

Civil Society and Social Movements: Building Sustainable Democracies in Latin America

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Latin American Women in Movement: Changing Politics, Changing Minds

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Women in Latin America have organized to push for social and political change since the suffrage movements of the 1920s through the 1950s. Women have been active in guerrilla movements, left-wing political parties, and unions. Women's mobilizations also played a role in bringing down progressive presidents like Salvador Allende in Chile and João Goulart in Brazil. This chapter will examine women's social movements that emerged in the 1970s—during the dictatorships and economic crises in South America and guerrilla movements opposed to authoritarian regimes in Central America. This period also coincides with the emergence of the second wave of feminism. We will review the evolution of women's organizations and mobilizations, their nature, structures, goals and strategies, to discern patterns from the past and lessons for the future.

Historical Context

Women's activism for political rights dates back to the first successful struggle of middle- and upper-class women for suffrage in 1929 in Ecuador. Unexpectedly, the right to vote took longer to achieve in higher-income countries like Argentina and Chile, where women had to wait for the vote until after World War II. In Peru and Mexico, women did not win the right to vote until the mid-1950s and in Colombia not until 1957. Because women were perceived as conservative and likely to be influenced by the Catholic Church, suffrage was not championed by leftist or progressive parties (Calderón et al. 1992:3).

At times women did mobilize for conservative causes. In Brazil, religious, conservative women demonstrated against the progressive government of João Goulart in “Marches with God for Fatherland and Family” while praying the rosary. Goulart's government was replaced by a repressive military regime in 1964. Women also played a role in toppling the socialist government of Salvador Allende in Chile. Upon his electoral victory in 1970, middle- and upper-class women gathered in public mourning for the loss of democracy. Later, in a foreshadowing of their role against the dictatorship that followed, women organized in marches, banging empty pots and pans in protest against consumer shortages brought

on by the truckers' strikes under Allende (Sternbach et al. 1992:218–229, and Soares et al. 1995:306).

The nature of women's movements changed under the military dictatorships and economic crises that ensued in the 1970s in South America. We will see that in the context of political repression, women were driven by their private sphere concerns to organize both in protest against dictatorships and to fulfill their families' basic consumption needs. In the context of recession, debt crisis and economic stabilization policies of the 1980s, women's groups continued to provide goods and services no longer delivered by the state. Although women's activism was not initially driven by political ambitions, in the process of their activism, women forged a collective identity. In time, women began to struggle for their own political and social rights, as women (Molyneux 1998:221).

Transitions from Authoritarian Rule

On September 11, 1973, the Chilean armed forces, under the direction of General Augusto Pinochet, violently wrested power from Chile's democratically elected socialist president, Salvador Allende. The military coup broke sharply with Chile's established tradition of legitimate constitutional democracy, and of respect for political institutions as a means for resolving conflict. The economic policies and political methodology implemented by the military junta reversed Chile's decades-long history of distributive justice implemented by an activist state (Remmer 1980:282).

Pinochet resorted to extreme repressive measures in part to dismantle resistance to his radical free market economic program. His economic policies generated high levels of unemployment and eroded gains in the areas of health care, education, and housing. Pinochet targeted with the most severe repression those groups most likely to resist his policies—labor unions, political parties, university professors, students, and the urban poor—thereby disarticulating the population.

Despite the near complete closure of political space and demobilization of traditional political actors, sectors of Chilean society responded with a redefinition of *hacer el político*, doing politics. Most notably, women emerged to fill the vacuum left by the repression of union and political party leaders. Touched by the economic and political crises in their private-sphere roles as mother and provider for the family, women mobilized for political action.

The first groups to organize demonstrations in the face of the economic and political crises were women's. Women acted in part because men, as the main victims of the repression, could not. Either they were absent—arrested or disappeared—or it was too dangerous for them to do so. Hence women's marginal roles, if any, in the targeted political parties and unions afforded them an initial invisibility which allowed them to act politically (Chuchryk 1989:131). The character of women's mobilization reflected the two-pronged nature of regime repression: political and economic.

Brazil experienced a military coup in 1964 that lasted until 1985, with varying degrees of brutality and openness. During the early stages of the regime, repression was high and political protest limited. Political activity began to resurface by the mid-1970s, with popular sector and feminist activism (Soares et al. 1995:306). Much like in Chile, women in Brazil were able to organize because they were essentially invisible to the regime, which did not see them as political or as a threat, as it did the unions and political parties. In the mid-1970s, coinciding with the opening allowed by the military regime, the Feminine Amnesty Movement was able to organize, while such a group made up of men would not have been permitted (Alvarez 1989:26).

Throughout the region, women formed two types of groups—human rights and subsistence. In the process of organizing to protect their families from torture and imprisonment and to provide their basic needs, women from all social classes began to make the link between the institutionalized violence of state repression, on the one hand, and the patriarchal underpinnings of the oppression they experienced in their unequal gender relations at home (Jaquette 1989:210). We will see how a third type of movement emerged from women's experience with political and social activism outside the home—a self-conscious, at times avowedly feminist, women's movement. Feminist groups and a feminist consciousness developed out of the struggle for democracy, often in collaboration with activists from leftist political parties.

Human Rights Groups

The best known example of women's activism in defense of human rights under the South American dictatorships is the case of the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina. This group of mothers and grandmothers acted exclusively from a private-sphere concern for their "disappeared" children and spouses. They did not see themselves as "doing politics" when they marched silently in front of the presidential palace to protest the human rights abuses of the military dictatorship. Indeed, part of their ability to act without triggering a repressive response from the government was due to their seemingly apolitical nature. Political party activity had been banned by the Argentine dictatorship. Nor did the *Madres* even want to enter the political realm. Their demands grew out of their family concerns, and they aimed only to reestablish the integrity of their families (Jaquette 1989:189). Of course, the repercussions of their actions were indeed political, and they inspired women beyond Argentina to take political action.

In Chile, also in reaction to the disappearance, imprisonment, exile or torture of family members, women formed associations as wives and mothers of the victims of repression agitating for the return of political prisoners and for an end to the torture. These wives and mothers principally sought a reply from the government: either the release of their relative, or the truth about what happened to them. One such group was the *Agrupación de los*

Familiares de los Detenidos y los Desaparecidos, formed in 1974. As with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the same women routinely ran into each other at government offices, hospitals and prisons in search of information on missing family members. Initially the women sought each other's emotional support to cope with their trauma as helpless victims, because they did not immediately perceive their situation as "political". The Church, which also petitioned the government on behalf of the detained and disappeared, helped these wives and mothers form an organization to coordinate their struggle into a collective force (Chuchryk 1989a:134).

The *Agrupación* directed its first efforts at the criminal justice system, seeking writs of habeas corpus. However, the military often claimed no record of a detention, thereby rendering useless any legal recourse. So the relatives resorted to extralegal methods such as hunger strikes, chaining themselves to government palace gates, and street protests. The government arrested many women at one such protest in 1975. The group's character became decidedly more politicized after 1976 when members of the fallen Communist Party joined the *Agrupación*. This caused the membership to clearly define as political the issue of the detained and disappeared. Their efforts broadened to encompass support of the general fight for a return to democracy, as well as support for workers' rights and the return of the exiles (Chuchryk 1989b:158).

In addition to expanding their goals, the *Agrupación* also implemented a wide range of strategies, both internally and externally oriented. The Folkloric Group, formed in 1978, embodied both. It comprised small groups that gathered to make handcrafts, which afforded a therapeutic outlet for the women, while simultaneously providing a vehicle for articulating protest against the regime. The *Agrupación* also held workshops for the development of its own membership in the areas of political education, public relations and leadership training. Externally oriented strategies included public educational efforts aimed at raising the general population's consciousness that the crisis was political (as many Chileans did not view the Pinochet regime as a crisis) and an information campaign to mobilize international solidarity in opposition to the regime (Chuchryk 1989a:135–136).

Other human rights-oriented groups included the Families of Executed Political Prisoners, the Women's Committee of the Chilean Human Rights Commission, and the People's Rights Defense Committee (CODEPU) (Ríos 1986).

The Women's Committee, established in 1979 by professionals, housewives and union leaders, began publishing a newsletter *Hojita* in 1982. They focused their attention on solidarity with women who had been imprisoned and tortured. This focus on women extended to their educational outreach programs, which sought to foster an awareness of women's rights issues and to document women's legal situation in Chile (Chuchryk 1989a:137). CODEPU, in contrast, was not an exclusively women's organization; it provided legal defense for political prisoners, even those accused of acts of armed resistance.

Subsistence Groups

The second type of group to emerge in response to the economic repression of the military regimes was dedicated to fulfilling subsistence needs. In addition to imposing a *laissez faire* economic model that had devastating consequences for unemployment levels, the military government in Chile cut back many social services such as the free milk program and neighborhood health clinics, and it closed local self-help groups. Pinochet's policies increased hunger and malnutrition, especially for the urban working class. Women agitated for drinking water in the *poblaciones*, and, pooling their resources such as pots, pans and labor, set up communal soup kitchens (*ollas communes*) to help feed the children of the unemployed. Although opposed to such collective action, the junta did not close down the *ollas communes* for fear of exacerbating malnutrition. But they did closely monitor them for indications of political activity (Andreas 1977:121–125).

A similar phenomenon was taking place in Peru, which also experienced an economic crisis toward the end of the 1970s. A range of grassroots women's organizations emerged in response, supported by foreign aid agencies and governments, and created and staffed by professional and political women, often feminists. As in other countries, these groups were formed to meet subsistence needs for nutrition, health care, legal aid and employment training. Some, like the communal kitchens, were supported by the Catholic Church, others, like the "Glass of Milk" programs, were supported by the leftist municipal government of Lima, and the groups that provided health and legal aid services were often feminist NGOs (Blondet 1995:255–256). Historian Cecilia Blondet points out that each of these sponsoring entities used the distribution of food and services, and later technical assistance, to broaden their base of support. For women's groups, these collaborative activities served to strengthen their ties with women in poor urban sectors (1995:259–261).

Role of the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church began to play an increasing role under the dictatorships in South America. After the Second Vatican Council (1962 to 1965) and the Latin American Bishop's Council in Medellín (1968), the Church turned away from its exclusive alliance with powerful social and political oligarchies and focused on protecting and including the poor and marginalized sectors of society. Liberation theology, introduced at the Medellín conference, called for "a preferential option for the poor," and sought to address the social ills and injustices of the region. These new postures often put the Catholic Church in conflict with the military dictatorships in Chile and Brazil (although not in Argentina) over the abuse of human rights and the increase in inequality resulting from their free market economic policies (Htun 2003:79).

In Chile, the Catholic Church's *Vicaría de Solidaridad* played an important role by providing a space, resources, and accessories necessary for women's groups to address

subsistence needs. The *Vicaría* served as a protective umbrella to groups that otherwise would have been unable to function under the dictatorship. It also played a vital role in defending the human rights of political prisoners and their families (Delsing et al. 1983: 24; Chuchryk 1989a:149; Chuchryk 1989b:154).

Similarly, the Catholic Church in Brazil, conservative on issues of sexuality and gender relations, was appalled by the abuses of the military regime in the 1960s and 1970s, and began to protect those who opposed it. Working-class and poor women first reacted against the regime's social and economic policies by participating in "women's auxiliaries" to Christian Base Communities, organized around survival mechanisms. This novel experience of involvement in social activism outside the home politicized many women. Their experience led them to question not only the regime's social and economic policies, but also their own subordinate relations to men in the context of the family and community. Sonia Alvarez attributes this participation in Church-sponsored activities—and the participation of women in leftist groups and student movements opposed to the dictatorship—with broadening the base of women poised to embrace feminism (Alvarez 1989:21–22).

The Catholic Church also played a role in the development of the women's movement in Peru. Women achieved suffrage under General Manuel Odría in 1955. The first generation of women who exercised the vote in Peru was born in the 1930s. For this group, their formative years in Catholic schools instilled a deeply held sense of social responsibility and social justice. In fact, Odría granted women the vote precisely because he assumed that the influence of the Church would lead women to vote for his conservative party. But by the early 1960s, the post-Medellín Catholic Church, influenced by liberation theology, had turned its focus to the plight of the poor. The early feminists were first exposed to political activism through Church-related reform groups committed to creating a more just society, where they engaged with women from poorer social classes. Elite women from this generation developed and deepened their commitment to social change by volunteering with Church-sponsored groups like the Institute for Rural Education and Toward a Church of Solidarity, which promoted exchanges across classes (Bourque 1985:35–40).

Although in time the church hierarchy retreated from its progressive stance on certain issues, like family planning, women maintained their relationships with the nuns and priests with whom they worked on the ground for social change. The younger generation of Peruvian feminists who came to political activism in the 1980s was not formed by exposure to liberation theology, but drew its inspiration from leftist political parties, and tended instead to criticize the church for its position on reproductive rights and abortion (Bourque 1985:42–43).

Effect on Participants

The repression cut across class lines, so the organizations of relatives and the church groups served to bring together women of different socioeconomic classes. The *pobladora* housewife,

by assuming new responsibilities in organizations, developed contacts with professionals involved in the struggle for human rights, such as doctors, lawyers, professors, and social workers. Women discovered that, once allowed the opportunity to do a job, they could accomplish the task as well as men (Ríos 1986; Rozas 1986:247–249). This experience imbued women, who previously had been marginalized from political activity, with a new sense of empowerment.

This newfound confidence combined with a raised political consciousness—from contact with various socioeconomic classes—led women to think in terms of their shared subordination. In their work among the popular sectors, middle-class women affiliated with church groups often mixed with women from political parties of the left. When women of the popular classes brought up issues like contraception and unequal power arrangements with the men in other political groups to which they belonged, some women came to realize they were not necessarily united with these men against a common oppressor, but that as women they were uniquely oppressed both at home and in the world. This new consciousness operated in the formation of a women’s movement that came to identify itself as feminist. But not all women followed this path (Alvarez 1989:31–32).

To some extent, the nature of this activism conforms to Elsa Chaney’s image of women’s style of political participation, which she characterized as the *Supermadre*. Although her research looks at women in formal positions of political power, her empirical observations are also applicable to grassroots activism. Chaney found that a woman enters politics as “an extension of [her] family role” and she acts in that realm as if “tending to the needs of her big family” (Chaney 1974:273). Chaney’s study of women public figures, however, led her to conclude that this propensity constrained women from competing for leadership roles, thus inhibiting them from pushing for significant social reform. This was not the case for the women who organized to protest or protect their families under the military dictatorships of South America.

Because the military governments considerably narrowed the space for political activity, new flexible forms of political action and social protest emerged. The resulting groups incorporated previously marginalized actors—*pobladores* and women—who probably would have remained excluded from politics under democratic conditions. Furthermore, the struggle and agitation for various demands gave rise to the convergence of two social sectors. Professional women from the upper-middle class contributed material resources to the subsistence efforts of the *poblaciones*, *favelas*, and *pueblos jóvenes* (peripheral urban slums in Chile, Brazil, and Peru), and they also performed tasks of reflection and research that helped to raise the consciousness of those mobilizing against the dictatorships (Serrano 1986:74).

The nature and structure of the organizations—the fact that they were independent of political party affiliation and often included women of various socioeconomic classes—allowed them to stress unity in their mobilization and strategy, define an agenda in the absence of political parties, which were repressed, thus allowing the space for new movements to emerge and perhaps to succeed in a way that partisan politics might have failed (Garretón 1989:272–273).

Writing in a pamphlet at the time, one woman summarizes these implications for and about women vis-à-vis the Chilean junta (Alamonedá 1985:6):

Curious paradox, but the dictatorship has created favorable conditions for raising women's consciousness ... Women nowadays have had to go outside of their homes and organize among themselves because generalized firings forced them to ... The struggle for survival breaks with all myths, especially with the one that says that the man is the one who should work and maintain the family, and the woman should stay at home and care for the children ... Women discover ... that it is more possible to achieve something together than separately.

Participation had a groundbreaking ripple effect throughout the political spectrum. In leaving the private sphere, women began to value organization and the process of working together collectively. Once outside the home, they discovered their potential, which led them to question the confinement of their traditional role in the family. Furthermore, participating in the community put women in touch with other women with whom they shared common problems as women in relation to men in a patriarchal setting (Delsing 1983:39). This process of solidarity enhanced women's sense of self-worth, and led to a heightened feminist consciousness (Ibid.: 24).

Central America: Civil War, Peace Processes, and the Ongoing Debate

Women's movements in Central America are inextricably linked to the region's history of revolution. Unlike the Southern Cone, most women's organizations in Central America grew out of guerrilla movements that formed in the 1970s and 1980s. In Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, women joined clandestine movements to overthrow repressive governments. Yet these women rarely integrated into the revolution with feminist goals in mind. For most women, it was their experience as guerrillas and organizing as part of the revolution that led them later to shape a feminist agenda. Women's groups first formed under the auspices of the revolutionary leadership, with the intent of addressing the needs of women. The reality, however, was that these groups served primarily as a mechanism to recruit new women to the movement and provide general support to the revolution. Later, some of these same organizations reevaluated their goals and sought autonomy from the revolutionary parties in order to pursue an explicitly feminist agenda.

Historical Context

Revolutionary movements in Latin America famously began with the overthrow of Fulgencia Batista's government in Cuba in 1959. Cuban women, however, were allowed only a limited

role in the guerrilla struggle, and those women who did join the revolution largely served in support roles. Most historians place the number of female combatants in the Cuban struggle at roughly 5 percent (Kampwirth 2002:118). In comparison, women's participation in guerrilla movements swelled in the 1960s and 1970s in Central America. Studies indicate that in Nicaragua as many as 30 percent of FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) participants were women. Similarly, in El Salvador, United Nations demobilization records show that nearly 40 percent of FMLN (Frente Farabundo Marí para la Liberación Nacional) members were women (Molyneux, 1986).¹

Scholars attribute the larger numbers of women in Central American revolutions to two factors. First, the Cuban guerrillas used the *foco* strategy to overthrow the dictatorship. This tactic relied on a small, committed number of armed combatants to defeat a dictator, rather than the sheer force of the masses. According to Karen Kampwirth, Cuban revolutionary leaders viewed women as part of “the category of people who were not worth mobilizing” (Kampwirth 2002:127). Women did serve in support roles, such as cooks, but—for the most part—did not serve in combatant positions (Ibid.:127). Furthermore, few women were included in leadership positions in the Cuban revolutionary government that came to power in the following years.

In contrast, the mass mobilization tactic that was eventually adopted by FSLN leaders in Nicaragua and the FMLN in El Salvador required the participation of as many citizens as possible to overthrow the dictatorships—a strategy that necessitated the inclusion of women. Women in the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran revolutions fought as combatants and served as support workers, a number of whom reached leadership roles. Dora María Tellez served as head of the forces of the FSLN Western Front, and Mónica Baltodano led the FSLN troops in the surrender of Granada.

The second factor that changed the face of Latin American politics between the Cuban and Central American revolutions was the emergence of liberation theology in the Catholic Church. As in South America, the turn to liberation theology often placed religious leaders in opposition to dictatorships. Although the Catholic Church in Central America was notoriously conservative, liberation theology eventually found its place in the region. A number of revolutionary leaders were also clerics, such as Father Ernesto Cardenal and his brother Father Fernando Cardenal in Nicaragua, as well as Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador. Romero proved to be one of the most important leaders in the Salvadoran struggle against the military regime, due to his public condemnation of the state's human rights abuses. He announced cases of torture and disappearances during his weekly mass, which was broadcast

¹ Cited in Kampwirth 2002:2. It should be noted, however, that there is some controversy regarding the numbers of women participants in the FSLN, which largely revolves around the definition of the word “combatant” and the dates from which that data were collected. Estimates placing women's involvement as 30 percent of FSLN members were generally taken from the final years before the insurrection. For a detailed analysis of this debate, see Luciak 2001:16–23.

nationally to radio stations. In 1980, he was publicly assassinated in the middle of a service. One woman, who was just 11 when Romero was killed, recalled the influence of his murder: “Just as in all of El Salvador, it had quite an impact” (Kampwirth 2002:69).

One important method used by the Church to combat inequality was the creation of Christian Base Communities (CEBs), which sought to educate peasants in both religious doctrine and social justice. CEBs worked to mobilize peasants—and importantly, women—through grassroots organizing, hoping to overcome their historic marginalization (Walker 2003:41). In fact, many women were first “politicized” in Christian Base Communities or through other church activities. Religious leaders, such as Sister Maura Clarke, a Maryknoll nun in Ciudad Sandino, Nicaragua, helped women fight for basic utility services. Collective action at home was often the first step towards integrating into guerrilla movements later. Joining religious groups or student groups increased the chance of eventual recruitment by the guerrillas (Ibid.: 12, 31). Both Dorotea Wilson and Aminta Granera, two notable FSLN leaders, joined the Sandinistas through religious activity.

Revolutionary Women’s Groups

Nicaraguan women organized for both feminist and nonfeminist causes as early as 1837. The first wave of women fought for voting rights and access to education. By the 1920s, a small group of educated, bourgeois women referred to themselves as “feminists,” and a later movement of women supported the Somoza party in the 1950s. The contemporary women’s movement in Nicaragua, however, sees little connection to their predecessors. Most Nicaraguan feminists today link their activism to their participation in the Sandinista revolution.²

The reality, however, was that most women did not join the FSLN with feminist goals in mind. Although a few women joined with an explicitly feminist perspective,³ the majority of women collaborated for similar reasons as the men: they wanted to defeat the Somoza dictatorship. Within the FSLN, however, women began to coordinate. In September of 1977, several Sandinista women founded the Association of Women Confronting National Issues (AMPRONAC), which sought to defend both the rights of women and human rights. In 1979, following the triumph of the revolution, AMPRONAC was renamed AMNLAE (Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses “Luisa Amanda Espinosa”) and became the official women’s organization of the FSLN (Fernández Poncela 1997:38). The group’s early projects focused on literacy, health, housing and other issues that affected the lives of women. However, the priority of AMNLAE always remained the revolution, and in 1982,

² More information on the Nicaraguan women’s movement pre-FSLN is provided in González 2001:41–78.

³ Sofía Montenegro was one leader of the women’s movement who joined the Sandinistas in large part due to her feminist beliefs. See Randall (1994:286–311).

AMNLAE focused its resources on recruiting women into the military to fight the counter-revolutionaries, known as the “Contras.”

Throughout the 1980s, AMNLAE remained loyal to the FSLN, frustrating women who saw clearly the machismo that existed even within the revolutionary context. The very experience of participating in the guerrilla struggle made the prevailing sexism more obvious to Sandinista women. Women—who had trained and fought in combat in the mountains alongside men—returned to the workforce only to encounter gender discrimination from the very same men. Despite the leadership women demonstrated during the insurrection, including heading battalions and squadrons of soldiers, the nine-member FSLN national directorate had no female representatives.⁴ By 1989, women held only three ministerial posts in the FSLN government. Female representation in the Nicaraguan National Assembly was similarly low. In 1984, women comprised 13 percent of the elected delegates, and by 1990 that number had only increased to 16 percent. In other professions, men also outnumbered women (Ibid.: 41–43). The statistics demonstrate a continuation of institutionalized sexism, despite the supposed feminist goals of the FSLN.

Daisy Zamora, a Sandinista guerrilla who later served as the vice-minister of culture in the FSLN government, explained the contrast between the ideals of the revolution and women’s reality in Nicaragua:

It’s absolutely true that the revolution opened up a new space for women here. We fought alongside our male comrades and that produced an explosion of new possibilities. By the end of the war the old order had been completely disrupted, and all the women who had taken part had the opportunity to help construct a more just society. I think the problem was that this new space wasn’t accompanied by a new mentality on the part of most of the male-dominated leadership. What this meant was that there was a gap between what the revolution offered its women and what we women found in our day to day relationship with ‘Co-mandante X,’ a man still very much formed in the old ideas.⁵

Facing gender discrimination, Nicaraguan women disagreed over the most effective strategy to fight sexism. Some women believed that the best route was to continue to support the FSLN. Others saw the need to break away from the party. AMNLAE refused to address many issues central to the feminist cause, such as abortion and other topics related to sexuality, in order to preserve the FSLN’s relationship with the Catholic Church.⁶ In

⁴ Dora María Tellez ran for a seat in the National Directorate in 1991, but failed to be elected by Congress.

⁵ Interview with Daisy Zamora in Margaret Randall (1994:111).

⁶ Though the Catholic Church supported the organization of women and peasants to address the problem of poverty, Church hierarchy remained conservative on issues of sexuality.

the mid-1980s, a smaller group of women, who already identified themselves as feminists, formed PIE (Partido de la Izquierda Erótica) to address women's issues that were excluded from AMNLAE's agenda. These topics included violence against women, voluntary maternity and abortion, sexuality, freedom of sexual choice, and the right to political participation (Stephen 1997:60). Other women lobbied for greater autonomy of AMNLAE from the party leadership, particularly for the right to elect the general secretary of AMNLAE. In 1989, however, the FSLN announced that it would name Doris Tijerino as the general secretary of AMNLAE, ignoring the women's demands for democratization within the movement. The appointment of Tijerino—who at the time was national police chief and a staunch party loyalist—was a setback to the women who hoped to democratize AMNLAE.

The situation that women's groups in El Salvador confronted was similar. The civil war in El Salvador lasted from 1979 through January 1992, and it has been estimated that during that time, one out of every hundred Salvadorans was killed. There, as in Nicaragua, women's groups created under the patronage of the FMLN struggled to maintain their role as supporters of the revolution while also advocating for the rights of women. Unlike the FSLN, the FMLN in El Salvador was divided into five branches, and each division formed its own women's organization during the revolutionary struggle. Consequently, in El Salvador, there were a number of women's groups organized under the revolutionary party structure.⁷

In 1977, a group of Salvadoran women, with the support of the Catholic Church, founded the Co-Madres, an organization committed to protesting the disappearances of their relatives and the violence of the dictatorship. The group originally formed with only nine members, but in a few years its membership had risen to thirty. By the 1980s, they had been joined by solidarity delegations in the United States (Stephen 1997:30–31). The work of the Co-Madres focused on ending human rights abuses—advocacy work that caused many Co-Madres to be kidnapped and tortured by the dictatorship. In conversations about state violence, the Co-Madres learned that nearly every detained woman in El Salvador had also been raped. Moreover, husbands often disapproved of their wives' involvement in the Co-Madres. Women were expected to be at home, instead of out in the street protesting. As a result of these exchanges about gender, the Co-Madres began to work not only on human rights but also on women's rights, and in 1991, the group hosted a series of discussions to examine these issues in El Salvador. The transition to a more feminist agenda was difficult for some of the older and more conservative members, but the majority of Co-Madres saw the change as a necessary improvement.

Another influential women's group in El Salvador was Las Dignas (Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida). Las Dignas was created in July of 1990 as a subgroup of the Resistencia

⁷ See Kampwirth (2004:77–80) for a complete list of women's organizations in El Salvador and their political and religious affiliations.

Nacional (RN), one of the five arms of the FMLN, to address the concerns of women in the party. Soon after its formation, however, Las Dignas moved towards an autonomous agenda. By 1991, Las Dignas knew the FMLN was likely to become a legal political party. Rather than remain affiliated with the RN, the women decided to seek autonomy. Contact with other Latin American feminists strengthened these convictions. One member of Las Dignas traveled to Argentina for the Fifth Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentro* in 1990, an experience that prompted further determination to focus on women's rights rather than the political goals of the RN. The group began working with Nicaraguan feminists to hold workshops on sexuality, domestic work, violence against women, and power. They also began mobilizing for a Central American feminist meeting in Nicaragua in 1992.⁸

Las Dignas split from the RN in 1992, issuing a statement of autonomy that positioned the group as an independent feminist organization, inclusive of women from all political parties. Like AMNLAE in Nicaragua, Las Dignas struggled with its early ties to the revolution. But while AMNLAE continued to serve as a bastion of FSLN support through the decade of Sandinista government, Las Dignas quickly established its independence from the RN and the FMLN. Although the Co-Madres was not formed as part of a revolutionary group, its ideological trajectory closely mirrors groups with revolutionary origins like Las Dignas. Few women's groups in revolutionary Central America were originally structured with a feminist agenda. The Co-Madres initially focused solely on human rights abuses linked to the dictatorship. As their activism continued, they began a dialogue about gender that eventually caused them to reevaluate their organizational mission and add a focus on women's rights. It is important to note that this shift to a feminist agenda did not come without conflict—both among the women themselves and between the women's groups and the mostly male revolutionary leadership. As in Nicaragua, women in El Salvador disagreed over the strategies to fight gender inequality. Was it best to support the revolution, which promised a new type of society? Or was it necessary, in a context of male domination of the left, to work for feminist causes as an autonomous organization?

Maxine Molyneux addresses the question of autonomy for women's movements in her essay, "Analysing Women's Movements." Molyneux identifies the matter of authority as central to the decisions that women had to make regarding autonomy, specifically the question "from where does the authority to define women's goals, priorities and actions come?" (Molyneux 1998:226). As in South America, these questions also framed the debate in Central America, where women's organizations were founded under the hierarchical structure of guerrilla organizations. On reflection, Molyneux's thoughtful query invites critical thinking and open debate. During the 1980s, however, the question of autonomy was often reduced to the phrase *doble militancia* (literally, double militancy). In other words, could a woman be both a feminist and support a political party? (Alvarez et al. 2002:543).

⁸ For a complete discussion of the history of Las Dignas, see Stephen (1997:56–107).

This debate continued in Nicaragua and El Salvador for over a decade, reaching only the eventual conclusion that both independent feminist groups and political parties were necessary (Luciak 1998). In Guatemala, however, the issue of *doble militancia* never reached the same sense of urgency, as the Guatemalan women's movement lacked an official connection to the revolutionary party until recently. Though Guatemalan women organized to fight for the right to vote during the Arbenz government in the 1950s, the issue of gender was noticeably absent from the official mission statement of any of the revolutionary groups. Four revolutionary factions formed in the 1960s in opposition to the military regime, all of which later joined together to form the URNG (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca). Throughout the thirty-six years of civil conflict, none of these organizations prioritized the issue of gender equality. Comandante Lola, who later headed the URNG's Women's Secretariat, remarked: "It wasn't that we didn't consider gender issues important, but that our life was very hard, full of activity directly related to combat, to the recruitment of military units." The Women's Secretariat of the URNG was not formed until 1997, after the peace accords had been signed (Luciak 2001:181–189).

Lacking a women's arm of the revolutionary party, Guatemalan women organized independently to fight the massive human rights abuses and the disappearances of their relatives. Although these groups were organized against the military regime, they were not officially linked to the URNG. The Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM) was founded by four women on June 4, 1984 to pressure the government to locate disappeared husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons. Similarly, the Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala (CONAVIGUA) was formed in 1988 by Rosalina Tuyuc to find lost family members. These groups and other women's groups in Guatemala relied heavily on international funding, since they received essentially no support from the Guatemalan government. Though international funds provided a sustained source of money, these grants often restricted organizations to the expectations of the donors. Grantors preferred short-term projects with visible results. With the emergence of many new NGOs in Central America in the 1990s, the work of the women's movement was often dictated by these preferences (Berger 2006:32).

Autonomous Women's Movements and the Role of NGOs

With the FSLN electoral loss in 1990 in Nicaragua, the subsequent demobilization of the Contras, and the signing of the peace accords in El Salvador in 1992 and in Guatemala in 1996, women's organizations in Central America began to break from the revolutionary movements. Of the three nations, only the Guatemalan peace accords included a clause on gender equality and the role of women. Some analysts attribute this to the fact that the planning for the Guatemalan peace accords began after the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, which called for an increased participation of women in global conflict resolution. As a result, Guatemalan women's groups made up a large part of the Assembly

of Civil Service (ASC), the civil society constituency at the peace accords (Nakaya 2003: 463). Unfortunately, many of the reforms included in the accords were never implemented. This is due to a combination of factors, among them the lengthy amount of time it took to pass constitutional reforms, the failure to elect a new Congress, and the strength of the Guatemalan military compared to the URNG (Ibid.:464–465).

Unlike Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador did not mention gender in their disarmament agreements. The end of the civil wars, however, opened up new spaces for women to organize. In Nicaragua, the 1990 election of Violeta Chamorro—and the end of the FSLN government—brought many changes to the women’s movement. First, without the FSLN in power, AMNLAE no longer served as an official arm of the state. Second, Chamorro quickly cut government funds for social programs in her support of neoliberal economic policy, and organizations linked to the FSLN (including AMNLAE) lost funding. Moreover, user fees were introduced in the health and education sectors. These costs made basic health care and education unavailable to the poorest segments of the population. In response, the Nicaraguan civil sector organized to fill the gaps. The autonomous feminist movement began to include not only networks of activists but also non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In Nicaragua, the first of these feminist-based NGOs emerged before the end of FSLN government. In 1988, a group of women from the FSLN professional workers’ association founded the *Colectiva Masaya*. Their goal was to provide services for women’s health care as well as a physical place for women to congregate and share ideas. After 1990, more NGOs surfaced, many of which focused on health care for women. Although the Sandinistas had made large gains in health, particularly through mass vaccination campaigns, Nicaraguan women still faced grave health risks, including maternal morbidity, maternal mortality, and cervical cancer (Ewig 1999:85). NGOs provided much-needed services to poor women, while at the same time creating jobs for educated, middle-class women who previously had worked for the state. As in Guatemala, most Nicaraguan NGOs were financed through international donations and grants. *Servicios Integrales de la Mujer* (S.I. Mujer) and the *Centro de la Mujer IXCHEN*—two large and influential women’s NGOs—were founded at this time (Ibid.).⁹

In El Salvador, many women broke from the FMLN after the peace accords ignored the contributions of women during the war, and moved to work in NGOs to address the failures of the state. One of the most successful NGOs in El Salvador is *Las Madres Demandantes* (LMD), an off-shoot organization of *Las Dignas* that works to ensure compliance with court-ordered child support payments, an issue that affects women of all social classes. Though LMD largely aids poor women, wealthy and middle-class women also support the organization’s work. Furthermore, LMD has succeeded in drawing national attention to

⁹ Interestingly, the founder of the IXCHEN centers, María Lourdes Bolaños, was involved in the feminist group PIE in the 1980s. See Randall 1994: 307–8, for a discussion of the accomplishments of PIE members.

the issue as well as passing a number of measures that guarantee greater funds to children. By addressing an issue that affects women nationally, LMD has been able to achieve substantial changes. Similarly, women members of the Salvadoran Congress formed a caucus to fight violence against women, also a cross class issue. They were able to pass a series of laws condemning intra-familial and domestic violence (Blumberg 2001).

The success of Nicaraguan and Salvadoran NGOs is largely due to two factors. First, these organizations relied on the skills gained by women within the revolutionary movements. Though most feminist groups chose officially to separate from political parties, the women's experience as guerrillas honed their expertise as leaders and organizers. Women were linked nationally as a result of networks created during the revolution. The second reason that NGOs thrived in Central America was the extent of state failure to provide basic services to the population—and particularly, to the poor. The lack of state social services created a huge need, which NGOs willingly filled, financed heavily by international aid groups.

In addition to the growth of the NGO sector in the social services, Nicaraguan and Salvadoran feminists coordinated nationally to address the needs of women and increase female representation in politics. By this time, the international feminist movement had begun to influence Central American women. Forty-four Nicaraguan women, including members of PIE¹⁰ and a delegation from AMNLAE, attended the Fourth Latin American Feminist *Encuentro* in Taxco, Mexico in 1987 (Randall 1994:304). Unfortunately, many long-time feminists from South America found the presence of the Central American newcomers—consumed by the issue of *dobles militancia*—a burden (Alvarez 2002:546). Yet Central American women, and Nicaraguan feminists in particular, cite this *encuentro* as an important moment for the feminist movement in their countries. The affirmation of their feminist beliefs—compared to the narrow focus on the revolution at home—was a rejuvenating experience. Two women's groups in Guatemala, Tierra Viva and the Grupo Guatemalteco de Mujeres (GGM), formed directly following the Taxco *encuentro*. Nicaraguan feminist Sofía Montenegro left Taxco feeling similarly inspired. She explained to Margaret Randall that the “experience in Mexico was like a catharsis for us. We came back to Nicaragua feeling much stronger” (Randall 1994:307).

In the years following the end of the revolutions in Nicaragua and El Salvador, there were a number of regional gatherings of women. In March 1991, Nicaraguan feminists held the “Festival of the 52 percent”—named for the percentage of women in Nicaragua—to celebrate International Women's Day and offer an alternative to AMNLAE's national congress. Salvadoran women held the First National Women's Meeting in late 1991, and on January 8, 1992, eight hundred women convened for the first Nicaraguan Women's *Encuentro*. The theme for the Nicaraguan *encuentro* was “Unity in Diversity,” recognizing

¹⁰ Members included Sofía Montenegro, Gioconda Belli, María Lourdes Bolaños, Milú Vargas, Yvonne Siu, Malena de Montis, Ileana Rodríguez, Olguita Espinoza, Ana Criquillón, and Vilma Castillo.

the various factions of the Nicaraguan women's movement. For three days, women from various sectors gathered to discuss the future of the Nicaraguan women's movement. The result was a series of networks to address women's needs (Babb 2002:39–40). Nicaraguan women also remained connected to other feminists in Latin America. In March 1992, Nicaraguan and Salvadoran feminists met in Montelimar, a resort on the Pacific coast, to prepare for the sixth Latin American Feminist *Encuentro* to be held in El Salvador in November of 1993 (Ibid.; Stephen 1997:70–71).

Nicaraguan and Salvadoran women also organized campaigns to support female candidates and policies that benefited women. In El Salvador, a coalition of women's groups organized *Mujeres '94*, a campaign to create a national platform on women's issues that would be adopted by all political parties. A similar platform was created for the 1997 elections. Hampered by internal disagreements, the Salvadoran women's movement was unable to obtain strong consensus among the organizations in time to effectively lobby the political parties. In Nicaragua, women were better able to forge a pluralistic alliance for the 1996 elections, and presented an agenda six months before the elections. Women in both countries also pushed for quota laws, encouraged by success in other Latin American countries. Though the FMLN did not adopt a quota law in El Salvador in 1994, by the 1997 elections the party had reached an effective quota of 35 percent (Luciak 1998:41). In Nicaragua, a 30 percent quota was applied to the FSLN for the first time in 1996. The number of elected women was greater than in previous years, but a lack of support from men and an unwillingness of many women to run at the local level continued to hinder women's participation (Ibid.).

In Guatemala, women initially appeared to gain significant political power following the civil war. In the 1995 elections, three of six FDNG (a party formed as an offshoot of the URNG) representatives in Congress were women—Nineth Montenegro, Manuela Alvarado, and Rosalina Tuyuc. However, the election of these women reportedly had little to do with the gender movement, and more to do with their unique leadership abilities. Nineth Montenegro had founded GAM, and both Alvarado and Tuyuc had been instrumental in the fight for indigenous rights (Luciak 1998:182). Indeed, women later proved to be underrepresented in all Guatemalan political parties. By the 1999 elections, only eight women were elected to Congress. In addition to the previously discussed challenges that Nicaragua and El Salvador faced, Guatemala's indigenous population and low levels of literacy added to the difficulty of including the majority of women in politics. Furthermore, there were a total of 16 indigenous languages within the URNG, and many indigenous women did not speak Spanish. In areas of largely URNG support, over 80 percent of residents lived in poverty. Only 66 percent of the general population was literate. These social conditions made it difficult to unite women to push for greater representation in politics (Ibid.:58).

Without strong representation in Congress or at the executive level in any of these countries, the feminist movement and feminist NGOs in Central America continually

battled the governments on issues related to women. A number of structural changes—as well as the political agenda of elected leaders—threatened to hinder the effectiveness of women's groups. In Nicaragua, the election of Arnaldo Alemán as president in 1996 was a low point for the feminist movement. Alemán attempted to reduce the role of the Nicaraguan Women's Institute (INIM) from a state agency to a less powerful office within the newly created Ministry of the Family. The new ministry would promote a traditional family structure, in direct opposition to much of the work of the women's movement. At the same time, Alemán proposed a revision of Article 147 of the civil code. This revision would increase government control of NGOs, enabling the government to have power over NGOs' ability to raise and request funds. Fortunately, neither of the proposed changes was passed in its original form, and various revisions weakened their mandates. However, NGO leaders and feminists were left gravely aware of the potential of the executive to undermine their movements (Kampwirth 2003:139).

NGOs have made significant progress in providing services to women, but the feminist movement continues to confront a number of challenges. None of the Central American countries mentioned in this chapter have decriminalized abortion. In El Salvador, a 1998 constitutional amendment declared abortion illegal in all circumstances, increasing punishment to up to 50 years in prison. Article 1 of the Salvadoran Constitution now states that the government must protect life from the "very moment of conception." (Hitt 2006). The language of the revision is rooted in the strong influence of the Catholic Church in El Salvador. In Nicaragua, the situation is similarly grim for women's rights activists. Church hierarchy practically wrote the new law that was passed in November of 2006, outlawing even therapeutic abortion in cases of rape or where the mother's life is in danger. Both the Sandinistas and Liberal Alliance, which account for 91 out of 92 seats in the Nicaraguan legislature, approved the law's passage. Although Daniel Ortega, the recently elected FSLN president, professed liberal views on reproductive rights during the revolution, his recent return to Catholicism leaves no hope for an overturn of the law during his tenure (Tobar 2006). Abortion is also illegal in Guatemala. In addition, Guatemala faces increased violent crime against women. Since 2001, more than 700 women have been murdered in Guatemala. Observers have begun to call these crimes "femicides" (NACLA 2004:46).

The situation for women is compounded by recent undemocratic action by government leaders. In Nicaragua, the agenda of the women's movement now focuses increasingly on the state's lack of democracy, in addition to the traditional themes of women's rights. In 2004, a number of long-time feminists joined together to form the Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres de Nicaragua (MAM) to address the lack of democracy in their country. The organization's slogan—"For democracy, autonomy, and liberty: Stop the Pact!"—presents a political rather than feminist agenda. The pact, an agreement between Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega and Liberal Alliance leader Arnaldo Alemán to consolidate their power, is an example of the recent deterioration of Nicaraguan democracy. In fact, leaders of the

women's rights movement in Nicaragua currently state that the largest problem for women in their country is the lack of a democratic government.¹¹

National women's networks and feminist NGOs have been crucial to promoting the rights of women in Central America, and these organizations continue to play a large role in distributing the international aid that reaches the region. Since the end of the wars, women have achieved progress in many areas—by implementing quota laws, increasing dialogue among sectors, and providing social services to women. However, violence against women and a lack of individual freedoms continue to motivate women's groups to organize and advocate for change in these countries. Additional gains could be made with the election of more women to power, on both regional and national levels. But to be effective, elected women and men would have to work with feminist groups to ensure that the voice of women's organizations reaches national legislatures. Women's groups have, at times, felt isolated from female government officials, who may have other priorities. Alliances between elected women and feminist leaders could help to ensure the rights of women in Central America.

Autonomy and External Influences

Women's Movements vis-à-vis Political Parties

In the 1930s and 1940s, women's movements fought for the vote independent of political parties—mainly because the parties, wary of women's conservatism and allegiance to the Catholic Church, were not natural allies in the struggle. Once the vote was won—in 1932 in Brazil, 1946 in Guatemala, 1949 in Chile, 1955 in Peru and Nicaragua, and 1961 in El Salvador¹²—women entered the parties, because that was the field in which the game of politics they had fought to enter was played. As Patricia Chuchryk notes, the goal of the women's suffrage movement was political participation, not regime change. By the 1980s, as Brazil and Chile were poised to begin their transitions to democracy, women were hyper-aware of the need to maintain autonomy or have their issues co-opted and diluted by the return of political parties. The parties, much like the democratic governments that followed, did incorporate women's committees or agencies, but women's concerns were just one among a long list of competing priorities (Chuchryk 189a:173–174). Such is the nature of democracy. And in a democracy, parties are needed to channel demands from civil society into the policy making process, which is comprised of a series of negotiations.

¹¹ Azahálea Solís Román, head of the Law and Equality program at the Center for Constitutional Rights in Managua, and Sofía Montenegro, of the Center for Communication Research in Managua, both listed the national threat to democracy as the largest problem facing women in Nicaragua today (Managua 2007).

¹² Although Salvadoran women won the right to vote in 1939, they were not allowed to stand for election until 1961.

Across the region, women's movements either remained separate from parties, or struggled to strike a balance between their work within parties and their efforts to promote the feminist goals of the movement. In the context of politics emerging under an authoritarian regime, activists were faced with either maintaining the unity of the opposition in its struggle to defeat the regime and restore democracy on the one hand, or fragmenting among parties that represented the interests of different sectors, on the other. For women, the choice was between either pursuing broad-based women's movement politics or joining forces with single-issue interest groups so as not to conflict with party loyalties. It turned out that these latter groups, organized around issues like domestic violence or equal pay for equal work, survived while the broader "movement-oriented" feminist groups were weakened by the return of political parties (Alvarez 1989:45–48).

The Brazilian case offers an example of the tension that began to develop between women who wanted to focus their struggle on gender equity and women's rights issues within the women's movement, and those who felt the larger goals of recovering democracy and seeking broader social justice should be pursued first. At the Second Women's Congress in Brazil in 1980, women from political parties of the Left tried to take back the agenda from feminist women, and return the orientation of the women's movement to a broader concern for the economic problems of popular sector women. The feminists held their ground against the sometimes-violent pressures and manipulation of the partisan Left, and stuck to their mission of unifying women around gender-specific demands (Ibid.: 42–43).

The following year Brazil held its first elections since the military coup, resulting in the reemergence of political parties and the deepening of partisan rifts among women in the movement. An inevitable struggle ensued among the various opposition parties for the loyalty and votes of participants in women's movement organizations. Political parties came to view the support of feminists as important to burnishing their progressive credentials and their reputation as committed democrats (Ibid.: 41).

In Ecuador, as elsewhere, women organized in opposition to the dictatorship in the 1970s, but their numbers were small, and they participated as part of women's fronts established in trade unions, peasant federations, neighborhood organizations, and political parties. Although women participated in the protests against the dictatorship, in the period of re-democratization, women's concerns were rarely discussed. As elsewhere, these were thought to be subordinate to the struggle to reestablish human rights. It was not until the economic crisis of the 1980s that women began to organize in force. Inspired by the UN Decade for the Advancement of Women, and frustrated by neglect of their issues by the parties, Ecuadoran women began organizing their own groups to pressure from outside traditional power structures. Bending to the pressure from these women's groups, and from the international arena, the state began to focus on women's issues (Lind 1989:135–139).

In Peru, the relationship between social movements and the military government took a different route. The military coup led by General Velasco in 1968 actually represented a

reaction against the dominant political class and not against the people. In fact, it initially opened new opportunities for political participation and representation for groups that were previously excluded. By the late 1970s, however, the military government replaced the progressive reforms of the Velasco period with social adjustment policies that hurt the poor, who then mobilized against the government. Their demands, taken up by the parties of the left, were more economic than political. Women of all classes were affected by the economic crisis and joined the protests against the government (Barrig 1989:115–117).

At the same time, women's groups began forming, with support from international aid agencies and private foundations, guided by a commitment both to community development and to women's rights. In Peru, as elsewhere, women became politically active out of a commitment to helping the poor. They worked for improving the literacy rates, nutrition, health, legal rights, and job prospects of the poor. These women struggled to bring about social and economic change through their membership in Church-sponsored reform groups, independent groups, and political parties of the left (Bourque 1985:40–42).

At first, some Peruvian women exercised *doble militancia*, working both within the parties for political change and outside the parties for feminist causes and in opposition to male domination (Jaquette 1986:190). Those working for reform from within the political parties encountered party leaders who either ignored their feminist concerns or isolated them from influencing party platforms. These women considered themselves feminists, but chose not to label themselves as such in order to avoid being accused of “undermining the revolutionary potential of the poor by pitting them against men” (Bourque 1985:41).

Although the younger generation of feminists in Peru came to their political activism through involvement in parties of the left, they felt excluded and ignored by those parties. This led them to create independent feminists groups, like Action for the Liberation of Peruvian Women (ALIMUPER), the Flora Tristán Center for the Peruvian Woman, Manuela Ramos Movement, Women in Struggle, Perú Mujer, and the Women's Socialist Front, among others. These groups embraced a range of feminist issues, including the legalization of abortion, and organized in solidarity with the FSLN in Nicaragua. They eventually formed an umbrella organization, the Women's Organizations' Coordinating Committee, to combine their efforts in support of progressive social reform (Ibid.; Blondet 1985:258).

These women's groups shared a commitment to fighting for the rights of the poor, but in the context of fighting all oppression. Yet they were also disillusioned with the sexism and rigid hierarchies of the parties of the left. Like the Sandinista women's frustration with their male counterparts in Nicaragua, women in Peru encountered gender inequity even in progressive parties. In 1981, Peru's women's groups organized a Metropolitan Encounter in Lima where they joined their critique of socioeconomic inequalities with a denunciation of the patriarchal power relations between men and women. They began to argue openly for the autonomy of feminist groups from political parties (Barrig 1989:125–126). As Virginia

Vargas said, feminism is an expression of women who are “united in their sexual oppression to all other forms of oppression” (Jaquette 1989:190).

This isolation from the parties came with a political price, however. Peruvian women fled the leftist parties because they felt marginalized and their issues ignored, and in turn isolated themselves in autonomous feminist groups. When competitive democracy reemerged, some of these women’s groups pooled their resources and formed an autonomous leftist coalition to run in the elections. They were defeated (Ibid.). Autonomy is not only a failed electoral strategy; it also diminishes the arenas in which the movement’s issues can be promoted. Women effectively marginalized themselves and their issues from political power. This led many women’s groups to become dependent on support from abroad—from international foundations and foreign governments’ development agencies—and thus, ironically, they put their autonomy at risk, once again (Barrig 1989:125–127).

International Influences

Throughout this period, women began to share experiences across countries and continents. During the military dictatorships, many women from the Southern Cone countries emigrated to Europe. Some exiles returned to Brazil during the opening of the mid-1970s, bringing with them influences from reproductive rights movements in Italy and France, and ideas about the need for women’s groups to secure and maintain their autonomy from male-dominated institutions like the Church, political parties, and unions (Alvarez 1989:40).

The emerging women’s movement in Latin America was reinforced by international pressure and solidarity that coalesced in the launching of the United Nations Decade for the Advancement of Women in 1975. The worldwide meeting that convened in Mexico City that year issued declarations that called on governments to improve the health, employment opportunities and educational levels of women. Such proclamations resonated at the national level throughout the region.

In 1975 in Brazil, influenced by the UN conference in Mexico City, and given space to dialogue with civil society by the military’s *abertura* (opening), women organized an International Women’s Day celebration—the first mass mobilization since 1967 (Ibid.: 26). As in other countries, middle-class Brazilian women—some linked to church groups, others linked to political parties—interacted with women of the popular sectors in their work in the *favelas* addressing the social service deficit under the military regime. The educated, middle-class women brought a feminist consciousness that began to permeate the agendas of the popular women’s groups. By 1978, International Women’s Day celebrations reflected more gender-specific calls for social justice. For example, rather than focusing on running water, women demanded equal pay for equal work, day-care centers for the children of working-class mothers, social services for female heads of household, and reform of family and reproductive health laws (Ibid.: 26–35).

By 1979 in Brazil, a full-fledged women's movement was forming, evidenced by the formation of up to 100 women's groups, comprised of women from across social classes, spanning the political spectrum. The groups' focus reflected feminist concerns, such as domestic labor, day care centers, equal pay for equal work, women's political participation, and, for the first time, female sexuality. However, in the 1979 Congress of São Paulo, women who organized the platform, cautious not to lose the support of the allies they had worked side by side with in the Church and in leftist political parties, carefully selected themes that would not offend. Thus, the platform hewed to safe issues like the provision of day-care centers by the state and private enterprises and equal pay for equal work (Ibid.: 36–38).

The UN Decade for the Advancement of Women was also influential in Ecuador, where women's organizations received support from women's groups throughout Latin America, and financial support—and ideological influence—from international development agencies globally (Lind 1992:143).

In Peru, the Velasco government, although progressive in many arenas, did not say much on women's issues. However, General Velasco's activism in the non-aligned movement led him to support international movements of other sorts, including the first UN conference on women in 1975. Peru's participation in the preparatory conferences breathed new life into the National Council of Peruvian Women. Peru sent large delegations of women to the Mexico City meeting, hence inserting itself firmly into the international women's movement. Peruvian women lawyers and professionals criticized laws that discriminated against women and worked to reform the legal code. In 1979, the Constitutional Assembly, formed by the military government, included guarantees of equal rights for women in the new constitution, and Congress rewrote the civil code to remove discriminatory laws (Bourque 1985:41).

Intra-Regional Influences—The Encuentros

Beginning in 1981, Latin American feminists gathered from countries across the continent to share their experiences in social movements working to restore democracy and human rights, and for some, struggling as women to promote a feminist agenda. The first *Encuentro* (Encounter) was held in Bogotá, Colombia in 1981 and attracted some 200 women from throughout the region. Disagreements surfaced from the start over the question of autonomy, pitting women who believed their organizations ought to maintain ideological and organizational independence from political parties against those who practiced *doble militancia*—the simultaneous involvement in political parties of the Left dedicated to the class struggle, and participation in feminist groups working to end gender-based oppression. Despite this dissension over tactics, participants agreed that women suffer a particular oppression both at home and in society at large. Their shared agenda included

the struggle to end the double burden, to guarantee equal pay for equal work, and to demand the right to reproductive choice. Most of the women came from the political left, and remained committed to their party's goals. But others, frustrated with male-controlled parties, believed that socialism could not overcome women's oppression—that women instead needed to establish a footing independent of political parties. Thus was planted the seed of discord between those who became known as the *institucionalistas*—feminists willing to work with other institutions like parties, the state or non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—and the *autónomas*, who argued for independence (Sternbach et al. 1992:217).

The second *Encuentro* took place in Lima in 1983—600 women from throughout Latin America attended. The overarching theme of this meeting was patriarchy and gender power relations. The tension at this encounter was between the interests of popular sector women and feminists. The third *Encuentro* in 1985 was hosted in Bertioga, Brazil, where 900 women converged. Conflict between the parties of the left and the feminists played out dramatically at this meeting. A busload of women from the *favelas* arrived at the site of the encounter, demanding to be admitted without paying the fee. This incident inserted race and class issues—and political party manipulations—front and center into the regional women's movement. Conference organizers had already arranged for the participation of a number of local low-income women without charge. Local feminists blamed the Labor Party (PT) for orchestrating the intrusion as a way to discredit feminists as bourgeois and unconcerned with the problems of poor and marginalized women. This clash over the competing priorities of class, race, and gender continues to simmer.

The fourth *Encuentro* in 1987 took place in Taxco, Mexico, where 1,500 women assembled, including, for the first time, a sizeable number of Central American women. This encounter brought together a combination of feminist activists promoting attention to women's health, domestic violence, contraception, abortion, and sexuality, with women who struggled for survival issues. The fifth *Encuentro* was held in San Bernardo, Argentina in 1990 and attracted some 3,000 women, this time including legislators—feminism had arrived (Ibid.: 217–230). Thanks in part to the UN World Conference on Women in 1975, feminism was beginning to achieve public acceptance. The sixth *Encuentro* took place in Costa del Sol, El Salvador in 1993.

These early *Encuentros* provided a place for women's movement activists to meet across countries and share theories and strategies as individuals, and not as representatives of groups or tied to official international institutions—like the series of UN conferences. As we have seen, many women became active in women's movement groups that emerged in response to survival needs. Through this work, their concerns gradually evolved to include feminist issues that were ignored by the parties of the left and by the state, like reproductive choice, female health concerns, domestic violence, and state-provided child care. Coming together with women from other countries struggling for the same set of demands and fac-

ing similar obstacles nurtured a feminist consciousness in many women and strengthened their movements (Ibid.: 226).

The *Encuentros* also fostered the development of regional solidarity networks of women working on common goals, like the Latin American and Caribbean Black Women's Network founded at San Bernardo, the lesbian feminist network formed at a regional preparatory meeting preceding Taxco, and the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health and Reproductive Rights Network (Alvarez et al. 2002:546).

On the other hand, the *Encuentros* also highlighted divisions among the women who attended, based on class, ideology, and their relationship to established institutions. A rift developed between the *autónomas* who insisted on maintaining independence from any institutions—be they political parties, the state, or NGOs—that placed women's rights in a subsidiary position to other goals, and the *políticas* or *institucionalistas* who exercised a strategy of *dobles militancia*, working both within the political parties and women's movements groups (Ibid.: 543).

These tensions exploded in the seventh *Encuentro* held in Cartagena, Chile in 1996. The *autónomas*, who considered themselves the true feminists, accused the *institucionalistas* of selling out to the established order. But a third stream emerged, those who referred to themselves as *ni las unas, ni las otras* (neither the one nor the other). They tried to reclaim and broaden the concept of autonomy, so that it did not exclusively refer to sources of money or degree of institutionalization, but rather to a commitment to a transformative agenda for the betterment of women's lives and society (Ibid.: 557). The fact is that most women lived the ideals of both the *institucionalistas* and the *autónomas*—maintaining an involvement in the movement and a commitment to its vision, while working in institutional settings (Ibid.: 560).

A generational divide within the women's movement emerged at the eighth *Encuentro* in Juan Dolio, the Dominican Republic in 1999, and suggests that the issue focus of the movement may yet change, as well as its methodology. Young feminists raised questions about how older women maintained control and power in the movement. Other traditionally excluded groups like Afro-descendent feminists, poor women, and lesbian feminists brought to the fore how race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality offer different lenses through which gender oppression can be experienced. Despite the fact that these issues have been present at the *Encuentros* from the beginning, and diversity has always been touted as an ideal of the women's movement, issues of race and sexual orientation have not explicitly been placed on the agenda (Ibid.: 563–566).

Women's Agencies in Government

A heightened consciousness of gender issues not only affected women, but governments and society at large. The UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 was

particularly instrumental in strengthening women's organizations and pressuring governments to respond to their demands. In the context of a raised awareness in civil society of gender equity issues, many governments—and by now, most—formed agencies and departments, and in some cases ministries, devoted to promoting women's rights and improving the status of women (Franceschet 2007:1).

After the transitions to democracy, tension among participants in women's organizations swirled around their relationship to these newly created women's agencies. Some women advocated for remaining autonomous from government agencies in order to maintain control of the women's movement agenda and to avoid co-optation. Other women supported the new agencies, went to work for them, or worked in NGOs that took on contracts from the agencies to carry out their work. This division among the feminist movements persists today (Ibid.: 5).

In Brazil the first democratic government created the National Council on Women's Rights (CNDM) in 1985, which actually proved to be quite effective, despite having only an advisory capacity, limited budgetary authority, and no power to implement or execute policies. The council was comprised of representatives from women's organizations who were open to input from their former colleagues. In fact, rather than co-opting the agenda-setting power of social movements as many analysts feared, in this case, having fellow travelers inside the government advocating for shared priorities, actually strengthened the women's movement and provided conduits for groups on the ground to channel their priorities through the council to government authorities (Alvarez 1989:52–57).

This belies the notion that feminists must choose either autonomy or integration. In Brazil, feminists were able simultaneously to maintain their integrity and independence working in special interest groups pressuring the government to adopt the movement's priorities, while their counterparts, who had opted to take positions within the government women's agency, were able to promote their issues from within. In fact, the success of this strategy is evidenced by the gains the Brazilian women's movement has achieved: women's police stations, robust domestic violence legislation, progressive day-care policies, antisexist education reform, family planning and reproductive health policies, and women's access to government-controlled media (Ibid.).

Long before the transition to democracy, in 1970 the Ecuadoran government had created an agency within the Ministry of Labor, the National Department of Women, in response to pressure from the Organization of American States' Inter-American Commission on Women. This evolved in the 1980s into the National Office of Women (OFNAMU). Unlike in Chile and Brazil, Ecuador's government agency became the source of a heightened feminist consciousness for the women who worked there. In turn, as some women left their government jobs in inevitable frustration with the slow pace of change, lack of independence, and meager budgets, they went to work in autonomous research

centers and in activist groups. This influx of women from the government agency served to strengthen an independent women's movement, which continued to pressure and influence government policy. In the case of Ecuador, the state both contributed to and was affected by the development of women's mobilization into movements (Chuchryk 1989a:140–141).

The first democratic government to take office in Chile in 1990, headed by President Patricio Aylwin of the *Concertación*, inaugurated a women's agency with ministerial rank, the *Servicio Nacional de la Mujer* (Sernam). The right-wing parties were opposed to Sernam and wanted to limit its role to coordination, to isolate it from direct contact with feminists. Sernam also met resistance from the coalition's own center-right party, the Christian Democrats, who were put off by its feminist cast. In the end, Sernam maintained ties with women's organizations and professional NGOs as technical consultants, but not as representatives of civil society. According to Marcela Ríos Tobar, Sonia Alvarez, and other critics, this arrangement further undermined the strength of women's movements in Chile (Tabar 2003:262–263).

This pessimistic view, however, does not take into account Sernam's influence on the policy agenda embraced by women's groups. According to research and analysis by Susan Franceschet, Sernam has developed considerable capacity to collect, analyze, and disseminate data about women's economic, political and social status in Chile. Gender disaggregated data collection is no small feat, and something that women's groups have been demanding of governments and international institutions for years—in order to make possible the setting of benchmarks and monitoring of government compliance with commitments. In fact, Sernam successfully promoted aggressive reform of Chile's domestic violence legislation by educating the public and lawmakers about the extent and seriousness of domestic violence in the country. Sernam also pressured the National Statistics Institute to produce data disaggregated by sex, and designed an interagency program that requires all public services to incorporate gender goals into their programs. Failure to comply results in financial penalties for bureaucrats. The resulting data has provided both Sernam and women's advocates in civil society with useful tools to promote legislation and formulate policies to advance gender equity (Franceschet 2007).

Across countries, the work of women's agencies has been most effective when agency staff work in concert with women's legislative caucuses (*bancadas*) and women's movement advocates in civil society. Susan Franceschet documents the effectiveness of these cross-sectoral alliances that were responsible for passing far-reaching reform to domestic violence laws in Chile and Brazil, in 2005 and 2006, respectively (10, 4 and 8). Other factors that determine the effectiveness of women's agencies include their placement within the power hierarchy of the state—only eight have ministerial rank—the size of their budgets and staff, and whether they have enforcement authority over other government agencies, or their “power” is limited to persuasion (Ibid.: 5–7).

Globalization

The series of UN-sponsored international conferences¹³ and international norm-setting exercises (like the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW) enhanced the globalization of the women's movement and the worldwide promotion of women's agenda issues (Jaquette 2003:334). The 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was particularly influential. It turned on the spigot of international funding in support of a proliferation of regional and national preparatory conferences. Although welcome, this raised renewed concerns about the threat that foreign funding poses to the independence of local women's organizations, and how it weakens their capacity to control their own agenda. Most women's groups, however, viewed Beijing as a boon to the women's movement, invigorating their organizations and bringing renewed attention to the issues of gender equity (Alvarez et al. 2002:552–553).

On balance, globalization has been good for the promotion of women's issues and the development of women's organizations throughout Latin America. The series of international conferences sponsored by the UN has served to set norms adopted by governments, and has spawned a tidal wave of NGOs devoted to helping governments craft and carry out policies designed to advance gender equity. This growth is witnessed by the increase in numbers of NGOs who participated in the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975 (5,000) to the number at the Beijing conference in 1995 (25,000).

The Return of Politics

With the transition to democracy in the Southern Cone and Brazil, the autonomy debate faded, as women entered political parties, state agencies, and NGOs, and brought their feminist ideals, issues, and goals with them. But in the 1990s a new rift emerged between those women who went on to pursue policy advocacy *modus operandi*, working to advance an agenda of gender rights through governments, NGOs, and international forums, and those who preferred to avoid formal institutions and to center their focus on identity and solidarity issues within women's movements at the community level (Alvarez et al. 2002:548).

Several forces were at play to encourage the dominance of feminists working to advance policy goals via formal institutions. With the return of democratic politics, women not only entered political parties, but they began to compete for seats in legislatures, for appointed positions in government, for positions in the newly installed women's agencies,

¹³ The 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro; the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna; the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo; the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing; the 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen; and the 1996 Second UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in Istanbul (12,548).

and, with support from international foundations and foreign governments, many went on to found and staff professional, issue-oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Some analysts like Sonia Alvarez, Marcela Ríos Tobar, and others (Alvarez 1999:181–209; Franceschet 2007; Alvarez et al. 2002; Ríos Tobar 2007; Ríos Tobar 2003) point out that government agencies increasingly began to depend on these professional NGOs as surrogates for civil society, treating them as intermediaries for larger constituencies. Alvarez and others point out that the problem with this scenario is that the NGOs, while staffed by professional women who share a feminist agenda, have lost their links to women's groups on the ground. NGOs with the highest level of technical capacity tend to attract international foundation funding and government contracts, thus strengthening their capacity to evaluate policies and carry out programs. Analysts agree that while technically competent, these organizations are not necessarily representative of anyone, but yet are setting the gender policy agenda. Not surprisingly, women's movement groups who are critical of the government tend not to be consulted as interlocutors or selected as partners to carry out programs (Alvarez 1999:181–194).

The independent voice of these expert NGOs is further undermined by their dependence on the state for financing. International donors have reduced their foreign aid to countries in South America at the same time that the state is shrinking its social service activities, and increasingly relying on professional NGOs to carry out training and other programs. According to research by Maruja Barrig in 1997, many Chilean feminist NGOs depended on state funds for 10 to 25 percent of their budgets, and Colombian NGOs for 40 to 50 percent of their budgets (Ibid.: 196). So results-oriented technical NGOs focused on policy impact are more likely to attract funding and have an influence than the traditional women's movement groups, which are more geared to feminist consciousness-raising and anti-establishment mobilizations (Ibid.: 197). While there is nothing wrong with increasingly professional women's issue NGOs, what may be lost in this process is the creative give and take of agenda setting that has the potential to transform the cultural landscape. Professional NGOs may be reluctant to bite the hand that feeds them, thus movement-oriented feminist groups may be in danger of disappearing.

Some Concluding Thoughts on a Future Trajectory

Women's social movements of the 1970s and 1980s were formed to challenge the government, its economic policies and political practices, and to change social attitudes. Predictably, the transitions from military dictatorships to civilian rule brought political parties back to center stage. There has been much hand-wringing among feminists over whether this would spell the demise of women's social movements. But they ought not to lose sight of the limitations of movements. With the dawn of competitive democratic politics, autonomy from institutions may serve to marginalize women and diminish their influence

on the political policy process. Many women have realized that if they are to be effective in getting their issues onto the public policy agenda, they must play the game of politics. At times, this may mean participating in male-dominated institutions like political parties, and even in the government itself, in order to promote gender equality.

By the 1990s, many of the groups that made up the movement began to evolve in order to survive and continue pursuing their goals in the new political context. There has been a clear shift among the majority of women's groups toward what Hugo Hecló termed "issue networks." According to Mala Htun's analysis, issue networks have a connection to social movements, and often emerge from them, as is the case with many women's NGOs. Unlike social movements, though, issue networks focus on specific policy issues, and are not comprised exclusively of civil society actors. In the case of the NGOs that emerged from the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s, they are fighting for specific goals like the legalization of divorce, equal treatment under the law, reproductive choice, and abortion. But the goals of a movement, *per se*, would be broader, and would include transforming social attitudes, behavior, and even cultural institutions (Htun 2003:15).

The emergence of these single-issue NGOs brought to the fore the fear of many social movement activists that they would lose their agenda-setting edge by cooperating with the state (Jaquette 2003:342). Others lament that the dominance of NGOs has crowded out traditional forms of feminist mobilization, like marches in the streets or consciousness-raising groups (Ríos Tobar 2003:365–366). But weren't these very NGOs born of the failure of political parties and governments to address women's concerns—such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, and abortion? Weren't they an expression of women's groups setting the agenda? The very existence of these NGOs is a testimony to the evolution of the women's movement from a practical response to survival issues to an innovative focus on the very feminist concerns that now absorb single-issue NGOs. It would seem to count as a success to have governments interested in what they have to offer.

Another perceived threat to the "movement" nature of women's NGOs is their increasing professionalization and symbiotic relationship to funding from the state and international donor agencies. This phenomenon is analyzed by Sonia Alvarez in her 1999 article on the Latin American feminist NGO boom (Alvarez 1999:342). She raises concerns about the "NGO-ization," or increasing professionalization of women's movement politics, which undermines the capacity of women's NGOs effectively to monitor and critique government policy. She acknowledges the important role that NGOs played in the 1980s and 1990s, and attributes their success to their ability to maintain a "hybrid nature." That is, they were able to advance a progressive feminist policy agenda, while simultaneously sustaining their relationship with their base—the broader women's movement and poor women's community organizations on the ground. She goes on to argue, though, that NGOs have now lost this "hybrid nature" due to the influence of financial support and contracts from governments and international aid agencies that increasingly depend on women's NGOs as technical gen-

der experts. These donors and state agencies have come to consider NGOs as “surrogates” for civil society in the formation of gender policy (Ibid.: 183).

As such, the state and donors consult the NGOs as interlocutors for larger social constituencies. But in reality, many of these groups have actually lost their connections to women on the ground. Those groups that do maintain linkages to larger constituencies—poor women’s organizations or avowedly feminist groups that may be critical of the state’s agenda—are not consulted because they lack the technical capacity of the more professional NGOs. Thus, the groups who truly represent the grass roots are cut out of the process of formulating gender policy altogether. This has implications for the value of the policies and programs enacted by governments. But for the purposes of this study, it is interesting to note the effect that this dynamic may have on the groups themselves (Ibid.).

Ironically, the increasing adoption of gender policy concerns on the part of the state, and increased support from the state and international donor agencies, while strengthening a broad range of NGOs working on women’s issues, may simultaneously threaten to debilitate their capacity to advocate for more overarching feminist critiques of state policy (Ibid.). This situation underlines the long-standing debate in feminist circles about whether it is dangerous for women’s groups to get too close to the state and risk losing their autonomy and credibility. But as Jane Jaquette reminds us, the state is, after all, “the only social institution with the legitimacy, scope and credibility to deliver any of the goods feminists seek, from reproductive rights to affirmative action ...” (Jaquette 2003:342). So it is incumbent on NGOs to not just provide technical advice and project implementation, but to hone their capacity to monitor and hold governments accountable.

Rather than let the perfect be the enemy of the good, women’s movement activists would be well advised to appreciate the potential of women’s groups and NGOs to hold onto their dual nature identified by Alvarez. Women, who are famously adept at multitasking, are surely capable of carrying out specific technical projects, while maintaining their capacity to objectively critique—and attempt to shape—the agenda being promoted by the state. As Alvarez suggests, it is imperative that women’s NGOs sustain their ties to civil society by regularly convening open forums with groups representative of the diversity of feminist thought and grassroots activism.

Unlike political parties and single-issue NGOs, which are rooted in self-interest politics, women’s social movements under the dictatorships were characterized by solidarity and collaboration (Ibid.: 340). Women’s groups now have changed their rhetoric from the purely moral, universalist language of the human rights arena, to adapt to the rough and tumble of politics, which is characterized by negotiation and compromise (Jaquette 1989: 196–206). According to Judith Adler Hellman (1992), this ought not to be considered a dilemma. Social movements need not disappear just because political parties have returned. Nor is their existence threatened by allying with political parties.

...this position overlooks the possibility that movements can influence parties or contribute to the rise of new political formation, radicalizing and transforming political programs and dictating an agenda of new issues ... The capacity of new social movements to mobilize dynamic and growing sectors of the population that had either been ignored by political parties or proved resistant to the parties' traditional modes of organization has contributed to the crisis of party politics ... And it is precisely this crisis that has forced parties to open up to new movements in the hope of reaching those sectors of the population ... whose political relevance can no longer be ignored. (Hellman 1992:60)

The breach between political party activists and independent feminists overlooks the positive potential of joining the two projects. Feminism adds a crucial perspective to class analysis, and in turn, understanding class relations deepens feminist analysis. The two strains are actually complementary (Chinchilla 1992:49).

Maxine Molyneux's conceptual distinction between practical and strategic interests is useful in considering whether a women's movement still exists—and whether it matters. To the extent that the demands of women's groups go beyond the practical—the satisfaction of immediate needs—to the strategic—making claims that have the capacity to radically transform gender relations and societal structures that subordinate women—then they could be said to be part of a “movement”, operating outside the traditional political channels (Molyneux 1998:232). The question remains whether individual actors—be they in NGOs, political parties, government agencies, national legislatures, radical lesbian feminist theater groups, or some combination of the above—can form a movement. Must the capacity to upset the status quo and propose a transformative agenda be checked at the security desk upon entering political institutions? We think not.

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