

# Housing, Political Movements and Female Empowerment: The Case of Esperanza Andina in Santiago

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NOTE: THIS IS A VERY PRELIMINAR DRAFT

*I am doing this for you...to give you a home*  
Female occupant of Esperanza Andina to her children



## **Introduction**

During the winter of 1992, the biggest occupation of land in Chile since the seventies took place in the Municipality of Peñalolén, in the Southeast of Santiago. 4000 homeless people, i.e. almost 500 families occupied 14 has.; they were prepared to struggle by all means for the achievement of an own home. After a couple of months, having been lashed by a harsh winter, and succeeded in resisting several attempts from authorities, using the police force in order to clear the people out of the place, the tents the occupants had lifted up were replaced by small hovels of light materials. The families of the Campamento began to urbanize the site and to settle down. The occupants of the Campamento Esperanza Andina understood from the very beginning that the action would not survive unless they implemented a strict system of organization and internal discipline. This conviction lead to an interesting process of empowerment of the women of the Campamento Esperanza Andina, since they took an important part in the leadership for the organization (both the president and the vice-president of the steering committee of the Campamento were women). This leadership was strongly legitimated and supported by high levels of collective participation, as well as by the processes of political and gender consciousness, that the community of Esperanza Andina developed during their struggles for the own dwelling.

As well as the participation of women in the labour market has been made partially invisible, their participation in social movements has mainly been measured and referred as their participation in women's organizations, specially in those aimed to gain some basic civic rights, as the right to vote in elections. (Stoltz Chinchilla, 1993: 37, Craske 2006). This dimension of women's social and political mobilization, though important, gives just a partial vision of the complex picture of participation that women particularly in Latin American societies offers to the researcher. The study of mixed social, political, women's and feminist movements in Latin America has consequently emerged as a way of giving the understanding of women's roles in societal processes and the relationship between gender, politics and national politics in the region (Stoltz Chinchilla, 1993:38). New political movements and especially urban "territorialized" movements (Castells, 1998) are taking a leading role in urban politics. Among them there are particular movements and organizations that combine gender issues claims with other more traditional social and political claims, as for instance housing.

In his book 'Barrio y Participación', based on his empirical studies in poor neighborhoods in Santiago, Francisco Sabatini shows that social mobilization has been rather "lazy" in the Chile of the nineties. The explanations can be found at different levels, but one important fact is the inclination of the masses to adopt dominant cultural models in which individualism is a common feature for all social classes. Nevertheless, there are some exceptions to this general - what we could call pessimistic - view of social mobilization in Chilean popular politics.<sup>1</sup> A particular and maybe exceptional case regarding the capacity of popular groups in creating and activating social movements is the case of the Campamento Esperanza Andina, which we are going to grasp nearer in the following pages.<sup>2</sup> As we are going to see, women played a first role in the collective struggles for the dwelling, developing own organizations with a feminist liberating character. According to Stoltz Chinchilla, it is possible to classify women's mobilization in three different categories, depending on the goals and claims of the groups. Firstly, the author identifies the participation in *social and political mixed movements, where the goals are not gender specific*. Secondly, organization takes place in the so called *women's movements*, i.e. movements that solely or primarily are organized by women in order to rise claims associated to the gendered division of labour market, as women's working conditions, lower levels of wages, representation in segregated parts of the labour market, etc; these movements do not explicitly call into question further aspects related to the structures of power. Finally, Stoltz Chinchilla suggests a third category of movements which can be conceived of *as a more explicitly feminist form of mobilization*, that is participation in movements that reject different justifications of women's subordination and adopt a concrete strategy for pursuing gender equality alone or combined with other social goals (Ibid).

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<sup>1</sup> Besides the examined example of Esperanza Andina, there are interesting episodes where women have adopted active roles in working class struggles in current Chilean politics. One of them is the social movement of the Mapuche Indians in the Araucanía region, where the construction of an hydroelectric dam in the high waters of the Bio-Bio flood is threatening the communities' possession of ancestral lands. The role of women in this mobilization has been remarkable, since two of the main leaders are a two women (mother and daughter). Another example is the recent conflict in the mineral of Lota in the Eighth Region of Chile. In this conflict there were women who took the first role in the struggles in spite of that they were "just the wives" of the directly affected, the workers.

<sup>2</sup> The information used in this article is fundamentally coming from two sources, firstly documentation from the movement itself, the media covering including newspapers and the television program "El Mirador" (TV-Chile Señal Internacional, July 1999), in which a significant collection of media covering, interviews and other research sources were used, and secondly, the research data collected by the human geographer Ximena Galleguillos during her field studies in Esperanza Andina in the years 1998 and 1999 and the author's own interviews and field work in 2000 and 2008. Thanks to Ximena Galleguillos for so kindly putting her research material at my disposal.

The main thesis of this chapter is that in Esperanza Andina women went through the three categories identified above, as we are going to see in the following pages, i.e. the female political participation of women in the land occupation movement started as a non-gendered socio-political struggle, to develop successively into a more gender-specific, and finally a women's liberation feminist mobilization. Media largely documented the processes generated in Campamento Esperanza Andina during almost a decade, generating thus a research material that became important for the analysis. Before going into the example of Esperanza Andina, it is convenient to make clear that the question this chapter is aimed to rise is that of to what extent and in what ways women's movements of today at the beginning of the twenty-first century are replacing the role of destabilizing established institutions that – mainly male – working class movements started to play for approximately one hundred years ago.

### **Women's mobilization in Chile and Latin America: challenging masculinistic dichotomies**

During the second half of the twentieth century women in Chile, as certainly in the rest of the world (McDowell), have been challenging the traditional notions between separated spheres of life in public respectively private realms. (Boyle, 1993). The dichotomic separation between the public and the private largely legitimated by almost every single piece of research can be seen as a process of genderization of knowledge. As it has been well documented in feminist human geography research (Massey, Rose 1993, Eyles, McDowell), this process of genderization has assigned the most positive values - as dynamism, changeability, production, profitability - to the public sphere and public spaces, that is the world of economy. This world in constant movement and development has been socially constructed and conceptualized as the male world. Opposite to these features, the private sphere represented by the private space of the home, has been ascribed qualities such as stability, passivity, immanence (stagnation), safety, shelter, reproduction, in few words it has been constructed as the female world.

As a result of the complex patriarchal systems dominating in colonial and postcolonial America, women have rhetorically been relegated to the sphere of the home. This is though, as it always is, a truth with modifications, since women have historically been actively participating in production mainly, but not only, largely represented within the informal

sector of the labour market during the whole twentieth century. Before the massive incorporation of women to industrial and service production, as a result of the processes of urbanization and industrialization, they had already been participating in economic life as consumers, but even working as teachers, nurses, housekeepers, secretaries, sewers, working in agriculture in rural and suburban areas, among many other works. The categories within this sector of the labour market, i.e. service production, are often discursively relegated to the category of *reproduction*. In this way, the sphere of the home has been projected to public space, but is still being conceived of as a prolongation of the home. Even if women largely has been participating of public life and occupying public spaces for the performing of remunerated job, she has discursively remained at the private space of the home and of reproduction. Women's relegation to the sphere of the home has rather been related to social class in the sense that the factual, as it is often called, "possibility" of women of staying at home has been the privilege of the wealthy upper class households, and to certain extent middle-class women.

This has been the case of Esperanza Andina, where women took a protagonic role in the organization of the civil disobedience movement that resulted firstly in the illegal occupation of land, and later on in the more definite solution of the housing question for the occupants, when in 1998 they received their newbuilt dwellings. In the following lines I will refer to the socio-political context of the analysed land occupation, that is the housing question and the question of gender equality in the country.

### **The Housing question in the Chile of today**

During the nineties the governments of the Christian Democratic-socialistic political coalition (la Concertación) have been only straightening the economic mode imposed by the dictatorship of Pinochet in the seventies. No structural changes have been made to this model and the patterns of concentration of capital in a few national and international economic groups have resulted in an deepening of the socio-economic and class gaps in the country. Although the proportion of the population living in extreme poverty has according to official information falled from 38% in 1987 to 18% in 1998 (Moreno 1999), the growing social distance between those who can be called "first" and "second class citizens" an those who travel in the "bandwagon" in terms of income levels, access to public services, the quality of housing, (very often dramatically exposed to spells of rough weather), health,

education; the differences between the inhabitants of rural and urban areas; the regional differences in quality of life, etc. are indicating that the Chilean society is shaping its own apartheid system (Schatan W. 1997). In 1996 Chile was placed among the countries of the world with the most unequal distribution in the world (Fazio 1997).

One of the most acute problems for the extended deprived population is housing, i.e. the access to a decent own dwelling, a problem that is not exclusive of, but most visible in the greater urban areas of the country. The Metropolitan region of Santiago, concentrating not far from half of the country's total population (near 6 million people in 2000), is the city with the major concentration of the extremely poor as well as the homeless, "los sin casa". (reference)

### **Campamentos and the Chilean housing question**

The history of Campamentos in Chile's urban landscape is quite long. In the Chile of the twentieth century, housing provision has been one of the most important political areas of nearly each government in power. The authoritative and populist regime of Pinochet used the housing question as a political instrument to create an image of a governor that cared of his people and its social needs, implementing different social housing programs, though highly questionable in their quality and effectiveness. A very extensive program for the eradication of campamentos started in 1979, aimed to provide all families living in campamentos in the Metropolitan region of Santiago with a permanent dwelling. Due to political reasons, since campamentos had often resulted from political conscious actions of land occupation and were therefore considered by the regime as focuses of discontent and protest, the program was organized in that way that communities were dissolved, and families destined to separate locations in different municipalities of the capital of the country (Molina, 1985). Between 1979 and 1984 more than 26 thousand families were removed from a total of 65 campamentos to social housing dwellings. The evaluation of this program throws the conclusion that a series of social, economical, political and environmental problems were generated as result of a deficient urban planning behind the formulation of the actions. (Molina, 1985). According to spokesmen of the military regime, the purpose of eradication was fulfilled during the eighties. Nevertheless, in many cases the goals were changed halfway and some families were provided with urbanization and infrastructure on site instead of the new dwelling that they had been promised from the beginning.

The shortage of dwellings in the country has continued to grow year by year, rising the level of 760.000 for 1996. 60% of this shortage is localized among the households in the two lowest quintiles regarding income levels (Moreno 1999:21). Estimates for the housing shortage in the country reached almost 1 million in 2008 (INE 2008).

### **Esperanza Andina**

There are several features that make Esperanza Andina a rather different experience compared to earlier campamentos originated from occupations in Chile. Firstly, it challenged the 16-years long passive attitude undertaken by the homeless which had been imposed by Pinochet's dictatorship through a highly repressive terror state. Secondly, the new generation of land occupation by homeless families in Santiago has no intervention of political parties or organizations, and as a matter of fact they often declared themselves as "unpolitical" and independent in very many ways. Thirdly, the shortage of dwellings has grown mainly due to that housing production has not followed the rythm of expansion of the city of Santiago during the last decades.

Is there anything special in women's quality of life that makes their situation desperate and push them into social and political movilization? And what does their active participation in this particular movement for housing mean for a feminist specific movilization? The answer to these questions is not easy but a reflection about them can be helped by a revision of some relevant indicators of quality of life.

### **Chilean women and men in statistics**

Between the years of 1990 and 1998, the total rate of participation of the population in the labour market experienced a growth from 52 to 56%, while women's participation grew from 32 in 1990 to 39 in 1998. From 1994, the rate for men decreased lightly, while women's rate continued growing. Women are mostly represented in service production, while men are participating in all sectors of the economy, without any signs of exclusion from the principal female activities (INE, 1999). Participation of women in the formal labour market is thus still very low compared to both chilean men and to women in other, specially european countries. This situation is particularly preoccupying considering the fact that the proportion of female headed households in Chile has constantly been increasing during the nineties.



**Table 2: Evolution of the distribution of households by sex of the head (%) 1990-1998**

Year	Female headed household	Male headed household
1990	20	80
1992	21	79
1994	21	79
1996	22	78
1998	23	77

Source: INE, 1999.

Women were more often head of households in recent than in earlier years; 23% of the households were headed by women in 1998, which in absolute terms means a total of 854.230 households. Regarding the distribution of incomes between the sexes, Table 3 shows that the level of income for women is considerably lower for women than for men in all income categories.

**Table 3: Average income by sex of Head\* of household (only single, and single parent households) according to income quintile, in Chilean Pesos 1998\*\***

Income quintile	Women	Men	Total average
I	74.170	89.751	86.075
II	165.926	192.442	186.543
III	218.501	290.767	272.956
IV	367.125	471.563	448.986
V	888.257	1.465.371	1.338.336
TOTAL	335.754	505.282	466.589

\* Excluding housemaids living in the employers' house.

\*\* Not confirmed

Source: INE, 1999.

The average income for male headed households is 50% higher than female headed households. In the first quintile, which is the poorest, the male heads of households earn 21% more than the female ones. The difference is sharpened in the fifth quintile, where the male incomes are 65% higher than the women's incomes.

Other aspects related to women's quality of life are social conditions around pregnancy, health indicators, and working conditions. Regarding pregnancy, one of the main social problems associated to it is the fact that very young girls are becoming mothers, often carrying the weight of this responsibility alone; 44% of the women between 12 and 19 years old were single in 1996.

In terms of participation in formal structures, the political history of Chilean women is rather short, since the voting rights in general elections was first gained in 1949. Nevertheless, their introduction in politics has been a fast and intensive process. The elected women in Parliament became 7% in 1965 (INE 1999), 9% in 1993, 10.8% in 1997 (CEPAL 2000) and 15% in 2005 (<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/chile/04620.pdf>). It has to be taken into consideration the fact that the democratic political life was abruptly interrupted in 1973, and reinitiated in 1989, after the fall of the military dictatorship. In the post dictatorship parliament of 1990, the elected women were 7% of all representatives (that is the same level as in the middle of the sixties). In the parliament constituted in 1998, women were already 9% of all representatives.

Although their representation in formal politics has been and still is extremely low women's participation in social movements has been rather intensive from the 1990s.

### **La mujer hizo la toma - woman made the occupation**

The occupation movement organized itself in a number of committees where every woman and man was active with a specifically assigned role. Each of those committees took the responsibility of a specific aspect of the daily needs of the community. One of the groups that were built during the occupation, was the surveillance committee, in which each male member of the community participated in a rotation system. Problems common in deprived and highly segregated areas, as intrafamiliar violence and alcoholism were present at the

beginning of the occupation. Women hold this home violence within the sphere of the private life, as they have learned to do through generations. The task of this committee was to protect the community from aggressions and criminality from outside, but even to keep the order within the community. Drugs, criminality and acts of violence, with special emphasis on intrafamiliar violence, were totally forbidden at the interior of the Campamento. The system of rotation of the participants was thought to guarantee the engagement of all members of the community in the processes that were initiated. The representatives of this committee on duty were thus highly legitimated and respectfully approached by the whole community. A collective system of social punishment against the aggressor was also established. According to the testimonies of several occupants, intrafamiliar violence at the Campamento ceased quickly.

The internal organization of the community gave successively rise to the organization of different activities and the formation of many groups. Special important within the context of gender mobilization are the nursery, the workshops for women's liberation and female labour market training, and an almost institutionalized "women's evenings meetings", with music, dance, food and most important of all, the strict exclusion of male guests.

(To be completed with references from the interviews)

### **The March of the Pain**

One of the intentions of the community of Esperanza Andina, was to obtain the right over the land they were occupying, and for this they started to save money in a collective fund. Their plan was to buy the land from the owner, a wealthy woman, who indeed did not make the task easy for the people of the Campamento. After a long and difficult process of negotiations, during which the price for the land was risen in several occasions, the possibility to buy it practically escaped from the hands of the community members. The vice-president of the steering committee, Maritza Villagra, who was in charge of the juridical procedures, suggested to demand the government the expropriation of the land where the Campamento was situated. To present the request to the national authorities, the community organized a march to Valparaíso, a coastal city situated 116 km far from Santiago, in which the House of Parliament is located. Approximately 1200 women, men and children deployed once again their enormous capacity of organization and went to Valparaíso. The Media largely noticed

the manifestation, and people stationed along their route welcomed the occupants supporting their action. Even in the organization of the march, women played a crucial role, rising up provisional shelters and kitchens during the breaks, and encouraging the group not to give up. The action was successful, and after a few days of great sacrifices, the participants could turn back to Santiago with the compromise of expropriation from the members of Parliament.

### **The Neighbours - Gated communities**

According to Sabatini (1999) the latin american city is undergoing a sharpening in patterns of residential segregation. One of the most visible features of this increased segregation is the appearance of one nowadays common component of the urban landscape, specially in the US cities, the *gated communities*. This kind of closed residential areas varies strongly, in terms of size, geographical situation, social composition of the resident population, type of surveillance system that is adopted, etc. The most common aspect linked to these communities is obviously the goal of isolation for the joint purpose of preserving prestige and exclusivity. Nevertheless, in the case of Santiago as it is for many other world cities, the access to exclusive land, sufficiently distant to other less wealthy social groups often perceived as a threat, is not possible anymore, due partly to the significant growth of the city. This obligates te privileged social classes to live at the proximity of poorer residential areas. The reaction to this certainly non-wanted proximity has been the closing up and the investment in increased surveillance of the own residential areas in gated communities (Sabatini, 1999). In Chile these gated communities are known as “condominios”, some of which are in fact residential areas in the surroundings of Esperanza Andina.

After the land occupation, the conflicts with the residential areas adjacent to the Campamento did not delay. In one of the gated communities, the residents organised themselves to make a petition to authorities asking for an eradication of the Campamento. This was also a conflict thet women decided to solve in a quite particular way. A saturday morning, a numerous group of women and children went to the condominium in question, and “armed” with white carnations, knocked at the neighbours’ doors. They presented themselves and give each neighbour a flower. In a television interview, one of the visited people, a high middle-class woman, recognized that she felt ashamed of standing there and receiving a flower from her neighbour, “... I thought... the people we are repelling are now giving us flowers?”

## Conclusions

It would be naive to think of women as political actors alone. The historically internalized role of women as the heart of the home, as a mother first of all, but even as the supporter of the family is a marked feature of gendered politics in Latin America. That means, among other things, that women, and probably working class women in particular, conceive of their own political role as something necessarily related to the well being of their families; this has clearly been the case in Esperanza Andina. But in spite of this gendered image of woman as a political actor, women have raised their own claims besides the demands of the own dwelling. Women in Esperanza Andina initiated a process of self-consciousness and mobilization for their rights as women in a highly patriarchally organized Chilean society. In the autumn of 1999 the people of the Campamento Esperanza Andina received their new homes. More than 800 residential units in multi-dwelling houses had been built after 7 years of sacrifice. The new houses were received with a big party outdoors, and with evident manifestations of happiness. But what is going to happen next is difficult to say. In a recent informal visit to the new residential complex, and talking to some ex occupants, I could perceive a generalized opinion asserting that the feminist mobilization had ceased after the reception of the new dwellings. This was not exclusive for the female participants, but for the whole population of Esperanza Andina. As one of the settlers told me, “we have turned into individualists and we only think about our own family and our own house”. If the dynamics of collectivism weakened successively as a result of a solved housing question, that is when the central issue of the claims of people of Esperanza Andina has disappeared, a possible effect could be the withdrawal of women from political and social mobilization to the sphere of private life. As one of the female occupants, maybe anticipating what was coming, told to the TV-camera: “I am going to miss this ... the land roads, the Christmas party ... we are going to become more individualist.” The findings of Sabatini (1996) regarding women in the neighborhoods of Hirmas, which in their origins also had been occupations for the claim of an own dwelling, could become a reality even for the women of Esperanza Andina. This could be seen as a result of the solution of the claims that originated the mobilization. Nevertheless the last word is not pronounced yet. There are new problems in this residential complex that can come to require collective action to be solved. Apart from the possible problems related to the condition of the dwellings when the residential complex was opened for its inhabitants to move in, the urban infrastructure of the area is far from completed. Among other things the

area lacked pavement in most of the streets and it took several years to finish it. The condition of poverty that characterize many of the families of Esperanza Andina has not disappeared, even if the access to a decent dwelling without any doubt has improved their quality of life. New problems such as drug abuse especially among the youth, unemployment, etc. have been during the last years reanimating a part of the local social mobilizations and many people in the neighbourhood wish that the community could be as succesful in counteracting these problems as it was during the years of the occupation. The main conclusion of the study is that the housing question is on the one hand an important activating factor for social mobilization, and on the other hand this mobilization is more often than not leaded by women. Sometimes mobilization for the housing question can be a mean for the organization of a more ambitious and complex movement which may acquire a feminist liberation profile as it was in the case of Esperanza Andina.

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