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## Shaping Chilean Feminism

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## Shaping Chilean Feminism

### Abstract

The early 1990s are marked by worldwide feminist movements and women's suffrage. Women mobilized through feminist groups that demanded political rights, marital rights and labor rights. In the case of Chile, advocating for women's suffrage was an extensive process that required mass unity and mobilization through agitative media. By 1935, one of the most prominent feminist leaders, Elena Cafferena, co-founded The Movement for the Emancipation of Chilean Women (MEMCH) which became a critical actor in the Chilean women's rights battle. This case demonstrates how working women and "elite women" worked in collaboration for diverse demands within the movement. This paper aims to trace the Chilean feminist movement and point out which actors and political tools kept the movement alive, thus allowing for female liberation and a direct challenge to the patriarchal structure of Chilean society.

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### Abstract

*The early 1990s are marked by worldwide feminist movements and women's suffrage. Women mobilized through feminist groups that demanded political rights, marital rights and labor rights. In the case of Chile, advocating for women's suffrage was an extensive process that required mass unity and mobilization through agitative media. By 1935, one of the most prominent feminist leaders, Elena Cafferena, co-founded The Movement for the Emancipation of Chilean Women (MEMCH) which became a critical actor in the Chilean women's rights battle. This case demonstrates how working women and "elite women" worked in collaboration for diverse demands within the movement. This paper aims to trace the Chilean feminist movement and point out which actors and political tools kept the movement alive, thus allowing for female liberation and a direct challenge to the patriarchal structure of Chilean society.*

The Southern Cone of Latin America is widely known for popular feminist movements that embraced intersectionality, which has positively transformed Latin American politics. These feminist movements demonstrated that together, women can successfully widen the political space. Additionally, these movements have emphasized the critical role that strong female figures have played in leading movements. Chilean politician and jurist, Elena Caffarena, is one of many figures that have founded organizations advocating for unity and equality. Her charismatic and tenacious spirit brought women from different socio-economic backgrounds together to confront a patriarchal society. As a result, Caffarena and her colleague Olga Poblete founded the Movement for the Emancipation of Chilean Women (MEMCH) in 1935 to continue advocating for women's rights. In an interview regarding the MEMCH, Caffarena states that the feminist movement represents a number of different socio-economic classes and championed diverse demands. Unlike many figures, she stood for underrepresented women such as divorced women, illiterate women, and domestic workers. Overall, Elena Caffarena represents progressive feminist movements that sought to transform patriarchal societies by rallying marches and creating messages of female unity and liberation.

The Movement for the Emancipation of Chilean Women (MEMCH) was its own unique entity that was unlike any other feminist organization. As stated in the interview with Caffarena, the MEMCH was not a group of leaders that were elite women; instead, it consisted of "women of all social classes [who] worked together and in perfect harmony" (Hutchinson, p. 316). The repressive conditions in Chile pushed for unity and the creation of the MEMCH. In 1929 the Great Depression hit and it severely affected the struggling Chilean economy. Poverty and unemployment rates were high and particularly affected women and children. In these same years, the exploitation of working-class women occurred as the government provided no

solutions. In 1931, the government enacted the Labor Code of 1931 which aimed to grant Chilean workers the right to unionize and engage in collective bargaining. This labor law excluded a great percentage of female workers who worked in the domestic sector as maids, cooks, and babysitters. These conditions allowed women in domestic labor, mothers, excluded workers, and those who advocated for inclusion to collectively work to expand labor rights. As a matter of fact, the same year MEMCH was founded Cafferena and her colleagues began the newspaper *La Nueva Mujer* which aimed to illustrate the conditions of the female population and inform women about their rights. This newspaper allowed *memchistas*, members of the MEMCH throughout the nation, to connect, and expand the MEMCH.

While Elena Cafferena claims that the MEMCH stands for every woman, to what degree is that claim accurate? The MEMCH heavily advocated for women's suffrage which would benefit the white, elite, wealthy women. Though she claims that women's suffrage is key to change, a substantial number of women in Chile would not be able to vote due to illiteracy, lack of education, language barriers, and race, among other factors. It is critical to point out that her point of view is not only optimistic but through the eyes of a privileged educated woman. However, her optimism and inclusivity did inspire lower-class women to participate in feminist groups as she directly tried to illustrate an image of diversity to gain MEMCH members and support. She provided a platform where working-class women could provide testimonies and lead marches advocating for education, labor rights, and women's suffrage.

In addition to the MEMCH's strong support for the right to vote, the MEMCH and Caffarena advocated for gender equality and labor rights. In the 1940s Chilean women were expected to be mothers and subordinate household figures. The situation escalated when women entered the workforce; the inequality was blatant with regard to wages and treatment. For

example, in multiple factories, women were paid significantly less compared to their male counterparts while working the same jobs. Not to mention the treatment of women was brutal as some were sexually assaulted, disrespected, and relegated to second-class status. The MEMCH explicitly acknowledges its support for the expansion of labor rights and through *La Nueva Mujer* newspaper launched an article that demonstrated how a working-class woman was twice as likely to be exploited as middle and upper-class women. *La Nueva Mujer* does not explicitly mention the sexual abuse women experience but rather focuses on reproductive rights such as abortion. The MEMCH was in favor of abortion as women faced poverty and did not have the resources and support to raise children. This created controversy in a conservative and Catholic country that clashed with reproductive rights.

Simultaneously, conservative groups encouraged women to stay at home and discouraged participation in the workforce and politics. They used two specific tactics to discourage women; ridicule and trivialization. Ridicule was used widely by anti-feminists to intimidate women who were mocked, called ugly, sexually aberrant, and attacked their femininity. Caffarena personally experienced this when she was directly asked whether she had lost femininity in spending so much time on social and political work. She responded with a rhetorical question asking what it is to be feminine. There are many connotations that go along with femininity but femininity itself is “a particular way of being a woman” (Hutchinson, p. 318). She argues that if femininity is lost when women work then there would be no femininity left; women have been in the labor force for hundreds of years. It is just around this time when women are considered part of the working class and labeled as workers. The imposition of gender roles worked to intimidate women and push women back to domesticity. Trivialization, on the other hand, was how feminist groups were disparaged by political actors and the

government. Politicians often questioned how the MEMCH was going to create significant change if they did not collaborate with politicians. These politicians claimed that women were new actors in politics that did not understand how politics operated.

Moreover, this was not the only way Caffarena and the MEMCH were challenged; some believed that to achieve change women would have to work with men in the political sphere. Caffarena does not deny that some types of political work should be in collaboration with male political figures but other tasks should strictly involve women. For example, women should collaborate with politicians in generating labor and voting laws. Yet she also states, “there [should] be a group of women who work independently, who do not obey party interests, brandishing the flag of women’s demands” (Hutchinson, p. 317). She highlights that there needs to be some sort of confrontation against the patriarchal society to create change. Caffarena also mentions that when women fight against the patriarchy, progress can be realized. An example of this is English and American feminism which was combative and confrontational but effective. Eventually, this ‘radical’ feminism brought subjectively rapid changes in society as women protested and held conventions to be granted suffrage, marital rights, and many others. Elena Caffarena wishes a combative and confrontational movement had happened in Latin America to provide more unity and rapid change to a conservative society. Though things didn't go that way, she is certain that women will unite to create a strong front as long as unity prospers and women take initiative in politics.

All in all, Elena Caffarena and the Movement for the Emancipation of Chilean Women played an essential role in changing Chilean society for the well-being of women. Their efforts influenced the acknowledgment of reproductive rights and the enactment of women’s suffrage in 1949. Unfortunately by 1953, the organization stopped operating, halting further progress.

Furthermore, Elena Cafferena's interview reveals the harsh conditions women had to live through inside and outside the home. They were treated as second-class citizens without guaranteed rights yet they managed to create movements that enabled them to advocate for their needs. The MEMCH proved to be a formidable force for Chilean feminism as women from diverse sectors worked side by side to dismantle conservative and sexist laws created by the patriarchal government. While women still did not hold any power in political offices, they now held political power in the masses. Women proved anti-feminists to be wrong about the future of feminist movements and received support from diverse groups of people. Once they received support and clarified Chilean women's needs, MEMCH took action in rallying protests and producing propaganda. While gaining national attention, feminist movements received a great amount of criticism from politicians, conservative groups, and religious groups. A fight against feminists emerged, yet this would not stop Chilean women from accomplishing their goals. Though women have been granted rights and suffrage, the fight for equality is still in progress. Women continue to face lower wages and a lack of reproductive rights in Chile and every step taken to combat the patriarchy is a step toward achieving equality. Despite the end of MEMCH after women's suffrage was granted, women in the early 1980s revived the organization in opposition to the Pinochet regime. Since then, MEMCH has evolved as part of an NGO coalition to support women's equality. As Chile waits for the process of achieving equality to unfold, women must remain persistent and united.



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