

Discourses on women's suffrage in Chile 1865-1949**

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Abstract

Women's suffrage was not a subject that interested women only but involved all sectors of national political life, becoming a milestone of Chilean political history. This work analyzes feminine and masculine speeches over the subject since the end of the 19th century until mid 20th century (1865-1949). We can verify that the vote of women became a matter of real importance for feminine organizations when they realized that, without participating in the political sphere, little could be done for their civil vindications.

In that sense, the feminine discourse evolves from a clear rejection of suffrage, expressed around 1865 in the *El eco de las Señoras de Santiago*, to its passionate vindication, in the 1930's and 1940's. The masculine discourse also evolves from silence (which can be considered as a refusal to discuss the subject) along the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th, to an unanimous acceptance around the decade of 1940, when the problem of women's suffrage seems to be threatening Chilean democratic image by excluding half of the population from politics for gender reasons.

This is why we consider that the speeches are important sources of analysis, since they allow the analysis of the evolution of Chilean society in that period. The arguments favoring or rejecting women's suffrage show us certain points of view about the world, women and politics in Chile on those years, points of view to be redefined and thought over in light of the modernization and democratization processes.

Women's right to vote in Chile is a complex subject, rich in interpretations, and it permits to observe, from a different viewpoint, the changes that were produced in the Chilean society at the end of the 19th and mid 20th centuries. This slow process can be attributed to multiple reasons, all of them signaling a society amidst an evolutionary process, the appearance of new political actors and a system that needed democratization without losing its characteristic order and stability.

Though Chile was pioneer in Latin America in other aspects related to women, as for allowing them to enter universities in 1877, in relation to their right to vote it stayed behind. This right was only approved fully in 1949, under Radical Party

president Gabriel González Videla. His government went through a strong political crisis due to the Law of Permanent Defense of Democracy, dictated in July 1948, which declared illegal the Communist Party. In the midst of multiple critics against the government for its undemocratic conduct, the law of women's suffrage was approved after sleeping in Congress for almost ten years. In this context, arguments of Chilean political history were more determinant in the attainment of full women's vote than the actual action of women.

We can certainly ask ourselves why the approval of this law took so long, considering that in some countries women already voted before the First World War. There are multiple answers to this question, which are undoubtedly related to the permanence and changes that the Chilean society went through during the period studied here. The disarticulation of the feminine world or the inexistence of cohesive groups of women that could fight for their rights delayed the process¹; the idea that the fight for civil rights was more urgent than the fight for political rights and moreover, the distrust and the later indolence of the masculine political world were barriers hard to overthrow.

This paper postulates the hypothesis that the main reason such a late approval of women's suffrage is that the Chilean political class and public opinion did not consider it an important subject until the 1930s. In fact, before that decade it was hardly considered a subject. Both the masculine and feminine worlds considered that there were other matters the country had to solve before giving women the right to vote, like extending the masculine vote or the attainment of civil rights for those same women.

The period included in this study starts in 1865, when the first public reference to women's suffrage is made, until 1949, with the approval of law number 9.292, a law that gives women national voting rights. Nevertheless, due to the extent of the period, some milestones have to be emphasized, like the first speech in which the feminine vote is referred to (1865); the enrollment of women in the electoral registers (1875); the appearance of women's suffrage as a subject in public opinion (1920's); the approval of the women's suffrage law in municipal elections (1934) and the approval of the general women's suffrage law (1949).

The subject of women's vote cannot be treated separately, as a process that relates to women only. It is rather a process that concerns society as a whole: from the moment it is denied until it is unanimously approved, women's vote reflects the problems and transformations that happened in the society of those days. This is why the evolution in the process of the discourse relating to women's suffrage is directly related to the changes of the Chilean society since the end of the 19th century until midst of the 20th.

The defense of the church's interests and later, the so called "Social Question" played a main role in incorporating women into the public sphere. High class women, mostly catholic, were in charge of welfare and charity and from that position advocated for better conditions for women. Middle and lower class women had to become part of the work force to sustain their homes and from there they began to vindicate their rights. It is in this context that the feminist struggles arose, first for civil rights and later political. When women began organizing in groups and movements to demand certain attributions they considered fair, they realized that the vote was an important weapon to

enter into the political system and put pressure from within to defend the rights they were due. In this context, the political vote is not an end in itself but rather a means to obtain a solution to problems considered urgent by women, but apparently not by the masculine political class.

But the right to vote also has an important symbolic weight because it confirms and makes real the citizenship of Chilean women. The enlargement of the citizenship is a process that does not only happen to women but to different social groups within the liberal Republic, nevertheless, this happens after the individuation process of any social group. When women recognize themselves as individuals, subject to rights and duties, they also begin to think of themselves as citizens and demand their rights. Thus, women move on from a passive citizenship, the state in which the individual exercises his civil rights and expresses himself through channels other than the vote, like the press, to an active citizenship which is that in which society members have real participation in the political system; in other words, the right to vote.

In that sense, women were passive citizens in the national project that was constituted beginning in 1810 (as a symbolic date); nevertheless, with the passing of the years they began to realize that they needed to participate actively in the system to fight for their own rights. And in this context, an active citizenship necessarily requires the exercise of political rights, which implies both choosing representatives as being able to be chosen. This is how the vote became an element that would grant women the quality of active citizens.

All in all, it must be noted that the feminine movement that fought for the women's right to vote was an elite. Asunción Lavrín explains that in Chile, women organizations born after 1915 were created by educated women to promote among middle class women the interests in feminine education, equality before the law and other rights². Nevertheless, not all Chilean women were interested in the right to vote; this is reflected in the slow registration in the electoral registers and in the low participation level in elections once the political rights had been obtained. Thus, Chilean suffragettes had to defeat not only masculine opposition but also the feminine lack of interest in political matters. It was a hard and very long job which lasted for decades.

During the period studied by this work the dissertations about women's vote change and become more complex. The evolution in the feminine discourse about women's suffrage makes it move from a concession of the masculine political world to being a right that stems from women's quality as citizens and from the gender equality established by the Constitution. In other words, there is a change in language and in the mentality of women, that move on from "to concede" (as a gift, a courtesy from the political world) to "to grant" (a right which in justice is due to them).

Nevertheless, in the masculine political world the subject of women's vote was treated very cautiously. There was never a speech of open resistance to conceding this right but its discussion was clearly evaded, and when the subject was seen in the House of Representatives, trivial arguments were given so as to deny it, as for instance, that feminine vote would impose a greater expense on the State by the necessary creation of new registers. Since the 1930s there was consensus that women were perfectly capable of participating in the political system, yet the law that finally gave them ample voting rights took almost another twenty years. This, because among politicians there was a

constant fear over the effects that women suffrage could have on the prospect of the parties. Politicians imagined, and not without reason, that women would mainly vote for the Conservative Party³. This is one of the reasons for granting them voting rights in 1934 only for municipal elections, as an experiment, almost to test how women would vote.

The feminine vote, seen from a masculine point of view, was more a subject of opportunity than of justice. On the one hand there was always the fear that it would break the balance of the political system; but on the other hand the democratization⁴ process of society was advancing and women could not be denied this right without impinging upon the republican and democratic values. In this way, the approval of the law that gave Chilean women the right to vote implied an important change for the whole society. The subject of women's suffrage is in direct relation to the democratization processes started by the State beginning the third decade of the 20th century; but also, and maybe more importantly, it is related to the way society sees itself, in as much women constitute half, though silent for years, of that society.

Finally, the subject of women's suffrage was settled when the discussion of which political party it would benefit was overcome, and when the question of what kind of society was wanted for Chile was established. Even though the political party interests kept interfering in the discussion there came a moment when denying women this right would imply to opt for a non democratic and non inclusive society, against all the speeches and processes that pushed towards the democratization of the political system.

Discourses and representations

By discourse we understand the art of argumentation and of exposing ideas through words. The discourses over femininity have created multiple representations, models, paradigms, preconceived notions of what a woman is or should be. These feminine representations are mainly made by masculine speeches and correspond to historical visions of the woman role within society. The feminine representations evolve in time and adapt to the changes in society. Nevertheless, though they are masculine constructs, the feminine representations are also echoed among women who do not refute them, and often even share them.

In that context and beginning with the social contract, the masculine political world constructs a feminine representation that is relegated to the private, domestic world, as a way of exclusion. The concepts of public and private originate in liberalism⁵, which creates these abstract open spaces as a way of arranging and ruling society. The divisions between these spaces are not clear though, because they are rigid concepts that do not correspond to reality. For this paper's purposes, by public sphere we will understand the "space in which people make public use of reason"⁶. Also, as the space in which the exchange of opinions is practiced, where conflicts are resolved on the basis of argumentation⁷. Thus, the public sphere essentially deals with political and state matters; the private sphere is understood as the civil society, which is private when it regards the public, but is different in the domestic sphere. Women are relegated to this third sphere.⁸.

All illustrated representations of women tend to confine them to the domestic sphere, so they are unable to act in the public sphere and much less in politics. She is relegated to the private mainly because the social contract⁹ presupposes the convention of equal and rational individuals, and the rationality of women is doubted as they are associated with nature, in opposition to men, who are associated with culture (culture being understood as reason). In this illustrated discourse, women appear closer to animals than to rationality due to their biological functions - procreation -, and must be excluded from the political order because they become a threat in as much as they are nonrational beings. This dichotomy nature / culture is the base of women's exclusion from the public sphere, since by being nature women must be governed by culture, in other words, by men. And since the citizenship is mainly shaped by reason women cannot be citizens, therefore, "delegate" this function on their father or husband. "Men, when confining women to a reproductive space (nature), freed themselves "to the business world" and thus creating and controlling culture"¹⁰.

The insertion of women into public life in Chile, 1865-1948

The project of nation to be built in Chile after the Independence made a clear distinction between those that constituted the nation and those who governed it. The idea of popular sovereignty was conditioned by the idea of progress, in other words, when society was prepared, civilized, only then could it participate in the political system. And that "preparation" was in direct relation to education and property, which operated as exclusion mechanisms. This is why a distinction was made between active and passive citizens. Active citizens were those who had incomes and the education to participate within the political system, in other words, to govern. Passive citizens were those that, although being part of the nation, did not participate in its construction. Thus, generating a conscious exclusion system that left the majority of the population out of the power groups.

Nevertheless, the situation of women was different. When the politicians of the beginnings of the 19th century thought about the nation, they knew they were excluding an important part of the population, but women were not part of it, in other words, in the illustrated discourse of the 19th century women did not belong to the consciously excluded part of society because they were not supposed to vote. In legal terms, in 1874 masculine suffrage was extended to all those over 21 years who could read and write. Then, why did feminine suffrage take so much longer? This study postulates that the slowness of the process has to do with the fact that the insertion of women in politics is difficult and slow because it must move from the domestic sphere to the public and, once validated in the public sphere it can begin to move on to the political sphere.

The first irruption of women in the public sphere was in 1865, to defend the maintenance of their faith and of the Catholic Church as the only true one¹¹. This irruption in the public space was mainly made through a newspaper, *El Eco de las Señoras de Santiago (The Echo of the Santiago Ladies)*, founded in 1865. By using a newspaper as a means of expression for their ideas and defense of their interests, women used a tool that was given them by modernism to open up a space in public opinion. Though it lasted only twelve issues *El Eco* is emblematic, because it symbolizes the first attempt of the feminine world to participate in the public sphere.

“Why, then, do we remain as cold spectators of the political-religious drama that started to be represented in the House of Representatives and that could well have the whole republic as theater? Because we are ladies? No. We have the right to write; AND WE WILL. Yes, we will defend the threatened institutions, the infringed religious rights, the honor of the stained fatherland¹².”

The voice of the *Eco de las Señoras de Santiago* was the voice of a specific group of upper class women, catholic, well educated, close to the Conservative Party. The other women, anticlerical or working women had no space in public opinion because they were not organized as the catholic women. In that sense, the catholic feminine organizations were the first to appear and to advocate for some women’s rights. The slow insertion of women into public life became somewhat faster due to improvements in education and mainly after the Amunátegui Decree, approved in 1877, which allowed women to enter the university. This decree was not without controversy and finally served to enhance the feminine social role and the right to equality¹³. The education of women is a subject directly related to women’s right to vote: the anticlerical sections opposed approving this right because they considered that women were educated under the arm of the Catholic Church and, in that sense, their vote would be favorable to conservatives. Women had already shown their attachment to the Church during the discussion of article 5 of the Constitution (1865). In that sense, the anticlerical sectors preferred to wait until lay education was extended rather than giving votes to women.

Another catalyst for the integration of women into public affairs was the “Social Question”, an economic and social process that Chile underwent at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th. Although the breach between the rich and the poor had always been large, during this period it grew, mainly by migrations from rural areas to the cities, attracted by the illusion of a better life. Yet, in the cities they found no jobs but miserable housing conditions, stacked together and with poor hygiene. The economic and social problems which the country went through by the end of the 19th century lead many women to organize themselves. Catholic women did so in welfare associations, lay women in liberal organizations and working women in mutual-aid associations and working women societies.

Both the lay and the catholic feminine organizations of the time shared some ideas regarding the main roles of women: that of mother and wife. According to Diana Veneros, “both feminisms were of the domestic or relational type¹⁴ and did not seriously question the social structures that produced the social discrimination against women”¹⁵. Nevertheless, a fundamental representation will stem from these social roles that are assigned to women since times immemorial, that of mother of all humanity. “In effect, in accordance with what has been pointed out, both groups converged in a type of feminism that sought to extrapolate the maternal spirit from the social problems of the time. By reinforcing the subject of maternity, both groups of feminists (catholic and lay) attributed themselves a greater sensibility to suffering and a higher sense of duty and morality and expected to act as collaborators of men in eradicating vice, giving remedy to injustice and contributing to greater social welfare”¹⁶. This role assumed by women will reinforce the masculine representations that saw women as a moral reserve, as savior of society, an incorruptible being.

The decade of the twenties marked a turning point in the Chilean feminist movement. Women integrated in greater numbers to the working world, education

reached more and more of them and the international situation also influenced the beginning change of mentality in the society. The First World War ended with the international order that prevailed ever since the 19th century and opened spaces to new political actors, among them to women. Thus, with the beginning of the twenties, “women moved from the defense of their nature and their action, to the vindication of civil rights that they had not yet demanded”¹⁷.

In Chile, the election of 1920 and the victory of Arturo Alessandri, who included women in his reform program, put the subject of feminine citizenship in the public eye. That is how the Civic Feminine Party was founded in 1922, that “vindicated - especially among educated city women - the aspiration to gain broader civil rights for their gender”¹⁸. Beginning the twenties a great number of projects for laws demanding the feminine vote slept in Congress, mainly because they did not have solid backing from feminine organizations and by the profound uncertainty that existed in the masculine political world with respect to the electoral behavior of women¹⁹.

The economic crisis of 1929 shook the whole world, but very especially our country. Added to that, Chile’s political problems allowed women to intervene forcefully in the public space. The economic crisis produced a high inflation and an increase of unemployment, which, added to the restrictions on public liberties, made the panorama unbearable; women manifested this through protest parades against General Ibáñez’s government, who assumed this “as an outburst of indignation for the repeated abuse that the sons, husbands and brothers of those ladies were victims of”²⁰. Once the crisis was overcome the women were not ready to return the spaces they had conquered²¹.

In 1934, after hard campaigns and debates, the municipal feminine vote was approved; it was argued that the municipal administration was very much like a large household. The municipal vote was a first step to the conquest of women’s political rights and, also, it was a good way for the masculine political world to observe the feminine electoral behavior without risking the balance between parties.

In the 30s decade multiple feminine organizations appeared, but the most important was the *Movimiento pro Emancipación de las Mujeres de Chile*, Memch (*Movement for the Emancipation of Women of Chile*), founded in 1935. The directors of Memch achieved something which no other feminist group had obtained: organization, massivity and continuity. In the middle of the 30s women’s suffrage had become a priority subject for the feminine organizations. Two leaders of Memch, Elena Caffarena and Flor Heredia, wrote a project for a law over general feminine vote which was presented by President Aguirre Cerda to Congress in 1941. Nevertheless, the sudden sickness and death of the president stopped the initiative. In 1944 the *Federación Chilena de Instituciones Femeninas*, Fechif (*Chilean Federation of Feminine Institutions*), started a big campaign national-wide for the conquest of political rights for women. In July 1945, senators of different tendencies presented a project for a law over feminine vote. The project was only approved in 1948 and was published in the official paper on January 14, 1949.

This was the culmination of a very large and complex process that meant an important change for Chilean society, both for the masculine as for the feminine world. Feminine voices made themselves heard evermore loudly and the representations over

women began changing with time; but also with the work of some women since mid-19th century to obtain a space in the public sphere. Women's suffrage had not always been a priority subject for feminine organizations; education, the defense of morality, civil rights and other subjects were more important for many women than the right to vote. It only begins to appear more permanently in public beginning the 20s and it becomes a priority in the 30s and 40s decades. Now that we have traced a general overview of the Chilean feminist movements of the period included in this study, we intend to analyze the speeches of both the masculine and the feminine worlds, in order to understand the evolution of a process that lasted almost a century.

1865 and 1875, two emblematic years for the feminine vote in the 19th century

The first outstanding milestone in the context of this study is Abdón Cifuentes's speech defending the feminine vote, read on August 16, 1865 to the Sociedad de San Luis. This is the first public record in which the subject of women's suffrage is mentioned. Although he had the political intent to favor his party, the Conservative Party, the speech of Cifuentes gives way to an interesting proposal for women to mix into public life (they already acted in public life through welfare societies and through some publications, mostly conservative-catholic).

Abdón Cifuentes emphasizes that modern political societies rest on an unfair base, which excludes half of the human gender, exactly the weakest half, that which is most interested in the welfare and progress of society, and that needs the most protection. In this point, Cifuentes is clearly referring to women, and places them on an inferior level than men, not in intellectual or biological terms but social.

“Ask the philosophers and legislators, ask science and common sense why the Creator supposed that men should live in society....why man cannot live without outward help, why in humanity we find weak people that need protection and destitutes that require a shelter”²².

The author also points out the contribution that women could make to politics, referring to them as a moral reserve of society. “*How many venerable matrons, how many highly respectful ladies are there whose knowledge and exemplary virtues, public and private, would blush, confused and humiliated by the depravation and the ignorance of thousands who go to the booth to decide the destiny of the fatherland!*”²³.

Along the speech the author places the subject of women's suffrage as a matter of social justice, to protect the more destitute individuals of society, which are, according to him, women. This way, Cifuentes advocates, being less protected by laws and by the institutions, women should have the right to vote to procure the protection they need. He constructs an interesting logical argument and certainly new for his listeners: Cifuentes suggests that women could move on from the domestic to the civil sphere.

Abdón Cifuentes defended the idea of intellectual equality between men and women, therefore makes the difference between absolute inability to exercise rights, as

in the case of children and the insane, and the relative inability, which has to do with accidental circumstances, as in access to education. In this argument he gives a glimpse that education is the main component for granting the right to vote and suggests a restricted feminine vote, for educated women.

“(…) that those who meet certain conditions should even have the right to deposit a vote of cultivated understanding and of a just conscience in the booth; the vote of an intelligence that knows what is good for the country infinitely better than many men to whom the vote is granted by law; the vote of a heart that has an unrivaled love for the fatherland and can live it heroically, that is more interested in its destiny than anyone else”²⁴.

One should ask oneself who the educated women of that time were: mostly high class catholic women, close to the Conservative Party. In this sense, Cifuentes’ speech has a strong political inclination. Nevertheless, this does not invalidate it since all the speeches about women suffrage are tainted one way or another by ideological inclinations. In spite of the former, we can emphasize that Cifuentes was the first to bring up a subject of fundamental importance for society and to try to overthrow certain preconceived notions about women, as for example, that their only field of action was their home and were unable to participate in public life. Finally, Cifuentes creates a representation of women as fair owners of rights and active and interested members of the future of society, an idea that will be sustained by the Conservative Party during the whole process of attainment of political rights for women.

The only public reaction from the feminine world to the speech of Cifuentes was that of *El Eco de las Señoras de Santiago*. The answer is not taxative, there is an ambiguous relation to the subject of the vote: on the one hand, they consider it an affront not to have it, but on the other, they say they do not want it. There is a conscious annoyance with the masculine world for leaving them out of political life but it would seem that the right to vote is not their way of participating. Lacking the right to vote does not hinder the women of *El Eco* from feeling citizens, and that is how they express it: “In abnormal periods, in vertiginous days, every citizen²⁵ has the duty to contribute his efforts to prevent any wrongdoing to his fatherland, and we will pay Chile that tribute”²⁶.

Facing Abdón Cifuentes’ speech, the women of *El Eco* point out that the deputy’s proposal reaffirms the idea that the mission of women is not circumscribed to the private sphere. But in relation to votes they say “we do not consider the question from the side of those rights, which we do not covet, but rather from the purely christian and rational side”²⁷. In this sense, they make it clear that they want to participate in public life, that they think of themselves as citizens and will fight to protect the interests they consider vital for the fatherland, but do not need the right to vote to reach these ends. We cannot extend the answer of the *El Eco* to all women but this is the only feminine voice that responds Cifuentes’ speech. The answer of *El Eco* represents only a group of women, but it is the most active (if not the only active) part of the public sphere.

The discussion over women’s suffrage did not deepen at the time. More pressing needs dominated the public sphere, mainly doctrinal subjects. But in 1875 an event occurred that would put the subject of women’s suffrage back on the public agenda. That year a group of ladies in San Felipe and another in La Serena tried to register in the

Electoral Qualifying Board, due to the ambiguity of the Constitution, which granted the vote to all “Chileans” over 21 years old who could read and write.

Some ladies were qualified; this caused a controversy that was reflected in the newspapers of the time. The commentaries were somewhat ambiguous, some limited themselves to reproduce what was stated by the Qualifying Board, others commented the fact ironically, but none assumed a clear position. From the treatment given by the newspapers to women’s suffrage we can construe that this was not a problem for society, it is rather seen as an unusual event which remits to irony but it is not treated as a serious public debate.

On November 18, 1875, *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*, publishes that a lady registered in Casablanca.

“The registry of this town was closed today after having inscribed Mrs. Clotilde Garretón de Soffia. The table unanimously decided that the law does not exclude her and therefore there was no objection to calling her a citizen, since she had all the prerequisites demanded by the law.

The government circle is deeply discouraged and whenever they think about the new electoral law they sigh remembering their former power. Accusations deluge the electoral jury”²⁸.

In the House of Representatives, on the 24th extraordinary session of November 13, the Interior Minister Mr. Altamirano makes the first reference to the subject:

“About the qualifications, I received a telegram informing that one lady has qualified in San Felipe.

Some people think that if a measure is not taken about this, a large number of women could qualify. So I wish the House would express an opinion, which would of course be very respectable and that we could use as a guide for everyone”²⁹.

Despite the call, the House continued discussing the financing of the publication of the registers in newspapers and made no comments in this respect. This silence can be interpreted as a way of evading a subject which would further complicate the political panorama of the end of the 19th century; or, also, as a confirmation that women’s suffrage did not constitute a problem and that the San Felipe and La Serena events were unique and certainly unexpected. Finally the women that had been qualified could not exercise their right to vote because the jurists were of the opinion that, although the Constitution did not explicitly prohibit them this right, it was against the spirit of the Constitution of 1833. This interpretation again confirms the lack of interest or the negativism of the political class in regard to women’s suffrage.

After this controversy, the new electoral law begins to be discussed in 1880. In this context, a group of young deputies from different parties presented a project for a law that recognized women’s right to vote. Nevertheless, this was not picked up by Congress and the law approved in 1884 expressly denied them the right to vote; as Martina Barros de Orrego said, “in the HONORABLE company of the insane, the

domestic servants, the indicted for crimes or transgressions that merit afflictive punishment, and the condemned for a deceitful bankruptcy”³⁰. This situation meant that some progressive women like Martina Barros grew disillusioned by the political world and started to believe that the only way to change it was from within so that the vote became their maximum aspiration. “This bitter experience made me become one of the defenders of the right to vote as the only means to make ourselves heard and attain deeds, not only good words”³¹.

The decade of the twenties and the appearance of new discourses

After the disillusion suffered by some suffragettes of the decade of 1880, the subject of the feminine vote seemed to disappear from the public discussion, especially because the country went through complex moments. The Pacific War, the civil war of 1891 and the social and economic problems filled the public agenda for many years. Nevertheless, the “Social Question” brought back the subject of the feminine vote, mainly because women became part of the working world. The social and economic problems were a catalyst for the insertion of women into public life and to increase their sphere of action in it. In 1917, the conservative deputy Luis Undurraga presented to Congress a project of law about women’s suffrage. The deputy started his speech by announcing that he would speak about a strange subject, which is an indication that the feminine vote in those years was not part of the public discussion.

“I present before the Chamber a project of public law which for most will be a strange political and social question; so strange, that if I weren’t accompanied in it by my honorable colleagues whose clear intelligence nobody could doubt, I would have deserved the jolliest comments, the most spiritual interruptions, had I presented it alone”³².

Undurraga’s speech is based on that of Abdón Cifuentes of the year 1865; in that sense the evolution of the masculine conservative discourse has been minimal from 1865 to 1917, which explains why they were the first in bringing up the subject and, also, because the political advantage they envisaged in the feminine vote existed just as much in 1865 as in 1917. In other words, the majority of women that were in the public sphere in the first decades of 1900, as by the ends of the 19th century, were catholic, upper class women that defended the postulates of the church and politically adhered to the Conservative Party.

The most interesting point of this speech is that which is related to the democratization of the vote. Representative Undurraga emphasizes the fact that the rights granted by the Constitution are exercised by a minimal part of the country’s inhabitants, which would run contrary to the democratic republic that Chile boasted it was.

“More than half of our countrymen who, having greater physical and moral aptitudes than many of those we have accorded the right to vote by law, whom we have deprived by an, in my view unfair law, of the right to clearly influence the Government of the Republic, the most basic of the rights in a democratic State: the right to be a voting citizen”³³.

This argument is central and will become stronger as years go by. In this sense, Representative Undurraga's speech seems to be the first to ask itself what class of political system the country has or wants to have. The theme of the growth of democratization is not unimportant, since it directly impinges upon how the subjects of sovereignty, citizenship and, finally, the notion of the existing Nation are considered. Representative Undurraga's speech is interesting because it combines the traditional representation of women as a pillar of society and sustainer of the values with the subject of democratization. It must also be pointed out that in his project he links the civil and the political rights of women and demands reforms both in the Civil Code as in the electoral law. In this sense, Representative Luis Undurraga is the first man to completely vindicate women's rights.

In parallel, at the beginning of the 20th century a new catholic feminism appeared, influenced by the *Rerum Novarum* Encyclical Letter and by the Social Question, which vindicated the rights of women in a relational sense, that is, looking for the common good of society. Upper class women were in charge of social work and welfare, but not with a merely charitable end; they also intended to enhance women and demand rights for them which they considered fair. But this catholic feminism did not advocate the liberation of women nor that they abandon their main roles of mother and wife; it emphasized the obtainment of civil rights, especially those related to the family and the children. In the exposition of Isabel Irarrázaval de Pereira at the Marian Congress of 1918 she objects to certain privileges that the Civil Code gives men in detriment of women.

“Among them, the right to deny mothers the same right it gives to fathers, called “*patria potestad*”. The father has the right to administer his children's goods and to profit from them. The mother always needs previous formalities, almost as a stranger, to administer those same children's goods (...) This cannot be called Civil Code, but rather Uncivil, an aggregate of injustices to women”³⁴.

In relation to the feminine vote, the speaker is not a clear backer of it but considers it a matter of justice and equality.

“Thinking intimately, I do not know whether that right could bring us any good but I do proclaim with all the force of my soul that in justice we should have that faculty since we are conscious humans, just like men, and we suffer and are made to feel the weight of the laws that they vote”³⁵.

In this context, catholic feminism had advanced from the women of *The Echo*, who said they did not want the vote, to a more ambiguous posture reflected by the exposition of Isabel Irarrázaval, in which it is not the main subject but a matter of principle.

Just as was the case with catholic women, lay women also gathered to obtain their objectives. By the middle of the decade of 1910, women began to organize imitating the masculine clubs, so as to discuss matters that interested them. Thus, the Ladies' Club and the Reading Circle were born, both founded in 1915. The main characteristic of these organizations was that their leaders were women who did not follow the orientations of the Catholic Church and “even opposed its considerable influence over the feminine public. They tried to discuss certain measures, especially the benefits of a

divorce law which the Church and the conservatives rejected because it was a dogmatic matter”³⁶. These feminine lay associations organized debates around subjects of present interest, of women’s rights, etc. Some were quite radical in subjects as divorce and contraception, but referring to civil and political rights their discourse was very similar to that of the conservative feminism.

The big difference was the support to both sectors from the masculine world: while the catholic feminism had the support of the Conservative Party with respect to women’s rights, lay feminism did not have the same answer from anticlerical parties, especially in reference to suffrage. This happened because the anticlerical leaders were afraid that the feminine vote would favor the Conservative Party. All in all, when women’s suffrage becomes more extended throughout the world, especially after the First World War, the anticlerical leaders declare themselves willing to back it if and when the civil rights of women are reformed first, to insure a lay education and their independence from their husbands. Thus, liberal and radical leaders exclude themselves for some time from the women’s voting problem, while they very calmly see about the reforms to the Civil Code.

In 1917, Martina Barros de Orrego gave a conference at the Ladies’ Club called “The feminine vote”, where she openly spoke out in favor of the right to vote. In relation to the reasons aduced by politicians for not giving women the vote, Martina Barros refuted them one by one. The lack of preparation to exercise this right was, according to the author, an excuse under which politicians hid and which masked the idea of male superiority and feminine submission.

“It has been said and often repeated that we are not prepared for this. What preparation is this that the humblest of men has, by the mere fact of being one, but we cannot attain? I have much searched for it but cannot discover it. If any preparation, we receive at marriage to become mothers, the largest of our duties, and for that neither the church, nor the law, nor the parents or husband demand anything other but our will to accept it”³⁷.

She also criticized the opinions that assured that the feminine vote would favor the Conservative Party, considering them capricious and mean.

“It has also been argued that the vote of women in Chile will favor a specific party. Apart from being a completely unfounded and whimsical objection, that could produce great surprises for those who so believed, supposing it were true and well founded, it would do little honor to the liberal spirit of this country that a mean and passing interest prevailed over a demand for admitted justice”³⁸.

Martina Barros’ speech is very interesting because, though she is a predecessor in the subject of women’s suffrage, she represents an intermediate position. She is liberal but does not foment the emancipation of women, she considers the roles of mother and wife as the most important for women but also demands what she considers to be fair for all womankind without distinction. Martina Barros, following what Abdón Cifuentes said in 1865, considers that the feminine vote can be useful to a more human development of society, and for a higher leadership of the nation: “I precisely believe that the influence of the feminine vote can be very beneficial, in the sense of distancing men from that kind of struggles and rather drag them into serving the high social

interests that drive women”³⁹. She points out that the feminine virtues that could be well used by the country are being wasted; also, that the interest of the country is at the same time the interest for her own home. In this sense, Martina Barros is the first woman who combines in her discourse the individual feminism (rights on their own) with the relational (rights for the common good). After her, the individual current of feminism will prevail over the relational, that is why we can consider Martina Barros as a transition figure in the fight for the rights of women.

The voices of organized women, the Civic Party and Feminine Action

In 1922 the Feminine Civic Party was created, an organization that included lay or moderate catholic women. Their objectives were the social, economic, political and legal rights of women. In this context, the Civic Party founded the *Acción Femenina* newspaper, which was its main means to divulge their ideas. They were defenders of the right to vote and severely criticized those who said that women would lose their femininity if they got involved in the political world.

“There are those who deny woman her political rights based on her being the angel of her home, an angel of innocence and candor and cannot be allowed to take an active part in the struggle of mean passions called politics. Why would woman lose her innocence and her charm if she showed her way of thinking about the Government of her country? Why would she stop being the queen of her home if she influenced the destiny of her fatherland with her generous feelings?”⁴⁰.

The strongest criticisms to the political world made so far were launched by *Acción Femenina*. They considered that the arguments against women’s suffrage were mean and lacked vision, since women are able to participate in the public sphere without neglecting their homes, moreover, their inclusion was necessary because it would raise the political level: “Politics are like the men who make them, and he who has his soul full of mean passions makes mean politics. A woman who always has noble feelings will make noble and high politics”⁴¹.

Once established in the public space through newspapers and magazines, at the beginning of the 20s and mainly in the 30s and 40s, women began a fierce struggle to conquer their civil and political rights. The step to move women from the private to the public had already been taken, the move on to politics was lacking. With the perspective of time and the advancement of gender studies at present, we can understand that the public and private spheres are social constructs of the masculine world as ways of exclusion. Both spheres constantly touch, the world is composed by men and women that relate and interact, as much in the private as in the public. Nevertheless, the women of the 30s in Chile had to transit from the private to the public because the dominant masculine discourse used the argument of the separation of both spheres and created the experience of exclusion of women.

The thirties and municipal suffrage: civic learning

The debate over the extension of vote to women took a different character in the thirties. This already represented a problem for society, there were feminine organizations that fought and demanded their rights (both civil and political), but for the masculine world it had to be a very well thought decision, since giving the vote to

women would duplicate the number of potential voters and possibly alter the balance of forces of a political system with well defined parties in the right, center and left⁴².

In the discussion over the new Municipal Elections Law, a senator from the Radical Party assures that his party “is sure that the feminine element, with its sagacity, with the intelligence and special preparation it has, will be an efficient collaborator in all masculine activities that refer to this kind of struggles and civic contests”⁴³. And he ends by saying that he has faith that women will make appropriate use of this right and that will be the best platform to grant them general suffrage in the future. It is interesting that a member of the Radical Party already supports general women’s suffrage in 1933, but always subjected to what to him is good use of this right. That can mean that, to him, an appropriate use of the feminine right to vote would have been to vote for the Radical Party. In this parliamentary speech we can observe how the women’s suffrage subject is subjected to political opportunism.

In 1934. Law 5.357 about Municipal Elections is dictated, in which women could elect and be elected for municipal seats. For the liberal and radical sectors this was a good solution to the subject of feminine suffrage, because they would be able to observe its electoral effects and also begin creating feminine sections within the parties. This is how the 1934 law confirmed that feminine suffrage already constituted a subject and, even more, a problem of the Chilean society. Law 5.357 was finally approved by the masculine political world to solve a latent subject in society, but the insistence of the feminine organizations and the manifestations they made from beginning 1931 also had vital importance here. Thus, the municipal vote was an advancement in legislative terms for women, but on the other hand it gave a glimpse of the existing prejudices of society with respect to the role of women, and the fear of the political class about the effect that women’s suffrage would have on elections.

The election of 1935 did not produce a massive movement of women to register and vote. In fact, only a few did so: of a total of 850.000 potential new voters, barely 76.049 registered, that is only 9% of the women that could vote⁴⁴. Almost half of the feminine vote went to the Conservative Party so it became the largest electoral force in the country. Of the 98 women candidates that were presented, 25 were elected; 16 of them adhered to the Conservative Party. Despite the low feminine participation, the clear preference of women for the Conservative Party confirmed the fears of the liberal and left members of Parliament and they had reason to slow down the approval of the general women’s suffrage. In 1935 *Acción Femenina* interviewed the radical leader Pedro Aguirre Cerda and asked him when women would be granted the vote in national elections. “He answered that, in principle, the party was still in favor of women’s suffrage but there was a certain tendency to “want to postpone it(...)to carry it out at a more timely date”⁴⁵.

These elections served as a kind of test and were the first, therefore, a poor showing of women could be expected. Nevertheless, *Acción Femenina* magazine criticized those who said that the feminine municipal vote had been a failure, and mainly blamed the left parties for not showing any interest in including women in their campaigns.

The preference of the feminine votes for the Conservative Party does not necessarily relate to the fact that women were educated by the Church. In the 30s this

was already an obsolete argument because the lay education had extended to middle and lower class women. But we can affirm that the Conservative Party had for years taken charge of the subject of women's suffrage and had organized feminine associations close to it. From the ends of 19th century, catholic women acted in public life through welfare and charitable organizations so it was to be expected that they should be more willing to participate in politics. Besides, the Conservative Party created a campaign addressed especially to women for the 1935 election.

In this context, the result of the 1935 elections is quite logical, if one thinks that the left or the Radical Party hardly integrated women into their lists; that meant that only two radical women candidates were elected. For historian Edda Gaviola, what finally won the elections of 1935 was "*the indifference of the feminine world to participate in this event. Conditioned by their domestic role, very few women were interested by this first test*"⁴⁶.

This is an interesting assertion because already in the decade of the 30s we see that women's suffrage has become a problem for the political class: it is a very discussed subject, its consequences are feared but it can no longer be avoided. From the standpoint of women participation, though, their own rights do not yet appear to be a subject, except for the women of the social and intellectual elite, who for years had fought to attain suffrage.

After the election of 1935, the political parties opened their doors to women, creating feminine divisions, certainly with political intentions. No doubt, the Conservative Party was the most successful in its effort to register women and give them an important role within it. The left parties, in view of the electoral results, chose to ignore women, but in the following years they will also include them. The work of Memch will be crucial here.

More women registered for the next municipal elections. Obviously the proportion favoring the Conservative Party declined, while the Radical Party obtained more feminine votes. From the 13.1% it had obtained in 1935 it reached 24.4% in 1941. This meant that in 1941 the Radical Party almost equaled the feminine vote of the Conservatives⁴⁷. In the year 1938, when Pedro Aguirre Cerda had already been elected president, *Acción Femenina* interviewed him again and asked him about the general vote for women: "We will try to recognize all women's rights. All, exactly like men. It is somewhat of a disloyalty to half of the human gender to keep it chained up like this"⁴⁸. Apparently, the municipal elections of 1938 had made the president elect change his mind or, perhaps, as he had said in 1935, the right moment had come to grant women's suffrage.

Nearing the decade of the 40s, women's votes for the Radical Party get quite close to those obtained by the Conservative Party. In that context, the argument so often used by the members of Parliament, that the feminine vote would favor the Conservative Party became obsolete. But then, why did almost another decade have to pass to approve general women's suffrage? This study postulates that the problem of general women's suffrage will not be discussed by members of Parliament until the democratic image of the Republic is at risk.

General voting rights for women and the problems of democratization

The 15 years between the approval of municipal vote and the general voting rights show an important change in both the feminine and masculine discourse. Women began to better organize, they campaigned at a national level and used all the tools of modern politics: propaganda in the written press and radios, concentrations, manifestations, etc. The speeches of members of Parliament evolve from a minority to a unanimous acceptance of general women's suffrage. Nevertheless, what is interesting in this case are the arguments that were used.

Beyond the classical reasons of justice and social benefit that women's participation in the political sphere would have, by the end of the 40s decade other arguments gain importance: the democratization of the political system and the international commitments. The political class only really takes charge of the subject when it sees that the democratic image of Chile is at risk, both at the internal as at the external level. How can a system be considered democratic when it excludes half of the population just for gender reasons? How can Chile, which always considered itself a precursor among Latin American countries, sustain a democratic image if it still had not given women the right to vote in spite of innumerable recommendations by signed international commitments? Only then did the problem of women's general suffrage receive unanimous support from Parliament members, although the doubts and fears about the electoral conduct of women remained, which can be proved by the slowness to approve the law.

Liberalism, understood as the thinking that promotes individual liberties, equality of rights between all men and the progressive democratization of society, had sustained, at least in theory, the republican system in Chile ever since independence. With different shades, most of the political parties adhered to this ideology, which translated into a defense of democracy and individual liberties; yet, there is a paradox when it comes to feminine vote. In spite of that, theoretically, liberalism should have harbored the feminine political vindications as a way of extending the electoral base of the country and of including more people into active citizenship; this does not happen in Chile until midst 20th century. Before that, the relation between the liberal and the feminist currents operates in a rather antagonistic fashion. Nevertheless, within this same liberal ideology are the principles and arguments that women will use to demand their rights. "In reality, the ideology of individual liberty - the idea that all "men" are born equal - motivated the political action of women as much as that of men. By insisting that women are equal in spite of physical differences, feminists challenged the democratic ideologies of the individual rights"⁴⁹. This is why we can affirm that women's suffrage becomes a problem when it puts democracy at risk, because it questions the very same arguments that it had been defended with.

In 1935 was founded the *Movimiento pro Emancipación de la Mujer Chilena* (*Movement pro Emancipation of the Chilean Woman*), Memch, a group that centered its fight in obtaining economic, social, and legal independence of women. Memch was the first organization to use massive mobilization of women and held innumerable public acts. Thus, from the midst of the 30s the vote of women started to be vindicated by the new feminine organizations as a matter of justice and equality. In other words, they did not see it as a concession of the masculine world but as a right of women that the State had to recognize⁵⁰. Memch also had another important weapon, their monthly review *La Mujer Nueva* (*The New Woman*). Through it, a call was made to women of all ideological tendencies and social classes to become interested in their rights. They

postulated that if women did not fight for their own rights, nobody would. *La Mujer Nueva* was tenacious in its criticism of the political world: they accused it of instrumentalization of women, using them when it was convenient, but not giving what in justice they deserved, for fear of the effects that this could bring.

In the decade of the 30s the feminine organizations were already convinced that the only way to get the changes they looked for was through the vote. Although Memch promoted the general emancipation of women, suffrage was among their main subjects. In an interview to Elena Caffarena, founder and leader of Memch, Georgina Durand asked her about the most important achievement for women, to which Elena Caffarena answered that it was the political vote:

“Not because it is the most important as such but because I consider it the instrument, the key to get the rest of the vindications. The vote will allow women to be present there where laws are made, to influence and modify those laws that limit our rights or our possibilities...”⁵¹.

Although many members of Parliament had spoken up in favor of reforming the Civil Code first, so that women could be on an equal level with men, the attainment of the municipal vote had already convinced women that they had to fight for the general vote. This, because the only way to reach the social, economic and legal vindications they needed was from within the political system, and therefore they had to be considered active citizens.

Memch was the best structured organization and that which had the most concrete action plan: its main preoccupation was the position of the integral woman. Nevertheless, although declaring itself plural, Memch had a clearly leftist view and let it be seen in its newspaper, trying to orient the feminine vote of the 1938 municipal elections. Memch quickly formed an alliance with the Popular Front that arose in 1936 and supported all the radical candidates.

1941 seemed to be the right year to enlarge the vote of women, since in that year the feminine votes of the Radical Party had equaled those of the Conservative Party. On that same year, President Aguirre Cerda presented to Congress a project for a law of women suffrage drawn up by Elena Caffarena. In his speech, President Aguirre Cerda introduced the subject as a matter of justice and of the spirit of the Constitution. Besides, he made a positive evaluation of the work of women in the elections and in the municipal seats: “*the action of women in the Municipalities has constituted, since its implementation, an edifying test. In the elections where they have participated they have shown great civic culture and have distinguished themselves for their dedication and intelligent work in the municipal posts they filled*”⁵². In this paragraph it is clear that the municipal vote was a test, an examination, that after 6 years was considered approved by women.

It is possible then, to affirm that after reading President Aguirre Cerda’s presentation the subject of general women’s suffrage could no longer be obviated. The arguments of feminine inability to exercise this right were unsustainable and even the arguments that arose from political opportunism could no longer be used. By the 40s decade the problem of women’s suffrage was placing Chilean democracy under questioning because, in spite of the democratic discourse, half of the Chilean population

was excluded from political participation. Half of the Chilean population could not choose its representatives in Congress and, therefore, could not be represented either. It is at that moment that unanimity was forged for the subject and the law was approved in 1949. The parliamentary arguments given between 1941 and 1949 in favor of women's general suffrage were basically the same: the justice of such a right, the beneficial effect of women on society, the example of other countries of the world where this right had been approved, etc.

Now, one can ask oneself why if in 1941 the majority of members of Congress seemed to favor the general right of vote for women, why it took 8 years to be approved. It is interesting to point out that there is a remarkable difference between the speech and the action of the masculine political world. No politician publicly opposed the enlargement of the feminine vote, yet after the unexpected death of President Pedro Aguirre Cerda silence operated anew. Only in 1945 a project for general voting rights of women was presented again, promoted by congressmen from different political parties. The justification for this project was the same that Aguirre Cerda had used in 1941 and it was presented by senator Rudecindo Ortega of the Radical Party: "It does not escape the Honorable Senate's judgement the injustice it means to keep the feminine sector, which reaches fifty-one per cent of our population, on the margins of active citizenship of nationality. We also know in what way, by their culture, sensibility, abnegation and clear sense of responsibility, women can contribute to overcome in national life"⁵³.

Ideas of equity, justice and the beneficial effect of women on the fatherland through their incorporation to national politics, get repeated over and over. Nevertheless, arguments of democratization also get repeated, even more forcefully: *"The suffrage right in Chile has been exercised in 1945 by only 419.930 voters which represent 70% of those inscribed in the Electoral Registry, and 8,4% of the total population of the country; quite narrow political bases, which need to be enlarged to assure the strength of the republican institutions. As much as it is necessary to look after the health of our people, provide housing and welfare, eradicate illiteracy through the multiplication of schools and a strong literacy and culture campaign for adults, so it is also necessary to incorporate women to political citizenship since they constitute 51% of the Chilean population"*⁵⁴.

It is noteworthy to observe how the masculine discourse about women's suffrage became urgent only when it felt that it presented a risk to the republican institutions. Thus, the feminine vote was established in the public discussion as much by action as by omission, which means that together with the classical arguments of justice, equity and beneficial effects of women's suffrage, in the 40s decade another argument gained much strength: if women's suffrage was not recognized, democracy and its institutions were at risk. Thus, the problem of women's suffrage made it compelling to redefine the notions of republicanism and democracy. If the Chilean political system excluded half of the population could it be considered democratic? On what reason were women being excluded? What happened with the concepts of sovereignty and participation in the case of women?

All of these questions pointed to the center of the problem: the persistent negative or the silence around the feminine vote strongly questioned democracy. In this context, and contrary to the political speeches of the beginnings of the century, the Radical, Communist and the Socialist parties were the strongest defenders of women's suffrage,

since it was part of the project of these parties to enlarge the electoral bases. The leftist currents, from the more moderate to the more extreme, wanted to promote popular participation in the democratic system; this is why they so strongly supported the general women's suffrage project in the 40s. On the other hand, the decrease of the Conservative Party's influence is evident. Despite it had been supporting women suffrage for years, in the discussion of the latter years it had not made new contributions. In that sense, the Conservative Party intervened less in the discussion because it was already clear that the electoral benefits of women's suffrage would not mainly go to it.

The argument of democratization goes hand in hand with another that appears for the first time in the project of law of 1945: international commitments. In 1924, Chile accepted the recommendations about feminine political rights given by the V Panamerican Conference held in Santiago. At the VIII Panamerican Conference held in Lima, in 1938 Chile adhered to the Interamerican Commission of Women (created in 1928), whose job it was to obtain full civil and political rights for the women of the continent. Thus, "*Chile, that has always honored international commitments, feels tied to these interamerican recommendations approved for the benefit and progress of all the nations of the continent*"⁵⁵. Nevertheless, the international recommendations were made from the decade of the 20s onwards and only in the 40s were they taken into account. Here, again, we see how the subject of feminine vote becomes a problem when it puts into risk the democratic image of Chile before the world, having half of its population excluded from political participation.

Finally, the project presented in 1945 pointed out the wish to enlarge the democratic base of the country, wish shared by all political sectors. Only in December 1946, the Constitution, Legislation and Justice Commission announced that feminine vote would be mandatory, leaving women in absolute equality to men, and suggested that the law started to be enforced beginning January 1st, 1948 so that women had a year to prepare for the compliance of this new civic duty⁵⁶. Again it is possible to observe incoherences in the speeches of the political class about general suffrage. It was supposed that the municipal vote was the first step for women's civil education, and more than 10 years had gone by since it was approved, so why do they decide to postpone the approval of the general suffrage law for another year? The fears produced by the duplication of the electorate still existed for congressmen, in spite of their speeches favoring the project.

Another year had to go by before the House of Representatives approved the project. On September 15, 1948, before a rostrum and galleries full of women, the deputies took charge of the project. Congressmen from different parties fought to speak up to remind everyone that they had all supported this initiative, that they all considered women's suffrage as a fair right of women, but, the delay in the approval of this law on which they all accorded (or said they did) could not be explained.

It is clear that the congressional discussions are always crossed by ideological differences and by party interests, but it is interesting to remark that many congressmen from different parties accused the government of delaying the law or, at least, for not doing anything so that it got approved, mainly for fear of the effects it would have on the electoral results in the 1949 election. It must have been at least surprising for the women present to hear all congressmen declaring themselves in favor of women's

suffrage, praise the qualities of women, emphasize the injustice it meant to have excluded them, and each one declaring himself the “*first in understanding the need to give women a law which should never have been postponed more than a hundred of years*”⁵⁷. Especially if we think that women had been fighting for years over this, the subject was being discussed publicly for more than 20 years and the law had still not been approved. In the last proceedings the project returned to the Senate and it was discussed in a Special Session on December 21st, 1948 and finally approved. The new law was only published in the Official Paper on January 14, 1949.

It is interesting to note how different arguments were wielded in the congressional debate favoring women’s suffrage: women’s unquestionable capacity, their sensibility for social problems, their quality as citizens, etc., nevertheless, after reading the parliamentary discussions it can be interpreted that women’s suffrage was again victim of political opportunism. The project was presented in 1945, and slept in the Constitution, Legislation and Justice Commission until 1947. At that point the Senate sent it to the House of Representatives for its discussion and approval, which took another year; and this was supposed to be a project which had the express approval of all congressmen and considered it of maximum importance. But the Executive only gave it the character of urgency on December 1948, after dictating the Law of Permanent Defense of Democracy in July of that same year, which declared the Communist Party illegal. Finally, the law of general women’s suffrage was enacted in January 1949, which prevented women from voting in the parliamentary elections of March 1949.

We can see that general women’s suffrage only became a fact when the government went through an instability crisis, in which democracy was questioned because of the so called Ley Maldita (Damned Law) of 1948. The González Videla government firmly supported women’s suffrage when it realized that with it the government could partly offset the criticism over the deterioration of democracy in Chile. This is why we can affirm that the Chilean political situation was more effective in the attainment of the feminine vote than the campaigns of women themselves.

In this context, we can postulate that the subject of women’s suffrage was used by the masculine political world. This does not mean that they did not think women should participate in the political system, since women had sufficient capabilities and would benefit society, but these arguments had not been enough for the approval of the law. One must remember that these same arguments had been used by Abdón Cifuentes in 1865. The law’s discussion only became speedier when the subject of women’s suffrage became a problem. And mainly, when the political class began to ask itself what type of democracy and what republic it wanted to have; then the subject of suffrage became really important. Finally, it became a law when women could no longer be excluded from the political sphere without putting democracy at risk, a democracy which the masculine political world bragged about.

Conclusion

The evolution in both the feminine and masculine discourses about the vote of women is evident under the light of the analyzed texts. Nevertheless, what is most interesting is how and why they evolve. Women’s suffrage does not become a subject of

public debate until the 20s and then another 20 years will go by before it becomes a law of general suffrage.

Clearly, the society transformed from the end of the 19th century until mid 20th century, and in that evolution women's suffrage gained in importance. From not even being a subject, in the 40s the feminine vote became a problem for the political class, because it put the Chilean democratic system under question. For the feminine organizations it also became a problem when they realized that their hopes for justice and equity in civil terms would not become a fact if they did not participate in the political system. At that moment we can see how Joan Scott's sentence "that which is personal is political" becomes real: in this case, what is personal would be to obtain jurisdiction over the children, the right to administer their own goods, civil rights. Nevertheless, these will not become a reality for women if they do not join the political world.

The discourse of power, the discourse that dominates in this case, that of the masculine world, was so strong that it limited the political aspirations of women. For men it was so clear that women should not vote that the qualification of some women in San Felipe and La Serena in 1875 was considered an unheard of fact, even funny, but never dangerous or interesting enough to generate a discussion. In the concept of nation that the politicians of the 19th century had, women were relegated to the private field. This meant that, due to their passional nature, emotional and irrational, women had to be subjected to men; therefore their place was the domestic sphere. The masculine world considered itself with exclusive rights to occupy the public sphere but could govern both the public and the domestic spheres. Despite that the liberal ideology said that the social contract was established between free and equal persons, women were not considered in it: "The family is, therefore, the first model of political societies: the leader is the father image; the people, the children, and all, having been born equal and free, do not alienate their liberty unless for certain purposes"⁵⁸. And the mother? She does not appear because she is not considered free, or equal, due to her nature. Based on this, women are excluded from the category of "individuals" and, therefore, from the public world of equality and consensus⁵⁹.

The feminine criticism of this dichotomy between the public and the private rejects the division of both spheres in virtue of the natural characteristics of the sexes, in that sense, "it is only possible to correctly understand the liberal social life when it is accepted that the two spheres - the domestic (private) and the civil society (public) - allegedly opposed, are interrelated"⁶⁰.

The struggle for women's suffrage is an example of the criticism and the feminist attacks on the liberal theory of the separate spheres. The arguments of the suffragettes try to show how the supposedly universal principles of liberalism lead to a questioning of liberalism itself⁶¹. In the Chilean case, we can affirm that this assertion is true: the liberal suppositions of equality between individuals in the 19th century run against it during the 20th century, when from different excluded social sectors (one of them, women) it is fought for the inclusion into the political system. The ideals of democracy, sovereignty and representation which liberalism postulates are deeply menaced by the very political world which proclaims them, when it keeps half of the population excluded from the political system until mid 20th century.

Once the vote is obtained, women gradually began registering and participating in greater numbers in the electoral process. The first female member of Congress was the Radical Party militant Inés Enríquez, who was elected deputy for Concepción in 1950. In 1953, María de la Cruz was elected as the first woman senator of Chile when she triumphed in Santiago with the support of the Democratic Party of Chile, with an overwhelming majority of approximately 107.000 votes⁶².

Despite the years that have gone by since the approval of women's suffrage until today, we can confirm that the inclusion of women into the public sphere has been slow and has not reached the same level of men. Although their rights have been recognized and having reached civil and political equality to men, women must now enter into the power spheres, because power was shaped by men. The so called first wave of feminism, the suffragist wave, tried to reach equality with men in legal and political terms. This implied that women had to "become mannish" to reach power spheres, and lose certain aspects of the feminine identity. The second feminist wave criticizes the masculine world and incorporates a sentence which will be fundamental: the equality in difference. This means not trying to gain egalitarian access to the masculine world but redefining the political from the feminine side. It is not enough to discuss women as an aggregate within the political social context, but the essential bases on which the political theory is built on must be reexamined. So that, in this way, women can integrate into it from their womanhood.

The equality in difference is just a sentence in Chile at the moment. The difference, that is to say, the feminine identity, must permanently be sacrificed or left behind by those who want to join the power spheres. That is why we finish this work by asking ourselves whether the fight for suffrage marks an end of a stage or the beginning of a new battle for recognition of the differences, in as much women, in equality, in as much individuals.

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¹ These movements are only formed in the 20s decade, but the struggle for the feminine vote begins forcefully in the 30s.

² Asunción Lavrín, *Women, feminism, and social change in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, 1890-1940*. University of Nebraska Press, 1995, 286.

³ This is so because catholic women were the first to enter public life, when they defended the Church's interests, which were also their own.

⁴ We understand as democratization the process in which formerly marginal social sectors are now included into the political system, mainly by exercising their right to vote.

⁵ The definition of liberalism is very complex because, according to Norberto Bobbio, it sometimes refers to a political party, at other times to a political movement, to an ideology or a political ethic. In this study we follow Bobbio's definition of liberalism which defines it as an ideology that relates jusnaturalist

philosophy with contractualist philosophy, in the sense that both set as their absolute aim the realization of man and the existence of rights before him. In that sense, the liberal State is a State that finally guarantees the individual rights in face of the political power, and therefore, demands quite broad ways of political representation, although this changes from country to country. In Latin America (for the Chilean case) it is possible to recognize the liberal ideology in the different independence processes, although it is not shown in its pure form due to the various doctrinal inspirations of the leaders and to the particular connections of the local elites with the subordinate sectors, and especially to the degree in which the relation between liberalism and democracy is conceived. Norberto Bobbio, Nicola Matteucci, Gianfranco Pasquino, *Diccionario de Política*, Siglo XXI editores, 7ª edición, Madrid, 1997, tomo II, 876, 878, 897.

⁶ Roger Chartier, *Espacio público, crítica y desacralización en el siglo XVIII*, Gedisa editorial, Barcelona, 1995, 33.

⁷ Ana María Stiven, *La Seducción de un orden*, Ediciones Universidad Católica, Santiago, 2000, 17.

⁸ Judith Squires, *Gender in Political Theory*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1999, 25.

⁹ Under social contract we understand the political theory that sees the origin of society and the base of political power in a contract, in other words, in an agreement between various individuals which would imply the end of a natural state and the beginning of a social and political state. The major exponent of this theory is Jean Jacques Rousseau, and when we speak of social contract we will fundamentally be based on him. Bobbio y otros. op. cit., tomo I, 351.

¹⁰ Carole Pateman, "Críticas feministas a la dicotomía público/privado", in Carmen Castells (comp.), *Perspectivas feministas en Teoría Política*, Paidós, 1996, 40.

¹¹ When article 5 of the Constitution, which declared illegal the non-practice of religions other than the catholic, was discussed.

¹² *El Eco de las Señoras de Santiago*, Santiago, 13 de julio de 1865, 1.

¹³ A. M. Stiven, *Historia del feminismo en Chile: avances en la consolidación republicana*. Unpublished, 20.

¹⁴ It is spoken of relational feminism when it defends rights which are for the common good, for all of society. It is spoken of individual feminism when it defends specific rights of women in as much as individuals.

¹⁵ Diana Veneros, "Sufragismo y Roles Femeninos. De las paradojas de "La Mujer Moderna" 1946-1952", en *Nomadías. Series Monográficas*. Editorial Cuarto Propio, Santiago, 1999, 242.

¹⁶ Diana Veneros y Patricia Ayala, "Dos vertientes del movimiento proemancipación de la mujer en Chile: feminismo cristiano y feminismo laico", en *Perfiles Revelados, Historias de Mujeres en Chile, s. XIX-XX*, Editorial Universidad de Santiago, Santiago, 1997, 51.

¹⁷ A.M. Stiven, *Historia del feminismo*, 34.

¹⁸ D. Veneros y Ayala, *op. cit.*, 53.

¹⁹ Edda Gaviola y otros. *Queremos votar en las próximas elecciones*, Coedición Centro de análisis y difusión de la condición de la mujer, "La Morada", Fempress, Ilet, Isis, Librería Lia, Pemci, Centro de Estudios de la Mujer, Santiago, 1986, 37.

²⁰ E. Gaviola, *op. cit.*, 40.

²¹ It is interesting to observe that in critical situations, women appear more forcefully in public spaces than in normal situations. Maybe, this is because in a crisis a woman feels her most precious possessions, her family and children, become menaced.

²² Abdón Cifuentes. “Acerca del Derecho Electoral de la Mujer” en *Colección de discursos de don Abdón Cifuentes*, Escuela Tipográfica La Gratitude Nacional, Santiago, 1916, 233.

²³ Cifuentes, op. cit., 242.

²⁴ Ibid., 241

²⁵ The underlining is mine.

²⁶ *El Eco de las Señoras de Santiago*, July 13, 1865, 1

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*, November 18, 1875.

²⁹ Chamber of Deputies, 24th Extraordinary Session, November 13, 1875.

³⁰ Martina Barros de Orrego, “El Voto femenino” en *Revista Chilena*, Año 1, tomo II, Num. IX, December, 1917, 392–393.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Luis Undurraga, *Boletín de Sesiones Extraordinarias*, Cámara de Diputados, 1917-1918, 56.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Isabel Irrarázaval de Pereira, “Sobre algunos derechos a los que la mujer debe aspirar”, en Rosa Rodríguez de la Sotta, *Relaciones y documentos del Congreso Mariano Femenino*, Escuela Tipográfica La Gratitude Nacional, Santiago de Chile, 1918, 278-279.

³⁵ Ibid., 279.

³⁶ Erika Maza, “Liberales, radicales y la ciudadanía de la mujer en Chile” (1872-1930), *Estudios Públicos*, n. 69, verano 1998, 323.

³⁷ Martina Barros de Orrego, op. cit, 393.

³⁸ Ibid., 394.

³⁹ Ibid., 393.

⁴⁰ *Acción Femenina*, Año I, N^o. 8, Santiago, abril de 1923, 7.

⁴¹ Ibid., 8.

⁴² Erika Maza, Catolicismo, anticlericalismo y la extensión del sufragio a la mujer en Chile. *Estudios Públicos*, n. 58, otoño 1995, 173.

⁴³ *Boletín de Sesiones Ordinarias*, Senado, June 13, 1933, 309.

⁴⁴ Data from Edda Gaviola, op. cit., 61 y de Erika Maza, *Catolicismo...*, 174.

- ⁴⁵ *Acción Femenina*, Año IV, n. 6, Santiago, May, 1935, 3
- ⁴⁶ Edda Gaviola, op. cit. 61.
- ⁴⁷ Erika Maza, *Catolicismo...*, 185.
- ⁴⁸ *Acción Femenina*, Año IV, num. 35, Santiago, October and November 1938.
- ⁴⁹ Joan Scott, "El problema de la invisibilidad de la mujer", en Carmen Ramos Escandón, *Género e Historia*, Instituto Mora, UAM, México, 1992, 63.
- ⁵⁰ There is a fundamental difference in the change of discourse, between the words "grant" and "recognize". At the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th, the subject of women's suffrage was considered a concession, a gift or a grace from the masculine world to women. By the 30s this changes drastically. The change from conceding to recognizing implies a redefinition of republicanism, because it implies including women as equals in the nation, with the same rights as men, which the State must recognize and not grant as a gift.
- ⁵¹ Paz Covarrubias O. *Movimiento Feminista Chileno: 1915-1949*, Instituto de Sociología de la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, 1974, 36.
- ⁵² *Boletín de Sesiones Extraordinarias*, Senado, 8 de enero de 1941, 1745.
- ⁵³ *Boletín de Sesiones Ordinarias*, Senado, 20 de junio de 1945, 476.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 477.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ *Boletín de Sesiones Extraordinarias*, Senado, December 3, 1946, 135.
- ⁵⁷ Felicitas Klimpel, *La mujer chilena (el aporte femenino al Progreso de Chile) 1910-1960*, Editorial Andrés Bello, Santiago, 1962, 104.
- ⁵⁸ J. J. Rousseau, *El Contrato Social*, Biblioteca EDAF, Madrid, 1989, 41.
- ⁵⁹ Carole Pateman, "Críticas feministas a la dicotomía público/privado", en Carmen Castells (comp.), *Perspectivas feministas en Teoría Política*, Paidós, 1996, 34
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ⁶² Interview to María de la Cruz in 1985, citado por Edda Gaviola, op. cit., 81.