

# OUT OF THE SHADOWS

**Women, Resistance and Politics  
in South America  
Jo Fisher**

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# Introduction

'Everyone was out on the streets, waving their flags, banging drums, dancing, singing, crying. It was the first time I'd seen members of the two main political parties cheering the same president! Everyone was full of hope that this was the start of something new. We'd lost so much in all those years. It wasn't enough for things to go back to how they were before the barbarism of the dictatorship, we wanted something better.'

Ana María (Argentina)

On 10 December 1983 hundreds of thousands of Argentines filled the streets of Buenos Aires to celebrate the inauguration of the newly-elected president, Raúl Alfonsín, and the end of a seven-year military dictatorship which had become synonymous with death squads, concentration camps and murder. As the president appeared on the balcony of the presidential palace the crowds roared its approval, waving political banners and blue and white national flags and chanting, 'Argentina today, Chile and Uruguay tomorrow'. Uruguayans had to wait another two years for the end of military rule and it was not until 1990, after more than 16 years in power, that General Pinochet finally handed over to an elected president in Chile. 1989 saw the overthrow of Latin America's longest surviving dictator, General Stroessner, ruler of Paraguay since 1954.

In all four countries of the southern cone area of Latin America women led the struggle for democracy, showing extraordinary courage and determination in confronting the brutality of military repression. In Argentina, the Mothers and Grandmothers of the victims of the regime's concentration camps mounted the first public challenge to military rule, breaking the silence imposed by the terror of 'disappearances' with their weekly marches in Plaza de Mayo (May Square) in the heart of Buenos Aires. Driven by desperation, they

risked their lives to take to the streets to demand the return of their missing children and grandchildren. In Paraguay, peasant women organised their first public demonstration and the largest gathering of women in the country's history to demand land and democracy. But it was not only in public protests that women played a crucial role in the opposition movement to dictatorship. Behind the scenes, in shanty towns and poor communities, women fought a private daily battle for the survival of their families in the face of the devastation caused by the economic policies of the military. With communal kitchens, canteens and health projects, they helped keep working-class organisation alive and built networks of resistance to military rule.

It was a challenge that took the military rulers by surprise. Before the coups most of these women had been housewives, tied to the home by children, with no political experience and little interest in the world outside their homes and families. Military rule shattered this world, forcing them to take on a more active role in public affairs. As male breadwinners fell victim to a wave of unemployment, women were forced to find paid work; as savage cuts in government spending put medical care out of the reach of working-class families, women started their own health campaigns; when hunger and despair struck their communities, they combined their efforts, setting up communal self-help projects to feed their families; and when members of their families fell victim to political persecution and 'disappearance', they organised public protests that brought the attention of the international community to their cause. In the name of motherhood and the family, women extended their domestic role into the public arena, and in the process they transformed not only politics, but also challenged traditional ideas about women. They became aware of their own interests not only as members of the poor and working-class sectors of society, but also as women. The slogans 'democracy in the country and democracy in the home' and 'without women there's no democracy' which appeared in the pre-election rallies in Chile and Uruguay expressed women's determination to make a permanent place for themselves and their interests in the world of politics.

Ironically, the immediate effect of the return of 'democratic' politics was a fall in women's political activity, as male-dominated political parties and trade unions took the centre stage and national and local government moved into the areas in which women had worked. Few women candidates were put forward by political parties and they were only a tiny minority of those elected to the new parliaments. In the Uruguayan parliament there were no women at all. Women did not give up and return to the home, however, and this book tells the story of their battle, not only for the survival of their families in the

face of continued economic hardship, but also against inequality and discrimination in the trade unions, political parties and society at large.

While there is a great variation in the position of women depending on the country and geographical region in which they live and on the particular religious, ethnic and social group to which they belong, what is striking about the testimonies of the women in this book are the similarities in their everyday lives. Much of the uniformity in the lives of women of all four countries is the result of the particularly oppressive version of sexism which permeates Latin American culture, known as *machismo*.

## **Machismo**

*Machismo* is an ideology which owes much to Spanish colonial ideas about women (they were classified in colonial legal codes as 'imbeciles by nature') and the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Gender is the term used to refer to the different roles that societies and cultures ascribe to men and women, as opposed to sex which refers only to biological differences. *Machismo* is a system of gender relations which exaggerates the differences between men and women according to their so-called 'natural' qualities and determines what is acceptable behaviour from each. Although these differences are supposed to complement each other, *machismo* clearly asserts the superiority of the male over the female. The stereotypical macho male is strong, aggressive and virile while women are dependent, self-sacrificing, submissive and emotional; men are unfaithful by nature and women are monogamous and devoted to the family. Men and women are destined to different roles in society: men in the outside world of work, money and politics and women in the unpaid work of the home. Most women are brought up with the idea that their natural role in life is to become a mother and that their place is inside the home. The female equivalent of *machismo*, known as *marianismo*, refers to the exalted respect women command as mothers and has sometimes led to the misconception that countries such as Paraguay and Chile are 'matriarchal' societies, or societies ruled by women.

The lives of most women, of course, have never conformed to these caricatures. Necessity has dictated that a significant proportion of working-class women, for example, have always worked outside the home and most of those interviewed here had paid jobs at some time in their lives. In the past thirty years economic and social factors have transformed the position of many women in the Southern Cone. Most women in Argentina, Uruguay and Chile now live in cities, they have fewer children and there has been an explosion in the number of

women in education and paid work. Nevertheless, *machismo* continues to exert a strong influence over women, creating a whole series of obstacles to their participation in society and limiting the choices they can make in their lives.

Cultural barriers combine with the teachings of the Church and family and civil law to consolidate discrimination against women. The influence of *machismo* can still be seen in many laws, particularly in relation to married women and reproductive rights. In a continent where most of the population are registered as Catholic, the teachings of the traditional Roman Catholic Church reinforce and perpetuate the subordination of women. Women are seen as protectors of the faith and virtue and encouraged to endure silently unhappy marriages and poverty. Although one in five households in Latin America is headed by a woman, the Church has been one of the biggest obstacles to the introduction of divorce. When divorce and equal rights for children born outside marriage were introduced briefly in Argentina in the 1950s under President Perón, the withdrawal of church support for his government helped legitimise the coup which toppled him. In Chile and Paraguay divorce is available only in very exceptional circumstances and has only recently been legalised in Argentina. Only in Uruguay has divorce been available since early in the century.

Until recently, Uruguay was also the only exception to a system where men had privileged legal rights over marital decisions, children and property. Until 1985 Argentina still had the system of *patria potestad*, which gave men the final decision over issues concerning children, even after the couple had separated. In Chile the concept of women's obedience to their husbands is still enshrined in family law. In Paraguay the freedom of married women to work outside the home is also limited by law. Paraguayan husbands still have control over matrimonial property and women have to obtain the consent of their husbands before entering into economic activity. A woman's duty to be sexually faithful to her husband is also embodied in legal systems as in Chile, where a woman commits adultery if she is found having sex with any man other than her husband, while for men adultery only applies if the sexual act takes place inside the marital home. In Paraguay the law exempts a man from punishment if he murders his wife when she is found in the act of adultery.

Contraception is legal, although not always widely available to women. Its availability has been, and to a large extent continues to be, determined by access to medical services and by the woman's ability to pay. In Argentina in 1974, for example, during the government of Isabel Perón, over-the-counter sales of contraceptives were banned. Rural women in particular have little access to contraception and to the medical supervision they require and this partly explains the



higher birth rates in rural areas. Moreover, decisions about having children are still often taken out of women's hands by their partners and by the Church: men often object to women using contraception, seeing a large family as proof of their virility, and the Church campaigns actively against the use of artificial methods of birth control. Eulogia, a peasant from Paraguay where families of ten or more children are not uncommon, recalls, 'I've had 15 children. The eleventh time I was pregnant with twins and I went to the priest and told him that we couldn't support any more children. He told me it was wicked to think of stopping pregnancies and that we would be punished, so I never went back to him and I went on having children.'

One consequence of the unavailability of contraception is a high abortion rate. Despite the huge number of illegal, backstreet and self-induced terminations carried out in Latin America and the high number of maternal deaths and injury that result from them, abortion remains a taboo issue. Statistics on illegal abortions are obviously unreliable, but some studies suggest that up to forty per cent of pregnancies in Latin America end in abortion. Uruguay is believed to have one of the highest rates of abortion in Latin America — 150,000 a year in a country of three million, resulting in over a hundred deaths a year. Research in the early 1970s suggests that nearly half of all pregnancies in Chile ended in abortion. In one survey in Paraguay, 35 per cent of women interviewed admitted having had one or more abortions and a study of 13 Third World countries showed Paraguay with the highest maternal mortality as a result of backstreet abortions.

Several of the women interviewed in this book talked of having performed abortions on themselves and recognised it as a serious problem in their neighbourhoods. In the words of one Argentine woman, 'In my neighbourhood a woman with five little children has just died trying to do an abortion on herself. There was another case of a fifteen year old who did an abortion with a parsley root, which is very common and very dangerous, because it rots inside and causes an infection'. According to a Chilean woman, 'Women don't want to talk about abortion because it's against the teachings of the Church and also because it's against the law, but nearly all women have them'. Abortion is illegal in Chile and Paraguay, except to save the mother's life, and permitted only on exceptional grounds in Argentina and Uruguay. A woman who has an abortion in Paraguay can be sentenced to 18 months in prison and in Chile she can receive a sentence of between three and five years.

*Machismo* also influences attitudes to women and work and creates a whole series of obstacles to their participation in the labour market. Housework and children are considered to be the 'natural' responsibility of women. An International Labour Organisation study

carried out in 1984 showed that the average Argentine housewife worked ten hours a day, seven days a week, on housework while other members of the family contributed an average of 15 minutes a day. In the Paraguayan countryside, where the majority of families live without the benefits of running water and electricity, the preparation of food, cleaning and washing are infinitely more burdensome. These household tasks however, are not considered to be 'real' work and neither are the mass of jobs women do to assist family businesses and farms. The invisibility of this unpaid work is reflected in the statistics of women's economic activity, which measures the proportion of women of working age actually in paid employment plus those searching for work, but exclude housework, childcare and women's role in family businesses and farming.

Women's work inside the home seriously restricts the paid jobs they can do. Latin American men, in general, avoid housework and childcare, and there is little in the way of nursery school or creche provision. As a result married women with young children form a low proportion of the workforce. The majority of women in paid employment are single, separated or divorced and most have to combine paid work with housework in what has become known as the 'double shift'.

The dramatic increase in educational opportunities in the last thirty years has meant that working-class women are much more likely than their mothers to finish primary school and have some secondary education. The differences in educational backgrounds of young and older women came out clearly in the interviews. Of the older women, the majority had little schooling and were brought up with the idea that, since the woman's main role in life is to become a wife and mother, education and training were not a priority for them. This attitude still reigns in rural areas of Paraguay, where in 1982 32 per cent of all Paraguayan women were illiterate while the figure for men was 26 per cent. This reflects not only the lack of educational provision in Paraguay's rural areas but also the continued existence of a particularly severe form of social and cultural discrimination against rural women. When a peasant girl reaches puberty it is no longer acceptable for her to leave the house alone and she can only go to school if she has brothers of school age willing to take her. Only one in three Paraguayan university students are women and most of these are women from the towns and cities.

Women in Argentina, Uruguay and Chile are only slightly more likely to be illiterate than men and there is little difference between men and women's schooling at all levels of the educational system. Since the 1960s there has been a huge expansion in the numbers of women entering higher education. In Argentina and Uruguay nearly

half of university students are women and in Chile the proportion is only slightly lower. In all these countries, however, women are less likely to receive vocational training and less likely to be found studying typically 'male' subjects, such as science, engineering and technology.

In all countries except Paraguay there has been a large increase in women in paid employment. The proportion of Paraguayan women in or available for paid work showed a fall from the 1950s due to a drop in rural employment opportunities. In 1985, when the rate of female economic activity for Great Britain was 39 per cent, the figure for Paraguay, where statistics are notoriously unreliable, was 19 per cent. Uruguay and Argentina's rates of around 28 per cent were among the highest in the continent and in Chile the figure was 25 per cent. Most of the new opportunities were for educated women in the growing state sector, mainly in areas for which their home life was deemed to give them 'natural' qualifications, such as teaching, nursing, public administration and community and social services. Women on average earned about half a man's average wage, even though women had higher educational levels than men in comparable jobs. Argentina and Uruguay have, on paper at least, the most advanced labour legislation in Latin America in relation to women. In Argentina, for example, maternity leave provision is superior to Britain's, but women are often unable to claim their legal entitlement.

For the mass of women in paid work, labour legislation is a nicety from which they rarely benefit. These women, with little formal education or training, have seen their job opportunities diminish as the traditional sources of women's employment in textiles and food industries have contracted. Many have been forced to work on the 'informal' labour market, working cash-in-hand in small, often illegal enterprises which offer no job security or welfare benefits. In 1979 half of all urban female employees in Latin America were domestic servants, whose pay and conditions of work rank among the worst of all Latin American workers.

Social class plays a major role in determining the nature of gender inequalities and their effect on women's lives. While upper- and middle-class women may also have the chief responsibility for the home and children, they are less constrained by housework and childcare, which is frequently carried out by working-class women employed as domestic servants. An Argentine professional woman and her domestic servant, often Paraguayan, inhabit different worlds. Middle-class women have greater access to education and more opportunities for better paid work. Money can buy better healthcare and even abortion laws can be bypassed by private arrangements.

The sharp class differences which divide women were reflected in the nature of the women's movements which grew up in the early

twentieth century. With few exceptions, the women interviewed had never been involved in women's rights organisations prior to the 1970s. Working-class women, often not legally married to their partners and struggling to feed their families, saw the demands of these movements for higher education, equal rights in marriage and even the vote, as middle-class affairs. They took little part in the important female suffrage and civil rights movements which grew up in Argentina, Uruguay and Chile. The independent women's movement in all three countries dissolved after achieving their goals. Uruguayan women won the vote in 1932 and equal civil rights in the 1940s, and in Chile women's suffrage began in 1949. In Argentina the independent women's movement began to decay even before the vote was granted and suffrage organisations were not even able to claim success for their decades-long struggle. Their demands were hijacked by Perón who saw women as a huge untapped source of support for his political ambitions. With his wife Evita Perón as his appointed spokesperson for women's rights, the struggle for the vote in Argentina became a genuinely mass affair. When they were awarded the vote in 1947, tens of thousands of women filled the streets of the centre of Argentina's capital, Buenos Aires.

Paraguayan women were the last in Latin America to get the vote, in 1961. Women organised inside approved political parties which were strictly controlled by the Stroessner dictatorship and political repression prevented the emergence of any significant independent movement.

But political rights for women did not mean political power. None of the countries beat the record set in 1951 when, in the first election in which Argentine women could vote, 24 women deputies and seven women senators were elected to parliament. Of the women interviewed, only in Argentina and Uruguay had women held positions in political parties or trade unions before the coups, although these were always minor positions. From national government and local councils to community organisations and trade unions, with a few notable exceptions, men have occupied the key positions of power and decision-making. Consequently gender issues have rarely reached the agendas of political parties. Apart from some formal gains in the area of labour legislation, there was little progress from the 1940s to the early 1970s, even in Uruguay and Chile, countries not under military governments. Parties of the left and trade unions have tended to see women's demands as divisive to working-class unity and of secondary importance to the class struggle. Parties of the right have appealed to women in their traditional role as mothers and home-makers and paid little attention to issues such as education and job opportunities.

This is not to suggest that women have played no part in popular movements for social change, but rather that they have been excluded from leadership positions and that their contributions have been underestimated or 'invisible'. Research by Latin American feminists is only now beginning to uncover the crucial, if hidden, role women have played across the political spectrum. In Chile, for example, many working-class women, including some interviewed here, were active in the social and health campaigns of President Allende. At the same time some middle- and upper-class Chilean women were vocal in their opposition to Allende and in their support of the military coup which toppled him. In Argentina the key role played by women in the resistance to military rule and popular social movements did not go unnoticed; nearly one third of those who 'disappeared' under the military regimes of 1976-83 were women.

## **Military Rule**

When the United Nations declared a Women's Decade in 1975, three of the four countries in this study were under military rule; Argentina fell a year later. Millions of women were living in the shadow of dictatorship, disappearances, torture, murder and poverty. When the tanks rolled out onto the streets of Chile (1973), Uruguay (1973) and Argentina (1976) it was on the pretext of a threat to the 'Western and Christian way of life'. In Chile sections of the labour movement had begun organising massive strikes to press for more radical policies from the Popular Unity government of the Marxist President Allende. In Uruguay and Argentina the threat came from a combination of working-class militancy and a number of small guerrilla organisations. The militaries' promises to restore order and stability won the support of significant sections of the middle and upper classes and right-wing movements in all three countries. Few could have predicted the barbarism that was to follow.

The regimes which seized power in the Southern Cone in the 1970s were all pro-Western in foreign policy, defenders of the free market on the economic front and virulently anti-communist in domestic politics. In all countries the military violently crushed any potential opposition, closing political parties and trade unions, banning public meetings and controlling information through censorship, not only of the media but also in universities and throughout the education system. In Argentina, for example, this not only included the outlawing of communist texts but also the works of Freud and the teaching of psychology. All four military regimes adhered to the guiding principle of United States policy in Latin America, the doctrine

of National Security. This doctrine, developed in the wake of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, assigned the armed forces of Latin America the role of safeguarding internal security and waging war against 'subversive elements' within their borders. Many Latin American military officers had been trained in counter-insurgency methods in the US army School of the Americas in Panama where the curriculum included courses on the theory and practice of torture. The armed forces of all four countries co-operated with each other in a combination of legal and illegal methods ranging from persecution and illegal detention to torture and murder in order to wipe out any possible resistance to their rule.

In Paraguay, since the coup of 1954 this had taken the form of 'nipping in the bud' any nascent opposition, normally by huge 'search and kill' operations. This was the fate of a church-supported peasant movement in 1976, the only significant popular opposition to emerge during the Stroessner years. The bloodbath which followed the coup in Chile was just the first stage of a repressive strategy that cost thousands of lives and forced tens of thousands into exile. In Uruguay one in thirty of the population passed through prison and some half a million people left the country. The Argentine military, anxious to avoid the international outcry which followed the Chilean coup, built a massive network of 350 concentration camps into which, according to the estimates of human rights organisations, between 20-30,000 victims simply 'disappeared' from the eyes of the world. Some 5,000 others were killed and hundreds of thousands went into exile.

A crushed opposition and a population paralysed by terror were the prerequisites for the imposition of economic projects based on the free market economics of the Chicago monetarist school. For the economy this meant cuts in real wages and government expenditure, incentives for foreign investors and increased borrowing from international banks. For the majority of the population it meant growing unemployment, deteriorating social services and a drastic fall in living standards. When foreign markets contracted with the world recession in the early 1980s, the situation became critical for wide sectors of society in all four countries. Export earnings crashed at the same time as US interest rates rose, making interest payments on the massive foreign debts only possible by further borrowing. Governments turned to the International Monetary Fund whose condition for credit was a package of austerity measures which raised the price of food, while cutting wages and social services still further. Extreme poverty became visible for the first time in countries like Argentina and Uruguay. In Chile, where monetarist policies were implemented in their most undiluted form, unemployment reached between 25-30 per cent in 1983, when an estimated thirty per cent of all Chilean families were

living in 'extreme' poverty. In 1986 half the population of Paraguay were estimated to be living below the poverty line and in some regions over a third of the population were suffering from malnutrition.

Women's lives were not only affected by the general political and economic conditions created by the dictatorships, but also by the ideological offensive directed at them by the military rulers. In the words of Chile's General Pinochet, 'the more a woman is feminine, the more she is admirable'. Calls for a return to traditional Christian and family values accompanied the military seizures of power and in this the military regimes were supported by powerful sections of the Church. Women were to revert to their traditional roles as guardians of the faith, the family and morality and to their proper place, the home. Attempts were made to limit, if not eliminate, a public role for women; many of the gains of the previous years, such as maternity benefits and labour rights, were revoked, and in Chile they even went as far as trying to ban women from wearing trousers.

The role that women were to play in the years of dictatorship was not that envisaged by the military when they extolled the virtues of motherhood and the family. Ironically it was the regimes' own economic and political programmes which provoked the surge in women's public participation in those years and most women defended their activities as those of good mothers and wives. Falling living standards forced many women out of the house and into paid work for the first time and chronic poverty forced others to look for community solutions to the problem of feeding their families. Many women had their first real contact with the outside world of politics when the army burst into their homes and seized family members or when husbands were sacked for political or union activity. The repression of political parties and unions brought political life to the community where it was more accessible to women and in all four countries women became a key force in resistance to military rule.

In Chapter One, Chilean housewives from the shanty towns around Santiago describe the devastation caused to their communities by the brutality of the military coup of 1973 and the 'shock' economic policies the regime imposed. They describe how the new organisations they created to combat widespread unemployment and chronic poverty put them in the firing line of a regime determined to crush all working-class organisation. Their courageous defence of their communal kitchens and canteens, shopping collectives and sewing workshops not only ensured the survival of their families, but also offered women a new role in community life. The value they attach to the opportunities for companionship, self-education and personal development offered by their new organisations helps explain their persistence, even as the economic situation has become less critical.

Throughout the Southern Cone, economic crisis forced growing numbers of women into paid work, a phenomenon which was most pronounced in Uruguay. In Chapter Two, Uruguayan women describe their 'double day' of work, inside and outside the home, and their role in the struggle to re-establish trade unions under the military regime. With the return of constitutional rule they found themselves engaged in another battle, this time to force the male world of trade unions to introduce women's concerns into union policy and to create a new kind of trade unionism, more attractive and accessible to women. Working closely with the wider women's movement, they recount the successes of new women's commissions in areas such as equal pay and opportunities, childcare, health education and training.

The voices of peasant women from the Paraguayan Peasants Movement appear for the first time in English in Chapter Three. Their testimonies tell of their fight not only against landlessness and poverty, but also against the particularly oppressive form of discrimination they face as Paraguayan women. They describe their battle within the peasant's movement to establish a women's commission to promote equal rights for women, both inside the movement and in their homes and communities. The testimonies of women from a new peasant community, Limoy, show the effect of the commission on women's lives and their remarkable achievements in the face of extreme poverty and the deeply-embedded *machismo* of peasant men.

In Chapter Four, Argentina's Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo describe how their desperation for information about their 'disappeared' children led them to organise the first public protest against one of the most brutal dictatorships Latin America has witnessed. The discovery of the military's secret network of concentration camps and the disappearance of three Mothers only reinforced their determination to continue a remarkably courageous struggle, which became an inspiration for the human rights movements throughout the continent.

Argentina, for many years one of the richest Latin American nations, was unfamiliar with the kind of hunger suffered in much of the continent during the military period. Chapter Five looks at the varied ways Argentine women responded to the economic crisis of the early 1980s, from the shopping strikes of militant housewives' groups to the creation of the world's first housewives' trade union calling for wages for housework. With the dramatic decline in the Argentine economy and the adoption of austerity measures by constitutional governments, this chapter looks at one of the first examples of women's self-help groups in the poor neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires.

Working-class women's resistance to military rule has made them more conscious of discrimination against them as women, at work, in



the world of politics and inside the home. Domestic violence, women's sexuality, education and childcare, as well as the immediate problems of caring for their families, have become issues for many women's organisations. Most reject the label 'feminist'. An exception is Chile, where women in the shanty towns have begun to make their needs a priority, a process which has led them to question the traditional roles of men and women. Chapter Six looks at the growth of grassroots feminism in Chile and the differences they perceive between 'middle-class' women's organisations and their own brand of feminism.

The book is based on extensive interviews with women in all four countries. Sometimes names and places have been changed to protect the women involved. Most women belonged to organisations which had been mentioned in passing in the local press or had been suggested by women who worked in the field, including aid workers from CAFOD and Oxfam. The themes discussed reflect key areas of grassroots activity by women in each of the four countries. This does not mean that they are the only areas of women's activity in those countries. All four countries, for example, had human rights movements in which women played the key role; women's commissions are appearing in trade unions throughout the region and women's neighbourhood organisations are becoming a common feature of community life in the Southern Cone. Remarkably, some of these groups have so far received little publicity in their own countries and little has been written about them. For these groups in particular, it is important that their voices be heard and their words recorded. Without their testimonies, their work and achievements may, like many women's struggles in the past, disappear from history.

Many of the women interviewed were the leaders of organisations. Men were almost never present during the interviews. Almost all the women had faced problems with their husbands in the beginning, but most said they have now established their right to time for their own activities. Most had experience of talking about their work, even to foreigners. Organisations for which international solidarity has been crucial, such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and community groups which receive financial support from foreign aid organisations, welcomed the continued interest in their work. In some ways being a foreigner made the task of talking to these women easier, a fact pointed out by several Argentine and Paraguayan colleagues. Not being involved in local party politics, nor part of a local feminist movement that they often perceived as being middle-class, was an advantage when dealing with groups who were anxious to preserve their independence or class identity.

With women who were new to the organisations, there was clearly less understanding of why a 'gringo' should be interested in their affairs. For most women in the village of Limoy in rural Paraguay, for example, it was the first time they had spoken to a foreigner. Their broken Spanish meant interviews had to be carried out with the help of those among them who were bilingual in Spanish and the native Guaraní. There was a great deal of curiosity about me, about life in the UK and considerable amusement at my ignorance of British farming techniques.

All the women were extremely kind and patient, and generous with their time and affections. Most of the interviews were carried out while they were working, in the gaps between workshops at summer schools, as in Chile or while they were organising new campaigns, as with the Mothers. Even though many of the groups now have their own premises, the interviews often took place in their homes, which was frequently where they also carried out their paid jobs and where meetings of their organisations were held. They talked while they cooked for their families and for the communal kitchens, while customers came to buy from their communal shops, while organising games for forty children in a creche or while they attended to streams of visitors. They found the time to show me around their neighbourhoods, deliver me to and from buses, and often insisted on feeding me. I usually left with samples of their work: bread and cakes from communal bakeries, needlework from their workshops and in Paraguay they loaded me up with watermelons, grapes and honey. The Paraguayan men and women shared their homes with me, went to great lengths to make me comfortable and enthusiastically accompanied me on long treks across the countryside.

This book is dedicated to these women, to the strength, humour and optimism they show in the face of severe hardship and to their creative and courageous struggle for social justice.



## Chile Chronology

- 1949 Women win the vote.
- 1970 Salvador Allende becomes the world's first elected Marxist president.
- 1973 President Allende killed during the bloody military coup which brings General Pinochet to power. Coup provokes international condemnation.
- 1974 Association of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared is formed. Church sponsors neighbourhood groups to look after the victims of military persecution and unemployment.
- 1982 Movement of Women Slum Dwellers (MOMUPO) is created to unite and co-ordinate the activities of grassroots women's groups. More than 50,000 people in Greater Santiago belong to 494 grassroots organisations set up to combat poverty.
- 1983 One third of the population is out of work. First mass street protests against Pinochet regime. Several federations are set up to co-ordinate women's opposition to military rule.
- 1986 Creation of the Communal Kitchen Command. Two hundred grassroots organisations join trade unions and political parties in the Civil Assembly and organise a two day national strike. Assassination attempt on General Pinochet. Military impose a state of siege to clamp down on resistance in the shanty towns.
- 1988 Pinochet defeated in the plebiscite by which he sought to maintain power for another ten years.
- 1989 First free elections for 19 years. Christian Democrat Patricio Aylwin leads opposition coalition which wins elections. General Pinochet remains as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. 270,000 Chileans belong to some 3,000 grassroots organisations.
- 1990 The government creates the National Women's Service (SERNAM) to develop and promote women's programmes.
- 1991 The government publishes the report of the Committee of Truth and Reconciliation which chronicles the murders of 2,279 people by the military in the aftermath of the coup.

## 1

# **‘The Kitchen Never Stopped’**

## **Women’s self-help groups in Chile’s shanty towns**

LUZ MARIA: When they began to interrogate my husband, being an uncultured woman you could say, not educated for anything, I had the guts to stand by his side and answer their questions. My husband couldn’t speak because he was in total shock. He forgot everything, even his date of birth, where he’d worked, why he’d left. They asked the opposite — why he’d been sacked — but we’d been lucky because a relative had found him another job. They asked one question after another, repeating the questions, changing them around, trying to confuse me and after they’d asked so many things so many times I went to get the bag of documents that I’ve always kept and I put everything on the table so they could see he hadn’t been sacked for being a militant, that he’d left of his own accord and that now he was in a better job.

From then on my husband never wanted to participate in anything again. He fell to pieces. But I reacted differently. Before, he always told me that I was a woman who didn’t understand anything, that it wasn’t worth having a conversation with me and that I was a brute because I come from the south. He had undervalued me, put me down all my life. Now I realised that he was only alive thanks to me. If I’d been so stupid, so brutish, I’d have been crying, or created a scandal or a wrong word would have come out. If I’d said one wrong thing or said something badly, they would have taken him and I’d never have seen him again. It was then that I thought. ‘I’m worth something’. I said to him then, ‘You’re not going to tell me I’m useless again. Things are going to be different now. Now I’m going to go out, work with the church, get involved’.

The courage and strength with which thousands of working-class housewives like Luz María faced the violence and poverty inflicted by military rule on a wide sector of Chilean society provided the backbone of resistance to the regime which seized power in 1973. When massive street protests broke out in 1983, what captured the attention of onlookers throughout the world was the number of women confronting the tear gas, water cannon and bullets of the armed forces. This, however, was only the public face of a long drama that had been unfolding behind the scenes in the poor neighbourhoods of Santiago where women played a crucial role in the day-to-day survival of their families and communities. Women like Luz María were the key actors in the network of workshops, communal kitchens (*comedores*), popular canteens, housing, cultural and human rights organisations, created as part of the battle against poverty and despair.

The coup of 1973 ended four decades of stable parliamentary government in Chile. The strong trade unions and communist and socialist parties of the working class and peasants were radical but not revolutionary. They accepted the rules of the parliamentary game, participating in the political system, contesting elections and gaining seats in congress. This heritage of parliamentary democracy was a powerful factor in allowing the Marxist, Salvador Allende, to be elected president in 1970. It was not until the working class began to demand more radical policies from Allende's government that the military stepped in.

The bloodbath which followed the coup provoked a wave of international condemnation. On the morning of 11 September 1973, President Allende broadcast his defiant farewell speech from La Moneda, the presidential palace, shortly before it was bombed by the Chilean airforce and the president himself was killed. Political parties were closed down, trade unions were declared illegal and the tanks rolled out onto the streets in search of any potential opponents to the regime. Chile's main football stadium became the scene of mass murder and torture as some 3,000 people were slaughtered or 'disappeared'. Having smashed Chile's political system, the regime launched an economic onslaught based on the monetarist policies of the Chicago school, the production of raw materials for export, free markets, privatisation, massive cuts in welfare expenditure, the privatisation of health and education services and the destruction of a large part of the country's industry. The immediate results were unemployment, poverty and unprecedented misery for a wide sector of Chilean society. Some of the worst effects of military rule were felt in the *poblaciones*, the slums of the vast urban belt around Chile's capital Santiago. About two million people, half Santiago's population, live

in the *poblaciones*. The changing fortunes of Chile's working classes and poor are reflected in the half-built concrete and brick structures, patched with corrugated iron and wooden planks, the semi-paved or dirt streets and the deteriorating schools and clinics. Vast areas of cardboard, wooden and metal makeshift shelters are tacked on to the borders of the *poblaciones*, where the poorest of Chile's poor live with no piped water, street lighting or sewerage facilities. During the first two years after the coup many of these *poblaciones* were occupied by the military in their attempts to search out union, political and neighbourhood leaders who formed the basis of support for the Allende government.

Forty minutes by bus from the centre of Santiago to the northern zone of the city, just off the main road, lies a *población* of 12,000 inhabitants where Luz María lives with her husband and four children.

LUZ MARIA: We were woken up by the sound of the tanks on the streets and the deafening noise of the helicopters which seemed like they were touching the roof of our house. On the radio they were saying that there was going to be a state of siege, and they were giving us instructions about what we had to do, that foreigners had to present themselves to the authorities to be sent home. Everything they said was full of threats. You could hear the bombs hitting La Moneda and I heard the president speaking on the radio. They were searching houses. The neighbours told me to buy food because the shops were going to be closed and to keep the children indoors and we all started dashing about in a panic. I didn't have any idea what a coup was — I don't think any of the women did. There'd never been one before. Then I heard that they were taking people to the stadium and I began to realise what it all meant.

My husband, like most of the men in this neighbourhood, worked in the local factory. He was a union militant. On the day of the coup the workers occupied the factory so the army wouldn't take it over and they began to burn all their records so that they couldn't find out the names of the militants. My husband was lucky because his brother stayed in the factory until the end and burnt his files. If he hadn't, my husband would have disappeared with the hundreds of others who were taken from the factory.

After the coup they closed the factory, changed its name and reopened it. They called some of the people back to work, including my husband and he went back not knowing what was going to happen to him. DINA (the secret police) used to go to the factory and take away workers and the next day their bodies were found in the river. DINA made the other workers pull out the corpses. My husband became more and more terrified but he had to go on working because we had the children to feed. The working class doesn't have the option of exile. He had to go

on working, seeing that every day his workmates were disappearing.

They raided our house on 11 September 1974, the first anniversary of the coup. Every 11 September we relived the coup because they closed the streets and the army appeared in battle gear, with their faces painted, frightening the children. They came to my house at seven in the morning. In those years they just kicked open the door and walked straight in. I was getting dressed, I was pregnant with my little girl. I was alone with the children. My husband was working the night shift. They said they were from DINA and they wanted to know what the vehicle was that had been at my house on a certain day. Thank God I didn't have a nervous attack. I answered all the questions calmly while another man turned over the house. They looked everywhere — in the latrine, the well, they dug up the yard to see if there was anything buried. Others were asking the neighbours questions — what was my husband like, where were the weapons. They treated many people very badly, but they were OK with me and I was very polite with them. I told them that my husband was working and that if they wanted they could wait. Of course they were going to wait anyway. The area was full of vehicles as if they'd come to get hundreds of people. Then my husband arrived. I didn't know that people had gone to the bus stop to meet him. He had two choices — to go home or to run. Everyone told him not to go home, but he was brave enough to come home and they interrogated him. The DINA men said, 'Now it depends on the neighbours whether he stays alive or whether you become a widow'. The neighbours all tried to protect him, saying he was a very quiet man, a good neighbour, a good sportsman, things like that. They took a long time, I think it was an hour, but it seemed like a century and when they came back they said they had nothing against him and left.

Olga lives in the *población* of La Victoria, five blocks down from the main street in a narrow dirt road lined with one storey houses built of brick, sheets of corrugated iron and wooden boards. She is in her early sixties and has lived alone since the death of her husband, a former community leader, four years ago.

OLGA: I'd never seen anything like it in my life. In the first raid they took away all the men. At six in the morning, when it was still dark, we woke up with the noise of helicopters which sounded like they were landing on the houses. They were calling out over the loudspeakers that all the men between the ages of 18 and 60 had to go out onto the streets. When we went outside we saw that everything was surrounded by the military, lorries, police, tanks and soldiers. They led the men off to a nearby football stadium, hitting them with sticks. The women followed behind. The streets were full of women and we were all shouting 'murderers!'. They kept the men for days in the stadiums without food and some never