

Annie Virnig

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Latin American Women in Politics

Single-Point Paper # 1: The Question of Gender-Bending in Allende's Chile

In "The Revolution Question," Julia Shayne introduces the idea of gender-bending as a concept which extends beyond the easily definable concept of women in men's professional spheres. By addressing the topic in terms specific to Salvador Allende's Chile, she begins to look at the idea of bending gender conceptions even while organizing around a patriarchal division of labor. In the context of Chile's shifted feminine – rather than feminist – beliefs, this shifting of the concept of gender-bending away from an emphasis on specific roles seems to be both appropriate and necessary. This paper will address the definitions and implications of the unique feminism and gender-bending which occurred during Allende's era (1970-1973) and the anti-Pinochet era (1973-1988) in Chile.

Because the roles of motherhood and marriage were imbued with strong cultural significance in Chile, many Chilean women embraced these positions as their strengths rather than their downfalls (as many Western women regarded them). These cultural ties promoted a movement more feminine than feminist: while women fought for their rights, they did so in the context of their roles in the family rather than in a more individualistic sense. The Allende government also embraced these traditional roles, providing space for women to grow solely in their typical sphere of action: the home. The government-sponsored Mother's Centers of the time were built around what Shayne refers to as "patriarchal gendered divisions of labor," and embraced stereotypical feminine skills like knitting and cooking (110).

Thus, it only seems reasonable that the concept of gender-bending naturally changed to accommodate this emphasis on the feminine rather than the feminist. Shayne argues that women's participation in the Mother's Centers indicated "processes that challenged traditionally proscribed

gender roles, and were thus examples of gender-bending” (110). Qualifying this statement slightly makes it even more applicable to the situation which occurred in Chile. By participating in these typically feminine roles, in an environment which facilitated social ties, women simultaneously opened the space to challenge the constructed gendered conceptions while appearing in a non-threatening manner to Chilean men. Because the majority these women felt uncomfortable when confronted with more Western, radical definitions of feminism, the Mother’s Centers provided a basis for grassroots feminine engagement against a non-threatening backdrop. Shayne comments, “women felt empowered not as a result of a feminist agenda, but from the opportunities that were presented to them as a result of a socialist government” (110).

As both men and women became acquainted and comfortable with this logical extension of the woman’s niche, women gained a freedom which allowed them to challenge cultural conceptions of gender without disputing or changing their prototypical roles. While their roles still oriented primarily about the family, home, and other such “women’s issues,” women began to extend their influence into social and political organizations, thus changing social conceptions of the boundary between private and public spheres. This concept was amplified in the political vacuum ensuing Allende’s overthrow as women found themselves encouraged to stand up for women’s issues in increasingly political and public venues. At this point, the unique bending of gender conceptions and its implications became particularly evident in Chilean society, as it gradually led to a movement of women united.

Because, as Shayne notes, “women as a sector had no real leverage,” they were forced to turn to their traditional strengths and to use these associations with motherhood and marriage to promote their cause in a non-threatening way (107). By embracing these qualities as both the basis of their subjugation and as the ground for their resistance, Chilean women succeeded in bending and extending conventional conceptions of women and their place in society. These women knew

that “equality is something deeper that of course has to do with structural things, but is also an everyday process,” and they acted accordingly, securing and expanding their niche within Chilean society (106). Because of the unique culture and background, Chilean feminism and gender-bending emerged in a distinct way which nonetheless perpetuated the cause for democracy, social participation, and rights to adequate standards of living.