

Violence as Both Repression and Opportunity:
Women and the Formation of an Anti-Pinochet Movement

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Latin America Through Women's Eyes

“There was immense brutality that assaulted the very essence of life, of ideas, and of freedom.”—Alicia Basso¹

For seventeen years, General Augusto Pinochet ruled Chile with an iron fist. Sixteen years after he left the presidency, Michelle Bachelet became the country’s first female leader—and the only Chilean president who has also survived torture at the hands of Pinochet’s secret police. “Violence ravaged my life,” she said in an interview with *The New York Times*. “I was a victim of hatred, and I have dedicated my life to reversing that hatred.”² Unfortunately, President Bachelet was one of many victims of the Pinochet regime, when more than six thousand Chileans were killed and tens of thousands were jailed or disappeared by government security forces. Both men and women were targeted, but purposefully invasive, violent tactics were specifically employed against leftist women to damage their feminine identities. However, this vicious repression simultaneously offered the perfect opportunity for Chilean left-wing women to build support for the anti-Pinochet movement, culminating in the effective “No” campaign of 1988.

Women-specific violence performed by the military under the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (DINA) varied in degree of severity, but it was all constructed to target the traditional feminine identity of the victims. “The organisms of repression, whether they were soldiers or police, used a language with women that was brutal, absolutely disparaging. They called us whores... ‘you’re fat, your breasts are sagging, you have a big behind’... It was a way to make everybody laugh, and to humiliate and degrade you.”³ By employing sexualized abusive

¹ Julie D. Shayne, *The Revolution Question: Feminisms in El Salvador, Chile, and Cuba* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004) 91.

² Larry Rohter, “A Leader Making Peace With Chile’s Past,” *The New York Times* Jan. 16, 2006.

³ Lisa Baldez, *Why Women Protest: Women’s Movements in Chile* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 163.

language against female protesters, repressive government agents impugned the purity that is so important in a traditional feminine identity, a goal that was also achieved by applying electric shocks to women's breasts—and by the powerful tactic of rape. Every woman arrested for political reasons under Pinochet was to be raped, either by soldiers or specially trained dogs. “The individual who worked out this particular tactic was an intelligent and cultivated man who knew that a woman who has been raped faces great difficulties in rebuilding her emotional life afterwards. He realized, too, that for wives and mothers a sense of humiliation would permeate family life, causing permanent emotional instability.”⁴ Rape destroys the victim's feminine identity as wife and mother and debases her into a violated sexual object, leaving lasting psychological damage. And it was not coincidental that every pregnant woman arrested by the regime was beaten until she lost her baby. In addition to intentionally obliterating the victim's sense of herself as a wife and a mother, these tactics create a sense of constant fear and vulnerability that leads to intense feelings of individual impotence, psychologically torturing the victim for years after the violation takes place.

But it was not enough for the Pinochet regime to target female bodies as sites of repression—they went after their husbands, fathers, and brothers, too. By jailing or “disappearing” leftist male family members, DINA physically removed the men who could have defended its female victims, who “were left to themselves to handle (the) abuse.”⁵ Chilean women in the anti-Pinochet movement had their traditional familial support system torn away: As Viviana Díaz, president of the Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos y Desaparecidos (AFDD), explains, “This method of forcefully disappearing people was aimed not only at

⁴ Jacobo Timerman, *Chile: Death in the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987) 30.

⁵ Lisa Baldez, *Why Women Protest: Women's Movements in Chile* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 163.

eliminating the victim but also the family group that surrounded the person... The goal was to cause fear in the population.”⁶ And cause fear it did: “It was too horrible, it was so brutal, the destruction of all your relations, and the fear, and not being able to do anything and knowing that you are exposing yourself and at the same time trying to do something.”⁷ By targeting male relatives and loved ones, DINA attempted to silence left-wing women, but this only inspired them to organize among themselves.

In order to not despair, Chilean women who had been victimized by the military regime began to create support systems as soon as three weeks after the coup against Salvador Allende.

“They got organized out of necessity. A huge political persecution started taking place and husbands, sons, family men, started being jailed... Women started feeling terrorized from going to visit them in the jails. This generated the first human rights group whose membership was fundamentally women; they were victims of repression that got together in hundreds of little groups like the women who would accompany each other to the jails. Through this, the embryo of the first (anti-Pinochet) organization emerged in Chile.”⁸

At first, these women’s organizations were informal networks of support for imprisoned family members and friends: the women visited the prisons to distribute food and clothing and to gather information, or they met repeatedly in lines at police stations, detention centers, and government offices, trying to learn the whereabouts of their missing loved ones. The government refused to give out any information on the disappeared, “and that is how (the AFDD) started to go out in the streets; we were the first organization that conquered the fear of going out in the street and having small, simple demonstrations.”⁹ Women were the first to organize against Pinochet and

⁶ Julie D. Shayne, *The Revolution Question: Feminisms in El Salvador, Chile, and Cuba* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004) 91.

⁷ Shayne 92.

⁸ Shayne 95.

⁹ Shayne 96.

they organized around human rights violations, uniting in order to liberate their families, the nation, and themselves from the violently repressive regime.

The first time Chileans mobilized en masse against the common enemy of Pinochet was a 1977 demonstration outside the Foreign Ministry where one hundred members of the AFDD marched with photos of their missing relatives pinned to their clothes. These women went on to organize multiple hunger strikes to bring attention to the regime's human rights violations, and even went to far as to chain themselves to the fence outside the national Congress building in Santiago. These AFDD demonstrations played a crucial role in gaining support for the anti-Pinochet movement by lessening the fears of those who were supportive of their cause but uncomfortable with the idea of participating in protests themselves. Because the women of the AFDD took serious risks they were able to mobilize other communities in the fight for human rights:

“As a response to the amnesty law... we went on an indefinite hunger strike... at the church and in an international precinct. That hunger strike started to cause a great impact through the Christian communities and it was transmitted throughout the priests and the nuns and it would go to the grassroots communities and solidarity started emerging from the mothers' centers, the unemployed pockets. It was in this way that after being at ground zero we started again to form organizations.”¹⁰

In this way, the AFDD was able to mobilize the wider community and foster solidarity among various sectors of society, establishing networks around human rights and catalyzing the movement against Pinochet.

Through its involvement with the AFDD, the Catholic Church provided an institutional umbrella to shelter the opposition groups from governmental repression and offered moral and material support to victims of human rights violations and their families. The Vicariate of

¹⁰ Shayne 96.

Solidarity, established in 1976 by Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez, was the primary source of help for victims of the Pinochet regime. When a mass grave was discovered at the Lonquén mine in 1979, five of the fifteen bodies had been reported missing at the Vicariate, providing incontrovertible evidence for the first time that disappearances had indeed occurred. This was a turning point in public sympathy for the victims of human rights violations, and led to demonstrations of thousands of Chileans on behalf of the Lonquén dead. The Vicariate also organized *arpillera* workshops for women and sold the tapestries to the international community, spreading the word about the government's atrocities through the fabric images.

As more and more exiles fled Chile and as word got out about the rampant violence employed by the military regime, an international solidarity movement emerged against Pinochet. Exiles pressured their adoptive governments to take action, and they in turn pressured Pinochet to reduce repression and address issues human rights. Protesters in the United States, Spain, and Switzerland staged demonstrations to keep the brutality of the regime in the public eye and to sway public opinion about events in Chile.

Even within Chile the initial demonstrations denouncing human rights violations appealed directly to the international community to intervene on the victims' behalf. In 1977, relatives of the disappeared occupied the United Nations Economic Commission on Latin America building and staged a ten-day hunger strike, demanding an international investigation into human rights abuses. In their coverage of the demonstration, newspapers acknowledged for the first time since Pinochet took power that disappearances had occurred. This led to demonstrations in the United Nations Economic Commission offices in the United States and Sweden, compelling the Secretary General of the U.N. to negotiate a settlement with the Chilean government to release information about the whereabouts of the protesters' disappeared relatives.

The anti-Pinochet movement, legitimized by the recognition of the Catholic Church and the international community thanks to its mobilization on behalf of victims of governmental violence, came to a head in 1988 with the plebiscite on a new presidential term for Pinochet. Women were intimately involved in the “No” campaign, filling downtown Santiago with black silhouettes that were each marked with the name of one of the disappeared, and pouring red dye into public fountains to represent the blood of the thousands of Chileans murdered by the government. With only 44.01 percent of the votes, Pinochet lost the plebiscite and left office in 1990, pushed out by the consequences of the gendered violence that he had hoped would silence a nation.