

Madam President: “None of us could have imagined a woman president,” said Rafael Bustillos, a 42-year old *huaso* (Chilean cowboy). In 2006, Dr. Michelle Bachelet was elected Chile’s first female president. As Minister of Health in 2000, Dr. Bachelet, a surgeon, pediatrician, and public health administrator, eliminated the long waiting lines of the sick at government clinics. In 2003, as Chile’s first female Minister of Defense and army commander in chief, General Juan Emilio Cheyre pledged to her the military would “never again” coup or interfere in politics. Bachelet’s presidential campaign promised dignified pension reform by 2010 to retirees receiving a fraction of what they had been told when the privatization of pension funds that replaced a state social security system failed, a program George W. Bush praised. Upon taking office, Bachelet immediately appointed 10 women and 10 men to her cabinet. Many Chileans speak of how good they feel seeing women at top government levels. Many others feel unsettled. In a culture where bias against women runs rampant, where divorce just became legal in 2004, this divorced, working mother works as a president none had imagined.

Suhbaataryn Yanjmaa of Mongolia was the first woman in the world to serve as an “acting” president during the transitional period of September 1953 to July 1954.

With no head of state designate in the People's Republic of China, Song Qingling, widow of Sun Yat-sen, founder of the Chinese Republic, and sister-in-law of Chiang Kai-shek, served with Zhu De as vice-president and shared presidential duties (1968-1972). In 1980, she was elected "Honorary President" of the People's Republic of China.

Isabel Perón was the first woman to serve as president of any country. Though not an elected president, as vice-president, she replaced her husband, President Juan Perón, upon his death in July 1974. She served until March 1976 as president of Argentina, a country where women first were allowed to vote in 1951.

The first woman to win a democratic presidential election of any country was Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, elected president of Iceland in 1980. Three subsequent election victories continued her presidency until 1996.

Globally, approximately forty-six women have served as president or head of state in countries large and small. Bachelet joins ten other female heads of state holding office: Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf - Liberia; Angela Merkel - Germany; Maria do Carmo Silveira - Sao Tome; Lusía Diogo - Mozambique; Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo - Philippines; Tarja Kaarina Halonen - Finland; Helen Clark - New Zealand; Vaira Vike-Freiberga - Latvia; Mary McAleese - Ireland; and, Khaleda Zia - Bangladesh.

In 2007, Segolene Royal will run as France’s first female presidential candidate from a major political party. In 2006, the French cabinet approved a proposal to encourage political parties to promote more women. If it is passed, districts with more than 3,500 people will be obliged to ensure gender parity of appointments to top positions as of 2008. Fifty-six political parties in twenty-four other countries already employ a gender quota system. Some are: Belgium, Brazil, South Africa, Nepal, Denmark, Norway, India, and Sweden,

In 2004, newly elected prime minister of Spain, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, fulfilled his campaign promise and appointed eight female ministers to achieve a gender equitable cabinet. Marta Oritz, a women’s rights activist since Franco died in 1975, couldn’t imagine this political parity would happen.

Of the first 12,000 members to serve in the U.S. Congress, only 215 are women; of 110 Supreme Court justices, only two. In the 110th Congress, only sixteen U.S. senators will be women; and, of 435 representatives in the House, only seventy-one. Nine women will serve as governors; none as president.

The Chilean cowboy's reaction of a woman president none could have imagined is still to be imagined in this American country of cowboys and women.

Sources: http://womenshistory.about.com/od/rulers20th/a/women_heads.htm; "Chile's Driving Force," Jonathan Kandell, Smithsonian Magazine, November, 2006.