

# **Democratization, Transnationalism, and Gender Politics in Argentina and Chile**

Susan Franceschet  
Department of Political Science  
University of Calgary  
Calgary, AB T4N 1N4  
Canada  
(403) 220-5931  
sfrances@ucalgary.ca

Paper Prepared for the 2007 Annual Conference of the Canadian Political Science Association,  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan  
May 30 – June 1, 2007

## Introduction

One of the most striking trends in Latin American politics in recent years is the dramatic increase in the number of women holding positions of power and influence. In a move that challenges its image as the region's most socially conservative country, Chileans elected a female president, Michelle Bachelet of the Socialist Party, on January 15, 2006. Elsewhere in the region, women are emerging as viable presidential candidates, and in Argentina and Costa Rica, women hold more than 35 percent of the seats in legislative bodies. Outcomes such as these are part of a broader process of democratizing gender relations that has emerged out of the convergence of two sets of factors: growing transnational activism around gender issues and the growth of women's movements within individual Latin American countries. However, the relationship between these two factors—transnational actors and domestic women's movements—has been a source of some debate among scholars.

To what extent have transnational processes and actors had a democratizing impact on gender relations in Latin America? On the one hand, it appears that the simultaneous trends of transnationalism and democratization have benefited women, by creating greater space for women's issues on the political agenda. In part, this occurred because the recent democratic transitions throughout the region occurred in a context of heightened global awareness of gender issues, a context that legitimized demands for women's rights as part of the democratization process. Greater attention globally to women's rights grew out of a series of United Nations (UN) conferences around themes relating to gender. This had two main consequences for gender politics in Latin America. First, opportunities emerged for activists to create both regional and transnational linkages as they were invited to participate in activities surrounding these conferences. Second, regional and UN conferences contributed to the emergence of norms about gender equality, norms which Latin America's newly democratizing states were eager to adopt as indications of their democratic credentials and their status as modern and civilized states.

But transnationalism has had other, less positive, consequences. Some scholars have pointed out that transnationalism has shifted the focus of movement activists away from pressing national issues in favor of themes and issues defined by international actors (see Friedman 199; Ríos Tobar 2004). A related concern is that the dynamics associated with transnationalism have fragmented and weakened women's movements. Given the important role that a strong and vibrant civil society plays in promoting democratic values and practices, processes that weaken civil society can in turn weaken democracy. Hence, while global norms about gender equality have been diffused throughout Latin America, there is some concern that the translation of these norms in different domestic contexts has been superficial, with few meaningful improvements in women's status or their ability to exercise their rights. This is because successful implementation of gender norms is at least partly dependent on the capacity of civil society actors to hold political leaders accountable for the commitments they make to women. While Latin American states may seek international legitimacy by signing onto international conventions on women's rights, or passing legislation that criminalizes domestic violence, most states in the region lack the political will (and willingness to use state resources) to make women's rights laws effective. And, without substantial pressure from organized civil society actors, states are unlikely to allocate sufficient resources to ensuring effective implementation of women's rights.

This paper takes up these issues by exploring the impact of transnational activism in Argentina and Chile. The discussion in the paper aims to accomplish two things. First, it provides an overview of transnationalism and gender politics in Latin America, and outlines the variety of actors involved in creating opportunities for transnational activism and the diffusion of global (and regional) gender norms. These actors include inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) like the United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), state actors (including the women's policy machineries in the various countries in Latin America), and non-state actors (such as feminist NGOs and women's movement organizations).

Second, through a comparative analysis of Argentina and Chile we get a better sense of the ways in which global trends are filtered through different domestic contexts to produce varying outcomes. I argue that the impact of transnational norms and networks is filtered through a domestic context characterized by both structural/institutional and agency-centered factors. Whether transnationalism strengthens or weakens women's movements is related to the internal structure of the movement itself, as well as the national context in which it is embedded. This argument is outlined in the remainder of the paper. The first section discusses the importance of the global arena for gender politics in Latin America, focusing on the emergence of transnational activism around UN conferences and the diffusion of global norms about gender equality. The second section comparatively analyzes the cases of Argentina and Chile to show how the impact of transnationalism is filtered through domestic contexts with different institutions, and different relationships between state actors and women's movements. We will see that while the democratic transitions in both countries led to more demobilized and fragmented women's movements, the close relationship between Chilean state actors, the governing coalition, and key segments of the feminist movement created an inhospitable context for feminist mobilization in response to conservative challenges to the promotion of gender equality during the preparations for the Beijing Conference. In contrast, the growing distance (and even tensions) between Argentina's more conservative government and women's movement actors provided a context in which Argentina's women's movement undertook broad-based mobilization in response to perceived challenges to women's rights.

### **Transnationalism and Gender Politics**

There are at least two crucial dynamics involved in the transnationalization of gender politics. First, the emergence of UN conferences on gender issues and, by the 1990s, the growing involvement of NGOs and civil society actors in these processes, has created new global spaces in which activists from across regions can meet, and share information, strategies, and resources (Clark, Friedman, and Hochstetler 1998). Second, and related to the first, the increased mobilization of women in these new spaces created greater global awareness of women's inequality, leading in turn to the emergence of new global norms of gender equality. In this section, I discuss each of these dynamics as they relate to Latin America.

Amrita Basu (2000, 72-73) writes that "the growth of transnational women's movements entails the spread and growing density of groups and linkages among groups within transnational civil society. It also refers to a flow of resources, generally from the North to the South, to support women's organizations." The explosion of NGO participation in UN conferences is a

crucial feature of transnationalism. In 1975 at the First World Conference on Women held in Mexico City, 114 NGOs participated in the NGO forum. By 1995 at the Fourth World Conference in Beijing, the number of NGOs participating had risen to over 3000 (Basu 2000, 73). Scholars are of opposing views as to whether these developments should be celebrated or criticized. On the one hand, many scholars point to the opportunities created for local women's movements who can exploit not only the increased attention to gender issues but also the expanding pool of resources provided by international donors for transnational organizing.

Other scholars emphasize the more ambiguous nature of transnationalism. Significantly, it is scholars working on Latin America who have developed the most incisive analyses of the negative impact that transnationalism can have for feminist politics. Sonia Alvarez (2000), Elisabeth Friedman (1999), and Marcela Ríos Tobar (2004) all note that the existing literature has been overly optimistic and preoccupied with the benefits of global organizing among women's movement activists. As such, existing studies have not paid sufficient attention to the impact of transnational organizing "at home."<sup>1</sup> According to Friedman, more attention needs to be paid to what she labels "transnationalism reversed," referring to the impact that organizing at the global level has on the domestic level. Through a comparison of the domestic impact of transnational organizing at two historical moments in Venezuela (organizing around the Nairobi conference that closed the UN Decade for Women in 1985 and the 1995 Beijing Conference), Friedman finds that national factors, including "stage of the national movement, its sources of funding, and the politics of particular administrations" determine whether transnationalism has a positive or negative impact (1999, 359). When movements are in their early stages and have few resources (either from the state or from foreign donors), they benefit from the legitimacy and networking opportunities posed by global conferences. In contrast, when movements are more developed and already crossed by some divisions, global conferences are likely to produce conflicts over leadership and agenda-setting as well as exacerbate conflicts over access to resources.

Sonia Alvarez (2000) points to additional negative dynamics, also making the important point that in Latin America, women's organizing had transcended national borders for many years, through a process that was entirely distinct from the process initiated by UN global women's conferences. Beginning in the 1980s, feminists in the region began to organize regional "*encuentros feministas*" as forums through which to construct and deepen feminist identities, creating what Alvarez terms an "internationalist identity-solidarity logic" (2000, 31; see also Alvarez et al. 2002). Participating in these events did not require any special skills or expertise, and also required few resources. However, these events had little impact on state gender policy in Latin America given that most states in the region were authoritarian. Hence, rather than lobbying governments for gender policy change, activists debated the meaning of Latin American feminism and how to build inclusive feminist identities.

Unfortunately, according to Alvarez, the type of "identity-solidarity" logic fostered by the *encuentros* in the 1980s was replaced by an "IGO-advocacy" logic initiated through a fairly top-down pattern of inviting NGO and activist participation in the UN conferences in the 1990s. This process did have some positive effects, for example, some of the funding agencies

---

<sup>1</sup> The title of Marcela Ríos Tobar's (2004) paper on this topic is quite fitting: "When Feminists All 'Go Global,' Who Mobilizes at Home?" The paper addresses the case of feminist organizing in Chile in the 1990s.

prioritized inclusion and diversity, thereby increasing the involvement of traditionally marginalized groups, most notably Afro-Latinas (2000, 45). Additionally, as women's rights were increasingly cast as human rights in the international arena, feminist demands found a more receptive audience, especially in the new democracies eager for both domestic and international legitimacy.

Other consequences of transnationalism were less salutary according to Alvarez. The new tool in the "repertoire of collective action" was *advocacy*, something quite new for Latin American women's movements. Advocacy involves "compiling 'expert' information to support one's political claims," forging new kinds of alliances, especially with public officials at the national and international level, being more pragmatic about goals and objectives, and finally, working "on the inside" rather than remaining autonomous from institutionalized forms of politics (48). This strategy, however, has a number of less desirable outcomes. First, it tends to divide movements into two groups: those with the specialized skills and expertise needed to participate in lobbying public officials and those without those skills. Second, given the need to be pragmatic and policy-oriented, the advocacy logic is less conducive to the feminist project of broad-based cultural change. For Alvarez, this partly accounts for the paradoxical situation in much of Latin America where a public discourse proclaiming concern for women's equality exists within a context where feminism remains a denigrated concept, unable to mobilize large segments of the population.

A final negative consequence of transnationalism noted by both Friedman (1999) and Ríos Tobar (2004) is that excessive preoccupation with global conferences can come at the cost of ignoring pressing national issues. In Venezuela, where the preparations for Beijing were taking place amidst severe national crises, "some activists were disillusioned by the degree to which the process diverted energy and resources away from pressing national problems" (Friedman 1999, 359). In the Chilean case, the organizational resources needed for the Beijing conference could not have come at a worse time for Chilean feminists. According to Ríos Tobar, organizing for Beijing "came at the cost of diminishing activism in national spheres at a moment when conservative forces were at the height of a campaign to reverse existing gains and stop new ones" (2004, 5-6). As I show in the next section, whether transnationalism facilitates or inhibits domestic mobilization around national issues is at least partly dependent on the relationship between women's movements and state actors.

The second aspect of transnational gender politics is the emergence of global norms about gender equality. According to Nüket Kardem (2004), the emerging "global gender equality regime" is embodied in treaties, documents, and platforms of action that have been ratified by many of the world's countries. The crucial actors in creating these norms have been feminist movements (especially those in the western world), who have successfully promoted these norms through IGOs such as the United Nations and other regional multilateral organizations. The norms that comprise the global gender equality regime include mainstreaming gender in public policy, gender-balance in political representation, and that state authorities take concrete measures efforts to eradicate violence against women.

While much of the earlier literature on norm diffusion in international politics focused on intergovernmental organizations and transnational NGOs, more recent literature has come to

appreciate the important role played by state actors, including those in the “norm-receiving” countries. Susanne Zwingel, for example, argues that too much of the existing literature conceives of norm diffusion as primarily a top-down process—from the transnational to the national—while ignoring the extent to which there is a “process of active appropriation or refusal of appropriation” by state (or other domestic) actors (2005, 414). In this process, women’s policy agencies within the state are crucial because it normally falls to them to implement, or lobby other institutions within the state to implement, the norms embodied in international treaties or conventions. This is one of the reasons why domestic institutional arrangements matter a great deal. Where women’s policy machineries themselves command resources and influence within the state, then they may serve as critical transmitters of global norms by introducing domestic policy that advances women’s rights. And, where women’s movements also possess some capacity to mobilize, they, too, can use international or regional conventions as a tool to pressure governments to comply with commitments that they have made by signing onto such conventions.

With respect to global gender norms, it has been those norms surrounding the elimination of violence against women that have enjoyed fairly widespread adoption.<sup>2</sup> In the Americas, the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women has been signed and ratified by all Latin American countries, and as a result, almost all countries put in place domestic violence legislation in the 1990s. This Convention has been applauded for being more precise about women’s rights as human rights than other international conventions (Stacy 2004, 34). In fact, the Convention has been credited with moving forward the adoption of legislation on domestic violence in Brazil, after a Brazilian woman took a case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (which is charged with hearing cases of violations of conventions). Despite the adoption of domestic violence legislation across the region, however, numerous complaints remain about the laws’ ineffectiveness, given the lack of resources and political will to enforce them.

It is here, on the issue of norm implementation, where processes that potentially weaken civil societies can undermine the democratizing impact of transnationalism. The bulk of the literature on gender politics in Latin America credits women’s mobilization, especially mobilization that involves alliances among state and non-state actors, with pushing states to improve the delivery of public policies that aim at gender equality (Baldez 2004; Friedman 2000; Rodríguez 2003).

### **The Impact of Transnationalism on Gender Politics in Argentina and Chile**

Transnational processes have had a rather different impact on women’s movements in Argentina and Chile, in particular on these movements’ willingness and capacity to respond and mobilize around national concerns. In Chile, the process of transnational organizing initiated around the Beijing Conference produced a situation where feminists were almost completely silent amidst a national debate about gender issues (led by conservatives and the political right). In contrast, feminists from a variety of social sectors in Argentina mobilized against president Carlos Menem’s attempt to insert an anti-abortion clause into the Argentine Constitution around the

---

<sup>2</sup> See Darren Hawkins and Melissa Humes (2002) for a discussion of the sources of domestic variation in the Americas with respect to the adoption of norms about eradicating violence against women.

same time as the preparations for Beijing were underway. Why did the preparations for Beijing produce passivity in Chile and combativeness in Argentina?

One part of the answer lies in the different partisan dynamics in the two countries and their relations to the feminist movement. In Chile, women's movement activists were allies of the center-left parties of the governing Concertación. In Argentina, activists were found across the major political parties. This created rather different types of state-movement relations, as I describe below. Specifically, Chilean feminists were less autonomous from the governing coalition than Argentine feminists.

*The transnational dimensions of women's organizing*

In Latin America, preparations for the UN Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing were mainly led by the Women's Unit of CEPAL (Centro Económico para América Latina y el Caribe). CEPAL compiled a list of all NGOs in the region that organizers could use to create national and also regional networks (Ríos Tobar 2004, 6; Vargas and Olea 1998, 18). CEPAL also invited NGOs throughout the region to a workshop where they taught NGOs how to lobby governments and international organizations. Finally, international organizations like UNIFEM encouraged governments to open themselves up to the participation of NGOs in the preparations for the Beijing conference (Vargas and Olea 1998, 19; 26).

If women's movements throughout Latin America were subject to the same process initiated by international actors, why were the consequences so different? To answer this, we must look at the conditions already prevailing within national women's movements. In Chile, the process unleashed by the Beijing preparations served to reinforce a dynamic that was already underway. That is, movement actors were increasingly being drawn into institutional spaces in such a way that compromised their autonomy. This trend was less pronounced in Argentina, where the women's movement was already much more diverse than in Chile. The Argentine movement was composed of feminist party militants (in many different political parties), grassroots organizations, labor activists, and feminist NGOs. In this context, it was harder to generate an obvious cadre of leaders who could claim to represent women as a group in the national and regional conference preparations. Consequently, in Argentina, the process leading up to Beijing was marked by much higher levels of conflict and division among various actors. But, at the same time, the relationship between the movement and the state was different than in the Chilean case.

In Chile, many women's movement activists were members of the left and center parties and were thus well-placed to enter state agencies (especially the state women's agency—SERNAM) after those parties won the first set of post-transition elections. Others worked in feminist NGOs, most of whom had cooperative relations with the governing coalition and state agencies. As a result, movement and state actors had close alliances, in many cases based on personal friendships (see Franceschet 2005, ch. 7; Ríos, Godoy, and Guerrero 2004). The close relationship between feminists and the state owes to the fact that many were members of the parties that won the founding elections and had been key allies during the nation's struggle against the Pinochet dictatorship. This coalition has governed Chile without interruption since 1990. In Argentina, the relations between the women's movement and the state have not been

quite as close. Most importantly, the government changed hands in 1989, and by the time of the Beijing preparations, the state was almost completely closed to the feminist movement. The different state-movement relations have meant that the women's movement in Argentina has retained greater levels of autonomy.

In both Argentina and Chile the relationship between women's movements and the state is linked to the nature of the transition to democracy.<sup>3</sup> Argentina's transition to democracy (1983) occurred much more suddenly than in Chile (1988-1990), largely due to the collapse of the dictatorship following economic crisis and the disastrous attempt to reclaim the Falklands/Malvinas islands from the United Kingdom. The complete discrediting of the military regime produced a democratic transition that was fairly "open" rather than "pacted" (see Karl 1991). Women played an important role in the process of discrediting the military. As elsewhere throughout the region, women were organized into three fairly distinct types of movements: human rights; popular sector survival organizations; and feminist movements (see Feijóo 1998). In some ways, however, Argentina's experiences differed from those elsewhere. For example, while human rights movements elsewhere, notably in Chile, tended to be dominated by women members, they did not necessarily depict themselves as organizations of women. In Argentina, the most visible face of the human rights movement was Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, an explicitly feminine organization. Las Madres were also more independent from political parties than were most other human rights movements (Bonner 2004).

Feminist organizing in Argentina was more likely to emerge among women involved in party politics, and by the time of the transition, both of the main parties—the Peronists and the Radicals—were appealing to women's issues. However, due to the abruptness of the Argentine transition, opposition groups were never forced to work as closely or be as strategically careful as the pro-democracy movement in Chile.<sup>4</sup> In Chile, protests against the dictatorship began to emerge in 1982, with the onset of the economic crisis. However, it took another six years of opposition organizing before Pinochet was defeated in a plebiscite in 1988.<sup>5</sup> During that time, the various segments of the opposition movement—human rights groups, labor, feminist groups, opposition political parties, and some popular sector organizations—came together to launch a concerted challenge to the legitimacy of the military regime. Although the opposition remained divided between a moderate and more radical segment, most women's organizations, except for those linked to the far left parties, participated in the moderate opposition movement. This opposition formed the Concertación de los Partidos por el "No" to mobilize Chileans to vote against Pinochet in the 1988 plebiscite. After winning the plebiscite, the alliance became the Concertación de los Partidos por la Democracia and put forward a Christian Democratic candidate for the presidential elections held in 1989. Since then, the Concertación has won every set of presidential and congressional elections in the country.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Georgina Waylen (2000; 2003) for a discussion of how the paths of transition influence the trajectories of women's movements.

<sup>4</sup> According to Haydée Birgin (president of ELA, Equipo Latinoamericano de Justicia y Género) the transition to democracy in Argentina occurred only after the fall of the military dictatorship (Personal Interview, August 24, 2006, Buenos Aires).

<sup>5</sup> A plebiscite on the continuation of Pinochet's rule was made possible by the 1980 Constitution.

Women in the democratic opposition created the Concertación Nacional de las Mujeres por la Democracia, and put pressure on their male colleagues to include women candidates and to promote gender equality in their election mandates. Interestingly, in Argentina, it was only after the transition that women came together to form the Multisectorial de Mujeres (created on March 8, 1984) to lay out a program of women's gender demands (Feijoó 1998, 117). Although women's movements and feminist organizations in both countries experienced debates over whether to remain autonomous or to engage in "double militancy" (a strategy of political involvement in and commitment to both movement and party or state arenas) it turned out that in Chile, only a small minority of feminists opted for an autonomy strategy.<sup>6</sup> Although the double militancy strategy led to some successes, particularly in having women's gender interests addressed by the new democratic government, a less desirable consequence has been a feminist movement that has much less public visibility and has been more "silent" on controversial issues.<sup>7</sup> How did this happen, and how did transnationalism reinforce this tendency?

As noted above, women played a large role in the opposition movement that defeated Pinochet. That fact, combined with the desire of the post-transition government to restore Chile's international legitimacy, led the government to create mechanisms to address women's gender demands, most notably, the creation of a women's state agency. Although SERNAM's first director was not directly from the feminist movement, feminist NGOs enjoyed considerable access to the institution, and many of them have been contracted to carry out research and project design for SERNAM. However, a number of criticisms have emerged about the relationship between feminist NGOs and SERNAM. According to one feminist, SERNAM has tried to "coopt" feminist NGOs, by calling them to participate in events as a way of showcasing how open the state is to the participation of civil society.<sup>8</sup> Another criticism is that the relations between feminists in NGOs and officials who work in SERNAM (or in the parties, or elsewhere in the state) are relations based on friendship or personal connections. One woman explained that there is a marked informality of relations between state and many civil society actors precisely because those in each sphere have a shared history of activism, education, and friendship. This informality makes it hard sometimes to criticize the government for fear of being labelled a "traitor."<sup>9</sup> A labor activist noted that this problem is not limited to the women's movement, but also plagues the post-transition labor movement because any form of protest is viewed "as being against the government".<sup>10</sup> This tendency, combined with the Concertación's reluctance to take on controversial issues for fear of destabilizing democracy, has led feminists to engage in substantial levels of self-censorship (Ríos Tobar 2003).

Transnational dynamics exacerbated this tendency in Chilean feminism. First, those NGOs who already had relatively greater access to resources (through contracts from the government) and who were already "professionalized" (in the sense of carrying out research and policy design) were precisely those who had access to international organizations and foreign

---

<sup>6</sup> Although only a small portion of feminists were rigidly committed to an autonomous strategy, the debates between the autónomas and the "institucionales" (the name given by autónomas to feminists who opted to work with and alongside state actors) were extremely bitter and divisive (see Ríos, Godoy, and Guerrero 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Note the title of Ríos, Godoy, and Guerrero's study of the post-transition feminist movement: *¿Un Nuevo Silencio Feminista? La Transformación de un Movimiento Social en el Chile Posdictadura*.

<sup>8</sup> Author's interview, October 6, 1999, Santiago.

<sup>9</sup> Author's interview, July 19, 2002, Santiago.

<sup>10</sup> Author's interview, August 26, 1999, Santiago.

funding. This occurred because the sub-regional co-ordinator of Unifem in Brazil had encouraged the formation of *Grupos Inicativas* throughout the southern cone countries as a way of co-ordinating national activities to prepare for the regional preparatory conference, to be held in Mar del Plata in 1995 (Guerrero and Guzmán 1998, 181). These *Grupos*, composed of national NGOs, received funding from Unifem to compile data, gather information, and help to prepare national NGO reports for the regional preparatory meetings. In Chile, the *Grupo Iniciativa* (formed in July 1993) was initially composed of seven well-known NGOs, almost all based in the capital, Santiago. There was little debate within the feminist NGO community itself over this process, because the main split between the *autónomas* and the *institucionales* had already taken place, leaving the two groups to engage in completely separate activities and processes (Ríos Tobar 2004). Feminist NGOs, especially those who formed *Grupo Iniciativa*, participated closely alongside the government and Sernam in the national and regional preparations for Beijing. The national report prepared by the *Grupo Iniciativa* initially served as a basis for both the NGO position and the official government report for the conference.

In Argentina the process was not as smooth. First, there was a much greater array of positions being debated over the relationship that women's movement activists should be taking with respect to the state, IGOs, and foreign donors. Likewise, the array of actors involved was somewhat broader. In Chile, it was almost exclusively feminist NGOs that were engaged in the process. In Argentina, in contrast, the participants included activists from political parties, labor activists, grassroots organizations, as well as feminist NGOs (Guerrero and Guzmán 1998; Lubertino 1996). While a *Grupo Iniciativa* was formed in September 1993, it had much less legitimacy and generated much more conflict right from the outset. Like Chile's *Grupo Iniciativa*, Argentina's was also basically composed of groups located in the capital city who had a national profile. Soon, however, five NGOs who were critical of the process by which *Grupo Iniciativa* had been formed, created their own group, the *Grupo Propuesta*, and later, feminists even more committed to autonomy and independence created the *Comité de Enlace*, calling for a parallel forum to the regional meeting of governments and NGOs in Mar del Plata (Guerrero and Guzmán 1998 183). While the *Grupo Propuesta* then temporarily re-joined *Grupo Iniciativa*, they withdrew again in 1994 citing their desire to work from "a position of independence and autonomy" (Guerrero and Guzmán 1998, 183).

In addition to having a women's movement that was characterized by greater diversity and open conflict, movements also had a different sort of relationship with the state. A key difference between Chile and Argentina was that in the latter, it was human rights movements rather than women's movements per se that played the main protagonistic role in the transition to democracy.<sup>11</sup> Hence, it was only under the first democratic government of Raúl Alfonsín that women's NGOs expanded when public space was opened up for them by the creation of the *Subsecretaría de la Mujer* in 1989 (Guerrero and Guzmán 1998, 178-179). When the government changed in 1989 after the election of Carlos Menem (a Peronist), Menem replaced the *Subsecretaría de la Mujer* with the *Consejo Nacional de la Mujer* (CNMD). Although Argentina's CNMD was created with less prestige and a lower profile than Chile's SERNAM, it

---

<sup>11</sup> Feminist activists and members of NGOs in Argentina noted in interviews (July-September 2006) that they had far less access to funding provided by international donors than did their Chilean counterparts. They claimed that this made it more difficult for them to create the highly institutionalized spaces (like feminist NGOs and women's studies centres) that emerged in Chile.

initially established more formal relations with the women's movement in the country. Whereas SERNAM has been criticized for being led by women with stronger party connections to government than links to the women's movement, Menem initially named a feminist—Virginia Franganillo—to the presidency of the CNMD.

In the early years of the Beijing preparations, Argentine NGOs enjoyed substantial access to the CNMD, given Franganillo's commitment to link herself to the movement and respond to its demands. The CNMD also provided financing for NGO forums and asked experts from the feminist NGO community to write the national report for the regional preparatory meetings (Guerrero and Guzmán 1998, 192-193). But the open relationship between the state and women's movements changed dramatically in 1993 when president Menem launched an anti-abortion agenda.<sup>12</sup> According to Merike Blofield (2003), Menem was partly motivated by the emergence of Catholic-based criticisms of the hardships created by the government's neoliberal policies. Forging an alliance with the Vatican in the transnational arena was a way to neutralize the criticisms coming from local Catholics. So, at a 1993 regional Beijing pre-conference of Latin American governments, Menem proposed—unsuccessfully—an absolute prohibition on abortion (Blofield 2003, 155). This serves as a reminder that states as well as social movements utilize the transnational arena to secure domestic objectives.

Then, in 1994, as an elected constituent assembly was in the process of reforming the Argentine constitution, Menem announced his goal of having an explicit prohibition on abortion written into the document. This move provoked a strong and highly visible mobilization by Argentina's women's movement. Activists from over one hundred organizations, including labor unions, political parties, and NGOs, created *Mujeres Autoconvocadas para Decidir en Libertad* (MADEL).<sup>13</sup> MADEL pursued a multi-pronged strategy, lobbying members of the constituent assembly and political parties, as well as launching a public awareness campaign that included street demonstrations and statements to the media (Gutiérrez 2000). MADEL successfully framed Menem's proposal as illegitimate and undemocratic, given that the Peronist Party had not raised this issue during the previous electoral campaign. The constitutional ban on abortion was unsuccessful.

An important consequence of these developments was a dramatically transformed relationship between the feminist movement and the Argentine state. The president of the CNMD publicly clashed with Menem, leading to her resignation (Blofield 2003). Feminists within the Peronist party and the opposition had supported MADEL's campaign. While feminists can claim success in blocking Menem's move, an important consequence was that feminist NGOs and even feminists within the CNMD were increasingly cut off from the official preparations for Beijing. Hence, Argentina's delegation grew increasingly conservative. Argentina's ambassador to the UN publicly declared that Argentine women are conscious of their mission as wives and mothers and that women are at the center of home life (cited in

---

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that Argentina's criminal code was already highly restrictive in terms of abortion, permitting legal abortion in only two instances: where the mother's life is at risk, and where a mentally handicapped woman becomes pregnant as the result of rape. Menem's attempt to insert a clause banning abortion in the constitution was resisted because it would make it much more difficult to expand women's access to legal abortion in the future. Liberalizing abortion was (and still is) a key goal of the feminist movement in Argentina.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Monica Gogna (CEDES), September 20, 2006, Buenos Aires.

Gutiérrez 2000). During the final stages of the Beijing preparations, NGOs had no influence, and they were not kept informed of what was happening in the official national delegation.<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, at the NGO forum in Hairou, Argentine NGOs formally rejected the position of the official government delegation (Guerrero and Guzmán 1998, 197).

In the Argentine case, the conservative direction taken at Beijing was at least partly initiated by the state itself. In the Chilean case, on the other hand, the official delegation was pushed to a more conservative direction by conservative forces in politics and society. The preparations for Beijing coincided with the launching of Chile's first Equal Opportunity Plan for Women and Men, a document that drew substantial criticism from the political Right. A joint statement by conservative NGOs and the rightist parties claimed that the Plan was "inspired by renovated socialism and radical feminism" (cited in Ríos Tobar 2004, 9). Criticisms of the Concertación government's commitment to gender equality from conservatives were not new, however. Extensive debate had erupted in 1991 when the Concertación first introduced the bill to create Sernam. Given the more closed nature of Chile's "pacted" transition, the Concertación government was compelled to negotiate and try to build consensus with the political Right, who held a slight majority in the senate, given the existence of nine appointed senators.<sup>15</sup> This fact, in addition to the Concertación's unwillingness to tackle controversial issues (including divorce legislation, reproductive rights, and the legacy of human rights violations by the military), led to a situation in which the political Right often sets the agenda and frames the debates over gender rights controversies (see Blofield 2003).

In this context, it is not surprising that controversy soon emerged over the way that the Chilean government was preparing for the Beijing conference. Conservatives initiated public debates (mostly in the media, which are overwhelmingly conservative in Chile) about the very concept of gender, the meaning of equality, and the concept of the family. Conservatives charged SERNAM and the government's official Beijing platform with endangering Chilean "national cultural values" (Ríos Tobar 2004, 9-10). A heated debate emerged in congress when it came time to ratify the government's official document for Beijing (a document in which feminist NGOs had a substantial stake). Although the document was approved in the lower house, where the governing Concertación had a majority, it was not approved in the senate, where a number of opposition senators, in addition to nine members of the Concertación (all Christian Democrats) recommended that the official document be revised (Baldez 2001, 19; Ríos Tobar 2003, 10). The revised document included explicit opposition to abortion and an affirmation of the family as the foundation of society. Prior to leaving for Beijing, SERNAM's minister, Josefina Bilbao told the press that she had "been in permanent contact with the ambassador at the Vatican" and that "we agree with the issues the Vatican has assigned the highest priority".<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Some information was provided to the NGOs through the one opposition parliamentarian that was part of the official delegation (Lubertino 1996).

<sup>15</sup> The so-called "*designados*" (appointed senators) are a product of the 1980 Constitution, written by the military. Unlike in Argentina, the Chilean transition to democracy did not involve rewriting the constitution. However, a package of reforms that includes elimination of the *designados* and reduction of the presidential term was approved in September 2005 (*Santiago Times*, September 19, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in *Chip News*, July 7, 1995.

What is most significant about the debate that emerged in Chile was that, unlike in Argentina, feminists did not mobilize in opposition to the conservative attack. Instead, as Ríos Tobar notes (2004, 13), NGOs, including the Grupo Iniciativa, were totally absent from the public debate. There are two explanations for feminist silence in this national debate. One explanation is that feminist NGOs in Chile had decided to support the government and its position. And, according to Ríos Tobar (2004, 16), the Chilean government was quite clearly playing to two very different audiences, an important point to consider when trying to unravel the complexity of transnationalism. On the one hand, the Concertación government was eager to erase the image of Chile as an international pariah and present itself to the international community as a modern and democratic country where gender equality norms were accepted. But the Concertación also had to play to a domestic audience where conservatives—the Catholic Church and the political right—were dominating the agenda with appeals to nationalism and the claim that the Beijing platform violated national political culture. In order to play to this audience successfully, the Concertación clearly chose to moderate its own platform rather than vigorously defend a position that favored “gender” equality and women’s freedom to define themselves outside the traditional image of wife and mother. Given the close relationship between Grupo Iniciativa and the government, most feminist NGOs also chose to remain silent rather than add further to the controversy.

Another part of the explanation is that feminist NGOs were simply too preoccupied with the Beijing preparations to involve themselves in national issues. Moreover, as Ríos Tobar points out, the preparations for Beijing had exacerbated the conflicts between feminist NGOs and Chile’s “autonomous” feminists. When the *autónomas* began criticizing feminists in the NGOs for participating in institutional spaces, feminists in NGOs simply withdrew from those spaces in which they would be forced to confront these charges. For example, the *foros feministas* and the *encuentros feministas* were no longer real spaces of debate and exchange because the “institutional” feminists simply avoided these events. The result was a feminist movement with two completely separate segments—one group that cooperated with state and international actors and another that participated in the national and regional *encuentros*. This substantially reduced the potential of the feminist movement to cooperate and respond assertively to the conservative assault on the goals and norms of gender equality. And, without any participation by feminists in the national debate over Beijing and the norms of gender equality, the conservatives enjoyed a wide open space to claim that they were articulating the national culture and representing the interests of Chilean citizens (Ríos Tobar 2004, 25).

In contrast to the high level of fragmentation and division among Chilean feminists, the feminist movement in Argentina, while not completely free of tensions and conflict, has continued to display healthy debate amongst different types of organizations. In addition to participating in national and regional “encuentros feministas,” Argentine activists meet on a yearly basis in a national “Encuentro de Mujeres.” These events are attended by over 20,000 women drawn from political parties, labour unions, community organizations, and feminist collectives.<sup>17</sup> They serve as sites for sharing information and strategies for achieving women’s rights. Also significant is the fact that the women’s policy agency created in Argentina—the CNMD—has not drawn as many feminist policy experts into the state itself. It has always been

---

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Susana Pastor (MEI, Mujeres en Igualdad), one of the co-ordinators of the 2007 Encuentro. September 11, 2006, Buenos Aires.

smaller than Chile's Sernam, and therefore has exerted fewer demobilizing pressures on the women's movement.

What conclusions can be drawn from a comparison of the Argentine and Chilean experiences? Two important similarities that should not be overlooked are the extent to which transnationalism produced (or deepened) divisions within both countries, leading governments to adopt a fairly conservative agenda in the international arena. However, feminist movements reacted to this differently in each country, largely due to different kinds of relationships between movement and state actors. In Chile, the movement's lack of autonomy is partly linked to the shared partisan identity of feminists and the parties of the governing coalition. In Argentina, feminists are not unified in their party affiliation, and thus, there has never been as close a relationship between the women's movement and the government of the day. The fragmentation of Chile's feminist movement and the lack of autonomy of the NGO sector led to its passivity in the midst of a national debate over norms about gender equality. In contrast, despite deep divisions within Argentina's women's movement, activists came together and responded assertively to Menem's attempt to place a constitutional ban on abortion. Argentine feminists also denounced their government's conservative position at Beijing, while feminist NGOs in Chile remained fairly silent. The difference displayed in the two countries illustrates that to understand the effects of transnationalism we need to explore "how the local and global intersect at specific historical conjunctures and in politically grounded contexts" (Ríos Tobar 2004, 23).

## Conclusions

This paper has shown that, in the realm of gender politics, the processes of democratization and transnationalism have reinforced each other in powerful ways. Global norms about gender equality have led democratizing states to create institutional space for the representation of women's interests in the state. Likewise, the transnational space opened up for the UN conferences created openings for both state and civil society actors to work alongside one another. However, as the cases of Argentina and Chile indicate, the consequences of these dynamics are not always causes for celebration as some early analyses claimed. Instead, a number of outcomes are possible, depending on the nature of the women's movement in question and the type of relationship it has with government and state actors.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the forgoing analysis is that it may be time for researchers to focus on the possible linkages between the impact of transnational organizing on domestic social movements and the diffusion of global norms. While these two areas are frequently treated as distinct, they are clearly linked. Where transnationalism leads to (or reinforces) the fragmentation of social movements, it then becomes more difficult for civil society-based campaigns to push governments to ensure effective implementation of norms to which governments have rhetorically committed themselves (for example, domestic violence legislation). While scholars are certainly correct in pointing out the emergence and diffusion of a "global gender equality regime," the real pressure for effective translation of these norms to the domestic level must come from within that society. If it turns out, however, that the processes of transnationalism can, under certain conditions, undermine the capacity of social movements to mobilize "at home," then it would seem that the consequences of transnationalism for deepening democracy are more ambiguous than previously understood.

## Bibliography

- Alvarez, Sonia E. 1999 "Advocating Feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO 'Boom'" *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1(2): 181-209.
- Alvarez, Sonia E. 2000. "Translating the Global: Effects of Transnational Organizing on Local Feminist Discourses and Practices in Latin America" *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 1, 1. pp. 29-67.
- Alvarez, Sonia E., Elisabeth Jay Friedman, Ericka Beckman, Maylei Blackwell, Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, Nathalie Lebon, Marysa Navarro, Marcela Ríos Tobar. 2002. "Encountering Latin American and Caribbean Feminism" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (2): 537-579.
- Archenti, Nélica. 2002. "Los Caminos de la Inclusión Políticos: Acciones Afirmativas de Género" *Hombres Públicos, Mujeres Públicos*. Silvia Vázquez, (ed.). pp. 25-55. Buenos Aires: Fundación Friedrich Ebert.
- Archenti, Nélica. 2004. "¿Qué Han Hecho las Legisladoras? Impacto de las Cuotas en el Congreso Argentino" Paper presented at the XXV International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association. Las Vegas, October 7-9.
- Baldez, Lisa. 2004. "Elected Bodies: The Adoption of Gender Quota Laws for Legislative Candidates in Mexico" *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 29, 2. pp. 231-258.
- Baldez, Lisa. 2001. "Coalition Politics and the Limits of State Feminism in Chile" *Women and Politics* 22, 4. pp. 1-28.
- Basu, Amrita. 2000. "Globalization of the Local/Localization of the Global: Mapping Transnational Women's Movements" *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 1, 1. pp. 68-84.
- Blofield, Merike. 2003. "Inequality and Democratic Politics: The Catholic Church, Feminists, and Policy Reform on Abortion and Divorce in Argentina, Chile, and Spain. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- Bonner, Michelle. 2004. "Defining Democracy: Women and Human Rights Organizations in Argentine Democratization" Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Toronto.
- Clark, Ann Marie, and Elisabeth Friedman and Kathryn Hochstetler. 1998. "The Sovereign Limits of Global Civil Society: A Comparison of NGO Participation in UN World Conferences on the Environment, Human Rights, and Women" *World Politics* 51, 1. pp. 1-35.
- CEPAL. n.d. Unidad Mujer y Desarrollo. <http://www.eclac.cl/mujer/>
- ECLAC. 1998. "The Institutionality of Gender Equity in the State: a Diagnosis for Latin America and the Caribbean". Document prepared by the Women and Development Unit of ECLAC.
- Feijoó, María del Carmen. 1998. "Democratic Participation and Women in Argentina" in *Women and Democracy: Latin America and Central Eastern Europe*. Jane Jaquette and Sharon Wolchik (eds). pp. 29-46. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

University Press.

- Finnemore, Martha and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change" *International Organization* 52, 4. pp. 887-917.
- Franceschet, Susan. 2005. *Women and Politics in Chile*. Lynne Rienner Publishing.
- Franceschet, Susan. 2004. "Explaining Social Movement Outcomes: collective action frames and strategic choices in first- and second-wave feminism in Chile" *Comparative Political Studies* Vol. 37, No. 5, 2004, pp. 499-530.
- Friedman, Elisabeth. 1999. "The Effects of 'Transnationalism Reversed' in Venezuela" *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1, 3. pp. 357-381.
- Friedman, Elisabeth J. 2000. "State-based Advocacy for Gender Equality in the Developing World: Assessing the Venezuelan National Women's Agency" *Women and Politics* 21 (2): 47-80.
- Gray, Tricia. 2003. "Electoral Gender Quotas: Lessons from Argentina and Chile" *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 22 (1): 52-78.
- Guerrero, Elizabeth and Virginia Guzmán. 1998. "El Caso de Chile y del Cono Sur" *Caminos a Beijing: IV Conferencia Mundial de la Mujer en América Latina y el Caribe*. Virginia Vargas Valente (ed.) pp. 173-205. Lima: Unicef, Ediciones Flora Tristan, Unifem.
- Gutiérrez, María Alicia. 2000. "Mujeres Autoconvocadas Para Decidir en Libertad (MADEL): la Experiencia Reciente del Movimiento de Mujeres" *La Sociedad Civil Frente a las Nuevas Formas de Institucionalidad Democrática*, Martín Abregú and Silvina Ramos (eds) pp. 83-111.
- Hawkins, Darren and Melissa Hume. 2002. "Human Rights and Domestic Violence" *Political Science Quarterly* 117, 2. pp. 231-257.
- Htun, Mala. 1998. "Women's Political Participation, Representation and Leadership in Latin America" Issue Brief for the Women's Leadership Conference of the Americas.
- Htun, Mala. 2001. "Advancing Women's Rights in the Americas: Achievements and Challenges" Working Paper, North-South Center, University of Miami.
- Inter-American Commission of Women. 2000. "Quota Laws" <http://www.oas.org/cim/English/Laws-Cuota.htm>
- Jones, Mark P. 1996. "Increasing Women's Representation Via Gender Quotas: the Argentine Ley de Cupos" *Women and Politics* 16 (4): 75-98.
- Kardem, Nüket. 2004. "The Emerging Global Gender Equality Regime from Neoliberal and Constructivist Perspectives in International Relations" *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 6, 1. pp. 85-109.
- Karl, Terry Lynn. 1990. "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America" *Comparative Politics* 23 (1): 1-21.
- Krook, Mona Lena. 2003. "Get the Balance Right! Global and Transnational Campaigns to Promote Gender-Balanced Decision-Making" Paper presented at

- the International Studies Association Annual Convention. Portland, OR. February 25-March 1.
- Krook, Mona Lena. 2004. "Reforming Representation: the Diffusion of Candidate Gender Quotas Worldwide" Paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Convention. Montreal, Canada. March 17-20, 2004.
- Lubertino, María José. 1996. "Argentina Antes y Después de Beijing". [www.ispm.org.ar/documentos/doc004.htm](http://www.ispm.org.ar/documentos/doc004.htm)
- Macaulay, Fiona. 1998. "Localities of Power: Gender, Parties and Democracy in Chile and Brazil" In Haleh Afshar (ed.) *Women and Empowerment: Illustrations from the Third World*. pp. 86-109. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Ríos Tobar, Marcela, Lorena Godoy Catalán, and Elizabeth Guerrero Caviedes. 2004. *¿Un Nuevo Silencio Feminista? La Transformación de un Movimiento Social en el Chile Posdictadura*. Santiago: CEM, Editorial Cuarto Propio.
- Ríos Tobar, Marcela. 2003. "Chilean Feminism(s) in the 1990s: Paradoxes of an Unfinished Transition" *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 5, 2. 256-280.
- Ríos Tobar, Marcela. 2004. "When Feminists All "Go Global," Who Mobilizes at Home? The Chilean Experience in the Nineties" Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, September 4-6, 2004.
- Risse, Thomas and Kathryn Sikkink. 1999. "The Socialization of international Human Rights Norms into Domestic Practices: Introduction" *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change*, Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink (eds) pp. 1-38. Cambridge University Press.
- Rodríguez, Victoria E. 2003. *Women in Contemporary Mexican Politics*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- SERNAM. 2002. "Percepción de los Líderes Políticos y Sociales sobre la Ley de Cuotas: Contenidos y Factibilidad". Santiago: SERNAM Working Document Number 79.
- Stacy, Helen. 2004. "Equality and Difference: Regional Courts and Women's Human Rights" CDDRL Working Paper No. 18.
- Towns, Ann. 2003. "Women Governing for Modernity: International Hierarchy and Legislature Sex Quotas" Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. Philadelphia, August 26-30.
- True, Jacqui and Michael Mintrum. 2001. "Transnational Networks and Policy Diffusion: the Case of Gender Mainstreaming. *International Studies Quarterly* 45. pp. 27-57.
- Tula, María Inés. 2002. "La Ley de Cupo en la Argentina: La Participación de las Mujeres en los Organos Representativos de Gobierno" *Hombres Públicos, Mujeres Públicos*. Silvia Vázquez, (ed.). pp. 58-89. Buenos Aires: Fundación Friedrich Ebert.
- Tula, María Inés. 2004. "La Ley de Cupos en la Argentina: reforma electoral y

- representación política” Paper presented at the XXV International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Las Vegas, October 7-9.
- Valdés, Teresa. 2000. *De lo Social a lo Político: la acción de las mujeres latinoamericanas*. Santiago: LOM Ediciones.
- Vargas Valente, Virginia and Cecilia Olea Mauleón. 1998. “El Proceso Hacia Beijing: Reflexiones Desde Adentro” *Caminos a Beijing: IV Conferencia Mundial de la Mujer en América Latina y el Caribe*. Virginia Vargas Valente (ed.) pp. 13-33. Lima: Unicef, Ediciones Flora Tristan, Unifem.
- Waylen, Georgina. 1997. “Women’s Movements, the State, and Democratization in Chile: the Establishment of SERNAM” in *Getting Institutions Right for Women in Development*. Anne Marie Goetz (ed.) pp. 90-103. London: Zed Books.
- Waylen, Georgina. 2003. “Gender and Transitions: What do we Know?” *Democratization* 10, 1. pp. 157-178.
- Waylen, Georgina. 2000. “Gender and Democratic Politics: A Comparative Analysis of Consolidation in Argentina and Chile” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 32. 765-793.
- Zwingel, Susanne. 2005. “From Intergovernmental Negotiations to (Sub)national Change: a Transnational Perspective on the Impact of CEDAW” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7 (3): 400-424.