

INTRODUCTION

IN 1872, Chilean writer Martina Barros Borgoño made it her personal task to translate into Spanish the acclaimed *On the Subjection of Women*, a work by Englishman, moral philosopher, and political theorist John Stuart Mill.¹ In a provocative prologue that gave her a name as a respected voice among Santiago's intellectuals, Barros Borgoño introduced what she considered Mill's most important contributions to a critique of gender roles at the time, and added her own conclusions regarding the role of women in society.² She argued that Mill rightfully exposed some of the fundamental contradictions of societies where men used references to women's "natural qualities" to justify women's limited access to social and political rights.³ Mill had rightly identified a contradiction at the heart of patriarchy: men believed that they had a legal obligation to force women to engage in their supposed "natural vocations": marriage and motherhood.⁴

Barros Borgoño viewed these contradictions not as an invitation to ignore all "natural differences" among the sexes, but instead as a call to question the seemingly unavoidable consequences of what men termed "women's nature." Why would men in Chile consider it their obligation to force women to choose between marriage and the convent? In her critique, she defended a woman's right to make motherhood a choice and she requested women's access to "social rights," to an education, and to a career. Barros Borgoño provoked her readers by asking questions that had not yet been asked in Chilean society: "[W]ho would accept the tremendous responsibility of forcing you to become a wife or a nun if you had not been born with the ability to be a wife or a nun? In the name of what obligation [could anyone] . . . command such useless sacrifice for society or for God?"⁵

She demanded a new take on the “natural rights” of men and women, in the spirit of Mill’s liberal feminism. Both genders should have the right to select their paths based on individual “natural” abilities to avoid “useless sacrifice for society or for God.”⁶ Barros Borgoño dared to question women’s “natural,” supposedly predetermined path and argued that women’s reproductive capacities should not define their roles in society. Her concerns did not meet a widespread response during the 1870s. They did, however, provide an ideological foundation for her compatriots in the twentieth century, who passionately debated women’s “natural” roles and “natural” vocations. Mothers and motherhood became the central concerns of different groups of women and men in Chile, including feminists, reformers, policymakers, doctors, and legislators.

Motherhood and Women’s Rights

Barros Borgoño’s call to question the seemingly unavoidable consequences of “women’s nature” is part of the historical trajectory of women’s rights in Chile that can be seen through the lens of the changing social constructions and political uses of the concept of motherhood. Motherhood, as the most important signifier of womanhood in Latin America, has been at the heart of the gender system and critical for defining women’s responsibilities throughout the nation. As such, different meanings assigned to motherhood have stood for different qualities associated with the supposed “essence” of femininity. The image of the sanctity of motherhood continues to shape Latin American realities. “Sacar la madre” (to bring out the mother) and question her virtue is still one of the worst possible insults.⁷ But motherhood has also stood for women’s submissiveness and dependency, justifying the lack of women’s individual rights.

Stories of “mothers and machos,” of dependent women and controlling men, have often dominated interpretations of historical change in Latin America. But the gendered access to citizenship rights was much more complex than the hierarchies reflected in these simple dichotomous definitions.⁸ My lens of motherhood builds on the historian Marysa Navarro’s critique of the *marianismo* model by showing that *marianismo* remains insufficient to explain even the persistent reliance on motherhood as a political tool.⁹ Referring to an ideal of womanhood modeled after the Virgin Mary oversimplifies the realities

of women's lives and wrongly suggests that women have been passive recipients of roles assigned to them by men. Women, just like men, mobilized the category of motherhood, and thereby challenged the stereotype of passive, dependent mothers. In Chile, different groups of women reconfigured the understandings of motherhood throughout the twentieth century and made clear that gender relations exceed the binary concept of identities labeled *marianismo* and *machismo*.

Neither gender politics, nor gender roles, were shaped by men alone—and motherhood has not been a role simply imposed on women by men. In the Latin American Southern Cone, even outspoken feminists embraced motherhood as a vital part of their early political mobilization and celebrated their feminism as a natural extension of their maternal role. The historian Asunción Lavrin has shown the centrality of motherhood to feminism in the Latin American Southern Cone and asserted that “[f]eminism oriented toward motherhood was more than a strategy to win favorable legislation, it was an essential component of their cultural heritage: a tune that feminists not only knew how to play but wished to play.”¹⁰ Scholars have also demonstrated how Chilean women have used references to motherhood to increase their political weight. The historian Ericka Verba, for example, has illustrated how elite and middle-class women in Santiago addressed what they saw as alarming by-products of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization. Concerned about lower-class behaviors, these women made it their mission to “uplift” poor women.¹¹ Other groups of Chilean women have mobilized the category of motherhood in quests for more radical change and for political rights. They used motherhood not only as a “tune they knew,” but as an effective tool that could extend the reach of their political campaigns. Feminists of the Movimiento Pro-Emancipación de la Mujer Chilena (Movement for the Emancipation of Chilean Women, MEMCh), for example, drew on the discourses of the parties on the political left—communists and socialists—that framed their quests for workers’ rights as mothers’ and families’ rights.¹²

The Politics of Motherhood shows that the social construction of women's roles, as mothers and as individuals, lies at the heart of gender systems and patriarchal structures and argues that the lens of motherhood offers revealing new insights into specific histories of women's rights. Gender is fundamental to the construction of political power and to hierarchies between men and women, and analyzing the changing social constructions of motherhood allows us to follow and draw conclusions about the changing state of women's

rights over time—and in particular environments.¹³ The work of the historian Marcela Nari, on political motherhood in Argentina, for example, illustrates that doctors, educators, and legislators attempted to “naturalize” women’s maternal roles between 1890 and 1940. Unlike the Chilean case, the Argentines’ maternalization of women was greatly inspired by the quest to populate the country, and religious considerations helped doctors to defend a pro-natalist policy early on.¹⁴ In both countries, nonetheless, doctors helped support state policy, and medical debates helped naturalize women’s maternal identities. In Chile and Argentina, health officials and politicians created feminine ideals and prescriptions for “proper” mothering that some women found impossible to attain and that other women rejected in their quest for full and equal citizenship.

The focus on motherhood as a privileged lens reveals its uses in debates over women’s rights and obligations.¹⁵ The competing uses of motherhood by state officials, physicians, and different groups of women show the frontiers and fault lines of women’s place as citizens. While professionals have deployed motherhood as a means of social control and a justification for female dependency, different women have contested and appropriated disempowering stereotypes of motherhood throughout the twentieth century. Diverse groups of women have also profited from and contributed to the reshaping of a global paradigm of women’s rights, most prominently in the postwar period.

Motherhood and Chile’s Path to Modernity

The fast-paced changes of industrialization and urbanization in the twentieth century provoked unprecedented debates on the meanings of motherhood. Doctors, policymakers, and male and female reformers voiced concerns over “unfit mothers,” and contributed to modifications of the politics of motherhood throughout the past century. Women from all class backgrounds made varied quests for women’s rights that have surged and resurged. In Santiago, the capital city, residents experienced firsthand the changes that transformed the country from a predominantly agrarian nation to an urban one, where doctors, politicians, and different groups of women continuously negotiated the meanings of motherhood and women’s rights.

Ambivalence toward modernity accompanied the economic, political, and social changes brought about by industrialization and urbanization in the

changing nation. Industrialization reshaped everyday life, first for Santiago's urban residents, then slowly and steadily for most Chileans who witnessed the rise of new technologies, the transformation of the nature of work, and the changing needs and characteristics of the labor force. Modernization stood for a break with the past in the lives of both those who abandoned their rural homes to come to the capital and those who saw their urban neighborhoods expand and transform. Many Chileans might have felt the "nostalgia of things that had passed" and "sorrow for the *barrio* that had changed," as expressed by those who played the tango known as "El Sur." Many have tried to forget their pains in the bars of Santiago, where rising alcohol consumption provoked great concern among reformers and health officials.¹⁶

Authorities also addressed the anxieties they felt about change by insisting on protecting the continuity of such gendered responsibilities as women's role as mothers. A 1908 editorial in Santiago's newspaper *El Mercurio* exemplified what was at stake from the perspectives of policymakers and reformers for much of the first half of the twentieth century. It dwelled on the image of a helpless woman-mother who "wears herself out in the workday and wages are insufficient to bring the restorative and sufficient food to her lips; . . . the mother is destroyed as she surrenders herself to work, and . . . [her child] bears the marks of the miserable 'terrain' where the first roots of its life were sown."¹⁷ Indeed, working-class mothers in particular provoked concern and prompted legal changes as women became wage earners in industrializing cities.¹⁸ The image of mothers in need of help revealed the burning concerns that were on the minds of legislators and social reformers: how could mothers be protected from the dangerous consequences of work, and how could they be sheltered from the impacts of urban life that would compromise their maternal mission?

The lives of these "vulnerable" Chilean mothers unfolded in a "male republic," in the midst of a political setting where women still had access only to limited citizenship. In 1822, the first Chilean Constitution addressed citizens as naturally gendered males. And a century later, the 1925 Constitution confirmed the political disenfranchisement of women.¹⁹ Even after women had gained the right to vote in the national elections in 1949, they remained politically, socially, and economically marginalized. Few women held political office, and only a limited number of women were admitted to institutions of higher education. A case in point was medical education: from 1910 to 1960, fewer than five hundred women were permitted to study medicine at the

University of Chile.²⁰ The Medical School limited women's enrollment by adhering to the low end of its quota—a maximum of 10 percent of total enrollments—thereby ensuring women's limited professional advancement in the field.²¹ Added to this was the enduring prejudice against female professionals. Officials, alleging that women professionals might neglect their domestic roles, excluded women from medical careers and other fields of higher education and specialized professions.²²

Nonetheless, different groups of women and feminists contested “official” constructions of motherhood, with varying degrees of success. In the 1920s, Elena Caffarena, for example, earned a law degree, became a labor inspector, and mobilized for the political rights of women and workers. In 1935, she became a founding member of MEMCh. When interviewed about the negative influence political activism or work could have on a woman's femininity, she replied: “If work influenced femininity, then, believe me, there would not be any femininity left in the world.”²³

Local Women in a Global World

From the poor women who visited Santiago's health clinics, to the political activists who protested dictatorship or joined the emerging debates on reproductive rights, women's lives illustrate the concrete effects of seemingly abstract policy changes and economic transitions. The nature of women's political involvement changed dramatically and varied according to class, age, experience, and the political climate of the time. In the 1930s, middle-class and elite women tried to reform poor women they deemed in need of help. In the same decade, MEMCh mobilized women from all classes to support women's political rights. The group also addressed the problem of abortion and high maternal death rates in its journal *La mujer nueva* (The new woman). Lower-class women, meanwhile, were dying in alarming numbers as a result of resorting to backstreet abortions, when the burden of motherhood became too heavy to bear.

Twentieth-century Chilean history is marked by striking changes in political leadership. Those reveal a different intensity when addressed from the perspective of Chilean women in the global world. The anthropologists Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp have illustrated the importance of adopting a global lens to examine the intersecting interests of states and international institu-

tions as they construct the contexts within which local reproductive relations—and the politics of motherhood—are played out.²⁴ In Chile, physicians like Benjamín Viel exemplify one dimension of the intricate connections among these levels. A key figure in the foundation of both the Chilean Public Health System in 1952 and the first family-planning programs in poor Santiago neighborhoods, Viel was Harvard- and Johns Hopkins-trained and secured support from the Rockefeller Foundation and other U.S. sources for birth control programs in Chile. His outspoken support of a neo-Malthusian position typified the global alliances among physicians and politicians in the Americas. All agreed on a politics of fertility regulation that prioritized population decline and ignored local women's voices. The impact of the doctors' work and the political changes that resulted from contests over motherhood were both symbolic and materially real. Doctors' global connections and national policies profoundly changed local women's lives.

Chileans did not merely respond to changing global paradigms, but actively participated in their construction. A new understanding of international relations in the Americas comes from examining the ties among medical practitioners of the United States and Chile, for example. These ties are frequently misunderstood within imperialism's narrow theoretical framework.²⁵ In the history of U.S.–Latin American relations, scholars have often portrayed imperialism as a one-way imposition of ideas between unequal representatives of more and less developed nations. The politics of motherhood, however, show a world of collaboration among doctors and scientists across national economic and political boundaries. Physicians and politicians created understandings of motherhood within a fluid global world of scientific concepts. The hierarchies between nation-states remained secondary, after health officials across the Americas agreed on a neo-Malthusian paradigm and subsequently pushed control over women's reproductive lives to the center of global attention.

Chilean women also acted as agents of change, and different groups of women challenged doctors and policymakers who attempted to control the meanings of motherhood. Female reformers—concerned about health, welfare, and the future of children in the Americas—built international networks early on and often set the agenda of international conferences.²⁶ Diverse Chilean ties to international feminisms were most pronounced in the 1970s, inspired also by the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–1985) and by global and regional feminist meetings. Globally, feminism (and the different

regional and local manifestations of feminisms) became a legitimate vehicle for change—accompanied by a thriving discourse in defense of women’s rights. In Chile, diverse feminist groups helped translate motherhood into a new political practice and mobilized for gender equity. Women from different class backgrounds, with varied ties to feminism, transformed the understanding of motherhood as a fixed, essentialized identity, and set in motion new quests for women’s citizenship rights. But through the lens of motherhood, we also see unexpected turns and regressions in the history of women’s rights that have often been unacknowledged in narratives that follow traditional political chronologies.

This book further complicates recent challenges to the widely accepted belief that democracies expand the rights of the populace and that dictatorships restrict these rights. In a comparative study of Argentina, Brazil, and Chile between the 1960s and the 1990s, the political scientist Mala Htun has analyzed how these countries reformed discriminatory laws and demonstrated that an expansion of women’s legal rights did not result automatically from particular types of government. Surprisingly, women secured unprecedented legal rights under dictatorships in Argentina and Brazil.²⁷ Although I concur with Htun’s assessment that legislators and feminists saw women’s rights as less pressing under democracy than under dictatorship, the case of Chile, where women saw unprecedented restrictions to their rights under the military, shows very limited evidence of legal changes in favor of gender equity. While some women gained new rights, women in general were subjected to new rigid regulations that compromised their health and reproductive rights. On the eve of democratic transition in 1989, the military eradicated the legal power of a husband to control and administer his wife’s moves, but left intact the property rights that gave him sole control over all resources. The regime also made another last-minute change that affected women’s lives: it criminalized abortion under all circumstances.

Fertile Meanings and Barren Truths

Chilean history elucidates the primacy of gender in the process of urbanization and industrialization, as argued by the historian Susan Besse in her foundational study on the restructuring of patriarchy in Brazil.²⁸ Male policymakers, intellectuals, and Church officials acted upon their fear of the destructive

effects that a change in women's roles could have on the very foundations of society. In the process, they explored new means of limiting women's agency in a changing society. Gender-based hierarchies in patriarchal societies have continuously assigned a disproportionate amount of political power to men and have set limits to women's rights as citizens. Simultaneously, women have contested, challenged, and expanded the boundaries of patriarchal restrictions in the course of the twentieth century.

Chapter 1 exposes the tensions over women's proper roles in society and pits the construction of "unfit motherhood" by health officials and policy-makers against women's struggle for political rights. It shows a new politics of motherhood, justified by public concern for the terrible hardships of poor mothers and their children, especially the high rates of infant mortality. An analysis of public health and managed motherhood concurs with the proposition of historian Ann Zulawki that "no other issue . . . more clearly demonstrates the connection between medicine and politics than the debate about women's health, because it was at base a debate about citizenship and women's roles in the nation."²⁹ In Chile, doctors in alliance with the state vowed to support the nation's path to modernity by controlling and educating women they designated "unfit mothers." In the process, they cast mothers as the progenitors of new citizens and new workers, and inserted the issue of maternal health into broader discourses on modernity and citizenship. Different groups of women contributed to these debates and often challenged claims about women's "nature" and mothers' obligations to the nation. Early feminists united women from various classes to demand political rights.

Chapter 2 addresses the agency of women who gained special attention as mothers whose lives were at risk. Doctors documented high maternal mortality rates as a result of induced, illegal abortions that had reached epidemic levels. Health officials and policymakers resorted to a specific version of a Chilean "pro-life discourse" that justified pioneering family-planning programs as a means to save women's lives.³⁰ Women's demands from below led to changes in health policies from above, and doctors responded to women's desperate desire to space their pregnancies. Although women gained access to expanded medical services and saw some improvements in their lives, they also experienced limits to their freedoms. There were few options to making motherhood a woman's individual choice in the context of her own life. When doctors and health officials connected the local politics of motherhood in Chile to the global politics of reproduction, they also contributed to the

emergence of a new population control paradigm and to fears of “uncontrolled motherhood.” This led to the construction of responsible mothers as “saviors of the nation.”³¹ In this view, mothers themselves should promote national development by controlling their pregnancies and supporting small, modern families for the modernizing nation.

In the 1960s, doctors addressed mothers as “bearers” of an excess of motherhood, producing families that were too large. Chapter 3 reveals the consequences of rising fears of population explosion, especially in developing worlds. Chilean and global population planners viewed women’s unguarded reproductive capacities as detrimental to political and economic stability. Doctors used both the global paradigm of population control and national concerns about maternal mortality to institutionalize family planning with the support of the Catholic Church. Strikingly, the first Christian Democratic government in Latin America, guided by Christian Social doctrine, was also the first to support a nationwide family-planning program in Chile. These developments resulted from the interaction among different historical actors—population planners, doctors, politicians, and representatives of the Catholic Church. Many women found new ways to use family-planning services they deemed appropriate. Nonetheless, officials simultaneously connected these services to obligations they expected women to fulfill. Mothers were now held responsible for limiting family size for the sake of modernization.

Chapter 4 draws on debates over motherhood and birth control to explore the obstacles to women’s rights and gender equity under a leftist government that was crippled by sexism. President Allende’s Unidad Popular (UP), a coalition government under socialist leadership, promised to secure full and equal citizenship rights for all Chileans. However, in the course of its short tenure (1970–1973), the government failed to deliver on its promises to women and placed even further restrictions on the option of voluntary motherhood. Historian Sandra McGee Deutsch has maintained that the UP was guided by “[a] simplistic faith in socialism as the automatic solution to Chilean problems, including that of discrimination against women.”³² Indeed, men who led the “Peaceful Road to Socialism” in Chile ignored, even reproduced, gender-based discrimination in Chilean society. But the global lens must also be considered—for example, the international political fronts shaped by the Cold War—to understand the difficulties of promoting gender equity at this time. Women’s rights as citizens were severely restricted, as they were squeezed between the right wing’s appropriation of the discourse of motherhood and

the left's anti-imperialist stance. Suspicious of ties between Chilean family planners and foreign birth control initiatives, UP policymakers constrained family-planning programs against the wishes of many women eager to regulate motherhood. The blame thus lay not only on Allende's administration, but also on the deep sexist consensus across international political lines.

Chapter 5 shows the complexities in women's roles as "subversive mothers" who protested right-wing violence and political oppression. Women invoked traditional obligations of motherhood as they entered the public arena and demonstrated against the political leadership in the name of protecting their families. Although some subversive mothers had protested Allende's government and set the stage for a new politicization of motherhood, a different militant motherhood inspired the political restructuring under dictatorship. These women contributed to the end of military rule and created a fresh understanding of citizenship rights: in the process of navigating repressive conditions under dictatorship, women transformed a rights discourse from *mothers'* rights to *women's* rights. Both middle-class and poor women mobilized and helped transform motherhood as a political tool to demand full citizenship rights. Women's movements in Chile contributed to the remarkable re-configuration of a women's rights discourse. Their international ties supplied key contributions to these developments.

Chapter 6 examines the specific circumstances of Chilean women's international ties and explores their empowerment through connections to global feminisms. It explores the strengths and the limits that a new global discourse of women's rights had on women's local empowerment. With the celebration of International Women's Year in 1975 and the beginning of the UN Decade of Women (1975–1985), women also participated in the creation of an innovative global discussion on women's rights. Chilean women used global connections during the 1980s and 1990s to empower themselves, and used these international connections to demand gender equity back home. Many women became knowledgeable about international feminist movements through returning exiles; others traveled to participate in international conferences and used a global paradigm on women's rights to make demands under the new democracy. Back in Chile, they addressed specific obstacles in their ongoing struggles for rights, especially with regard to health and reproductive rights. In the 1990s and into the new millennium, Chilean women felt the consequences of ideological and economic legacies remnant of military rule. These legacies would manifest in, for example, more difficult access to health care in

a neoliberal competitive market as well as the illegality of therapeutic abortion. Adapting feminist political strategies to contemporary realities, Chilean women have continued to rely on transnational and national feminist ties as sources of collective empowerment to contest these and other violations of women's rights.³³

A culture of feminist mobilization around changing conceptualizations of motherhood has served as a driving force for diverse patterns of women's activism in the 1930s as well as throughout the 1990s. Chilean women have increased their interpretive power, have assigned new meanings to motherhood and womanhood, and have created space for a reconfiguration of women's rights in Chile. From the benevolent maternalist women who protected the traditions of motherhood and the family in the early twentieth century, to the militant mothers who demanded new rights in subsequent decades, women have been agents of change. This trajectory shows that from the perspective of local women, the periodization of Chilean national developments and the meaning of global connections appear in fresh light. Global paradigms of population control, international ties of Chilean health officials, and the global ties of feminists mattered greatly to the construction of gender equity in Chile.