



**Rosalía Arteaga**, former president of Ecuador and feminist activist

I am 60 years old. I was born in Cuenca (Ecuador) and I live in Quito. I was my country's minister of education, and then president. I am divorced, and I have three living children and seven grandchildren. Politics? I am a centrist. I am a Catholic, and a proponent of inter-religious dialogue. Women still need to demonstrate, more than men, what they can do

## “Education is the only way to equality between the sexes”



You were president of Ecuador. Yes, the first woman to be president of my country. But only for six days, between 6 and 12 February 1997.

What happened? Congress alleged that President Abdalá Bucaram was “mentally incapacitated”, and he was dismissed from office and deposed.

What had Bucaram done? It was strange. He called himself “the madman who loves his country” and he showed himself to be unreliable, easily irritated and rude... Congress became fed up with him. I had run in the presidential elections as part of a coalition

on his side. Why did you associate yourself with such a character? We had signed an agreement giving me responsibility for social and cultural policy. It had been my dream! We then won the election, and I became vice president, sometimes standing in for him as president. A few days later, the speaker of Congress cleverly had himself named caretaker president. Bucaram meanwhile complained of the unconstitutional nature of his fall from power, of course... And so it was, on 6 February 1997, that

Ecuador had three presidents in a single night.

How was it resolved?

Male chauvinism won out in the country. I was pressurised, but refused to accept any deal with the powerful and greedy. The generals betrayed me, acting against their own officers... I feared a civil war. So I resigned. Bucaram fled, because he had court appearances pending for

corruption.

What a travelling companion... I soon became aware of his nepotism with his family members, of the way he let me down, and of how he left me trapped in a corner. There was unrest. That was 20 years ago, and now he is returning to Ecuador...

How did you get into politics? I was the family's first-born, which supposes certain responsibilities and a leadership role... Perhaps it was my avid reading as a child that made me daydream with a sense of justice. Then I fell in love with my outstanding professor of literature, and ended up marrying him.

What does this have to do with events? We married when he was mayor of Cuenca, the city where we lived. I was studying law, philosophy and journalism... and started to perform the role of First Lady. And there were children. Five

pregnancies in all... And I also wrote. Did you like your role as First Lady? I decided not to be just an adornment, and took advantage of the role to help the city's disadvantaged and defend women's rights... This has been the struggle through which I have lived in my house... What was life like then? My grandfather didn't understand that I wanted to study. My father used to say: “Let her be. She likes to read”. So I studied. Years later, I heard my father encouraging my little sister: “So what are you going to study?” I cried tears of emotion at that.

**Jerónimo**  
One of her children, a baby with Down's syndrome, died before his first birthday. She went on to write Jerónimo, it tells the story of this heart-breaking experience. Her original vocation was to be a writer, but this was replaced by political commitments that would lead to her to becoming the president of her country... “You lost the presidency”, people would say to her later. “It was harder to lose a child.” she would reply. She refers to her late child in the manner of a grand master. With doctorates in law, political science and anthropology, she now lives “an itinerant life”, imparting her wisdom in discussion forums all over the world, including the first Encounter between Science and Business, organised on the island of Fuerteventura by the Royal European Academy of Doctors.

Whis mindset had changed. Mindsets evolve on the basis of consistent behaviour. I encouraged all the politicians' wives to lend a hand and participate. And I took some difficult decisions... For example? Before becoming vice president, I was the first woman minister in the history of Ecuador... of culture, education and sport: I pushed through a revolution in education...

How did these improve? I established four pillars: literacy, numeracy, human values and the development of thought. I am very proud in this respect. Then I went and resigned! How strange. Why was that?

There were going to pass a retrograde law concerning the catechism in public schools. I was in favour of secular schooling and the separation of church and state. So I left. They told me it would be my death politically. But it wasn't. I returned as a member of the Bucaram team. I had been faithful to my principles. And now?

I've dedicated myself to journalism, with weekly television interviews involving writers, artists, scientists, educators, entrepreneurs and... not a single politician! You have you won a place for women in Ibero-American politics?

There has been progress, but inequality persists. Women don't have it easy. They still need to demonstrate, more than men, what they can do.

So what's the solution? If we are going to modify habits, the only way is a more egalitarian approach to the education of both sexes.

And if a girl wants to be a housewife? That is a decision that she should take freely, with equal conditions in force. There are men who take this decision. Like my son-in-law, who supports my daughter's career and looks after their three children.

Which has been the best of your interviews?

A young man with Down's syndrome. “I'm not going to talk about my private life; only my work”, he told me firmly, and I apologised.

Many people from Ecuador are currently working in Spain. What would you say to them?

It is a pity that their own country could not maintain them, and that they have had to leave. This is painful. But the good thing is that you are workers and bearers of friendship. You are appreciated as ambassadors of Ecuador. I hope that you will be able to return when you have a desire to do so.

What is the best thing about Ecuador? Its natural wealth, the Amazon rainforest and its biodiversity, the Andes, our roses, cocoa, bananas, mangos, sugar cane, and our coasts, with their shrimp and tuna, plus oil, gold and copper, and the Galapagos Islands and their wildlife! And above all, our very good people.

There are in fact three tribes in the Ecuador rainforest whom we are still to make contact with.

VÍCTOR-M. AMELA