

# Labors Appropriate to Their Sex

GENDER, LABOR, AND POLITICS IN URBAN CHILE, 1900–1930



Elizabeth Quay Hutchison

Labors  
Appropriate to  
Their Sex

*A book in the series*

**LATIN AMERICA OTHERWISE**

Languages, Empires, Nations

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Gender, Labor, and Politics

in Urban Chile, 1900–1930

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Elizabeth Quay Hutchison

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## About the Series

*Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations* is a critical series. It aims to explore the emergence and consequences of concepts used to define “Latin America” while at the same time exploring the broad interplay of political, economic, and cultural practices that have shaped Latin American worlds. Latin America, at the crossroads of competing imperial designs and local responses, has been construed as a geocultural and geopolitical entity since the nineteenth century. This series provides a starting point to redefine Latin America as a configuration of political, linguistic, cultural, and economic intersections that demand a continuous reappraisal of the role of the Americas in history, and of the ongoing process of globalization and the relocation of people and cultures that have characterized Latin America’s experience. *Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations* is a forum that confronts established geocultural constructions, that rethinks area studies and disciplinary boundaries, that assesses convictions of the academy and of public policy, and that, correspondingly, demands that the practices through which we produce knowledge and understanding about and from Latin America be subject to rigorous and critical scrutiny.

Women were key participants in Chile’s transformation into an urban and industrial society during the first decades of the twentieth century. By 1912, they made up one third of Santiago’s factory workers, and were the majority labor force in textile, clothing, and tobacco enterprises. Their growing presence in urban life earned them editorials in the press along with the apprehension of both radical and conservative organizations, troubled by their well being. Yet their significance has been, for the most part, ignored by scholars.

Elizabeth Quay Hutchison’s study of these tumultuous times brings gender back into play. She investigates the way the gendered division of labor constrained women’s possibilities in the labor market, and burdened them with double work; how the growing numbers of women in urban Chile provoked concern among male-dominated labor organi-

zations while spawning the development of radical socialist feminist movements; how reformers working within the government and the Catholic Church, alarmed by the “woman question,” promoted programs that constrained what Chile’s women could become. *Labors Appropriate to Their Sex*, recognizing the singular importance of gender as an analytical category, returns women to the complex political and economic relations of early-twentieth-century urban Chile; it makes us, therefore, understand Latin America Otherwise.

In memory of  
Pablo Andrés Candia Gajardo  
1969–1996



For Regina



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## Introduction

I told the head of investigations and the Criminal Judge that I have been dressing as a man for four years and that I did this, first, in order to better protect my honor as a woman, and second, to earn more so that I could live. Dressed as a man, I am more respected and no one propositions me. In this way I can work without anyone making me uncomfortable or bothering me. Dressed as a woman, I could not live among men nor work in whatever job [I wished]. Work for women is scarce and very badly paid. I preferred to look for another way to satisfy my physical necessities without upsetting my spiritual inclinations.

—Laura Rosa Zelada, November 26, 1903

In November 1903, the Santiago and Valparaíso newspaper-reading public were entertained by the revelations of an illiterate young woman named Laura Rosa Zelada, also known as Honorio Cortes. The nineteen-year-old bakery employee was discovered to be a woman in man's clothing, arrested for dressing in disguise, and thrown in jail. According to lawyer Agustín Bravo Cisternas—who dubbed her “Laura, Virgin of the Forest” in his account—Zelada had fled her rural home and an abusive brother-in-law four years earlier, shed her skirts for pants, and gone to work in and around Santiago as a servant, fruit seller, hotel employee, and baker. In the above petition for her release, Zelada argued that she was not guilty of the crime of wearing a disguise, because she had dressed as a man only to earn a decent living and to protect her honor. When charges were dropped and she was released, Zelada disappeared without a trace.<sup>1</sup>

During the six months of her imprisonment, Zelada's case became the talk of the town. As the details of the case emerged, she was lauded as a local heroine in urban newspapers, which also took advantage of the situation to produce titillating accounts of cross-dressing throughout

history. One editorial defended Zelada's right to wear pants and mocked the charges that had been made against her, arguing that she had "cut her hair and become a better man than any Deputy or Senator."<sup>2</sup> The bulk of editorials, however, focused on the economic logic of Zelada's actions. Journalists from the working-class daily *El Chileno*, for example, followed the case closely, justifying Zelada's masquerade in light of women's limited occupational choices: "If she had not changed her clothes, she would have been a laundress, a seamstress, which is to say, a slave to someone who only pays her enough so that she doesn't die right away."<sup>3</sup> Publicity about Zelada's arrest provoked widespread sympathy for her plight, reflecting the common perception that working women were unduly exploited. Zelada's case was also used to illustrate complaints about women's low wages, poor working conditions, excessive sexual vulnerability, and desperate poverty. By dressing as a man to survive and to protect her honor, Zelada had apparently won more fans than critics.<sup>4</sup>

The most extensive and revealing treatise in Zelada's defense was penned by her lawyer, who included a chapter about her case in his legal polemic, *La mujer a través de los siglos* (Women Through the Centuries). Bravo Cisternas rendered a detailed account of Zelada's hardships and defended her cross-dressing as a rational economic choice: "She solved the economic problem regarding women's capacities in male occupations and found a way for a woman to get a better salary and more respect from men."<sup>5</sup> According to Bravo, "the Virgin of the Forest" had chosen the only virtuous option available to a woman who had to support herself, and she should not have been punished for it. On the contrary, he argued, Zelada's actions should be considered exemplary until legal reforms that would improve the lot of working women could be implemented.

The scandal generated by Zelada's arrest was only one manifestation of widespread public concern for the plight of working women in early-twentieth-century Chile. Labor organizers, elite Catholic women, industrialists, and legislators all debated the nature and propriety of women's paid work as they confronted a rapidly changing society. As urban and industrial growth engulfed Santiago and women literally went out to work, traditional gender and social arrangements came under intense scrutiny. What did it mean that poor women could not, or would not, tend exclusively to domestic responsibilities? How should the state or private organizations intervene to ensure healthy future

generations of workers? These queries spurred private and public efforts for the aid, protection, and organization of women workers that characterized the era of the social question in Chile.

In part, this preoccupation was a result of the increasing evidence of women in the urban labor force around the turn of the century; according to the 1885 national census, women constituted 35 percent of the national workforce, and their work was concentrated in manufacturing, service, and commercial activities in urban centers. Women working for wages outside the home had become not only more numerous, but also more visible against the backdrop of the dramatic urban transformations of the late nineteenth century. Much of the public concern about the mushrooming urban population, therefore, focused on the unseemly presence of *women* in the city: as factory workers, street sellers, domestic servants, and prostitutes. In the still predominantly rural society of nineteenth-century Chile, women's work, though necessary for family survival, was not paid or public; in the burgeoning capital, by contrast, women and their work were everywhere in evidence. This study explores the origins, motives, and objectives of debates on women's urban work in Chile over the first three decades of the twentieth century to show how these debates influenced broader developments in labor politics, women's activism, and state formation. In this fashion, the Chilean case illuminates how gender affects and is affected by social transformations linked to urban and industrial growth in Latin America prior to the 1930s.

Public outcry over working women's condition was just one aspect of a society that anxiously confronted far-reaching social and economic changes. This period spans a critical juncture in Chilean development, from the aftermath of the Second War of the Pacific (ending in 1883) through the Ibañez era, a period in which a set of crucial socioeconomic and political changes transformed Chile's territory, demography, and administration. Many of these changes stemmed from Chile's acquisition of vast nitrate fields in its second great war with Peru; taxes from the export of nitrates to Europe funded the growth of the Chilean state and encouraged national integration through the development of transportation networks. The so-called Parliamentary Republic that followed, initiated with the fall of Balmaceda in 1891, described a thinly disguised version of oligarchic rule, one riven by increasing levels of class conflict in the new century.

Changes linked to the export of nitrates also dramatically transformed the living and employment options of working people. Rural wage la-

borers, already migrating in search of work, turned to the city in hopes of finding some opportunity for economic advancement and freedom from rural peonage. The promise of employment in nitrates and related industries sparked massive migration of male peons from rural to urban areas: urban centers expanded from 34 to 49 percent of the population between 1885 and 1930, and Santiago's growth peaked at almost 5 percent a year between 1885 and 1895. Male artisans and workers found in the city increased employment opportunities as production diversified to supply domestic markets for luxury and essential goods. The emergence of an urban proletariat and the enactment of literate male suffrage (1885) contributed to the foundation of the first workers' parties in the late 1880s. Subsequent labor organization and conflict in port, mining, and industrial centers presaged the conflictive, repressive relations between workers and their employers that would come to characterize labor relations under the Parliamentary Republic.<sup>6</sup>

Women also formed an integral part of these changes, as they too turned to the city in search of employment. Since the 1860s, women had begun to abandon the shrinking family economies of the countryside and take up residence in the *ranchos* (shacks) that circled Santiago.<sup>7</sup> To sustain what were often female-headed households, women mixed domestic agriculture with cottage industries and local commerce in the urban periphery. As Santiago increased in importance as the administrative and residential center for Chile's aristocracy in the late nineteenth century, demand for female domestic services increased and urban space was reorganized to accommodate elite plans for the city. Relocated to slums at the city's center, poor women and men were drawn into a cash economy, and consequently women became more dependent on either male family members or their own scarce wages for survival.

The growth of urban population and domestic consumption also provided some women with another option: factory work in clothing, textile, cigarette, and food production. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, Chile's early industrial production was well underway, supplying the growing domestic markets for clothing and food. The average size of factories grew from seventeen to thirty workers between 1895 and 1925; by 1918, 43 percent of all industrial workers in Chile were employed in factories of one hundred or more.<sup>8</sup> Citing their superior dexterity, docility, and sobriety, industrialists actively recruited women and children to manufacturing employment, thereby ensuring a sizable and inexpensive workforce for textile, food, and clothing production. By 1912, women made up a solid third of Santiago's factory workers, where

they predominated in the clothing, textile, and tobacco industries by a ratio of 3 to 1. All told, approximately one tenth of the wage-earning women of Santiago worked in factory production, including those who retrieved factory piecework to complete in their homes.<sup>9</sup>

Because of women's visible role in these socioeconomic transformations, this was the period in which attention to the plight of working women was first ignited. The fact of women's manual employment—and its high visibility in the city—disturbed and offended a wide variety of social actors, from anarchists to senators, who seized on the figure of the woman worker as proof of social decay. At the turn of the century, labor organizers referred with increasing frequency to the plight of working women, diagnosing this pressing issue according to the various dictates of anarchist or socialist ideology. In parallel fashion, Chilean elites initiated a variety of private and legislative projects to protect, train, and mobilize working-class women, revealing their competing visions for the preservation of Chilean society and its values. The simultaneous growth of middle-class employment in clerical, sales, and professional jobs evidenced Chile's gradual shift to a more middle-class, urban society and spurred new concerns over the nature of female employment. The growing presence of women in these sectors not only buttressed the emancipatory designs of middle-class feminists, but also prefigured the feminization of state welfare activities in the 1930s.

Despite the abundant evidence of female participation in the urban workforce in the twentieth century, existing studies of the urban working classes in Chile have been generally inattentive to women's participation and to gender as an analytic category. Until very recently, labor historians have relegated women workers to the very margins of narratives on industrial development and class formation in Chile.<sup>10</sup> This failure to consider women as worthwhile subjects of working-class history has been misleading: it not only overlooks female agency, but also conflates the experience of male workers with the process of class formation itself, dictating the periodization, subjects, and sources for its study.<sup>11</sup> The fact that labor historians have viewed women as only a secondary workforce obviates the reality that, historically and currently, almost one of every four Chilean "workers" is female. This was, and is, not simply a "natural" division of labor: women's position in the labor market—in Chile as elsewhere—has been constrained by material conditions on the one hand (including the double duty performed by working mothers) and normative and institutional exclusions on the other (bar-

ring women's access to "skilled" and more permanent jobs).<sup>12</sup> The characteristics of women's participation in the labor force—in a variety of settings and conditions—have challenged scholars first to incorporate women into labor history and then to question prevailing wisdom about the construction of working-class identities, consciousness, and agency.

Fortunately, the development of Chilean social history in recent years has mandated that women and other "popular subjects" be included as historical subjects, and has begun to provide a more complete picture of working-class development.<sup>13</sup> When working-class women have been discussed, however, most authors have not sufficiently challenged the normative analytic dichotomy between the male as worker and the female as mother, which tends to obscure women's productive and sometimes public contributions, both as workers and as labor militants. As Joan Scott has observed, gender is a remarkably powerful mechanism in class formation because "sexual difference is invoked as a 'natural' phenomenon; as such it enjoys a privileged status, seemingly outside question or criticism."<sup>14</sup> Historians who, in like fashion, fail to question the apparent immutability of gender roles have overlooked an important analytical tool for understanding labor and workers' politics. For example, women have often been given short shrift in research on working-class political movements because many historians have tended to dispense with female participation in labor politics with the observation that women were more "passive" than men, without asking how or why this might have come about.<sup>15</sup> By presenting instances of female activism as exceptions that confirm the rule of female passivity, these accounts fail to consider the fact that male-led labor movements have historically offered conditional support for the mobilization of women workers, whose demands have consequently been structured around the twin goals of cross-gender solidarity and increasing male wages. The ways labor movements have drawn on and manipulated gender ideology to great political gain have been amply documented in a variety of historical cases and periods.<sup>16</sup> In the Chilean case, historians' continuing tendency to view working-class women first as housewives and only secondarily as workers has inhibited closer scrutiny of their participation in the labor force, as well as its implications for workers' political movements.<sup>17</sup>

Like the labor movement, debates on the social question have provided one of the central reference points for Chilean histories of the period, which have explored the ideological, political, and institutional parameters of public debate and legislative action under the Parliamen-

tary Republic.<sup>18</sup> However, the substantial literature on Chilean industrial relations has described the evolution of the social question in Chile as an exclusively male phenomenon: male politicians and employers debating the fortunes and control of male miners and industrial workers. Because they have focused solely on conflicts between working men and their male employers, historians have tended to overlook the ample evidence of public concern for working women.<sup>19</sup> Even though contemporaries themselves addressed concerns about women's changing role in society in the context of debates on the social question, historians have divided research on "the worker question" and "the woman question" into separate projects concerned exclusively with their respective male and female subjects.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the growing field of Chilean women's history has offered a partial response to this elision of working women from the historical record.<sup>21</sup> Although early studies of women's political participation tended to emphasize middle-class professional women's leadership in the gradual transformation of Chilean women's roles,<sup>22</sup> recent scholarship has begun to flesh out working-class women's agency and experience by examining their labor, community ties, and political participation. Guided by a variety of distinct theoretical orientations,<sup>23</sup> these studies have confirmed the need to revise the "master narratives" of both labor and political history in Chile.<sup>24</sup> Chilean women's labor history promises to illuminate how the persistent identification of men with wage work and women with reproduction reflects gender hierarchies that influence working-class men and women in the home as well as in labor politics. Given the incipient development of the field of working-class women's history in Chile, the methodological sweep of this study extends from the first step of compensatory history (in which women are reconstituted as subjects) to the task of posing new questions about previous interpretations of female agency and influence in historical processes. What happens when we place working-class women at the center of historical narratives about organized labor, the rise of feminism, and state formation? We see, first, that Chilean working-class women struggled to reconcile the need for wages with changing expectations about working-class domesticity and class solidarity; working women's concerns with gender "rights" and their capacity to achieve them were therefore quite different from those demonstrated by elite feminists of the period. Second, we see that the *problem* of women's work was often constructed quite differently by women's erstwhile protectors—union leaders, legislators, elite women, and state officials—than it

was by women themselves. Nevertheless, it was outsiders' continuing attention to women at work that fundamentally shaped the emerging urban labor movement, early protective legislation, and private and state welfare activities in the early twentieth century, effectively limiting the range of choices for women who needed to work for wages in the urban economy. Therefore, this focus illustrates how changes in the panorama of women's paid, manual labor accompanied the growth of the city and sparked the attention of social actors who saw in working women the illustration of a society in crisis and the springboard for necessary reforms.

Much of the existing history of Latin American women in the modern period has focused, understandably, on the increasing access of middle-class women to education and professional employment and on the corresponding emergence of movements for gender equality, in which women and their male allies challenged the civil codes and suffrage restrictions of their respective countries.<sup>25</sup> The present study intentionally circumvents this narrative of liberal feminism not because it is unimportant, but rather because without further development of the social history of women's labor, deceptive generalizations about women's "progress" in the modern era remain seductive.<sup>26</sup> Recent scholarship has demonstrated that liberal feminism was not the only movement that emerged in defense of women's "interests" during the century of "the woman question" in Latin America. As Lavrin has shown, liberal feminists borrowed selectively from competing feminists' claims and built their projects for social reform on existing class and political networks.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, proponents of "other feminisms," often social Catholic in orientation, drew attention to the plight of working women to achieve conservative political and social goals.<sup>28</sup> Of all the varieties of feminism circulating in early-twentieth-century Chile, this study examines working-class feminism most closely, fleshing out its substance and significance within socialist unionism, precisely because this discourse clearly illustrates the constraints on and opportunities for working women's political action in this period. This approach not only privileges working-class actors—particularly women—but also allows us to examine the claims they made on behalf of working women, which were quite different from those of liberal or conservative feminist movements of the period. Each of these "mixed feminisms" provided an arena for women's struggle to change their social condition (or that of others), leaving a rich and complex record of their social agency.

This study has also been enriched by recent studies of Latin American

working women that examine how gender is articulated in the process of class formation, particularly in terms of cultural representations of working-class women. A number of recent North American studies have examined the “cultural paradox of the woman worker,” referring to the central discursive paradigm that makes women’s workforce participation suspect, dangerous, or at the very least requiring an explanation. This tension has been amply documented in Ann Farnsworth-Alvear’s study of the Antioqueña textile industry in the 1920s, where she argues that the “fictive category” of *la mujer obrera* (the woman worker) shaped both industrial discipline and the resistance of women textile workers.<sup>29</sup> Other studies have shown that the discourse that emerged in conjunction with women’s factory work in much of Latin America has shaped their employment on a structural level—through the creation of industrial training programs, charitable work, and protective legislation—as well as at the level of experience, influencing how working women view themselves and their work. Oral histories have therefore frequently revealed how women employ a “language of necessity” or turn to available life scripts of working-class social motherhood to justify their employment.<sup>30</sup>

Chilean representations of *la mujer obrera* during the first three decades of the twentieth century confirm that the paradox of the woman worker was a powerful stimulus to social reform, but it was not the only available paradigm for workers’ own actions. As union militants struggled to resolve the tension between working-class aspirations for viable patriarchy on the one hand and the challenges presented by female employment outside the home on the other, representations of working women became relatively *less* paradoxical, as competing representations of women as active agents in revolutionary struggle became available. Where we do glimpse women’s own agency and voice, there is also evidence for what Deborah Levenson-Estrada has called “the gray area of women’s experience of gender ‘imperfection.’”<sup>31</sup> Women militants active in the labor associations of early-twentieth-century urban Chile justified their appropriation of a male role in a variety of ways, in some cases feminizing that role by evoking the feminine traits of virtue and self-sacrifice, and in others embracing the model of “virile” activism for the greater good of class revolution.<sup>32</sup> Militant women workers both manipulated prevalent assumptions about their vulnerability and asserted through their activism a claim to the “manly” characteristics of organized labor. By looking at the interplay between “fictions” and “realities” of working women’s experience, we gain a greater appreciation

of how constructions of *la mujer obrera* might have shaped women's economic opportunities and community solidarity in early-twentieth-century Chile.

Like most projects in social history, the task of reconstructing Chilean working-class women's experience in this period began with the search for relevant sources. Because many women were engaged, then as now, in informal employment that allowed them to fulfill domestic obligations, quantitative data are weak and incomplete indicators of their employment. Women's work was also characterized by a high degree of instability, as women moved between jobs in search of better working conditions and wages and more time for domestic duties. Given the diverse nature of female employment, this study draws on a variety of sources to reconstruct how, when, and where women worked in the city. Although contemporaries demonstrated ample concern for the effects of female employment, data on women's working conditions and wages were not collected in any systematic fashion. Data on women's work thus had to be gleaned from labor inspectors' reports, factory surveys, and the published census. Law theses concerned with the social question occasionally provided case studies of working-class women amidst legislative analysis and foreign bibliographies. Journalists, on the other hand, regularly focused their attention on abuses and developments in the most common forms of female employment: manufacturing, domestic service, commerce, and prostitution. Labor Office records, trade magazines, and factory rules provide some indication of how women's work was organized in certain highly feminized industries.

The search for sources also quickly revealed how the story of women's work is also a narrative about the emergence of organized labor, the consolidation of the state, and elite projects for social control of the working classes. The state's earliest attempts to protect women in the workplace were documented in congressional debates, legislative proposals, and ministerial records. The abundant labor press of the period reveals all sorts of information on working-class women, from doctrinal statements on "the woman question" to meeting announcements, denunciations of employers, and flowery poetry.<sup>33</sup> These observers gathered and disseminated information on working women in the service of their respective causes, offering various solutions to the perceived crisis. However divergent their ideological positions, their views tend to converge on the premise that if women were to continue working outside the

home, their activities had to be monitored and protected in the interest of the public good.

As the present study shows, historical documents that describe women at work—in both quantitative and qualitative terms—are infused with the cultural norms, symbols, and ideologies that differentiate male and female qualities and behaviors, particularly in the sphere of employment. For example, all of these sources share a marked bias toward the definition of work as only waged, and usually industrial, employment, so much so that women's activity in other areas can be drawn only from anecdotal information. Moreover, methods of data collection and the use of results reveal the political and social aims of each group with respect to workers and their families, as well as their assumptions and expectations about women in the labor force. In the end, many of these sources reveal more about how women's work was valued, rationalized, and contested than about the reality of women's work in any objective sense.

Divided into two parts, this book sketches out the changes in women's paid employment and a series of developments that followed in two major arenas: the labor movement and the private and state projects of Chilean elites. The first chapter sets the stage for this discussion by describing the processes of industrialization and urbanization in Chile in terms of migration, housing, and the urban labor market. Chapter 2 charts the economic activities of urban women, challenging accepted interpretations of women's economic role in Chile's industrial growth. Previously, historians have taken at face value census figures that show a dramatic decline in women's industrial work after 1907. Closer examination reveals that women's participation shifted rather than evaporated: the use of female labor in domestic sweatshops and changing definitions of employment combined to informalize women's labor, making much of it disappear from census records by 1930.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine how workers' organizations responded to women's increased visibility in the urban workforce. Whereas some leaders relied on available discourses of female emancipation to unionize working women, labor organizers also utilized images of female victimization in the workplace, both to shame employers and to assert male workers' rights to control and protect working-class women's labor and sexuality. Although working-class feminist criticism sometimes emerged to protest gender inequalities in Chilean working-class politics, this challenge was limited by a tacit consensus between men and women

about the gender roles they deemed appropriate for each sex and the gendered codes of respectability to which they aspired. The surge in socialist unionization among women workers between 1900 and 1908, often referred to as *feminismo obrero* (worker feminism), illustrates the inflexibility of gender roles even under the pressure of a rapidly changing workforce and a challenge from the more radical worker feminists. Although socialist organizers' attention to women workers attenuated in the subsequent two decades, women continued to participate in labor associations, occasionally raising the banner of worker feminism in later years for the benefit of cross-gender solidarity.

Part 2 explores how women's paid labor became the locus of anxiety for social elites—industrialists, educators, aristocratic women, social reformers, and legislators—who were alarmed by the changes induced by industrial and urban growth. Chapter 5 describes how industrialists and their state allies set out to modernize Chilean industry and rescue women from poverty by establishing industrial schools for girls. The innovative potential of this project was constrained, however, by the school administrators' acceptance of existing occupational segregation, which, compounded by consistently low female wages, made female training and certification in industrial skills superfluous to improving their position in the labor market. Instead, the schools evolved into a mechanism for improving poor women's morals and domestic skills in an effort to discipline potentially unruly working-class men. Chapter 6 examines how elite women addressed what they perceived as a gendered social crisis through attempts to educate, organize, and protect women workers. Aristocratic Catholic women, who had long supported religious and vocational programs for poor women, were compelled to take further action by the increasing participation of middle-class and even aristocratic women in economic activities. Alarmed by radical labor's organizing among women workers, they also turned to organizing women in the workplace in hopes of staving off what they perceived to be the impending social and moral impact of industrialization. In the 1910s and 1920s, Catholic women's societies countered leftist mobilization by establishing worker cooperatives and Catholic unions for women workers.

Finally, women workers became the explicit subject of congressional debate in these decades, as politicians considered implementing social legislation in response to the social question. Taking their cue from the private charitable organizations and international laws that preceded them, prominent legislators urged their colleagues to provide women

and children with state protection, securing several largely uncontroversial measures passed (but not enforced) after 1910. Chapter 7 analyzes how and why legislators debated laws and regulations designed to limit what they considered to be the untoward effects of female employment on working-class families. The timing and content of labor legislation for women reveals how assumptions about masculinity and femininity—in relation to wage work, family survival, and reproduction—shaped the state’s response to the social question as a whole. As recent scholarship on the welfare state elsewhere has shown, such policies were gendered not only because many of them were directed at women, but also because they derived from gendered assumptions about human capabilities, the nature of the state, and social organization.<sup>34</sup> However divided they might have been over the social question itself, opposing politicians agreed on the necessity of state intervention to protect working mothers. Private charities and gender-specific legislation thus paved the way for the comprehensive and paternalistic Labor Code of 1924. Although little in this Code was effectively enforced prior to the 1930s, these regulations consolidated men’s role as breadwinner and further narrowed opportunities for women in the labor market.

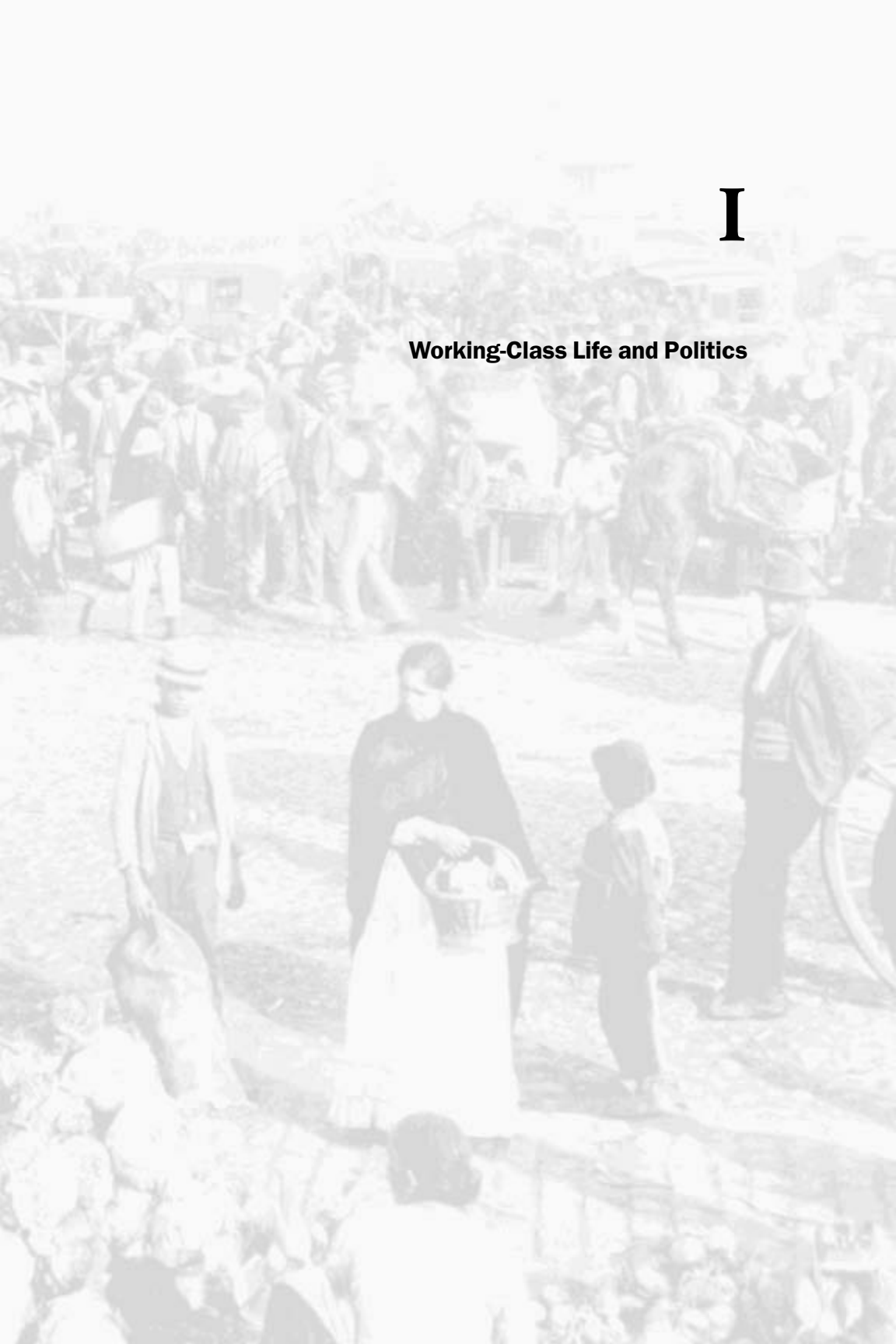
One of the keys to understanding how gender operates historically in any society has been the sexual division of labor, by which economic activities come to be identified as appropriate for either men or women. In urban Chile at the turn of the century, such gendered divisions, including the low value attached to women’s labor, had already become firmly entrenched in cultural understandings. The phrase commonly employed to describe women’s occupations—“labors appropriate to their sex” (*labores propias de su sexo*)—relied on a supposedly natural and therefore immutable division of labor by sex. In fact, as forms and levels of female employment were transformed, women’s “appropriate” work would become a contested category, as working women and other social actors tried to explain, challenge, or justify the kinds and conditions of female employment. Although the growing presence of women in formerly male arenas such as the industrial workshop was readily acknowledged around 1900, their presence there was considered—by all but their employers—detrimental and temporary. Women who earned money for their labor outside the home continued to be defined as exceptions to the rule of the working-class homemaker, which confirmed and justified women workers’ confinement to female occupations and their correspondingly low wages. Nevertheless, as the case of Laura Zelada demon-

strates, working women did not always accept such constraints on their choices, but regularly subverted them (by performing “male” work), challenged them (through strikes and labor actions), or adapted them to their own advantage (through recourse to protective legislation and vocational training). Through their own actions, women demonstrated their agency, if not by refashioning definitions of “appropriate work,” then by working around such exclusions in order to survive.

This study of the “labors appropriate to their sex” demonstrates how this very concrete manifestation of sexual hierarchy shaped women’s economic options, structured urban working-class communities, and affected debates about the well-being of Santiago’s working poor. Although certain norms concerning gender and work came under public scrutiny in the social transformations of the period, prevailing constructions of gender roles and identity continued to shape labor movement strategies, the development of the industrial relations system, and elite administration of private and public welfare for the working classes. Gender norms and their changing content therefore crucially informed the process of class formation and urban change in this critical period of Chilean history.

# I

## Working-Class Life and Politics





**D**uring the decades flanking the turn of the century, the city of Santiago made manifest the social distance between the growing wealth of a few and the grinding poverty of the many in increasingly dramatic terms. While profits from the nitrate industry funded the palatial homes of Santiago's aristocratic families, rural unemployment and poverty sent scores of women and men into the city in search of work in wealthy homes and industrial workshops. The history of "the city of the poor" and "the death of the people" is also a history of an emerging public awareness of working-class women's subjugation within that scheme.<sup>1</sup> The story of where these women lived and worked and of how they participated in working-class political movements forms a crucial part of the history of class formation and the politics of the left in Chile.

Part I begins with two chapters that describe the transformation of the urban areas and labor markets of urban Chile in the early twentieth century, focusing on how such changes shifted the contours of working-class urban life and impacted women and men in different ways. Not only did more women than men migrate to urban areas in search of work, but they also facilitated male migration and family survival in the increasingly cash-based economy of the city. As women and children became a crucial labor pool for factory expansion in textile and clothing production, as well as an important source of labor for making tobacco, chemical, and leather products, these new workers in fact "invaded" the streets and tram cars of Santiago and Valparaíso. However, these formal employment opportunities did not at once eliminate women's simultaneous responsibility for domestic reproduction, nor their participation in informal and illegal employment. Determining how, where, and for what women labored in this shifting economy is an important step in sketching the urban panorama of early-twentieth-century Chile.

These socioeconomic transformations also triggered increasing conflicts between workers and their employers, stimulating working-class

organization and the circulation of radical labor ideologies in Chile. Chapters 3 and 4 explore how representations of women in relation to wage work shaped the discourse and platforms of labor militants, both male and female, at this crucial stage in the genesis of the Chilean labor movement. The discourse on women workers that emerged in the first decade of the twentieth century—made necessary in large part by the incessant focus on the social question at all levels of public debate—required that labor leaders acknowledge women’s presence in the workplace and propose forms of female organization, if only to bring the erosion of male industrial wages through female employment to an end. Despite the prevailing consensus that women—and their families—were better off when women stayed at home, images of working women in this period were adapted to the exigencies of mobilization through labor propaganda that lauded, naturalized, and explained this “unfeminine” behavior. By the 1920s, the intensity of attention to “the woman question” had declined, reflecting the success of socialist cross-gender strategies, which both legitimated working women’s demands and buttressed campaigns for the male family wage.