

USSOUTHCOM and Breaking Gender Barriers in Latin American Militaries

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14. ABSTRACT Since the Department of Defense released their Women, Peace, and Security action plan in 2020, there have been a growing number of initiatives to break gender barriers for military members. South America is of particular interest in this respect because of the proximity to the United States and the growing amount of cultural and political instability in the region. These conditions pose unique barriers to women in Latin American militaries for career and leadership progression. This paper discusses specific areas that United States Southern Command should focus on in order to overcome these gender barriers that are preventing militaries from obtaining full operational capability.					
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In June of 2020, the United States published the Department of Defense's strategic framework for their Women, Peace, and Security action plan. This was twenty years after the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 acknowledging the importance of including women in regional security efforts and policy development. This resolution specifically called for "increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional, and international institutions for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict."¹ This was the first time that the world formally acknowledged the role that gender inclusion plays in promoting security and stability and, in the last twenty years, the importance of including women at all decision-making levels has continued to increase. In addition to equal representation, bringing a gender perspective to male-dominated career fields like security and government has allowed for a number of benefits. For example, in areas of Iraq and Afghanistan where all-male security teams had previously been unsuccessful due to gender and religious barriers, female engagement teams were increasingly effective at connecting with the local populations to gather information and aid security in the region.² In politics and peacekeeping efforts, women have brought an increased level of understanding and patience, allowing for successful negotiations that encompass a broader population in a region. Even trans-national criminal organizations like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) recognized

1. Cecilia Mazzotta and Marcela Donadio, "Women in the Armed and Police Forces-Resolution 1325 and Peace Operations in Latin America," (Security and Defense Network of Latin America, 2010), also available online at <https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library2/Policy-and-Research-Papers/Women-in-the-armed-and-police-forces-Resolution-1325-and-peace-operations-in-Latin-America>

2. Chris Telley, "Women Peace and Security: A competitive Edge in Latin America's Human Domain," *SmallWarsJournal.com*, 18 June 2019, accessed 15 September 2021. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrn/art/women-peace-and-security-competitive-edge-latin-americas-human-domain>

how a gender perspective can be a force multiplier, having recruited and employed women in their field operations since 1978.³ Like any organization that works with people, the FARC recognized that women have unique perspectives and can broaden capabilities of an organization and it makes sense that women must be part of the security solution to combating these capabilities. As seen in all these cases, the stability and security capabilities of a region depend on including a balanced gender perspective and inciting this change needs to be prioritized at all levels within the government.

The Women, Peace, and Security movement has been acknowledged widely around the world since the adoption of Resolution 1325, and 83 countries had adopted national action plans as of January 2020.⁴ It has taken two decades for the importance of this initiative to become a priority for the United States Military, and the published guidance places a heavy burden on Combatant Commanders to determine how best to execute these concepts within their geographic area of responsibility. Each region continues to pose unique challenges for women due to political, religious and social barriers, and it is in the interest of the United States to continue promoting gender inclusion that enhances security. South America is of particular interest in this respect because of the proximity to the United States and the growing amount of cultural and political instability in the region. These conditions pose unique barriers to women in Latin American militaries for career and leadership progression. In order to overcome these

3. Chris Telley, "Women Peace and Security: A competitive Edge in Latin America's Human Domain," *SmallWarsJournal.com*, 18 June 2019, accessed 15 September 2021. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/women-peace-and-security-competitive-edge-latin-americas-human-domain>

4. Joan Johnson-Freese and Andrea Goldstein, "Women, Peace, and Security at Twenty," *Strategy Bridge*, 28 April 2020, accessed 17 September 2021. <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2020/4/28/women-peace-and-security-at-twenty><https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2020/4/28/women-peace-and-security-at-twenty>

gender barriers that are preventing militaries from obtaining full operational capability, United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) should focus efforts on increasing gender education outreach within military partnerships, working to expand operational training capacity for women in Latin American militaries, and promoting strong female role models through the use of the media and public outreach across the region.

Barriers for Women

It can be easy to assume that Latin America is leading the way in breaking barriers for women when considering that South America boasts more female governmental leaders than any other continent.⁵ In the last fifteen years, presidential firsts like Michelle Bachelet of Chile and Cristina Fernandez of Argentina have seemingly paved the way for women in the highest levels of government and politics. Furthermore, sixteen countries across Latin America have adopted political quotas that open essential opportunities for women to run for local and national offices.⁶ Having women in these top political leadership positions has helped develop programs designed to foster gender equality in communities. For example, Michelle Bachelet focused extensively on gender equality during her first presidential term and later during her time as the director for UN Women. Her willingness to drive these initiatives forward brought attention from other Latin American nations and served to encourage other women to pursue political positions.

5. Silvia Viñas, "Latin Women Take the Helm," *World Policy Journal* 1 March 2014; 31 (1): 39–47, also available online at <https://doi-org.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0740277514529715>

6. Silvia Viñas, "Latin Women Take the Helm," *World Policy Journal* 1 March 2014; 31 (1): 39–47, also available online at <https://doi-org.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0740277514529715>

Compared with the progress made in the political sector, the inclusion of women in Latin American militaries has progressed more slowly due to a number of barriers preventing them from pursuing leadership positions. One main barrier specific to women in the military has been governmental instability over the last twenty years. While the propensity for Latin American political climates to shift from conservative to liberal has undoubtedly helped women gain a foothold into politics within communities seeking drastic change, the “pink tide” phenomenon has had the opposite effect for women in the military. With constantly changing governmental administrations, policy for advancing women’s rights and equal opportunities in the military remains either stalled or non-existent in some countries. Without women in top military leadership positions, the drive to build these policies has not gained much traction.

Another barrier that prevents women from obtaining leadership positions on both the civil and military side is the importance of a traditional family structure in Latin American countries. When asked about the struggles she faced becoming the first mayor of Santiago, Chile, Carolina Tohá claimed, “men are not expected to care for children as women are in Chilean and other Latin American societies.”⁷ Close family ties and tradition are important to the Latin American culture and, traditionally, women are at the heart of the family at home. To this point, most militaries in Latin American countries do not allow pregnancy during military training periods such as academy time or formal training courses.⁸ This gives the impression of having to choose

7. Silvia Viñas, "Latin Women Take the Helm," *World Policy Journal* 1 March 2014; 31 (1): 39–47, also available online at <https://doi-org.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0740277514529715>

8. Cecilia Mazzotta and Marcela Donadio, "Women in the Armed and Police Forces-Resolution 1325 and Peace Operations in Latin America," (Security and Defense Network of Latin America, 2010), also available online at <https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library2/Policy-and-Research-Papers/Women-in-the-armed-and-police-forces-Resolution-1325-and-peace-operations-in-Latin-America>

between having a military career or having a family. Because of this, many qualified women turn down the precious few opportunities for military leadership because there are no policies or precedents in place to accommodate this shift in home life.

The last main barrier keeping women in Latin American militaries from progressing to higher leadership positions is the lack of training and career opportunities for women in the higher echelons of the military. In their 2010 study of women in the armed and police forces of Latin America, Cecilia Mazzotta and Marcela Donadio found that many Latin American countries not only limit the number of women who can attend military training schools, but they also still restrict access for women to certain specializations that allow further promotion. When women were first allowed in Latin American militaries, they traditionally could only serve in an administrative or logistic field.⁹ Today, it still remains that the highest leadership positions in some Latin American militaries are reserved for career fields in which women are currently not allowed to serve, making it impossible for women to progress to the highest ranks and advocate for increased leadership positions, despite being equally qualified as their male counterparts.

The Role of United States Southern Command

In his 2021 Theater Posture Statement to Congress, Admiral Craig S. Faller, Commander of USSOUTHCOM, highlighted the importance of empowering women by stating, "For a nation's defense and security forces to be sustainable, legitimate, and respected, the meaningful

9. Cecilia Mazzotta and Marcela Donadio, "Women in the Armed and Police Forces-Resolution 1325 and Peace Operations in Latin America," (Security and Defense Network of Latin America, 2010), also available online at <https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library2/Policy-and-Research-Papers/Women-in-the-armed-and-police-forces-Resolution-1325-and-peace-operations-in-Latin-America>

inclusion of women is imperative.”¹⁰ With this in mind, United States Southern Command created a Women, Peace, and Security team (WPS), guided by the Department of Defense’s WPS strategic framework, to address gender inclusion and help refocus the gender perspective expansion efforts in the region. Based on the barriers previously outlined, SOUTHCOM and their WPS team should focus their efforts in the following areas: increasing gender education outreach, working to improve training capacity for women in Latin American militaries, and promoting strong female role models through media and regional outreach. With limited operational authority in Latin America, the military and diplomatic partnerships that SOUTHCOM has built with the countries in the region will be absolutely critical to expanding the WPS policy and outreach initiatives to further opportunities for military women.

Gender Education and Outreach

The importance of gender perspective was first identified in response to United Nations peacekeeping efforts where it was necessary to understand how women, men, and children were all being affected differently by conflict, and this understanding led the efforts to map out vulnerable areas that needed additional security.¹¹ The United Nations realized that women and children in conflict areas were the most vulnerable and discovered that the best way to connect and gain information was to actually have women conduct the security operations. In a similar

10. Admiral Craig S. Faller, *Statement to 117th Congress: USSOUTHCOM Theater Posture Statement* (Washington, DC: Senate Armed Services Committee, 16 Mar 2021)

11. Cecilia Tornaghi, "Why it's Essential to Have More Women in Latin America's Militaries," *AmericasQuarterly.org*, 15 December 2019, accessed 15 September 2021. <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/why-its-essential-to-have-more-women-in-latin-americas-militaries/>

fashion, SOUTHCOM can help expand this concept by promoting the use of gender advisors. As described by SOUTHCOM senior leaders, this position “ensures we accurately represent the roles of women in our plans, operations, and exercises, as well as encouraging our partners to implement changes that enhance the meaningful participation of women in decision-making processes.”¹² These advisors, usually uniformed military members, would help inform commanders of barriers, concerns, and policies that prevent women from serving in their full capacity. These advisors could help advocate for programs and policies that would break that stereotype that women have to choose between family and military service. These include childcare programs, maternity and paternity leave policies, and career intermission programs. Already, a few countries like Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica have successfully incorporated uniformed gender advisors in their staffs to ensure there is female participation in policy development and decision-making.¹³ SOUTHCOM should continue to help other partner nations build and identify these roles for their own militaries in order to promote gender inclusion, equality, and overall unit effectiveness.

In addition to gender advisors, another way to help partner nations incorporate gender perspectives into their militaries is through gender awareness training. In 2008, the United Nations published *Gender Training for Security Sector Personnel* to offer ways of implementing

12. Ambassador Jean Manes and Admiral Craig S. Faller, "The Rising Role of Women in the Hemisphere's Militaries," *AmericasQuarterly.org*, 21 October 2020, accessed 15 September 2021. <https://americasquarterly.org/article/the-rising-role-of-women-in-the-hemispheres-militaries/>

13. Paul J. Angelo, "More Than a few Good Women: Improving Hemispheric Security by Advancing Gender Inclusivity in Military and Police," *CFR.org*, 22 March 2021, accessed 15 September 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/more-few-good-women-improving-hemispheric-security-advancing-gender-inclusivity-military-and>

these concepts, but training needs to be frequently updated and specific to the culture and region that it is meant to serve. SOUTHCOM has the experience and resources to help adapt and incorporate this training into the operations of military partners in the region. This should not only involve awareness training, but also seek to modify current training and exercise scenarios to include more gender perspectives.¹⁴ Incorporating gender perspectives more commonly in exercise scenarios would help build more realistic situations to help military members and leaders understand these barriers. These changes would come at a relatively low cost and, given passionate and dedicated training teams, could have a lasting impact for gender equality in the military culture.

Expanding Operational Capacity

Because the limited capacity for training and leadership positions represents a significant barrier for women in Latin American militaries, policies in these organizations must change to provide equal opportunities for women. The Strategic Framework published by the Department of Defense for the Women, Peace, and Security program directs Combatant Commands to “encourage partner nation governments to adopt policies, plans, and capacity to improve the meaningful participation of women in processes connected to security and decision-making institutions.”¹⁵ SOUTHCOM should leverage their partnerships with other militaries to identify

14. Chris Telley, "Women Peace and Security: A competitive Edge in Latin America's Human Domain," *SmallWarsJournal.com*, 18 June 2019, accessed 15 September 2021. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/women-peace-and-security-competitive-edge-latin-americas-human-domain>

15. U.S. Department of Defense, *Women, Pease, and Security Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan*, June 2020 (Washington, DC), accessed at [https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jun/11/2002314428/-1/-](https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jun/11/2002314428/-1/)

gender policy gaps and shortfalls in an attempt to streamline policy changes. These include policy that limits opportunities at military academies, technical training, and professional military education. SOUTHCOM has a vested interest in advocating for these changes on the basis of gender equality and how expanding the roles available to women has proven to be a force multiplier.¹⁶ It was only recently in 2016 that the United States passed legislation to remove legal barriers for women to serve in all career fields in the military, and SOUTHCOM can use this precedent as a guide to aid policy discussions in Latin America. However, this advocacy should happen at the highest levels of military leadership to give credibility and urgency for support of gender equality.

In the short term, SOUTHCOM leadership should advocate for increased training slots in the United States military to open opportunities for women from Latin American countries. This could include additional exchange positions for women at service academies in the United States, operational programs such as pilot and navigator training, and professional military education programs. In some countries, this is already happening; in Uruguay, women make up 11% of military personnel, but they filled 13% of the International Military Education and Training slots between 2015 and 2019.¹⁷ The exchange programs are beneficial to overall diplomatic relations,

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16. Chris Telley, "Women Peace and Security: A competitive Edge in Latin America's Human Domain," *SmallWarsJournal.com*, 18 June 2019, accessed 15 September 2021. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/women-peace-and-security-competitive-edge-latin-americas-human-domain>

17. Ambassador Jean Manes, "Bringing More Women to the Fight for Peace through Security Cooperation," US Department of State DipNote, 10 June 2021, accessed at <https://www.state.gov/dipnote-u-s-department-of-state-official-blog/bringing-more-women-to-the-fight-for-peace-through-security-cooperation/>

giving an opportunity for outreach to different countries and offering opportunities to share cross-cultural experiences for both United States and foreign military members. SOUTHCOM can continue to prioritize these exchange slots for women in order to ensure access to professional development opportunities that normally might not be available to them in their own militaries at this time.

Promoting Female Role Models

The last area where SOUTHCOM can focus their Women, Peace, and Security initiatives is by continuing to promote female military role models through media and outreach. Latin American politics has been at the forefront of this movement, leveraging the success of female politicians to encourage more women to participate in their governmental processes. However, when asked about leadership barriers in the military, female active-duty members from Colombia described how the lack of female mentors in higher-level leadership positions remains one of the most difficult things about wanting to pursue further leadership roles.¹⁸ Because women were only permitted to join the military in the last few decades, most have not had time to reach higher levels of leadership. Without a female role model or mentor, many women struggle to navigate the leadership channels or are never afforded the opportunities to lead. The following chart shows the minimum number of years required for female members of different militaries to reach the highest rank currently obtainable to women.

18. Angelica Bergoo, e-mail message to author, 6 September 2021

Prospective promotion of women officers within the command corps (Army)

Country	Highest rank currently held (2009)	Highest reachable rank according to seniority criteria	Years to elapse before promotion to the highest possible hierarchy	Estimated year
Argentina	First Lieutenant	Division General	21	2030
Bolivia	Colonel	Division General	4	2013
Brazil	N/V	N/V	N/V	N/V
Chile	Lieutenant	Brigade General	26	2035
Colombia	Second Lieutenant	Major General	36	2044
Ecuador	Captain	Army General	35	2044
El Salvador	Second Lieutenant	Colonel	27	2027
Guatemala	Colonel	Colonel	N/V	N/V
Honduras	Major	Colonel	11	2020
Paraguay	Second Lieutenant	Brigade General	28	2034
Peru	Lieutenant	Division General	29	2038
Uruguay	First Lieutenant	Colonel	17	2024

Table 1 – Prospective promotion of women officers within the command corps (Army)¹⁹

These timelines prove that waiting for women in these countries to advocate for female perspectives and policy from the top down is not an option if we are to leverage the potential of women in the military today. Therefore, SOUTHCOM has to promote and highlight women in leadership positions, no matter where they are serving. To this point, Army Lieutenant General Laura Richardson recently took command of USSOUTHCOM, making her only the second female geographic combatant commander and the Army's first combat arms four-star general.²⁰

19. Cecilia Mazzotta and Marcela Donadio, "Women in the Armed and Police Forces-Resolution 1325 and Peace Operations in Latin America," (Security and Defense Network of Latin America, 2010), also available online at <https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library2/Policy-and-Research-Papers/Women-in-the-armed-and-police-forces-Resolution-1325-and-peace-operations-in-Latin-America>

20. Paul J. Angelo, "More Than a few Good Women: Improving Hemispheric Security by Advancing Gender Inclusivity in Military and Police, *CFR.org*, 22 March 2021, accessed 15

This notable choice sends the message across Latin America that women are fully capable of commanding at the highest levels and enforces the claim that women are a force multiplier in security environments. Furthermore, General Richardson's presence serves as a role model for women across Latin America and provides a platform from which gender issues and policies can continue to be discussed and prioritized.

Ambassador Jean Manes, the former civilian deputy to the Commander of USSOUTHCOM, is another notable woman who is leading the way in the Command's Women, Peace, and Security program. One example of a current initiative in this program is Breaking Barriers, a podcast where Ambassador Manes interviews various female leaders from across Latin America, exploring their military experience, barriers they have faced, and how they have handled different situations. This is an incredible initiative that is not only available to anyone with internet access but also has the potential to continue influencing military members across Latin America for many years to come. Other similar ways that SOUTHCOM could leverage the media to highlight female leaders would be through video interviews with female leaders, news stories, documentaries, and social media forums that focus on mentorship and shared practices for women in the military. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have proven to be a powerful tool in connecting people to discuss current issues, seek advice, and share different experiences; SOUTHCOM would be missing an opportunity for outreach if they chose not to leverage this audience.

Conclusion

September 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/more-few-good-women-improving-hemispheric-security-advancing-gender-inclusivity-military-and>

From politics to the military, there is no denying the importance and criticality of including women at all levels of leadership and decision making. Inclusion of women has proven to be invaluable in peacekeeping efforts, where previous all-male teams had failed to connect with populations.²¹ However, for women in the military, the last two decades have demonstrated how policies deeply rooted in culture can be slow to change. Twenty years after the United Nations proved that the inclusion of women in military and security operations is a critical component to international security, only six other nations in Latin America have adopted WPS action plans.²² The barriers that military women face today, to include cultural stigmas with respect to traditional family structure, the lack of advocacy for gender inclusion policies, the limited training opportunities for women, and the lack of strong female role models in the military, will not disappear without someone identifying them to leaders with the power to create change. While women in the political sphere were able to start breaking these barriers from the top down, women facing barriers in the military need assistance to pave the way.

Because of the focus on building partnerships throughout the Latin American region, USSOUTHCOM is in a unique position to help break these barriers for women. They can do this by focusing their WPS team efforts on the following: promoting gender outreach, developing regional gender training, identifying gaps in policy relating to opportunities for women, advocating for increased exchange opportunities, and using the media to highlight women role

21. Cecilia Tornaghi, "Why it's Essential to Have More Women in Latin America's Militaries," *AmericasQuarterly.org*, 15 December 2019, accessed 15 September 2021. <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/why-its-essential-to-have-more-women-in-latin-americas-militaries/>

22. Ambassador Jean Manes and Admiral Craig S. Faller, "The Rising Role of Women in the Hemisphere's Militaries," *AmericasQuarterly.org*, 21 October 2020, accessed 15 September 2021. <https://americasquarterly.org/article/the-rising-role-of-women-in-the-hemispheres-militaries/>

models across Latin America. Ambassador Manes best described the vision of what the Women, Peace, and Security program is working toward in the following statement, “When we have the second, third, tenth woman in a key position, when it stops being remarkable, and when it is finally viewed as enhancing the combat effectiveness of our forces, then we will have achieved gender equality.”²³ This is happening already in some areas across Latin American already, but SOUTHCOM has the resources, capabilities, and credibility to be the conduit for change where assistance is needed.

23. Ambassador Jean Manes and Admiral Craig S. Faller, "The Rising Role of Women in the Hemisphere's Militaries," *AmericasQuarterly.org*, 21 October 2020, accessed 15 September 2021. <https://americasquarterly.org/article/the-rising-role-of-women-in-the-hemispheres-militaries/>