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Feminism in Chile

# Democracy in the home and the bed - Chile's day of women

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**Chilean women have hit the headlines recently on social media around the world with their performance denouncing violence against women which has been taken up in [countries around the world](#).** But women's protests didn't start in November.

The women's demonstration and strike this March in Chile was the country's biggest protest since the early 1990s, organised from scratch and as inclusive as possible. They had much to protest about: life, death and income.

More than 350,000 people marched through central Santiago on 8 March to celebrate International Women's Day and Chile's first ever feminist strike. Most were young women; some had brought their partners and children. Under the watchful eyes of the Carabineros, Chile's national police, they sang, danced and shouted. Stray dogs followed the joyful yet angry demonstration.

There were human rights activists and women who had survived the military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, 1973-89. Many, like Alicia Lira, head of the Association of Relatives of Political Executees (AFEP), carried photographs of missing female relatives: 'The reasons why the dictatorship murdered them are exactly the same as the reasons we are marching today. They wanted to build a free and equal society.'

There were slogans about violence towards women, discrimination against lesbians and transgender people, poor conditions for female migrants and equal pay. Alongside NGOs, civil associations and trade unions were Mapuche women in tribal costume, protesting against oppression of their people. A student carried a placard that read 'Liberate my ovaries: make abortion a right, safe and free of charge!' Women from working-class neighbourhoods, organised through the Ukamau network, demanded a right to housing. The Bread and Roses movement, with close ties to the small Revolutionary Workers' Party had turned out, as had a few leftwing members of the national congress. At the head of the march was a huge banner protesting against the increasing precarity of life.

## 'It was a gut reaction'

Conservative activist Javiera Rodr guez said, 'It's typical of leftwing groups and Marxists. They say they want to bring people together, but in the end they just muddle everything up. They started out calling for a demonstration on International Women's Day. Then it became a demonstration for "oppressed" women, for "working" women and so on. The people who turned out found themselves marching for pensions reform, and against pension funds, for the right to abortion or gay marriage.'

Rodr guez came to notice in 2018 during the feminist occupation of her university, when she took down a banner that read 'No to harassment at the Catholic University' (in Santiago): 'I couldn't accept the image this slogan was giving our university. It was a gut reaction. I tore it down, and I confronted the occupiers. And I told them what I thought in front of the TV cameras. I did it out of respect for order and for our institutions. Some people will say I'm a fascist, but I don't care.'

But the organisers of the 8 March demonstration felt the success was historic, if unexpected. It was one of the biggest demonstrations since 1990, when Chile began its transition to democracy; 800,000 marched in more than 60 towns and cities across the country, including small provincial towns that had seen nothing like it in 30 years.

The success was all the more surprising since Chile is a conservative country with a civil code that dates back to 1855. Divorce was only legalised in 2004 and abortion (partially) decriminalised in 2017, after decades of obstruction by the major political parties and the Catholic Church. [1]

A few days before the march, there was already a response from the higher levels of government. President Sebastián Piñera (a multimillionaire businessman re-elected in 2017 having previously served 2010-14) appeared on one of the many private television channels that support him, calling for calm: 'It's wrong to hijack the noble cause of full equality of rights and duties between men and women. I believe a strike is unnecessary, because our government has adopted the feminist cause as its own.'

His nervousness may have stemmed from memories of the student demonstrations in 2018, against sexual harassment and for non-sexist education. Universities were occupied and reluctantly forced to acknowledge problems that went back many years. High-profile faculty members were targeted and some were suspended, including the former president of the Constitutional Tribunal. Even the venerable Pontifical Catholic University of Chile in Santiago (home of the 'Chicago boys' who advised Pinochet during the military dictatorship) was occupied, angering Rodríguez. That hadn't happened since 1986.

## Women's demands have old roots

This year's feminist mobilisation was much smaller than the huge student demonstrations of 2011, during Piñera's first term of office. [2] Those who took to the streets then, and those who answered the call for a feminist strike on 8 March, wanted Chile to break with the terrible heritage of the military dictatorship. Successive Concertación governments (a centre-left coalition including the Socialists (PS), Party for Democracy (PDD) and Christian Democrats (PDC)) had failed to do this during two decades in power (1990-2010).

But the demands of today's feminists have older roots. Historian Luna Follegati said, 'The feminist movement has never disappeared, despite ups and down in its visibility. Rather than "waves", there have been three major periods. From the early 20th century to the 1950s it focused on political and civic demands (notably the right to vote, won in 1949). In the 1980s, working-class women fiercely resisted the dictatorship. In recent years the struggle has focused on issues of sexual diversity, queer theory and so on.'

## The feminist movement has never disappeared, despite ups and down in its visibility

The powerful Pro-Emancipation Movement of Chilean Women (MEMCH), originally active from 1935 to 1953, used strikes to demand the right to contraception and abortion, the legalisation of divorce and equal pay. MEMCH's founders, including Elena Caffarena and Olga Poblete, helped to re-establish the organisation in 1983 to fight the military regime. With them were political scientist Julieta Kirkwood and architect Margarita Pisano, who came up with the slogan 'Democracy in the country, in the house and in the bed'.

The democratic transition of 1989-90 preserved the dictatorship's economic model and Pinochet's constitution. The demobilisation of critical voices also allowed the emergence of the 'consensus democracy' much praised by Chilean employers. The feminist movement, gradually losing its focus, drifted into gender policy, limiting itself to reforms compatible with the ideology of the supremacy of the market, to which many progressives converted. Some

women managed to make the highest levels of the state as long as they did not upset the status quo; at the bottom, women from the working class and indigenous peoples saw no improvement in their situation.

## ‘Mother of all Chileans’

Socialist Michelle Bachelet, a victim of the dictatorship, agnostic and single, became a government minister in the 2000s, became South America's first popularly elected female president in 2006, and was re-elected in 2014, playing on her image as ‘mother of all Chileans’. But she did no more to advance the feminist cause than she did to break with the social liberalism of her political clan. ‘She achieved almost nothing during her first term,’ said Gael Yeomans in her constituency office in the working-class municipality of San Miguel.

Yeomans is a member of the left wing of the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) coalition, formed in 2017, which brings together political movements from centre to far left, including some that emerged from the student movement of 2011. ‘During Bachelet's second term,’ she said, ‘one positive measure was the creation – finally!’ of a ministry for Women's Affairs and Gender Equality. But it got neither the budget nor the political attention it needed to be properly effective in every area of society. Even the law on violence against women was neglected, and eventually the right appropriated the initiative.’

The Women's Agenda, a package of legislation launched by Piñera in May 2018, combined a conservative vision (in which women were mostly reduced to the role of mothers) and economic neoliberalism. It called for parity of numbers on corporate boards of directors and a universal right to childcare for women with a stable employment contract (which restricted its scope in a country where precarious employment is widespread, especially for women). Fewer than half of Chilean women are in paid work, and 31% have no contract or social or health insurance, or the right to unionise. [3] The president frequently says he supports the ‘rights of woman’ (a singular that tends to reduce women to a mere idea), but fools no one: he is known for his misogynistic jibes, reported in the media throughout his career. He is also under pressure from his partners in the coalition government, now a minority in parliament, who include members of Opus Dei, anti-abortion activists and former supporters of Pinochet.

Rightwing members of the national congress have persuaded the Constitutional Tribunal to accept the idea that institutions as well as individuals can be conscientious objectors to abortion. Healthcare in Chile is mainly private and provided by religious organisations, and a clinic can now declare that no abortions will be carried out on its premises, thereby excusing itself from complying with both domestic and international law.

## ‘Not one less!’

Chile's feminist movement is not concerned only by the domestic situation. It is a bottom-up movement, driven by street demonstrations, and recognises itself in the calls for a women's strike in Poland in October 2016, in the mass demonstrations in Madrid after men convicted of rape were released in 2018, and in the writings of Silvia Federici, Cinzia Arruzza, Nancy Fraser and Tithi Bhattacharya. But its main concern is Latin America: green scarves, representing the struggle for the right to abortion in Argentina, have crossed the Andes, as has the slogan ‘¡Ni una menos!’ (Not one less), denouncing the murder of women. This southern feminism draws on experience of conferences in South America since the 1980s, although these have been marked by growing divisions. There is a common desire to protest against the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez (Mexico), San Salvador and Guatemala.

The coordinating committee for the 8 March demonstration was formed in early 2018 in Santiago, and later

established links with other organisations in the provinces. Local women's assemblies drew up mobilisation programmes. A year on, the committee still has no offices but has been joined by more than 60 organisations.

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*Alondra Carillo*

Working committees for social coordination, communication and logistics were set up, and spokeswomen elected on a rotating basis to vary the age, sexual orientation, social background and viewpoint of those in charge. 'We wanted to break away from the male, patriarchal model of organisation, which you find in politics, even on the left,' said an activist. Neighbourhood strike committees, posts on social networks and street canvassing by feminist brigades all helped to ensure the success of the 8 March demonstration.

Alondra Carillo, a spokeswoman for the movement, told me that the idea of a feminist strike emerged 'precisely because the right to strike is guaranteed for no one. Our aim was to rehabilitate strikes as a political tool.' Under labour laws adopted by the dictatorship in 1979, the right to stop work was reduced to a minimum for all workers, as was the freedom to unionise. This restrictive legislation means that most strikes by those workers who still dare to mobilise are declared illegal, and public sector employees are totally deprived of this fundamental right. Carillo said, 'The idea of a strike also implied the involvement of both women and men, even if women would play the leading role ... and men would provide support, by organising food and drink and child-minding.'

Hundreds of women became involved despite their differences. Some wanted to work in exclusively single-sex environments (with no men present); others opposed this. Some wanted to establish contact with political parties, the state and the media; others felt this was too risky.

## 'Legal, safe and free of charge'

The Women in Struggle Conference in December 2018 brought together 1,200 women from across Chile, who formulated the call for a strike. According to Carrillo, the programme the conference drew up aims to bring feminism into every aspect of the social movement with demands for 'de-commercialised, non-sexist, anti-colonial and secular education'; for recognition of the right to self-determination of indigenous peoples; for abortion to be 'legal, safe and free of charge'; and for 'an end to political, sexual and economic violence against women'.

According to official figures, nearly a third of Chilean women are sexually assaulted at least once in their lifetime. The Chilean Network Against Violence Towards Women has for several years condemned the fact that, on average, one woman is killed by a man every week in Chile (and that is not necessarily considered femicide by the law). Activists equate this with the violence of the neoliberal capitalist economic model. Carillo and her comrades take the opposite view to the government and policies currently in force, pointing out the intersections between gender, race and class domination.

Women are among the biggest losers in Chile's ultra-capitalist economic model: Chile has a 45-hour working week, 70% of employees earn less than \$825 a month, and women are paid 30% less than men. They are discriminated against by health insurance schemes because of the possibility that they will become pregnant. Chile has entrusted pensions entirely to pension funds since the 1980s, at the instigation of José Piñera, brother of the current president and labour minister under the dictatorship.

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The coordinating committee faces criticism from within Chile and outside that threatens its desire for unity. Mapuche poet Daniela Catrileo, a member of the decolonial collective Rangitūhū, said, ‘The dominant feminist movement today is closely linked to the student movement and the struggle against sexual harassment in universities ... The racialisation of women, the demands of the Mapuche people, and internal colonialism were not sufficiently visible or taken into account. We were also critical of the call for a “feminist strike” because this term, which comes mainly from the North and from European movements, tends to exclude many migrants and women in precarious jobs.’ Carrillo responded, ‘We suggested four modes of action: a strike at the workplace, if the workers’ situation allows it; stopping care and unpaid work in the home; suspending consumption; and public demonstrations.’

Demonstration was the core mode for 8 March. The Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Chile (CUT), the biggest trade union organisation, did not support the call for a strike, which did not help the movement. The CUT has a female president, the communist Bárbara Figueroa, but its leadership has always been reluctant to support movements it doesn’t control. Nevertheless, in some towns, including the port of Valparaiso, militant trade unions turned out, and were repressed by police. Other public sector workers’ organisations (the College of Teachers of Chile and the National Confederation of Municipal Health Workers) were also committed.

## ‘We have made progress’

Karina Nohales, an expert on employment law, was happy at the progress made in just a few months, though there were still problems, especially in reaching Santiago’s many deprived neighbourhoods (poblaciones), female migrants and low-paid workers. The prevailing image of feminists as mainly white and middle-class makes people reluctant to get involved. ‘However,’ she said, ‘the feminist struggle is now better represented in the poblaciones and some trade unions, especially in sectors [education, healthcare, government] where there is a significant proportion of women. The coordinating committee’s goal is to find an approach that appeals to all women and addresses the expectations both of working class women and migrants, and also of women who are often regarded as “middle-class”, though in neoliberal Chile they are in reality especially the young up to their necks in debt, despite their university degrees.’

The strike was seen as a huge step forward. The committee plans to build on it, completing the founding programme by opening it up to discussion and strengthening cooperation throughout Chile and internationally. The aim is to strengthen bridges to female migrants, older women and minors, and build them to female prison inmates. Carrillo said, ‘It’s a case of showing that feminism is a real solution, especially at a time when the far right and reactionary movements are gaining strength throughout our region.’

Surveys show the Catholic Church is steadily losing ground in Chile, and paedophile scandals covered up by the church hierarchy have made matters worse. Meanwhile, evangelical sects are gaining ground in working-class neighbourhoods, and not all are fundamentalist (two female pastors have taken part in feminist gatherings). Some small groups with fascist leanings regularly and violently attack feminists, lesbians and transgender people. And reconfigurations of political movements have allowed far-right politicians to come to the fore in the media and at elections, including lower house member José Antonio Kast (Republican Action party), a critic of ‘gender ideology’. Kast fiercely opposes abortion and those he refers to as ‘cardboard feminists’, and praises the ‘real Chilean woman’, who is, he says, a Catholic, a nationalist and a housewife.

Source: May 2019, English edition [Le Monde Diplomatique](#) .

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[1] Abortion is only authorised in cases of rape, immediate danger to the mother, or non-viability of the foetus.

[2] (2) See Hervé Kempf, [â€˜Chile's southern spring'](#), Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, November 2011.

[3] National Statistics Institute of Chile, Santiago, October-December 2017.