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1 INTRODUCTION

With the return to competitive electoral politics in a number of Latin American countries, the viability of 'state feminism' has come under scrutiny as a mechanism with which to achieve change. This article explores one such attempt to engage with the state to effect some change in the position of women. It examines SERNAM (*Servicio Nacional de la Mujer*), the Chilean women's bureau, established during the process of democratization and consolidation by the incoming civilian government. Because it is impossible to analyse the nature and efficacy of an institution like SERNAM in isolation from the wider context, this case study also highlights the nature of the relationship between different women's movements, the state and political parties in one political conjuncture. When examining this type of example, a number of questions must be considered. What possibilities exist for women's movements in their relationships with political parties and state? How much space and manoeuvrability can exist within the state for women's movements to achieve their aims? Or do they simply get co-opted, lose autonomy and have to submit to the agendas of others (Waylen 1993)? What happens to other movements which stay outside the state? The exploration of these issues can only be historically and conjuncturally specific.

The assumption that the nature of state is not fixed provides the starting point. Indeed, the state has no necessary relationship to gender relations, but this is evolving, dialectic and dynamic. 'The state' can rarely, if ever, be seen as a homogeneous category. It is not a unitary structure but a differentiated set of institutions and agencies, the product of a particular historical and political conjuncture. It is far better to see the state as a site of struggle, not lying outside of society and social processes, but having, on the one hand, a degree of autonomy from these which varies under particular circumstances, and on the other, being permeated by them. Gender (and race and class) inequalities are therefore buried within the state, but through part of the same dynamic process, gender relations are also partly constituted through the state (Pringle and Watson 1992). The state therefore partly reflects

and partly helps to create particular forms of gender relations and gender inequality. State practices construct and legitimate gender divisions. Gendered identities are in part constructed by the law and public discourses which emanate from the state (Showstack Sassoon 1987).

Because the relationship between the state and gender relations is not fixed and immutable, battles over gender relations can be fought out in the arena of the state. Consequently, while the state has for the most part acted to reinforce female subordination, space can exist within the state to act to change gender relations (Alvarez 1989; Charlton *et al.* 1989). At different times and within different regimes, opportunity spaces can be used to alter the existing pattern of gender relations. Women's relationship to the state, particularly its welfare element, can also be seen as a site of contestation which provides the context for mobilization, and the welfare state can function as a locus of resistance. The actions of the state can also become a focus for political activity by groups outside the state e.g. poor women campaigning for an extension of services. Alvarez (1990), for example, has argued that the extension of the remit of the state into the realm of the private has the effect of politicizing the private e.g. through issues such as abortion, rape and domestic violence. This politicization then gives women's movements a handle to campaign around and influence the political agenda. Shifting the boundary between the public and the private then becomes an important point of influence (Alvarez 1990).

Different groups of women therefore interact with the state in different ways, and can have some influence over the way in which the state acts. Feminist analyses have advanced from looking at the way the state treats women unequally in relation to men, to examining the ways in which particular states act to construct gendered state subjects, and the public/private divide in different contexts. As part of the process of engagement with the state, interests and identities can also be constructed. It is therefore important to analyse under what conditions and with what strategies women's movements can influence the state and policy agendas. Debate

has centred around whether women's movements should attempt to work with the state and political parties. Australian 'femocrats' argue that the state is a potential agent of empowerment and feminist strategies should involve winning gains from it (Watson 1990).

Some Chilean feminists have shared this view and attempted to influence the state directly in the course of the transition to democracy. An important characteristic of this transition was the role played by heterogeneous women's movements, particularly in its early stages. But it has also seen the reconstitution of a strong and traditional party system and the subsequent demobilization of popular movements, including women's movements. The transition has been narrowly defined to focus on the political to the exclusion of the social and economic, as the civilian governments have maintained the liberal economic policies of the military government and had a narrow economic focus on social questions such as poverty alleviation. During the initial opening, concerted campaigns were undertaken by some feminists and women party activists to influence the political process. The resulting centre/left government was committed in its programme to establishing the women's bureau SERNAM but with an unclear brief. The complex and contradictory fate of SERNAM can therefore only be understood as part of this wider process of democratization.

In order to explore how these processes unfolded in the transition and consolidation of competitive electoral politics it is useful to divide the transition into three phases, as events which occurred in the two periods prior to the civilian government taking power had important implications for the post 1990 period.

2 1983-86 PERIOD OF SOCIAL MOBILIZATION

During this period of mass opposition to the dictatorship, diverse women's movements had a high visibility. Human rights organizations, comprising mainly women, highlighted disappearances and abuses; popular movements were active around social and economic issues; and feminist movements, including 'popular feminist' groups, campaigning around gender inequality (re)emerged (Arteaga 1988; Valdes and Weinstein 1989; Kirkwood 1990; Valenzuela 1991; Waylen 1992). Once political parties began to reconstitute, all social movements (including feminist ones) were under

pressure to decide on a strategy: whether it was to be autonomy from or integration into the unfolding political process (Valenzuela 1990). Some feminists decided on integration and moved into the political parties. They tended to be middle class professional women, active in centre and renovated left parties. Women's sections were set up in some of these political parties e.g. in 1986 the *Federación de Mujeres Socialistas* (FMS) was established in one faction of the socialist party to help increase the influence of feminism in national politics.

Women's organizations also tried to remain united in the face of a divided political opposition through broad umbrella movements such as *Mujeres por la Vida* (formed in 1983). Despite the efforts to prevent it, party factionalism did have an impact on women's organizations e.g. as the umbrella organization MEMCH 83 became more associated with hard left, other women's groups left it (Molina 1989). One organization, *Mujeres por la Vida*, also played a role in the *Asemblea de la Civilidad* (a broad opposition front) opposing the dictatorship. A women's petition was included in a document submitted to the military government in 1986 and (the socialist) Maria Antioneta Saa sat in assembly as the women's representative. However, in a trend which was to recur, some popular women's organizations felt *Mujeres por la Vida* did not represent them in the assembly (Angelo 1990).

3 1987-89 POLITICAL PARTIES REGAIN HEGEMONY

In this period, two events – the political parties gaining control over the unfolding political process and the centre/left moving towards negotiation with the military government – set the tone for the transition. The left and other organizations, such as human rights groups and popular organizations, not adhering to the strategy of *negociación* but *ruptura*, became increasingly marginalized in this middle class transition of negotiated pacts. These developments, in combination with the experience of the *Asamblea* reinforced the belief of some feminists that more than ever it was necessary to enter the political process, but in the context of an autonomous women's movement, while others decided to remain outside (Molina 1990). Tensions which had existed between the *feministas* and the *políticas* (female activists within political parties) were reduced as many *políticas* became more sympathetic to the aims of feminists (Serrano 1990). Feminists

appeared to make significant headway within the political parties of the centre/left. This was particularly true of the PPD, the umbrella party of the renovated left, which adopted a quota system for women, although this was ignored on occasions e.g. in the PPD political council and in the selection of candidates (Saa 1990). However, while several parties were prepared to make general statements about women's equality they were not prepared seriously to restructure power to allow women greater access to decision making processes within them.

It was the perception of women's continued lack of influence in the run up to 1988 plebiscite (in which people voted yes or no to Pinochet continuing as President) and the selection of very few women candidates (around 5 per cent of the total) for subsequent elections, which provided the major impetus for the creation of the autonomous *Concertación de Mujeres por la Democracia* in 1988. It was formed by women from a wide range of parties in the *Concertación* (the centre-left coalition contesting the elections) together with independent feminists (including academics, and activists, many of whom were middle class professionals). The *Concertación de Mujeres* can be seen as growing out of a tradition of attempts to create a united women's movement to influence the political agenda. However, as had been the case with some of the earlier attempts, some women active in the popular organizations again felt that the *Concertación de Mujeres* did not represent their interests (Angelo 1990).

The *Concertación de Mujeres* had a threefold aim: first to raise women's issues on the national political scene, second to work in the presidential and parliamentary campaign on behalf of the *Concertación*, and third to formulate a programme on women for future democratic government. The eleven commissions of the women's *Concertación* produced a document which included a proposal for the ministry for women (and for changes in education, law, employment, health, and the family). These were presented as demands and most of them were incorporated into the electoral programme of the *Concertación* (Montecino and Rosetti 1990). The visibility of women's movements during transition, in combination with the activities of feminists within centre/left parties, had meant that those political parties felt that they could not ignore their demands.

'Women's issues' had been firmly placed on the political agenda in the following form: the *Concertación* was now committed to 'fully enforce women's rights considering the new role of women in society, overcoming any form of discrimination'. However this on its own was not acceptable to all in the coalition and the statement that the 'government will enforce the measures required to adequately protect the family' was added, leaving the proposal with what were perhaps contradictory aims from the start.

The goals were to be enforced through:

- 1 legal changes: improving women's legal position;
- 2 social participation: the incorporation of women into the political system and labour market;
- 3 the creation of a national machinery at state level which would propose policy and oversee its implementation by other ministries.

It was therefore anticipated that these goals would be implemented through policies specifically aimed at women, but that these would not be ghettoized away from mainstream development policy but integrated into the work of all relevant government departments.

These proposals came out of the strategy of direct engagement of parts of the Chilean feminist movement with the political process and it is highly unlikely that, without this pressure, the *Concertación* would have adopted these ideas. According to Valenzuela (1992) (an academic, feminist activist and later part of SERNAM) members of the *Concertación de Mujeres* assumed that the government (and by implication the state) was a gender-neutral tool which could be used in gender-based ways, i.e. that engaging with the state would be a relatively straightforward process to bring about an expansion of rights and democratic procedures through which women would also be incorporated as full citizens. There was also an assumption that relationships with women's organizations outside the state would be relatively unproblematic. Neither of these two assumptions has been borne out in practice.

¹ I am grateful to Anne Marie Goetz, Verónica Schild and particularly Ann Matear for supplying much of the information in this section.

4 1990-PRESENT DAY¹

The centre-left *Concertación* was elected convincingly. Clearly some space did then exist within the state to introduce gender based policies but the government's programme on women has only been partially implemented. In order to explore why this has occurred, it is useful to consider which parts of the programme have been initiated and to what effect, and thereby understand why there have been complex and contradictory outcomes both within and outside of the state.

The major way in which the programme on women has been implemented has been through the establishment of SERNAM, the *Servicio Nacional de la Mujer* in 1990, which was modelled on similar bodies in Spain and Brazil. After pressure from the feminist movement, SERNAM was created through a law rather than a presidential decree so that it is less vulnerable to abolition. The bill was toned down as a result of right-wing opposition. The functions of SERNAM were reduced, its capability to execute programmes was removed, its personnel reduced, and while its director was in the cabinet, SERNAM was placed under the auspices the Ministry of Planning. SERNAM's personnel, many of whom were involved in drawing up the *Concertación de Mujeres'* original proposals, are activists drawn mainly from NGOs, or academics. But while they are not civil servants with experience of government, many are members of the political class with connections to *Concertación* politicians. SERNAM's budget has been small. According to some sources it was initially established with US\$2m plus US\$1.5m from outside, primarily from foreign governments and NGOs such as the EU and UNICEF which could potentially give it greater autonomy from government. SERNAM benefited from the shift of foreign funding from the grassroots NGOs, which had received resources directly during the dictatorship, to the civilian government.

The role and functions of SERNAM were unclear at its establishment as it was not made into a full ministry, and while its institutional location in the ministry of planning means that it should be at the heart of planning and policy making, it has no concrete mechanisms to influence government decisions (Goetz 1994). However, four priorities were determined:

- 1 The establishment of a Programme for Women Heads of Household.

- 2 The establishment of a Network of Information Centres in Women's Rights.
- 3 The establishment of a Violence against Women Programme.
- 4 The introduction of legal reforms.

5 WHAT SERNAM HAS DONE

SERNAM has carried out multiple roles, although its limited functions, particularly its weakness in overseeing other departments and in making policy, has resulted in a concentration on public awareness building, implementing pilot projects and pushing for legal changes (Goetz 1994).

SERNAM has experienced its greatest problems in its role within the state. Its brief within the government to coordinate with other ministries, particularly those concerned with social policy, has been problematic. There is no formal machinery with which it can oversee the work of other government departments, and contact points are neither high ranking officials nor are they necessarily interested in gender issues. SERNAM provides training to civil servants to increase gender awareness but this too has been problematic. Because of the voluntary attendance, only those already committed to gender awareness, with few top level officials among them, have taken part. As a result of its lack of power within the state, progress often depends more on the existence of already committed individuals with influence within ministries than on the actions of SERNAM.

SERNAM has been more effective in some of its other roles. As part of its role in information gathering and dissemination, it has commissioned research from outside academics. Its communications brief was financed by foreign aid and UNICEF until 1993. Much of its publicity has been relatively successful but because of underfunding has been limited. A network of Information Centres for Women's rights (CIDEMs) has also been established to provide women with information on their rights (Matear 1993). The centres were also meant to maintain links with women's movements outside the state and to promote women's organizations. They were initially funded by the EU but that money is now being withdrawn. Despite the potential autonomy offered by foreign finance, CIDEMs have been constrained in their activities, concentrating

more on social benefits and poverty rather than gender issues.

As SERNAM cannot set up programmes on its own account, it has concentrated on establishing pilot projects for others to continue. The majority of the programmes have focused on income generation in some form or other. Many of these have been seen as part of a move away from the broad emphasis on empowerment in the programmes of many grassroots NGOs, to a much more narrowly defined 'market empowerment' which fits in with the socio-economic policies of government i.e. an emphasis on poverty reduction through increasing individual access to the market such as training women for the labour market (Schild 1994). The programmes include employment training for women in both traditional and non traditional jobs. Its female heads of household programme has caused controversy from opponents for destroying the family and SERNAM has had to couch its support for it in terms of the better results for social policies which can be obtained by increasing the income generating capacity of the needy. Other programmes have included a microenterprise support programme and childcare for temporary agricultural workers (Matear 1993).

The domestic violence against women programme is an exception to this pattern. Its establishment was a result of campaigning by feminists and the commitment of feminists in SERNAM. Initially no funds were allocated but the programme secured international funding in late 1992. It has initiated research to discover the extent of the problem and organized training programmes for the police and civil servants. SERNAM has also campaigned for legal reforms. It has worked for more rights for women in the labour market to be incorporated into labour law, particularly for service sector workers such as domestic servants. It has agitated for changes in the civil code, working on changes to marriage legislation and on the legitimacy of children. In the field of criminal law SERNAM oversaw the domestic violence bill which finally became law in 1994, three and half years after first being presented, and after much opposition.

Some space has therefore existed for SERNAM to achieve some of its goals, but this has been limited. Some of the obstacles have been practical such as the limited budget, inexperienced personnel and lack of power within the government, but it is also

necessary to understand the wider political context in order to comprehend the outcomes. SERNAM has faced opposition from a variety of sources within the state and the political superstructure. First, it has come from the right-wing political parties. Before its establishment, the right-wing opposition mobilized against SERNAM. Despite the claim that its goals were to implement the UN convention which had been ratified by military government and to protect the family, it was seen as a threat to the social order and the family on the part of feminist and socialists. Second, the church has opposed some of its proposals and in part this reflects the transformation of the Chilean catholic church from playing an oppositional role under military rule to a more conservative one (Schild 1992). From 1988 onwards the church began retrenching its social and educational programmes to concentrate more on '*evangelización*'. In addition the catholic church as an institution is opposed to divorce and reproductive rights and has 'traditional' views on the position of women. Its relationship with the Christian Democrats, the majority partner in the *Concertación*, means that it has some indirect influence over SERNAM. For example SERNAM's deputy director was removed after a row with a senior church figure. SERNAM has also faced opposition from within the *Concertación*, particularly from the right of the Christian Democrats, which highlights the contradictions which exist within the coalition.

This has meant that the greatest space for change has existed on those issues which are considered least controversial. These centre around social and economic measures such as women's employment training which are seen as part of poverty alleviation and income generation. Huge tensions have appeared around issues such as divorce and reproductive rights, particularly abortion.

Those more gender specific measures which threaten to change the nature of gender relations directly are more difficult to get accepted. Indeed gender issues are, according to Valenzuela (1992), the most significant point of disagreement within the coalition, as there is general agreement on most other aspects of social and economic policy. However, despite these difficulties, some important legal changes have been made.

There have also been divisions within SERNAM itself, which reflect divisions between the parties, especially between the Christian Democrat orientated

members who tend to have more conservative views particularly about the family, and the socialist women who tend to have a more 'feminist' agenda (Matear 1993). This lack of agreement on both analysis and on what action should be taken about certain issues, has meant that SERNAM has not been able to come up with a position on abortion and has avoided the issue instead. Personnel are often appointed along party lines; the new director is a friend of President Frei's wife, who is seen as more conservative and headed the commission on the family.

SERNAM has also had an ambivalent relationship with women's movements outside the state. Many women's organizations (some of which are often seen as radical feminist) have been wary because SERNAM is regarded as an arm of state (La Bolétina nd). Popular women's movements in particular are confused as to what SERNAM does and do not feel represented by it. There has also been some disillusionment with what is considered to be SERNAM's lack of a radical approach. The nature of the projects now being funded has shifted towards projects focused around narrow market orientated economic aims. MOMUPO (*Movimiento de Mujeres Populares*) has criticized social policies which treat poor women as isolated individuals without allowing for the creation of collective spaces. It is claimed that SERNAM's policies can also have a differential impact on different groups of women. For example it is claimed that changes to laws on property between men and women affect poor women negatively because property will be split and as a result poor women could lose the roof over their heads which is the most significant thing they have.

There is a general consensus that women's movements, particularly popular women's movements along with many other social movements, have lost momentum since the return to competitive electoral politics. Schild (1994) (contrary to what she sees as the analysis of some feminists within SERNAM) attributes this in part to the existence of SERNAM. Women's movements in this view have been headed by the creation of SERNAM and the subsequent migration of feminists into the state. They have also lost potential resources because funds which used to go directly to NGOs are now channelled through the state, and organizations then have to bid for them. This procedure has led to accusations that SERNAM has a clientelistic relationship with NGOs (Schild 1994). Under these

conditions resources are also more likely to go to middle class organizations proficient at form filling who know their way around the system, rather than to popular organizations, and as a result some autonomous women's organizations have lost out. SERNAM is therefore caught in a potentially contradictory position. According to Valenzuela (1992), it loses potential power through any reduction in the strength of the autonomous women's movements outside the state, as its existence is due in part to their strength and the pressure that they brought to bear on the political parties which now form the government. But at the same time, SERNAM's existence could be part of the very conditions which are undermining those movements.

6 CONCLUSIONS

These complex and contradictory outcomes must be seen as part of the whole process of democratization and reflect many trends seen in the Chilean transition more generally. They are in part a result of a narrow middle class transition characterized by negotiated pacts and without a radical agenda for change. Those social movements remaining outside of the unfolding political process have been increasingly marginalized. However, some space for change did exist in this political conjuncture. The nature of the state was potentially more fluid at this moment of transformation than at other times, but this space was limited by the nature of the transition. Clearly the state has become an arena for gender struggles. SERNAM's role within the state has been difficult. It is closely tied to the political parties which form the government and is split along those lines. It is not an autonomous body but part of the government and the state. It is unclear what implications for its position the reduction of foreign funding and its replacement by state funding will have. But at the same time it lacks the necessary power to influence policy-making and in its dealings with other ministries where it has faced some resistance. The lack of consensus over SERNAM's role and its lack of finance has also impeded its activities.

The state has not proved therefore to be the neutral tool some feminists had thought it was. It has been possible to achieve certain outcomes but not others. SERNAM has faced overt opposition for measures which threaten to alter gender relations. Those changes associated with some notion of strategic gender issues/empowerment are more

difficult to achieve, while more narrowly focused economic measures centred on poverty alleviation are far easier. However SERNAM has been relatively successful in politicizing issues hitherto confined to the private sphere such as domestic violence and teenage pregnancy as well as abuse in the public sphere such as sexual harassment at work, thereby helping to challenge the public/private boundary. There has been little, if any, success in increasing the number of women in the political processes and in positions of power in government, which was one of SERNAM's original aims.

The relationship with movements outside the state is complex. Some organizations feel that SERNAM does not represent them. But SERNAM has different relationships with different groups of women. Most of its personnel are middle class professionals while the organizations feeling most marginalized by it are made up of poor women. It is also unclear

how far SERNAM represents women's movements within the state. Its equal opportunities plan was drawn up without widespread consultation with groups outside SERNAM. While SERNAM has acted perhaps to add to decline in women's movements, it needs the backing of autonomous movements backing outside the state to give it greater power within the state. Feminist movements have lost some leverage within the government because in the process of transition women's movements have become less active. The government can afford to reduce its commitment to a feminist inspired programme, because the agenda was originally determined from outside by women's movements and brought into the political parties by feminist activists. Therefore no easy generalizations about SERNAM are possible. Engagement with the state has proved to be a complex and difficult process giving rise to some opportunity spaces as well as unforeseen obstacles.

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