

My research led me to visit prison

Irma Beusink

Lova member and external PhD Candidate at Wageningen University and Research Center

Currently I am writing the first chapter of my PhD dissertation that deals with the dynamics of the ‘Bolivian Change Process’ during the last two decades. While doing this I still have to process the research findings of my last field work period in Bolivia during the European winter of 2017-2018. Below I present some reflections on gender and power in my fieldwork. Doing fieldwork in a plural and polarised political field and researching the working of gendered and ethnic political power and influence is a complex matter; not only because of the many ways power is exercised and power can be defined but also because of the tensions between engaging and maintaining trust and analysing with a relative impartial perspective within such a politically sensitive field.

I did not want to investigate too much on presidential power and masculinities and not on political scandals, because these issues reproduce the existing power patterns and deal with dirty part of politics. In my research I investigate the transformations of the Bolivian Change Process from a gender, class and ethnicity perspective. I try to connect gender, agency, power, change processes and their entanglement with different development paradigms and resource struggles. During my fieldwork I interviewed indigenous women and men within and outside the Movimiento Hacia el Socialismo

(Mas)¹ who I met ten years ago in my previous research. In this way I can reflect on and evaluate long term changes. The interviews led me to visit jail in La Paz because I realised that skipping case studies of imprisoned women amongst indigenous women in politics would not be in accordance with scientific rules as it would distort the results. One moment during this visit made me remember the importance of studying gender and power. In this article I will share my reflections on the interconnection between these themes visible in some events regarding the perpetuation of masculine presidential power and gender complicities and complexities.

During my field work in 2017-2018 I could witness the increasing concentration of public power in the function and person of President Evo Morales related to the re-election proceedings and debate. The Mas imposed juridical arbitrary and almost absurd proceedings to enable a third re-election and fourth term period for their President, despite constitutional limitations to presidential re-election and despite a 52% referendum vote against the modification of this constitutional article. Through visual observations and recordings during my fieldwork I could obtain more insights into some of the power dynamics. The pictures I made, together with certain reports and inside information, helped me to understand the ongoing dynamics that I could not have accessed otherwise.

The financial benefits of hydrocarbon and mining are invested in megalomaniac, sometimes useless, infrastructural works that privilege men as main employees. Both the Mas in the national government and the opposition leading departmental governments are complicit of these practices. The newly build presidential palace is however the most

emblematic of phallocratic masculine state power. This building is symbolic for the efforts of the Mas to perpetuate in power and to maintain the centrality of masculine presidential power.

The woman I visited in jail was a previous Minister of Agriculture, Nemecia Achacolla. Her background is comparable to that of President Evo Morales, but she was incarcerated because of accusations of 'lack of duties' in the country's biggest corruption scandal of the so called 'indigenous fund'. Although it is difficult to trace from her narrative what really happened, my conclusion is that she has been complicit in certain affairs, but that she has been used as a scapegoat. The Minister of Finance who had the final responsibility, never was accused of corruption or 'lack of duties'. This demonstrates the working of gender and ethnic power in the (lack of) knowledge and experience to the disadvantage of an indigenous woman in comparison to a white academic man whose expertise was important for the government.

During my jail visit I also saw Gabriela Zapata, who was the main figure in a political love affair scandal that discredited both her and the President. The two women in jail do not talk to each other because they are political opponents, but they have something in common. I reconstructed the Zapata case by information from two books, from the internet research and from some commentaries of several informants. The Mas claims that the Zapata case was staged by the opposition to discredit the President, which is not unlikely as it popped up two weeks before the referendum. The electorate witnessed a scandal which centred on the question of existence of a supposed child of Zapata from her love affair with

President Evo Morales. The political drama full of contradictory declarations and lies from both sides kept the electorate under the spell of the Zapata case. The opposition tried to create the image of President Morales as a liar, and emphasised corruption and bad fatherhood.

Feminist activists emphasised the difference in power relations. Zapata would have been a minor of age during the affair and as a consequence the sexual relation with the President is legally considered an act of sexual abuse. Galindo (2016) points at the produced gender inequalities: the image of the President is polished by the political machine, while Zapata as a woman is smeared through machismo and ends up in prison. One male informant told me that Morales had lost the trust of the electorate because the public saw that the President was dominated by a woman who tried to blackmail him. This explanation is more in line with studies of Canessa (2011, 2012) on indigenous and mestizo masculinities. My preliminary conclusion therefore is that the Zapata case confirms that historically grown images of state power and mestizo masculinities are deeply entrenched and that they have become reproduced rather than dismantled with the 'indigenous government of social movements' of the Mas.

For the Mas, the Zapata case is the reason to not fully accept the result of the referendum on the modification of the constitutional article which contrasts with previously organised apparently democratic referenda to make the citizens decide about the mandate of politicians. The Mas continues to support the candidature of the President and the opposition campaigns for respect to the results of the referendum.

Most indigenous women in politics related to the Mas and even the most self-declared rebellious women continue to 'defend the Process' and fully support the re-election of the President. Political priorities of some of the indigenous women's organisations become subordinate to the presidential re-election which, however, does not mean that they do not exercise agency. Their political choices are based on strategic ethnic and class alliances. Autonomous women, more critical members of the Mas and women in the opposition share the notion of 'democratisation of power'. This has been on the women's agenda since the beginning of this so called 'democratic' and 'cultural' revolution and has been anchored in the new constitution in various articles. The next year of elections and the dispute about the re-elections at least promise to be interesting and decisive.

Notes

¹ Mas; Movimiento hacia el Socialismo: movement towards socialism, the party of social movements in governmental power since 2006.

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