The Emergence of Women's Social Movements Under Authoritarian Regimes: Studies of Brazil, Argentina, and Chile

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THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN'S SOCIAL MOVEMENTS UNDER AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES: STUDIES OF BRAZIL, ARGENTINA, AND CHILE

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1960 and 1970s, several Latin American countries experienced dramatic political shifts from democracy to a type of military-dictatorship often called bureaucratic-authoritarianism. These authoritarian regimes instituted a counter-revolution that aimed to stabilize their volatile economies and redirect their nations away from the emerging and popularizing trend towards Marxist or socialist policies. Despite the regimes' extensive success in suppressing political and social movements, women's movements became surprisingly strong during the authoritarian governments of the 1970s and 80s. In this paper, we will demonstrate how new political opportunities, the ability to mobilize within their communities, and the shared identity of mothers enabled women to emerge as a true social movement under conditions that inhibited most other forms of political activity. To convey our explanation to this political puzzle, we will first describe why the emergence of these women's movements was truly surprising given the political conditions. Second, we will explain how three existing explanations, which initially appear unlinked with each other, together fit within the broader context of social movement theory. Finally, we will test our theory through case studies of Argentina, Chile, and Brazil.

This paper makes at least two contributions to the literature on Latin American women's movements and social movements as a whole. First, it takes the existing and seemingly disjointed literature on the appearance of women's movements under authoritarian regimes and applies social movement theory to case studies for a more complete explanation. Second, this paper employs the techniques of McAdam et. al. to create a synthesis between the three branches of social movement theory to create an even more comprehensive explanation to the puzzle of women's movements under authoritarian regimes.

PRESENTATION OF THE PUZZLE

The authoritarian regimes that emerged in many Latin American countries during the 1960s and 1970s have been widely studied and greatly criticized for their use of force and coercion. Guillermo O'Donnell, one of the most frequently cited researchers of bureaucratic-authoritarianism in Latin America, proposed that the authoritarian regimes had two main goals: first, they sought economic normalization through liberalization reforms, and second, they hoped to restore order to their discontented populace (1988,
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88-89). O’Donnell also claimed that the success of a bureaucratic-authoritarian regime was rooted in its ability to exclude and deactivate the popular sector (1973, 100). To accomplish this purpose, regimes often exercised extreme practices of coercion and suppression of various political and social organizations.

The Argentine bureaucratic-authoritarian regime led by General Jorge Rafael Videla that overthrew the 1976 government serves as a prime example of the regime-type that O’Donnell discussed. Videla implemented tactics like shutting down Congress, dismissing opposing politicians from leadership positions, completely eliminating the General Confederation of Labor, and even taking over sports and charitable organizations (Skidmore and Smith 2005, 99). Similar repressive tactics were used by the various military dictators in Brazil between 1964 and 1985, as well as under the Pinochet regime in Chile beginning in 1973. These authoritarian regimes succeeded in silencing dissent by limiting social activism and political organizations. However, women’s movements surprisingly thrived despite the suppressive tactics of the authoritarian regimes.

Chile, Argentina, and Brazil provide examples of successful women’s movements under authoritarian regimes. In Argentina, due to its initial economic success, the authoritarian regime gained legitimacy and power that enabled it to stifle unions, leftist movements, and all other groups it felt were contrary to its cause (Anderson 1984, 155-157). However, one group emerged during the initial success of the government—Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo. Determined and fearless, these mothers met every Thursday in front of the Presidential Palace in Buenos Aires and protested the actions of the military regime. These women were the first to publicly oppose the regime. Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo showed Argentines, as well as the world, the atrocities committed by the military regime. They received national and international attention as they mourned for their lost descendents. The human rights movement that women started eventually forced the military to submit to elections and made military leaders accountable for their inhumane actions (Green 1991, 149-150).

In Chile, the role of women has evolved as different leaders have taken varying stances on the role that women should play. As early as the 1950s, political parties and leaders encouraged mothers’ centers, but the first displays of political involvement occurred in 1971 when Chilean women banged pots and pans to symbolize their unhappiness with Allende’s economic policies. These same women were the first to protest against Pinochet despite his efforts to employ traditional women’s roles in order to discourage women’s political involvement. Specifically, women became involved with the Days of Protest in 1983. In spite of Pinochet’s brutal response, each month from May through September women held demonstrations, which manifested their maternal and community roles in Chilean society (Noonan 1995, 100). Since the women’s groups that fought against Pinochet were more united than other political groups, their demonstrations were influential in overthrowing this authoritarian regime when no one else could (Safa 1990, 364).

Brazil also saw the appearance of women’s movements and organizations under military authoritarianism. Women’s community organizations took a political stance against such domestic issues as the rising cost of living, day care, infrastructure necessities, and other issues that directly penetrated women’s typical role in Brazilian society. While
initially acting only on the local level, women’s organizations eventually gained power on
the national level and even became one of the driving forces of opposition to the
authoritarian regime (Alvarez 1991). The 1975 celebration of International Women’s Day,
one of the first public gatherings that Brazil experienced since the military take-over, is an
example of the surprising levels of mobilization that women’s movements had under
Brazilian dictators. During this demonstration, thousands of women took to the streets to
denounce the authoritarian regime and speak out about women’s issues (Alvarez 1991, 79).
Brazilian women’s successful protesting greatly contrasts with the failed attempts at
mobilizing that groups like labor unions experienced under the same political environment.
For example, the populist labor movements that President João Goulart had supported were
completely deactivated by the new authoritarian regime, and even in 1968 when they
began to reorganize, these labor movements did not have nearly the success that the
women’s movements experienced at the same time (de Almeida and Lowy 1976).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Considering the history of women’s social movements in Latin America, one may
question how women were able to mobilize under authoritarian regimes. Scholars like
distinct explanations for this puzzle. The first emphasizes the political space that
authoritarian regimes inadvertently created for women’s movements. The second theory
focuses on the important role the community based women’s organizations played in
initiating mobilization for women. The final theory stresses that the women’s movements
under these authoritarian regimes differed from other forms of organization because they
used their maternal instinct as a platform for mobilization.

While each of the above mentioned theories addresses an important component of the
puzzle, we believe that they lack both a strong theoretical basis and consensus. To
establish a united theory, each of the above mentioned explanations must be analyzed
under the broader context of classical social movement theory. It is their lack of
connection to social movement theory that causes the disunity between these existing
explanations.

While social movement theory itself has also been fragmented in the past, in their
recent analysis of this theory, McAdam et. al. established a synthesis between the three
main approaches—structuralist, rational choice, and cultural (1997). Specifically, they
apply their synthesized theory to the US civil rights movement and show that the
weakening of elite alliances with the simultaneous growth of community-level and
national black organizations and changing cultural views on race led to the rise of the civil
rights movement. In their explanation of this social movement, they emphasize the
importance of creating an “intersection of the three broad sets of factors [structure, rational
choice, and culture...and showing] how the effects were mutually reinforced at each stage
of the civil rights cycle” (McAdam et. al.1997, 163).

While this technique described by McAdam et. al. has become widely accepted as a
more complete approach to explaining social movements, it has never been applied to
Latin American women’s movements that emerged under authoritarian regimes. We will
show that each of the above explanations fits within one of the three approaches to social movement theory. Additionally, we will use the current scholarship on social movement theory to establish connections between the three existing theories to develop a stronger and more comprehensive theory on the emergence of women’s movements under Latin American dictatorships.

**Structuralist Approach**

The structuralist approach to social movement theory emphasizes the necessary conditions within society that either allow or prevent the emergence of social movements. Often associated with a class-based analysis, structuralism looks at political institutions and how well those institutions represent the various segments of society. Structuralists predict that when there is a large body of discontents, social movements will likely arise.

Furthermore, the structural approach claims that the concept of political opportunity is a key determinant of the emergence of a social movement. According to this idea of political opportunity, "movements [...] are set in motion by changes in institutional rules, political alignments, or alliance structures that grant even more leverage to aggravated groups with which to press their claims" (McAdam et. al. 1997, 153). In other words, it is the institutions of a political regime that determine a social movement’s success. Those institutions either promote or inhibit the opportunities for people to unite under their cause.

A clearly structuralist approach to understanding the emergence of women’s movements under the authoritarian regimes in Latin America analyzes the political space that women found under those regimes that was not present under previous regimes. In contrast with most other political organizations and movements that were repressed by the new authoritarian institutions, women’s movements found a unique space under which they could unite. The regime created this space for women by pushing the leftist organizations out of the political spectrum. Leftist movements typically look down on women’s organizations because the left seeks a unified working class with no divisions or distinctions between the members (Alvarez 1990, 70). Once the authoritarian regime successfully disenfranchised the left, women could organize purely as women and use the political space created to advance their own unique agendas. Thus, in their pursuit of reducing political opportunity for the left, the authoritarian regimes unknowingly increased political opportunity for women’s movements.

Additionally, women’s movements responded better to the new authoritarian regimes than did other forms of political organization because women’s movements were inherently less political. The rules of the authoritarian regimes were established to suppress organizations that had strong political agendas. Thus, those countries under authoritarian regimes saw a decrease in labor union power, fewer political parties, and fewer otherwise politically active bodies (de Almeida and Lowy 1976, 103). However, because women’s movements promoted less political agendas such as better health, education, and justice for their lost family members, the authoritarian regimes did not see them as dangerous and actually created more space for women to unite (Waylan 1994). Under previous regimes, like that of Brazil’s populist president João Goulart, politically active movements like the labor movement took precedence over women’s movements.
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Once those political organizations were demobilized, women's organizations became some of the only groups that could thrive under authoritarian regimes.

In summary, by analyzing the structural conditions under which women's movements emerged in Latin America, it is clear how these women's movements fit into the broader context of social movement theory. The rules and institutions of authoritarian regimes created the political opportunity for women by suppressing the left and other types of organizations that were inherently more political. Women's movements found opportunities to organize under the structure of authoritarian regimes while most other groups lost political opportunity.

Rational Choice Approach

From a rational choice perspective, mobilization under authoritarian regimes is difficult and rare. The rational choice theory requires incentives to outweigh costs in order for the rational person to mobilize. Under authoritarian regimes, mobilizing has tremendous costs; often people risk their lives or social status in order to mobilize. Furthermore, even if people consider the benefits to outweigh the costs, their participation may not have a significant effect on the outcome, so they are persuaded to let everyone else take the risks. This action is commonly known as free-riding, which is central to the collective action problem under rational choice theory (Olson 1965).

Latin American women, however, mobilized effectively because they organized on the community level. This community based approach helped women mobilize in two different ways. First, they reduced the cost of mobilization because the authoritarian regimes focused their repression on large, privately created movements. Furthermore, women reduced collective action problems because some governments had already shown support for them by establishing community-based organizations. The governments felt much more comfortable with these smaller groups (Noonan 1995, 93). Latin American authoritarian regimes avoided collective action problems by concentrating on labor unions and opposing national parties. These community organizations avoided many of the mobilization costs that larger movements faced.

The second way women's community-based approach helped women mobilize effectively was by eliminating free riders. Free-riding occurs when a person decides not to contribute because his or her contribution is small enough that failure to contribute would go unnoticed and would not affect the outcome. Even if potential participants believe in the cause, they do not act because the utility is so small. Women's strong communities reduced free-riding because they were small enough to notice lack of participation, and leaders could monitor and sanction non-participants. Because these women's groups were community-based, every contribution was noticed and important.

In summary, women successfully overcame the collective action problem because their movements were community-based. At this less observable level, women's groups faced less oppression from the government, and they were more capable of dealing with free riders because of the small size of their community organizations.

Cultural Approach
Culturists understand the value of national tradition and the gravity of social norms in society (McAdam et al. 1997, 156). The cultural factors of social movements detail the difficulty of mobilization by explaining the influence that cultural norms have on the creation of a movement. Social movement theory explains that for a movement to attract a large and powerful support base, that movement must appeal to societal norms, create a cultural frame under which participants mobilize, and unite participants under a common sense of identity and meaning.

Latin American gender roles serve as a foundation for many norms. These gender roles have traditionally been strictly defined with the common ideologies and beliefs of marianismo and machismo. In Latin America, women have been idealized through the concept of marianismo for living a higher moral standard (Noonan 1995, 98). Authoritarian leaders used marianismo to emphasize the true role of the woman as domestic, self-sacrificing, and humble. The strong identity of femininity and the respect granted to a woman through marianismo gave Latin American women a specific role through which she contributed to society. While marianismo emphasized the submissive, caring nature of a woman, machismo depicted the man as strong and the representative leader of the family. Ironically however, machismo created the frame for women to act because men were naturally seen as aggressors, but no one expected the meek woman to use her traditional maternal role as a source of power. These ideational concepts, in conjunction with a strong cultural standard of a mother, caused women to act based on their maternal nature. When authoritarian governments promoted traditional roles, they simultaneously created a maternal collective action frame (Noonan 1995, 91).

The prevailing norm of a mother as caretaker of her family also influenced social movements in Latin America. Women took care of their families, their finances, and their communities. They dealt with the loss of children and husbands, social well-being and health issues, and economic policies that directly impacted the way that their families functioned. Thus, when women saw the authoritarian regimes harming their families and communities, they felt it was imperative to respond. Social movements inherently face the obstacle of framing their issue so that people feel compelled to support it. However, Latin American women overcame this obstacle by framing their issues around their essential role as mothers and caretakers, thus creating the cultural frame that legitimized their action.

Latin American women shared a strong identity as well as a strong sense of meaning. This combination resulted in a successful social movement because “social movements were both carriers of meanings and makers of meaning” (McAdam et al. 1997, 149). Mothers carried their meaning in naming the government as the source of their affliction. Latin American women created a meaning in explicitly defining their grievances and acting to reconcile the injustice as they mobilized collectively as mothers. Along with a collective meaning, the powerful identity of Latin American women also came from their incredible will. The core of their society was eroding. The culturist theory contends that the participators can will their cause into action (McAdam et al. 1997, 154). A deeply rooted maternal will catalyzed social movements against authoritarian regimes.

Synthesis

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Structural, rational choice, cultural theories each explain one necessary element of the puzzle. However, each of these theories lacks full predictive power because none explains all of the necessary conditions together under one theory. Specifically, the structural approach to understanding why women's movements emerged under repressive regimes focuses on the impact of rules and institutions. However, it does not account for what initially causes people to unite, such as a sense of collective identity and a shared sense of meaning. It also fails to show how people overcome the collective action problem in order to unite for their cause. Similarly, rational choice and cultural theory explain some necessary aspects of the puzzle, but individually do not provide a sufficient explanation. Thus, separately these theories do not fully explain the emergence of women's movements; however, collectively they reveal the full picture of the conditions that enabled women to gain influence under authoritarian regimes and emerge as a true social movement.

Our theory, therefore, is based on the confluence of the structural, rational choice, and cultural components of traditional social movement theory. It first explains how each of these three factors individually reveal certain necessary conditions for the emergence of a women's movement—finding political space and opportunity, overcoming the collective action problem, and framing the issues so as to appeal to a broad support base. However, our theory goes beyond analyzing the three components of social movement theory separately and shows that these components interacted and reinforced each other to create an environment conducive for women's movements to appear.

From this theory we derive several hypotheses that we will test in our cases studies of Argentina, Chile, and Brazil. First, we expect to see that by deactivating many of the formerly politically active organizations and seeing women as less political, the authoritarian regimes will inadvertently create space for women to emerge on the political scene. Additionally, we hypothesize that organizational structures at the community level will facilitate mobilization of women's movements. Also, we predict that where we see a strong cultural basis of the traditional female role, we will also see women's movements materialize. Last, we expect to find that the aforementioned hypotheses will reinforce each other and together more fully explain the necessary conditions for the emergence of women's movements in Latin America.

CASE STUDIES IN ARGENTINA, CHILE, AND BRAZIL

Argentina

In 1976 General Videla and his military overtook the Argentine government. Military coups in the past had not lasted long in Argentina, so General Videla was determined to set up a powerful authoritarian government that could eradicate any kind of resistance. The military had authority to arrest anyone who posed a threat to the regime; the result was a powerful united authoritarian government that abducted thousands of citizens who tried to challenge the regimes authority (Skidmore and Smith 2005, 98-100). However in 1977, fourteen mothers united and became the first movement to publicly oppose this ruthless regime; these brave mothers were known as Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Kaplan 2004)
A combination of cultural, structural, and rational choice approaches explains the success of these mothers against the authoritarian regime. These mothers succeeded because of a strong organizational base (rational choice), lack of regulations against women’s organizations (structural), and legitimacy through their assigned roles as mothers (cultural).

A rational choice theory explains why a less powerful group of women mobilized when other groups could not. The authoritarian regime in Argentina successfully eliminated the General Confederation of Labor, terrorist groups, and supporters of the Peronist parties (Skidmore and Smith 2005, 100), yet the regime failed to stop a community based group of women. Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo reduced collective action problems by forming on a community level. The authoritarian regime focused their assaults on larger groups that appeared more dangerous and easier to find. By forming on the community level, Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo could meet secretly in churches and avoid harassment from the government (Kaplan 2004 111). Mothers also eliminated free-riding because the organization was so small (it began with only fourteen mothers), and even as they grew, each mother felt responsible to represent their own lost loved ones. The responsibility to represent one’s child provided a selective incentive for each mother, and the weight of this incentive, while difficult to measure, does further explain mothers’ benefits.

While this theory explains advantages the community-based organization had, it fails as a complete rational choice theory. A rational choice theory demands that the benefits exceed costs, yet the overall benefits are marginal compared to the costs. Many women were abducted, killed, and harassed by the authoritarian regime (Kaplan 2004 110). Their weekly marches around La Plaza initially caused more sorrow than publicity, and the government stayed in power through years of protesting. Furthermore, their main objective was to demonstrate for their children—something that never happened (Malin 1994, 189). Therefore, while rational choice theory shows that mothers had an advantage by forming at the community level, it does not explain why these women sacrificed so much when personal benefits were so small. Structural and cultural approaches help us understand the rest of this puzzle.

General Videla created a structural opportunity for women in Argentina. Videla enjoyed support from the middle class and proclaimed to stand for high morals; their slogan stated “morality, uprightness, and efficiency.” They justified suppression of leftist movements by claiming to align with the “Western and Christian world” (Skidmore and Smith 2005, 98); this repression created political space for women to oppose the regime. Women used the same political ideology (morality and uprightness) that the regime used to suppress the opposition in order to support women’s protests. These mothers proclaimed only to be fulfilling their roles as mothers. This declaration created a political gap for women because the government felt pressured to support, or at least not suppress, the moral and Christian virtues they set. Furthermore, women widened this political gap by not allowing men to protest with them. Argentine men did not believe women could make a political difference, so the government gave them more political space than men to protest (Malin 1994, 203). This structural gap gave women the opportunity to emerge when others could not.
However, this theory becomes much stronger when we combine it with the cultural norms established in Argentina. This structural theory assumes Western and Latin American norms. Norms are not naturally associated with a structural theory but instead with a cultural theory. Mothers in Argentina have a cultural obligation to care for their families; Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo used this cultural norm for motivation and legitimacy in their quest to oppose the authoritarian regime. The Catholic Church greatly influenced Argentina’s culture; the church taught women to love their children and to be responsible for their families. When an estimated thirty-thousand people disappeared, many mothers shared a deep loss and a cultural obligation to stand up for their children. This theory best explains women’s motivation to mobilize. The strong connection that existed between mothers and children in Argentina persuaded them to act selflessly and defend all children in the face of strong opposition (Malin 1994, 189). Women also used their culturally assigned roles as mothers to legitimatize themselves as victims and not as political radicals (Green 1991, 149). They took extreme precautions to obey cultural norms and avoid any association with politics (Kaplan 2004 115). They used symbols like pictures and the Catholic cross to remind everyone they only wanted to know what happened to their children, and fulfill their cultural rights as mothers (Kaplan 2004 116). While cultural theory is strengthened by rational choice and structural explanations, the cultural lens is the strongest because it explains women’s legitimacy, motivation, and protection.

In sum, we conclude that rational choice helps us understand why community groups gave women an organizational advantage over larger organizations. Structural theory explains a political opportunity that women seized, and cultural theory explains the motivation and legitimacy behind Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo. While rational choice is not strong enough to stand on its own, it does give insights to advantages women had over larger organizations. Structural and cultural theories show that each one cannot stand on its own; however, they support each other and become stronger by coming together. All of this strengthens our theory that three lenses (rational choice, structural, and cultural) explain much more than one lens, and by connecting them, we can deepen our understanding of women’s success against the authoritarian regimes of Latin America.

Chile

When General Pinochet overthrew Allende’s government in 1973, he suppressed activists who had previously been effective under Allende. However, Pinochet could not suppress the women’s movement, which actually gained strength under his regime. The Chilean women’s social movement came into being based on three combined factors: pre-established organizations, political opportunity, and cultural conditions.

Chilean women had previously established organizations that created an arena in which they could meet and plan, exemplifying the rational choice lens of social movement theory. As leaders varied, different women’s organizations developed in Chile. As early as the 1950s, political parties like the Christian Democrats had expanded mothers groups. In 1954, women established a private organization designed to help the poor called Ropero del Pueblo (Noonan 1995, 93). Since women were mainly responsible for voting in
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Alessandri in 1958, when Eduardo Frei came to power in 1964, he began a program designed to put down women’s movements (Noonan 1995, 93). *Promocion Popular*, Frei’s program, created mothers centers, art clubs, and local councils. These local councils promoted the image of a woman as motherly, willing to sacrifice, apolitical, and very patriotic (Noonan 1995, 93). By 1968, over 400,000 women were involved in 8,500 mother’s centers (Noonan 1995, 93). Despite Frei’s objective, these various examples of mother centers created a forum where women could discuss their complaints and ideas.

As a precursor to the women’s movement against Pinochet, women created even more organizations under Allende. One of the first strong displays of political involvement occurred in 1971 when Chilean women banged pots and pans to symbolize their unhappiness with the economic policies of Allende. Many women felt disgusted by the path to communism and soon after this event formed *El Poder Femenino* (Noonan 1995, 95). Women then united to participate in activities such as throwing chicken feed at soldiers, placing nails on highways, and making stink bombs for shops that refused to strike.

Since these women had previously established organizations, they became some of the first to counter the Pinochet regime, and they actively participated in the Days of Protest (Noonan 1995, 95). At the same time, they benefited from the organization of the Catholic Church. The making of *arpilleras* exemplifies the utility of the Church’s role in their protest (Skidmore and Smith 2005, 134). Without these organizations already in place, the social movement would have been difficult to initiate. By uniting and organizing in already established institutions, women overcame the collective action problem, which exemplifies the rational choice aspect of social movement theory.

The rational choice explanation of foundational organizations from preexisting institutions did not catalyze the women’s protest in Chile alone. Another large factor was the availability of political opportunity. When the Pinochet regime came into power, it directed its oppressive tactics toward one main group—organized labor (Remmer 1980, 282). Specifically, the authoritarian regime began to pass legislation directly to oppress the working class. Decree Laws number 32 and 930 declared that an employer could dismiss a worker on the grounds of leadership or organizing strikes (Remmer 1980, 287). With organized labor under siege, women had more access to the limited political space. This occurrence underscores the idea of social movement theory, which claims that when social classes are unable to act, it creates political opportunity. In this case, it created space for women. The erosion of the left, due to Pinochet’s intolerance for dissent, opened political space for women’s activity to emerge (Noonan 1995, 101). Previously, leftist regimes had wanted a homogenous bourgeois and not a divisive women’s movement, but women’s movements did not violate the ideology of Pinochet’s authoritarianism (Noonan 1995, 90). Thus, with the left contained and an ideological difference, women had more space to act.

Although structure and rational choice explain part of the movement’s beginnings, culture plays an integral role in explaining mobilization. Authoritarianism victimized men and made women invisible. The political invisibility of women, due to the cultural condition of *machismo*, allowed women to come to the forefront as political activists. Within three weeks of Pinochet’s coup women formed the Association of Democratic Women in order to help those who Pinochet had already imprisoned (Noonan 1995, 96).
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Since men were the focus of Pinochet's military, women had the capability to perform the necessary measures of this group covertly. Later, in 1974, this same group of women formed The Chilean Association of the Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared (Noonan 1995, 96). The circumstances allowed women to create groups that men could not because of the military's reluctance to address women. These women's groups emerged because Chilean culture emphasized the actions of men as important and did not perceive women as a threat.

Leaders made decisions based on the cultural norms of Chile. Culturally, women had a passive, meek, and apolitical image. Both Pinochet and the female activists based their actions on the same arguments: the mother and family serve as foundations to Chilean society. Pinochet defined the family as the “core” of Chilean society in his socioeconomic reforms for 1981-1989 (Noonan 1995, 97). Although, both parties fully agreed on the foundation of the family and even used the same discourse, they employed similar arguments to achieve different ends. Pinochet used his promotion of the traditional role to silence women, but at the same time women promoted their traditional role to legitimize their voice. Women who sacrificed for their families had been a traditional Chilean ideology that had been promoted for quite sometime, but unknowingly, in the case of Pinochet, women adapted his encouragement of the traditional Chilean mother’s role to best fit their cause.

Pinochet had little in common with Allende, but both leaders implemented and supported women's groups because of the strong cultural role of motherhood in Chile. However, their purpose in promoting these groups was to keep women apolitical. Allende founded the National Secretariat for Women, and Pinochet's wife ran the program during her husband's regime (Noonan 1995, 98). The bonds of motherhood played such a strong role in Chilean society that these leaders felt obligated to support women in their traditional role.

Cultural norms and the willingness of the people to abide by them played a large role in mobilization of women in Chile. Here, cultural theory served as a necessary precondition that was realized by the existence of both structural and rational choice conditions. Each component of social movement theory explains part of the necessary conditions that assisted Chilean women in their social movement. Collectively, the three lenses provide a more complete explanation of how women mobilized to become a true social movement.

Brazil

In 1964, Brazil experienced a counter-revolution as the populist presidency of João Goulart was overthrown by a military coup that instigated a bureaucratic-authoritarian government that remained in power until the mid-1980s. Under this authoritarian regime Brazil saw the suppression of student movements and labor unions and the elimination of elections and leftist political parties. However, like both Argentina and Chile, Brazil also saw the surprising emergence of women's movements under the repressive tactics of the authoritarian regimes. Women's movements in Brazil emerged due to a connection between cultural, structural, and rational choice conditions that promote social movement.
One unique feature of the Brazilian military take-over that influenced women’s ability to gain legitimacy was the new authoritarian regime’s use of the traditional image of a woman as a symbol of its conservative ideology. The military used the notion of “Family, God, and Order” to arouse support for their takeover in 1964 (Alvarez 1990, 8). Under this motto, the leaders of the new regime appealed to traditional views of women’s societal roles and encouraged women to participate in its effort to gain power and mobilize support.

However, the authoritarian regime’s initial support of women’s involvement in political movements would eventually backfire on them. Under their “Family, God, and Order” movement, the regime inadvertently strengthened the common sense of identity and meaning of women as the protectors of basic human rights and promoters of improved standard of living for their families. Therefore, when the poorest segment of Brazilian society saw a decrease in standard of living during the 1970s, women within this segment of society felt that the authoritarian regime was now preventing them from fulfilling their basic role, and they began to organize under this common sense of identity (Alves 1985, 149). Thus, the authoritarian regime created the cultural frame between women that eventually prompted them to organize against the regime.

However, this sense of cultural unity between women does not fully explain how women’s movements became as significant as they did under the Brazilian authoritarian regimes. Women were also better able to organize because the regime’s suppression of large political organizations moved political activity to the community level. Thus, already united with the common purpose of improving their families’ standard of living, Brazilian women were better able to mobilize as their communities became the arena for organization. In the 1960s and 1970s working-class women increasingly began to join community-based organizations like community health groups, neighborhood soup kitchens, and other associations aimed at improving living conditions for the members of the lowest segment of society (Alvarez 1990, 38). Especially strong in the “industrial triangle” of Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, and São Paulo, the community groups based their issues on local concerns such as the improvement of schools, day-care, sewage systems, and transportation. Because women felt that these local issues were their primary concern, the majority of the members of these groups were women (Caldeira 1987, 77). Thus, the collective action problem for women’s organization was reduced because the community-based groups were more women-oriented, organized into smaller, more manageable groups, and the authoritarian regimes had less control over them.

While the above explanation of how community-based organizations facilitated mobilization clearly fits under the rational choice component of our theory, there is a cultural connection that further explains why women successfully organized at the community level. Women initially felt the need to organize because of the sense of meaning that they shared as protectors of their families’ standard of living. When the authoritarian regimes pushed organization to the community, women were better able to take advantage of this new framework of organization than men because of the common identity they shared as protectors of their families’ basic needs. By working together to promote their basic needs, their common sense of identity was reinforced as they mobilized within the community-based groups (Alvarez 1990, 39). Clearly the rational choice and
A structuralist explanation for the strength of the women's movement in Brazil is first seen by noting how the Brazilian authoritarian regime's suppression of the left opened the door for women's movements to act in the political scene. One of the regime's clearest actions of suppression against the left was the creation of the Institutional Act No. 5 (AI-5) in 1968. This act gave the president the power to shut-down congress and control opposition through any necessary means. In doing so, leftist parties like the Brazilian Workers Party were completely disenfranchised as were all other forms of leftist organization (Alvarez 1990, 73). The elimination of leftist movements in the political mainstream opened the space for Brazilian women to promote women's issues that they could not promote under leftist regimes. As one Brazilian leftist guerilla member testified, "the reigning theory (of the left) was that men and women were the same" (Costa 1980, 248). Thus, when the left had power, women were discouraged from promoting their issues. However, once the left was eliminated, many of the women who were formerly leftist activists became leaders of the Brazilian women's movement (Alvarez 1990, 70). These women then took advantage of the political space created by the absence of the left to push their own agendas.

While the above structuralist approach explains how women brought their movement into the national sphere of influence, there is a key connection between structural and cultural theory that further explains how women obtained political opportunity. Because women were already given some sense of legitimacy under the "Family, God, and Order" theme of the authoritarian regime, they were able to use this cultural appeal when they began to mobilize on a more national level. The authoritarian regime had already created the political space and opportunity that women needed when the regime used the traditional identity of a woman as one of its symbols. Because the authoritarian regime had encouraged women to speak out against the former populist leader, it had already opened the door for women to use their maternal frame for protest. Thus, in this sense the political space already existed for women. When women emerged on the political scene to speak out against the authoritarian regime, that regime could not rightly deny the Brazilian women the space that they had already given them. Thus, we see how culture interacted with structure to further create the political opportunity that women needed to establish a true social movement.

Initial evidence of women succeeding in using their increased political opportunity is seen in the 1975 celebration of International Women's day, which was one of the first public demonstrations permitted by the authoritarian regime. This demonstration is often considered the spark that led to the creation of many other politically active women's groups. As another example, the Feminine Amnesty Movement, which began in the mid-1970s, was allowed to organize while similar male groups were unsuccessful in mobilizing (Alvarez 1990, 79). By 1978 several female-headed organizations had gained powerful political influence: the Mothers' Commission in Defense of Human Rights, the Movement for Christian Renovation, and the Cost of Living Movement (Alvarez 1990, 113).

The Cost of Living Movement (MCV), an example of the success of Brazilian women's organizations, was organized in August of 1977 and began with around seven
hundred participants. By March of 1978, however, the MCV launched a nationwide campaign with tens of thousands of mostly female participants. These women gathered a petition of 1.25 million signatures that they gave to President Geisel as a way to speak out against the high costs of living that many Brazilians were experiencing. In 1979 the MCV continued in its demonstrations and organized five nationwide protests (Alvarez 1990, 99). The MCV serves as just one example of the amazing influence that the mobilized women had under the repressive authoritarian regimes that managed to prohibit nearly all other forms of political mobilization. Members of the MCV clearly began with the cultural connection as women whose responsibility it was to improve their families' standards of living. The movement began small and was initiated on a community level, but it eventually entered the national scene and was able to successfully present its agendas to the authoritarian government.

In summary, the success of the women's movement under the authoritarian regimes in Brazil is best explained by first, understanding the common sense of identity and framing process that the authoritarian regime initially promoted for women. Second, these now united women were able to overcome the collective action problem through the strength that the authoritarian regimes inadvertently gave to community-based organization. Finally, these community-based, female-dominated organizations were able to gain national influence because of the structural changes that the authoritarian dictatorship created that gave women the political space and opportunity necessary to instigate a full-scale social movement.

CONCLUSION

We conclude that examining these movements through a more comprehensive theoretical framework creates a stronger explanation of how women created a powerful movement under regimes that successfully inhibited most other political organizations. Without the analysis of women's movements through the lenses of social movement theory, one could not accurately apply the theories that explain women's movements beyond these isolated incidents. Because we have taken that step, our theory links women's movements in Latin America to social movements in general.

Although understanding the implications of each of the three lenses—structural, rational choice, and cultural—is vital to explain the mobilization of women's movements, we find that cultural theory explains the preconditions that catalyzed the unification of women as a social movement. Cultural theory also explains the shared sense of identity that the Latin American women had that initially motivated them to act as a unified body. Once unified under the cultural frame of motherhood, women were able to take advantage of the ease of mobilization at the community level and the political space that the authoritarian regimes created. Taken together, the lenses of social movement theory connect the three previously disunited explanations of these women's movements and explain that women were able to unite while no other group could because the regimes inadvertently created the necessary conditions for women to unite as a true social movement.

Although we have come to a more conclusive explanation of Latin American women's
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movements, some limitations to our theory exist. First, while social movement theory helps us understand the importance of each of its lenses in explaining the puzzle, our findings do not produce the synthesis that McAdam et. al. ambitiously claims. Furthermore, by choosing three case studies that all experienced significant women’s movements during authoritarian regimes, we limit the external validity of our results. Further testing of this theory requires applying it in a country where a women’s movement did not arise to verify the necessary conditions we established. Despite these limitations, because we have shown that these women’s movements can be explained through social movement theory, we have contributed to social movement literature. We encourage future researchers to analyze other seemingly unique movements through this more comprehensive framework to show how they fit within the broader context of social movement theory.

REFERENCES


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