Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo

When Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo died in 2004, it was nothing less than an era coming to an end in Portugal. Hers was the century of women being excluded from positions of power – and she went out and conquered them for generations to come being the first female president in Portugal and only the second woman to become head of state in Europe.

Working as a humanrights defender from early on, Ms Pintasilgo soon ventured in the fight for women's rights when women were still deprived from political participation. Born into a family of wool fabricants and in a time when her place should have been that of the wife and mother only, young Maria Lourdes started to make her first political steps as an activist and mind behind women's rights movements.

She enrolled into university for chemistry and natural science conquering her first of many realms as a woman. Her political engagement soon took her to oppose the prevalent faschism in her country. Eventhough she felt deep attachment to her catholic faith joining "Graal" the association of Catholic women and eventually becoming their president in 1952, she always remained open to joining forces with others, especially in the fight against exclusion, separation and nationalism.

In this role, she also gained a reputation as reconciler of religious groups and – much more important in a country with a catholic majority – between believers and non-believers.

Despite making her way through the ranks as an engineer at the national Nuclear Energy Board, Pintasilgo never stopped being involved in political movements. In 1965, she was appointed by the Vatican to become their representative and contact person in the areas of women's rights and social development. After she served at a national working group of the Spanish government on these issues, she became Minister of Social Affairs in 1975 and in 1979 was called to become Prime Minister after running for office as an independent candidate – and winning.

During her term, she continued to focus on social welfare, universal access for women and equal participation. She became well-known for her will and determination to reform and modernize the country's education and social welfare system as well as improving Portuguese general health care. After her time as Prime Minister she was elected into the European Parliament. In 2004. aged 74 years, Pintasilgo died of a heart attack in her home in Lisbon. In her name, the "Caring for the Future" Foundation operates to provide access to contemporary history notably contemporary documents of the life of Ms Pintasilgo.

But it takes a generation to change a country. In the case of Portugal, it took more than that. To date Maria Lourdes Pintasilgo is the Portuguese only female head of state.

Metadata

GENDER AREAS: "Women Inspiring Europe" resource pool, gender stereotypes, power and decision-making, society