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Portuguese women making great gains

By John Darnton
New York Times

LISBON — When feminist groups in Portugal look back over the past 10 years, the victories they count up would make women in the United States gape in astonishment.

There was 1976, when a husband's legal right to open his wife's mail was abolished.

Then there was the 1978 revision of the civil code, which allowed a married woman to have her own bank account, vote in all elections and transport her children across the border without the written permission of her husband.

So, considering the status of women in Portugal only a decade ago, after nearly a half century of right-wing dictatorship that was ideologically hostile to women's rights in any form, it is not surprising that politics here is still largely a man's game.

On the other hand, although men hold all the important posts in government, political parties and the unions, there are many here who think that the most interesting and innovative politicians around are women.

"I think women, when they get to a certain level of education, act less conventionally than men," said Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, a special adviser to President Antonio Ramalho Eanes.

"They're more daring. Underlying their actions is the conviction there is nothing less to lose. They're not working for their own careers but for causes."

Miss Pintasilgo, a 54-year-old chemical-industrial engineer, is the only woman who has held high office in Portugal, but not as a result of election.

The president appointed her prime minister from August, 1979 until January, 1980, until elections could be held.

Her name is the first to pop out when Portuguese television crews do people-in-the-street interviews on "women and politics." She sometimes comes out on top in polls on potential candidates to succeed the president in elections next year.

She also manages to convey the impression of being outspoken in a way that preserves her credentials with a wide range of groups, including the liberal Roman Catholic women's organization, Graal, whose Portuguese chapter she heads.

Thus, she remained aloof from a recent bitter debate in Parliament that led to liberalizing the country's anti-abortion law.

"I was not involved publicly. The question of abortion is not that simple," Miss Pintasilgo said.

"At least it was an attempt to erase from the penal code a real injustice — women were going to jail for an action that was not their sole responsibility. But it's a sensitive subject."



Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo
Women more daring

Such temperate caution is not shared by other women in politics, who tend to fight for causes with a barricades fervor that is at times unsettling to the male establishment.

One is Zita Seabra, a 34-year-old firebrand who took to politics at the age of 15 as a clandestine organizer for the illegal Union of Communist Students and is now a member of the Communist Party's Central Committee.

She is one of 20 women in the 250-member Parliament, where the fight for abortion is inextricably linked to her name.

Miss Seabra believes that the army-sponsored revolution that began in April, 1974 wrought a change in the "mentality" of women and conferred equal rights on paper, including an equal rights clause in the 1976 Constitution that returned democracy to Portugal. But she feels that their daily lives are much unchanged.

"In most of Portugal, especially the rural areas, women are still inferior," she said.

"In the cities the situation improved after the revolution, but now with rising unemployment there's a reversal. And when a woman works eight hours in a factory, she still does all the household chores."

Discrimination holds true in politics, too, she asserts. Women are apt to be placed lower down on the lists of candidates on the party ticket, or pawned off to run in difficult constituencies.

"In my first campaign, I went to a bottling factory and the workers sneered. 'Doesn't the CP have anyone else to send us?' they said. Now I make it a point to go there every time there's a campaign and they accept me. They say, 'That woman speaks very well. She speaks like a man.'"