

Article

“The Revolution Will Be Feminist—Or It Won’t Be a Revolution”: Feminist Response to Inequality in Chile

Sarah Perry * and Silvia Borzutzky

Heinz College, Carnegie Mellon University, USA

* Corresponding author (slperry@alumni.andrew.cmu.edu)

Submitted: 2 August 2021 | Accepted: 12 October 2021 | Published: 25 January 2022

Abstract

This article argues that gender inequality, which in Chile is superimposed on a societal and economic structure characterized by deep inequalities that cut across every aspect of society, has been sustained by a political and legal system that has severely limited women’s access to economic power and equality. The neoliberal policies implemented by the Pinochet dictatorship and maintained by the democratically elected regimes after 1990—generally characterized as an elitist democracy—have sustained this pattern of inequality. We argue that this gender inequality gave urgency to the regeneration and evolution of Chile’s feminist movement and drove the movement to develop claims against “the precarity of life,” uniting Chileans in a common struggle, contributing to the October 2019 “social explosion” and now the writing of a new constitution. We believe the current climate is rooted in the social mobilization that was the response to Chile’s economic and political system, and the feminist movement’s ability to put the rights of women at the forefront of the political and socio-economic agenda. In conclusion, we reevaluate the current climate to consider what a significant feminist presence means and how women can be effectively included and benefit from Chile’s economy and influence its progress.

Keywords

Chile; democracy; feminism; gender inequality; inequality; social movements

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Recent Trends in Inequality and Exclusion in Latin America” edited by Maria Amparo Cruz Saco (Connecticut College / Universidad del Pacífico).

© 2022 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

On July 4, 2021, nearly two years after Chile’s 2019 *estallido social*, or “social explosion,” Elisa Loncón, a Mapuche activist and scholar, was elected president of the Constitutional Convention. The vote was the culmination of, first, a national plebiscite to determine whether to re-write Chile’s dictator-era Constitution (an overwhelming 78% voted “yes”) and, next, elections for the 155-member Constitutional Convention. The latter was the first institution to reach complete gender parity (78 men and 77 women) and is one of the country’s most representative ever, with a majority of seats going to independent and left-wing candidates (Ríos Tobar, 2021). The significance of this level of inclusion was clear in Loncón’s inaugural speech. She stated that this is an

opportunity to *refundar* (reestablish) Chile, to build a plurinational country that, among other things, puts the rights of women at the center, builds a new relationship between all people, and, through a transparent process, will strengthen participation and democracy (Puertas Caveró, 2021).

The purpose of this article is to examine how Chile’s democratic deficit and enduring inequality, particularly the gender inequality that is superimposed on Chile’s general inequality, gave urgency to the evolution of Chile’s feminist movement. We argue that this urgency empowered the feminist movement to make claims that both centered gender issues and united Chileans into a common struggle. Through the articulation of this struggle and collaboration with other movements, feminists built power and, ultimately, influenced the mobilization

that led to the 2019 social explosion and now to the writing of a new constitution. We believe the current climate is rooted in the social mobilization that was a response to Chile's economic and political system and the feminist movement's ability to bring the rights of women to the forefront of the conversation, giving a name to "the precarity of life" that many Chileans, regardless of gender, experience.

The second section of the article provides context for Chile's democratic deficit, social movements' demands for political participation, and the feminist movement's demands against the precarity of life. The third section provides an overview of general inequality in Chile, starting with the Pinochet dictatorship and the neoliberal economic model, and providing an overview of economic and social policies under different presidents from 1990 until 2019. This section also addresses the lack of transformative power attributed to Chile's "democracy of elites." The fourth section addresses gender-based inequality and the laws and culture that uphold it. In the fifth section, we give an overview of the development of Chile's feminist movement, with particular attention to its regeneration in recent years and its ability to frame grievances that were both relevant to women and the broader Chilean society. In the conclusion, we revisit the current climate to consider what a significant feminist presence means and how women can be effectively included in Chile's economy and influence its progress.

1.1. A Note on Methodology

Our argument is rooted in the belief that social mobilization in Chile exists in its current form due to what Norris (2011) calls a "democratic deficit" that has necessitated a re-emergence of social movements. It is from this understanding we explore how in recent years the feminist movement has driven mobilization against inequality. To construct our article's argument, we have done a detailed review of the political science literature regarding Chilean politics and social movements. Additionally, we compiled quantitative and qualitative secondary data, including interviews, news articles, surveys, and global reports, to answer four main questions:

1. What inequality exists in Chile?
2. Why does this inequality exist?
3. What are the most important feminist claims?
4. How has the construction of these claims by the feminist movement advanced social mobilization in Chile?

Chilean feminists have constructed a process and framework through which claims are articulated and power is built. Because of this, we paid particular attention to what current feminist leaders themselves have to say about the theoretical and practical foundation for their claims, the process of developing these claims, and how the claims were used to engage movements more

broadly. We believe that viewing the movement through its framework, which is rooted in decades of feminist action and an intersectional perspective, allows for the best understanding of its influence.

2. Chile's Democratic Deficit, Participation, and Framing

Following Pippa Norris, we believe that Chile today suffers from a "democratic deficit" and that this deficit explains the appearance, development, and activity of several social movements which have demanded changes in Chile's socioeconomic and political system. According to Norris (2011, p. 5), the democratic deficit "arises from some combination of growing public expectations, negative news, and/or failing government performance." The democratic deficit is rooted in several factors including societal changes and dissatisfaction with the government's institutions and policy performance (Norris, 2011, p. 7). The failure of democracy cannot be traced to one single element but rather derives from complex socio-political processes driven by unsatisfied expectations, combined to produce a crisis of legitimacy. While dissatisfaction with policies does not always lead to social movements' actions, when it does, the participants are questioning the very legitimacy of the government (Lipset, 1983, p. 64; Norris, 2011, p. 17). We posit that this is what has happened in Chile since the beginning of the 21st century.

While these grievances might explain the proximate reasons for the social explosion of October 2019, it is important to also focus on the relatively more distant causes. Rhodes-Purdy (2017) argues that concerns with participation and not with representation or economic performance drive citizens' attitudes toward the state and that the presence of the binomial electoral system and elite preference for negotiations versus participation have drastically limited the political role of citizens. In Chile, the social explosion was a result, on the one hand, of dissatisfaction with the economic model and the inequality it supports and, on the other, as shown by Rhodes-Purdy (2017, pp. 1–31, 180–222), the lack of faith in parties' willingness to allow citizen participation.

The democratic deficit and dissatisfaction with the lack of channels for political participation can explain the re-emergence and evolution of Chile's social movements; but how do movements bring about change, and what has made Chile's feminist movement particularly impactful? To move from awareness to action, movements must be able to articulate claims that engage a critical mass of people. By creating a shared definition of "who is affected and responsible for the injustices and how to fight and discourage them" (Mårtensson, 2018, p. 28), feminists have allowed people "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" their personal and shared experiences (Goffman, 1974, p. 21).

The nature of feminist movements allows them to frame issues from a gender perspective and connect

them to broader struggles. Following Franceschet (2005, p. 139), women's movements "organize around issues important to women and their communities and seek to raise public awareness about these issues." Franceschet (2005, p. 139) also writes that through this process, many individuals:

Become more aware of the gendered sources of their problems, but also how class and race inequalities are implicated in political and social power structures. Through this process, groups that form to address particular problems...may eventually forge alliances with other groups, creating broader struggles for social change.

Alondra Carillo, notable member of the Coordinadora Feminista 8M (CF8M) and elected member of the Constitutional Convention, offers a contemporary perspective: "Feminism's rejection of the existing order puts the lives of women and sexual dissidents at the forefront as a political issue, and, in that sense, too, it laid the groundwork for political and social revolt" (as cited in Anderson, 2021). Regarding the *estallido* in 2019, she notes it was not spontaneous but instead, rooted in struggles that occurred over many years across social sectors and feminism brought "the capacity to name something that we all had in common" (Anderson, 2021).

In the case of Chile's feminist movement, naming the "precarity of life" created a unifying message and common understanding of the inequality people in Chile face. This precarity is the product of a neoliberal economic system combined with the violence of patriarchy, which together create insecure social and economic conditions (Green Rioja, 2021). Feminist demands are *against* the precarity of life and the ways that people living under capitalism and patriarchy experience violence. While the new wave of Chilean feminists maintains the fight against sexual violence and femicide, they also recognize that, to gain equality, there must be "feminist politics in every area of society: work, school, politics and familial life" (Green Rioja, 2021, p. 6).

3. Inequality: A Brief History

Despite the country's democratic structure and the developmentalist policies pursued between the 1930s and the early 1970s, Chile suffered from profound economic inequality and a structured class system. These profound inequalities were at times reduced because of favorable domestic policies or external markets, but they never disappeared. As noted by Rodríguez Weber (2017), while Spanish colonization created profoundly unequal societies in Latin America, in the case of Chile inequality can also be linked to the development process that began in the mid-19th century.

While Rodríguez Weber's careful historical analysis effectively links the fluctuations in inequality to changes in the internal and external markets, the Gini coefficient

(the standard measurement of inequality; see Figure 1) was always high and the expansion of state functions during the mid-20th century and the accompanying policies for import substitution industrialization (ISI) did not alter this process. It is noteworthy that we see declines in inequality during the mid-1960s and early 1970s (during the Frei and Allende administrations) because of their redistributive and social policies. However, inequality increased again during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–1989) and decreased somewhat after the transition to democracy.

3.1. The Pinochet Dictatorship: The Impact of Neoliberalism

Due to General Pinochet's violent military coup in September of 1973 and the actions carried out by his government in the next 16 years, several thousand people were killed or disappeared and tens of thousands were tortured; Chile's political institutions were destroyed, and the political and economic role of the Chilean state and the private economic actors were totally transformed. In the aftermath of the coup, Congress was closed, political parties were either suspended or destroyed, unions and union members were destroyed, individual rights and the free press disappeared, and power was concentrated in the hands of General Pinochet and the commanders in chief of the other branches of the Armed Forces. Through the 1980 Constitution, Pinochet constructed the bases for an authoritarian state that lasted a total of 16 years and limited democracy for at least another twelve years (Constable & Valenzuela, 1993).

The dictatorship's economic policies were designed and implemented by the "Chicago Boys" economists. The Chicago-inspired policies embedded in the 1980 Constitution, entailed a true economic revolution as they reduced the regulatory, investment, and distributive functions of the state and opened the entire economy to external competition. The Chicago policies led to the privatization of state-owned properties and the privatization of social policies, including social security and education, as well as the partial privatization of health and the deregulation of the labor market.

The combined effect of these policies had a large impact on the economy and wages. By 1975, the implementation of the market policies had contracted GDP by 12.9%, followed by yet another economic recession in 1982 that accounted for a 14.5% reduction in GDP. By 1983, the unemployment rate reached 23.9% and real wages were 14% below their 1970 level (Banco Central de Chile, 1983, p. 24; García & Wells, 1983). At the other end of the economic spectrum, a handful of economic groups or conglomerates gained enormous fortunes from the privatization process and the reallocation of credit and other resources (Dahse, 1979, pp. 188–193). The result was an impoverished population and increases in inequality.

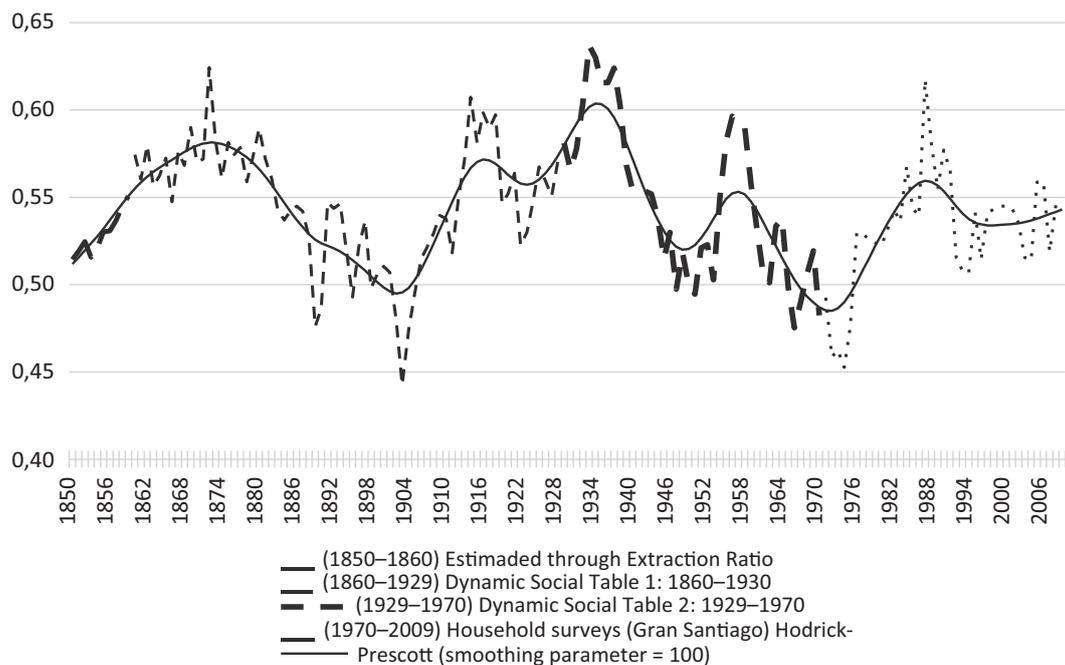


Figure 1. Gini coefficient 1850–2009. Source: Rodríguez Weber (2017, p. 8).

The legacy of the Pinochet regime was one of massive human rights abuses, poverty, and huge economic inequality. When President Aylwin took office in 1989 he encountered a set of decimated social policies. Spending on health was 40% of its 1974 level and 35% below the 1981 level; educational spending was 6% below the 1974 level and 25% of the 1981 level. Most dramatic was the poverty data which showed that 45% of the population were below the poverty level and 27% were extremely poor. The percentage of people below the poverty line in 1970 was 17% and wages in 1989 were still 29% below the 1981 level (United Nations, 1998).

3.2. Economic and Social Policies 1990–2019: Democracy, Neoliberalism, and Inequality

The post-dictatorship political and economic system was built based on a continuation of the neoliberal model and a political system that has become known as an elitist democracy. We will first provide a brief analysis of the overall economic structure and its impact on inequality, and then we will analyze the political structure from which those policies originated.

The end of the Pinochet regime did not produce any major transformations in Chile’s political economy because the economic model was and still is an integral part of the 1980 Constitution. Chile’s economic landscape in 1990 was defined by high rates of growth and profound inequities as the economy was growing at an average of 7.4%, inflation was about 18%, the unemployment rate was 8.8%, and real wages were growing at about 2.5% per year. Additionally, social spending had suffered major contractions and 45.1% of the population was living below the poverty (United Nations, 1998).

The challenge for the democratically elected administrations was to maintain the market model while improving social conditions.

Chile was also exhibiting a profoundly skewed income distribution. By 1996, the highest 20% of the population captured 56.7% of the income, while the lowest 20% received only 4.1% of the income. Nevertheless, while the Concertación—new governing coalition—socioeconomic policies led to massive poverty reductions, the same policies did not produce a substantial reduction in inequality. At the beginning of the 21st century, Chile’s Gini coefficient of 0.58 was the third highest in Latin America and twelfth highest in the world. By 2006, the Gini coefficient was still 0.56 (Meller Commission, 2008) and by 2017, according to data from the World Bank (n.d.), it had declined to 0.46.

It is noteworthy that there are very large income disparities not only between the different income quintiles but also between women and men and between urban and rural areas, with urban income at the time being 87% higher than rural income. As in other Latin American countries, the income disparities increased during the years of high economic growth. Marcel and Solimano (1994, p. 219) reported that the top 20% captured 61.5% of the income while the lowest 20% received 3.4%. Between 2011 and 2017, the income of the top 20% remained fairly stable at about 51–52% of total income (Statista, 2021a). Simultaneously, the bottom 20% received 5.7% of the income (World Bank, 2017).

3.3. Democracia de Acuerdos

Underpinning the economic system briefly described above, there was a new form of democratic engagement

known as the *democracia de acuerdos* (“democracy of agreements”; Siavelis, 2016). In this system, political leaders sought to build consensus, including with Congress members coming directly from Pinochet’s regime. This *democracia de acuerdos* was rooted in the very nature of the transition to democracy, steered by the 1980 Constitution which constrained the ability of elected governments to move away from the market economic policies. Thus, political and socioeconomic reforms were partial at best as they resulted from multiple agreements both within the governing coalition and with the right-wing opposition that held veto power over the system. While this type of elitist democracy gave the country political stability, its legitimacy declined as more and more people felt excluded from accessing a decent education and pension, or good health care among other things.

Despite his Socialist background, President Lagos (2000–2006) did not develop policies geared to reduce inequality. Much to the contrary, his pro-market tax and labor policies explain why inequality remained the same. President Michele Bachelet (2006–2010), also a socialist, was deeply concerned with inequality and argued for a pro-equality agenda as a necessary condition for development and social cohesion. Following Bachelet at a 2005 seminar on inequality, the inequality agenda would be founded in a new social dialogue involving workers and labor reforms, students and teachers, and educational reform, as well as a pension reform, pro-children, and pro-women policies. However, her ability to implement a pro-equity agenda was again limited by the administration’s commitment to the market model and the veto power that the right-wing coalition had on legislation. Nonetheless, President Bachelet obtained the passage of an electoral reform which, among other things, expanded women’s political participation. Limited legalization of abortion was also approved by Congress (Londoño, 2018).

During the first Piñera administration (2010–2014), the discussion was centered on the question of the *salario ético* (“ethical salary”). Following the recommendation of the Meller Commission, as well as civil and religious leaders, the first Piñera administration implemented the first component of an ethical salary program in March 2011. The policy involved a subsidy to the poorest economic groups conditioned to the fulfilment of certain commitments and the promotion of female employment and employment in general. A study on the impact of these policies shows a positive effect on poverty and inequality reduction, but a negative effect on labor participation (Cabezas & Acero, 2011).

During President Piñera’s second administration (2018–2022), the focus was initially on an adequate sufficient salary and yet another attempt to reform the pension system. To deal with the insufficiency of the minimum salary, the Chilean Congress approved a 3.6% increase of the minimum in September of 2018. However, the minimum salary as of January 2021 is about US\$440 for those between the ages of 18 and 65 and lower

for those under and above those ages (Statista, 2021b). The insufficiency of these reforms, in addition to the insufficiency of pensions, the high cost of health care and education, and the need for a new constitution and an end of neoliberalism led to the massive demonstrations of October 2019 (Borzutzky & Perry, 2021). While the pandemic stopped some of the demonstrations and massive acts of defiance, it also laid bare both Chile’s enormous inequities and the inability of the Piñera administration to deal with these challenges.

In brief, Chile’s large historical inequalities briefly reversed by the more socially minded policies of the Frei and Allende administrations, increased dramatically during the dictatorship. The coexistence of democratically elected government, the neoliberal model, and an elitist approach to governance between 1990 and 2019 explains reductions in poverty and relative reductions in inequality, which have had an even more pronounced impact on women in Chile.

4. Gender Inequality

4.1. The Constitution and Gender Inequality

Superimposed onto Chile’s general inequality is a clear gender inequality that has both cultural, economic, and political roots. From a political/legal standpoint gender inequality was consecrated in the dictatorship’s 1980 Constitution because as opposed to other 20th century constitutions, this one does not promote gender equality or address gender discrimination. Moreover, to the extent that the constitution gave the political right a veto power, right-wing parties could block policy proposals geared to create a more equal situation for women. Additionally, as noted by Lambert and Scribner (2021, p. 225), the 1980 Constitution does not support gender-based litigation geared to protect their rights and, more often than not, women are reluctant to use the courts to defend their rights. The lack of constitutional protections has had a cascading effect resulting in a lack of protection against gender-based violence and limited legal protections against sexual harassment in the workplace because there is no recognition of a women’s right to work without the threat of violence. Lambert and Scribner (2021, p. 230) also note that here and in other areas of “pro-women laws” the emphasis is on motherhood and family and not on gender rights. While legislation enacted in 2005 increased penalties for the perpetrators of domestic violence as well as more protective measures including shelters and data collection, the application of the laws remain problematic as litigants need to ground their judicial cases, not on this law, but international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) or the Interamerican Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women (Lambert & Scribner, 2021, pp. 228–229).

Lastly, in the area of sexual and reproductive health, Chile lags behind its peers in Latin America and Europe, especially in regard to abortion. Abortion was limited to saving the life of the mother between 1931 and 1989. As most other abortions were illegally performed in back alleys, many ended in hospitals with uterine infections which were often lethal. Data provided by the Gutmacher Institute notes that “the clandestine nature of abortion in Chile makes all aspects of the procedure difficult to research” (Prada, 2016, p. 1). The only national study, conducted in 1990, estimated that women in Chile had approximately 160,000 induced abortions annually, for a rate of 45 per 1,000 women aged 15–49. More recent—but less substantiated—estimates cited in the media have ranged from 60,000 to 300,000 abortions each year. “However, it is widely agreed that Chilean women who resort to unsafe pregnancy terminations, and subsequently seek treatment for complications, tend to come from the country’s more disadvantaged groups” (Prada, 2016, p. 1).

The situation got considerably worse in 1989 when the dictatorship enacted regulations criminalizing all forms of abortion. Issues such as sterilization, the morning after pill, and attempts to expand women’s rights in this area during President Bachelet’s second administration (2014–2018) were limited again by the 1980 Constitution and the power of the Catholic Church and the political right. After lengthy discussions a family planning law that allowed, among other things, the provision of emergency contraception was nullified by the Constitutional Court in 2008 (Castellanos, 2009). Small progress was made in 2017 as new legislation decriminalized abortion in cases when the life of the mother was at risk, there were lethal fetal abnormalities, and in cases of rape (Ministerio de Salud, 2017).

4.2. The Gender Wage Gap and Limited Economic Participation

Among the many dimensions of gender inequality present in Chile, this section of the article will focus on issues of economic inequality. A 2017 UNDP report notes that:

Economic inequality is not limited to income, access to capital or jobs, but also includes education, political power and the respect and dignity with which people are treated. This affects more women, the rural population and the population in the less developed regions of the country, the native population and other minorities.

We believe that Chile’s gender economic inequality is rooted both in culture and the law. From a legal standpoint, one of the most critical factors impeding economic equality is the conjugal society regime that regulates married women’s access to property and the administration of income:

This default marital property regime automatically makes the husband the head of the household and administrator of marital property. This has a direct impact on women’s financial inclusion and can deter their access to credit, personal wealth, and economic independence. Such a system exists only in nine economies around the world: seven in Sub-Saharan Africa, one in East Asia and the Pacific and one in Latin America and the Caribbean, Chile. (Santagostino Recavarren & Arekapudi, 2020)

This anachronism makes married women in Chile dependent on their husbands and unable to administer their own properties unless there is a prenuptial agreement, which is rare.

In the 2019 UNDP Gender Inequality Index, Chile ranked 55 (UNDP, 2020). The index also shows that 77.8% of women have some secondary education (men 81.1%) and that women’s labor force participation is among the lowest in OECD countries at 51.8% (men 74%). It is important to note that data from the World Bank (2021) show an even lower rate of participation at 44.6%. This is lower than Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, Uruguay, and Colombia, among others (World Bank, 2021).

As for the wage gap, Reyes Campos has studied its evolution in Chile using pre-1960 social security data and has documented that, from 1939 to 1968, although the gender wage gap diminished over time, the ratio of women’s wages to male wages only increased 14 percentage points from 1939 to 1968 (Reyes Campos, 2016). The evidence points towards discrimination (Camou & Maubrigades, 2017). Camou and Maubrigades (2017) find that contrary to what some expected, the gender gap widens gradually as years of schooling rise and that countries that combine high wages with the highest average years of schooling are also the most resistant to this egalitarian trend.

Writing for the World Bank, Santagostino Recavarren and Arekapudi (2020) note that Chile still scores the lowest among OECD high-income economies in terms of women’s participation in the economy due to several reasons, including sexual harassment in the workplace (there are no criminal penalties for perpetrators or civil remedies for victim), a law that does not mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value, or prohibit discrimination based on gender in access to credit, and the persistence of the conjugal society. Business Insider’s international ranking of wage inequality places Chile as the fourth most unequal country, with a wage gap of 21.1%, higher than Mexico (Delfino, 2018). It is interesting to note that despite legal improvements enacted by the Bachelet administration in 2009, in practice the law has not had a big impact on wages. As noted by Jarroud (2012) “it is not discriminatory to pay a male employee more if he proves to be more suitable, qualified or responsible than his female counterparts.”

Wage inequality has translated into pension inequality given the private nature of the system established

in 1980. Data indicates that because women earn less, retire earlier, and must take time off from work to have and raise children and care for their families, their pensions are significantly lower than those of men. To augment women's pensions and reduce gender inequality, the 2008 reform mandates 18 months of state contributions per child (the state contribution is based on a minimum salary). Although the money is not deposited into the account until the woman turns 65, the contribution begins to generate interest from the moment the child is born (Comisión Asesora Presidencial sobre el Sistema de Pensiones, 2015, pp. 118–120).

Despite this very important reform, the value of female pensions has not improved dramatically. The Bravo Commission created by President Bachelet to improve the pension system looked at the replacement rates of pensions and found that 50% of those who retired between 2007 and 2014 (including those who receive the solidarity pension), received monthly benefits of about US\$150, or about 40% of the minimum wage. Additionally, during the same period, women received pensions that were about half of those received by their male counterparts. They also found that half of pensioners received benefits that were at most equal to 34% of their last ten years of wages. Those receiving the supplemental solidarity benefit (APS) received a median benefit of \$84.298 (or about US\$105) for women and \$107.073 (about US\$133) for men (Bertranou, 2016).

5. Chile's New Wave of Feminists

Given the state of inequality in Chile, the conditions of inequality faced by women and gender minorities, and the limited opportunities for meaningful democratic participation, it is not surprising there has been a re-emergence of Chile's feminist movement. It is broadly acknowledged that there was a decline in all social movements and mass mobilization in Chile after the end of the Pinochet dictatorship (Franceschet, 2005, p. 141). The feminist movement was no exception, and it became a divided and overlooked voice in the political debate (Forstenzer, 2017). However, in recent years, the movement contributed to the re-politicization of inequality (Roberts, 2016), regained visibility, and helped unite Chileans in a common struggle.

In this section, we address Chile's new wave of feminism and its impact in three parts. To begin, we provide context for the development of the feminist movement from the post-transition years to the present, with attention to grassroots feminist action and the political development of feminists within other social movements. Next, we address how the feminist movement's most important claims, including institutional changes to increase social protection and inclusion of diverse feminist interests to eliminate inequity within family and community spheres, work against the precarity of life, and offer opportunities for change inside and outside of political institutions. Finally, we connect feminist claims and

coalition building to the 2019 social explosion and Chile's current political moment.

5.1. *The Evolution of Chile's Feminist Movement*

Before the transition to democracy, Chile's feminist movement was "a vibrant and plural social movement committed to bringing Pinochet's military dictatorship down alongside other social movements" (Forstenzer, 2017, p. 162). After the transition, the movement became fragmented and many feminists, particularly at the grassroots level, were made largely invisible. Meanwhile, feminists that could adopt the language and skills of the state, those that could and chose to function within formal political channels, were legitimized and given the power to be "Feminists reframing feminist claims to make them suitable for public policy" (Forstenzer, 2017, p. 171). Grassroots activists who chose not to adapt institutional tactics, or those whose claims were perceived as too disruptive, were marginalized and excluded from decision-making and funding access.

In the early 2000s, some feminist claims became part of the political agenda. There were advances in women's rights including poverty reduction, a reduction in maternal mortality rates, and strengthening of laws that dealt with gendered violence, as well as support for the victims of such violence (Ríos Tobar, 2008). The first female president, Michele Bachelet, was elected in 2006. Her administration focused on issues of inequality driven by the pension, education, and healthcare systems. While not explicitly focused on women's and gender-based rights, these policies disproportionately affect women as evidenced by smaller and insufficient pensions compared to male counterparts (Borzutzky, 2019). Reforms made by the Bachelet administration had the potential to improve women's access and outcomes as she increased the number of women in political positions and pushed abortion rights legislation (Ríos Tobar, 2008).

Of course, there were limitations to the progress achieved through political institutions. First, Chile's elite democracy and dictatorship-era constitution meant that major progress was largely impossible. Second, while the government and professionalized women's organizations collaborated to develop a policy agenda, many voices were left out of the political process. Forstenzer (2017, p. 171) notes that, most often, this exclusion impacted rural Mapuche women the most. State feminists, those articulating claims within institutions, viewed poor, rural, and indigenous women only as social policy recipients and not collaborators.

However, the story of autonomous feminists is not one of women who aspire to access formal political institutions. Forstenzer (2017, p. 172) writes that autonomous feminists, those that chose the work outside of the state system, "decided very early on that the policymaking system was rigged against radical societal change and that breaking down their agenda

into a “shopping list of demands” was not an option.” Instead, the *feministas autonomas* (“autonomous feminists”) sought civilizational change. They also sought to prevent professional feminists from re-writing feminist history as a set of linear events that resulted from cooperating with the government (Forstenzer, 2017, p. 172). This is noteworthy given the common narrative that feminism was weakened or close to non-existent after the transition to democracy. Certainly, the movement changed, social mobilization slowed and grassroots activists, especially the most dissident, were made invisible. However, in response to the supposed “new silence” of the feminist movement, scholar, and feminist Claudia Montero writes:

Autonomous feminism has been active against gender-based violence, pacts of silence, the plundering of natural resources, and supported the Mapuche people through a series of collectives which were active even while [the society] was anesthetized by the economic success of the 90s. (Stevani Gisletti & Montero, 2020, p. 5)

While grassroots feminists remained active in their communities, growing frustration with the limitations of working through state channels resulted in the re-emergence of other social movements during the second decade of Chile’s democracy. The 2006 Pingüino protests, a series of student-led protests against the educational infrastructure and transportation costs, sparked a new wave of social mobilization, which created opportunities for new iterations of the feminist movement. Student activist groups and actions provided a space where people were connected, many participating in debates and actions for the first time, and where autonomous development was necessary (De Fina Gonzalez & Figueroa Vidal, 2019, p. 63). The increased engagement of students in the political field, the Frente Amplio party is an example, also built a foundation where students and feminists could share ideas and develop shared slogans and demands (De Fina Gonzalez & Figueroa Vidal, 2019, p. 55). While student protests were the most visible, mobilization was not limited to one movement. Feminists were present in the No+ AFP, labor, and indigenous resistance movements. This resulted in a generation of Chileans that were politicized by their involvement in social movements as a reaction to inequality and neoliberal policies.

5.2. *The Current Movement’s Most Pressing Claims*

The feminist political framework that grew out of these different movements represents a new generation of feminists, whose practice is rooted in the history of the feminists before them, developing strategies and actions to call attention, nationally and internationally, to gender issues (De Fina Gonzalez & Figueroa Vidal, 2019, p. 64). However, Alondra Carrillo notes that the current feminist

project in Chile focuses on not only gender issues but the very system that creates them:

We said: we’ve spent a long time putting violence on the table, showing it to be a central element of our lives. Now it’s time to go a step farther and question this position of victimhood in which we find ourselves, so comfortable for the order that rests precisely on that violence. (Carrillo Vidal, 2019)

For Alondra Carrillo and other feminist organizers from the CF8M, the movement’s practice is rooted in two main ideas: first, the necessity to act against the precarity of life, that is, the violence and vulnerability that is promoted by Chile’s neoliberal political and economic system, and second, that to collectively say “no” to such a system enables feminist politics across issues and movements (Anderson, 2021). Collective resistance also enables feminist politics to move across nations. The rising tide of Chile’s feminists is closely tied to the development of feminist politics transnationally, and particularly in Latin America. The 2016 “Ni Una Menos” march, inspired by the Argentine movement of the same name and occurring across Latin America, made it clear that the feminist movement in Chile was no longer an inaudible voice in the political field (Mårtensson, 2018). The main purpose of the march was to bring attention to gender-based violence and demand better supports for women who suffer violence. The march also brought greater visibility to feminism and the movement continued to gain momentum.

In March 2018, 28 cities across Chile participated in the International Women’s Day strike (Carrillo Vidal, 2019) and shortly after, the CF8M formed and began organizing to articulate feminists’ claims. CF8M coordinated with women from across the county, with labor organizations, and with students. The group developed demands including access to free, safe, and legal abortion, acknowledgment of reproductive labor and care work as labor, and the right to non-sexist education (Carrillo Vidal, 2019). Throughout the year, the “feminist wave” continued. Chilean student feminists led university occupations to protest the patriarchal system that allows for sexual harassment, particularly on campuses. Sit-ins and marches occurred in cities across the country. The protests lasted for months and “paralyzed academic institutions” (McGowan, 2021). Feminist actors asserted that the fight was not limited to institutional protocols or goals, and instead represented cultural and political change across the country (De Fina Gonzalez & Figueroa Vidal, 2019, p. 64). In October 2018, CF8M held the Plurinational Meeting of Women in Struggle to refine their political agenda and prepare for the 2019 women’s general strike. To develop an inclusive strike, Carrillo says committees were formed “by territory and sector, by union, by educational institution, by social setting, and by sexual orientation” (Carrillo Vidal, 2019).

The actions that began in 2018 provided an opportunity for people of different backgrounds and experiences to come together. Karina Nohales, an organizer from CF8M notes that “women active in No Más AFP seized the opportunity to focus on the problem of work and social security from the point of view of women workers” (Anderson, 2021). The inclusion of multi-sector feminists allowed the list of feminist demands to broaden and include historical demands related to democracy and inequality (Cuffe, 2020). The movement was determined to be a transformational force and, according to Alondra Carillo, “an oppositional force to all political and economic sectors that have overseen the precaritization of life” (Anderson, 2021).

5.3. *The 2019 Estallido Social*

Chile’s social protests continued into 2019, a year that saw significant street protests and global unrest. While the focus of this article is on the national issues that have driven Chile’s social movement development, we must acknowledge there are global dimensions that inform and drive social protest and that, as with feminism in Chile, broader movements gain strength through connection to global struggle. From a national perspective, the massive protest actions that took place starting in October 2019 were made possible by the years-long concatenation of social movement engagement and mobilization in response to the democratic deficit and failures in representation which have prevented any serious attempt at dealing with inequality (Borzutzky & Perry, 2021).

The revolt that began in Santiago on October 18, 2019, in response to a metro fare hike was not just a response to the hike itself but to the various inequalities Chileans experienced in education, health, gender-based violence, work, and pensions. In the days leading up to October 18, students coordinated metro fare evasion tactics by rushing the turnstiles which at times led to confrontations with the police. On October 18, Metro Santiago halted all metro service in response to the ongoing protest actions. The metro shutdown left thousands of commuters stranded and agitated. The protests turned into takeover and vandalization of stations across Santiago, barricades in the streets, and ultimately fires and destruction that disabled the entire system. Over the next few days, the protests and riots continued and expanded across the country. By October 20, President Piñera had declared a state of emergency, implemented a curfew, and brought troops in to respond to the riots. On October 25, over one million people, more than 5% of the country’s population, marched in Santiago. They were joined by many others across Chile who gathered to show support and demonstrate that “Chile had awakened.”

Through its work in and across social movements, Chile’s feminists supported the development of a movement that cut across gender, class, age, and ethnic iden-

tity in response to “not just inequality but every institution that had allowed such a situation to fester with blatant impunity” (Dorfman, 2020). Simultaneous to this over-arching movement, feminists maintained visibility through feminist-specific actions. In November 2020, the performance by Las Tesis of their song *Un Violador en Tu Camino* gained immediate global attention. The song, which denounces the role of patriarchy in state violence and declares “and I’m not guilty, not because of what I was or how I dressed,” served as a protest within a protest by addressing the violence of rape as one of the many oppressions upheld and enacted by the state.

One of the clearest demands from Chile’s social explosion was the need to end the Pinochet-era Constitution, which maintained the policies that allow for the state’s precarity of life. At the time of writing this article, a major success obtained by the movement has been to have equal participation in the drafting of the new constitution. While the re-writing of a new constitution is an opportunity to develop the legal basis for gender equity, Chile’s feminist framework reminds us of the limitations of changing the system from within the system.

6. Conclusion

The nature of Chile’s 1980 Constitution has prevented reductions in inequality—especially in gender inequality—and limited opportunities for impactful democratic participation. The economic and political model codified by the Constitution has resulted in an incomplete transition to democracy (Borzutzky & Perry, 2021) from which multiple social movements have evolved. For feminists, the ability to name struggles from a gender perspective while unifying people across movements through their common struggles has made feminist politics in Chile increasingly visible and necessary for progress.

The inclusivity of Chile’s Constitutional Convention represents a success for the feminist movement, which seeks not to simply politicize the experiences of women, but to dismantle the systems from which patriarchal violence stems. This requires constitutional change that provides a legal basis to fight against gender inequality and violence. An independent analysis done by the investigative journalism organization CIPER reports that of the 155 members of the Constitutional Convention, 57.4% have at least one pro-feminist policy included in their agendas (Figuroa et al., 2021), which strengthens the chances these policies will be reflected in a new constitution.

The inclusion of feminists in the Constitutional Convention is not a sign that the movement was in full agreement on how to proceed. For some, any participation in institutional processes, starting with the plebiscite, would allow those institutions to tame the most dissident voices of the movement. For others, including organizers with CF8M, participation in the plebiscite was an opportunity to express popular will.

However, for this group, a willingness to participate does not mean submission to institutionalization. Forstenzer (2017, p. 172) writes that social mobilization feminists “believe autonomy is key for activism,” but they “decide on a pragmatic basis when and how to work with state organizations.” The feminists represented in the Constitutional Convention see this as a pragmatic opportunity, but to what end? Karina Nohales of CF8M recognizes that the goal is not to simply generate a new constitution and that it is likely many will not feel represented by the latter. She says that “this process is a moment of mass politicization, that is going to be fundamental moving forward,” and that feminists are committing to work together over the long term (Anderson, 2021).

At the time of writing, the Constitutional Convention is in its earliest stages. The process, which will take nine to twelve months, holds many unknowns. What is clear, however, is that feminist participation will continue to be central to the process (the phrase “nothing about us without us” is relevant) and that once Chile has a new constitution, the feminist movement will continue to push political and social progress to ensure inclusion of all Chileans. To what extent this movement will serve as a model for other movements in the region is still unknown and it is highly dependent on the nature of the new constitution.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- Anderson, A. (2021). *The tide of feminist organizing is rising in Chile: Interview with Karina Nohales and Alondra Carillo*. Jacobin. <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/03/cf8m-chile-feminism-organizing-constitution-agreement-social-peace>
- Banco Central de Chile. (1983). *Indicadores económicos y sociales: 1960–1982* [Economic and social indicators 1960–1982].
- Bertranou, F. (2016). *Pension benefits in Chile: Is it possible to improve adequacy and solidarity?* [Paper presentation]. ILO/IZA Conference “Assessing the effects of labour market reforms—A global perspective,” Geneva, Switzerland.
- Borzutzky, S. (2019). You win some, you lose some: Pension reform in Bachelet’s first and second administrations. *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 11(2), 204–230. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802X19861491>
- Borzutzky, S., & Perry, S. (2021). “It is not about the 30 pesos, it is about the 30 years”: Chile’s elitist democracy, social movements, and the October 18 protests. *The Latin Americanist*, 65(2), 207–232. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tla.2021.0016>
- Cabezas, G., & Acero, C. (2011). Effects of the ethical family income on labor participation, income distribution and poverty. In C. M. Urzúa (Ed.), *Microsimulation models for Latin America* (pp. 1–15). Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey.
- Camou, M. M., & Maubrigades, S. (2017). The lingering face of gender inequality in Latin America. In L. Bértola & J. Williamson (Eds.), *Has Latin American inequality changed direction?* (pp. 219–241). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-44621-9_10
- Carrillo Vidal, A. (2019, May 13). The feminist general strike in Chile. *Viewpoint Magazine*. <https://viewpointmag.com/2019/05/13/the-feminist-general-strike-in-chile>
- Castellanos, A. (2009, October 18). Chile: The struggle over emergency contraception. *Rewire News Group*. <https://rewirenewsgroup.com/article/2009/10/19/chile-the-struggle-over-emergency-contraception>
- Comisión Asesora Presidencial sobre el Sistema de Pensiones. (2015). *Informe final 2015* [Final report 2015]. http://www.comision-pensiones.cl/Informe_final_CP_2015.pdf
- Constable, P., & Valenzuela, A. (1993). *A nation of enemies: Chile under Pinochet*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Cuffe, S. (2020, March 8). Feminist groups hold mass Women’s Day marches across Chile. *Aljazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/8/feminist-groups-hold-mass-womens-day-marches-across-chile>
- Dahse, F. (1979). El Mapa de la extrema riqueza: Los grupos económicos y el proceso de concentración de capitales [The map of extreme wealth: Economic groups and the capital concentration process]. Editorial Aconcagua.
- De Fina Gonzalez, D., & Figueroa Vidal, F. (2019). Nuevos “campos de acción política” feminista: Una mirada a las recientes movilizaciones en Chile [New feminist “fields of political action”: A look at the recent mobilizations in Chile]. *Revista Punto Género*, 2019(11), 51–72. <https://doi.org/10.5354/0719-0417.2019.53880>
- Delfino, D. (2018, August 17). 12 countries where men earn significantly more than women. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/countries-with-the-gender-pay-gapp.2018--8>
- Dorfman, A. (2020). *Chile: Notes from a revolt*. The New York Review. <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/03/13/chile-notes-from-a-revolt>
- Figueroa, P., Miranda, L., & Meza, C. (2021). *¿Convención Paritaria = Convención feminista* [Equal convention = Feminist convention?]. CIPER. <https://www.ciperchile.cl/2021/05/24/convencion-paritaria-convencion-feminista>
- Forstenzer, N. (2017). Feminism and gender politics in post-dictatorship Chile (1990–2010). In S. Donoso & M. von Bülow (Eds.), *Social movements in Chile: Organization, trajectories, and political consequences* (pp. 161–189). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Franceschet, S. (2005). *Women and politics in Chile*. Rienner.
- García, A. H., & Wells, J. (1983). Chile: A laboratory for failed experiments in capitalist political economy. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 7(3/4), 287–304. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/7.3-4.287>
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press.
- Green Rioja, R. A. (2021). Collective trauma, feminism and the threads of popular power: A personal and political account of Chile's 2019 social awakening. *Radical Americas*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ra.2021.v6.1.002>
- Jarroud, M. (2012, August 2). Many Chilean women keep mum about unequal wages. *Inter Press Service*. <http://www.ipsnews.net/2012/08/many-chilean-women-keep-mum-about-unequal-wages>
- Lambert, P., & Scribner, D. (2021). Constitutions and gender equality in Chile and Argentina. *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 13(2), 219–242. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802x211024245>
- Lipset, S. M. (1983). *The political man: The social bases of politics*. Doubleday & Company.
- Londoño, E. (2018, March 10). In Chile, a billionaire takes the reins from a socialist, again. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/world/americas/chile-president-pinera-bachelet.html>
- Marcel, M., & Solimano, A. (1994). The distribution of income and economic adjustment. In B. Bosworth, R. Dornbusch, & R. Laban (Eds.), *The Chilean economy: Policy lessons and challenges* (pp. 217–238). Brookings Institution.
- Mårtensson, I. (2018, June 27). *Sorry for the inconvenience, but they are killing us: A case study of the Ni Una Menos protests' impact in Chile* [Master's thesis, Lund University]. Lund University Student Papers. <https://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/search/publication/8948244>
- McGowan, C. (2021, February 15). Why Chile's new constitution is a feminist victory. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/15/chile-constitution-gender-parity-feminist-protest>
- Meller Commission. (2008). *Informe final* [Final report]. <https://www.oei.es/historico/noticias/spip.php?article2605>
- Ministerio de Salud. (2017). *Ley 21030: Regula la despenalización de la interrupción voluntaria del embarazo en tres causales* [Law 21030: Rule the decriminalization of voluntary interruption of pregnancy in three cases]. <https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1108237>
- Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge University Press.
- Prada, E. (2016). *Induced abortion in Chile*. Guttmacher Institute. <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/induced-abortion-chile>
- Puertas Cavero, N. (2021, July 6). Elisa Loncón, the Mapuche woman presiding over the Chilean constituent convention. *AL DÍA News*. <https://aldianews.com/articles/culture/social/elisa-loncon-mapuche-woman-presiding-over-chilean-constituent-convention>
- Reyes Campos, N. (2016). Women's wages and the gender gap during the period of import substitution industrialization in Chile. In M. M. Camou, S. Maubrigades, & R. Thorp (Eds.), *Gender inequalities and development in Latin America in the twentieth century* (pp. 93–109). Taylor & Francis.
- Rhodes-Purdy, M. (2017). *Regime support beyond the balance sheet: Participation and policy performance in Latin America*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ríos Tobar, M. (2008, April 10). Chilean feminism and social democracy from the democratic transition to Bachelet. *NACLA Report on the Americas*. <https://nacla.org/article/chilean-feminism-and-social-democracy-democratic-transition-bachelet>
- Ríos Tobar, M. (2021). *Chile's constitutional convention: A triumph of inclusion*. UNDP. <https://www.latinamerica.undp.org/content/rblac/en/home/blog/2021/chile-s-constitutional-convention--a-triumph-of-inclusion.html>
- Roberts, K. M. (2016). (Re)Politicizing inequalities: Movements, parties, and social citizenship in Chile. *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 8(3), 125–154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802x1600800305>
- Rodríguez Weber, J. E. (2017). The political economy of income inequality in Chile since 1850. In L. Bértola & J. Williamson (Eds.), *Has Latin American inequality changed direction?* (pp. 43–64). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-44621-9_3
- Santagostino Recavarren, I., & Arekapudi, N. (2020, August 20). The path toward gender equality in Chile. *World Bank Blogs*. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/latinamerica/path-toward-gender-equality-chile>
- Siavelis, P. M. (2016). Crisis of representation in Chile? The institutional connection. *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 8(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802x1600800303>
- Statista. (2021a). *Income held by top 20% in Chile*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1075291/chile-income-inequality>
- Statista. (2021b). *Latin America: Minimum wage by country 2021*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/953880/latin-america-minimum-monthly-wages>
- Stevani Gisletti, M. V., & Montero, C. (2020). El octubre chileno: Voces y luchas feministas [The Chilean October: Feminist voices and struggles]. *Descentrada*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.24215/25457284e111>
- UNDP. (2017). *Desiguales. Orígenes, cambios y desafíos de la brecha social en Chile* [Unequal: Origins, changes, and challenges of the social gap in Chile]. <https://www.estudiospnud.cl/informes-desarrollo/desiguales-origenes-cambios-y-desafios-de-la-brecha-social-en-chile>
- UNDP. (2020). *Human development report 2020*. <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country->

[Profiles/CHL.pdf](#)

United Nations. (1998). *Chile: Crecimiento, empleo y desafíos de la justicia social* [Chile: Growth, employment, and challenges of social justice]. Oficina Internacional del Trabajo.

World Bank. (n.d.). *Chile: Gini index*. Index Mundi. <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/chile/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>

World Bank. (2021). *Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+): Latin American & Caribbean* [Data set]. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.NE.ZS?locations=ZJ>

World Bank. (2017). *Income share held by lowest 20%* [Data set]. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.DST.FRST.20>

About the Authors



Sarah Perry is an educator, writer, and analyst. Her research interests include social policy in the United States and Latin America, social movements, and climate-driven migration. Sarah is a graduate of Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz College working at the intersection of policy, data, and technology. She partners with grassroots organizations to design solutions that advance their policy goals and works with local governments to develop and implement plans that maximize the impact of public funds.



Silvia Borzutzky is teaching professor of political science and international relations at Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz College. She has written extensively on social security and human rights policies in Chile, as well as Chilean politics. She is the author of *Human Rights Policies in Chile: The Unfinished Struggle for Truth and Justice* (2017) and *Vital Connections: Politics, Social Security and Inequality in Chile* (2002). She is the co-author of *Rent-Seeking in Pensions* (2016) and *Michelle Bachelet: Una Mujer Política* (2019). She is also the co-editor of *After Pinochet: The Chilean Road to Capitalism and Democracy* (2006) and *The Bachelet Government: Conflict and Consensus in Post-Pinochet Chile* (2010). She is the author of over 60 articles dealing with Chilean politics, social security, and social assistance.