	1942	St. Kitts and Nevis	1952
Jamaica	1944	Mexico	1953
Guatemala (limited)	1945	Guyana	1953
Panama	1945	Honduras	1955
Trinidad and Tobago	1946	Nicaragua	1955
Argentina	1947	Peru	1955
Venezuela	1947	Colombia	1957
Suriname	1948	Paraguay	1961
Chile	1949	Bahamas	1962
Costa Rica	1949	Belize	1964
Haiti	1950		

* Except Quebec Province where women were granted the right to vote in 1952

Early feminists in Latin America recognized that there were advantages in addressing the question of women's rights in an international forum and that the leverage provided through this inter-American body was crucial to the expansion of political and civil rights in their own societies. CIM was instrumental in pushing for the debate of the issue of female suffrage at the national and international levels, and gradually—over the next thirty years—women throughout the Americas won the right to vote and to stand for office.

The struggle to extend effective suffrage to the women in the Americas, which so animated the presence of women at the international conferences of 1923, 1928, and 1933, came to a successful conclusion when in 1961, Paraguay granted women the right to vote and in 1965, Guatemala, which had granted suffrage to a restricted group of women in 1945, extended the right to vote to all women. The circumstances in which women in most of the English-speaking nations of the Caribbean, as well as Belize, Guyana, Suriname, and Canada, acquired the right to vote were different. Universal suffrage and participation and women's active role in political life predated independence in the English-speaking Commonwealth.

CIM Expands with the Inter-American System

The English-speaking countries of the Caribbean followed their independence with an application to join the OAS and CIM. As the OAS increased in numbers after 1967, with the staggered entrance of the island nations of the Caribbean, membership in CIM expanded accordingly. When Guyana and Belize joined the OAS in 1990, all the independent nations of the Americas were also represented in CIM.

From the halls of parliament to rural shops, women in the Caribbean have long been engaged in political debate and public discourse. Correspondingly, Caribbean delegates have played an increasingly important role in CIM. In their discussions of questions of civil rights, health issues, and problems of violence against women, they have brought to the continuing struggle for women's rights their particular perspective and additional support.

Canada, which joined the OAS in 1989, has been active in its support of CIM and its endeavors since it became an observer member of the Organization in 1972.

Women and development

The quest for educational opportunities for women and the application of that education to secure civil and political rights was fundamental for feminists in the Americas and for the founders of CIM. CIM's leaders felt that supporting the "moral, intellectual, and physical" education of women was an essential part of helping women to obtain and exercise the rights they were due. Equal access to education for women at all levels—be it academic, technical, commercial, formal, informal, scientific, political, domestic, or university level—was and continues to be one of the primary objectives of CIM. As stated in 1947, CIM's mandate established that:

The economic and social development of our countries calls for the effective participation of scientifically or technically trained women at all levels of endeavor.

In the 1950s, with the battle for women's suffrage in the Americas nearly won, CIM made economic and social rights the priority. The move represented a more comprehensive understanding of gender inequality, its sources, and of what steps were needed to improve the status of women.

CIM efforts resulted in a wider acceptance of the reality which most Latin American and Caribbean women confronted: the "double working day" and the need for social legislation to guarantee them a fair wage and acceptable working conditions.

This focus had always been part of the program of CIM and of feminists of the region. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, along with support of women's efforts to have the provisions of the 1948 Conventions on the Granting of Political and Civil Rights implemented in the OAS member states, CIM supported technical cooperation projects. CIM programs offered working women organizational and cooperative training. For both urban and rural women, CIM supported income-generating projects which supplied both the means and skills necessary for women to modify their situation. It stressed equal pay for equal work as the basis for any consideration of economic policy that affected women.

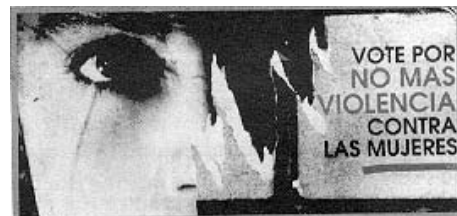
Decade of Women in the Americas - 1976-1985

The Regional Action Plan for the Decade of Women in the Americas (1976-1985) sought full and equal participation of women in the social and economic life of the OAS member states by improving the conditions of women, giving them greater equality, widening women's access to technical education, training, rural credit, and agricultural property, and concentrating on the rural and marginalized urban populations.

Under the Plan, CIM carried out an ambitious program of technical cooperation in thirty OAS member states, executing more than 200 projects on a wide variety of issues including women in the labor force, skills training for rural women, organization of craft cooperatives and the marketing of their products, legal aid for women, the development of small businesses, alternate forms of gainful employment, appropriate agricultural and livestock raising technologies, and leadership training for women in labor unions, rural communities, and political organizations. A number of these programs were directed toward indigenous women.

Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (1994)

Violence against women, in all its forms, is a central concern of contemporary women's movements in the Americas. Recognition of the problem, after its being concealed for so many years, has made the subject a priority of CIM.



In 1990, CIM convoked the Inter-American Consultation on Women and Violence, a special meeting dedicated specifically to addressing violence that affects women, which defined the problem:

In its broadest sense, violence is understood to include physical, sexual, and psychological aggression against women. It respects no strata of society and- while the prevalence of this problem may appear to be either a recent phenomenon, or greater nowadays... this apparent increase in violence against women is a result of it no longer being a hidden or forbidden topic.

Two sessions of the Intergovernmental Meeting of Experts to consider the draft Inter-American Convention on Women and Violence were held in 1993. Their task was accomplished with such thoroughness and dispatch that in April, 1994, a Special Assembly of CIM delegates was able to approve a draft text of the Convention for submission to the OAS General Assembly. Adopted by the Twenty-fourth Regular General Assembly of the OAS, which was held in Belém do Pará, Brazil, in June 1994, the Convention was immediately signed by several OAS member governments. The Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women, "Convention of Belem do Pará" not only recognizes that violence against women constitutes a violation of human rights, but it defines violence in both the public and private spheres. To date, thirty-two member States of the OAS have adopted and/or ratified this Inter-American Convention. Once again, CIM is the international body that has taken the first vital steps, placing before international political bodies a question that is of crucial concern both for women and for the better health of democratic societies.



Chilean Josefina Bilbao, Minister/ Director of the National Service for women (SERNAM), signed the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women in the presence of Secretary General Cesar Gaviria on October 17, 1994

Strategic Plan of Action of the Inter-American Commission of Women

The CIM's Plan of Action: Full and Equal Participation by the Year 2000, approved in 1986, set the guidelines for CIM's activities focusing on the elimination of discrimination, equal economic opportunity, and equal compensation for women in the workplace, as well as equal participation in political life and the regular and systematic inclusion of women in national development plans.

In 1994, the Inter-American Meeting to Evaluate the CIM Plan of Action was convoked to assess the advancement achieved by women in the preceding decade and to propose new strategies for the full and equal participation of women. The resulting Strategic Plan of Action of the Inter-American Commission of Women² adopted by the XXVII Assembly of Delegates in 1994 and presented to the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) has provided the basis for CIM's biennial work plans during the last six years. In this Plan of Action, priority status is assigned to four topics: participation of women in power and decision-making structures, education, elimination of violence and eradication of poverty.

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Plan of Action of the CIM on Women's Participation in Power and Decision Making Structures

CIM's "Plan of Action on Women's Participation in Power and Decision-Making Structures"³ adopted in 1998, emanated from the Inter-American Meeting of Consultation held that same year. The Plan, which contains the strategies proposed by CIM to achieve true parity in the exercise of power, has been presented to the governments of the member States by the Principal Delegates.

CIM and the Summits of the Americas

The Summits of the Americas (Miami, 1994; Santiago de Chile, 1998; Quebec, Canada, 2001) established the strengthening of the role of women in society and the further strengthening of CIM as priority elements of action plans for the future. As part of this initiative, the heads of state and government of thirty-four American nations have encouraged ratification of and compliance with the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women. They have also agreed to strengthen and promote laws, policies and programs that eliminate discrimination against women and improve and broaden their participation in all spheres of political, social, and economic life.

While reordering priorities within the Inter-American System, the heads of OAS member states have reaffirmed their support of the objectives, policies, and programs of CIM. They have recognized that full and equal participation of women is tantamount to the preservation of human rights. By effectively promoting the dignity and rights of women in the Hemisphere, CIM has made a positive contribution to the promotion of representative democracy and human rights in the OAS member states.

At the Second Summit, CIM received a specific mandate to support the implementation and follow-up of the commitments regarding the status of women agreed to at the Summits. In this connection, CIM worked with Nicaragua, Responsible Coordinator for Women, on the report on implementation of the Summit mandates on women and proposals for the Third Summit of the Americas to be held in the year 2001.

First Hemispheric Ministerial Meeting on the Advancement of Women

The first "Meeting of Ministers or of the Highest-Ranking Authorities Responsible for the Advancement of Women in the Member States", was held at OAS headquarters in Washington D.C., on April 27-28, 2000. This ground-breaking Ministerial was convoked by OAS General Assembly and coordinated by CIM in compliance with Resolution "Status of Women in the Americas and Strengthening and Modernization of the Inter-American Commission of Women."⁴

Thirty-three countries attended the meeting. Participants included the U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright; the Foreign Minister of El Salvador, María Eugenia Brizuela de Avila; Honduran Vice President Gladys Caballero de Arévalo; Graciela Fernández Meijide, Argentina's Minister of Social

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<http://portal.oas.org/Portal/Topic/Comisi3nInteramericanadeMujeres/Documentos/ProgramasPlanesdeAcci3n/Plandeacci3ndelaCIM/tabid/749/Default.aspx>

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<http://portal.oas.org/Portal/Topic/Comisi3nInteramericanadeMujeres/AsambleasnbndepndebndepDelegadas/XXIXAsambleaWashingtonDCnov1998/Resoluciones/tabid/713/Default.aspx#209>

Development and the Environment; Venezuelan First Lady Marisabel Rodríguez de Chávez; and CIM Vice President Indranie Chandarpal, Guyana's Minister of Human Services and Social Security.

The results of the Ministerial were highly positive. The Draft "Inter-American Program on the Promotion of Women's Human Rights and Gender Equity and Equality" (IAP)⁵ was approved. A proposal was made to hold ministerial meetings on a regular basis to follow up on the implementation of the Inter-American Program and the Summit Plan of Action. The Program was adopted by XXX OAS General Assembly in June 2000 and endorsed by the Heads of State and Government at the III Summit of the Americas, held in Quebec, Canada, in 2001.