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Amanda Labarca and the first feminist institutions in Chile (1910-1922)

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Abstract: Chile underwent profound social changes at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. In this context, women began to organize themselves in public spaces to improve their living conditions in different spheres. This article analyses the contribution of Amanda Labarca to the organization of the first feminist institutions in Chile (1910-1922). It looks at this from a cultural-historical perspective to understand the implications that such women's organizations had on the country's progress at the time, drawing on both primary and secondary sources of evidence. The findings show that Labarca played a leading role in the then incipient Chilean feminist movement, as materialized by her leadership in the creation of the *Círculo de Lectura* in 1915. She also played an active role in various women's groups that evolved into academic, cultural, and political organizations that were consolidated between 1930-1950.

Keywords: Amanda Labarca; feminist institutions; *Círculo de Lectura*; women's history; Chile

Amanda Labarca e as primeiras instituições feministas no Chile (1910-1922)

Resumo: O Chile registrou grandes mudanças sociais no final do século XIX e começo do século XX. Neste contexto, as mulheres começaram a organizar-se no espaço público para melhorar sua condição de vida em diversas esferas. Este artigo faz uma análise da contribuição de Amanda Labarca à organização das primeiras instituições feministas chilenas (1910-1922), abordando, a partir da história cultural, para compreender as implicações que teve a organização das mulheres no progresso do país, o que se realizou a partir de fontes primárias e secundárias. O estudo evidencia o protagonismo de Labarca nos recentes movimentos feministas chilenos, que ganhou forma com a sua liderança na criação do *Círculo de Lectura*, em 1915. Posteriormente, teve uma participação ativa em diversos grupos de mulheres responsáveis pelo crescimento de organizações acadêmicas, culturais e políticas que se consolidaram entre 1930 e 1950.

Palavras-chave: Amanda Labarca; instituições feministas; *Círculo de Lectura*; história das mulheres; Chile.

Amanda Labarca y las primeras instituciones feministas en Chile (1910-1922)

Resumen: Chile registró profundos cambios sociales a finales del s. XIX e inicios del s. XX. En este contexto, las mujeres comienzan a organizarse en el espacio público para mejorar su condición de vida en distintas esferas. El presente artículo realiza un análisis de la contribución de Amanda Labarca a la organización de las primeras instituciones feministas en Chile (1910-1922), lo cual se aborda desde la historia cultural para comprender las implicancias que tuvo la organización de las mujeres en el progreso del país, lo que se realizó a partir de fuentes primarias y secundarias. Los hallazgos evidencian el protagonismo de Labarca en el entonces incipiente movimiento feminista chileno lo que se materializó con su liderazgo en la creación del *Círculo de Lectura* en 1915. Posteriormente tuvo un rol activo en diversas agrupaciones de mujeres que evolucionaron a organizaciones académicas, culturales y políticas que se consolidaron entre 1930-1950.

Palabras Clave: Amanda Labarca; instituciones feministas; *Círculo de Lectura*; historia de las mujeres; Chile.

Introduction

During the 19th century in Chile, as in many countries, women lived in a period where they were governed by the family hierarchy and canon, where they were molded, controlled, and ultimately subjugated to the home (Claudia CALQUÍN, 2011)¹. Women's role was mainly within the family, where she limited herself to moving around, personally, socially, and in her work, always with the safeguard of ensuring she did not transgress from her imposed role. Furthermore, women's sexuality was supervised, regulated and even stereotyped as being for the purpose of conceiving the husband's offspring, thus providing the basis for supporting the inheritances of any property at stake, therefore restricting the women in the possibility of sexual exploration beyond the threshold of the capital agreements made within the framework of marriage (Asunción LAVRIN, 1997; Ana SALOMA, 2000). In the case of elite women, a considerable number of women had to circumscribe their activities to a predetermined space of behaviors and topics of conversation, or even to simply listen and not express their own opinion; while, for working women, their environments were subject to precariousness and moral and physical mistreatment at the hands of the boss of the workshop or place where they worked. However, regardless of their social class, all women shared the fact that they were far from being in a position where they could feel enriched and could evolve with their male partners (Francisca RENGIFO, 2011; Andrea KOTTOW; Ana TRAVERSO, 2020; Ana STUVEN; Joaquín FERMANDOIS, 2010).

This situation began to become visible in a certain malaise on the part of the enlightened class, especially evident from the second half of the nineteenth century, and mainly in women themselves, who saw that while Chile was being transformed in various areas, yet they continued to be socially stagnant, stuck in passive roles linked to motherhood or marriage, with this gender role perpetuated by a sexist education that taught women-only how to be good mothers and how to prepare themselves to be the head of the household (Florencia GUZMÁN; Catalina PADILLA; Livia RIVERA, 2019).

By the second half of the 19th century, Chile had witnessed a public irruption by some women who did not consider the practices of the Chilean education system to be fair and objective, particularly by excluding them from higher education, and who wished to be allowed to pursue higher education, with some women advocating the right to enter university. These first applications to universities were submitted because of the efforts of brave individuals with the motivation and personal interest to bring about change. Among those, the findings of the scientific literature on gender studies and feminism in Chile recognize Professor Antonia Tarragó as a leading light, who, despite not succeeding in her application, was the first to try to break with the prevailing tradition of the time, when in 1872 she wrote the first formal application by a woman to the *Comisión Universitaria* [University Commission]² in Chile to have exams for women's entry into vocational training approved and validated (Alejandra CASTILLO, 2010; Karin SÁNCHEZ, 2006). Years later, this first act inspired Isabel Le Brun de Pinochet, also an educator and director of a private educational establishment, who in 1876 wrote to the *University Commission* with the same objective as Tarragó. However, as the records show, while once again that sending was born of the courage of a woman, there was symbolic support from different social groups that considered it necessary and right for women to enter university, and that the reasons that were argued for not allowing this was not supported by objective justifications. In particular, Aníbal Pinto Garmendia and the *Ministro de Justicia, Trabajo e Instrucción Pública* [Minister of Justice, Worship and Public Instruction], *Miguel Luis Amunátegui Aldunate*, decreed the following:

Considering:

- 1° That women should be encouraged to do serious and solid studies;
- 2° That they can exercise with advantage some of the so-called scientific professions;
- 3° That it is important to provide them with the means to earn their own living;

Decree:

It is declared that women must be allowed to take valid examinations to obtain professional qualifications provided that they submit to the same provisions for this purpose as men.

To be communicated and published. (Miguel AMUNÁTEGUI, 1877)

The above-mentioned decree was a great step in the social change that the women of yesteryear began to experience; however, little credit is given to their managers, contrary to what various records of the time reported. For example, the Chilean researcher and writer Pedro Pablo Figueroa, through his *Diccionario Biográfico de Chile* [Biographical Dictionary of Chile],

¹ It should be pointed out that historiographical research has also reported an entire field of work and "enterprise" linked to domestic work, an example of this being the women who worked as laundresses in the tenements, which was a job performed by 20% of the women in these spaces; there are also reports of women who provided care services for children who were at the mercy of these women or who were temporarily abandoned while the caretakers worked in another space.

² Due to problems that emerge in the translations of institutions, books of archives from Spanish to English, it was decided to include the original name of the institution or archive only in their first mention, accompanied by its' translation to English. From the second and subsequent mentions, these names will be written in English.

refers to Isabel Le Brun as so "... she was the first fortunate Chilean governess to open the way for young women to pursue professional scientific careers" (Pedro FIGUEROA, 1897, p. 187), which was later complemented by Amanda Labarca, who in her book *Feminismo Contemporáneo* [Contemporary Feminism] states:

It was Mrs. Antonia Tarragó and Isabel Le Brun who promoted this transcendental advance; they acted, therefore, as heroes, setting the course for the future activities of women ... From them emanate the amplitude reached in Chile by the Liceos de Niñas, an expansion not equaled by any country in South America, and that, despite its detractors, has been a considerable part in raising the spiritual level of our environment. They stirred up and promoted a social movement of extraordinary transcendence. (LABARCA, 1947, p. 172)

A decade after the initiative of these women and the promulgation of the *Decreto Amunátegui* [Amunátegui Decree], doctors Eloísa Díaz and Ernestina Pérez became the first professional women in Chile, when in January 1887 they obtained the title of Medical Surgeon. This was considered by the press and different groups of society as a huge milestone, with the women being seen as pioneers entering a world that had been previously explored only by men, opening up the way and hope for future women interested in entering higher education in Chile (Gonzalo SALAS *et al.*, 2019; Hernán SCHOLTEN *et al.*, 2020).

The observation and analysis of a subject of study from the social sciences in general, and history in particular, obliges any research team to carry out a decision-making process that involves diverse aspects and is based on ontological and epistemological conceptualizations from which the research is sustained. Within these considerations, it is stated that this research is based on women's history, but it is performed in dialogue with various fields of social science. For example, it takes ideas and contributions from feminism as theory and epistemology, as well as gender studies, to contribute to forming these alternative histories that have been silenced or relegated by traditional history, which is more visible (Izilda JOHANSON, 2020; Cándida MARTÍNEZ, 2017; Recka PANDE, 2018; STUVEN; FERMANDOIS, 2010). Finally, both of these lines of research converge with the proposals developed by cultural history, the theoretical approach used in this research, developed in various fields since the 1930s, which first introduced a series of important changes to the historical discipline (Peter BURKE, 1999), as is the case for this research, which concerns the organization of women in Chile at the beginning of the 20th century.

To analyse Amanda Labarca's contribution to the organization of the first feminist institutions in Chile (1910-1922), reference is made to the methodology of biographical analysis developed by Alberto Rosa, Juan Huertas and Florentino Blanco (1996), which proposes an approach to the subject of study through narration, a process that is conceived in three stages: the beginning, the knot and the end. Each of these stages provides us with the necessary information to answer the research question, namely, how did Labarca contribute to the improvement of the situation of women in Chile in the first decades of the 20th century? From this question, a more extensive dialogue then begins to develop, which is enriched by questions such as: What was the scope of Amanda Labarca's contributions to this area? Or do Labarca's contributions initiate, contribute to an area already in development, or culminate in some aspects already established by other women? Finally, it is necessary to point out that this process does not linearly take place as can be inferred – wrongly, of course – but rather, it must be understood as a process of a constant 'back and forth' or of advancing and regressing, to understand not only the subject studied, but also, its context, its influences, its effects, its followers, and its detractors.

Biographical considerations of Amanda Labarca

Approximately one month before the first women graduates of the *Universidad de Chile* [University of Chile] were registered, Amanda Pinto Sepúlveda – whose would later become Amanda Labarca Huberston – was born, the eldest daughter of Onofre Pinto and Sabina Sepúlveda, both of whom constituted a traditional-conservative middle-class household, and family unit that was attached to the Catholic norms of the time (María REYES; Helia VARGAS; Camila MEZA, 2002). Labarca was from her childhood a lover of reading and had many varied interests, which allowed her to be nourished by the perspectives of different authors who exposed her to what was happening in other countries, especially through poetry, novels and other styles, thus allowing the young Labarca to immerse herself in the intellectual issues that prevailed at the time, which would later also be reflected in her book *Impresiones de Juventud* [Impressions of youth] (LABARCA, 1909), a text of analysis and literary criticism that deals with the main aspects of Spanish novels and poetry.

All these factors shaped Labarca's intellectual figure which, moreover, led her to raise in her family the interest that she had in pursuing university studies, a question that did not please her father, a traditional man attached to the canons of the time (Jaime CAICEO, 2015a). Without abandoning her ideals and goals, over the period 1902-1904, Labarca devoted herself

to the study of pedagogy at the *Instituto Pedagógico* [Pedagogical Institute] of the University of Chile. It was here, where she met a student with considerable interest in university politics, named Guillermo Labarca Huberston, whom she went on to marry in 1906, also giving up her civil surnames to acquire those of her husband. This decision is of great interest to researchers wanting to analyse this decision considering Amanda Labarca's work, and some explanations for this radical change have been hypothesized. First, the conflict with her father, who was reported to be a conservative who did not like Amanda Labarca, has been suggested as the reason for this decision as the change of her two surnames eventually led to her keeping her distance from her family. A second idea that has been put forward to explain this change is related to Amanda Labarca's interest in the reality of women in the United States, where it was common for women to adopt their husband's surname upon marriage, a practice that she replicated in Chile (María Inés WINKLER; REYES, 2010).

At the end of the first decade of the 20th century, Labarca was awarded a scholarship by the Chilean Government that allowed her to continue perfecting her knowledge through stays abroad. In 1910, Labarca set off for New York, heading for the important and outstanding *Teachers College of Columbia University*, where she would have encountered and read references to psychology and education by authors such as John Dewey and Edward Lee Thorndike, among others. After this experience in the United States, she traveled to France in 1912, where she attended the *Sorbonne University* (STUVEN, 2019). During this time, she not only continued her academic training, but also developed an interest in the social context of women's rights in the United States and France and, consequently, the feminism of the time (Claudia HUAQUIÁN, 2018).

Finally, it should be noted that in 1922, Labarca was the protagonist of a milestone for the Latin American community in general, and the Chilean community, when she became the first woman in Chile to enter the classroom of a higher education institution as a teacher (WINKLER, 2007; SALAS; Rodolfo MARDONES; Miguel GALLEGOS; Fernando PONCE, 2014). This house of study was the *University of Chile*, where she joined the *Facultad de Filosofía, Humanidades y Finas Artes* [Faculty of Philosophy, Humanities and Fine Arts], with the position of 'Profesora Extraordinaria de Psicología' [Extraordinary Professor of Psychology], which was created upon request by decree of the Rector, Mr. Domingo Amunátegui Solar (1860-1946), with the unanimous approval of the *Consejo de Instrucción Pública* [Council of Public Instruction], as registered in the sessions of 13 November, 1922, published in the *Boletín de Instrucción Pública* [Bulletin of Public Instruction] (CONSEJO DE INSTRUCCIÓN PÚBLICA, 1922). The importance of this event would be recalled by Labarca twenty-five years later, when in her book *Contemporary Feminism*, she shares:

When the one who writes this entered the University in 1922, as a professor, the cycle of female cultural conquests in Chile completed a stage. Since then, there have been no legal or practical obstacles to the advancement of women along the paths of intellectual improvement. (LABARCA, 1947, pp. 133-134)

It is important to note that the well-known aristocratic writer and salonnière Inés Echeverría Bello – Iris –, would initially compete for this place as 'the first Chilean academic'³. On 4 October, 1922, the *Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities of the University of Chile* proposed she fill the vacancy left by historian Enrique Matta Vial, but her investiture was not granted until December 1925 (Berta LÓPEZ-MORALES, 1994).

From the American feminist movement to the *Círculo de lectura* (Reading Circle)

Upon returning to Chile, Labarca resumed her activities and promoted what would become the initial period of women's organization in cultural and social groups in the country, both key groups for feminism in Chile⁴ (CAICEO, 2015b; Ana GUIL; Sara VERA, 2010). During her time abroad, mainly in the United States, she had studied and researched what was happening in the field of education, but also the historical development of women and their organization. In this respect, it is important to briefly point out this historical course for the organization of women in this country. The work is recognized as beginning with the courage of Jane Cunningham Croly (1829-1901), known by her pseudonym Jennie June, who was an American journalist recognized for her feminist struggle and for promoting the creation of *Sorosis* – the first women's club in the

³ It should be noted that it has also been stated that the first Chilean female academician would have been the writer and journalist Rosario Orrego, when she was granted the position of honorary member within the Academy of Fine Arts in 1873; however, in practice, this Academy functioned as a space for erudite meeting, similar to the Literary Societies or 'Ateneos', rather than as an institution of formal education.

⁴ Previously, in 1913, another women's group was created in the north of the country, called *Centro Anticlerical Belén de Sárraga*, but it was not considered here for two reasons: first, because it was not linked to Labarca, the subject of this research, and second, because the main objective that motivated the organisation of this centre was to achieve labour improvements in the northern space, which at that time had a strong concentration of male and female workers who worked under deplorable conditions in their work spaces linked to mining.

country – in 1868, which promoted the subjugated social status of her and her colleagues⁵. A call was made for those women who were educated and who had literary, artistic, musical, and/or theatrical inclinations to come together so that they could share with each other, cooperate with each other and see the possibility of achieving successful careers. Despite being limited to public mockery by men, Sorosis encouraged the expansion of other clubs throughout the nation, promoting the education of women as a faithful tool capable of achieving the emancipatory dream of overcoming the pervading social-cultural traditions (Henry SMITH, 1963).

Subsequently, June founded the *General Federation of Women's Clubs* in 1890 to promote a greater flow of communication between the different clubs formed throughout the country at that time. Later, in 1914, this federation added a more political role to its intellectual cause by pursuing women's suffrage (Jane CROLY, 1898). Besides, this federation gave women the courage to speak out in front of others and the platform to be able to articulate what they thought to give solid opinions on various issues, which led to a greater exchange of ideas between these groups of women, and also with men, which germinated into an enriched dialogue on the part of this new class of citizens, who now understood and articulated complex ideas that it was not possible to do within the walls of the home in previous decades (Mary WOOD, 1912).

Within the proliferation of women's groups that were created after June's contribution were the so-called *Women's Reading Clubs*. These clubs emerged in different areas of the United States and had as their objective the study of history, literature, arts, and culture in general, with both intellectual and social areas for their members to allow women to more fully develop. In their statutes, it is evident that the quotas were limited, so the admission process began when there were vacancies, with admission requests having to be submitted to the program committee in writing. Among the monthly topics discussed in these clubs, there was a wide range of areas covered; for example, French, Spanish and Italian literature; philosophy topics, such as the life of human beings in ancient times and today; as well as readings of authors like Voltaire and Montesquieu and talks about the latest inventions of the nineteenth century, the current problems of society, and many other topics (WOMAN'S READING CLUB, 1896; 1899).

Reception of the *Reading Clubs* in Chile

Labarca appropriated this space and idea, above all, because she saw in the Reading Clubs a place for women, for self-education and for the exercise of women's intellect, which, as already mentioned, was restricted by the differentiated education possible for women and men. On her return to Chile, and as expressed in her writing *Actividades Femeninas en los Estados Unidos* [Women's Activities in the United States], she proposed not to be a militant feminist, let alone a suffragette, because Chile was not prepared at that time to understand the importance of women's exercise of suffrage (LABARCA, 1914). For this reason, she preferred to experiment in other areas and, in line with her commitment to positioning the idea of the *Reading Club* in Santiago society, she obtained a space in the magazine *Familia*⁶ [Family], where she led the section *La hora de los libros* [The Book Hour]. In the pages of this magazine, in April 1915, Labarca sowed a seed that quickly germinated in the community by pointing out:

... The 'Reading clubs' are attended and supported by the female elements of the most advanced countries. Reflecting on them, I thought it might be of some interest to the Family readers to learn about this foreign activity, which, nationalized among us, would be able to offer a moment of peace and spiritual comfort to many women throughout the country ... And why couldn't this Family sponsored Book Hour be the beginning of a reading circle? (LABARCA, 1915a, p. 10)

It was precisely this simple question and the good reception it received in the community that encouraged her to start the first *Círculo de Lectura* [Reading Circle] in Chile.

The *Reading Circle*

Given the success of the *Reading Club*, Labarca proposed the creation of a *Reading Circle*, an initiative that was positively received by the group of women readers. Such a club was thus developed in Santiago and another in the provinces, which was coordinated by Gabriela Mistral; however, further details of the club formed in the provinces by Mistral are not known.

⁵ There had previously been individual demonstrations well before June, both in other countries and in Chile in the latter, the cases of *Martina Barros Borgoño*, for example, who translated and published Mill's *The Subjection of Woman* between 1872-73, which generated a local scandal, or *Rosario Orrego*, known as the first Chilean novelist and journalist, who also founded the *Revista de Valparaíso* [Journal of Valparaiso] in 1873, advocated with her literature on women's freedoms and education and that same year was admitted as an honorary member of the *Academia de Finas Artes* [Academy of Fine Arts]. However, the purpose of this research is to analyse and direct dialogue and reflection towards the organisation of women, which is precisely what Labarca's contribution describes.

⁶ A magazine published by Editorial Zig-Zag and aimed at women from the wealthier classes, especially in its early days (1910-1928).

Labarca began the shared readings by giving lectures based on her analysis of the *Églogas* [Eclouges] of *Garcilaso de la Vega* (Marina ALVARADO, 2016; Montserrat ARRE-MARFULL, 2018; Manuel VICUÑA, 2010; Luisa ZANELLI, 1917). The context for those early meetings was as follows:

Since the first preparatory sessions, the ladies and girls of the capital, without distinction of class or fortune, guided only by a perfectly explainable desire to escape the monotony of conversations and superficial interests, have gathered in meetings that have been extremely pleasant and very interesting. (LABARCA, 1915b, p. 8)

This is the way that Labarca described the meetings that the women's group had held since April 1915. In view of the positive reception, on 13 July of the same year, the statutes of the *Reading Circle* were approved, and a formal group was formed by Mrs. Sofía Eastman of Huneeus, in the position of president, Amanda Labarca as secretary, Miss Elvira Santa Cruz – Roxane – in charge of finances and a large board of directors made up of Delia Matte de Izquierdo, Inés Echeverría Bello de Larrain, Ana Swinburn de Jordán, Luisa Lynch de Gormaz, Delfina Pinto de Montt and Ana Prieto de Amenábar (LABARCA, 1915a).

Without measuring the impact and significance that this meeting place for women and girls would have for the Chilean feminist movement, this organization was founded in Santiago to provide a space for women only to stimulate their intellect through shared readings, to encourage discussion around the most current issues at the time, and consequently to increase the cultural knowledge of Chilean women (LABARCA, 1915a).

Various meetings were held in a room rented by the group, which was described by the writer Delia Rojas de White – Delie Rouge – as a simple space, which had a small library and very modest but delicately decorated furniture. This space was responsibly used by the registered women, who arrived in elegant costumes and hats intending to emulate a certain foreign air (ROUGE, 1943).

However, after just three meetings, differences between the members became apparent; whereby some of the women were in favor of a more liberal discourse, which unsettled other members who belonged to the more conservative Chilean aristocracy.

El Club de Señoras (The Ladies Club)

The women who formed this club showed differences with the group of women who remained in the *Reading Circle*. The latter group, which included Labarca, was created to further the intellectual interests of women from different social sectors, while the aristocratic contingent proposed having a select group of women from high society, who could only join by invitation from an existing member and membership was maintained by paying a high subscription. Among the founders were Delia Matte de Izquierdo, Inés Echeverría Bello de Larrain⁷ and Luisa Lynch (Ericka KIM, 1995). These differences were observed with restraint by Labarca, who pointed out that both groups shared a common life, but that as they matured at the organizational level, each formed its own discourse, aiming at the same end, but as developed by different means (LABARCA, 1934), in fact, among the aims set by *The Ladies Club*, it is reported:

This club will not have for object anything that approaches to feminism, to move away from our houses, or to form *marisabidillas*. Its purpose will be to cultivate all that is beautiful in the soul of the Chilean woman, beginning with the greatest of all beauties, which is the meeting and approach of all of us in a large home ... As you will understand, this will not contribute to moving us away from the house, but on the contrary, it will make our action more effective within it. (CLUB DE SEÑORAS, 1915, p. 3)

This club held its meetings in an elegantly presented space, with a reading room, another room for the library, an office for the directory, and a hall covered with tables for the members' teatime. The directory of the *Ladies' Club* also managed agreements with different institutions, including the National Library, which gave members the possibility to request books that could be read in the comfort of their own homes. They also had a wide repertoire of international magazines from England, France, and other countries that were at the forefront of fashion, history, art, culture, and current affairs. The club also took care to bring to its headquarters renowned people from the world of culture, so that its members could keep abreast of the most recent world events (ZANELLI, 1917).

Both clubs were active for several months; however, in 1917, the *Reading Circle* was affected by a sudden trip that Labarca undertook to the United States on behalf of the Chilean Government, to study the American secondary education system, for which her observations can be read and analysed in her book *La escuela secundaria en los Estados Unidos* [The secondary school in the United States] (LABARCA, 1919). During 1919 and when back in Chile, Labarca,

⁷ Iris was the most outstanding intellectual exponent of avant-garde spiritualism and aristocratic feminism of her time. She published different genres from 1904 until her death (1949), and was also the subject of study in various historiographical research projects linked to feminism, literature and women's history, among other fields.

together with other members of the *Reading Circle*, founded the *Consejo Nacional de Mujeres* [National Council of Women] (Patricia PINTO, 1990).

National Council of Women

Beyond the two previously reported clubs, a maturing of the women's organization could also be observed in the second decade of the 20th century, not only because of the formation of this Council or of groups that began to emerge in parallel, but also because of the aspirations and areas of interest on which they focused. Thus, this new society proposed focusing its efforts on contributing to the improvement of the condition of women in areas such as civil, economic, and legal rights, which would allow for the moral, intellectual and physical development of women in Chilean society. To do this, they articulated the idea of a project in 1922 to introduce changes to the laws that restricted women, mainly in their civil and political rights (Diamela ELTIT, 1994). This emerged precisely at the same time as the candidacy and election of Arturo Alessandri Palma – in his first presidential term –, who was supported by a strong mass of women who saw in his project the opening up of new freedoms and rights for women, which they had not been able to enjoy fully since the Republic was first installed, such as the right to vote. Sara Guerin, in her compilation of the main milestones of the women's movement in Chile, through her work *Actividades Femeninas en Chile* [Women's Activities in Chile], points out:

The National Council of Women was organized by an enthusiastic group of ladies who met and signed the founding act on 20 July 1919 ... The aim of this nascent society was to incorporate Chilean women into the great modern social action, elevating them morally, intellectually and economically to the place they deserve within our community. (Sara GUERIN, 1928, p. 630)

Labarca, in charge of this Council together with other women, maintained an interest in the mission that the clubs that preceded it had, in particular about their offers of courses, conferences and other activities for women, but also, strong links with foreign institutions began to be managed, highlighting the dialogues with other Women's Councils in various countries, for example, France, Belgium, Romania, and even with the headquarters of the National Women's Council located in London, which housed various delegations from Europe, Asia, Australia, South Africa and the Americas. Besides, the National Council of Women maintained fruitful relations with the Councils of Uruguay and Argentina (GUERIN, 1928).

In 1922, the *National Women's Council* expressed to the President of the Republic, Arturo Alessandri Palma, its aspiration to have full political rights for women, suggesting the idea that a first step could be the granting of the right to vote in municipal elections (Edda GAVIOLA *et al.*, 1986). In this respect, from Argentina, where they were going through similar political and social episodes, Ernesto Quesada (1920), Argentinean historian and professor, stated at the same time:

The program of feminism could not be more sympathetic: it does not seek to emancipate women, by masculinizing them and reversing their roles, but wants similar instruction for both sexes and equal possibility to exercise any profession, art or trade. Feminism, which tends to grant political rights to women, cannot theoretically be more justified, since it is based on the same reason that grants men such a franchise: on the fact that every taxpayer has the right to be a ruler, that is, to vote and to be elected. (p. 3)

This positively talks about the new social discourses and pronouncements that proliferated in the second decade of the 20th century, albeit these could scarcely be understood by certain sectors of society, expressing that women's discourses and these new ideas did not aim to 'replace men' or that an exchange of roles was being pursued, but rather that only equality or equity between women and men was being pursued, and this was made explicit in the various sources reviewed. This idea was supported by the fact that there were no objective and reasoned justifications for this not being possible.

Partido Cívico Femenino (Female Civic Party)

Continuing with the stage related to the consolidation of the feminist discourse and feminist demands, the *Female Civic Party* was created in 1922, but with an expanded field of action, seeking to obtain not only civic rights but also social, economic, political, and educational rights, among others, which would make it possible to continue opening up these spaces that for years had been denied to women (Javiera ERRÁZURIZ, 2005). Julieta Kirkwood summarises the statutes and areas of action of this group in five aspects, namely:

- Achieving legal reforms so that women can have the personality they have long been denied (voting and civil rights).
- Conscious use (by women) of the prerogatives that will give them their legitimate rights.
- Improving the status of women and children; guardianship and protection of children, protection of motherhood.

- Declares itself autonomous and independent of any political or religious grouping
- Seeking the abolition of all legal and constitutional provisions that place women in an undignified inferiority... (KIRKWOOD, 2019, p. 76)

This marked again a progress and change for the associations previously reported, not only because of the extent of the demands requested, but also because it positioned them as an important civic-political party, which was also reinforced by the creation of the magazine *Acción Femenina* [Women's Action], which allowed them to shape a discourse that soon began to circulate in society and that would allow adding followers who were in favor of what was requested, which justified the circulation of this magazine for almost fifteen years. From *Women's Action*, the biggest criticism of the political world that had been reported so far was launched. The groups considered that the reasons for men and society not wanting to share these new ideas were caused by long tradition rather than by reason, even though women had been demonstrating for decades that they could carry out good practices in the public sphere and could participate in different processes that had gradually been modified for the insertion of women; the clearest example of which was access to university (ELTIT, 1994).

In the years to come, different groups proliferated and pursued similar objectives, among them the *Movimiento Pro-Emancipación de las mujeres de Chile* [Movement for the Emancipation of the Women of Chile] (MEMCH). However, they are not considered in this research as a result of the fact that the national historiography has positioned this period as a stage of consolidation of Chilean feminism, and therefore this stage moves away from one of the purposes of this study, which deals with the beginnings of women's organization in Chile.

Conclusions

The present research addresses the question of how Labarca contributed to improving women's situation in Chile in the first decades of the 20th century. The findings show that Labarca played a leading role in improving the lives of women in Chile, beginning with the translation and development of American Reading Clubs in the national arena in Chile. As a result of the excellent reception they received, different groups proliferated, which initially sought to complement and nurture the limited education given to women, through providing self-managed cultural spaces where women could feel free and safe to express their opinions. As a result of these groups' rapid participation, the objectives and areas of interest of these women began to expand, moving from a cultural and educational focus in the beginning, towards discourses and hence organizations with a predominantly political nature, such as the *National Council of Women* and the *Female Civic Party*, where, together with their interest in maintaining these instances of educational self-management, a more complex level of organization was also deployed with the intention of pursuing equal rights in various social aspects, with the main driving force behind these two new organizations being women's suffrage, which for the period of interest of this research, was concentrated on the right to vote in municipal elections, with future stages of the feminist movement extending to presidential elections. These findings are in line with some previous contributions, which have pointed out that Labarca was always concerned with adapting the ideas and proposals she observed in the United States or European countries into a national context, to ensure their correct implementation and optimal reception in Chilean society (CAICEO, 2015b; KOTTOW, 2014).

This research also contributes to the ordering of the main milestones in the field of women's education, starting in 1872 with the first formal request to the *University Council* made by Professor Tarragó, followed by the efforts of Professor Le Brun and the *Amunátegui Decree* in 1877, the year in which women finally were no longer legally affected by the unjustified impediments that limited their possibilities of continuing their formal studies. A decade later, Chile and Latin America would see the first women doctors trained in the country. This aid understanding the social context in which Labarca grew up, and that led her in the years to come to become a professor and feminist leader critical of national events. This led to important social changes throughout her life through her writings, her pioneering proposals and her national and international political positions.

Another aspect that is interesting to reveal and that can be deepened in future research is related to the constitutions of these first organizations, where clubs or meeting groups of women from the middle and upper social classes are reported, as evidenced by the presence of recognized aristocratic women in these groups, but also by the type of readings that were discussed during the sessions, such as literature or philosophy, which in many cases were read in English or French. This indirectly prevented women with little education and who could barely read Spanish – who represented a large number at the time – from actively participating in these meetings, which was perhaps contradictory to the statutes and purposes of each of these groups, which invited “all women”, but which, together with the above, requested incorporation quotas or other processes that in turn limited the more heterogeneous participation of women (Joyce CONTRERAS, 2020). This research also identifies a gap that has been scarcely explored in the historiography and which

has to do with Labarca and the founders of the *Ladies Club* themselves, who stated that during the period studied they did not consider themselves feminists, which contradicts the contributions and dedication they made to the development and aggrandizement of Chilean women. In this respect, a window is opened to explore the theoretical conceptions of feminism in Chile's early years, in which the feminist current of intersectionality can make an important contribution through its integrative positioning.

Finally, it is possible to conclude that Labarca's figure and contribution to this period emerge as key to the configuration of Chilean feminism in the first half of the 20th century. This follows the line of previous research, but also gives an account of new avenues of investigation, namely, the characterization of Chilean feminism movements, to distinguish their purposes and propellers, but also to give an account of their positioning in the period of the first feminism that lasted several years in its moment of splendor, which could give considerations to the new feminism movements and struggles that have arisen in recent decades. Another area of research that requires attention is the awareness of the importance of inclusive feminist social processes, which advocates the participation of women from different social sectors, educational levels, political interests, ethnicities, sexual and gender identities, to guarantee more democratic cultural, political, and social processes.

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José Ramos-Vera: The author worked on the conception of this article, collecting and analyzing data, drafting the manuscript, editing and revising the text, and discussing results.

Montserrat Arre-Marfull: The author worked on drafting the manuscript, editing and revising the text, and discussing results.

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BACKGROUND

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