

*Claudia Mora*

## *The Meaning of Womanhood in the Neoliberal Age: Class and Age-Based Narratives of Chilean Women*

This article explores the transformations in the meaning of womanhood in Chile as articulated by women of different class backgrounds and age cohorts. It argues that the political and economic changes the country has experienced in the last three decades—specifically the drive to modernize and the adoption of a free-market approach to economic and social development—have clearly influenced women’s gendered expectations and ideals. Market dynamics infuse social relations with values of self-sufficiency and individualism, which engender new roles and demands for women. At the same time, family and work responsibilities have created contradictions in the lives of women, generating a critical assessment and a redefinition of their social place in contemporary Chile. Chilean women’s narratives suggest that personal development and growth, autonomy, and independence, often obtained as a result of paid work, are important sources of gender identity. At the same time, motherhood and home-life remain strongholds of womanhood, particularly for working class women and the older cohorts. This work proposes that social class and lived historical context provide women with different resources that allow them to sift through cultural ideals that privilege neoliberal values regarding femininity. Ultimately, women’s uneven participation in the process of modernization results in diverse women’s dissimilar emphasis on motherhood, domesticity and work as sources of gender identity.

In the last few decades, a renewed emphasis on economic modernization has become a prominent feature of many Latin American countries’ agenda for social development. Increasingly, a specific form of modernity has become the gauge of state and civil society’s steps towards development: a set of goals referring ever more clearly to the adoption and implementation of free-market policies and values (Schild, 2000; Franco, 2001; Dagnino, 2003). As Schild (1998) has argued, neoliberalism is directing macroeconomic and political transformations in the re-

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gion; modifications that not only redefine labor market conditions and actors, but also provide the backdrop for cultural changes that shape the understanding of what constitutes civil society. The latter process has materialized simultaneously with both the state's withdrawal as guarantor of social rights and an emerging individualized notion of citizenship which determines inclusion into civil society by people's integration into the market as producers and consumers (Dagnino, 2003). In this context, citizenship, Schild (1998) argues, has become synonymous with self-reliance and personal development through wider relations to the marketplace.

The current expansion of capital and the onset of neoliberalism in Latin America have provided the stage for profound transformations in gender relations and identities, primarily through the influence of the reorganization of production driven by a free-market economy and its impact on Latin American women. As many have argued, in the global search for increasing profits and problem-free labor, women have become the preferred suppliers of cheap labor power (Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Nash and Safa, 1986; Nash, 1990; Tiano, 1994), largely because women's social status makes them particularly vulnerable to economic exploitation. As the market system meshes with pre-existing gender and class hierarchies, the vulnerability bestowed upon women as low cost labor is enhanced due to the multiplication of their duties and responsibilities. At the same time, women have gained some level of authority and leverage in the household as a result of their economic contribution, along with opportunities for political activity and leadership (see Bayes and Kelly 2001, for examples of women's organizing in the *maquila* industry), and social recognition for their contribution to national economic development.

In addition, notions of autonomy, self-reliance, and individual choice, fostered by economic changes, have had an effect on gender relations via the increasing necessity and importance of paid work in the lives of women. The economically active female population has drastically increased in Latin America by 32.5 percent between 1980 and 2000 (ECLAC, cited by Hite & Viterna, 2005). This has rearranged the composition and strength of social classes (Hite & Viterna, 2005). And, it has also influenced notions of the "traditional family" and of rights and responsibilities of its members, in particular regarding the financial provision of the household. The extent of cultural transformations, especially in regards to women's social place, can be partially explained by the role of the state in fostering gender equity as part of the modernizing agenda. This emphasis on modernization may explain Latin American governments' willingness to assure gender equity by means of policies guaranteeing poor women's access to the market, primarily through job training and access to micro credit loans.

The interplay of economic and social changes occurring in the region have generated contradictions in the lives of women, a "site of contestation" (Bayes et al.,

2001) where family and work demands collide in women's lives, fostering challenges to established gender regimes. New social demands for women's economic contribution often give rise to their political activity, consciousness, and resistance, as well as to the reassessment of their place in society. While a vast body of scholarly work has addressed the repercussions of capitalist expansion and the free-market on state policies, labor conditions, and status of working class and peasant Latin American women (Bose & Acosta-Belén, 1995; Benería, Roldán, 1987; Nash & Safa, 1986; Leacock & Safa, 1986), few scholars examine the shifting meanings of womanhood in the neoliberal context, as articulated by women themselves. This is the focus of this article. Drawing from the period of Chile's transition to civilian rule in 1990 and the solidification of the neoliberal state, this work explores how gender identities are transformed by the new hegemony of the market, and how the interplay of women's material and social resources results in the tailoring of class specific gender identities.

I argue that the modernizing effort, interpreted as the adoption of a market economy, provides the backdrop for the changing meaning of gender itself, precisely because it creates contradictions between conflicting gendered demands and expectations. The narratives of Chilean women discussed in this work will highlight how discourses of womanhood are influenced by economic shifts and goals. This is not to argue for a universal category or ideal of womanhood in Chile, since, clearly, women's beliefs and practices are not monolithic and they are not equally affected by social and economic changes. Nevertheless, contemporary ideals of womanhood are inextricably linked to women's access to market resources, which provides coherence to the narratives of different social classes. I draw from ninety in-depth semi-structured interviews with working, middle, and upper middle class Chilean women, of three age cohorts conducted in the years 2000–2001, exploring the tensions between traditional sources of gender identity and those brought about by “modernity,” as it translates into economic self-betterment and autonomy.

### **From Mothers to Workers**

Chile's history of an elected Marxist government (1970–1973), followed by a right-wing dictatorship of 17 years, and a transition to a democratic government which has struggled to address social inequality via market-driven policies, provides an important opportunity to explore shifting gender regimes emerging from opposing political ideologies. Chilean women have been key protagonists of these socio-political events. The “democratic road to socialism” pursued by the government of Salvador Allende, was paved by the organization and political participation of working class women. These women were formally given voice through the Net-

work of Mother Centers (Coordinadora de Centros de Madres), and later through the National Women's Office (Secretaría Nacional de la Mujer). Official statements on the nature of women's struggles and the actual domestic role women undertook within gender integrated political organizations illustrate how state-promoted gender ideologies did not substantially unsettle traditional scripts, however. The conservative opposition at the time also drew from traditional gender images. In fact, the emblem of their dissent was crystallized in the "march of the pots" (*marcha de las cacerolas*), a protest in which primarily but not exclusively middle—and upper-middle class women, banged on empty pots to bring attention to food shortages and show their discontent with the political and economic model (Power, 2002).

The violent overthrow of Allende was followed by the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973–1990). This regime's embrace of traditional religious values associated women with conventional roles by elevating motherhood and promoting "The Family" (nuclear and patriarchal) as women's natural destiny (Noonan, 1995). The understanding of womanhood as synonymous with motherhood closely matched the ideals held by social conservatives and right wing women, which provided the foundation for a partnership with this sector of civilian society (Power, 2004).

Under the military regime, Marxism and also feminism were recast as foreign influences destabilizing what was truly Chilean, hence traditional gender images evoked the recovery of a "natural order" and were used to represent the political transformations thrust upon Chileans. This was patently clear in the representation of women as the moral reserve that would rebuild a great Chile. Their adherence to traditional values: domesticity, motherhood and sexual propriety, embodied the recovery of a lost order. The regulation of women's bodies became the immediate locus of social control, as evidenced by the regime's declaration of its population policy as an issue of national security (Oficina de Planificación Nacional, Plan de Población, 1979, cited in Grau; Delsing & Farias, 1996). The military's population plan restricted access to contraceptives, in some cases binding its availability to women's marital status and number of children, and restricting the legality of abortion until towards the end of the regime, when it became illegal to even have a therapeutic abortion. But, while traditional gender ideals were being codified, stringent economic conditions wreaked havoc on the country and raised the number of people living in poverty to almost one third of the population (Collins and Lear, 1995). With basic civil rights suspended, the regime had been able to implement a textbook model of a free-market economy. This meant that despite the promotion of motherly roles for women, the economic decline into which neoliberal policies plunged the nation demanded the economic contribution of all household members, men, women, and often children.

The neoliberal paradigm that was virtually unchallenged during the military

regime has been tempered since the return to civilian rule in 1990, first through public policies restoring basic labor rights to workers and, progressively, through the broadening of citizens' access to education and health (Larrain, 2005). At the same time, the model that so drastically restructured the Chilean economy during the military period engendered a true market-based society, where market rules came to determine "people's behavior, expectations, and preferences", and where market dynamics have "reach[ed] beyond the economic realm to permeate all social relations" (Larrain, 2005). These transformations have also influenced gender relations and have impacted contemporary constructions of femininity.

In the last two decades, the influence of market values has generated a paradox in prevailing gender metaphors. A religious view of women's dignity as achievable through the role of wife and mother (Olea, 2000), an imagery also sponsored by social conservatives (Power, 2002), coexists in contemporary Chile with an imagery of the articulate, educated, professional woman and worker, advanced after the transition to elected governments (Grau et al, 1996). Market ideals of self-development, autonomy, and individualism, have progressively infused the objectives of government and other social actors, giving way to the "modern woman" as the most desired goal. This does not mean that previous gender regimes have no influence on discourses of femininity. However, emerging gender ideologies tend to homogenize their stress on autonomy and self-reliance which affect the development of gender relations and identities. This study will show that the influence of market values into social relations enables the development of new gender identities. It also reveals that women's material and social resources greatly influence diverging constructions of femininity.

## The Data

I conducted ninety interviews with women in three towns in Southern Chile (Concepción, Tomé, and Coronel), following a semi-structured interview format with questions addressing women's notions of womanhood, their perceptions of gender expectations, duties, roles, and hopes, and their quotidian practices. The interviews lasted between one and four hours and were conducted in Spanish during one year of fieldwork in Southern Chile. The interviews were taped and transcribed.

I selected participants based on their residence, age, and social class, using a snowball method of sampling. I used three age cohorts as analytical categories to provide insight into similarities in gender attitudes and experiences of the three groups of women that came of age under the socialist government of Salvador Allende (1970–1973), the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973–1990), and the various *Concertacion* governments that, since 1990, have ruled following the return

to electoral democracy. These political periods were used as categories to explore the connections between the historical process of economic liberalization and women's gender identity (Rossi and Rossi, 1990). The first cohort included women between forty-three and fifty years old; the second included women between twenty-nine and forty-two years old; and the third included women between twenty and twenty-eight years old.

Second, the recruited sample consisted of working, middle, and upper middle class women. I selected thirty-five working class, thirty middle class, and twenty-five upper middle class women. The social class status was defined by a combination of years of education (high school or less, some college, college and above), level of household income (percent of income above the minimum wage), and women's occupation, in addition to parents' and partner's education and occupation. Additionally, I also incorporated cultural aspects of class emerging from women's perceptions of common patterns of behavior and attitudes and the "performance" of key markers of social class—especially accent and demeanor (Bettie, 2000).

### **Everything Is for the Children**

All the women interviewed considered motherhood and home life as integral parts of womanhood. Across social classes and age groups, women's narratives referred to domesticity and motherly roles as important sources of gender identity. These traditional expectations organize women's narratives providing a certain level of coherence, though they are increasingly in direct conflict with changing demands on women's roles prevailing in the socio-cultural context, in particular regarding their participation in the labor force. Contrasting ideals become evident in women's formulations of what mothering and home life mean in everyday life, which are the result of the processes of structural adjustment and opening to the market that have taken place in the last two decades. This has resulted in women's increasing entry into the work force (Valenzuela, 2000) and progressively, into an understanding of work as destiny, especially for the younger cohorts of women.

Hence, age but also social class, are relevant in the tailoring of specific notions of motherhood and domesticity, which is apparent in working class (and older) women's emphasis on domesticity and the quality of mothering as the main characteristics of womanhood, and the contrasting emphasis on independence and personal growth of the younger cohorts and upper social classes. Particularly for working class women, women's place in society is grounded in their daily child-raising activities and household tasks. For upper and middle class as well as the younger cohort of women, conflicting demands arising from their participation in the labor force transform family responsibilities into a rather managerial role, which in the

case of middle and upper middle class women involves the selection of a nanny/housekeeper (what MacDonald, 1998, refers to as “mother-management”). With varying intensity, depending on women’s material and social resources and age, paid professional work is a competing source of gender identity for middle and upper class women.

As the data below show, motherhood, domesticity, and paid work are consistently used to frame identity narratives but are represented in qualitatively different terms. Motherhood and domesticity, while strongholds of womanhood, are imbued with different meanings, shaped by the interplay of women’s resources to sift through hegemonic cultural norms about womanhood (Garey, 1998), and their uneven participation of “modernization,” through their access to the labor market, both of which are ultimately dependent on women’s material and social resources.

The data show that the older cohorts of working class women reflect attitudes towards the roles and social place of women that seem closer to a traditional stance, as demonstrated by the emphasis they place on home life. For example, Celia, a working class housewife of 35, represents the ideals of womanhood in the following terms:

*Author:* What are the characteristics that are valued in women? What does it mean to be a woman?

*Celia:* I don’t know, a home maker, a good home maker, who knows how to cook well, take care of her children, and be a good lover to her husband, well, at least that is what men would want from a woman . . . Now women are more [pause] liberal, let’s put it that way, and we have been trying to move forward. Women have more rights now, maybe. Now, I don’t know about politics. Some women have tried to gain rights for all women, for all to have more things, I don’t know . . . Women have to do too many things, at work and at home, one has to do everything. Yes, women are self-sacrificing. It’s like we are women and men at the same time now. That didn’t happen in the past but now, women are working and they have to do everything around the house, manage the household and everything in the house . . . there aren’t very many rewards for being a woman. The fact that you are a woman and can give birth to a human being is like, beautiful. So it’s good in that sense but not in anything else, not to me at least.

Celia is characteristic of working class women her age. Her description reveals a common tension between her perceived responsibility to be a good home maker and the realization that women are making significant strides in the public realm—though saddled with additional work-related demands which have in Celia’s words, transformed women into “women and men at the same time”. Echoing a similar emphasis on having a “good home,” Corina, a working class woman of 52, living in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Tomé with two of her four daughters and her estranged husband (who is too old to take care of himself), describes the ideal woman as a woman who:

Is happy, someone who has a good home, gets along with her partner and who has everything . . . a hard worker, who tries to get along with others, caring for others, with the poor, open to other

people, who tries to get along with the people who are the poorest because they are the ones who need it the most, or with children, well, who pays attention to her community's needs.

*Author:* And what is a good home?

*Corina:* Well, a good home is for example where the woman takes care of her children, worries about her family, and teaches them basic things.

*Author:* Like what?

*Corina:* Like, there are families where there is a drug problem, there is vice, well smoking is not so bad but drugs are more serious, so I think a good home is where [women] teach their children, know how to educate them well, as they say, to avoid growing bad apples.

*Author:* Are there any rewards of being a woman?

*Corina:* The happiness of having your family or to think that one struggled for one's children, that you give whatever you can. I think that such a woman is a lot happier than she who gives nothing.

The representation of womanhood as demanding self-sacrifice and a duty towards children and husband does not imply working class women's unconditional acceptance of traditional gender ideologies. Women indicate a keen sense of awareness of the lack of economic and social opportunities and of the sacrifices they have to endure, and often, anguish at the realization of the daily hardships of motherhood and home life. For example, Marianela, a 36-year-old working class woman living in Coronel, highlights the burdens imposed by her community's traditional expectations on women that limit their social place to home and family:

Women are always struggling, women are extremely self-sacrificing and limited in our knowledge of ourselves, women give everything and often get nothing in exchange. In addition, women are submissive, we limit ourselves and accept the limitations that others impose on us, but we are also fighters . . . we limit ourselves in the sense that it is often assumed that we cannot study beyond a certain point, because you are supposed to get married and be provided for. So they sacrifice your education. And your expectations of a profession and self-fulfillment as a woman are limited and are sacrificed because you become a wife, and also a mother, and also a servant . . . and for us, that has a priority over everything else.

The scope of opportunities afforded to working class women is contingent upon their economic status and shaped by gender-specific demands. Family responsibilities are a culturally given gendered task, seen as rewarding and constraining at the same time, that prevent many working class women from pursuing interests, hopes, and dreams in other realms. Celia, for example, though characterizing women by their concern with domestic duties, points to the hardships of domestic life and to structural constraints that limit women's options:

*Author:* And that ideal you just mentioned [domesticity] is that something important to you?

*Celia:* Yes, in part, because you have to take care of your children, because knowing what's happening at home is important but not entirely, not a hundred percent, maybe half. The other half would be for me, because I want to do things but feel repressed . . . there are too many limitations, children are a limitation, because if you have a small child, you don't have anyone to help you take care of them . . . my kids, I always think about them more than anything else, and that is my major limitation.

To many women, having children determines their lives irrevocably since they usually lack childcare support from spouses and family or the economic resources to pay for care. A sense of joy but also the sense of confinement and lost opportunities are present in most working class women's allusions to their families. Similar to Celia, Miriam, a working class woman of 42, sees herself becoming the "maid of her house" as hindering her desire to complete her high school education, although she had started working at a women's shelter after her youngest daughter was old enough to take care of herself:

Well, I didn't even finish high school because . . . because I married too young, I mean, my son is now twenty five . . . that means I dropped out of school at seventeen because I got pregnant and my life from then on [pause] and never again did I have the chance to go back to school again. Thanks to this job I have taken a few courses but it's not like having a high school diploma. I didn't have the chance.

Perhaps more importantly, for working class women motherhood does not necessarily exclude paid work. Indeed, for many, good mothering means providing for ones' children emotionally and economically. While participation in the labor force may not be an option or a priority for the older cohorts of working class women—and in some cases may be perceived as presenting a challenge to the husband's role as a provider—paid work is also ideologically constructed as part of mothering, and not primarily as a source of satisfaction and personal autonomy (See Segura, 1998, for a similar view of employment as one of the domains of motherhood for Latinas in the United States).

Rosalinda, 50 years old, who works selling home-made goods, sewing, and occasionally cooking for other people to support herself and her two sons, highlights these different aspects of motherhood when talking about her difficulties in getting a full time job:

*Author:* Do you work?

*Rosalinda:* Yes . . . I make sausages, sell cheese, wood, sometimes I get sewing jobs, sometimes I iron clothes for people, sometimes they come looking for me because I'm a good cook . . .

*Author:* Have you been looking for a permanent job?

*Rosalinda:* I can't find one. I can't work at the fishmeal plant because of my back and kidney problems. I work for a week there and then I have to spend the next one at the hospital.

*Author:* And what other jobs have you held?

*Rosalinda:* In the fishmeal plant, in a restaurant, but now when they ask my age, they say "go home to rest." That has happened a lot. And everything I do and gather is for my children, I love them too much, I think. Everything is for my sons. They are good kids, so they give me strength to continue struggling . . . but both [family and work] are positive things for women.

Paid work, in Rosalinda's narrative is primarily a demonstration of motherly love, though it can also be a source of personal satisfaction, a "positive thing for

women”. Felicita, a 49-year-old domestic worker, also reflects on women’s work as good mothering and as presenting a challenge to the husband’s provider role:

Women must be hard working, someone who gets ahead, like I have done with my daughter. I always tell her that she has to work so she can provide an education for her children . . . A good housekeeper too, caring towards her children and everyone around her, at least that’s what I’ve taught my daughters. There are women who don’t work, they don’t struggle, they just stay where they are . . . I worked several years without my husband knowing. He didn’t want me to work, but he didn’t give us enough for the house and my kids were little. I needed to provide for my kids and worked for many years and when my daughter was ready for college I had to pay for that so I said to myself: ‘I need to work, whatever it takes’ and until now, I have gotten my kid fairly far . . . [my husband] eventually found out, I told him all of a sudden. He didn’t say anything . . .

*Author:* Why was he opposed to you working?

*Felicita:* I don’t know, I think he was ashamed, he said that he was the one who was working, but he didn’t give enough to his family! I always wanted to study and my mother was opposed to that.

*Author:* Why?

*Felicita:* Because people thought that way, I don’t know. I used to study in a coed high school and she [my mother] told my father ‘no more studies for her because she is coming of age and she will start going out with men’ and things like that so she didn’t want to give me the chance to study . . .

While working class women focus on motherhood and domesticity as their main calling, a closer look reveals a critical assessment of their domestic lives as well as women’s realization of the constraints they face—economic resources, education, and support networks, among others—that may limit their options beyond motherhood and domesticity. Celia and Miriam have seen their options curtailed by their child care responsibilities, given their lack of resources for paid day care; Rosalinda by her poor health and lack of formal training; Marianela and Felicita by the insufficient formal education allowed them by their families. Personal growth and self-satisfaction by means of paid work are not often mentioned by working class women, who do not have access to quality jobs that equate work with success but who still are committed to their labor force participation as part and parcel of their motherly roles (see Marx-Ferree, 1987, for a similar analysis of working class women in the United States). As Garey (1995) suggests, there is no cultural language that integrates women’s commitment to family and their commitment to work, which often leads to women’s re-framing of their labor force participation in domesticity-ridden language.

### **Looking at Each Other: Who Gets Her Hands Dirty?**

While working class women are likely to frame their paid work as a necessity, middle and upper middle class Chilean women’s narratives convey a sense of entitlement to personal growth and professional self-fulfillment, a notion of womanhood where personal independence and satisfaction are central to their self-defini-

tion and worth. Emerging in their reflections on the place of women is an emphasis on pursuing a professional life in addition to family, permitted to a great extent by this social class' common practice of hiring domestic help—buying the domestic services needed to reproduce the family. What is distinctive in these women's narratives is how they have intertwined notions of economic independence and professional success together with motherhood—at least in a reproductive sense—and home life, as important sources of gender identity. As their narratives show, access to material and social resources significantly shapes the way women view the world and their place in it.

Ana, for example, a 47-year-old upper middle class woman living in Concepción, reflects:

[What I value the most is] well, an intelligent woman, in every aspect . . . I like women leaders, women that get ahead professionally, a beautiful woman, successful in their lives

Author: *So, professional lives?*

Ana: *Well, one can also be successful having a beautiful family, that is also nice.*

Author: *Is that what people value, in general?*

Ana: *The majority of my friends work and in addition they have beautiful families, and they are all very happy . . . I want my daughters to finish college and to have a good life, I want them to find a good partner. I want them to get married, I am a fan of marriage so I do want them to do it, and to really think through and decide well their career moves also . . .*

Valeria, 50 years old, also captures the themes running throughout upper middle class women's narratives:

[A woman should be] first of all, professional, dedicated to her intellect, and secondly, a mother, and have children, whether she is married or not. She must have some income generating activity, that is the ideal to me, something that allows her economic independence, so she never has to make bad decisions just to survive, or just to ensure that her kids to go to a good school, so we don't have to take his anger, his hysteria, his violence, or whatever it is. She must have an income that allows her to make independent decisions . . . because to me, being educated and having an income are the basis of good motherhood.. Women today have to fulfill three roles at the same time, you can't get rid of being a housewife even with all the degrees in the world, you also have to provide economically, you have to be a professional, and a mother, which is a huge burden, ah! and you have to be stunning too. Now you have to be stunning, smart, make money, and be fertile, there you have your perfect woman . . .

Interestingly, for middle and upper middle class women, personal fulfillment through participation in the work force provides a measure of difference from what is perceived as the more traditional working class woman. Since working class women are more likely to stress home and family life as their primary concerns, this becomes in some ways a marker of working class womanhood, however ambiguous this may be in the day to day experiences of working class women. Ana, for example, a 47-year-old upper middle class woman remarks:

I think a lower class woman spends their lives struggling to feed their children and to escape poverty, probably to get for her children a bit more than what she had for herself. I see it in my maid, a woman whose father didn't want her to get an education and so she struggled for her kids to have one. Middle class women also try . . . well they have much better opportunities . . . I always see those lower class women, who live in the poor neighborhoods, who do laundry in a tub, who don't have tap water, I always see them struggling for their family, with a man by her side who is usually of no use, who hits her and rapes the daughters, well, a real tragedy, but I see her struggling. Middle and upper class women have higher aspirations, plus they live in a different social environment, have friends, more education so they aspire to other things; to have social networks, that her daughters get a college education and things like that.

Ana's view is shared by other women of her class. From the perspective of women with economic resources, self-sacrifice is what characterizes working class women. Carolina, a middle class 53-year-old woman summarizes an enduring stereotype of working class women among economically privileged Chileans:

[Working class women's priorities are] to have their little house, food for their children and perhaps a little job too, whenever they can do it too because with all the children they have, those people are the ones who have the most children, so [their priorities are] to raise children, serve their husbands, have their little house and things, and do a little job here and there, though that's difficult for them to achieve . . .

There is, however, a certain awareness that traditional gender ideals are determined by larger social forces. This is made evident by Paulina, a 36-year-old lawyer, who adds:

I think the priorities of working class women, because of lack of opportunities, or limited social mobility, or the limited chance to be something else, [are to] invest everything in raising their children, because they want their children to be what they can't be, that's something very common. They kill themselves working to give their kids a chance, the opportunity to study and with that, they feel they have fulfilled their duty, I mean, allowing their kids to be what they are not.

From working class women's perspective on the other hand, good motherhood or the fierce dedication to one's family indeed determines one's social value, and it also provides a measure of differentiation from upper class women. For this group, "real" motherhood is constituted by the constellation of day-to-day child care responsibilities and tasks. This involvement distinguishes the meaning of mothering for working class women, and it distances them from the upper classes, as suggested by the interview with Corina:

There are self-sacrificing women and those who are not. Those of us who are self-sacrificing need to work to help provide, since, there are so many poor people that are widows, who have to abnegate their lives to their children and have to work till late, get home at night to take care of their children, cook for them early, I think that is a self-sacrificing woman. My foster mom was like that, she used to iron other people's clothes till 2 am to be able to earn a little money and give

something to her children. During the day, she used to launder clothes . . . She struggled for her right to be a mother. But a woman who likes just to hang out, painting her nails, watching TV, reading a magazine, with all the luxuries possible, I don't think it is of any value . . . she is served, she doesn't get her hands dirty at all, so to me that woman is not worth it. I praise a hard-working woman, the one that struggles for her home, for her family.

The perception of a distinct quality of mothering that involves direct care as a social class trait is made clear by Gloria, a working class woman of 41:

I think upper class people are not dedicated to their kids. My husband used to work for [name] school, which is a school for upper class people, . . . he told me that those upper class people would give their kids whatever material things they asked for but the emotional part, what you teach your kids when you are with them cannot be replaced with money. Your maid cannot teach your child what a mother can, the love that you can give your child cannot be replaced with anything.

Motherhood as a social role or identity is separate from the tasks involved in the daily care of children (MacDonald, 1998). Mother-work, or as Corina puts it: "getting your hands dirty," is from a working class perspective, what characterizes motherhood—and womanhood. For working class women, the experience of mothering is largely represented by their direct involvement in raising children, in addition to childbearing and the enactment of the motherhood role. The social identity of mother, while relevant to women across social classes, is for middle and upper middle class women, often divorced from an investment in the direct care of their children. This aspect of mothering is facilitated by the labor of working class women. As Nakano-Glenn (1994) has argued, class privileges allow upper class women to "enjoy the benefits and status of being mothers" elevating them "to the position of 'mother-managers' releasing them for outside careers if they desire them". For the upper classes, professional endeavors are goals in themselves, and may take precedence over other expectations and demands. In these women's views, being career oriented and educated—which presumes financial resources and accumulated human capital—characterizes their social class and status and distinguishes them from the "traditional" working class woman.

### **The Multi-Tasking of "Modern" Womanhood, or "Performing in the World"**

The definition of what it means to be a woman is inextricably linked to women's economic and social resources, as the narratives show. But in addition, the imprint of age is also evident in the narratives of the younger cohorts of women from all social classes. Young working class women, though constrained like their older peers by the limited opportunities in higher education, employment, and overall access to

the market economy, reveal the influence of the economic context in the mixed description they provide of women's place in Chilean society. The young cohort of working class women consider paid work as a crucial arena for women's development and self-fulfillment, and part of their rights in contemporary society. However, they often struggle for access to formal education—which is their path to the work force—ending with heavy debts after attending vocational schools and college.

While many cite the cost of living as the basis for their participation in the work force, most young women consider working a source of autonomy and growth—something young working class women strive to achieve. Valeska for example, a 25-year-old working class woman who is currently working at a shelter, states:

First of all, I think it's really complicated to be a woman in Chile because this society is really machista. Jobs are for men and you notice that even in the salaries. A male engineer earns more than a female engineer, so it's hard. Now, a woman works harder [than men] women must contribute with money, same as the husband, because the cost of living is too high so the husband's salary is no longer enough . . . so the ideal woman in Chile, I think, is the working woman, I mean, besides the fact you grow as a person you are not stuck, well, house work is very nice, very nice, but you have to do other things otherwise, at home you get old real fast.

Monica, 26, currently unemployed, echoes a similar idea when she reflects on the opposing views of her community to her own:

The ideal woman in this community has to be at home, doing house work, and the better she does it, the better she is, the tastier her meals are that is the best, you can tell then that she is a good woman, well, according to people, if she is working and gets home in a hurry to do everything, she is no good. People talk, they say 'look, that girl is going to work but you should see her house' They criticize that a lot, like you go to work and leave your husband by himself, the kids in daycare so they criticize if you are not home doing your things . . . for me however, the ideal woman is the working woman who fulfills her roles as mother and wife, but who is also able to perform in the world, outside of the household. [In order to do that] you have to be strong because here, women are not taken very seriously. Sometimes women are discriminated against a lot so we have to be courageous to be able to confront that outside and plus, to not leave your family behind, especially in the emotional care part.

Middle and upper middle class young women's narratives are similar in that they assume an emphasis on paid work as a source of identity, echoing this class' notions of personal independence and satisfaction as characteristics of modern womanhood. The multiplicity of roles women are expected to play however, is detailed by Alejandra, an upper middle class, 22-year-old college student living in Concepcion:

[My ideal woman is] an active, modern woman, who is able to freely fulfill multiple roles, as a woman, as a mother and as a professional. She should complement all of these and have the organizational skills to develop in all the areas of her interest.

*Author:* What is an active woman?

*Alejandra:* One that can get involved in all areas of her interest and who does not put aside her own goals to fulfill other obligations, as important as these may be. Self-motivated, proactive in satisfying her needs.

*Author:* What do you mean when you say women should be women and mothers?

*Alejandra:* Being a mother means taking care of your kids, worrying about your kids. Woman is for herself, worrying about her interests, her body, her personal motivations, perhaps about being a good lover . . . the essence of being a woman, worrying about yourself, taking care of yourself.

In this narrative, being a mother may be part of women's interests but it is not synonymous to womanhood. Interestingly, individualism has captured the ideal of womanhood transforming it into a pursuit of personal goals and well being. Their narratives suggest that the engendering of young Chileans is inexorably shaped by the market economy in the demands of autonomy and self-sufficiency it presents to citizens. Certain of the feasibility of self-reliance offered by modernity, young Chileans dream of professional and personal success. Andrea, a middle class law student of 25 summarizes this influence well:

My vision has always been that I have to have economic independence, not for the sake of money itself, but because it gives you independence in a lot of other areas. When you are not dependent on anyone for subsistence you don't have to take certain things that you may have to sometimes, just because you don't have money.

*Author:* Like what?

*Andrea:* Like for example, I don't know, if your marriage fails, you can't get your stuff and get the hell out because if you have no money to get your own house and provide for your own children, etc. When you are economically independent you don't have to take certain humiliations that sometimes you have to because of the money situation. In that area I also want to have a good life, which doesn't always mean getting married, but I do want to have a partner and children.

Motherhood as an ideal has not lost its relevance for younger women. Having children, whether married or not, is seen across social classes at least as a necessary experience and a sign of "complete womanhood." However, for young women being a mother does not have the same urgency and priority attributed by the older cohorts. This is because the younger cohort perceives participating in the work force and financially contributing to the maintenance of their children as natural; they assume it to be a right, a responsibility and their form of integration into the market-driven ideal of national development.

## Summary

These narratives of Chilean women highlight class and age-based discourses and practices, and suggest that womanhood has diverse meanings. Women's social background, age, and the political period they have lived through, all influence their level of exposure to certain representations over others—prevailing representations

of women as moral overseers, mothers, or economic producers—and their ability to critically sift through gender images. In particular, women's access to material resources influences how social prescriptions, images, and representations affect them, and how they are able to respond to them.

While Chilean women's narratives reveal the diversity of their experiences and practices, there is also a consistency provided by women's social class backgrounds and age cohort. This similarity suggests specific boundaries to their construction of gender. Middle and upper middle class women, as well as the younger cohort across social classes, portray personal independence and growth mainly through their participation in the labor force as a competing source of identity and satisfaction, in conjunction with motherhood and domesticity. They embrace more directly the prevalent notion of marketized citizenship or self-reliance and development through wider relations to the marketplace, featuring their individual contribution to the modernization of the country via education and professional work. The extent to which this is understood by upper class women as embracing "modern womanhood," is highlighted in their self-comparison and depiction of a purportedly traditional working class, whose primary emphasis is on motherhood and domesticity.

Working class women and, to some extent, the older cohort of women from across social classes, draw more strongly from a notion of good mothering and domesticity as sources of gender identity. However, motherhood is not limited to care giving. Providing for the well being of these women's families includes an economic aspect as much as emotional support and maintenance of quotidian tasks. Women's participation in the labor force is thus framed as personal satisfaction through the accomplishment of good mothering. These women's awareness of the limitations constraining their lives calls our attention to the increasingly entrenched ideal of self-reliance and access to the market as the path to solving social and economic disparities. This influence of neoliberal ideals is especially highlighted in the narratives when lack of education, skills, and networks to find jobs are mentioned. These women's realization of their newly found status as outcasts in the framework of marketized citizenship may very well be finding expression in their assessment of the upper classes as lacking the central qualities of womanhood. The discursive defense of "tradition" can then be understood as a challenge to the marginal place of working class women in the marketized landscape.

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