
Special issue: *Chile's Popular Unity at 50*

Commentary

Women in Chile 50 years after the UP: 'The revolution will be feminist or nothing at all ...'

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How to Cite: Alfaro Monsalve, K. 'Women in Chile 50 years after the UP: "The revolution will be feminist or nothing at all ..."'. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 11.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ra.2021.v6.1.011>.

Submission date: 16 September 2020; Acceptance date: 17 March 2021; Publication date: 1 June 2021

Peer review:

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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Abstract

This article addresses the position of women during the Popular Unity years from the perspective of Chile's Mayo Feminista ('Feminist May') and the *estallido social*. The article maintains that there was a process of building a political consciousness of women during the Popular Unity that was expressed in various forms of political and social militancy. This was deployed in the participation of women on various fronts of the Chilean path to socialism, in which work, care, health, education and other aspects were seen as fundamental to the project. In this text we address the articulation of women and politics in the processes of construction of social change in the recent history of Chile.

Keywords: feminism; women; Popular Unity; Chile; *estallido social*; Mayo Feminista

In April 2018, an accusation of sexual harassment and abuse made against a male academic triggered feminist and student mobilisations in the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities at the Austral University of Chile. Thanks to a process of social network sharing and communication, 26 university takeovers were staged in its wake and the shutdowns were reproduced in the majority of the country's educational institutions. In May, the movement grew beyond university campuses and began to occupy Chile's *grandes alamedas* (great boulevards) as thousands of people took to the streets.

A significant number of the students who led the feminist takeovers in 2018 had previous experience as part of the secondary school students' movement of 2006. They were involved in processes of political socialisation during the fight against Chile's free-market education system, one of the main legacies of dictatorship which had privatised education and ensured that the only way for many families to access higher education was by amassing large amounts of personal debt. Moreover, higher female enrolment put increasing pressure on institutions' leadership models and their androcentric conception of knowledge/power.

The demonstrations gave rise to the term 'Third Wave of Feminist' as part of a wider conceptualisation that had associated the first 'wave' with the suffragette movement and the second wave with the protests against the military dictatorship. Such an approach assumes that the origins of feminism in the country are fundamentally linked to securing the right to vote. However, this obscures a long historical process of working women's struggle which had its seminal moment at the start of the twentieth century.

With this in mind it is important to reflect on the political participation of women in times of social transformation. Specifically, we are interested in accounting for this historical power at a moment in which Chilean society was closest to carrying out a revolution;¹ that is, during the Popular Unity (UP) government when women, especially those from the working classes, could understand and be aware of their rights. This is a key discussion because, by exploring the past, we can broaden the currently limited understanding of our rights as well as transform both analytical frameworks and democratic political practices. Thus, this article considers key questions such as: what activities were undertaken by women in the UP? What role did feminism play in the movement? What is the relationship between women and politics? These, as well as other issues, will be approached from the perspective of 'Recent History' (*Historia Reciente*).

The 2018 feminist revolution, or 'Mayo Feminista', as it was called, brought with it the return of certain types of political language that had not been used since the end of the military dictatorship. Indeed, the introduction of a model of adherence to institutional politics and concern for the 'greater good' of democracy eradicated terms such as 'the people' (*el pueblo*), 'class' and 'feminism', none of which fit in with the idea of social consensus proposed in the transitional pact developed by sectors of the political class in conjunction with the dictator Augusto Pinochet. Consequently, feminism and women's demands were, in the best-case scenario, superseded by the use of gender principally in the academic sphere, while in official spaces the gendered term 'woman' was imposed. This became institutionalised following the creation of the National Women's Service (Servicio Nacional de la Mujer, SERNAM) in 1991. This organisation has performed a political function for the subsidiary state, centred around a focus on family and conservative female domesticity. It is a space essentially controlled by representatives of the Christian Democrats who have become the custodians of moral values in post-dictatorship Chile. The directors of the National Women's Service were the Christian Democrat activists Soledad Alvear (1991–4) and Laura Albornoz (2006–9) together with the pro-Christian Democrat independent Josefina Bilbao.

It is for this reason that the eruption of the Third Wave of Feminist developed amid the crisis of the transitional pact and its neoliberal democratic model.² The feminist movement is increasingly international in scope as a result of global denouncement of the gender-based violence and sexual abuse present in various areas of culture and society. However, in Chile's case, this movement has taken on a mass political character and radicalism that marks it as one of the most important movements in the country's recent history.

The feminist movement, whose social base comprised mainly of secondary school and university students, was articulated under the slogans: 'Abort the patriarchy and its market economy', 'The revolution will be feminist or nothing at all', 'Non-sexist education against patriarchal violence', 'All women against

all violence' and 'Not one woman less', among others. The student movement, which sprang up with growing force in the country starting in 2011, initiated a process of democratic opening up which prompted direct criticism of neoliberalism and the free-market education model.

The women's movement and politics during the Popular Unity years

Analyses of feminist and women's movements have tended to use the terms and categories inherent in these movements' first-world dynamics. Thus, the concepts of 'waves' or 'feminist silences', even if they help explain the public outreach and broad appeal of the movements, also obscure the particularities of women's experiences. The pedagogical nature of these terms, which try to account for the historic continuity of the feminist movement, has shut down a broader debate about feminism being a *permanent revolution*, with 'multiple and simultaneous battle fronts'.³ The exclusion of women as citizens did not distinguish between women of different classes,⁴ and so, after their victory, 'the activists had no common purpose';⁵ or rather, that purpose was not shared by the majority of the women in the context of the Cold War period when anti-Communist and anti-feminist sentiment were spreading.

Following women's suffrage in 1949, women's politics in Chile were placed into a social hierarchy as women became involved in the various global projects of the 1960s and 1970s. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, and in the context of growing anti-Communist and anti-feminist sentiment, the right-wing developed the idea of 'women's fear of the unknown'. The Popular Unity coalition became the target of this fear,⁶ and Chilean rightists began to emphasise morality and the defence of family values. This provided the opportunity for an articulation of an anti-Allende 'feminine power' movement, which banged pots and pans in protest against shortages created by the opposition. However, women's political experiences during the Popular Unity government were not limited to the rightist movement and political activism. They also included a wide section of women who, via their social and territorial activism, played a fundamental role in the construction of popular power (*poder popular*). We therefore need to challenge what the historian Igor Goicovic has labelled 'a pedagogy of subordination',⁷ which closes the book on the UP's history so as 'not to repeat it' on the grounds that it was the result of a 'historical error'. In fact, turning our gaze back towards the UP is necessary in order to better understand the politics and power of women during a period in which conceptions of equality, rights and social justice were being redefined.

Fundamentally, when looking at the role of women in the process of building community projects, their actions should be understood as being imbued with a communal sense of politics far removed, in the majority of cases, from notions of objective power or disputes over representation. Consequently, we propose that women from within the Popular Unity coalition constructed a more *fecunda del poder* (productive conception of power), which allowed for the possibility of establishing spaces where women could socialise with each other, give new meaning to politics and thus exercise and reframe the meaning of political power. In turn, this conception put pressure on left-wing organisations and political culture.

The 'Chilean road to socialism' aimed to carry out a radical restructuring and develop a revolutionary consciousness and subjectivity. Within this last objective the fields of health, culture and education played pivotal roles as public issues, thus giving a new sense of direction to the civil organisations that had sprung up during the Eduardo Frei government, among them neighbourhood associations, mothers' centres, sports clubs and working-class schools. Various women across the country undertook important work in the areas of nutrition, health and education, helping to transform matters that had long been considered a part of the private sphere into central issues of the UP's political programme.

Indeed, we need to move away from liberal perspectives that associate daily life and care work with femininity, and thus assign them to the solely private sphere, in order to better understand the nature of women's politics during the construction of Chilean socialism. In this regard, issues of everyday living and women's emancipation from domestic labour through the building of an 'Estado Popular', or people's state, remain a little-analysed dimension of the UP experience. While the main proposals on this matter were never fully realised as a result of the 1973 coup d'état, the articulation of a political and moral economy that assumed the fundamental duties of life and care was and continues to be a challenge for revolutionary ideologies. It is therefore necessary to highlight the historical relevance in Latin America of the construction of women's activism and feminisms as collective and communal codes.

One of the challenges for articulating women's politics was the policy of *dual militancy* which complicated feminist politics during the revolutionary process. On the one hand, women's domestic roles, which were based on the logic of established gender hierarchies, were reproduced inside left-wing organisations. Revolutionary morality, which underpinned the construction of the 'new man', was not conceived as including women as participants in the revolutionary project.⁸ Yet alongside party activism, the majority of women also displayed a social militancy, constituted around the idea of women as female *compañeras* (comrades), within a broader process of social revolution. This established their commitment to and ensured their future role in the ongoing transformations under the UP government.

The cessation of full-time domestic work for women, made possible by the initiatives of Salvador Allende's government such as *comedores populares* (communal kitchens), the Programa de Comidas Preparadas (roughly, Prepared Food Programme), *lavanderías populares* (popular laundrettes) and others, enabled many women to get together and learn from each other in order to broaden their understandings of the country, its politics, economy and culture. In the words of Mariana, a young student of the era: 'I had my head in the clouds; I never understood anything about copper, for example, and it turns out that it leaves here in rods for other countries that later send it back in plugs... in manufactured products that are much more expensive for us when we could make them here.'⁹ That is how all 16 floors of the Gabriela Mistral Tower came to be occupied by women who, from all over the country, arrived to escape the 'world of the housewife' and take courses in craftwork and household appliances, or to become Inspectors of the National Directorate for Industry and Commerce (Dirección Nacional de Industria y Comercio, DIRINCO) or health campaigners, among other things. The women initially indicated that their husbands viewed these activities with scepticism but, given their expressed interest, 'they let them participate'.¹⁰ This implied the development of negotiations within the domestic space about reassigning housework, be it to other women, to their children or the creation of community support schemes for care work. However, it also meant the initiation of processes of political socialisation for women who, seeing their experiences reflected in those of other women, slowly began to formulate a critique of the conditions of oppression they faced in their daily battles against patriarchal authority during a period of social revolution.

The magazine *Paloma*, published with the aim of reinforcing this process of awakening a female consciousness, helped to highlight various government actions concerning women. It intentionally criticised *machismo* in different sections of the publication, including in the story of a housewife called Micaela. Such articles attest to the magazine's critique of *machismo* and its search for awareness of what it meant to be a woman. In a conversation between Micaela and her friend Manuela, the latter states that 'when her bedsheets tear, she mends them with different coloured and shaped patches'. The patches of fabric have pictures of what her children and her husband like most, football and cars in the latter's case. However, one day Manuela decides that from now on she is not going to think about Pepe when she patches up one of the large bedsheets, 'because if she only thinks about his preferences it would only serve to turn him into a complete chauvinist, and she would not like that! And yet, Micaela thought, Pepe had never taken on any domestic responsibilities and had made a face when Micaela had talked about working outside the home. Pepe was already a complete chauvinist.'¹¹

This passage seems to reflect one of the aspects of the *interrupted revolution* that had been transforming the politics and nature of emancipation while simultaneously broadening the conceptual framework for thinking about equality between men and women, starting with matters of basic dignity and a respect for social rights.

Final thoughts

While it is necessary to make visible formal instances of women's political participation, we also need to shift our attention to the diverse frontlines of activism and spaces of socialisation, which – together with the family, the local community, the *poblaciones* (urban shantytowns), feminised work environments and others – play a fundamental role in the construction of socialism in Chile. By working within domestic spaces, the socio-political dual militancy of women put pressure on the family, party, social and economic structures of the UP, and thus challenged existing authority.

The accumulation of women's historic strength within the UP ensured that activism and the fight for life continued during the period of state terrorism that followed the military coup. That experience led some women to embrace feminism as a subversive movement in the 1980s, which, together with a wider women's front, played a part in bringing down the dictator. As the Chilean feminist Julieta Kirkwood states, this feminism emerges strongly 'at times such as these, a "historic moment" dominated by tremendous ideological displacement (wars, starvation, wealth, opulence, dictatorship, atomic bombs), when there is "a worrying loss of perspective and when not everything can be explained by science".'

As a consequence of this and in the context of the failed neoliberal promise to make women equal in the labour market, an ideology of emancipation needs to be reformulated from a feminist perspective. Women's increased enrolment in university degree programmes, their extensive involvement in the flexible and unregulated labour market and the significance of dual socialisation in the home and in the workplace, among other things, mean we are facing a crisis of reproduction. This led women to the pinnacle of their historical power when, in 2018, they launched a movement that proclaimed the regeneration of a wider struggle as expressed in the so-called *estallido social* of October 2019.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work.

Notes

¹Pinto, *Cuando hicimos historia*.

²See <https://www.latercera.com/tendencias/noticia/feminismo-chileno-vive-revolucion-mas-importante-40-anos/172111/>.

³Illanes, *Nuestra Historia Violeta*, 11.

⁴Analysed in the texts in Gaviola et al., *Queremos votar en las próximas elecciones*; Kirkwood, *Feminismo*; Kirkwood, *Ser política en Chile*.

⁵Power, *La mujer de Derecha*, 84.

⁶Illanes, *Nuestra Historia Violeta*, 96.

⁷Power, *La mujer de Derecha*, 84.

⁸Vidaurrázaga, '¿El hombre nuevo?'

⁹*Paloma*, 12 June 1973, 109.

¹⁰*Paloma*, 12 June 1973, 106.

¹¹*Paloma*, 12 June 1973, 106.

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