



## The Woman Who Runs Portugal Is a Feminist!

Maria de Lourdes Pintassilgo, a prime minister of all the people

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY  
MARIA ISABEL BARRENO

Since April 25, 1974, when the more than 40-year-long dictatorship of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar and Marcello Caetano was overthrown, 10 governments have been formed and unformed in Portugal. The turmoil has been such that people have even moved in and out of political parties. In fact, many of the deputies currently in the Legislative Assembly no longer belong to the party from which they were elected, and form a large group of independents.

In response to the unrest, President Antonio Ramalho Eanes concluded this summer that since the political parties had proved incapable of forming a stable government and the assembly was no longer representative of the choice of the electors, he would call for new elections and appoint a new prime minister to govern until they could be held.

His choice, appointed in July, was Maria de Lourdes Pintassilgo—49 years old; a chemical engineer; a feminist; a radical Catholic who believes in reproductive freedom; single and living in a commune of Catholic women; a member of no political party, who served in both pre- and post-revolutionary governments.

Prime Minister Pintassilgo came into office amid much criticism—some of it due to the ongoing interparty squabbles and some of it pure antiwoman prejudice. Nevertheless, she proceeded



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"We have a very complex and disorganized bureaucracy. I want to destroy that."

were there as usual, but I could say things I would never have gotten away with if it had not been for my political functions.")

After the 1974 revolution, Pintassilgo was named Secretary of State for Social Security and then Minister for Social Affairs. Before her appointment as prime minister she was the Portuguese ambassador to UNESCO in Paris.

In order to learn about this remarkable woman personally, we asked Maria Isabel Barreno (one of the "Three Marias" who authored the landmark feminist book *New Portuguese Letters*) to interview her in Portugal. —The Editors

I first met Maria de Lourdes Pintassilgo when I—along with the other two Marias—was on trial for supposedly "corrupting public morals" with our book. This was not only before the 1974 revolution, but before it became fashionable in Portugal to sympathize with the Three Marias. She came to us with a big smile, with all the

warmth of her person. She told us she had read the book, and how stimulating and marvelous she found it. I listened to her talking about personal relationships and society and I found *her* stimulating and marvelous.

My first impression was a lasting one. When I went to meet with her at the official prime minister's house, it was August and unbearably hot. I passed the big gate, once as difficult to cross as the doors of heaven. This time I just had to give my name to a doorman. He phoned inside the building, and I went in. Two policemen, strolling in the garden, waved at me. They were the only show of security.

Inside, I was asked to wait; the schedule had started its daily expansion. Someone went in with a sandwich. Then a secretary led me into the prime minister's office. She smiled, and we started talking. There was almost no need to ask anything. My questions were just a way of ordering our conversation.

BARRENO: *What are your positions on women's issues?*

PINTASSILGO: Sexism is a violation of human rights, but it happens in specific ways, on specific grounds. At the same time, women's fight cannot be seen as an exclusive or isolated fight. It is like racism—a social plague.

We have to achieve women's autonomy: both bodily and spiritually. This includes changes in women's personal lives, and goes right up to changing the means of production. We live in a society with artificial needs and artificial goods. We have a thousand gadgets to try to solve the problems that come out of all these artificial needs and goods. Many people don't notice it, but domestic work takes much more time today than in the past.

The world is divided into two hemispheres, north and south; the north is trying to impose industrialism—belief in the universality of science and technology—on the south, while the south is trying to



to choose a cabinet and a program for her government and set out to keep a low profile until the elections, scheduled for December 2.

Maria de Lourdes Pintassilgo was born in 1930, in a small Portuguese town. She got a degree in 1953 in chemical engineering from the University of Lisbon. (She explains that she went into engineering to prove she could do it; several of her friends had tried and failed.) While in school, she became president of the national Catholic women's student group, and later she headed the International Movement of Catholic Students. One of her first jobs was as a researcher on nuclear energy for the government, after which she worked in research and planning for CUF, the country's largest industrial complex, where she learned the universal truth that women professionals had to work twice as hard as their male counterparts. In 1960, she left industry to work full-time for the Graal, an international movement of Catholic women, with activities ranging from rural development to intellectual discussion of social and spiritual issues. She notes that she was heavily influenced by the writings of the French philosopher Simone Weil.

In 1969 she went back to work for a quasi-legislative branch of the government. Caetano was in power at the time, and there were hopes of a progressive liberalization of the political situation. She was also president of a government commission on social policy concerning women and a member of the Portuguese delegation to the United Nations. (After her appointment as prime minister, she was criticized for working for Caetano, but she explains that it was "a good way to learn how things functioned. I was free to criticize and vote against the government. It was a good cover. I was working with rural women then, speaking in small communities. I knew PIDE agents [the political police]



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create something new. It's against the antihumanism of this industrialism that women are fighting. BARRENO: *Do you think women understand this antihumanism better than men because of their*

mystified professional work. There was a time when people thought professional jobs were a means of liberation for women. But, except for a minority who can choose either to work or not, the

or three children; and if she has more, you get lost counting.

BARRENO: *Where do you start changing—with the laws or with personal behavior?*

PINTASSILGO: You have to change everywhere—individually and legally. They are distinct but complementary aspects. It's true that the law consolidates the practice; but the law can also be a pioneer. In Portugal now, I think the laws should assume this pioneering role.

I believe also that women are in a position to begin to understand their weaknesses as strengths. This is very important. Take the way women express themselves, for example. First there is the silence; women don't talk in public when men are present, they find it difficult. But silence is also resistance; we can capitalize on it to make the final explosion. Second, there is the small talk, the chatting; women talk about

**M**OST DECEMBER HOLIDAYS ARE PART OF AMERICA'S EUROPEAN PAST, BUT WHAT ABOUT OUR AFRICAN HERITAGE? Celebrate *Kwanza*, the Swahili name for the week-long African festival praising the rich harvest of the earth and of the mind. On December 26, arrange fruits of the harvest including ears of corn (*muhindi*, a symbol of children and continuity) on a straw mat (*mkeka*) around a seven-branch candelabra (*kinara*). Light a candle each night, eat natural foods, pass around a unity cup (*kikombe*), celebrate creativity with original songs, dances, or poems—and good talk. (See opposite box.)

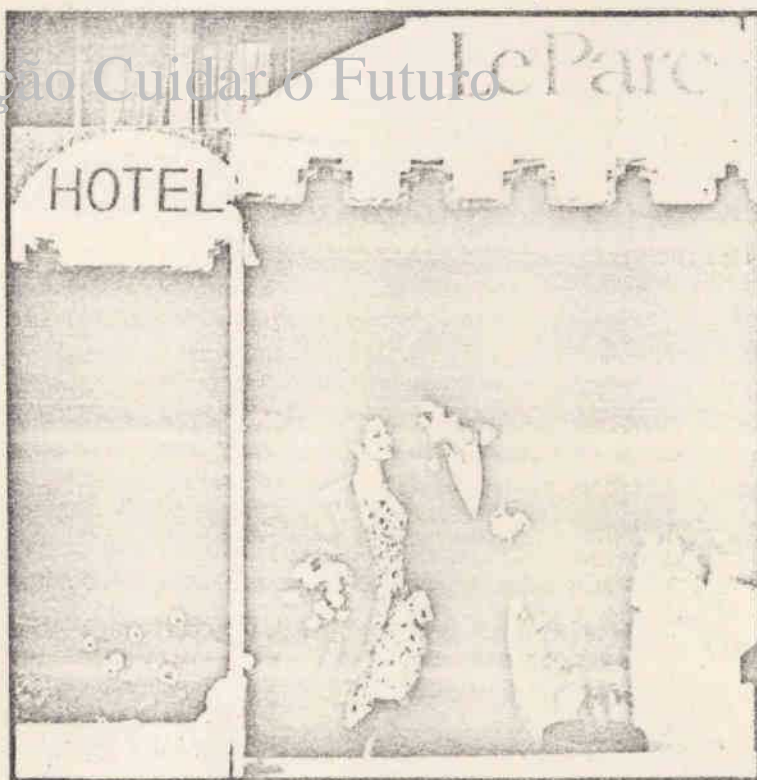
*specific social position?*

PINTASSILGO: Of course. Their daily work deals with everything; it's very diversified. Women can see the results of social mechanisms on people. And they have also de-

immense majority of women must work as an economic necessity and this is in addition to the domestic work they have to do at home. A woman works seventy to ninety hours a week if she has two

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things before they become events. This is also conspiracy. And finally, there is what you can call the "hysterical cry," the expression with the body. When women say no, it is with their whole body.

**BARRENO:** *Given the current political situation and the short time you have, what do you believe you can do while in office?*

**PINTASSILGO:** I know I can't do much. But even small changes are important. And there are some things I've started already. The demystification of power, for example, the breaking down of the usual political discourse and behavior. As a woman, I have nothing to lose. Also we have in Portugal a very complex and disorganized bureaucracy, much worse now than just after the revolution. I want to destroy that. And I've started. I don't accept any report that tells me the facts and leaves the decision to me. I send it back again. It's a small thing, making people assume responsibility, but it's a lubrication of the system.

I also want to decrease our dependency on imported food. We import forty percent of the things

women in her cabinet, but now I understand. Those women who are potential ministers belong to two major groups. The "olympic experts" tell you they don't want to be mixed up in politics. I understand them; they are afraid of a public image since they don't have enough self-confidence yet. I asked four women to be ministers in my cabinet; all four refused. One said she wanted to think about it and then when the attacks against me began in the press, she gave me a categorical refusal. I guess I'm not afraid of my public image any more, because I have no more illusions about myself.

The second group of potential women ministers are those who tell you they're not capable. There is no man who, when asked to be a minister, would give this kind of answer. So I go on with this struggle to put women in important positions. I've told everyone: "Under equal conditions, if you have to choose between a man and a woman, choose the woman." It's reverse sexism, but we need that to establish the balance.

The most pleasant thing about

**C**ELEBRATE THE WEEK OF KWANZA by exploring one of its seven Swahili principles each night at the dinner table: *umoja* is unity; *kujidagulia* is self-determination; *ujima* is collective work; *ujamaa* is cooperative economies, families, and communities; *nia* is purpose; *kuumba* is creativity; and *imani* is faith.

we eat. This is really sowing without reaping. Agriculture has to be diversified and organized in a more cooperative way. I think political weight has to be taken off technical questions and this is something women usually do, even if men don't accept it.

And I also want to do something like the American feminists did—to draw some guidelines that will function as a brake to sexism—though this is still a vague project in my mind.

When I was appointed, I wanted to have more women in the government. Margaret Thatcher was accused of not having enough

this job has been the letters from women. A fifty-year-old woman wrote, "I felt tied down all my life, but now, seeing you so free, I realize I can still change my life." I want to keep in direct contact with women. Not only through organizations, but through one-to-one communication. But I still don't know how to do it.

**BARRENO:** *What do you think of the other women prime ministers: Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher?*

**PINTASSILGO:** I think determination is their common trait. Not all the men who are prime ministers or presidents have this characteristic.

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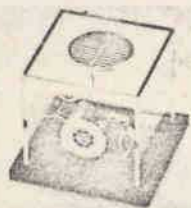
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istic. These women have very clear profiles. They know what they want. And they have a feminine quality, which is not Golda Meir's bonhomie, or Margaret Thatcher's cooking for her friends. It's something else that's difficult to define.

It's a good thing to have women in high posts, but we still don't have freedom of style. For that you need enough critical mass, enough women in power. Only then will the temptation to imitate male attitudes disappear. But there is already a qualitative change. I have been in many international meetings with women who have held powerful posts, and I've realized that a kind of deep and underground understanding exists among all of us.

Women also have more perspective on what they do. I once overheard two women ministers from different countries talking: "What have you been doing?" asked one. "A lot of nonsense and a few nice things," said the other. Can you imagine a man admitting that his important job has a lot of nonsense in it? Men in power hide behind

screens, and they can't see people's real needs. We need to take those screens away.

BARRENO: *What about your future? What will you be doing in a year or two?*

PINTASSILGO: I have no idea. Everything interests me. I don't intend to have a "career." I have been working on very different levels, from the grass-roots level to the macro-society level. I could go back to any kind of work. What I like is innovation and experience.

Our time is over. Nervous aides have been knocking at the door. We stand up, still talking. "They don't like me being single," she smiles, "but when they ask me why I stay single, I just answer, 'Why not?'"

I leave. She goes downstairs for an interview with Brazilian television. It's now after two o'clock. The sandwich, eaten in two minutes, was her lunch.

*Maria Isabel Barreno lives in Lisbon. Her most recent book, "The Death of the Mother," has just been published in Portugal.*

## Women and the Law in Portugal

The postrevolutionary Constitution gives equal rights to every citizen in Portugal and forbids any discrimination based on race, sex, or religion. The laws on the family give equal rights to women, not only in areas concerning the children, but even in details like allowing either the name of the man or the woman to be used. A couple living together for more than two years are considered married for legal purposes and have all the rights of a married couple. In addition, contraception is a constitutional right of every citizen.

The only (albeit major) flaw in Portuguese law is abortion, which is still forbidden, although it is usually allowed in practice (bad and/or expensive practice). Two recent trials are the surface symptoms of the big antiabortion campaign led by the Catholic Church with the help of the right wing and the center. In one case, Maria Antónia Palla, a

journalist, was tried this year for "outrage to public morals" and "incitement to crime" for a television show on abortion that she produced in 1976. She was acquitted, but 22-year-old Conceição Massano dos Santos was still facing trial at this writing for the "crime" of having an abortion in 1976. Both women received international feminist support and aid from the Portuguese National Abortion and Contraception campaign.

Despite their official, legal equality, Portuguese women are still seriously discriminated against in practice: their salaries are much lower, their family rights are limited, their media image is traditional, and so on. Small groups of women, along with the government's Commission on Women's Condition, continuously expose and denounce this discrimination, but the majority of women don't yet know and understand their rights. —M.I.B.

