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Source: Gender and Society, Vol. 4, No. 3, Special Issue: Women and Development in the Third World (Sep., 1990), pp. 354-369
Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/189648
Accessed: 28/01/2009 12:26

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WOMEN'S SOCIAL
MOVEMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA

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This article documents the increasing participation of poor women in social movements in Latin America, focusing on movements centered around human rights and collective consumption issues, such as the cost of living or the provision of public services. It analyzes the factors that have contributed to the increased participation of poor Latin American women in social movements and why they have chosen the state rather than the workplace as the principal arena of confrontation. Although these movements are undertaken in defense of women's traditional domestic role, collective action appears to be contributing to a greater consciousness of gender subordination among Latin American women and to their greater legitimacy in the public sphere.

The past decade has witnessed a marked increase in participation by women in social movements in Latin America. Latin American women are participating in organizations led by and for women, struggling for their rights as workers in trade unions, as housewives in squatter settlements, and as mothers defending human rights against state repression. While undoubtedly influenced by the feminist movements that developed earlier and were largely middle class in origin, these social movements are distinguished by the widespread participation by poor women, who focus their demands on the state in their struggle for basic survival and against repression.

While many studies trace the origin of these movements to the current economic and political crisis in the region, I believe they are indicative of a

AUTHOR'S NOTE: A revised version of this article will appear in Strength in Diversity: Anthropological Perspectives on Women's Collective Action, edited by Constance Sutton and based on a 1985 conference in Mijas, Spain, supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation. I wish to thank Constance Sutton, Teresa Valdes, and other colleagues, as well as the reviewers of Gender & Society for their helpful comments.

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GENDER & SOCIETY, Vol. 4 No. 3, September 1990 354-369
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broader historical trend toward the breakdown of the traditional division between the private and public spheres in Latin America. The private sphere of the family has always been considered the domain of women, but it is increasingly threatened by economic and political forces. Industrialization and urbanization have reduced the role of the family and strengthened the role of the state. There have been marked occupational changes, including an increasing incorporation of women into the labor force. The importance of women as wage earners has been made even more acute by the economic crisis now gripping Latin America, while state services upon which women have come to depend have been reduced or curtailed. Authoritarian military regimes have invaded the very heart of the family by taking the lives of children and other loved ones and subjecting them to terror and state repression.

However, women in Latin America are not just defending the private domain of the family against increasing state and market intervention. They are also demanding incorporation into the state, so that their rights as citizens will be fully recognized. In this sense, these movements not only are symptomatic of the breakdown between the public and private spheres in Latin America but are themselves furthering this process. Women are demanding to be recognized as full participants in the public world and no longer wish to have their interests represented solely by men, whether as heads of household, barrio leaders, politicians, or union officials.

At the same time, as Jelin notes (1987), Latin American women are insisting upon distinct forms of incorporation that reaffirm their identity as women, and particularly as wives and mothers. This form of incorporation differs from the contemporary U.S. and Western European experience, in which women seek a gender-neutral participation in the public sphere. Latin American women, in contrast, think that their roles as wives and mothers legitimize their sense of injustice and outrage, since they are protesting their inability to effectively carry out these roles, as military governments take away their children or the rising cost of living prevents them from feeding their families adequately. In short, they are redefining and transforming their domestic role from one of private nurturance to one of collective, public protest, and in this way challenging the traditional seclusion of women into the private sphere of the family.

The prominence of women in these new social movements challenges Marxist theory in at least two fundamental ways. In the first place, participation in these women's movements is based primarily on gender rather than on class, which Marxists have emphasized as the principal avenue for collective action. Most of the poor women who participate in these movements are conscious of both class and gender exploitation, but they tend to
legitimize their concerns over issues such as human rights or the cost of living primarily in terms of their roles as wives and mothers rather than as members of a subordinated class. This tendency points out the weakness of Marxist theory in addressing the importance of gender, racial, or religious differences within the working class. Second, and as a consequence of their gender emphasis, the primary arena of confrontation for women's social movements in Latin America has not been with capital but with the state, largely in terms of their reproductive role as wives, mothers, and consumers of both state services and private consumer goods. The state has assumed a major role in social reproduction in Latin America, particularly in terms of the provision of basic services, such as health, education, and transportation. At the same time, the need for these services has grown with the rapid increase in urbanization and industrialization in the post-World War II period.

Women are not the only subordinated group to challenge the state, and social movements have arisen as well among youth, peasants, the urban poor, and broader-based human rights groups. Latin American women have also demanded greater participation in labor unions, political parties, and peasant movements that have attempted to make the state more responsive to their needs. They have worked with feminists in establishing day-care centers or in developing ways to cope with sexual violence and other problems. However, this article focuses on Latin American women's movements for human rights and those centering around consumer issues. It explores the factors that contributed to the increased participation of women in social movements in Latin America and why women have chosen the state as the principal arena of confrontation rather than capital, as in workplace-related issues of collective action. It also discusses how successful these social movements have been in bringing about fundamental changes in gender roles in Latin America.

THE BASES OF WOMEN'S SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA

Women's social movements in Latin America are commonly seen as a response to military authoritarian rule and the current economic crisis, both of which create particular hardships for the working class. In an attempt to address the growing debt crisis, many Latin American governments have set up structural adjustment programs designed by the International Monetary Fund. These programs have had a devastating impact on women and children, since they have resulted in increased unemployment and underemployment, a decline in real wages coupled with accelerated inflation, the elimination of state subsidies for basic foods, as well as cuts in government expenditures
for social services, such as health and education (Cornia 1987). The economic crisis has reinforced the need for collective action, particularly among poor urban women who organize primarily on a neighborhood basis.

The urban poor in Latin America have a long history of collective action, as demonstrated by the squatter settlements and other neighborhood actions to improve urban services (e.g., Safa 1974). Women have always played a prominent role in these neighborhood forms of collective action, though their importance has seldom been explicitly acknowledged (Caldeira 1987, 77). At the same time, women commonly resort to informal networks of mutual aid, including extended family and neighbors, to help stretch the family income and resolve community problems. Women also add to the family income through participation in the informal economy as domestic servants, street vendors, industrial homeworkers, and other forms of self-employment. With the economic crisis, these survival strategies have been intensified and institutionalized into formal organizations, such as the comedores populares or ollas comunes (communal kitchens) for food distribution or talleres productivos (workshops) for making garments or doing other types of piece-work. In Santiago, Chile, in 1986, there were 768 organizations dedicated to collective consumption, including consumer cooperatives (Arteaga 1988, 577).

The participation of women in social movements in Latin America is also a product of the changes in women's roles in Latin America in the past two decades. Fertility has been declining steadily in most countries of the region, so that by 1980-85, only three Latin American countries registered average fertility rates in excess of six children per woman, while eight countries had rates of fewer than four children per woman (ECLAC 1988a, 2). Fertility decline was associated with women's higher educational levels and increased labor-force participation, as well as with greater access to contraceptives and the promotion of family-planning programs in several Latin American countries. Women's educational levels rose at a faster rate than men's as part of the enormous expansion in primary and, in particular, secondary education between 1950 and 1970. The number of women in higher education rose from 35 percent to 45 percent from 1970 to 1985 (ECLAC 1988a, 3-4). As a result, the female labor force increased threefold in Latin America between 1950 and 1980, with overall participation rates rising from almost 18 percent to over 26 percent in the same period (ECLAC 1988b, 15). Work-force participation rates for women grew faster than those for men, and while all age groups experienced growth, single women between the ages of 20 and 29 continued to have the highest level of paid employment among women.

Women industrial workers in the Caribbean are now making a major contribution to their household economies, which has resulted in a shift toward more egalitarian conjugal relationships (Safa 1990). In contrast to the
assumptions of some feminist theorists (e.g., Barrett 1980), women in Latin America and the Caribbean seem to have been more successful in negotiating change within the home than at the level of the workplace or the state, where their needs are still not given legitimacy.

The increased educational and occupational levels of Latin American women also contributed to the growth of a feminist movement among middle-class women, who felt their exclusion from the public sphere even more sharply than poor women did. These feminists have devoted much attention to the poor through research and involvement in action projects, such as day care, health services, and centers for raped and battered women. These programs helped to transmit feminist concerns for greater gender equality and have stimulated poor women to challenge their traditional role. The visibility these gender issues received during the U.N. Decade for the Equality of Women through numerous conferences, publications, and projects reinforced their appeal.

Poor women in Latin America also received considerable support from the church (Alvarez 1989, 20-26). Women played a major role in the Catholic church’s organization of ecclesiastic base communities (CEBs) in Brazil and other Latin American countries. The CEBs were part of the church’s efforts to give more support to social justice for the poor in Latin America, emanating from liberation theology, which is now under increasing attack from the Vatican. The CEBs were also an attempt by the church to reinforce grass-roots support, which was weakening with the growth of Protestantism and the church’s elitist stance. Women were organized into mothers’ clubs for the provision of food, sewing classes, and other traditional domestic tasks. Many of women’s collective consumption strategies, such as communal kitchens, have received church support. While based on traditional women’s roles, these clubs provided an additional organizational base from which women could challenge the existing order.

Under military rule, the church often provided the only legitimate umbrella under which women and other groups could organize, since all other forms of mobilization were prohibited. In some Latin American countries, such as Chile and Brazil, women from all class levels, with church support, organized into human rights groups to protest the disappearance or killing of their loved ones, or to seek amnesty for political prisoners or exiles. Catholic doctrine played an important role in these women’s self-definition and quest for legitimacy, and they rarely questioned traditional gender roles. On the contrary, these women often appealed to Catholic symbols of motherhood and the family in legitimizing their protest—values that these authoritarian states also proclaimed but destroyed in the name of national security. Women
themselves were often victims of this repression: They were systematically sought out for violent sexual torture designed to destroy their femininity and human dignity (Bunster-Burotto 1986).

In sum, many factors have contributed to the recent increased participation of women in social movements in Latin America. Women had long been active at the neighborhood level, both through informal networks and more organized forms of collective action, such as squatter settlements and barrio committees. With economic crisis and military rule, these activities took on added importance and also received the support of important groups, such as the Catholic church and nongovernmental agencies. Increased educational and occupational opportunities made women more aware of previous restrictions and more vocal in protesting them. Poor women became more receptive to the largely middle-class feminist movement in Latin America and began to redefine their traditional role, including their relationship to the state.

WOMEN'S SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE STATE

Women's social movements have been described as a new form of doing politics (nueva forma de hacer política) in Latin America, but the impetus for most of these movements has not come from traditional political parties and labor unions in the region. Most women's movements have consciously avoided partisan political connections, in part because of the weakness of these traditional avenues of political action during the period of authoritarian military rule when most of these movements arose. The attempt of these regimes to limit legitimate political action contributed to the politicization of women and other groups who had not been participating actively in the public arena (Jelin 1987).

The other reason women's social movements took place largely outside the realm of traditional political parties is that politics is seen as men's sphere, particularly by poor women. Latin American political parties traditionally have been dominated by men and have been seen as engaged in struggles for power in which the poor are essentially clients. Poor people's loyalty to the party is exchanged for favors, such as paving a road, providing state services, guaranteeing title to land, or getting jobs. The Centros de Madres in Chile, which had begun to acquire some autonomy under the governments of Frei and Allende, were, under the military dictatorship of Pinochet, completely subverted to the needs of the state for the control and co-optation of poor women (Valdes et al. 1989). Although the Centros de Madres were privatized, they were run by a staff of volunteers appointed by the government and
headed by Pinochet's wife, who offered to both rural and urban women such services as training courses that focused largely on improving their domestic role. Political participation was discouraged as "unfeminine", although members were often called upon to display their loyalty to the regime by participating in rallies and other activities. As a result, membership in the Centros de Madres declined drastically from the premilitary period, and new nonofficial women's groups arose, in the areas of both human rights and collective survival strategies, in response to Chile's severe economic crisis and rising rates of unemployment (Arteaga 1988, 573). These nonofficial groups provided the base for the women's movement against Pinochet starting in 1983.

Latin American women appear to have chosen the state as the principal arena of their collective action rather than the workplace as men traditionally have, partly because industrial capitalism transformed the organization and social relations of production and the gendered division of labor. While industrial capitalism initially drew women into the paid labor force in many areas, they were never as fully incorporated as men, who became the chief breadwinners. Women were relegated to a role as supplementary wage earners, while their reproductive role as housewives and consumers assumed new importance. Despite recent significant increases in women's labor-force participation in Latin America, this image of women as supplementary workers persists and helps explain women's comparatively low level of consciousness as workers. Most poor women are relatively recent and less-stable entrants to the formal labor force in Latin America and work primarily to support themselves and their families, obtaining little gratification or self-fulfillment from their jobs. Their primary identification, even when they are working, is as wives and mothers.

The gendered division of labor in the workplace may reinforce gender hierarchies rather than weaken them, by relegating women to inferior jobs. Even in São Paulo, Brazil, where the spectacular industrial boom of the 1970s led to a 181 percent increase in women's employment in manufacturing between 1970 and 1980, women workers were largely concentrated in exclusively women's jobs at the bottom of the job hierarchy (Humphrey 1987). These gender asymmetries in the workplace were reflected in the conflict between male-dominated unions and working women. Souza-Lobo's study (forthcoming) of the metallurgy industry found that although women formed union committees, and some individually active women were integrated into the union structure, women continued to see the union as a men's sphere that remained largely unresponsive to their demands.

As a result of their frustration in working through political parties and labor unions, the recognized channels for collective action, Latin American
women presented their demands to the state directly. One of the principal
demands was for the provision of public services, such as running water,
electricity, and transportation, all of which are sorely lacking in the squatter
settlements in which most of these poor women live. Women's reproductive
role as housewives and mothers has tended to push them into the foreground
as champions of these collective consumption issues, and they have been in
the forefront of protests against the cost of living and for demands for
programs to provide day care, health services, and even food.

One of the most successful and unique collective consumption strategies
to combat the growing economic crisis is the *comedores populares* or
communal kitchens organized by women in Lima, Santiago, and other Latin
American cities. Groups of 15 to 50 households buy and prepare food
collectively for the neighborhood, with each family paying according to the
number of meals requested. Many of these *comedores* sprang up spontane-
ously, while others have been started or at least supported by the church, the
state, and other local and international agencies. UNICEF-Peru in 1985
estimated that there were 300 in Lima (Cormia 1987, 99), while Blondet
(1989) recently estimated their number at 1,000-1,200. Their growing num-
ber is evidence of women's collective response to the increasing severity of
the economic crisis in Peru and other Latin American countries in the past
decade.

In Lima, popular organizations may be the only alternative to acquire
basic services, such as health, education, and food, yet the *asistencialismo*
(welfare dependency) that this policy encourages may be exploited by the
government, political parties, and other agencies (Blondet 1989). Traditional
district and neighborhood organizations are controlled by male leaders, who
attempt to usurp the popular support enjoyed by women's groups for their
own partisan ends. Blondet (1989) recounts, for example, how the popular
women's federation in Villa El Salvador, a large shanty town in Lima, split
and was partially absorbed through pressure brought by the traditional men's
organization. The political fragmentation then occurring among leftist politi-
cal parties in Peru was reproduced within the women's organizations, further
weakening their base of support.

Some feminists have been critical of these women's self-help organiza-
tions because they focus almost exclusively on traditional women's tasks and
do not challenge the traditional division of labor. I would argue that the
collectivization of private tasks, such as food preparation and child care, is
transforming women's roles, even though they are not undertaken as con-
scious challenges to gender subordination. These women never reject their
domestic role but use it as a base to give them strength and legitimacy in their
demands on the state (Alvarez 1989, 20; Caldeira 1987, 97). In moving their
domestic concerns into the public arena, they are redefining the meaning
associated with domesticity to include participation and struggle rather than
obedience and passivity.

Nowhere is their militancy more apparent than in the demands Latin
American women have placed on the state for the recognition of human
rights. One of the best-known cases in contemporary Latin America is Las
Madres del Plaza de Mayo, who played a decisive role in the defeat of the
military dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983. Composed
mostly of older women with no political experience, Las Madres take their
name from the Plaza de Mayo, the principal seat of government power in
Buenos Aires, in which they march every Thursday, wearing a white kerchief
and carrying photographs of their missing children as a symbol of protest.
Although the military government attempted to discredit them as madwomen
or mothers of subversives, they continued to march, publish petitions in the
newspaper, organize trips abroad, and seek cooperation with other human
rights groups and youth movements, with whom they organized larger
demonstrations in 1981 and 1982. The publicity they received from the
foreign media and the support given them by some European countries and
the United States during the Carter administration contributed to their popu-
lar support (Reimers 1989). In order to maintain their legitimacy during the
military regime, they refused any identification with political parties or
feminism. They maintained, “Nosotros no defendemos ideologías, defen-
demos la vida” (“We don’t defend ideologies, we defend life”; Feijoo and
Gogna 1987, 155). Their demands were not political power for themselves,
but that the state guarantee the return of their loved ones and punish the
military who had violated the sanctity of the home and family. These
demands remain largely unfulfilled. Though the top military were prose-
cuted, most officers were granted amnesty, and even some of those impris-
oned were later released.

After the end of military rule, Las Madres were weakened by internal
struggles that reflected a split between those who wished to remain aloof
from partisan politics and those who sought alliances with political parties,
chiefly the Peronists, to achieve their goals. Although women’s human rights
groups similar to Las Madres del Plaza de Mayo have arisen in Uruguay,
Chile, Brazil, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and other Latin American
countries subject to military rule, the decline in popular support for Las
Madres reflects the difficulty women’s social movements have in converting
THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL
OF WOMEN'S SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA

Most participation by women in social movements arises out of women's immediate perceived needs and experiences, or out of what Molyneux (1986) terms women's "practical gender interests." Molyneux claims these practical gender interests do not challenge gender subordination directly, whereas strategic gender interests question or transform the division of labor. As we have seen, women's social movements are often based on their roles as wives and mothers and may reinforce or defend women's domestic role. However, as these practical gender interests are collectivized and politicized, they may also lead to a greater consciousness of gender subordination and the transformation of practical into strategic gender interests.

Although neither women's movements for human rights nor collective consumption were designed as challenges to gender subordination, participation in these movements has apparently led to greater self-esteem and recognition by women of their rights, as the following statement by a Brazilian woman, leader of a neighborhood organization, underlines:

Within the Women's Movement, as a woman, I discovered myself, as a person, as a human being. I had not discovered that the woman . . . always was oppressed. But it never came to my mind that the woman was oppressed, although she had rights. The woman had to obey because she was a woman . . . . It was in the Women's Movement that I came to identify myself as a woman, and to understand the rights I have as a woman, from which I have knowledge to pass on as well to other companions. (Caldeira 1987, 95-96, my translation)

As this statement exemplifies, women's participation in social movements has produced changes in Latin American women's self-definition. Such changes are the best guarantee that these women will resist any attempt to reestablish the old order and will continue to press for their rights. They imply a redefinition of women's roles from a purely domestic image as guardians of the private sphere into equal participants as citizens in a democratic state. However, this redefinition must occur not only in the minds of women themselves but in the society at large, so that women are no longer treated as supplementary wage earners and pawns in the political process. To achieve such goals, there must be unity within the women's movement, across class, ethnic, and ideological lines; and women must also gain support from other groups in the society, such as political parties and labor unions, whom we have seen often try to utilize women's movements for their own ends.

A glaring example of co-optation comes from an earlier period in Bolivia, when women's committees within the party then in power and the house-
wives' committee of the miners' union were used for partisan politics, and neither the party nor the union ever addressed demands specific to women (Ardaya 1986). Neither of these women's committees had sought autonomy, since they saw themselves serving class rather than gender interests.

Tension between the primacy of class and gender interests in women's organizations throughout Latin America produces differences between women who are feminists and those who are políticas (party militants of the left) (Kirkwood 1986, 196). While feminists view politics as a way of furthering their own interests, políticas subordinate women's needs to a political program in the hope of their future incorporation. Those who profess to uphold both feminist and partisan political goals are said to be practicing doble militancia or double militancy.

This tension between feminists and políticas has become more apparent with the end of military rule in Latin America and the reemergence of political parties, which reactivate divisions within the women's movement formerly united in the opposition. The women's movement in Chile suffered less partisan fragmentation than other social sectors opposing the military dictatorship and was an important force in the plebiscite to oust General Pinochet. A group of 12 women's organizations were able to draft the Demands of Women for Democracy, which were presented to the opposition shortly before the plebiscite, and which included the constitutional guarantee of equality between men and women; the reform of civil, penal, and labor legislation that discriminates against women; and an affirmative action policy to reserve 30 percent of government posts for women. However, although the military and the opposition political parties have recognized the importance of women's electoral support, few have given women access to power (Valenzuela 1989). Since the newly elected democratic government in Chile has only recently taken power, it is too early at this writing to see whether women's demands will be implemented, but the small number of women elected or appointed to government office does not augur well for the future.

The Brazilian liberal, democratic state that supplanted military rule has been more successful in addressing women's needs and electing women to public office, including 26 women in the 1986 congressional elections (Alvarez 1989, 58). The initial impetus given by the church through the development of base communities (CEBs) and by feminist groups for the women's movement was critical in building a wider base of support, even though these groups remain divided on some issues, such as family planning. Women also gained greater representation within the state through the government-appointed Council on the Status of Women in São Paulo, which
was subsequently established in 23 other states and municipalities, and through the National Council on Women’s Rights, which played a critical role in developing women’s proposals for the new Brazilian constitution. Pressure put on the council, particularly in São Paulo, by an active grass-roots constituency operating outside the state has kept it responsive to women’s needs (Alvarez 1989, 53). However, in Brazil as in Chile, the increased importance of elections rekindled old political divisions between rival political parties formerly united in the opposition. The recent election of a conservative president and the continuing economic crisis weakens the possibility of implementing women’s demands, because of budgetary constraints and because of the election and appointment of women with less identification with women’s interests.

Women’s organizations under socialism have been accused of being imposed from above and of being instruments of state policy. Molyneux (1986) claims that although women’s emancipation is officially recognized and supported by the socialist state, it is contained within defined limits. Both Cuba and Nicaragua have been eminently successful in the incorporation of women into the labor force, which is considered a key to women’s emancipation, and have supported working women with education and training programs, day-care centers, ample maternity leaves, and other measures. Women’s employment has helped the state to meet its labor needs but has also been costly because of the support services women require, which make women considerably more expensive to employ than men (Safa 1989). Therefore, it is hard to argue, as some critics have, that socialist states have simply taken advantage of women’s labor power.

Perhaps the most controversial issue for socialist feminists is continued state support of the family, embodied in legal reforms such as the Family Code in Cuba and the Provision Law in Nicaragua. While both reforms aim at greater sharing of responsibility in the household and financial support for women and children, they are also attempts by the state to make the family responsible for needs the state at present cannot meet, given its limited resources (Molyneux 1989). Thus, the goal of these socialist states is to modify the family, to make it more egalitarian rather than to do away with it. This does not differ radically from the goal of most women’s social movements in capitalist Latin American countries.

The tenacity of the family in Latin American socialist or capitalist societies derives not only from the needs of the state, or Catholic doctrine, but from the strong identification and emotional gratification women feel in their roles as wives and especially mothers (Safa 1990). The family fulfills their emotional needs for giving and receiving affection, needs that men tend to
deny or undervalue. Women continue to value the family because their role within it is never questioned, while they continue to seek legitimacy in the public sphere. As Jaquette (1989, 193) notes, “The feminist perception of the family as an arena of conflict between men and women directly contradicts how women in urban poor neighborhoods understand and justify their politicization—for the family.” The strong attachment to the family may be one reason why the distinction between the public and private spheres is still more prevalent in Latin America than in more advanced industrial countries like the United States.

CONCLUSION

What is the future of women’s social movements in Latin America? Are we to conclude with Jelin (1987) that Latin American women participate more frequently in short-term, sporadic protest movements than in long-term, formalized institutional settings? Or does women’s political mobilization represent part of a progressive longer-term trend that may suffer setbacks but not total eclipse?

I would argue for the latter perspective. Latin American women have been too incorporated into the public sphere to retreat back into the private domestic sphere. They have become increasingly important members of the labor force and contributors to the household economy; they have organized social movements for human rights and social welfare; and they are trying to voice their demands in labor unions and political parties. Even if these activities are not undertaken as conscious challenges to gender subordination, they show that women have broken out of the domestic sphere and that gender roles are changing. Latin American women’s emergence into the public sphere is both cause and effect of profound cultural changes in the private sphere, in which women are demanding more “democracy in the home” as well as in the state. These changes in Latin American women’s self-definition are most likely to endure and to give women the confidence to continue bringing pressure on public authorities for greater recognition of women’s rights.

Despite the political and economic problems Latin American countries are facing in the transition to democracy, important gains in women’s rights have been made as a result of these social movements. The new Brazilian constitution adopted in 1988 guarantees women equality before the law, including right to property ownership, equal rights in marriage, maternity leave, and the prohibition of salary differences based on sex, age, or civil
status (*Debate Sindical* 1989, 24). Argentina has legalized divorce and modified *patria potestad* to give women joint custody of children and equality in other family matters (Jaquette 1989, 199-200). Despite concerted efforts by the Pinochet dictatorship to court women’s support in the 1988 plebiscite, 52 percent of Chilean women rejected the continuation in power of the military government, reflecting in part the effectiveness of opposition women’s groups. Whether current governments in power in these countries will continue to support women’s needs depends on the importance of their electoral support and on the strength and unity of the women’s movement in each country.

When women’s demands are confined to domestic issues like child care, communal kitchens, or even human rights, they pose less of a threat than when women attempt to gain leverage in men’s power structures, such as political parties or labor unions. In short, as women move away from practical to strategic gender interests, they are likely to encounter more opposition on both gender and class lines from established interest groups who are unwilling to grant them the same legitimacy as men in the public arena.

Latin American women are attempting to establish a new relationship to the state, one based not on subordination, control, and dependency but on rights, autonomy, and equality (Valdes and Weinstein 1989). They have passed beyond the stage in which women’s needs were largely invisible and ignored, to where women are now heard, even if some may be co-opted for partisan political ends. By politicizing the private sphere, women have redefined rather than rejected their domestic role and extended the struggle against the state beyond the workplace into the home and community. This shift does not invalidate the Marxist theory of class struggle but calls for its reinterpretation to accommodate these new political voices. As Kirkwood (1986, 65) reminds us, the issue is not simply one of women’s incorporation into a male-defined world but of transforming this world to do away with the hierarchies of class, gender, race, and ethnicity that have so long subordinated much of the Latin American population, men as well as women.

**NOTES**

1. While the concept of public-private spheres has been criticized by many feminists and has been largely replaced by the notion of production and reproduction, it has validity for Latin America, the Caribbean, and Mediterranean Europe, where it has been widely used in the study of gender roles. While the reasons for its usefulness for this region lie beyond the scope of this article, it should be noted that I am using the concept of public-private spheres as poles of a
continuum rather than as a dichotomy between mutually exclusive categories (cf. Tiano 1988, 40). It is this fluidity that makes possible the domination of the private by the public sphere.

2. The importance of women’s labor-force participation in arousing political consciousness can be seen in a study conducted two months prior to the plebiscite, according to which a greater percentage of housewives supported Pinochet than working women (Valenzuela 1989).

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