Supermadres y la mujer política: An Analysis of Female Political Mobilization in Latin America with Lessons from Chile and Argentina

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Supermadres y la mujer política:

An Analysis of Female Political Mobilization in Latin America

with Lessons from Chile and Argentina

Victoria Leah Falkner

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Introduction:

As Thomas Friedman has argued, the world has become flat. Through globalization the comparison between cultures, societies, countries is now an every day occurrence. The field of politics has changed substantially. One hundred and fifty years ago politics was based on the theoretical ideal: how people groups should and could act. However, today our politics are more prominently noted by how people groups do act in relation to one another. In essence, politics has become more comparative in nature. That being said, a type of measuring stick, therefore has been created for any given issue. If we were to talk about taxation, perhaps we would want to focus on some of the northern Europe states as a potential ideal, or if rapid economic integration were of interest, most likely China would be of importance. All this to say that some cultures or regions of the world are simply of more importance to study because of the light they shed on the underlying universal issues or principles. This is most certainly the case for Latin America and it’s relation to female political vitality.

To study female political life in Latin America speaks to the larger question of democratization in Latin America, for “women’s participation in all aspects of any democratic society is crucial to the quality of democracy itself”\(^1\) in that given locale. Hence, an in-depth study of the trends and trajectories of women in Latin American political life allows for certain conclusions to be drawn on the overall trajectory and health of democracy as well.

There is an intrinsically intriguing aspect of this field study, the idea that some Latin American states are traversing the norm. In a society marked by its patriarchy and traditionalism, many Latin American states are passing bars set by supposed highly developed democracies, in terms of female political participation and representation. Therefore, here lies a further investigation of how Latin American politics are arguably eroding some of the more traditionally held cultural rules as the globalized West’s influence has percolated down south. Specifically,

Latin American politics have traditionally been heavily dictated by the machismo-prevalent culture, thus creating a highly male-centered political environment, Despite the pervasive patriarchal tendencies of Latin American societies, there is an increasing trend towards higher levels of female political leadership and participation, hence highlighting a slow overturning of this patriarchal political culture. Chile is one of the most distinct poster children of this trend, and thus serves as an ideal case study to see this political phenomenon developing in Latin America. Therefore, an overall exploration of what makes for increased women’s political equality in Latin America is needed, and this Chile is central to study inasmuch as it marks the path for many other Latin American states to follow.

**Definition of Concepts and the Female Social Image:**

Before exploring the deeper plight of women in Latin America and specifically Chile, a definition of certain concepts would be beneficial for those less keen to Latin American culture and political life. First, is the concept of ‘machismo,’ a type of patriarchy specific to Latin American societies. As one academic explains, machismo is “the cluster of male traits related to the masculine honor as it dictates cultural and political environments”\(^2\). In essence, the political and social culture in many Latin American states are dictated by this marked male-dominance, often manifesting itself by having processes like decision-making, business operation, and political arrangements be male-dominated and led. This machismo is highly present both on the micro and macro-scale. On a governmental level, men are considered more apt and capable as leaders and decision-makers, and even on a small personal level, men are considered more enlightened in society, therefore taking leader roles in the family, as pastors, and managers of local stores. Hence, herein lies the inherent trouble for women engaging in such power structures

like politics and economics for the traditional sociological approach has been for men to have complete control over these areas.

Consequently, Latin American politics have had a distinct flavor in light of the pervasive machismo culture. Traditionally, “Latin American political systems have been largely authoritarian and have discouraged popular participation.”

Thus, as a result, over time “gender construction in the region has decreed that politics is part of a man’s world and an inappropriate activity for women” consequently in turn resulting in “women’s political involvement being ignored.”

Women were seen as second-class citizens but still highly important in the functioning of society, as mothers and wives, but in a context that is narrow and strictly defined. As consequence, strict gender roles have been constructed in which a women’s role and importance is maintaining the home and family. In essence, what had resulted was that in general the state “has confined women to their ostensibly natural functions within the family of the ‘private sphere’ by politically and institutionally reinforcing the boundaries which had delimited women’s lives socially and historically.”

Interestingly, however, this is not dependent on partisan politics, meaning both the right and left parties of most Latin American states have traditionally equally valued these gender roles with both progressive and conservative groups encouraging female domestication.

While each side of the political spectrum have distinct agendas, both sides have been traditionally similarly promoting of these gender roles, seeing these roles not as an issue of progressivism or something that is cumbersome for democratic health, but rather as a natural reality that is ever-present. Of course, over time this has changed, but classically speaking, these roles have become so strict that

3 Craske, Women and Politics in Latin America, 3.
4 Craske, Women and Politics in Latin America, 3.
6 Chaney, Supermadre, 34-5.
in some parts of Latin America, a woman who sought life outside of this role was a *mujer de mala* or a ‘woman of badness;’ an essentially off track little girl who has lost her way. Even though “the private sphere of the family has always been considered the domain of women, …. it is increasingly threatened by economic and political forces,” thus beginning to breakdown this commonplace trend of women staying in the household. Therefore, the machismo culture is still a significant backdrop for most Latin American states, but its influence is lessening. Women are challenging this social dogma, and thus encouraging parties and polities alike to heed their views.

It is important to note, consequently, a clear distinctive between what is physical poverty and what has been termed anthropological poverty. While many women in Latin America definitely experience physical poverty, many of these women also experience a high level of anthropological poverty, in which as individuals they feel a lack of recognition of their humanity. Thus, “anthropological poverty based in an oppressive system frames *Latinas* as less than human.” This author, for one, can attest to the unbelievable tendency of many *Latinas* to struggle to find self-identity. Whether it be historical, contextual, cultural etc, there seems to be sweeping tendencies for many women in Latin American (in various countries) to find their identity in things outside of themselves. The need to find a husband, have children, be the ‘good daughter’ of someone, what have you, speaks volumes to the lack of self-identity many of these women have. While many women in America often can find their identity in their jobs, beliefs, or titles, many Latin American women can only find this self-identity, and thus self-worth, in the people they are associated with, often being their husband, children, or family.

A key source of the female image in Latin America originates in religious influence and tradition. The primacy of Roman Catholic Christianity throughout Latin American during and

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7 Chaney, *Supermadre*, 36.

8 Chaney, *Supermadre*, 36.

post colonization further encouraged “greek ideas of male supremacy” and thus “contributed powerfully to the feminine myth of women’s inferiority and unfitness for a role in social and political life.” 10 Starting in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Latin America witnessed an onslaught of theological seminary promotion, these same seminaries most often rooted in the same ideals of female inferiority, and thus these ideals were professionally taught to many young men as theological truths. These seminaries were almost unilaterally closed to women and liberal thinkers alike, and therefore, unfortunately the misconception of female inferiority was only propagated and proliferated among the church and its increasing number of ordained leaders.

And while much of Latin America has progressed past it religious archaism, “the Catholic Church, still an influence to be reckoned with, ever really changed its ideas on then differential role of men and women.”11 This is even more important to recognize as the Protestant movement has increased and seen high success in parts of Latin America. While the Protestant and Catholic churches and quite distinct in Latin America and have little social overlap (in fact, in some parts each group refuses to recognize the other as legitimate Christians), the fact remains that much of the Protestant church culture in Latin America was patterned off of the Catholic model. While theologically these churches highlight their distinctions, especially in regards to the personal relationship with Christ, socially speaking, both have a tradition of culturally reinforcing the gender roles so present in Latin America’s history. This is an unfortunate story many Latin American scholars fail to recognize, but the underlying connection between these two groups is undeniable, and thus fault must be attributed to both Catholic and Protestant groups. Altogether to say, religion has played a deep role in the formation of the female image in Latin America and those pursuing to feminize politics in these states have various social constraints they much overcome.

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10 Chaney, Supermadre, 40.
11 Chaney, Supermadre, 42.
The Latin American Distinction in Feminization:

However, a general understanding of what ‘feminist politics’ looks like in Latin America is also key to the development and understanding of the thesis. The women’s political movement in Latin America is incredibly different than most Western developments in women in politics, in that the style and tactics employed are ideologically distinct. Overall, ‘feminism’ as a concept differs from the Western connotative understanding of ‘feminism.’ In a Western, particularly a North American, contexts ‘feminism’ connotes a sort of war female supremacists wage, in plight for a sort of Amazon based world in which women are superior. These preconceptions, perhaps rooted in the 1960s and 1970 American women’s movements, cannot be applied to the Latin American context. Feminism in Latin America speaks more to the level of integration of women in the political and economic society, seeing equal opportunity and value as core feminist principles. Therefore, the caveat is important that ‘feminists’ in Latin America do not see women as superior as men, but rather equally deserved and worthy as men in terms of political and social contributors. However, Latin America’s distinct interpretation of feminist politics is not limited to just this, but rather the understanding of gender roles in general.

Specifically, Latin America is distinct in that, on a comprehensive level, inequality is encouraged, whereas the American female suffrage movement for instance was rooted in a quest for complete equality. Now, certainly in application of law, good governance, etc, complete equality is expected and desired in terms of gender. However, Latinas in their political pursuits are looking for, instead, a distinct recognition of women in the political sphere. As consequence, “Latin American feminists have made claims not just for equal rights, but for the right to a differentiated treatment and to the social recognition of women’s uniqueness.”12 This underlying difference, thus, makes for a distinct way of approaching female political activism, and as I

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argue, a more realistic construction of gender in politics. After all, complete political and social equality between the sexes can never be perfectly achieved because there are simple fundamental difference between men and women, and people will pass value judgements on these differences as long as they are present. Latin American women seem fully aware and even comfortable with the reality and thus have embraced their uniqueness. As scholar Richards observes, Latinas’ “demands and political activism are uniquely feminine, drawing from histories as mothers and wives, something that the US and European women’s movements were not nearly as embracing of.” In essence, female Latinas, in general, have a desire to have a special place in politics that is equally important as the men’s, but perhaps not equal in function or role, thus creating a certain distinctiveness to the female pursuit for women’s right in Latin America.

In that light, Latina feminist political movements have been grouped in general into two main categories, that of ‘recognition-based’ movements and those of ‘integration-based movements.’ Recognition-based movements are more akin to the aforementioned feminized politics in Latin America where the “goal is to end injustice while maintaining and valorizing their difference” therefore not diminishing the inherent differences between men and women but rather accented. Thus, differences in function between male and female political activity is highlighted, but those differences are both equally celebrated and encouraged, as if two gears in a machine that support and propel each other forward. However, integration-based movements differ in that these type of movements focus on the inherent inequality between men and women in their given political system and therefore push for a redistribution of both intangible and tangible amenities in order to balance out the scale—amenities such as power, wealth, and resources. These types of movements are more similar to the traditional Western female political movements, such as the United States’ women’s movement, and are often more

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separated from men’s or conservative groups. In essence, these type of movements agree that both men and women are important gears in a machine, but instead argue that the machine (or system) ignores this facts and is therefore useless until other larger issues are addressed. Both of these movement types, and mixtures and offshoots thereof, are incredibly important and present in Latin American history. Moreover, both of these groups are important of study later in the case-study of Chile.

The character of the Latin American women combined with this specific flavor of feminism results in what scholars have termed the *supermadre* image. Literally meaning supermom, *supermadre* describes the experience of the Latin American woman as she enters in the political realm as an extension of her womanly duties—those of a mother, wife, supporter, and teacher. Thus, the *supermadre* image is defined by enlargement of the female responsibility to entire people group, population, or nation. Unlike a male leader whose politics may be absent of engendered goals, a female political player is to aspire to be a *supermadre* and thus her politics are only legitimate if they are in line the traditional female ‘concerns,’ such as children’s issues, social services, and human rights. Hence, “the female public official often is forced to legitimize her role as that of a mother in the larger ‘house’ of the municipality or even the nation, a kind of *supermadre.*”¹⁶

**A Changing Southern Neighbor:**

Despite the philosophy of political feminists in Latin America, the female population as a whole as seen a clear quantitative success, at least superficially speaking. Latin America as a whole has undergone various quantitatively based studies, and they all almost unanimously agree that female participation in the politics of a given country has increased and is still on the incline in some way. According to political researchers Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor Robinson, the

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¹⁶ Chaney, *Supermadre*, 5
number of ‘medium prestige’ female ministers in government positions in 18 Latin American countries increased from only four in year 1980 to about 27 in 2002, roughly increasing 575% in representation in 22 years alone.\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, the number of ‘high prestige ministers’ (those generally considered cabinet members or direct policy influencers) present in 1980 was a sad 0, but rose then to 7 ministers in 2002, thus increasing 700%.\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, it is important to recognize that ratified constitutional equality did not occur in some countries as late as 1993 (some as early as 1917 in the case of Mexico), while a majority of the countries did not see ratified gender equality until the 1960s and 1970s.\textsuperscript{19}

Figure 1:

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Graph showing the number of high, medium, and low prestige ministers from 1980 to 2002.}
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For many Latin American states, women were not politically considered even remotely equal as citizens until these ratifications were pushed forth. Hence, a clear drive for political gender equality and female political presence has seen success first in constitutional ratification and then political reality. Essentially first came the constitutional reforms and only decades later we can see outgrowth of those reforms as females increasingly took their place in the governmental ranks.

Therefore, the question must be asked as to why this socio-political trend is occurring? Essentially, what was or what were the catalyst(s) that sparked this movement. Statistically speaking, other major trends were and still are present in Latin America that are undoubtedly contributing factors to the larger phenomenon of female political engagement. Fertility rates, for instance, have substantially decreased. Considering the rates of 19 countries, overall in Latin America fertility rates have dropped from 5.3 in 1970-5 to 3.5 in 1990-95. This represents a departure from the family-focus only cultural for women; that women now are able and want to do things other than bear and rear children. This is overall indicative of women increasingly searching for an identity outside of just being a mother. Moreover, women in higher education in Latin America rose from 35% to 45% in 15 years (years 1970-1985), marking a increase in well-educated, career-minded women, some of which will later fill political positions. Additionally, female presence in the labor force increased from 18% to 26% between 1950 and 1980 respectively, again, marking a slight exodus out of the home to the workplace and business world. Correspondingly, the late 1900s brought with it increased percentages of women holding positions in executive boards of nationwide unions. This signals two positive trends. First, that women are indeed working outside of the home more, breaking old cultural roles. And, secondly, women should be encouraged to play a more active role in politics and public life.

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21 Safa, “Women’s Social Movements in Latin America,” 357.
that working women are beginning to seek leadership and respect levels that before they
would never have held.

Overall, perhaps a necessary caveat is that increased economic stability is connected to the
ability of women to politically integrate. Essentially, the polity is not apt to pursue more
‘luxurious’ political ideals, such as women’s rights when there are hard economic uncertainties at
play. Thus, as economies have become stronger, so have the successes of feminist politics (as we
will later see in the cases of Chile and Argentina). However, economic success aside, these
statistics show that both in highly developed economies (such as Chile), and in lower, still-
struggling economies (such as Ecuador), there is still a vitality among female political and social
empowerment that is at play. Therefore, all this shows that these background social movement
correlate to the later increases in female government presence post 1980s democratization trends.
In essence, these social currents of increased female engagement in society has trickled down to
create direct increased female governmental integration.

However, to discuss the political integration of women on a continental level, such as all
of Latin America, is not inherently advantageous, for Latin America holds a vast diversity in
culture, history, economy, religion, and other socio-political factors, making study of women in
Latin America innately overly simplified. Therefore, only general conjectures and theories can be
drawn from such a large body of variables and information. Therefore, it necessary to investigate
more directly a country and people group which clearly embodies the trend of increased female
political engagement in Latin America.

One such country is Chile; an ideal candidate for such a case-study. As part of this case
study we will explore the various facets of the historical and contemporary female populations in
Chile. These groups, while all seeking highly levels of political equality and integration, are
equally diverse. However, despite their differences and social boundaries, the female historical
project in Chile reached its final climatic success to date with the election of Michelle Bachelet: Chile’s first female President and head of state.

**Concise Background of Chile and its Female Populations:**

Chile, like most of its Latin American counterparts, has seen its share of colonization, chaos, consolidation of power, and authoritarian rule, finally achieving successful democratic rule in 1990. Yet, Chile is considered to have a “blessed democratic tradition” as compared to other Latin American countries,23 many of which still struggle to properly implement democratic practices. Hence, “economic growth and and increased welfare spending dramatically reduced poverty from 40 percent of Chilean in 1990 to 17.5 percent in 2006.”24 However, Chile is akin to many other Latin American states in that wealth has been consolidated into the highest levels of society, thus creating a very broad middle and lower classes that often feel underrepresented in Chilean policies. As one scholar notes, “the wealthiest quintile of Chileans rake in about half of national income while the bottom 20 percent earn only 5 percent.”25

Most Chileans will attest to this issue, constantly feeling quite caught in the capitalism hurricane. To many Chileans, the wealthy seem to not only get wealthier, but they also receive higher levels of attention and responsiveness in regards to political action and policy concerns.

As indicated by scholars Franzoni and Voorend, public social expenditures on the national level in Chile hit an all-time low since democratization in 2006, sitting at rough 12% expenditure of a national GDP.26 To many this marks a more evolved democratically stable Chile, but a state that still struggles with class issues that are ever-present in their nation’s history. As an outgrowth,

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24 Silva, “Chile,” 433.


like its fellow Latin American countries, “Chilean women have a history of second-class citizenship and discrimination in relation to men;” an unfortunate event is rooted in the immanent class structure and gender roles.

Moreover, also following a general Latin American pattern, Chile experienced a harsh 17 year dictatorship under the leadership of Augosto Pinochet and his military regime. Pinochet’s leadership brought with it not only terror through the use of abductions, murders, torture, and concentration camps, but also saw a time of crippling economic decline, leaving most of his population lacking necessary resources to live. And while the capitalist Chilean economy was birthed in this time, politically speaking, Pinochet’s regime saw the highest level of human right abuses and overall inequality in the history of Chile. And, ironically enough, it was this context that served as the incubator for the political feminist movement in Chile.

Phase One: Women in the Overtake of Pinochet:

In part, scholars attribute much of the feminist agenda’s success to the fact that “the women’s movement was a vital force in the opposition to the military regime” specifically in “organizing the vote that defeated Pinochet,” Chile’s dictator. In playing this democratic-warriors role, many women carved out their place in politics since the onset of democracy in Chile. In the midst of the dictatorship, there were three main branches in which women pitted themselves against the military rule; taking the form of human rights groups, economically-centered groups, and feminist groups. The first of the groups, those women concerned for human rights, were mostly charged by the loss of loved ones in the infamous ‘disappearances’ Pinochet was so known for. Many political activists or ‘liberal threats’ (as they were deemed) would inexplicably disappear to either never return home, or return in a casket.

27 Silva, “Chile,” 452.

28 Silva, “Chile,” 453

For Chilean women, many of which were first mothers or wives, this was unacceptable and a challenge to their ability to do their job—to tend to and care for the ones they loved. Their political endgame, therefore, was to use the female population as a base for protest against Pinochet, often manifesting their disloyalty by silent occupations in public squares and government centers. And considering the already visible gender roles, physical force against women by strange men (e.g. Not a woman’s husband or family) was unseemly. Therefore, Pinochet’s regime was stuck in an oxymoron of a trap—to stop the women would be acknowledging their power but to let them continue would be to accept their rebelling presence.

The second of the groups, economic survival grouped women, were among the poorest of citizens in Chile and were rallied together because of the rampant economic struggles and inflation the country was experiencing under Pinochet. Seeing their ability to provide as mothers and homemakers threatened, these women decided to act and provide the basic services that the Chilean people were lacking. Essentially, they expanded their mothering instinct and practices to the national level and worked to open and create communal food kitchens, create bulk-buying initiatives, work groups, and free day-care centers.  

Finally, the last group, which was centered around promoting feminism, were highly politically focused in their activism. Thus, they often received significant funding from abroad and used the political systems in other stable democracies as a means for their agenda. Often their actions were policy-based in nature, partnering with men’s groups and political parties, focusing on the articulation and distribution of what a free and equal Chile should be.

However, what all three groups had in common was the desire to see women in a place of equal power and importance, and thus were not mutually exclusive but highly interwoven. Perhaps, in time these groups would have formed naturally, yet strangely enough, Pinochet’s

dictatorship actually created an environment conducive to the building of the feminist agenda in Chile. Women in this time, as mothers and wives, were pushed to a breaking point and soon their entire lives’ purpose (according to the social gender roles of the time) were a jeopardy. Pinochet’s regime was threatening their ability to provide and protect their families, a woman’s one focus. Hence, women had no other option but to seek out a more feminized, equal Chile, and to pursue this Chile themselves. According to Chilean anthropologist Ximena Bunster, “the Chilean [woman] is a mama who approves, sanctions, and corrects” and thus they saw themselves legitimized in their desire to correct an ignorant leader, Pinochet.

However, as the movement progressed on all fronts, these activists soon began to see that the injustices their were fighting with the regime were not the only injustices that were at play, that Chile’s issues were not merely incapsulated in one evil leader. In essence, many Chilean women soon “linked authoritarianism in the country to authoritarianism in the home” thus seeing the “dictatorship to widespread societal patriarchy.” And “for many women, it soon became clear that authoritarianism, for them as women, did not being in September 11, 1973,” the date in which Pinochet rose to power, but “was in fact a central feature of Chilean society.” What had started as a pocket of scared, desperate mothers soon turned into a political machine using a range of tactics and resources that helped end a series of injustices, including the dismissal of Pinochet himself.

What is striking is that many of these women’s groups did not see their actions as inherently political. Instead they “often saw their work as somehow ‘outside’ of that which is conventionally political.” Thus, the “language used by these women is not the language of

conventional political discourse, but rather the language of reality—of daily life” and the pressing needs they were facing.\(^\text{35}\) Yet it was in this process of activism as mothers and wives quickly showed these women their political potential, even if political objectives were not their original ending goal. After the fall of Pinochet and the consolidation of democratic power, the dust had settled and many of these women discovered “that they [were] capable of much more than raising children and cooking and cleaning” but in fact were “capable of political action.”\(^\text{36}\). And in the years that followed Pinochet was no longer a threat to their livelihood, but other injustices were now on the horizon for there Chilean women, and it was these other misdeeds that further fueled the push for female political empowerment.

**Phase Two: The Creation of SERNAM**

In 1991, a year after democratic consolidation, the National Women’s Service (SERNAM) was created in response to pressure from Chilean women to address their political and social concerns in a legislative way. SERNAM’s objective is to focus on and terminate gender discrimination in society and in government in Chile. Thus, in the creation SERNAM, Chile publicly “committed itself to equality between men and women.”\(^\text{37}\) SERNAM essentially articulates a pursuit for equally, identifying and defining the inherent discrimination in the current Chilean systems. Centered around good governance and policy creation, SERNAM has been a consistent force demanding the State to make good on promises and agreements made for the work towards female equality and political participation. SERNAM’s vernacular is focused on the incorporation of a strong equal gender perspective into the core Chilean administration. And through further advocacy, SERNAM created two ‘Equal Opportunity Plans,’ specifically designed to increase a woman’s ability to be competitive in the work force.

\(^{35}\) Chuchryk, “Feminist Anti-Authoritarian Politics,” 155.


Although seemingly unquestionably valuable, SERNAM was met with ardent opposition, mainly fueled by the Catholic Church, objecting to “the principles it reflected, including equality, nondiscrimination, and state intervention to guarantee women’s rights.” Consequently, SERNAM was forced to compromise on some levels, speaking to the moderate level of power the Catholic Church and aligned right-wing parities still have over political action in Chile. Therefore, at its core, Chile through SERNAM has seemingly adopted a progressive stance on gender and politics, theoretically speaking, and has taken action to fulfill these goals. However, still outlying issues are inhibiting further progressive growth, which now holds SERNAM in a stagnant paralysis. This stagnation holds potential future threats to the well-being of women’s groups and politics in Chile, which are to be later addressed. Yet, considering SERNAM’s inception occurred only one year after democratic consolidation, it was a remarkable first step in the waves of female political mobilization in Chile.

**Phase Three: Recognition versus Integration Movements of Chile’s Urban and Rural Women:**

However, the female rally behind SERNAM and its counterparts is only the beginning of the story, for there are other actors at play in the Chilean pursuit of female political empowerment. Chile is known having a remarkably high urban population, with 85 percent of citizens residing in urban settings. However, Chile is also marked by containing a highly visible, strongly active indigenous population, the Mapuche people sitting at a population of about 900,000. Whilst most Latin American countries have various indigenous groups, the Chilean Mapuche population is one of the few indigenous groups that were never conquered by a colonial power. Hence, the state has been the main pacifier of the Mapuche peoples, thus causing

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39 Silva, “Chile,” 433.
for a contentious relationship between the two groups. In this way, they are still a highly active and politically forceful population and in general, the relations between the Mapuche and state have been tenuous at best. The most common criticism from the Mapuche people of the state is the feeling of underrepresentation and being ignored politically and economically. Meanwhile, the state generally views the Mapuche as a violent, removed group who are a constant headache for administration. Within this group, however, female Mapuche peoples are linked between two fights—the fight for justice for their own people group and the struggle for equality for Chilean women at large.

Thus, the Chilean women groups are divided between the Mapuche indigenous and the urban ‘pobladoras.’ and their tactics and demands are equally diverse as the context in which they represent. Hence, the female movement in Chile as a whole could be potentially equally divided. In that, there is an interesting challenge to the cause because two very distinct groups must somehow collaborate to reach overlapping goals, in this case increased female political equality in the Chilean state. Considering the feeling of subordination most Mapuche people express, Mapuche feminists “frequently [pose] their….need for recognition” 40 thus using recognition-based movement tactics, as previously outlined. Therefore, in the “Mapuche case, demands [are] ultimately rooted in recognition of their status as a people predominately.” 41 Hence, in the pursuits for a more equal Chile, many Mapuche women organize themselves around creating awareness of their sufferings and lobbying government for increased attention to these issues.

Moreover, the Mapuche women’s groups are equally enclave-based. Overall, “the Mapuche women’s struggle has occurred primarily in the context of the Mapuche movement” as a whole and therefore has not been a “separate, autonomous women’s movement.” 42 To give

context to the Mapuche plight, this indigenous group was never defeated by a foreign power, so-to-speak, but rather was colonized after Chilean independence and defeated by the state in 1881. Much akin to the Native American story in the United States’ history, the Mapuche people were then relegated to parcels of land that were deemed ‘reduction’ territories. The land given was significantly less than what was needed, thus over 60% of the Mapuche people now live in urban areas, a lifestyle contradictory to the Mapuche culture and belief system. The Chilean population consists of about 10 percent being Mapuche, and thus, arguably 10 percent of the Chilean population feels that the state is dealing out severe injustices. Therefore, Mapuche women have a unique situation in which they are fighting two fronts: the discrimination they face as women and as Mapuches as well, analogous to the female African-American in the United States’ context.

Therefore, Mapuche women add a striking, important discourse to the larger discussion of women’s rights in Chile. For, “if SERNAM’s discourse is rooted in equality” the discourse of the Mapuche women “is rooted in difference,” harkening back to their basic belief in a recognition-based movement. Thus, Mapuche women argue that “for there to be justice, equal treatment for all women, or for all persons, is not enough” because this ideal ignores cultural differences and that, realistically, each distinct cultural group needs different treatment for true justice to be served. In essence, the Mapuche women’s movement, although largely supportive of a larger feminized Chile, seek out an understanding of distinction; that they deserve certain things from the states that other female populations do not, and do not wish to thrown into the sack of other Chilean women.

Conversely, the urban pobladoras tend to utilize integration-based movements, pushing for increased access to jobs, education, etc, signaling that their prominent focus is to “emphasize redistribution” in the state. The pobladoras who mainly had been traditionally part of either the

human rights or economic survival groups during the Pinochet regime, had focused on “raising their voices against the suffering and injustices that had become part of daily life.”  

And thus, post-dictatorship, used their momentum and power to continue “as activists, providing important resources to their communities,” such as in the form of domestic-violence counseling, sexual and health education promotion, and so forth. Therefore, the urban pobladoras movement looks much less like the mainstream social movements of the upper class, in that it is focused on providing direct services to the communities in which they are a part of. This group is not so focused on widespread policy and structural change, mostly due to their lesser access to resources. Rather, this company of women is directly concerned with the well-being of the women in their own communities and promoting general equality in their own pockets.

Both urban pobladoras and Mapuche women alike are highly involved in and supportive of the overall promotion of feminist politics, however, they are a very distinct groups in that they represent some of the most economically and socially poor people in Chile. Yet, an issue that still faces these poorer women is that of class struggle. A majority of successful female political leaders and activists are of the middle or upper classes, and thus the policies they pursue are intrinsically beneficial to women, indeed, but more specifically most advantageous to mildly or highly wealthy Chilean women. Many pobladoras, for instance, have argued that many “femocrats rarely consulted them about then establishment of programs or priorities” in the creation and organization of SERNAM because and they “discriminated against them because [the pobladoras] lacked formal education.” Moreover, in the case of the Mapuche women, they clearly feel although the actions taken by SERNAM is not nearly as relevant to them as mainstream, middle-class feminists prefer to think.

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And while Pinochet-originated feminists, pobladoras, and the Mapuche female enclaves are all equally different, they have all added to the larger manifestation of increased women’s engagement in politics in Chile. Additionally, challenges have been posed in relation to class struggles within the larger feminist movement. However, all internal struggles aside, Chile has surpassed its issues and has come to represent the changing tides for Latin American women. The clearest summation (and thereof evaluation) of this work towards a more equal Chile is the climb to power and the presidency of Michelle Bachelet.

**Pinnacle Point: Michelle Bachelet’s Presidency as the Pinnacle of Chilean Feminist Politics:**

Assuming the role of President, Bachelet was the first female President of Chile and serving in the years of 2006 to 2010. Since her departure as President, Bachelet has been appointed as head of United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) which is designed to promote the investment in women as equal and vital citizens. Moreover, through her leadership in Chile, Bachelet’s agenda was heavily focused on pursuing issues of gender equality and eliminates everyday injustices Chileanas faced. Therefore, President Bachelet became the poster-child for actualized feminist politics in Chile, thus drawing clear distinctions between old, pre-Pinochet Chile and new post-modern Chile. In her tenure, “promoting greater social equity has been at the heart of much of the Bachelet government's legislation,” marking a stark difference from Pinochet’s earlier intolerance for female activism. One example of her foci on reconstructing a more equal Chile can be seen in her 2009 promotion (and thus inauguration into statute law) of a law that sought to eradicate gender inequality in wages in the workplace. This movement instructed that companies large enough would have to register themselves along with employee position profiles to decrease wage inequality. And if “female workers [felt] discriminated against” and the employer refused to respond, workers could

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report to a labour tribunal, which “would be able to impose a fine as well as order an appropriate wage increase.”\textsuperscript{50} Bachlet was a moving force not only for these types of legislative and political movements in Chile, but she has been accredited with progress of equality in dozens of sectors in the Chilean social and political arenas.

However, President Bachelet not only marked a divergence from historical leadership, she also contradicted the ‘norm’ of the female image altogether. Bachelet represented to many Chilean women a further breaking down of the gender roles in which they were enslaved only decades earlier. Contradicting the normal stereotype of a loving wife, good Catholic, and meek female, Bachelet rather “was not just an ‘ordinary’ woman, but a divorced mother of three, a recognized agnostic and a longtime socialist militant.”\textsuperscript{51} Hence, in her differences, Bachelet crushed what was left of the historical expectations of female political engagement. She was “center stage as a point of departure for tracing the evolution of Chilean political culture during the last two decades”\textsuperscript{52} and this change was highly celebrated and long-awaited by many feminists after Pinochet’s fall, thus marking “substantive cultural transformations to women’s place in society and vice versa.”\textsuperscript{53} Even in her vernacular, Bachelet has worked to transform the perception of feminist agenda in Chile something of worth, not a topic of scorn, as indicated in analyses in her speeches, in which she has used on average the word woman 36 times per speech.\textsuperscript{54}

In essence, Bachelet symbolized and push away from tradition, and in this, she has seen relatively strong levels of resistance among traditional Christian and Catholic groups. And while historically speaking, the Church in Chile has almost unanimously had the support of the masses,

\textsuperscript{50} Monthly review, Country Report. Chile, 13.
\textsuperscript{52} Tobar, “Chilean Feminism and Social Democracy…” 25.
\textsuperscript{53} Tobar, “Chilean Feminism and Social Democracy…” 25.
\textsuperscript{54} Tobar, “Chilean Feminism and Social Democracy…” 27.
Bachelet’s election marked a shift from this norm as well, as Chilean voters began shifting their loyalty from Church politics to Concertación politics, the long-standing political party of which Bachelet represented. In this way, “Bachelet’s election represents both a continuation of the Concertación policies and general political understanding on gender issues, and a significant departure from them.” 55 For instance, President Bachelet creatively adapted previously legislature quotas to support the feminist agenda, drawing from a historical practice from 1990 to fill government positions from social-militant women supporters and actors. Hence, Bachelet seemed to strike the perfect balance between being dutiful enough to Concertación policy and history, but divergent enough to prove her loyalty to women’s cause in Chile.

However, the query as to how Bachelet actually rose to power must be further investigated. Whether it was by accident or by intelligent fore-thought, many of the female groups focused on overthrowing Pinochet saw an narrow opening for feminist goal promotion in the consolidation of democracy in 1990. After 1990 democratic transition “the relationship that developed between the new government and women’s organizations therefore resulted no only from left-wing parties ascendance to government…. profoundly reconfigured the political scenario”56 as democracy was continuing to grow in Chile. Hence, many of these militant feminists who helped bring down the evil dictator soon saw a small but growing opportunity to further their own careers in higher government. Moreover, many scholars argue that in the post-Pinochet years, a stability of power was created in which Chilean citizens, for perhaps the first real time, were able to feel safe and secure in their country’s future, and therefore, this also increased the window for more ‘liberal’ political ideas, such as feminist politics, to take root. Specifically, the Concertación has a history itself of long, stable power in which citizens have come to trust, mostly. And in light of the “7 year of uninterrupted rule” of Pinochet, he coalition

55 Tobar, “Chilean Feminism and Social Democracy…” 27.
56 Tobar, “Chilean Feminism and Social Democracy…” 26.
has governed Chile for almost as long as the military did"⁵⁷ thus increasing the accountability in the government.

In essence, in the highly successful run of the coalition, they have made it difficult for themselves to ignore women’s issues, “making it difficult to blame women’s present living conditions and future expectations on authoritarian legacies or political opponents alone"⁵⁸ as it was so commonplace to do before under Pinochet. Thus, social trust has been established, allowing the Concertación government to push to advance women’s rights and gender equality, whether or not its leaders are personally interested in the movement or not.

**Challenges on the Horizon, Lesson from Chile, and a Chilena’s Perspective:**

While Bachelet’s ascendance to power is a clear, marked success for political feminists in both Chile and abroad, the picture is not perfect in terms of practical applications of Chilean feminist politics. Essentially, on a macro-level, Chile stands out as one of the top promoters of female political engagement in Latin America, Bachelet and other various policies highlighting this idea. However, on the ground, there are still strong struggles women are facing in the pursuit for female freedom and equality. While gender roles have substantially fractured, the Catholic church and other more conservative entities still hold control of other facets of the feminist cause. There are still many gender issues facing Chile, according to the UN Commission on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the three highest forms being that of abortion, high teenage pregnancy rates, and a contraception access ⁵⁹

Moreover, although the female force in Chile is strong, the women’s organizations are still largely divided, the weaker ones (such as the pobladoras or Mapuche women) seeing less success.

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⁵⁷ Tobar, “Chilean Feminism and Social Democracy…” 26.
⁵⁸ Tobar, “Chilean Feminism and Social Democracy…” 26.
in pursuing their goals. And thus the future of the Chilean gender political agenda is highly dependent upon their ability to unify and mobilize that the current regimes live up to their promises of equality. One fear is that the plight for female equality was applied universally, leaving many smaller woman’s interest groups underrepresented, such as is the case for lesbian movement in Chile. In general, there is an overwhelming concern among lower-class or vulnerable women that the mainly middle-class, educated, whiter Latinas have dominated and will continue to dominate the policy changes, leaving lesser from for the smaller groups’ agendas.

A personal friend, public government official, and female family lawyer once gave, what I believe to be a clear and concise depiction if the current political female in Chile. When I asked her about her perspective on female political empowerment and engagement in Chile, she quickly retorted:

Although it has been almost 100 years since the first forays of women in politics, in Chile as women we still suffer discrimination and face the perception that politics is an issue for men. Evidence of this is that the only female president we ever had was criticized often and teased, (not because of her management (that would be normal) but because of her physical appearance. The media even posted pictures of her in her bathing suit, and other photos, clearly faked, which appeared to be insinuating inappropriate relationships with her and other leaders. However, in my opinion, the most terrible thing is the first to discriminate against women in politics in Chile, are women themselves. And since they make up a fair number of voters, therefore the representation of women in Chile remains very low” (Hernandez).

Hence, the modern, contemporary female in Chile still feels the need for immense improvement, mostly on the cultural or community level itself.

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However, Chile is a clear poster-child for Latin American countries seeking to increase gender equality in the borders, and thus increase their overall level of democratization. Superficially, it may seem that a country must experience a dictator or social class in order to follow the Chilean model. And, clearly, this should not the solution encouraged. Rather, Chile lines the path of divergence; divergence from what is traditional in most Latin American politics and what can be. Many Latin American countries, in the wake of colonization, have experienced some level of dictatoriship or authoritarian regime.

However, many of these states have failed to properly pursue feminist goals in the aftermath of such dictatorships. Therefore, depending on the level of democracy in each country, the way in which women can mobilize themselves also varies. But, considering Chile’s past, each country, no matter the level of democratization, can take something away from Chile’s story. For example, a highly democratic country such as Argentina can follow Chile’s model of Michelle Bachelet’s party, in which a stable party (the Concertación) pushes the envelope a bit further by nominating a female leader in order to increase comprehensive democracy. Or, a less stable, democratically struggling country, such as El Salvador can learn from the various grassroots movement of Chilean women employed, such as using their identity as mothers and wives to question unjust powers and actions.

Overall, what Latin America and the Western world at large must accept (as indicated by the Chilean story) is that feminized politics in Latin America must be its own brew. If anything, we can learn from the past that grafting on American ideals and methodology is not successful. In staying with the Chilean model, we can cite the ‘Chicago Boys’ movement as a clear example of failure in which using models from the United States to meets Latin American means often does not work.

The search for gender equality in Latin America is the same. The ideals of pure equality and female independence from men cannot be politically or socially endorsed in the Latin
American context simply because it cannot coexist the cultural historical reality that is Latin America. Rather, learning from Chile as a case study, women should rejoice their identity as mothers and wives (as many are) but also use that as a tool in which their identity can be expanded and politically harnessed. This is perhaps the most notable lesson from Chile that other Latin American states much repeat—the grassroots motivation of national women to both assume their cultural roles while continuing to pursue a more expansive, equal identity.

As apparent in the Chilean struggle, both economic and political stabilities acted as catalysts for the women’s movement to progress past the Pinochet era activism. However, there are other characteristics that have given Chile a unique flavor of the feminist movement, such as the broad middle-class and their struggles with the Mapuche people. From these distinct features, Chile is facing an interesting time, in which they can continue their progressive adoption of the women’s movement, or the women’s movement shall become stagnant.

However, Chile is only one country is a continent of over two dozen. And, interestingly enough, Chile’s next-door neighbor, Argentina, has a very distinct and specific history in their own women’s movement that both highlights the similarities and differences between Chile and Argentina. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of Argentina in light of the larger women’s movement, as compared to Chile, is necessary and thus follows.

A Case for Argentina:

Chile’s neighbor, however is equally complex and crucial in its political history of women. The landscape of Argentina is largely comparable to that of Chile. Having a moderately successful economy, a large middle class, stable democracy, both of these countries pattern a similar type of success story for Latin American nations. However, a constant rivalry underscores the relationship between these two neighbors. From soccer teams, to celebrities, to economic successes, Chile and Argentina are in a constant battle to outshine the other, perhaps fueled by the
fact that they are so often compared to each other. In terms of female political engagement and mobilization in Latin America, both countries have contributed their own triumphs and their own failed attempts. Therefore, to only illustrate the chilena’s story and not that of the argentine’s, is not only unfair, but it is academically short-sighted, for these countries have contributed extensively to each other’s journey in female political engagement. Moreover, important conclusions can be drawn from comparing Chile and Argentina, conclusions that offer suggestions for other developing Latin American countries as well as highlighting techniques that should not be repeated.

Phase One: Juana Manso and the Nation-Makers:

Many scholars will argue that the narrative of the female plight for political recognition started with Evita Perón, or perhaps with the early suffrage movement (all of which indeed are important milestones to be discussed). Yet, the story simply goes back even further; back to some of the ‘nation-makers’ of Argentina, as they have been termed. Often ignored in feminist histories of Argentina is the group of women the preceded the highly visible women’s movement of the early 1900s. Juana Manso is one such woman. Although often defined as a novelist, Manso realistically was a crucial draftswoman of the Argentinean women’s movement. To highlight some of her achievements, Manso was “the first woman to be appointed to an official government position and arguably the most radical feminist in nineteenth-century Argentina… [she] was a schoolteacher, inspector and principal; the first female member of the Board of Public Instruction…. author of the first textbook of Argentine history, editor of three feminist journals and an education journal.”

She was perhaps the first challenger of the traditional image of Argentine women, and was one of the first native scholars to start pushing for steps towards gender equality, especially in the realm of education. Known for her sarcastic rhetoric, Manso

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saw the marginalization of women as a detrimental loss of potential national resources. She argued that traditional machista politics were preventing her country from truly developing and fruitfully prospering, as she once wrote:

The emancipation of women! What! Can that bolt of furniture, that kitchen utensil, the procreative machine, that golden zero, that frivolous toy, that fashion doll possibly be a rational being?

Juana Paula Manso de Noronha

Surely Manso’s antics would not have been appreciated in other points in Argentinean history, but Manso gained prominence in a time of a national identity crisis. By the mid-1950s “Rosas had fallen; former exiles were in charge; [and] there was a call for all talented people to their energies behind an unmatched opportunity to create a new nation.” It was time to build the New Argentina and Manso saw this as a time for women to get their foot in the political door. Specifically, Manso focused on the promotion of quality, egalitarian education. According to Manso, education “was the underpinning….of a successful nation” and thus if Argentina really wanted to compete on the world’s stage, the first step was education reform.

From her visits to Western countries (such as the United States) and from her close relations to her fellow scholars, such as the famous Sarmiento, Manso began to articulate and promote campaigns on Argentinean education reform. Specifically, she saw women as the key ingredient in a successful educational system and thus, key to a successful Argentina. Women, being natural leaders and teachers at home, “their role within the family was thus the cornerstone of a successful nation.” Hence, the state’s refusal to see women as anything other than wives or mothers “had made them into a wasted national resource.” In her career, Manso began the

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63 'Emancipación moral de la mujer’, quoted and translated by Francine Masiello, Between Civilization & Barbarism, Women, Nation, and Literary Culture in Modern Argentina (Lincoln, 1992), 71.

64 Peard, "Enchanted Edens and Nation-Making…..", 457

65 Peard, "Enchanted Edens and Nation-Making…..", 458

66 Peard, "Enchanted Edens and Nation-Making…..", 460
building the fragile bridge between women as marginal aspects of Argentinean society and women as key national resources.

However, although her commitment and legacy is strong, Manso was not impervious to what she worked against. Often she had to use American allies or other notable Argentinean men to publish her work; a few of Samiento’s writings were actually those of Manso published under his name. Moreover, even as early as Manso’s time, class struggles between the ‘femocrats’ and working feminists can be seen in her open criticism of the Society of Beneficence, the leading supposed pro-women organization of the time funded by the wealthy and politically elite. Hence, Manso’s story highlights some of the promises of the future of the Argentinean women, but also cautions against some of the later struggles. And although Manso may have not made significant substantive strides in the way of female equality in Argentina, she ushered in the process of questioning and introspection as to the value of la mujer beyond mother and wife in Argentinean culture.

**Phase Two: The San Juan Suffrage Movement:**

Juana Manso’s legacy, although a key catalyst for the beginnings of the women’s movement in Argentina, was limited to the scope in which she worked—essentially the sectors of education and workplace cultures. Hence, it was not an intrinsically political movement, but rather Manso and her colleagues were pushing for reforms in the cultural and economic sectors. However, the following phase harnessed this momentum and began to rally for female political rights for one of the first times in Argentina. The most notable example of such a phase is the San Juan suffrage movement.

San Juan, a border providence in the middle of Argentina sits almost directly across the Andes from Santiago, Chile. Argentina as a whole sanctioned women’s suffrage in 1947 (two

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years before Chile, in 1949 respectively). However, the San Juan providence first allowed women to vote exactly 20 years prior in 1927, one of the earliest form of suffrage in all of Latin America and thus worthy of proper investigation.

Superficially, this political phenomena can be explained by an alignment of factors, such as economic downturns, the need for women in the workplace, and political consolidation. “San Juan had thus established an environment conducive to female political rights well before the rise of the cantonistas,” a political alliance often attributed with the successes of women’s suffrage in these areas of Argentina. However, ideal political conditions only explains half of the reality, for this version of the story diminishes the specific and intentional power plays by feminists and party-politics in San Juan.

Seeking new, progressive ideals to bolster their vote, the Argentinian Socialist party saw female suffrage as a political win-win. In granting such a right, the Socialist party could a) appease the increasing numbers of contentious, restless women and, in doing so, 2) bolster their power by potentially doubling their support base. Hence, in making this part of their political platform, the Socialist party was poised “to claim a leadership position in the quest for women’s rights,” and so that they did. However, while adding women to their support base, the Socialist party had to be judicious, and even clever enough, to not lose the support of their male or more conservative voters. Hence, an interesting political tactic was used which essentially paired the ‘vote’ with the image of women in the workplace. Meaning, in a time where many women were being pushed into the workforce, the female image was already being ‘undermined’ by doing work that risked “them deforming their bodies….leaving them in a poor condition to fulfill the most noble and elevated function of women, that of maternity.”

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70 Cámara de Dispurados, Congreso Nacional, (1906). Diario de Sesiones.
saw extending the vote to women to be an opportunity to allow women to be political active in
the campaign for increased wages for men, which would ultimately allow women to return back
to the home sphere, protecting and restoring their feminine roles. This paradox, albeit odd,
eventually did usher in the mass platform for women’s suffrage in San Juan because “the vote,
therefore, was meant to protect women and their ‘natural state.’” 71

Herein, we see again, the deep, untouchable connection between woman as a mother and
as a political entity. Harnessing the power of the mother was indeed crucial to the suffrage
movement, but could have been ultimately detrimental as well. As many Argentine political
figures of the time expressed, “women supposedly possessed special reserves of moral strength
that men lacked, strength intimately linked to their role as mother...and this proved to be bother a
powerful and precarious argument.” 72 In essence, everyone noted and respected the importance
of the female population as mothers—women being revered and almost sacred as the bearers of
children. But, the disagreement, and thus much political discourse was spent on how to properly
allow women to harness and utilize this power as mother in the political realm. Hence, the
mother-debate was two sided.

On the feminist/radical/socialist side, women were considered prime candidates for the
vote because of the accountability they would offer the state. As Eufrisia Cabral, a female
Radical Party activist described, “the woman of our homeland should make herself the priestess
of liberty, inculcating the sense of deep morality in the home….Her conduct should adapt to the
present ideal, comply with the supreme destiny that will transform societies.” 73 However,
opposition claimed that such suffrage would disgrace and weaken the female exceptionalism.
Hence, the separation between women and politics, according to the political conservatives of the

73 Edith Rosalia Gallo, “La Mujeres en el Radicalismo Argentino, 1890-1991” Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires
time was in fact honoring the female ideal. They “argued that it was precisely because women remained outside the public sphere that they could maintain their special qualities—to vote would be to risk tainting or turning them into caricatures of men”\textsuperscript{74} The debate was heated and each side saw mass amounts of support in unprecedented numbers in the San Juan region and thus feminists in the region had to convince politicians that suffrage would only benefit mainstream society, and not disrupt it. In essence, “suffragists, therefore, had to prove that suffrage would be benign”\textsuperscript{75} and essentially be an invisible positive force, at most.

And, the suffragist movement, partnered with the politically ambitious Cantoni brothers, were in fact able to convince the powers that be in San Juan that the right of women to vote would be in the region’s best interest. In seeking to broaden their power, the Cantoni brothers successfully mobilized both females and working class males and passed the women’s suffrage amendment into law in the San Juan providence 1927. Yet, the impacts of San Juan reached far beyond their small subsection of Argentina. For, following the San Juan movement was an outpouring of commentary (albeit some critical) regarding the political nature of women and their space in Argentina. Following the suffrage movement in San Juan “85 per cent of registered women voted compared to 73 per cent of men” and thus national press hailed “the suffrage article as the most important clause of the new San Juan constitution”\textsuperscript{76}

The praise that Argentina received nationally, regionally, and internationally was overwhelming to the Argentinean government, and thus suffrage became a subject of debate (and a source of discontent for women outside of the San Juan region). In essence, “women’s suffrage in San Juan continued to elicit comment in Argentina” and the 1928 election (the first election in San Juan in which women could vote) allowed for the “critical support to the argument that

\textsuperscript{74} Hammond, “Suffrage in San Juan,” 6.
\textsuperscript{75} Hammond, “Suffrage in San Juan,” 2.
\textsuperscript{76} Hammond, “Suffrage in San Juan,” 11.
suffrage would not disrupt society, and could even improve it.” Hence, for one of the first times in Argentinean history, women were engaging with politics in a progressive, positive manner instead of a conflictual, negative one. Meaning, previous women engagement in Argentina often circled around anti-regime movements where women, as mothers, were acting from a place of defense.

Therefore, the suffrage movement that was born in San Juan and then spread out across the nation was one of the first occurrences were women were acting politically offensive, motivated not by threat but by desire and opportunity. The San Juan movement marked the successful transition from anti-regime angry mothers to pro-feminism political women finally starting to push for recognition outside of their traditional roles. And although it would be another 20 years before Argentina would fully accept a federal law of female enfranchisement, San Juan spurred the chain reaction for key female leaders to enter the political sphere. It is these female leaders that serve as the underpinning of historical female engagement in Argentina as well as key insight prospects for what is to come next.

**Phase Three: The Cult of Evita:**

Perón—the utterance of the work sparks passion in any part of Argentina. Even the seemingly political mute will pipe up at the mention of the name. The Peronists, as they were called, were some of the most historically and politically significant families in all of Argentina. Juan Perón served as president (in two eras) but also politically mobilized the women in his life as well, starting with his first wife, Eva Perón, or Evita as she was warmly called. Evita had a power over the Argentinean public that has yet to forget.

The Personists saw the rise and approval of national female suffrage, and thus the Personist government was credited with the movement, despite the stronger surrounding factors

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77 Hammond, "Suffrage in San Juan," 12.
that truly led to national suffrage being adopted. In fact, Eva Perón “became so closely associated with woman suffrage in Argentina not through her tepid support of the idea but because of her highly successful effort to rally the newly enfranchised middle-class and working women on Perón’s behalf.” In doing so, “she made politics a legitimate activity for women, but as an extension of women’s traditional family responsibilities,” mainly rearing children and ceaselessly supporting one’s husband. Using this political machine, Eva, in essence, used the feminist momentum to increase support and she capitalized on the female energy to gain support for her husband. Her ability to consolidate and ensure support for her husband was astonishing, and her following, as it was, soon was deemed as a ‘Cult of Evita.’ In fact, the Personistas (the staunch female Perón supporter) would sing at political gatherings their support, declaring:

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\begin{align*}
\textit{Las muchachas Péronistas} \\
\textit{Con Evita triunfaremos} \\
\textit{Y con ella brindaremos} \\
\textit{Nuestra vida por Perón}
\end{align*}
\]

The Perónista girls  
With Evita we will triumph  
And with her we will dedicate  
Out life to Perón. 

Yet, as interesting paradox, Eva Perón herself despised feminists, claiming that they were “women who did know how to be women” Rather, “what she did care about was empowering Juan Perón; she worked indefatigably to re-create herself as the symbolic embodiment of the Argentine working class, male and (now that they had the vote) female” Evita’s dualistic legacy compliments both sides of the coin. On one hand, her mere presence of strength and leadership


has encouraged many to follow in her political footsteps. Yet, conversely, Eva exemplifies the ‘token female syndrome’ of playing an extra in the man’s political career. Her career, thus, marks both a divergence and an example of the passive political female image.

Embodying the juxtaposition between power and subordination to men, Eva was the supermadre and the super-esposa (super wife) in this case, harkening back to her womanly duties. Yet, it is from her legacy that feminism was able to grow in Argentina, for her political tenacity galvanized the Argentinean feminists and female leaders for decades, and still inspires the movement.

**Phase Four: Isabel Perón:**

After the ousting and reinstating of the Personist government, 1973 marked the Argentinean return of democracy, and thus the return to Juan Perón. As part of his new platform, Juan revamped his power scheme, now with his new wife, Isabel Perón. With Isabel at his side, both personally and politically, Juan appointed her as his Vice President in the 1972 elections. And although Perón was able to regain his power, there were “clear divisions in the movement” and hence “a new generation of labor leaders….were calling for ‘Perónism with ‘Perón.’”83 Enter Perón’s Vice President candidate Isabel, a fresh new face who still reminded the public of the dearly missed, late Eva.

Upon Juan Perón’s death in 1974, Isabel Perón became president of Argentina, the first female to have such a position. However, Isabelita, as she was known, “entered office with little political experience and without the charismatic appeal and natural leadership skill of Evita.”84 This personal political deficiencies coupled with the fact that “she took office in a country that was [still] strongly antifeminist,”85 made Isabel’s tenure a political disaster. However, unlike her

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female predecessor Evita, Isabel was committed to female movement in Argentina, her ideals akin to those of Bachelet later in Chile. In an interview Isabel explained: “I felt that the women’s movement in my country and all over the world had a sublime mission to fulfill.” And, from the perspective of voters, Isabel “like Evita, too a special interest in women’s issues” clearly with a different motivation however, for Isabel was actually committed to the cause.

Despite her perhaps good intentions, Isabel’s inexperience shined through, and her responses to issues were unfortunately repressive and seen as undemocratic. And, in light of their fragile state of democracy, Argentineans did not respond well to her tactics, and thus she was overthrown in 1976. Unfortunately, her shining moment, therefore, was being the political representative of her husband Juan Perón, like Eva. Isabel, characteristically, marked what is good in a female argentine leader—the embracing of her womanhood but the tenacity that could compete with the men. However, what she lacked in experience and skill cascaded into the ultimate upheaval of a nation. Hence, she finishes as neither a victor nor loser in the feminist agenda in Argentina.

**Persónisma Reflections:**

So, what can be said for the Persónist wave of female leaders. As it had been mentioned, these women both aided and hurt the larger feminist cause in Argentina. They, especially Evita, were masters of using the *supermadre* image to their political advantage. However, it is this image itself that arguably perpetuates the limited power a women can have in these cultures. In, at its core, Perónism and the Perónist party “was antifeminist—the franchise can without the support of Argentine feminists,” yet, “Perónism still opened the door to women politically.”

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86 Isabel Perón in Marifram Carlson, *Feminismo! The Women’s Movement in Argentina from its Beginning to Eva Perón.* Chicago: Academy Chicago Publisher (1988).


Whether women acted as Perónistas in support of the coalition, or against them such as the Mothers of the Disappeared after the overthrow of Isabel, regardless, women were beginning to engage politically, and that has to be largely attributed to the Perónist legacy.

**Pinnacle Point: Ley de Cupos:**

A key point in the history of the feminist agenda in Argentina is the passing of the Ley de Cupos, or quota law in 1991 for the national Chamber of Deputies—the first nation to pass such a quota law. The original requirements of that all national deputies elected to the legislator a) 30 per cent of all candidates on the party lists would be female candidates and b) these female candidates must be places in actual electable positions on the lists (i.e. not decorative list positions). The law came into effect as a result of the vigorous promotion by “a coalition of elite women from various political parties that was backed by President Carlos Menem.” Essentially, women had proven themselves through the work of Evita and, in small part, Isabel Perón and through their actions to consolidate democracy in the in the post-Rosas and post-Isabel phases of political instability in Argentina. The Cupo, therefore, was an appeasement of sorts after years of democratic loyalty from key argentine women.

Statistically, the Ley de Cupos has been successful. The number of female deputies in the chamber increased from 5 per cent in 1991, to 21 per cent in 1993, to 28 per cent in 1995. Additionally, “contemporary Argentina has again achieved one of the highest levels of female representation in the national parliament” Various studies have shown that “quotas increase women’s citizens’ propensity to contact their representatives regarding issues of importance to

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89 Pär Zetterberg, "Do Gender Quotas Foster Women's Political Engagement?: Lessons from Latin America," *Political Research Quarterly* 62(4), 715-730 (2009), 718.

90 Zetterberg, "Do Gender Quotas Foster Women's Political Engagement?" 718.


them”93 hence, there quotas have shown to increase responsiveness to constituents’ requests as well as transparency.

However, there are various limitations to the Ley de Cupos. Most of the resistance to the Cupos was when it came time to actually make the party lists. Upon the 1993 elections “male party leader realized for every woman placed on the party lists, a man would be excluded.”94 At this point, the quota law went from a theoretical threat to male political power to a real, clear challenge. Hence, many times, although the law was technically on their side, women were excluded from proper creation of party lists. This non-compliance is just one limitation of the Ley de Cupos, for women were legally supported, but not necessarily politically or culturally supported. This made fighting back on illegal lists tricky, at best. For, some women would face political suicide if they were to legally challenge some non-compliance cases.

Additionally, another limitation to the Ley was that of its minimalist effects. This is not to say that the quota law in Argentina did not (and does not still) dramatically increase the number of women as representatives. That fact is irrefutable. However, many women in Argentina saw that the minimum quickly became the maximum; the baseline of 30 per cent participation on lists quickly became the ceiling.

Thus, an additional large issue is getting the women to be the mandate position on the lists. In the candidate lists, the positions are separated into 3 main categories: ornamental, challenge, and mandate positions. Ornamental positions essentially are positions on the candidate lists that have almost no chance of receiving any seats in the legislator; challenge position candidates generally have a good chance of being elected if his or her party does well, and mandate positions, generally the first position on the list, has an almost guarantee of election.95

93 Zetterberg, "Do Gender Quotas Foster Women's Political Engagement?" 719.
94 Gray, "Electoral Gender Quotas: Lessons from Argentina and Chile," 60.
Moreover, the mandate position(s) comes with a tremendous amount of power as well. Generally, the first nominee on the candidate party lists are also the de facto president of the party and thus carry a lot of weight and power once elected into office. Additionally, there is a much higher likelihood for upward career mobility, and hence, these positions are highly coveted. Therefore, there are huge hurdles in place and many women cannot get these more prestigious positions.

However, an important note must be made. Indeed, despite the Ley de Cupos, women do face more challenges still to have more equal chances for political success in Argentina. However, we should not discount the potential positive impacts of quota laws in Argentina. As some studies have shown, quota laws greatly increase the percentages of women in representative positions (see Figure 2) as well as increased percentages of women in mandate and challenge positions (see Figure 3). Thus, there is a clear positive effect of the Ley de Cupos on other parts of Argentine society; thus one of the most important consequences “of the Ley de Cupos is the contagion impact which it has had on other institutions in Argentina.”

Thus, there is a clear positive effect of the Ley de Cupos on other parts of Argentine society; thus one of the most important consequences “of the Ley de Cupos is the contagion impact which it has had on other institutions in Argentina.” The greatest contagion force is that quotas have been applied to other legislatures and institutions in Argentina (such as provincial and judicial elections) as well has spread to other surround countries in Latin America. Although the Ley de Cupos in Argentina does not increase substantive representation of women as much as Latin American feminists would like, it indeed increases the presence of women in government, and thus increases attention spent on issues pertaining women’s rights and issues. And in this way, the Ley de Cupos stands as a definite step forward in Argentina for the progression of

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96 P. Jones, "Increasing women's representation via gender quotas…" 84.
97 P. Jones, "Increasing women's representation via gender quotas…" 89.
98 P. Jones, "Increasing women's representation via gender quotas…" 89.
female political engagement and equality. However, the greatest pinnacle point in Argentinean feminist politics is found in the shining moment of the election of Cristina Kirchner.

Figure 2:

Figure 3:


Pinnacle Point: Cristina Kirchner:

Following in the footsteps of Evita and Isabelita, Cristina Kircher was a first-rate first-lady to her husband Néstor Kircher, who was elected president of Argentina in 2003. Harkening back to the Peronista style, Nestor Kircher decided to use his wife as a key player in his political career. As political analysts reported, Néstor Kirchner enjoyed “extraordinary approval ratings—the highest of any current Latin American leader”99 of his time. However, Argentina and Latin

America at large, was shocked “when Néstor Kirchner decided to endorse his wife instead of seeking re-election in 2007.”

Throwing his political power and connections behind his wife, Cristina Kirchner was elected President of Argentina in 2007; the first elected female president of Argentina. Moreover, Cristina Kirchner is the only female ever to be re-elected as President in Argentina and in the wake of her husband’s death “Cristina Kirchner’s popularity has surged” and politicians and Argentineans “hope to see her move to further from his policies, gaining a new kind of independence she has not asserted during [Néstor’s] life.”

Argentina lays in waiting, therefore, to see what Cristina’s politics will hold next.

Yet, once again, we can see the limitations that Cristina’s Kirchner tenure holds. Firstly, she indeed came to power through less-than-progressive manners. Her highly popular husband strongly endorsed her as his primed successor, the party and public were already attached to her image, and she rose to power in the wake of the Ley de Cupos appeasement processes. The limitations in her career are that she is known, at least until perhaps recently, to be the continuation of her husband’s presidency—essentially Krichnerism without Kirchner akin to the Peróns. Moreover, she is known for being a fashion icon, working towards poverty awareness, and eliminating issues of human rights, all good characteristics for a leader, but all marked traditional characteristics of a what a Latina woman should care about. Kirchner, to some, marks the endgame, the finish line, for Latin American feminists. However, her role is merely another step higher up the ladder towards a more equal Argentina. Yet, it is a definite step, and credit must be given to Cristina Kirchner and company for that.

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**Challenges on the Horizon and Lessons from Argentina:**

Argentina has been praised internationally for its progress in women’s political empowerment, especially considering the culture in which it is wrapped. However, many real political and feminist critics argue that this praise has been unfounded and premature, for these success that we cite are only superficial and not substantial. As one scholar explains, “in many cases, feminist groups, political analysts, and voters are left with a choice between supporting a symbolic achievement and holding out for a practical one”\(^{102}\) Therefore, ostensibly, Argentina is the poster-child for female political empowerment, but to the strongest of critics, it is a sour, political joke.

However, neither of these views are appropriate to the context of Argentina. Indeed, some of these ‘successes’ are purely symbolic and therefore are not deep-seated overturns of the *machismo* culture. Yet, they are not without value towards the larger goal female political empowerment in Argentina and Latin America. Feminist-sympathizers have to work within the culture behind the politics. Argentina is not primed for an unknown, progressive woman, such as Bachelet. The culture and nature of Latin American politics must be considered, and the critic must realize that certain progressive ideals are just too extreme, even for a country that is hungry for democracy, such as Argentina. It would be similar to critiquing the United States for not yet electing a Muslim—sure it would be progressive of us, but it is unrealistic to hope for given our current cultural standards.

We must be wary of treating Argentina as the golden calf, idolizing it for its grand successes in female empowerment. However, we must be equally cautious in criticizing a country that has already pushed the bounds and stretched itself towards a more holistic democracy.

\(^{102}\) Kennedy, “Las Presidentas,” 2.
Comparison Points: From Home to Homeland:

Perhaps one of the greatest similarities between Chile and Argentina in regards to their historical approach to female integration into politics is the way women harnessed power in fighting against their respective oppressive regimes. For in Chile, female mobilization and organization against the Pinochet regime helped usher in the final consolidation of democracy to Chile. Chilenas then were able to cite this work as examples of the superior morality and inclinations towards a more fair, democratic Chile. In Argentina’s case, women responded similarly to the waves of militant regimes like during the de Rosas or military rule eras. It was in these times where women, as mothers, wives, and teachers, were forced to move outside of their private, isolated sphere, and this was a transition was a permanent, irrevocable one. In these times, women were forced to ‘hacer la politica’ (make politics) and at last, the private and public realms merged, and women saw that their civic responsibilities were not isolated to their homes, but the homeland. These merges can be encapsulated in the figures of Michelle Bachelet and the Perónist tactics.

Moreover, the fact that these regimes directly affecting many women’s abilities to serve as good mothers was the clear catalyst for these women to act, and to act strongly. In the case of Chile, the Mothers of the Disappeared were key in the overturn of Pinochet’s power (largely because of the vast international attention they received) and in Argentina, las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo will forever be iconic, each group drawing tactics from each other to reach their ultimate goal: to protect and bring home their children and stop their oppressor.

In both cases, both Chilean and Argentinean women used similar strategies to organize and mobilize themselves. Depending on their various personal connections or ideals, women in both Chile and Argentina largely joined one of three groups: Human rights groups, economically-driven support groups, or feminist fronts. Having similar motivations and having similar tactics,
these groups in both countries saw great successes in using the momentum they harnessed to further their own political agenda, even after the oppressive regimes had collapsed.

However, both Chile and Argentina have different struggles on the horizon for how they will utilize and motivate these groups. For Chile, fractionalization is strong, and therefore these civic groups have formed staunch factions. Negative femocrat-pobladores relations must be eased before major institutional changes can occur, such as increased equality in domestic violence polices. Hence, collaboration and consolidation of these civic groups is key before continued progress can be made.

In the case of Argentina, the opposite is true. The civic groups in Argentina display a remarkable level of interdependence and commitment, yet the partisan factions on the state-level impedes much of their progress. Therefore, these consolidated groups lose their impact once thrown into the middle of the partisan wars that many Latin American states are known for. A key suggestion, therefore, would be a continued effort to consolidate democracy in Argentina. Especially considering the fact that there has been a relatively stable level of democracy since early 1980s, it is high-time Argentina starts the process to become a more responsive, accountable democracy to its people.

Finally, another key challenge that both countries face is that of the influence of the Catholic Church. The Church has been a pervasive force throughout Latin America (and the world at large) for centuries, from pre-colonization to the present. And although the Catholic influence is definitely waning in both countries, the culture that it has created is still highly noticeable. From family values to gender roles, traditional church-thinking is engrained in these societies and the feminist movement must overcome certain barriers. The church culture in both of these countries is rooted in the idea that God, and therefore the Church, is the one unconstable reality. With such traumatic, tumultuous histories of war, military, unrest, murder, and hunger, as are the histories of Chile and Argentina, it is easy to understand why challenging this one Truth is
terrifying. From personal experience, I can attest to the clout and power a Pastor or church leader as in both of these communities. To even ask questions of the Bible must be worded very carefully, as to no disrupt the fragile balance of the church. And thus, there is a general lack of openness and willingness to challenge the status quo in many church cultures in Chile and Argentina, and this has dramatic effects on the action these feminist civic groups can have.

This is not to say that a religious backbone is bad, or even anti-progressive necessarily. Rather, if these countries truly seek acceptance into the club of democracy, there are certain values that must be reevaluated, many of those values stemming from church influences. Issues regarding birth-control, contraception, abortion, divorce rights, etc cannot only be analyzed through the Catholic or religious lens, but also through the feminist lens. Hence, both Chile and Argentina share in the struggle to overcome yet not completely drop their background and roots with the Church.

**Supermadre on the Horizons:**

So, what can we make of the supermadre. It is an image that is adored yet hated, examined yet ignored, praised yet criticized, and exaggerated yet mitigated. It is the supreme image of the female ideal and special responsibility she holds as a woman and thus as a mother, in some capacity, whether that be a biological mother or a symbolic mother of a nation. Even when a women reaches the supreme level of leadership as President, such as Michelle Bachelet or Cristina Kirchner, her title comes with the caveat of still performing these mother-like functions—caring for policy and work regarding women, children, education, the home, and human rights. Economic and defense issues are still largely left up to the men, even if they are her subordinates. Media output alone shows that the public in Latin America blatantly view a woman leader and a male leader as different in function. Headlines during Kirchner’s tenure
focus on her wardrobe and love interests, yet the media focused mostly on her husband’s economic work and international travel when he had the same position.

However, should we really criticize Latin America, specifically Chile or Argentina, for this. Indeed, these are less than ideal manners in which women are in power; they are still having to conform to society’s ideals on what a woman should be. Yet, it also seems to be working for them. The fact remains that women and men are biologically different, and thus socially and politically these differences will always be reflected. So why not embrace these differences (and perhaps even exaggerate them as Latin American seems to do) and use them to the feminist’s advantage. It may not be pure feminism in the Western sense of the word, but these women are finding paths to power, capitalizing on this *supermadre* image. And, in the end, is that not what politics always is about, using your resources to your advantage. Hence, why should we criticize a woman for using her mothering qualities to be elected, but not criticize a man for using his military background as a platform. Is this unfair judgement anti-progressive in itself. Thus, Argentina and Chile, and their surrounding neighbors, should continue to embrace this image of the *supermadre*. It is not ideal, but as long as it serves as a base for further improvement and equality, it is an image that is, in the end, working towards the feminist’s advantage. A new generation in Chile and Argentina suggest a new game. Camila Vallejo, the student protest leader in Chile, is a prime example of what this next wave of young female leaders may be capable of. There is a plenty of energy and passion among women in contemporary Latin America, and it will be up to the respective governments to harness this energy properly to further solidify democracy rather than threaten it.

**Conclusions:**

Almost every country in our large world has a relatively deep history of the women’s struggle. Any researcher would be hard pressed to find a community or society that has not dealt with gender issues such as gender roles, equality, and political freedom. Therefore, it becomes
too simple to generalize and abstract the women’s fight in Latin America. Indeed there certain universals that weave through almost all the stories—clearly, if there is higher levels of democratic or economic stabilities are more favorable to the women’s movement. However, it is important to not forget the distinctive aspects that each culture, country, and people group brings with it that characterize and foretell the success of any given women’s movement.

What can be said, however, is that Latin America should never be discounted. Its rich culture, complex histories, and new horizons should excite any political scholar. Therefore, we must be wary of imposing any Western ideal or pattern onto Latin American governments. As mentioned, Latin America has its own special flavor of feminism that may contradict what is normally understood feminism. However, it is a style of feminism that works within the culture and context, and it a feminism that has ushered great female successes into what is a culturally *machismo* world. Hence, it is a feminism that works, at least for the time being.