

Fear, Anger, and Necessity: The Driving Forces Behind Political Action

Women have been an important force in Chile's recent political history. Various types of women's groups had a major impact both in the years leading up to Pinochet's dictatorship and in the years leading to its end. From 1970 to 1973, right-wing women organized in opposition to Allende in order to remove him from office. Left-wing women's groups also rallied in support of Allende, but ultimately were not successful when the military coup established Pinochet as military dictator of Chile. Left-wing women once again organized from 1983 to 1988 against Pinochet and for the No vote in the 1988 plebiscite. Right-wing women on the other hand fought for the Sí vote and united in support for the Pinochet regime. In the end, a majority No vote signaled the success of the left-wing women. In each time period, the groups that were in opposition to the current leader and fighting for change were more organized, active, and effective in achieving their goals than the groups fighting to preserve the status quo. This paper will demonstrate, using the example of Chile during this time period, that that fear and anger are generally stronger motivators for action than is satisfaction with the current situation.

The Allende Years: 1970-1973

As "president of the workers," Allende provided many services to poor and working class women that contributed to their decreased motivation to organize. Allende expanded the existence of Mothers' Centers into rural areas, increasing poor women's access to these centers (Shayne, 80). Mothers' Centers provided various services for women and allowed many lower-class women a reason to leave their homes for the first time, contributing to their increased self-confidence. The Women's Secretariat was created under the UP government to focus on programs for women, such as women's health care, day-care, and public food programs (Shayne,

82). In addition, Allende created milk programs that were designed to distribute milk to all Chilean children through the school system (Shayne, 82). While women's issues may not have been Allende's first priority, lower-class left-wing women experienced an increase in attention and service by the government, especially during Allende's first year in office. Even during the economic crisis, waiting in long lines for food was not as shocking for lower-class women as it was for upper-class women, because poor women were used to not having enough food. Satisfaction with the UP government combined with the fact that most left-wing women were poor and did not have the time or resources to protest led to decreased political activity by women on the Left.

However, there were instances of upper class leftist members leading some political activity in support for Allende. The Allendista Women's Unit was an organization that "group[ed] together all the leftist Chilean women in favor of the popular government" (Shayne, 83). The March of the Empty Pots and Pans also prompted a reactionary response from left-wing women, as they could not believe that the rich women were complaining about not having food (Shayne, 85). And if they had not been prevented by Allende from doing so, the Allendista Women's Committee would have marched in a similar fashion in support for Allende. However this response was not large enough to overpower the opposition's efforts. Since it wasn't vital to their well-being, left-wing women had little motivation to leave their work or homes to demonstrate support for Allende.

On the other hand, right-wing women certainly felt injured and threatened by the economic policies of the UP government. Hailing from middle and upper-classes, they were unaccustomed to experiencing such discomfort in their lives. They were threatened by Allende's actions of working towards a redistribution of wealth (Power, 2002, 27) as it jeopardized the

privileges they had always enjoyed. For the first time in their lives these women experienced difficulty in obtaining food for their families and long lines for food. In addition, their fear of communism as a threat to their families was exacerbated by the Scare Campaign, implemented with the support of the United States. Right-wing Chilean women during this time felt that they had a lot to lose from Allende's presidency. This fear combined with an existing anger towards Allende prompted them to fight for a change.

As Power (2002) points out, center and right-wing women were highly active and successful during this time in mobilizing female support, demonstrating disapproval with the UP government, and provoking the military to stage a coup. The March of the Empty Pots and Pans produced an image of women in solidarity against Allende. Some right-wing women took it upon themselves to personally visit the working class women in the *poblaciones* and "convert" them to their cause (Power, 2002, 105). Poder Femenino, the right-wing women's opposition group, exploited events such as the miner's strike at El Teniente and General Prats' irrational outburst in order to undermine Allende's alleged support for the working class (Power, 2002, 215). In addition, women of Poder Femenino exploited societal views of masculinity by calling members of the military cowards and accusing them of not being real men, enhanced by the act of throwing chicken feed and feathers at them in various demonstrations (Power, 2002, 229). As Power recognizes, all of these efforts greatly contributed to an increased anti-Allende sentiment and the military's eventual action to overthrow the government.

The Pinochet Years: 1983-1988

Towards the end of the Pinochet regime, many right-wing women organized again in support of the Sí vote and dictator they loved. First Lady Lucía Hiriart led a women's volunteer

movement in aid of the military regime, and later taught “civic education” classes to convince women to vote Sí in the upcoming plebiscite (Power, 2001, 311). Mujeres Por Chile united women’s groups that supported Pinochet and, along with the National Secretariat of Women, educated women in classes on voting in order to “convert” women to support Pinochet. But this time the right’s efforts were neither as unified nor as effective, and did not include large demonstrations like those against Allende.

Similar to women on the left during Allende, right-wing women were the main beneficiaries of the dictatorship. Pinochet’s patriarchal rule confirmed the traditionally conservative view of women as mothers who were subordinate to men. The neo-liberal economic policy implemented by the regime mainly benefited these upper-class right-wing women. Satisfied with the current situation, and possibly believing Pinochet would win, these women may not have been as motivated to organize and act. But there were other reasons as well; many women were pulled out of the volunteer movement and into politics by the emergence of the new conservative parties, Unión Democrática Independiente and Renovación Nacional (Power, 2001, 312). Some right-wing women, especially those previously belonging to the Partido Nacional, purposely did not participate in the volunteer movement. While they fully supported Pinochet and his accomplishments, they were looking forward to the possibility of once again becoming politically involved (Power, 2001, 312). The fact that some women were supportive of the regime yet would equally enjoy a transfer of power adds another dimension to their apathy. All of these factors combined contributed to a decrease in organization and effectiveness of the right-wing women’s movement under Pinochet.

As expected, the poor and working classes were the most negatively affected by the regime. Pinochet’s new economic model caused an economic crisis that hit the poor the hardest,

deepening the disparity between the poor and the rich. Many leftist women viewed Pinochet as the ultimate patriarch who threatened their feminist ideals of equality. Most importantly, the left was the group that was targeted for repression of free speech and human rights abuses. Since they were the original supporters of Allende and of “communism” in the regime’s eyes, they were “punished” by the regime with torture, disappearances, and murder. This in turn had a great impact even on those not directly targeted, because the culture of fear the regime created kept them in a constant state of paranoia and prevented them from carrying on in a normal way (Baldez, 286).

In response to the very real fear and injuries forced upon them by the regime, left-wing women rallied to demonstrate their anger. Like the right-wing women who organized to oust Allende, left-wing women during Pinochet’s regime unified to protest gross human rights violations and to aid in his removal from power. *Mujeres Por La Vida* was one of the major groups involved during this time, and in 1983 it held the massive *Caupolicán* rally, bringing together left and center parties in opposition to Pinochet (Baldez, 290). Various groups formed, such as the *Agrupación de Familiares de Detenido y Desaparecido* (AFDD) and *MEMCH '83*. Most of the women in the AFDD were from “humble origins” and had relatives that had been killed, tortured, or disappeared by the military government (Shayne, 95). This group protested the abuse of its loved ones through regular demonstrations in the streets of Santiago, while *MEMCH '83* worked to unify smaller neighborhoods and organize women at the grassroots level (Shayne, 97). As the plebiscite neared, all of these groups worked together on the *No* campaign, using television commercials and images of the disappeared to convince people that change was needed and Pinochet had to go. The success of these left-wing women’s group was established when the *No* vote did in fact win, and Pinochet was forced to step down.

Conclusion

During these two contrasting periods in Chilean history, different groups of women held the “upper hand” in the battle for their distinct ideals. While the efforts of right-wing women were more organized and successful under Allende, left-wing women were the victors under Pinochet. In each of these cases, the group who claimed victory was the one in opposition to the current leader. The women who were in favor of the current leader, whether it be Allende or Pinochet, belonged to groups that gained from that particular government. In each case, women in the opposition felt very real threats and injuries by the government in power. Right-wing women succeeded in ending the decreased ease and comfort of their daily lives, as well as the perceived threats to their families when they aided in the overthrow of Allende. Left-wing women succeeded in stopping the continuation of human rights abuses towards their families and the worsening economic crisis with their efforts to vote Pinochet out of power. In these instances, fighting for change was a stronger motivation for action than was fighting for the status quo. Women in opposition responded out of necessity, while supportive women responded out of interest. In the end, oppositional women’s groups were more effective because fear, anger, and the necessity for change this generated, created the strongest push for action.

Works Cited

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