

1

Advocating Suffrage and Sovereignty

Pan-American Feminism and the Rise of the Trujillato, 1922–1942

COMMENTING IN THE INAUGURAL EDITION of her magazine *Fémina* in 1922, San Pedro de Macorís resident and feminist Petronila Angélica Gómez wrote that in such an “hour of adversity” as her nation faced, women not only merited an intellectual position in society but were crucial to creating a viable future for the Dominican state. “This humble magazine,” she noted, would serve as a small tribute to women’s place as actors for “the good of liberty and culture of the country.”¹ From her call to arms in 1922 through the beginning of the Trujillo regime in the 1930s, a feminist movement developed in the Dominican Republic that demanded recognition for the role of women in raising future citizens, debating issues of nationalism and sovereignty, and engaging with issues of transnational import. The hour of adversity of which Gómez spoke was indeed a serious one, as the U.S. Marines had been occupying the country since 1916. While this moment marked a crucial point in the advancement of women’s rights in the Dominican Republic, it was deeply entrenched in events of the previous twenty years and would prove foundational in situating the movement politically and socially as it adapted to the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo.

The years that preceded Gómez’ clarion call and Trujillo’s rise to power in the Dominican Republic brought women into the public sphere in various ways. Between 1900 and 1930, the efforts of liberal-minded education reformers, an eight-year occupation by U.S. Marines, a growing middle class, urbanization, and a nascent women’s movement combined to significantly increase the presence of women and young girls in education, social reform, and even protest movements. A consistent theme in national debates about women’s public presence during these years was how

the modernizing state could make room for the “modern” Dominican woman while maintaining its structure of paternalistic protections. Ultimately the much sought-after connection between acceptable modernity and proper womanhood through the model of the secular schoolteacher would provide the ideal platform for Trujillo’s politicization of women. He would continue to mobilize the group of activists through a project of nation building precisely because they had managed to demonstrate their support for Dominican sovereignty and tradition while upholding select traits of western progress and emphasizing their maternal contributions. As a result, the regime’s construction of a new vision of paternalist politics and masculine identity was at once unique but also built upon the previous years of transformation of women’s roles in the state.

Dominican feminists who operated within the transnational arena during the first twelve years of the Trujillato built their work on several decades of previous women’s activism yet adroitly adapted to new national political discourse and a changing global environment. Within the larger context of pan-American relations, the 1930s and early 1940s demonstrated a shift in interactions between Caribbean nations and the United States.² The formulation of the Good Neighbor policy represented the efforts of U.S. diplomats to offer the carrot rather than the stick in its relations with Latin American states. For their part, many Caribbean nations sought to prove their advancement and progress in the pan-American arena, and no one excelled at this display more than Trujillo.³ Dominican women understood the stakes of this geopolitical posturing from the very inception of the Trujillo regime.⁴ Their efforts were inextricably linked to the regime’s reliance on its international reputation and its practiced façade as a democratic nation. International activism for Dominican women—specifically affiliation with the Inter-American Commission of Women—became an important element in the women’s movement in the early 1930s with the rise of the dictatorship.⁵ Enabled by the desire of the dictator to present the country in a most favorable and democratic light, Dominican women were able to use the international arena to press for changes at the local level, even if that space was still much encumbered by the presence of an overwhelmingly authoritarian and paternalist regime. The *feministas trujilistas* employed the rhetoric of egalitarian rule to assert their place in the theater of democracy that Trujillo had begun to act out locally for the international stage. Enacting

publicly what the international community expected of the modernizing nation-state was key to the longevity of the regime as well as to the advancement of women's political rights. Politically active women, by this point well versed in international politics, assimilated the discourse of democratization into their everyday discussions of feminism and the Dominican state.

Although Trujillo vacillated in the type of assistance he offered women of the "feminist movement," he, in his words, "had never hesitated in backing the just cause of the woman."⁶ Dominican feminists, in turn, learned to carefully deploy their just causes with strategic intent. Feminism, for those women who accepted the regime's political parameters, was not an attempt to reformulate the philosophical underpinnings of a paternalist dictatorship but a struggle for recognized equal rights and participation in political life as it was. The idea that women brought an element of tranquility, peace, and justice to the boisterous world of politics remained a constant touchstone for women's continued participation in the government of Rafael Trujillo but also served as a foil for the regime's more violent underpinnings. Rather than endorsing full equity between the sexes, women reminded the regime of their importance as mothers, educators, and peacemakers.⁷ This tactic, fully supported in the dictator's plan for the nation and his vision of a virile yet fatherly masculinity, enabled their entrée into politics and served as the continued foundation for many women's increasingly public positions in government and politics.⁸ This vision of feminism delineated a specific place for women in the public sphere as moral guardians and social conservators, allowing them to contribute to the progress of the nation under a dictatorship according to their particular skills and capabilities. Locally and internationally, Dominican women found fertile ground in which to cultivate the idea that they provided "el freno suave" (the smooth brake) to a political system that could get unruly and potentially even uncivilized when managed solely by men. In the end, by proving themselves as skilled, networked, and nonthreatening agents in the nation's show of democracy, the women active prior to and during the first decade of the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo made themselves central to a carefully orchestrated national and international reputation, garnered concrete political gains like suffrage, and allowed for their continued engagement with the politics of the Dominican state through an intense period of transition.

Dominican Feminism and Politics before Trujillo

Prior to World War I and the U.S. economic and military occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1916, Dominican national politics consisted of several small elite groups competing over social and economic supremacy. The assassination of dictator Ulises Heureaux in 1899 and the chaotic years that followed made room for a group of liberal political thinkers who sought to direct the nation's progress.⁹ Although forced to cede control of the nation's customs revenues to the United States in 1907, the liberal constituency was able to implement an agenda of modernization through the rule of Ramón Cáceres and other caudillo rulers.¹⁰ One of the keys to the project of progress lay in liberal, positivist education, which encouraged secular environments and modern teaching techniques. Much like the concept of citizenship at the time, the elite's plans for education were highly exclusionary. While generally praised and given significant capital by the late-nineteenth century residency of Puerto Rican positivist intellectual Eugenio María de Hostos, the project still only managed to incorporate a small percentage of mostly upper-class women into the nation's embryonic school system.¹¹ Nor was the project an endeavor that received full support. Teresa Martínez-Vergne demonstrates that for the first twenty years of the century, elite society faced a paradox: how to incorporate such elite women into the larger concept of nation while limiting their avenues of participation.¹² As she notes, "Bourgeois women were entrusted with the task of raising the new generation of citizens" and, it was often argued, should be educated but not so as to encourage the abandonment of their expected duties of home and family.¹³ Women were seen as lacking the full capabilities to participate in the intellectual world, particularly when it meant combining these new tasks with the sacred duties of the home. The delicate balance for women between the home and the life of the mind was not a concern unique to the Dominican Republic. As several scholars have indicated, Latin American liberal elites were keenly aware of what they viewed as women's innate connection to teaching—as mothers—and the need to selectively educate and employ them as "agents of secularization and modernization."¹⁴ A number of Dominican women, having been trained as *normalistas* (primary school teachers) at the end of the nineteenth century and claiming the role of cultural transmitters, worked for expanded education for women and for greater opportunities to contribute to civil society.

One woman played a central role in the advocacy of female education in the Dominican Republic precisely because she carefully fused liberal education with a dedication to motherhood and vigilant attention to the nation and its progress. Despite her death several years before the turn of the century, Salomé Ureña de Henríquez, poet, essayist, mother, and patriot, wrote extensively about the need for public education for young women.¹⁵ The symbol of women's education for this period, she started the Instituto de Señoritas (Young Ladies Institute) in 1881, a secular school for young women that ran nearly continuously for the next forty years and significantly expanded educational opportunities for young women of the middle and upper classes.¹⁶ She and her husband maintained a close relationship with Hostos, who worked to establish normal schools across the region and was a particular advocate of education for young women, believing that ultimately all learning begins with mothers.¹⁷ Building on the momentum created by Hostos and other Dominican liberal reformers, Ureña successfully pushed for greater educational opportunities for the young women of the *gente de primera* (elite).¹⁸ Though she ceded leadership of the school to two younger women in 1896 and died shortly thereafter, the group of elite women who continued the liberal tradition of female education in the Dominican Republic created a dense network of *normalistas* who would advocate for an ever-expanding role of women in the progress of the nation in the coming decades. Historian Neici Zeller contends that it was the creation of a network or "sisterhood" of teachers that facilitated women's entrance into the political world and would create a platform of activism for decades to come, including during the difficult occupation years.¹⁹

Despite a liberal constitution established in 1908 under President Ramón Cáceres, the country's inability to pay on its foreign debt forced it into the position of a semiprotectorate of the United States, which then effectively controlled the Dominican economy and sent Marine forces in 1916.²⁰ U.S. administration entailed strict fiscal limitations and attempted to reformulate Dominican ideas of civic culture and modernization against which many Dominicans chafed. They continued to direct their own ideas of positivist change through agricultural, educational, fiscal, and infrastructural ventures. The modernization project Cáceres and his followers endorsed, while limited by U.S. oversight, sought to reconstitute citizenship and, according to Martínez-Vergne, chart a "discourse of progress."²¹ While many of the elite's liberal ideals found echoes in the policies of the U.S. occupa-

tion, the occupying forces invoked widespread indignation over the total denial of sovereignty.²² Lauren Derby and others have argued that the United States ostensibly sought to create a “civic culture of democracy” and used schools, roads, banks, and U.S.-styled military government to achieve those ends.²³ Through economic and military measures, the occupation weakened the previously dominant Cibao-region leadership, solidified the political elite in Santo Domingo, and affirmed the importance of sugar as the nation’s primary export crop.²⁴ In addition to strict economic and political controls instituted by the U.S. government, occupiers sought to teach western-style citizenship to their Dominican charges. Turits points out that many of these changes, particularly the encouragement of sugar production, engendered a highly nationalist response among the liberal elite.²⁵ Reacting to the modernizing and often materialist tendencies of the occupation, many of the Dominican lettered class—men and women—sought both an assertion of national sovereignty and a return to more traditional gender divisions of labor that extended to a critique of women’s expanding social roles beyond the home. Concurrently, many middle-class and elite women continued to demonstrate that the modern woman was a benefit rather than a detriment to the nation’s quest for sovereignty.

The women who entered into the public sphere during the occupation and the several years that followed provided the foundation for the feminist movement that solidified in the two major urban centers of Santo Domingo and San Pedro de Macorís as well as the reconceptualization of the so-called modern woman. In San Pedro de Macorís, Petronila Angélica Gómez began calling for a greater feminist consciousness with her publication *Fémína*.²⁶ Five years later a group of women in Santo Domingo inaugurated a cultural and social club for women called Club Nosotras.²⁷ Branches of the group sprung up quickly in other towns and cities. *Fémína* and Club Nosotras focused on what their founders saw as modest social and cultural goals such as education, art and music awareness, and female intellectual advancement. Gómez and the women of Club Nosotras drew their ideas for women’s roles in society from literature emanating from Europe, predominantly Spain, and the Americas, yet they were also fiercely committed to building a sovereign Dominican democracy. Suffrage was initially not the primary target of their efforts, although it certainly was part of the larger discussions of female intellectual capability and civic duty. They defined themselves as feminists, working as women for the betterment of

Dominican society. Gómez asserted in an article defending feminism that “the transfer of feminine activities to the social world does not mean that a woman has to abandon the home, but rather, expand [her skills] to the shop, factory, warehouse, school, municipality, and national government.”²⁸

This early feminist collective, despite being the object of attack by elite men who feared, among other things, the adverse effects of U.S.-style modernization, did not fall in line with the occupation, as one of the main objectives of the loosely structured movement was the return of national sovereignty. Records of female opposition, especially evident in a weeklong 1920 protest called the *Semana Patriótica*, demonstrate elite women’s own fear of the continued effects of foreign domination and their desire to use the opportunity to reconfigure the image of the modern political woman.²⁹ The *Junta Patriótica de Damas* was allied with the anti-occupation *Unión Nacionalista Dominicana*; junta members’ concern was to “protect the Dominican people from the danger of becoming prostituted [to the United States].” They assisted with fund-raising and appeared publicly throughout the week demanding the return of Dominican national sovereignty.³⁰ Despite an evident elite male desire to use the errant female as a scapegoat for the occupation, women participated in the resistance and solidified the reality that they were moving into the public sphere through work, society, and politics.³¹

Women within the feminist core sought to expand upon and highlight the ways their endeavors outside the traditional domestic sphere brought honor and advancement to the nation.³² From within the pages of *Fémima*, Gómez and others praised the efforts of the newly graduated and freshly licensed in the professions of pharmacy, law, teaching, and the arts.³³ In 1927 *Fémima* offered space—and its editor’s opinion—on a transnational debate over women and the working world. Reprinting the article “Feminismo y trabajo” (Feminism and work) from Spanish feminist Carmen de Burgos that originally appeared in New York’s *La Nueva Democracia*, Gómez invited renewed debate over issues of women outside the domestic sphere.³⁴ Burgos contended that maintaining the argument that women should not work outside the home perpetuated the practice of female enslavement. To be a feminist was not to oppose the ideas of the home or maternity but simply to support the assertion of rights for women.³⁵ Writer Delia Weber responded that the women within Burgos’ *Liga de Mujeres Ibéricas e Hispano Americanas* (League of Iberian and Hispanic American Women)