Forging Feminisms under Dictatorship: women’s international ties and national feminist empowerment in Chile, 1973–1990

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Focusing on the period of dictatorship, this analysis explores Chilean feminists’ empowerment through international ties when feminism gained legitimacy as a vehicle for social change in the aftermath of the United Nations International Women’s Year in 1975. Centering on three types of encounters that marked women’s coalition-building and their international ties, both personal empowerment and institutional change in defense of women’s rights are discussed. Chilean women participated in the United Nations International Women’s Conferences that accompanied the Decade of Women between 1975 and 1985. They also joined regional feminist conferences called Encounters, Encuentros, which were explicitly aimed at convening women in the Americas. Chilean women’s experience of international solidarity and exile encouraged many to reconsider their own roles in their native society. In the course of military rule and re-democratization, Chilean feminists connected these experiences to domestic feminist activism and set a path for empowerment that fitted their national historical trajectory.

We reconstructed the story of what had been invisible and we proposed to break with the private; we were very brave: heretics by dint of shamelessly, openly turning everything around; … we discovered, discovered with passion, laughter, tough fights, difficult reflections, we kept going, we opened the Circle [of Women’s Studies], the House [of the Woman, called ‘La Morada,’ the Dwelling], we opened books, even the Lila

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In 1915, Amanda Labarca, one of Chile’s most prominent feminists, founded a pioneering feminine organization with the exclusive goal of advancing women’s emancipation. She had attended universities in France and the United States and then returned to Chile with a particular admiration for North American women’s community service and social engagement through clubs. In her home country, Labarca set out to improve women’s social and legal status and invited fellow-educated women of a ‘progressive spirit’ to form a Ladies’ Reading Circle. While the model of women’s ‘foreign reading clubs’ inspired participants who joined, they agreed on the need to set up their own circle in a form ‘suitable for national needs and customs’. At the time, Chilean feminists continued to insist on the importance of the family and of women’s roles as wives and mothers, and they expressed their dislike of ‘the woman who adopts the deportment of a man’.

Labarca’s initiatives show not only that middle-class, educated feminists in Chile responded to foreign feminists’ influences early on, but also that Chilean feminists set a path of feminist activism that fitted their national historical trajectory. Educated women like Labarca were very familiar with suffragist activism in Europe and in the United States. Yet they deliberately advocated steps suitable to their own national-cultural context, often at a pace that distinguished their own initiatives from the actions of ‘radical’ foreign feminisms abroad. In the course of the twentieth century, Chilean feminists with international ties continued to position themselves with regard to changing international feminist paradigms. Under dictatorship, the impact of feminist mobilization changed radically when feminists, in the words of Julieta Kirkwood, became daring, brave, and were ‘openly turning everything around’.

This study explores feminists’ international ties under dictatorship (1973–90). I adopt a global lens to show that Chilean feminisms, defined as multiple initiatives by different groups of feminists who all mobilized for women’s rights, were empowered when feminism gained legitimacy as a vehicle for social change in the aftermath of the United Nations International Women’s Year in 1975. Here, I focus on three types of encounters that marked women’s coalition-building and their international ties and provide evidence of both personal empowerment and institutional change in defense of women’s rights in Chile. First, Chilean women participated in the United Nations International Women’s Conferences that accompanied the Decade of Women between 1975 and 1985. Second, starting in 1981, Chilean women also joined regional feminist conferences called Encounters, Encuentros, which were explicitly aimed at convening women in the Americas. Finally, I explore women’s experience of international solidarity and exile that encouraged many to reconsider their own roles in their native society. This, too, often introduced them to feminism.

Because international networks often exclude working-class or shantytown feminists with limited means to travel, the encounters discussed in this study
disproportionately reflect the voices of middle-class, professional, or well-educated feminists. Middle-class feminists were also instrumental in the foundation of the National Office for Women’s Affairs (SERNAM). This organization began to promote gender equity and domestic change in Chile after re-democratization, employing an international language of women’s rights to promote its ends.

The Rise of a Culture of Violence and a New Women’s Politics under Dictatorship

When well-known Chilean feminist Julieta Kirkwood told the story of feminist activism under dictatorship, she rightly evoked the daring nature of women’s resistance to military rule. Kirkwood and other feminists walked dangerous grounds when they mobilized in desperate response to military violence, when they set up meetings in defiance of curfew and discussed survival strategies in a nation under siege, and when they began to organize protest-demonstrations in the streets of Santiago in the early 1980s. For all women, rich and poor, life in Chile had changed dramatically after 11 September, 1973, when a military coup terminated socialist President Salvador Allende’s Unidad Popular left-of-center coalition government and instigated a rule of violence and human rights abuses. Initially, the four-man junta that had led the coup governed the nation. By 1974, General Augusto Pinochet had seized power and forged a personal dictatorship until 1989. Although leftist politicians and civilians were the first victims of the dictatorship’s arrests, torture, and executions, state terror soon affected all members of Chilean society and forced an estimated 200,000 into exile.

Women’s organizations, including self-help groups, human rights initiatives, and feminist organizations, emerged in response to political repression and economic need. After the coup, women joined to rally ‘in defense of life’ and to protect and save family members and relatives. The Agrupación de Mujeres Democráticas (Association of Democratic Women), for example, worked to locate missing family members in Santiago’s National Stadium, now transformed into a concentration camp, and supported former detainees as they emerged from prison. One woman recalled:

You never knew when someone was going to be released. Sometimes they would let someone out by 7 p.m. … with no money and no way to get home. If they didn’t get home before the 8 p.m. curfew, the police would arrest them again … . So we organized the people with cars to be ready to pick up people at a moment’s notice.

Women’s self-help and human rights initiatives often took place under the protective umbrella of the Church and particularly with the support of the Vicaría de Solidaridad (Vicariate of Solidarity), founded after the coup. Among other survival strategies, women began to make arpilleras (quilts), covered with images depicting life under the dictatorship, that were eventually sold all over the world. In 1975, the Vicariate’s founder, Raúl Cardinal Silva Henríquez, added an academic branch to his organization, the Academia de Humanismo Cristiano (Academy of Christian Humanism). This branch provided safe meeting spaces for human rights groups and study circles.

Founded in 1979, the Círculo de Estudios de La Mujer (Women’s Studies Circle) was one of the first feminist organizations that started meeting at the Academy of Christian
Humanism, and employed strategies of consciousness-raising to mobilize fellow-women. Isabel Gannon, a founding member of the Círculo, recalled how:

I first became aware of feminism in the United States, where I was living, in California, from 1967 to 1970. My experience with women’s lib changed my life and was a most gratifying discovery. Once conscious of the issue … there is no turning back, and I was more than willing to join the Círculo from its very beginning, always with the idea on my mind that creating a movement needed consciousness raising groups—which I proceeded to form as soon as it was possible.

Gannon drew on what she personally experienced living abroad and shared it with other women upon returning home. She valued collective consciousness-raising as a tool not only for individual growth, but also for promoting the cohesion of a feminist community that would join to share experiences and insights that inspired subsequent mobilization for women’s rights.

In 1979, Círculo feminists in Santiago sponsored a first public gathering ‘to discuss the situation of women in Chile’ and the response they received dramatically exceeded their expectations: over 300 women answered the call. Most responded to word-of-mouth invitations. Círculo members had used wide-ranging feminist and human rights networks, as well as friends with community ties. They came from different neighborhoods and thus brought diverse educational and personal experiences with them. Ema, one of the participants, commented on the meeting and the shared feelings of solidarity and collectivity that united the women in spite of their diversity:

When I left I had the worst argument with my husband; so when I came to the meeting I felt very bad, guilty, that I had caused trouble again, that my marriage would end. And the best thing was that the meeting started with everybody talking about how difficult it had been to get there, everybody had encountered similar problems: those who were married, with children, were feeling terribly guilty, felt that they had put the family second place. And, at the same time, their fears were connected to the coup and the dictatorship.

Ema poignantly described the feelings of guilt familiar to many wives and mothers who began to expand old limits of women’s domestic and dependent roles by taking on new tasks for the sake for their families. Where male breadwinners were absent, incarcerated or disappeared, they had to mobilize to document human rights abuses, and also to find ways to feed their children. Meetings, discussions, and ongoing interactions with fellow-women helped them not only to ease emotional stress, but also to share insights about how to make ends meet. Some of the many participants at Círculo meetings adopted a feminist approach, an active pursuit of gender equity in the nation and at home.

For the twenty or so professional women who sponsored the first official call of the Círculo their initiative represented an explicit quest for women’s rights. Since its onset the Círculo aimed at advancing the ‘struggle against all forms of discrimination and oppression against women’. Academics and activists alike pressed this agenda. For Círculo feminists, their mission was:

political, since it proposes to eliminate a form of domination that is strongly embedded in the social, economic and cultural spheres. The feminist commitment entails revolutionary changes because the elimination of sexual oppression compromises all
forms of social relations. And it is necessarily democratic because only in conditions of equality between the sexes is it possible to create a social project that is just and libertarian.  

With arrests and disappearances of family members, women not only protested the military state, but they also began to address domestic oppression in new ways. They recognized that the regime’s authoritarian and patriarchal practices in the public sphere resembled those that men employed in the private sphere.

Feminist historian Alicia Frohmann and activist in Chile remembered the 1980s as the most ‘heroic’ period of the women’s movement, marked by women’s contribution to the dictatorship’s end. Braving violent streets, women with diverse ties to feminism and from diverse class backgrounds joined las protestas (the protests), an intense period of women’s resistance and public demonstrations. In the 1980s, their massive mobilization left little doubt about the seriousness of women’s protests as a powerful political force. Chilean women, who mobilized under the banner of self-help, human rights, or feminist groups, not only contributed to the end of military rule, but also created a new understanding of citizenship rights. While navigating the dictatorship’s repressive conditions, they placed gender equity and women’s rights at the center of the re-democratization and citizenship discussions that unfolded in the 1990s. International ties mattered in these processes.

Indeed, Alicia Frohmann also remembered that ‘the women’s movement of the 1970s and 1980s was an international movement, and whatever happened concerning women, both in the industrialized and the developing countries, influenced debates and initiatives elsewhere’. Feminists participated in international conferences set up by the United Nations (UN) and in regional conferences specifically geared to unite feminists in the Americas. Like Isabel Gannon, who shared her feminist insights with fellow-Chileans at the Círculo, many also brought back to Chile the individual experiences with feminisms they gathered as exiles abroad.

The Decade of Women and Global Paradigm Shifts: legitimizing women’s rights

In 1975, Chilean women joined over 5,000 fellow participants from all over the world who came to Mexico City to the first United Nations International Women’s Year Conference or to the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) Tribune that convened simultaneously. They participated in global networking initiatives and mobilization for women’s rights, a development closely intertwined with the initiatives of the UN. In Mexico, conference participants drafted a World Plan of Action that set the agenda for eliminating discrimination against women. Affirming that equality had to begin in the family, the plan demanded a more equitable division of labor between men and women, or fathers and mothers, in household settings. It also extended International Women’s Year to a Decade of Women (1975–85).

While many women, including Chilean participants at the NGO Tribune, criticized the tone and content of the official UN Mexico Conference as anti-feminist, women with a clear quest for rights improved the conservative UN machinery through grassroots initiatives at parallel events. The official Chilean delegate, Alicia Romo Román,
for example, upset members of her audience when she praised Chile’s military govern-
ment as a much-needed alternative to the previous socialist leadership under Salvador
Allende’s Popular Unity coalition party. To the dismay of many listeners, she made no
mention of violence and abuse, and promised her audience that the military ‘will
restore the order destroyed by the treason committed by Salvador Allende’.24 Other
Chilean women, nonetheless, spoke at the parallel NGO Tribune and exposed this offi-
cial misrepresentation, vigorously denouncing human rights violations committed by
the regime. Among them were former president Allende’s widow Hortensia Bussi de
Allende, his sister Laura, and his niece Isabel Allende. All received an affectionate
welcome from Chilean exiles—in fact, an ‘interminable line’ of women greeted Bussi
de Allende in solidarity.25 The tribunal also brought them together with compañeras
who were suffering under military dictatorships in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and
Uruguay. They came together and produced a joint communiqué that denounced the
abuses those regimes were inflicting upon them and others.26

The tribunals and NGO activities also helped shape later UN conferences in Copen-
hagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985), thus encouraging network building in support of
human rights and women’s rights struggles. In the course of the Decade of Women,
the number of global advocacy networks among women exploded, providing women
with new opportunities to assume leadership roles in their struggle for gender
equity.27 In a parallel explosion of research, women documented, exchanged, and
applied information regarding the conditions of women’s lives. In Latin America
alone, they founded over 150 periodicals with a feminist or women’s-liberationist
perspective between 1980 and 1988.28

Feminists’ pioneering research and enhanced visibility contributed to their growing
political clout worldwide, just as new international legal norms added legitimacy to
specific quests for rights. The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of
Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) served as a standard bearer by setting
international legal norms, providing a basis for the efforts of feminist organizations to
pressure their governments to strengthen their commitment to gender equity and
women’s rights. National leaders could choose to ratify CEDAW as it was or to renego-
tiate a modified version. In 1980, at the second World Conference in the United
Nations Decade for Women held in Copenhagen, sixty-four states signed the conven-
tion and two ratified the document. In 1981, CEDAW was enacted after twenty
nations ratified it.29

These developments also led to more outspoken affirmations of women’s rights. The
Declaration and Program of Action of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights
held in Vienna officially acknowledged that ‘women’s rights are human rights’. Wom-
en’s human rights ‘should form an integral part of the United Nations human
rights activities’.30 In 1994, the UN World Conference on Population and Develop-
ment in Cairo also defined and recognized the reproductive and sexual rights of both
men and women, specifying that ‘reproductive health … implies that people are able
to have a satisfying sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the free-
dom to decide if, when, and how often to do so’.31 Women in Latin America and the
Caribbean, meanwhile, set up parallel women’s meetings to enhance the dialogue
among feminists in the Americas, particularly regarding violations of human rights and women’s rights under dictatorial rule.

**Global Encounters, Regional Feminisms, and Women’s Empowerment in Chile**

Parallel to the ongoing global meetings that drew on participation by representatives of all UN-member states, feminists in the Americas established their own sites for the exchange of knowledge regarding specific, regional challenges to women’s rights. Beginning in 1981, and roughly every two to three years thereafter, they came together at international *Encuentros Feministas* (Feminist Encounters). The initiators, again, often middle-class, professional women with a history of feminist activism, attempted to create regular forums for an exchange of experiences, ideas, and strategies for change. These meetings produced experiences of solidarity, inspired consciousness-raising, and set in motion a state of network-building that moved women from the ‘logic of solidarity’ to organized ‘advocacy networks’ that pressured individual governments, including Chile, to protect women’s rights. In the words of participants, the gatherings served as markers of shifting feminist priorities and as ‘springboards for the development of a common Latin American feminist political language.’ This new feminist language also led to action.

In 1981, many women who lived under dictatorship experienced the first *Encuentro* in Bogotá, Columbia, as a space free of censorship and fear, where they not only spoke openly about the disturbing human rights violations at home, but also took action to increase awareness of such violations. Participants discussed the different strategies of patriarchal institutions at the center of military regimes, and identified violations of women’s rights, including their reproductive rights. They exposed both state-led violence and family violence as practices that supported male dominance. In a collective effort to diminish gender-based violence, they declared November 25 as the International Day of Nonviolence against Women.

For some, like prominent Chilean feminist Julieta Kirkwood, Bogotá symbolized the restoration of power by and for women. In her writings, she describes the meeting as a ‘(re-)conquest of space’: women gained access to an international realm that had until then been pervaded by patriarchal culture. Other Chilean participants learned to connect the domestic violence against women in patriarchal societies to the political violence against women that military regimes inflicted. They translated this understanding into specific demands for ‘democracy in the nation and democracy at home’ and, subsequently, into the motto that guided their mobilization against dictatorship back in Chile.

At subsequent *Encuentros* in Lima (1983), Brazil (1985), México (1987), Argentina (1990), El Salvador (1993), Chile (1996), the Dominican Republic (1999), Costa Rica (2002), and again in Brazil (2005), women negotiated both agreements and disagreements concerning feminist priorities. The gatherings continued to promote consciousness-raising, solidarity, and collective learning. But the meetings also highlighted conflicts among participants with different experiences and expectations. At the Brazilian *Encuentro*, for example, academics, labor leaders, union organizers, and
political activists lamented a ‘lack of resolutions, strategies and theories’ and left dissatisfied. Others felt that extensive discussion over theories and resolutions interfered with spontaneity and creative freedoms, and ‘would handicap the dynamic thought process which is the very nature of an Encuentro’. The disagreements showed that all participants needed to learn to negotiate diversity—of class backgrounds, levels of education, ethnic identities, rural–urban divides, and generational differences. Diversity, they learned to appreciate, should strengthen rather than weaken feminist activism.

As feminists continued to negotiate the effectiveness of specific feminist strategies, the Encuentros provided inspiration and support. Women initiated advocacy networks that developed long-term strategies to combat violence, to strengthen women’s citizenship rights, and to defend reproductive rights. After the 1981 Colombian Encuentro, they met in Argentina in 1990, and declared 28 September the Day of Decriminalization of Abortion in Latin America and the Caribbean. They thus raised awareness of the high maternal mortality rate resulting from women’s self-induced abortions, which still characterized a brutal reality for women in the region. The Encuentros stimulated ongoing dialogues among women from different countries in the Americas—and yet another group of women who experienced the force of international solidarity movements, Chilean exiles, contributed to this dialogue.

**International Solidarity, Experiences of Exile, and Individual Feminist Encounters**

In November 1975, the Chilean secret police arrested Sheila Cassidy, an English doctor who practiced medicine in Santiago’s poor neighborhoods. She was brought to one of the notorious concentration camps set up by the military regime after its takeover in 1973, where they held her incommunicado for days, and tortured her. They arrested her after she had treated a young ‘subversive’ Chilean who had sustained injuries in a shoot-out with the military. Cassidy later managed to leave Chile alive, and after her ordeal gained international attention. The British government withdrew its ambassador from Santiago and cancelled arms sales to Chile.

Sheila Cassidy’s story not only documented her own experience of state-sponsored violence and human rights abuses under military rule in Chile, but also shed light on the force of emerging solidarity movements that had begun to resist this regime. Her case helped inspire transnational solidarity, and it particularly contributed to Britain’s Solidarity Campaign. It also contributed to the extension of solidarity networks in other European countries that helped Chilean exiles who often followed more cumbersome pathways as they left Chile to seek refuge abroad. In exile Chilean women often developed ties to women’s groups, including feminists.

Recalling the years of dictatorship, some Chilean feminists suggested that ‘exile constituted the most important link between national and international expressions of the feminist movement—and a vehicle for the diffusion of new ideas and forms of organization in the country’. Indeed, many women who left the familiar environment of home found that life in a foreign country encouraged them to re-examine previously unquestioned relationships and gender stereotypes. Unfamiliar customs,
new languages, and new relationships inspired profound introspection. A woman from Santiago, long active in party politics back in Chile, experienced her first encounter with feminism while exiled in Germany. She described herself as ‘a typical example of a woman who begins to think about her domestic work and about motherhood’. Initially isolated at home during the day, she had only her three-month-old child for company, and spent the day impatiently awaiting her husband’s return from work. Her need for human contact drove her to participate in organizing meetings with other exiles from Latin America and with German feminists, who all began to share experiences and insights. She recalled ‘that was when I began to notice the division of roles … I had never asked myself about it before, and had accepted it’. In the process, she began to define herself as a feminist.43

Some solidarity groups specifically focused on working with women, arguing that women often bore the brunt of human rights abuses and military violence. A Chilean women’s group in Hamburg, Germany, for example, suggested that women not only felt more pressure than men as they tried to protect their families, but that women were also ‘subjected to the most brutal sexual tortures’.44 Organizations of the German left published translations of Chilean underground journals and pamphlets like ‘Women’s Voice’ and exhibited photographs and drawings by women who had been imprisoned in military concentration camps. They often featured prominent exiles, such as the leader of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria—MIR), Carmen Castillo, who met with women’s groups in Hamburg and Berlin. In numerous interviews, Castillo also addressed specific gendered concerns and shared her views on the role of women in revolutionary struggles.45 Chilean exiles, side by side with women of the German left, explored women’s roles in leftist politics and discussed the obstacles to gender equity posed by traditional male-led political parties.46

German women of the left made great efforts to build on Frauensolidarität, solidarity among women, and also discovered difficulties of translating cultural difference and filling gaps among women’s diverse experiences.47 As they set up seminars to address topics like partnership and sexuality, they touched themes that, in the words of one Chilean participant, were better left to close friends and private settings.48 Even as all participants made the effort to work ‘with women for women’,49 German women reported that ‘behind the difficulties in their interaction lay different experiences in the process of socialization and understandings of the meaning of being a woman’.50 Violence against women was a topic that was particularly hard to address. This became clear as German women listened to the testimony of former political prisoners like Luz de las Nieves Ayress, who came ‘from the concentration camp to exile in Berlin’,51 or of a woman they referred to only as Cecila, who shared experiences of violence and torture. They listened to each other and learned intimate details about each other’s lives, but they also discovered the limits of mutual empowerment through solidarity.52 Many women, after all, remained in Chile and still lived under the threat of arrest, torture, disappearance, or death.

The acquisition and production of new knowledge by and for women, nonetheless, provided an element of strength and continuity to feminist causes. This became evident
in the work of yet another group of exiles who focused on the production and distribution of new knowledge about women’s rights and gender relations abroad, and eventually, upon their return home. Adriana Santa Cruz and Viviana Erazo, exiled in Mexico, began to work with local feminists.

In the process, they identified themes of gender discrimination that affected women throughout Latin America and published Compropolitan, a small book with a big message that became a transformative tool of feminist consciousness-raising in the early 1980s. Its title was derived from the Spanish verb comprar, to buy, and the title of the well-known glamour-magazine, Cosmopolitan. Compropolitan exposed media-marketing strategies of publishers who earned dirty money by (ab)using women. The authors provided a feminist critique of the media and deconstructed the transnational model of femininity that reduced women to consumers and sex objects. They revealed that advertisers manipulated Latin American women, teasing them into buying products for their supposed ‘mission’ to conquer men. Products like perfumes, stockings, and undergarments were high on the list of tools that allowed women to ‘take charge’, the feminine way. Finally, Santa Cruz and Erazo also helped found a new journal, Mujer/fempress, a constructive alternative to mainstream magazines tailored to women—published in Santiago after 1986, when Adriana Santa Cruz had returned home from exile.

Santa Cruz and others followed one of the mandates of the UN Decade for Women when they produced and spread information about women, including gender-specific information about health and the body, and continued to learn from feminists abroad. Chilean feminists also learned from feminist activists in the United States. When I asked Dr María Isabel Matamala about international influences that inspired a women’s health movement in Chile, she recalled that ‘yes, there was a group in Boston, the Boston Women’s Health [Book] Collective, that we all knew about’. Founded by participants of a 1969 women’s liberation conference, the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective (BWHBC) grew from grass-roots initiatives into an organization known all over the Americas. Its initial publication, Women and Their Bodies, became an ‘underground success’ due to its open exploration of women’s health, life cycle, and sexuality. In 1973, BWHBC published Our Bodies, Ourselves, a landmark book and tool for women’s empowerment. It fostered understanding of women’s bodies, health, and sexuality in order to give women increased control over their own lives. In 1979, Our Bodies, Ourselves, was translated into Spanish. Nuestros Cuerpos, Nuestras Vidas, inspired transnational advocacy networks among women who spoke similar ‘languages’ of women’s rights and health. Dr Matamala’s engagement as a physician and feminist activist in general, and her interests in gender equity and women’s health in particular, explained her early ties to the BWHBC. But the collective also provided others with the raw data for awareness-building campaigns and for transnational activism aimed at protecting women’s health. Chilean activists were among those who built ties to an international women’s health movement that was, in the words of one participant, ‘bursting into worldwide bloom’.

In 1977, the BWHBC published the first edition of an International Women and Health Resource Guide in collaboration with Isis International, a new advocacy network
of women’s health with headquarters based in Rome. An international group of feminists founded Isis, named for the goddess of knowledge and creation, in 1974. In 1979, a small group of Chilean women exiled in Rome joined Isis and helped develop a Spanish edition of Isis’s bulletin, *Women in Action, Mujeres en Acción*. Ximena Charnes, one of the Chilean coordinators, recalled that:

> Isis has been a space for many women of diverse origins, nationalities and experiences, where we have been able to work and contribute to the women’s movement. [It is] a space where we have learned to respect the varied opinions within our organization and within the movement in general. [Here, we feel] that all women share a point of view, information, a new sensibility, and that we all are enriching our selves in the process.

The cooperation among the members of Isis, female contributors, and readers of Isis publications furthered international advocacy among women. In 1984, two of the Chilean women in Rome helped set up Isis headquarters in Santiago and coordinated the Latin American and Caribbean Women’s Health Network (LACWHN) that continued to function and even expanded its international activism after re-democratization.

**Testing the Strengths of Women’s Empowerment under Re-democratization: conclusions**

In the words of scholar-activist Verónica Schild, the new elements within feminists’ international networks and their specific configuration deserve attention even as the very existence of such links remains ‘an old phenomenon’. In this study I have explored the international links that Chilean feminists, most of whom were middle-class and professional women, built under the dictatorship, and the empowerment these women experienced through a new international paradigm of women’s rights. The end of dictatorship and the beginning of re-democratization encouraged women to apply new global norms, such as those evident in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to secure gender equity under the new democracy. Their activism produced mixed results.

In the 1980s *las protestas*, women’s intense resistance and public demonstrations, helped pave the way toward re-democratization in Chile. In December 1983, over 10,000 women of different political and class backgrounds came together at the Caupólicán Theatre in Santiago to participate in what was the largest gathering since the military coup. Linked together under the motto of unity, they proclaimed that ‘freedom has a woman’s name’. In subsequent public marches, protesters called for ‘Democracia en el país y en la casa’—democracy in the country and at home. Women also met, marched, and mobilized in preparation of the 1988 plebiscite proposed by General Pinochet to secure the longevity of his regime. Chileans voted Sí or No to the question of ongoing support for the military. Over 1.9 million women, or 51%, supported the No campaign, as did 58% of male voters. Their victory signified the first official step toward the return to democratic elections in 1990. From that moment on, women’s demands for rights appeared in a new light, connected to the right of equal citizenship under an elected, democratic government.
The open political environment brought opportunities, but it was also marked by new challenges. Under re-democratization, women experienced first-hand the contradictions between two final acts of the Pinochet dictatorship—and the limited reach of the global paradigm of women’s rights: before leaving office, the military signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), yet, simultaneously, ended therapeutic abortion. Just as the dictatorship paid lip service to the international norms of women’s rights defined in the Convention, it violated women’s rights to bodily integrity at home. In August 1989 the military replaced Article 119 of the Chile Health Code with Act No. 18.826, stating that ‘no action may be executed that has as its goal the inducement of abortion’. Jaime Guzmán, lawyer and influential ideologue under the regime, was adamant about the need to outlaw abortions and to prosecute those who violated the law. In his own words: ‘The mother must give birth to her child, even if it will be born abnormal, if she did not plan it, if it was conceived as a result of a rape, and even if giving birth will kill her.’ Guzmán also succeeded in having a right-to-life clause added to the Constitution.

As feminists took a stand to defend gender equity in the midst of old and new challenges, it became clear that moderate middle-class feminists had a stronger influence on the nature of change than their politically radical or working-class sisters. The former group first came to the fore when they founded the Conciertación Nacional de Mujeres por la Democracia (National Coalition of Women for Democracy) in December 1988, thereby building an autonomous political coalition aimed at shaping the political direction of the Coalition of Parties for Democracy, the Concertación. As part of this initiative, middle-class feminists set up eleven commissions of women who drafted recommendations for specific areas, such as health, work, family, and education. In the process of these negotiations, coalition-members set political priorities not shared by all women’s groups. Negotiating moderate propositions, they excluded ‘radical’ demands, for example, those that called for changes in abortion and divorce legislation. The coalition alienated those feminists who had insisted on the importance of such legislative change. But it won the approval of a politically conservative opposition that had initially rejected their demands. In 1991, the goal to promote women’s rights became an official part of government policy through the National Office for Women’s Affairs (Servicio Nacional de la Mujer, SERNAM).

While the potential gains of state-led feminism have remained the subject of ongoing debate, SERNAM successfully supported a number of feminist campaigns, for example, a mobilization to end violence against women. The office sponsored research on domestic violence and lobbied for legislative changes to help victims. In October 2005, the Chilean government passed a new law on family violence, which facilitated police intervention and efforts to prevent domestic violence. The following year the Chilean newspaper El Mercurio reported that sixty family courts with over 250 judges were prepared to tackle the issue. SERNAM minister Laura Albornoz acknowledged that, even though the new system was not without flaws, women were given some semblance of legal support to combat domestic violence. Victims of violence could also access information on legal procedures on the website, Tramite Facil.
Procedures), where links led to a network of Regional Domestic Violence Prevention and Services Centers that provided psychological counseling.75

Relying on the global paradigm of reproductive rights, SERNAM-backed feminists have also lobbied for consciousness-raising initiatives to address the lasting problem of teenage pregnancies. In 2006, 17% of all pregnancies occurred among women between fifteen and nineteen years of age.76 Feminists linked the problem of teenage pregnancy to women’s right to health and reproductive freedom. Chilean health activists successfully lobbied for the legalization of ‘emergency contraception’, a pill that women could use if other birth control measures had failed. Women above the age of fourteen will be able to get emergency contraception free of charge in public health centers, without parental consent.77 The new policy will significantly reduce the risk of unwanted pregnancy, and access to emergency contraception free of charge will protect all women, regardless of resources. Women can also use emergency contraception to avoid unwanted pregnancies and illegal abortions.

Chilean feminists have been empowered through ties to international feminism, although they have also learned not to assume that the causes and manifestations of women’s oppression are the same in every national context. In international conferences, participants often set different priorities, and were sometimes divided by regional and cultural differences, as well as by class, religion, race, sexual orientation, and experience with feminism. In Chile, the history of women’s rights violations and the rise of a movement in defense of gender equity were connected to a very specific history of political negotiations that encouraged women’s temporary cross-class alliances, and also brought solidarity from abroad. The history of Chilean feminist activism showed that the success of feminist mobilization was not an experience of linear progress. Successes, such as the new attention to violence against women, were accompanied by setbacks, such as the end of therapeutic abortion. But although the new global norms that set higher standards for gender equity and women’s rights have not been totally realized in practice, these norms have guided the new government and feminists as they work to develop policies in these areas.

While recent statistics have shown that poor women continue to resort to induced abortion to end unwanted pregnancies, it is unclear what impact the legacies of dictatorship and the historical legacy of social conservatism have had on the views and behaviors of all Chileans.78 In 1991, a survey reported that only 22.4% of the population supported the legalization of induced abortions. A later survey that focused on the larger Santiago area showed that public opinion on abortion divided almost equally: 51% rejected the legalization of therapeutic abortion altogether, but 49% believed it needed to be legalized. Only 23% of those in favor of legalization felt strongly or very strongly about the need for legal changes, suggesting a degree of ambivalence among proponents of decriminalization.79 Other indicators of change show less ambivalence. Chile’s social conservatism has not prevented an increase of women’s political participation—and of women in political positions. Some women—who have an interest in promoting gender equity—have now become decision-makers at the highest level, and have made real what was once unimaginable. In 2006, Michelle Bachelet made history by becoming Chile’s first female president. She ran as a Socialist Party candidate, and
remained outspoken about her goals of addressing the needs of women and the poor. Some of her political weight stemmed from real and symbolic connections to military rule, from her personal experience of prison, torture and exile, and from her loss of family—the dictatorship killed her father. Today, President Bachelet can claim credit for an increase in women’s access to political positions that has risen from a slow start to a remarkable high in some sectors of government.

We should continue to investigate evidence that sheds light on the specific consequences of women’s awareness raising and advocacy initiatives in Chile. It will be important to see to what extent feminists can shape future changes in public opinion, and, thereby, increase the state’s attention to women’s rights. The 2006 death of former dictator Pinochet could help lift some of the weight of the military legacy. In the long run, it could ease the struggle of women’s rights activists who work for constitutional and legal changes in support of gender equity. Much work is needed to identify and analyze the specific options activists have on local and national levels as they attempt to defend global norms of gender equity and women’s rights.

Notes


Women formalized their institutional affiliation in 1979, but had to overcome prejudices against women’s mobilization. Reminiscent of traditional gender systems, they were deemed trustworthy only after they submitted personal data on their families. Academy representatives requested a list of names and occupations from *Círculo* members, and it was not until women identified themselves through their husbands that they were seen as acceptable affiliates. See Chuchryk, *Protest, Politics and Personal Life*, footnotes 28 and 29, pp. 360–361.


As cited in Edda Gaviola, Eliana Largo & Sandra Palestra (1992) ‘Si la mujer no está, la democracia no va’, *Proposiciones*, 21, p. 81.


Ibid.


*El Universal* (Mexico City, 2 July 1975), p. 15, as documented by Jocelyn Olcott, *Star Power*, n. 68.


[37] For ongoing activism on 9/28, see http://www.reddesalud.org/english/sitio/info.asp?Ob=1&Id=541


[42] The memories and personal experiences of exiles varied enormously. In some cases, the sense of having been condemned vied with feelings of betraying those left behind. For some, exile was akin to death, while others found it introduced them to new worlds. For an excellent discussion of the many dimensions of the exile experience, see Loreto Rebollo (2006) Memorias del desarraigo: testimonios de exilio y retorno de hombres y mujeres de Chile (Providencia, Santiago de Chile: Catalonia); for testimonial accounts and historical context, see also Thomas Wright & Rody Oríate (1998) Flight from Chile: voices of exile (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press).


See, for example, the contributions in Komitee für die Freiheit der Politischen Gefangenen Frauen in Chile, *Frauensolidarität*.

Ibid., p. 79.

Ibid., passim.

Ibid., p. 79.

Ibid., pp. 54–69.

Ibid., pp. 46–53.


Maria Isabel Matamala, Interview with the author, August 1998.


Resource Centers and Information Program (n.d.) *Objectives and Background*; see also informal interview with Jaimie Penney (BWHBC), June 9, 2000.


The Guide presented information on international resources for women’s health, including a list of non-governmental organizations, books and films. In addition, it provides background information on, of example, the ‘control of women by medical institutions’ and ‘Self-Help’, health and the environment, and reproductive issues. See *International Women and Health Resource Guide* (1980) Preliminary Draft Edition.


Boniol & Calma Sandoalla, *Coming a Long Way Together*, p. 44.

See Verónica Schild, *Transnational Links*, p. 68.


La Epoca (Santiago, Chile, 7 October 1988), p. 9.

The end of therapeutic abortion violates a number of basic women’s rights, including reproductive rights. See José Barzelatto, María Cristina Calderón, Stephen Isaacs & Lidia Casas (1996) *El aborto en Chile elementos para el debate* (Santiago: CORSAPS).


Sonia Montecino & Josefina Rossetti (1990) *Tramas para un nuevo destino: Propuestas de la Concertación de Mujeres por la Democracia* (Santiago: Concertación de Mujeres por la Democracia).

[73] In theory, SERNAM represented the government’s commitment to incorporate a gender perspective into public policy and to uphold the principle of women’s equal rights with men. In practice, SERNAM had to prove its effectiveness. Some feminists claimed that the agency isolated women’s demands from mainstream politics and lamented that gender-specific legislation received varying degrees of attention depending on the changing interests of the state. For views on the role of SERNAM see, for example, Merike H. Blofield & Liesl Haas (2005) Defining a Democracy: reforming the laws on women’s rights in Chile, 1990–2002, Latin American Politics & Society, 47(3), pp. 35–68, and Susan Franceschet (2005) Women and Politics in Chile (Boulder: Lynne Rienner), pp. 111–115.


[77] Ibid.


[82] In 2006, Bachelet elevated the presence of women in Parliament to 15% (slightly below the Latin American average) and female senators to 50% (the highest percentage in Latin America). About 18% of the seats of national legislatures in Latin America and the Caribbean were held by women. See Pamela Marie Paxton & Melanie M. Hughes (2007) Women, Politics, and Power: a global perspective (Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press), pp. 228–229.