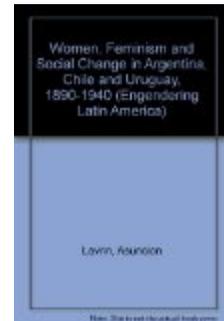


# H-Net Reviews

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Asuncion Lavrin. *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890-1940*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. x + 480 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-2897-9.

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## Women in the Southern Cone

This book focuses on the political gains made by women in the Spanish-speaking Southern Cone of South America after 1890. The gains were fostered by the social and economic transformations that took place after the 1870s. New urban groups, including women, helped further the democratization of their societies by opening up the political system and promoting social reforms. The first phase of feminism developed an agenda. The second phase, after 1920, witnessed the campaign for its enactment. In the end, women won the suffrage and right to run for office, the right to divorce and remarry (except in Chile) and retain custody of their children, the right to enter the professions, the right to work for equal wages, and protective legislation and welfare for themselves and children. Other reforms revising gender relations in the family, allowing women to control their own bodies and reproduction, and abolishing the double standard, proved more elusive. Latin patriarchal tradition and the strong influence of the Roman Catholic Church restricted the feminist push for social and economic equality before 1940.

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### Summary

Chapter 1 Feminism in the Southern Cone: Definitions and Objectives

Feminism in Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina was urban and middle class, and especially appealed to educated women who suffered from legal discrimination and economic inequality. Middle-class women reached out to those in the working class from the very beginning, so that class did not divide the movement. Middle-class women, made aware of social problems, became reformers in health care, welfare, and the workplace. Ethnicity was important, especially in Argentina and Uruguay, but did not become a problem because the movements invoked nationalism. Women portrayed themselves as bettering the lives of all in their nation. Moreover, the philosophy and practice of feminism helped women gain a new self-confidence and self-respect while adhering to family and Catholic values.

Lavrin emphasizes two distinct branches of feminism—socialist and liberal. Their differences were resolved under the rubric of “compensatory feminism.” The legal equality of women was combined with protective legislation for women (and children) at home and

in the workplace. By the 1930s, Catholic groups that emphasized gender differences, motherhood, and femininity accepted legal equality for men and women while praising women's superior morality.

#### Chapter 2 Labor and Feminism: Foundations of Change

Concern with the problems of working women and, in particular, working mothers grew as more women entered the labor force. Their paid labor outside and inside the home attracted the attention of the socialist, anarchist, and Catholic labor organizations. Liberals pushed for reform of the Civil Codes and socialists called for equal wages for equal work. Women as economically independent and as taxpayers should surely enjoy the right to vote. While traditional culture viewed female labor as antagonistic to motherhood and home life, others praised it as contributing to the nation. The compromise was to adopt a "maternalist feminism" that sought state protectionism and equal wages.

Women were chiefly employed in domestic work and in urban industries such as textiles. Employers liked them because they were reliable and cheap. In addition, they increasingly entered professions such as education, health, and public administration. The working conditions of women in the factory and in the home (as domestics or piecework in the home) were often deplorable and unhygienic. Reforms and regulations such as regulated hours and a minimum wage excluded domestics in Argentina. However, Uruguay's and Chile's laws were concerned with domestic laborers. All three nations' laws allowed leave for pregnant mothers and breaks for mothers to nurse their babies at work. However, female labor organizations and the women's branches of political parties decried the lack of enforcement of regulations and the low wages paid women. The sexual exploitation of women by employers was denounced by all except anarchists who decried conventional morality. Protective legislation for women and children, the male backlash against women employees, and low wages conspired to keep women subordinated and belied any extolling of their "economic independence."

#### Chapter 3 Puericultura, Public Health, and Motherhood

Southern Cone feminists, working in a Catholic culture, tended to accept motherhood as the highest calling for a woman. They also seized upon motherhood as a metaphor to promote women as workers in the caring professions—teaching, health care, and social services.

These new careers in *puericultura* (child care) were broadened to include caring for other women, and offered a chance for mobility to working class women. Chile enacted a Code for Children and Uruguay and Argentina passed laws to protect needy children and their mothers, a problem exacerbated by illegitimacy.

#### Chapter 4 Feminism and Sexuality: An Uneasy Relationship

While child mortality could be lessened by nutrition and pre- and post-natal care, the social problem of out-of-wedlock births was harder to resolve in a patriarchal culture. The hesitant broaching of the subject of human sexuality by feminists was necessary to fight the double standard that resulted in so many female heads of households with illegitimate children, in addition to the spread of venereal disease.

The anarchist attack on monogamy was rejected by most women, but the ideology of a single standard was not. This "moral unica" underpinned the ensuing push by feminists for sex education, the acknowledgement of paternity, the deregulation of prostitution, the establishment of health clinics to stop venereal disease, and divorce (p. 133).

Most of these efforts met with success, except for the attempt to establish a moral unica. In fact, the passage of welfare laws to provide for needy children and women further freed men from sexual and paternal responsibilities.

#### Chapter 5 The Control of Reproduction: Gender Relations under Scrutiny

Although the state had stepped in to provide for women and children when fathers did not, gender relations were still subject to reform. Many feminists advocated gender equality and entered discussions of socio-sexual behavior. Interest in eugenics, which meant prophylaxis and social hygiene, had to include women. Female physicians adopted the principles of eugenics to combat tuberculosis, syphilis, and alcoholism. Bound by cultural traditions, most feminists could not bring themselves to discuss sex, birth control, and abortion. They could, however, make bold to advocate sex education.

All three countries' legislatures discussed eugenics, abortion, prostitution, and birth control in the context of societies that revered motherhood. Prenuptial certification of men to block the spread of social diseases was debated, and such laws were passed in Argentina. Only Uruguay briefly legalized abortion because men and

women hesitated to legalize abortion even in the face of so many clandestine ones. Both men and women were unwilling to give up the idealization of motherhood and allow women to control their reproduction. It took enduring underdevelopment and poverty after World War II to cause Southern Cone men and women to begin to question gender relations and roles.

#### Chapter 6 Reform of the Civil Codes: The Pursuit of Legal Equality

Feminists and their male allies did succeed in questioning the legal subordination of women in the family. This chapter relates the reform of Civil Codes to allow married women to control property and their children. Socialists and feminists (and Colorados in Uruguay) gave women a share of “*patria postestad*” (the father’s authority in the family and over children) in Argentina in 1926, Chile in 1934, and Uruguay in 1946. These changes were defended as the right of mothers to be responsible for their children.

#### Chapter 7 Divorce: The Triumph and the Agony

In matters of divorce, Uruguay’s Colorado Party separated church and state, and allowed for the dissolution of marriage in 1907. A double standard for adultery as a reason for divorce was inserted in the law (infidelity on the part of a woman but scandalous adultery on the part of a man). In Argentina and Chile the subject of divorce was brought up by liberals and socialists, but traditional views of the family and the strength of the church forestalled a law of divorce that allowed remarriage. The Civil Codes maintained the authority of men over women even as women became wage earners and educated. Chilean women especially were lukewarm about the right to divorce and remarry, and they still do not have that right today.

#### Chapter 8 Women’s Politics and Suffrage in Argentina

Feminists were successful in challenging the subordination of women in politics; however, Argentine women did not obtain the vote until 1947. Political parties, women’s groups, and international congresses advocated women’s suffrage. In this chapter, Lavrin describes the debates in the Congress, and reviews the striving of women and groups committed to this goal.

#### Chapter 9 Women’s Politics and Suffrage in Chile

In all three countries, women rejected violence and confrontation as methods to gain the vote. Instead, they

developed the metaphor of mothers in the body politic who deserved to participate in decisions affecting the home and family. Lavrin agrees with Elsa Chaney, Evelyn Stevens, and Jane Jaquette that *supermadre* and *marianismo* concepts are valid to explain the political activities of Latin American women (p. 13). This was especially true for Delia Ducoing and the Union Feminista in Chile. She wrote in 1930 that “[T]rue feminism is gentle and admirable” (p. 299). In 1934, literate Chilean women were given the right to vote in municipal elections. In 1935 an umbrella organization for several women’s groups—MEMCH—was founded to campaign for complete legal equality of men and women. Even though women were elected mayors and city councillors, Congress did not give them the right to vote in national elections until December 1948.

#### Chapter 10 Women’s Politics and Suffrage in Uruguay

Uruguayan women lagged other Southern Cone women in organization and self-consciousness due to their lack of education. Jose Batlle y Ordonez and his Colorado Party supported women’s rights and feminist issues. The Socialist Party also pushed for women’s rights, but it was small. The main female feminist before 1915, Maria Abella de Ramirez, spent most of her life in La Plata, Argentina. She joined a group that was masonic in origin, the Society of Freethinkers, and received acceptance for her ideas to liberate women.

The Colorados held power early in the twentieth century and gave little support to women’s suffrage, which was opposed by the Nationalist Party. The Uruguayan National Council of Women, founded in 1916 as a member of the International Council of Women, was led by Paula Luisi. She later formed the *Alianza Uruguaya de Mujeres*, and both groups campaigned for women’s suffrage. The arguments in favor of women’s suffrage in Congress were classical—that motherhood gave special sensitivity to women, as well as that women deserved basic justice. The Colorados downplayed the fact that they had controlled Congress all those years when they purported to advocate women’s rights. In December 1932, Uruguayan women received the right to vote. The next year Sara Rey Alvarez founded a women’s party (PIDF) that lasted six years. Established parties organized women’s sections. In 1942 women were elected to Congress and were present when the Civil Code was reformed in 1946 (see above). The Uruguayan feminist movement had caught up with Argentina’s and Chile’s, and had surpassed them by 1940.

#### Epilogue

In this time period, feminism had come to be understood as the “reevaluation of women’s roles in society” (p. 353). It was “a mantra for incorporating gender into all forms of social reform” (p. 354). Feminists were nationalists who wanted to build a better future for all. In the epilogue, Lavrin reviews the meaning of the themes presented in the above chapters. The most important legacy left by the first two generations of feminists and social reformers in the Southern Cone was connecting nurturing and motherhood with civic activities of moral and material betterment of their nations and the world.

#### Evaluation

Asuncion Lavrin is a thorough researcher who is bilingual. She was born in Cuba and earned her doctorate at Harvard. A pioneer in Latin American women’s history, she has been concentrating on women in Latin America for over twenty years. She is now a professor of history at Howard University.

This book renders a great service to Latin American scholarship by describing the contributions of women to political and social reform in the Southern Cone from 1890 to 1940. The names of women, men, and organizations (national and international) that dealt with

women’s issues and feminist ideas are rescued from oblivion. Lavrin goes beyond compensatory history in sketching themes and providing meanings and interpretations for the activities of these women and men. She reminds the reader that women and their ideas influenced the evolution of their nations. Societal reforms and democratization of Latin American societies owe much to them, even in the period when women did not have the vote. Women participated in every sphere of life and labor.

This book is not easy to read since it reflects the language of scholarly discourse. It is well-organized and carries a very complete list of sources. The drawing together of data from three countries is a daunting task, one that Lavrin handles exceptionally well. The publication of this book marks a watershed for Latin American studies: It is difficult to conceive that there will be any more books on politics and political parties in the Southern Cone that ignore women and feminist issues.

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