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Portugal's woman premier in a male world

By Jimmy Burns in Lisbon

"I'll believe it when I see it," said one of Portugal's leading politicians on being told that 49-year-old spinster Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo had been appointed the country's new Prime Minister.

The chauvinist reaction was not entirely unpredictable in a country where politics has traditionally been a male reserve. Only 7 per cent of the Portuguese Parliament comprises women. No presidential candidate has ever been a woman, and usually military at that, while all political parties there exclude women from their leadership. Sra. Pintasilgo has no official party links and it is doubtful whether, given the present state of Portuguese politics, whether she would have made the grade other than as anything but an independent.

I have recently obtained an unpublished paper which Sra. Pintasilgo wrote in 1974 when she was Minister for Social Affairs and already deeply involved in stimulating the Commission on the Status of Women as an effective government department for the promotion of women's rights.

On the role of her sex in society she said: "Within the revolution women can form a 'new left' that will point to a different attitude towards reality. They can thus become dynamic elements in the

reconstruction of the country not only by just following the road that men have begun but rather by breaking entirely new ground."

Her thoughts go a long way towards explaining some of the disquiet which the right-wing parties have felt with her appointment.

For Sra. Pintasilgo's vision was directly linked to Portugal's special social and political circumstances and particularly the transformations following the military overthrow of the old regime on April 25, 1974.

As a result of the coup, Portuguese women threw off their status as second class citizens and became conscious of their power and the opportunities opening to them.

Five years after the coup, with the Portuguese political system moulded to western style democracy, the revolution looks like having fallen by the wayside. In retrospect though Sra. Pintasilgo's words are still prophetic since a lot of ground has been gained in the meantime.

The constitution throughout the Salazarist Regime based itself on the primitive principle that all animals are equal and defined women accordingly.

He stated that every Portuguese was equal before the law "except for women," the differences resulting either from their nature or from family interests.

The basic principle of female subservience was confirmed in legislation which varied from allowing husbands to open their wives' mail to clemency for men who murdered their wives found in or suspected of adultery.

The 1966 Civil Code stated that "the husband is the head of the family and as such he is to decide and direct on all matters concerning marital

life." Female access to the labour market was restricted and women were legally prevented from becoming judges or diplomats.

Portugal's present Constitution, approved by a freely elected constituent assembly in 1975, lays down that no person can be discriminated against on account of sex and that husbands and wives share equal rights and responsibility towards their children and towards each other.

The new Civil Code, which came into force in April last year, confirms women's equal rights within the family. The wife can now choose when and where to work, be admitted into the higher echelons of the Civil Service, and can leave the country of her own volition.

There have also been radical changes in legislation governing divorce and illegitimacy, no easy task in a country where the Catholic Church still wields considerable political as well as spiritual muscle.

The new Civil Code has annulled the concordat with the Holy See, which had prevented those who had married with the Catholic Church from getting a divorce.

Other legislation in the pipeline is an Equal Opportunity Act. A member of one of Portugal's leading women organisations told me: "The Constitution is one thing, the other is the reality of Portugal's economy. Portuguese women are still the first to be dismissed and the last to be employed."

It is doubtful, given Portugal's self-imposed austerity whether this pattern will change dramatically in the short term. But with the appointment of Sra. Pintasilgo Portuguese women have at least some ground for hope.