

Esmerelda Arboleda, a Leader for Women's Rights in Colombia

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CIA

map of Colombia

Esmerelda Arboleda was a Colombian woman who championed women's rights. She was born on January 7, 1921, in Colombia and had six sisters. Even though it was uncommon for women to attend university, Esmerelda's mother urged her to get a good education. Esmerelda Arboleda knew that she wanted to get a law degree even though few women were lawyers at the time. And she achieved her goal, becoming the first female lawyer to graduate from the University of Cauca in Colombia. In regards to getting her law degree, she said, "I didn't want to remain ignorant. I knew there was a lot to do, I had to open a field for women" Arboleda was just beginning to expand opportunities for other Colombian women.



This is the Capitol building in Colombia's capital, Bogotá.

In the mid-20th century, Colombian women could not vote. Arboleda wanted to change that. After getting her degree and working as a lawyer, she began fighting for the women's right to vote. She toured Colombia to gain supporters and signatures for this movement. During this time, the president of Colombia, General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, appointed her to Colombia's legislative assembly. She and Josefina Valencia Muñoz became the first women to serve in this assembly. The government even had to build a new bathroom in the Capitol building because there was no bathroom for women!

Finally, in 1954, the Assembly approved universal suffrage due to the efforts of these women. All Colombian women could now actively participate in politics. About six years later, Arboleda ran for Senate. She won and became the first female elected to the Colombian Senate. She would continue to use her political skill to lobby for women's rights.

Her political journey was not an easy one. She was threatened and spied on throughout her time in office. She did not let those people intimidate her out of achieving her goals. By persistently fighting for gender equality, Esmerelda Arboleda paved the way for more women to enter the world of politics and law.