

# PARADOXES OF GENDERED POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY IN THE VENEZUELAN TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY\*

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On International Women's Day in March 1958, ten thousand women gathered in the largest stadium in Caracas to celebrate the fall of the dictatorship of Major Marcos Pérez Jiménez and to commemorate the many women who had taken an active role in opposing it. This gathering was the first mass meeting following the demise of authoritarian rule. Despite the array of political views represented in the audience and on the dais, unity was stressed by every speaker. Women had struggled against the dictatorship united, and united they would promote their own rights in the fledgling democracy. But within a year, the women's group that had sponsored the rally disbanded. Women did not hold another nonpartisan meeting for sixteen years, and then only when the United Nations' International Women's Year in 1974 galvanized the two thousand participants. During the first thirty years of democracy in Venezuela, women held no more than 5 percent of congressional seats and few of the decision-making positions in political parties.

What happened to Venezuelan women's capacity to organize in the new democracy? Answering this question will shed light not only on the experience of Venezuelan women but also on a troubling paradox of participation in Latin America: women mobilize politically under even the most repressive forms of authoritarian rule, but in the transition to democracy, they demobilize. In country after country, Latin American women have played central roles in overthrowing authoritarian regimes. Yet women's organizational strength and leadership has declined with the

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advent of democracy. In 1994, for example, women held only 8 percent of Latin American ministerial posts. In 1997 they constituted only 13.6 percent of parliaments (UNDP 1995, 62; IPU 1997, 95–96). A trend toward the disarticulation of women's organizations formed under dictatorship has further deepened this "democratic exclusion" (Chuchryk 1994; Feijóo and Nari 1994; Waylen 1996).

Women's participation in ending authoritarian regimes and their marginalization in the transitions to democracy have been documented in recent studies.<sup>1</sup> But it remains unclear why this pattern has emerged. I will argue that the institutionalization of politics during the transition impedes the forms of organization that women developed under the previous regimes and their subsequent political incorporation into democracy.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, the political opportunity structure—the ensemble of political institutions and actors conditioning social mobilization—of each phase of democratic transition is gendered, meaning that it reflects certain gender relations (the social dynamics attributed to sexual difference). Although these relations are not fixed, they usually reflect the traditional division of labor that associates men with the more socially valued public sphere of work and politics, and women with the less-esteemed private sphere of the home.<sup>3</sup> The manifestation of gender relations within the political institutions characterizing different regimes, such as parties and the state, creates a unique set of opportunities and obstacles that condition women's political participation, which are further qualified by actors' gendered understanding of politics. These processes help to explain both the prominent place of women in the fight against authoritarian rule and their subsequent marginalization in the early stages of democracy.

Repression of traditional actors and institutions of politics under authoritarian rule makes men's opposition activities risky and difficult. The role of political actor, traditionally associated with the masculine gender, is anathema to most authoritarian regimes. Accordingly, the main channel of public participation adapted for this actor, the political party, is

1. On women's organizing and demobilization in Latin America, see Navarro (1989), S. Alvarez (1990), Jelin (1990), Radcliffe and Westwood (1993), and Jaquette (1994a). Although women in Eastern Europe did not participate in oppositional movements on the same scale as in Latin America, they also have experienced exclusion during transitions. See *Feminist Review* (1991), *Signs* (1991), Corrin (1992), Funk and Mueller (1993), and Rueschemeyer (1994). For a comparative perspective, see Waylen (1994).

2. Although the issue of what is *political* is highly contested, for the purposes of this article, I am taking the word to mean active participation in the decision-making levels of formal political structures or conscious demands for inclusion in public life. My general argument builds on the work of others who have addressed the impact of political institutionalization on women during transitions to some degree. See S. Alvarez (1986, 1990), Jaquette (1994b), Nelson and Chowdhury (1994), and Waylen (1994, 1996).

3. Because gender relations are socially determined, their content varies according to their historical context. I have found, however, that they have remained somewhat static in the political transitions of Latin America.

usually banned or subject to regime control. Extraordinary conditions call for extraordinary measures. Thus opposition movements begin to incorporate women. Women can mobilize precisely because their gender is not associated with political life, and therefore their supposedly nonpolitical identity disguises their political actions. Taking advantage of traditional expectations, women participate in ways that accommodate the demands of their conventional role (if at times with tensions and contradictions), often through social movements that allow them to continue to fulfill domestic duties.

But when democracy is restored, women's "nonpolitical" gender impedes their participation. Because their link to private life has been relied on rather than broken during the time of political repression, many women as well as men do not expect women's involvement in the public world of politics to continue once the crisis has passed. Women who attempt to continue being active face gendered institutional impediments. Because the major "construction workers" building or rebuilding democracies are men, the political structures they put in place tend to favor their own gender—and thus exclude women. The founders of such institutions do not necessarily seek to privilege men's participation. But in designing political mechanisms with male politicians in mind, they end up creating institutions into which women do not "fit."<sup>4</sup> Thus the paradox of women's demobilization under democracy suggests a second paradox: political parties, the most widely accepted channel for democratic representation, often present gendered barriers to women's full incorporation. The same result may also be found in the state structures of new democracies.

Venezuela provides an exemplary case for studying these paradoxes. The traumatic events of the last ten years show that this forty-year-old democracy, once considered a model of political development for other Latin American countries, contains serious structural flaws.<sup>5</sup> Although traditional analyses of Venezuelan democracy have focused on the accomplishments of the party system and state structure, more recent or innovative work has shown how political parties and the dominating executive branch have contributed to the current crises.<sup>6</sup> This body of work

4. Examples of this type of institutionalized discrimination abound. Consider the former strength and endurance qualifications for U.S. firefighters. Because firefighters were originally all men, these qualifications were based on men's physical capacities, to which women were unable to conform. When challenged, the requirements for fire fighting per se proved to be of a different order, but one that could not be perceived as long as men were assumed to be carrying out the activity.

5. Since 1989 Venezuela has undergone a series of political, social, and economic crises, including a major urban riot resulting in more than three hundred deaths, two coup attempts, the impeachment of a president for corruption, the partial collapse of the banking system, and ongoing public protests.

6. U.S. analysts have praised the Venezuelan party system as a successful model of political institutionalization. See Martz (1966), Levine (1973, 1978, 1989), Martz and Myers (1986),

points to the parties' long-standing co-optation of independent organizing based in civil society as well as to the nondemocratic channels of access to the executive. As this article will show, the experiences of women as a group vividly illustrate the operation of these mechanisms of exclusion.

Women have remained largely invisible to students of Venezuelan democracy. For example, one recent analysis of the party system neglected to mention that women were one of the first groups included in the formation of Venezuelan parties—before students, a sector that does receive attention (Kornblith and Levine 1995). This omission is not surprising. Women rarely appear in general analyses of Venezuelan politics. The only works that mention women either comment on their lack of success in achieving political leadership (Martz 1966; Ellner 1988; Coppedge 1994) or include them in general discussions of recent organizing based in civil society (Salamanca 1995).<sup>7</sup> Bringing women's experience of Venezuelan democratization to light therefore adds to the ongoing reevaluation of the country's "model politics." I will argue that Venezuelan parties are fundamentally discriminatory institutions that, while allowing the initial incorporation of certain class-based groups such as labor and peasants, have specifically marginalized women. This marginalization has been augmented by gender-biased channels of access to the state.

Following a discussion of the gendered nature of democratic transitions, I will examine women's organizing in Venezuela during two time periods: the dictatorship of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1948–1958) and the subsequent transition to democracy (1958–1969). Bringing women's experience to the fore will demonstrate how the main mechanism of political institutionalization, the political party, as well as certain state structures have incorporated gendered notions of political participation. This analysis helps to explain the paradox of women's mobilization under dictatorship and their demobilization during the construction of democratic politics. But my endeavor will go one step further. By drawing attention to women's contestation of their gendered exclusion, it will show how they began alternative forms of political organization as democracy became consolidated.

#### GENDERED TRANSITIONS

Although work has been done on social mobilization in the transition process and on women's participation in democratizing and demo-

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McDonald and Ruhl (1989), and Mainwaring and Scully (1995). Critiques of the party system have been ongoing in the Venezuelan literature: see Brewer-Carías (1988), López Maya et al. (1989), García Guadilla (1992), and Salamanca (1995). Until the mid-1990s, among U.S. analysts, only Karl (1987) suggested the potential problems with the system. More recently, Ellner (1993–1994), Coppedge (1994), Kornblith and Levine (1995), and articles in Goodman et al. (1995) and McCoy et al. (1995) have presented extensive discussions of the need for "democratizing" reforms of political parties as well as other aspects of Venezuelan politics.

7. A few works exist that analyze aspects of Venezuelan women's political participation,

cratic politics, little theory exists concerning the influence of gender on transitions to democracy: how the social meaning attributed to sexual difference is deeply implicated in the political dynamics and institutions of the process. Theorists of democratic transition have neglected women as a group and gender as a category of analysis, subsuming women's actions under non-gender-specific discussions of mobilization. Studies of Latin American women have described their experiences of transition, but most have not analyzed how gender relations influence the political environment in which women are active.<sup>8</sup>

Bringing together insights from several bodies of literature will help to explain why Latin American women have had more success in fighting dictatorships than in participating fully in democratic politics. Theory on democratic transitions examines the political dynamics of the elite actors and institutions of the transition process: the breakdown of authoritarian regimes, the transition to political democracy, and the eventual consolidation (or perhaps deformation) of democracy. Complementing this emphasis on elites, social movement theory offers an approach based on political opportunity structure, which focuses on how movements interact with their political environments. But these approaches' lack of attention to women and gender dynamics calls for incorporating insights from two other bodies of work: feminist democratic theory, which demonstrates how classical theorists in the Western tradition have based democratic theory on the assumption that only men participate in the public sphere; and the work of feminist institutionalists, who show that democratic institutions continue to be built on this assumption. The literature on the political participation of Latin American women can expand this developed-world perspective.

Social mobilization has not been a major focus of the democratization literature, which is largely based on Latin American experiences. As noted, this body of work concentrates on the elite interactions guiding democratic transitions.<sup>9</sup> Some have argued that as a result, social move-

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but not how women as a sector fit into the dynamics of Venezuelan politics. See García Guadilla (1993) and Espina (1994).

8. Sonia Alvarez has done the most to rectify this oversight, although her gender analysis is deeper in discussing the state than when applied to other political structures, such as parties (S. Alvarez 1986, 1990, 1994). The most systematic gendering of transition politics is that of Georgina Waylen (1994). She provides a thorough overview of the situation and suggests some reasons for women's exclusion during democratization in Latin America and Eastern Europe. But her confusion of a normative bias (that democratization should include social and economic considerations as well as political ones) with analysis (that the political institutionalization of democracy has impeded the inclusion of women and their issues) prevents further exploration of the structural impediments to women's organizing and their links to current debates about political democratization.

9. By "democratization literature," I refer to those general works that seek to map out and theorize the process of political democratization, such as O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986),

ments cannot be productively discussed within the framework of this literature (Waylen 1994). But there is no need to dismiss its findings entirely. A cycle of visible mobilization takes place during regime change, starting under authoritarian rule, peaking as the regime begins to fall, and declining during the transition to democracy. This cycle was noted early on in the literature and confirmed broadly by subsequent studies (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Mainwaring 1987; Mainwaring, O'Donnell, and Valenzuela 1992; Jaquette 1994a). Analysis of social movement decline, however, has not concentrated on how the very mechanisms relied on to effect a stable transition—political parties—play a significant part in social demobilization. Such a dynamic may stunt the later development of civil society.

The decline in general mobilization during the transition stage, in which authoritarian leaders have ceded political power and negotiations over democratic politics have begun, arises partly from necessary changes in the opposition's tactics. As its goal shifts from building a movement against a common authoritarian enemy to constructing complex alliances within a democratic regime, mobilizational activity wanes.<sup>10</sup> But demobilization can also be a strategy chosen deliberately by political parties. As Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter have pointed out, during the transition, "parties . . . show themselves to be not only, or not so much, agents of mobilization as instruments of social and political control" (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 58). As they emerge or reemerge to play a central part in political life, parties strive to reduce the uncertainty caused by the shifting political framework of the transition by co-opting or repressing independent organizing (Karl 1987).

The impact of party dominance during the transition may be lasting, despite the uncertainty characterizing transition politics. In some cases, negotiations have resulted in a "freezing" of democracy under conditions of demobilization, one governed by the initial actors (Karl 1990).<sup>11</sup>

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Diamond, Linz, and Lipset (1989), Higley and Gunther (1992), and Mainwaring, O'Donnell, and Valenzuela (1992). As will be shown, a body of research exists that specifically addresses social movement activity during democratization, but it has yet to be systematically incorporated into the broader discussion.

10. Social movements may fare better in countries that go through long transition stages. Unlike opposition movements facing a sudden shift in political winds, these movements have more time to reorient their strategies and goals to the new political situation (S. Alvarez 1990; Waylen 1994). Moreover, it may be that social movement activity does not cease completely but is redirected toward less-visible and less-unified ends (Fitzsimmons 1995).

11. This "freezing" has been shown clearly in Venezuela, which has been praised for including the institutionalization of a strong party system in its successful transition. See Karl (1987), Brewer-Carías (1988), López Maya et al. (1989), and Salamanca (1995). Hagopian has argued in a similar vein about Brazil: "Patterns of politics established in periods of transition have a very real and strong potential to become semipermanent features of the political landscape. . . . Political institutions are molded to suit the regime that they uphold, and state elites and societal organizations build bridges to one another appropriate for the immediate polit-

The most common way that this process takes place is through “pacting,” or constructing a series of agreements that guarantee the protection of certain elite interests—whether political, economic, or social—in exchange for promises to abide by democratic political procedures. Some have promoted pacting as the most effective transition mechanism (Higley and Gunther 1992), but it has also been shown to hinder further democratization. As Terry Karl has argued, pacts can “circumscrib[e] the extent to which all actors can participate or wield power in the future” (1987, 88). Therefore, if parties dominate pact making during the transition, they may impede the development of new self-constituted organizations as democracy is consolidated.

Out of concern for the establishment of stable political regimes that can prevent a return to authoritarian rule, most scholars studying democratization ignore the demobilizing potential of parties and the possibility of “freezing” this demobilization during the transition.<sup>12</sup> Analysts acknowledge that both civil and political society play crucial roles in assuring the conditions of consolidation, when the rules of politics gain general acceptance and no serious challengers exist outside the system.<sup>13</sup> But analysts also agree that the key to achieving consolidation is the institutionalization of a party system (Agüero, Gillespie, and Scully 1986; Diamond, Linz, and Lipset 1989; Pridham 1991; Mainwaring and Scully 1995).

The problems that can arise if civil society is separated from political society have been recognized. As Larry Diamond explained, “Organizations and networks in civil society may form alliances with parties, but if they become captured by parties, or hegemonic within them, they thereby move their primary locus of activity to political society and lose much of their ability to perform certain unique mediating and democracy-building functions” (Diamond 1994, 7). But concern with building strong parties during transitions seems to have prevented analysts from considering how or whether civil society can remain sufficiently independent

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ical environment. Individuals rise who are adept at the political game as it is played, and they use their positions to perpetuate modes of political interaction that favor them” (Hagopian 1990, 148).

12. Hipsher (1996) is one of the few analysts who focuses on the demobilizing interactions between party elites and social movements during the transition, but her perspective stresses the accommodation of party politics by social movement actors more than the losses that they and democracy as a whole may sustain in the long term.

13. For the sake of analytical clarity, I am following Larry Diamond’s separation of civil and political society. Civil society is the “realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, largely self-supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules. It is distinct from ‘society’ in general in that it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials accountable” (Diamond 1994, 5). Primary examples of “citizens acting collectively” are social movements and interest associations. Political society is, most simply, the party system.

from political society during this construction. Although the social movements active under the previous regime appear the most obvious basis for reviving civil society, the Uruguayan democratic consolidation illustrates the fate of these movements as parties develop. As Eduardo Canel observed, "The logic of the consolidation of democratic institutions—which required the active participation of political parties—made party-building a central priority [in Uruguay], contributing further to the tendency toward the assimilation or displacement of nontraditional collective actors" (Canel 1992, 284–85).

Those who study the activities of Latin American social movements during democratization have echoed this sentiment, finding new social movements to be the "casualties" of the transition, "whose role in defining the issues . . . has again been taken over by political parties" (Jaquette 1994b, 337). This "takeover" is often a hostile one. Research indicates that the infiltration of party politics into movements creates schisms that frequently lead to the movements' demise (S. Alvarez 1990; Chuchryk 1994; Foweraker 1995). Not all parties have such destructive influences, however. Parties on the Left in Peru, Chile, and Brazil have all helped social movements expand (Starn 1992; Schneider 1992; S. Alvarez 1990). Comparison of the different experiences of social movements during regime change indicates that highly institutionalized party systems that rely on the return of parties established prior to the authoritarian period tend to have the most demobilizing effects (Canel 1992; Churchryk 1994; Salamanca 1995).<sup>14</sup>

Because transition analysts have not focused on the displacement of social movements by political parties, most have not perceived the disproportionate drop-off in women's participation in transition politics and their resulting difficulties during democratic consolidation.<sup>15</sup> Jane Jaquette has observed that in the fight against authoritarianism, social movements "draw women's loyalties and energies more successfully than more conventional forms of participation" (Jaquette 1991, 194). Thus their decline and the concomitant rise of parties have a severe impact on women's ability to organize politically.

The link between women's demobilization and party ascendancy during regime change is a global phenomenon, as described by Barbara Nelson and Najma Chowdhury in their introduction to a comparative volume on women's political participation:

14. This outcome arises from these parties' organizational power to co-opt social sectors and also from their more traditional political ideologies, which make them unlikely to incorporate concerns of newer sectors.

15. In his only mention of women's interaction with political parties, Diamond noted, "because of the traditional dominance by men of the corridors of power, civil society is a particularly important base for the training and recruitment of women . . . into positions of formal political power" (Diamond 1994, 10). But like other theorists of transition politics, he does not explore the extent to which the "traditional dominance by men of the corridors of power" presents obstacles to women's "training and recruitment."



Moments of system change, when the distribution and forms of power are in flux, underscore the importance of parties in structuring women's opportunities to participate in formal politics. There has been growing recognition that even though social disjunctures like war, revolution, or economic distress may temporarily increase the range or intensity of women's political activism, these changes do not endure after political consolidation. The role of parties in returning politics to the gender status quo is demonstrated in the chapters discussing the transitions from authoritarian or state socialist regimes to democracies. (Nelson and Chowdhury 1994, 16)

Analysis of women's mobilization in democratization or democratic politics in Latin America supports these conclusions. Clandestine parties have taken advantage of women's ability to organize above ground during authoritarianism, and legal parties often pay at least lip service to the importance of women's incorporation during the transition. But as democratization proceeds, party politics tend to be carried out to the detriment of women's organizing (Jelin 1990; Jaquette 1994a, Waylen 1996). A common finding is that partisan rifts are introduced into women's organizations. As women are recruited into parties, they begin to carry political rivalries into formerly unified women's groups, often resulting in their dismantling (Barrig 1994; Chuchryk 1994). At times segments of women's movements are completely absorbed into different parties, thus subordinating women's demands to party priorities. Parties may also set up their own women's bureaus, with a similar result (S. Alvarez 1986; Kirkwood 1986).

Women have reacted in different ways to party dominance of transition politics.<sup>16</sup> Some have joined parties, finding them to be the most effective means of representation. This strategy has resulted in limited political power for predominantly middle-class women (Waylen 1996, 127). Other women have been active in both parties and women's organizations. Still others have insisted on complete autonomy for their women's groups. The success of these strategies has varied, creating some opportunity for continuing activism but not equality in women's decision-making roles, thereby demonstrating the challenges that party politics pose for women.

To understand the experience of women during different periods of regime change, it is necessary to examine the effect of the political environment on the development of social movements. The concept of "political opportunity structure" permits analysts to go beyond explanations of social mobilization focused primarily on the micropolitical (Tarrow 1994; Foweraker 1995). Resource mobilization emphasizes the internal development of the movement (Cohen 1985; McAdam et al. 1988), while the new social movements or "identity school" looks at the reasons for actors' mobilization (Melucci 1985; Slater 1985). This focus on the micropolitical, especially in the identity school, has often resulted in an overly optimistic

16. See Jaquette's discussion of "autonomy" (1994a, chap. 9); see also S. Alvarez (1990) and Waylen (1996, 123–27).

assessment of social movements' potential, including their promotion of "pure democratic politics" (Slater 1985). Micropolitical explanations cannot account for the cycling of social movement activity and its "failure" to change radically the way politics are conducted. The political opportunity perspective restores macropolitics to the discussion, framing the development of the micropolitical in its political context: the institutions and actors that condition the emergence of social movements.<sup>17</sup> Thus while this approach takes into account the mechanisms within which elites operate (such as political parties and state structures), it focuses on the impact of these actors and institutions on social mobilization.

Political opportunity structure as currently theorized, however, neglects an important element of analysis. Rooted in the resource mobilization school, the approach focuses on how political context conditions the mobilization of movement resources, but to the exclusion of its impact on the identity formation underlying all social mobilization. Without reprivileging analysis based on "identity," its incorporation into an assessment of political context is crucial when studying nontraditional political actors such as women. Why they enter into political life is clearly a matter of who is perceived as a political actor, and also what is viewed as political activity in a given context. To determine women's ability to act politically, scholars must examine how gender relations are implicated in the structure of political opportunities.

Feminist theorists of democracy such as Carol Pateman (1988, 1989), Susan Okin (1979, 1989), and Anne Phillips (1991) have focused on why women are not central political actors. These scholars have shown how canonical Western theorists have based their constructions of political life on assumptions about the gendered division of labor. Citizens of liberal democracy were assumed to be male heads of household who did not have to carry out duties associated with the private sphere. These tasks were left to other members of citizens' households, including most women. Consequently, such theorists never considered what changes beyond enfranchisement would be necessary to ensure female citizens' ability to participate in public life. But many feminists claim that the mere existence of political democracy—the presence of political competition and channels for participation—is not sufficient to ensure women's participation in political decision making.<sup>18</sup> As long as the requirements of demo-

17. Sydney Tarrow and others have described the elements of the political opportunity structure as follows: the openness of political institutions; the availability of allies for the movement; the conflict between elites; and the impact of political alignments. These elements are defined differently in the various analyses that use the model. I have found that the two essential factors are the roles played by political institutions and political elites in the emergence and development of social movements.

18. Critiquing the most basic of democratic activities, Pateman argued that suffrage "highlight[s] the practical contradiction between the formal political equality of liberal democracy

cratic politics fail to take into account women's responsibilities in the private sphere, where the demands of home and family reduce time and inclination for political activity, women will not be able to participate fully.<sup>19</sup>

Other feminist work on institutions suggests that beyond theory, the structures of democracy themselves may have a gendered basis. According to Joan Acker, "The term 'gendered institutions' means that gender is present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life" (Acker 1992, as cited in Kenney 1996, 446). State structures, workplaces, and civic organizations have been shown to reflect the power imbalance of gender relations. For example, national women's agencies occupy subordinate positions in the state, as do female bureaucrats (Franzway et al. 1989; Acker 1990; Goetz 1995; *IDS Bulletin* 1995). Up to this point, research has focused primarily on state or civil-society-based structures. The present analysis seeks to extend the discussion to political parties.<sup>20</sup>

The dichotomy between public man and private woman has been called into question in two ways: by citing the fact that some women manage to participate vigorously in public life (usually by passing on their domestic duties to other women); and by pointing out that class and race also affect how much citizens of either gender can take part.<sup>21</sup> Gender nonetheless continues to be a salient category of analysis, as shown by studies of women under authoritarian regimes in Latin America. These analyses at first seem to contradict the finding of feminist theorists by showing that women's protest activity has been facilitated by their association with the private sphere. Analysts have described how repressive authoritarian regimes altered the location of politics by prohibiting political organizing in the public sphere. Clandestine organizing then surfaced in places where women found it easier to participate, such as around their kitchen tables.

The varied impact of authoritarian oppression resulted in different types of women's organizing, based on class interests. Urban poor women

and the social subordination of women" through their position in the family (Pateman 1988, 214).

19. Some feminist theorists claim that only when social democracy (meaning equality within social institutions ranging from the market to the family) is negotiated will women be able to exercise their citizenship. Policies that would help to establish such democracy, ranging from flexible working schedules to group representation in formal politics, have been suggested by Okin (1989), Young (1990), and Phillips (1991).

20. The research carried out on women's participation in political parties has focused primarily on those elements (such as the party system or party structure) that may or may not contribute to "women-friendly politics." But much of this research seeks general solutions that would promote the inclusion of many other underrepresented groups. While these are valuable contributions, they do not focus explicitly on the particular reasons for women's inclusion or exclusion—that is, on the impact of gender on political structures. See Lovenduski and Norris (1993), Rule and Zimmerman (1994).

21. On the inadequacy of focusing on gender as the determining element in political participation, see Mohanty et al. (1991), Emberley (1993), and Grewal and Kaplan (1994).

demanded restoration of goods and services necessary for household survival. Middle- and upper-class women formed feminist groups that critiqued the patriarchal underpinning of authoritarian politics. Meanwhile, women from all classes participated in human rights groups that protested the disappearance of their children and other loved ones (Feijóo and Nari 1994; Waylen 1994). Women thus brought into the public realm what were formerly considered private matters of family sustenance and gender relations. Regimes initially tolerated these “nonpolitical” demands. As a result, women’s organizations provided both the image and the backbone of many of the opposition movements that helped to topple authoritarian governments in countries throughout the region.

Notwithstanding women’s active opposition to authoritarian regimes, their fate in transitions to democracy reflects the finding of feminist analysts that women’s association with the private sphere ultimately results in their political marginalization. Even in cases where women succeeded in compelling governmental action on their issues at the beginning of a new democratic regime (as in punishing violators of human rights or establishing commissions on the status of women), women’s groups were soon ignored, fragmented, or dissolved by partisan rivalry (S. Alvarez 1990; Chuchryk 1994).

How can women’s private duties account for and yet impede their political participation? A closer look reveals a basic commonality among the findings. The fundamental feminist finding that women’s association with the private sphere of “nonpolitical” activity conditions their political participation clearly applies to the experience of Latin American women. To show why this conditioning produces different outcomes in different contexts, it is necessary to identify the phase of democratization under consideration. Feminist democratic theorists and institutionalists consider the effect of gender relations on women’s participation in consolidated democracies, while analysts of Latin American women address women’s situation under authoritarianism and in the transition to democracy. Because the elements of political opportunity structure differ according to the phase of democratization, it is not surprising that gender relations are reflected variously within particular structures.

I use the Venezuelan case to demonstrate the power of a gender-sensitive analysis of the relation between political opportunity structures and different regime types and stages. In the two periods under discussion, the demise of authoritarian rule and the transition to democracy, I will first describe briefly the opportunity structure as it is traditionally understood. I will then use contemporaneous accounts to show how gender relations are embedded in the political opportunity structures and their corresponding effects on women’s mobilization. The progress of women’s organizing as democracy becomes consolidated will also be outlined.

## WOMEN JOIN TOGETHER TO OPPOSE DICTATORSHIP

*The Political Opportunity Structure of the Pérez Jiménez Dictatorship*

Venezuela's first experiment with democratic politics, the three-year period known as *el trienio*, was ended abruptly by a military coup in 1948.<sup>22</sup> An all-male provisional military junta took over and within two years banned the former ruling party, Acción Democrática (AD, the Social Democratic party), its affiliated unions, and the Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV).<sup>23</sup> At first the junta promised to restore democracy. But after the murder of junta president and former Minister of Defense Carlos Delgado Chalbaud in November 1950, Major Marcos Pérez Jiménez, a hard-liner, became the most powerful member of the junta. After the 1952 elections, he accused the winning party, the Unión Republicana Democrática (URD), of collaborating with the banned parties and claimed victory for himself and the government party. The URD leadership was sent into exile. They were joined by leaders of the other party that had participated in the elections, COPEI (the Comité Independiente Electoral, the Christian Democratic party), although COPEI itself was never officially banned during the dictatorship. To ensure his tenure, Pérez Jiménez relied upon the Seguridad Nacional, the national police force whose brutality led it to be nicknamed "*el gestapo criollo*."

Most of the opposition to Pérez Jiménez was carried out by the AD and the PCV in clandestinity and from exile. Differing tactics initially kept the parties from cooperating, and the opposition as a whole waned by 1953. But then necessity and a new generation of leaders led to the establishment in June 1957 of the multiparty Junta Patriótica to coordinate the opposition. It was soon joined by professional organizations, the middle class, and even the business sector, as these groups became increasingly alienated by Pérez Jiménez's repressive measures and financially unsound policies. By the end of 1957, the opposition had taken to the streets. Following a rigged plebiscite, reformist officers led a coup attempt against the government on 1 January 1958. Although insufficient coordination resulted in a lack of support for the coup, the attempt was followed by a month of turmoil, with continual rioting, school closings, and the open circulation of propaganda favoring democracy. The Junta Patriótica called

22. This section is based on accounts of the dictatorship in Stambouli (1980), Avendaño Lugo (1982), and García Ponce and Camacho Barrios (1982).

23. In 1944 the Communist Party split into two factions, known as the "Red" and the "Black" communists, over support for the current government of General Medina Angarita. The "Red" faction, which became the PCV, went on to give limited support to the AD during the trienio, while the "Black" faction, which eventually called itself the Partido Revolucionario Proletario (Comunista) (PRP-C), opposed the AD. Unlike the PCV, the PRP-C did not openly oppose Pérez Jiménez and remained legal for most of the dictatorship. Toward the end, however, certain PRP-C leaders joined with the PCV in fighting against the regime (Alexander 1969, chap. 1).

for a general strike on 22 January, and the army joined in to bring down the dictatorship the following day.

Thus the political opportunity structure of this dictatorship was characterized by a repressive security apparatus opposed by clandestine parties. Toward the end of the 1950s, other sectors of civil society joined the opposition, coordinated by an all-party council.

### *Women's Opportunities Expand under Dictatorship*

Most accounts of the opposition published after the fact have ignored women's participation (Levine 1973, 1989; Stambouli 1980; Aven-daño Lugo 1982).<sup>24</sup> But women played a significant role. The *Libro negro 1952: Venezuela bajo el signo del terror*, a collection of clandestine documents that the AD published and circulated during the dictatorship, lists 110 women known to have been either imprisoned or exiled between 1948 and 1952.<sup>25</sup> The editors of *Nosotras también nos jugamos la vida*, an edited volume of interviews with women who fought against the dictatorship, assembled the names of 275 women who participated in the struggle (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979). While these numbers no doubt underrepresent women's participation, the lists and other descriptive materials indicate that women's activism was valued at the time by the male party leadership as well as by the female activists themselves.

The political context of the dictatorship offered little hope for any opposition. Pérez Jiménez sought to repress his political opponents, the parties founded in the mid-1930s and expanded in the trienio. His idea was to raze the institutions of Venezuelan society almost literally and build new ones. Known opposition parties had no place in his plan. As his principal ideologue, Laureano Vallenilla Lanz, explained, "The tractor is the government's best collaborator, the exact interpreter of the elevated and noble aim of transforming the physical environment. . . . The tractor,

24. Writing soon after the events, Martz (1966) did not ignore women's contribution but mentioned it only briefly and without analysis. The attention that Martz paid to women's participation in politics, unique among analysts of Venezuelan politics, probably stems from his friendship with Mercedes Fermín, a prominent member of the AD since its founding, according to my interview with her. Fermín was a participant in the clandestine opposition, former head of the AD's Secretaría Feminina, member of Directorio Nacional of the AD, and former senator. She was interviewed in Caracas, 2 Aug. 1994. In addition to the texts cited, much of the information for this section is drawn from seventy interviews with participants in the opposition. Fifty-four of the interviews were published previously in two works, Petzoldt and Bevilacqua (1979) and Farías Toussain et al. (1985). I conducted interviews with sixteen participants in 1994–1995 (see list at the end of the bibliography). Some participants were interviewed for more than one study. Because the interviews were obtained at least twenty years after the incidents took place, they constitute contemporary reflections on past events.

25. This figure represents 3.4 percent of the total named in the *Libro negro*, which also listed 3,147 men.

that symbol of the fatherland and of the government, destroys many things, even the political clubs called parties and their representatives" (cited in Stambouli 1980, 94).

The information available suggests that Pérez Jiménez did not consider women to be political actors, at least initially. He told his biographer, "the problems that present themselves in life should be resolved by men. Women, although they might be the best companions, have their concerns with family life" (Tarnoi 1954, 197). The dictator had little else to say on the subject.<sup>26</sup> Women are not mentioned even in the section of his biography entitled "Family and Home," where one might expect to find some reference to them, given his conventional views.<sup>27</sup>

Opposition party leaders took advantage of Pérez Jiménez's association of men with politics by organizing women to do clandestine work. Unlike the dictator, opposition leaders were well aware of Venezuelan women's potential for activism from their history of social and political activity. Following the death of an earlier dictator, General Juan Vicente Gómez, in 1936 women's organizing formed a distinct part of the explosion of civic activity. Predominantly middle-class women joined the nascent parties and formed myriad civic, feminist, charitable, and cultural groups. Influenced by the growth of women's movements in England and the United States and by early international women's networks, these groups held two national meetings and helped reform discriminatory family legislation.<sup>28</sup> Venezuelan women also united in a suffrage movement in 1943, which crystallized around two national petition drives and the publication of a monthly newsletter, the *Correo Cívico Femenino*.<sup>29</sup> Women were granted municipal suffrage in 1945 and national suffrage in 1947.<sup>30</sup>

Because most opposition to Pérez Jiménez was carried out in secret, the women who took part tended to have some previous contact with the parties, either personally or through family members.<sup>31</sup> Interviews with former activists routinely highlight party sympathies if not member-

26. A review of government publications during the dictatorship and of analyses of the period reveal few references to Pérez Jiménez's views on women other than what is presented here.

27. Reflecting his philosophy of physically constructing the new society, this section about "home" mainly discusses how many apartment houses he had built.

28. Francesca Miller (1991) presents comparative information on the influence of international and regional organizing on Latin American women during this period.

29. This periodical appeared from August 1945 to January 1947.

30. Women's early organizing is described in *Primer Congreso Venezolano de Mujeres* (1941), Clemente Travieso (1961), de Leonardi (1983), CISFEM (1992), and Espina (1994).

31. Forty-seven percent of the interviewees (see note 24) cited family influence as crucial in their political development. This trend evidently pertains to later periods: according to a 1975 survey, Venezuelan women are more liable than men to be influenced by family members on political matters (cited in Montero 1987, 32).

ship.<sup>32</sup> Many of these women were teachers or students, in environments where political activism was hidden but palpable.<sup>33</sup> Most of these participants were young women without children, some unmarried, who were available for work outside the home. Like their activist foremothers, most came from the middle class, with notable exceptions among members of the PCV.

Party leadership incorporated women as individuals and in groups. Although they accomplished crucial tasks, individual women largely carried out the infrastructural duties of the opposition or exposed regime abuses. Women's experience in groups, however, led women to assume leadership positions and develop ties that would foster gender-based activism in the future. Yet because women's mobilization was predicated on their association with the private sphere, it did not form a basis on which they could develop sustained public activity when confronted with a new set of opportunities in the transition to democracy.

### *Engendering Enlaces: Individual Women's Participation*

By incorporating individual women in clandestine work, party leaders used gender relations strategically. For one thing, "they designated for women jobs that their female condition itself allowed them to accomplish" (Fariás Toussain et al. 1985, 97). For another, the eventual persecution of women was publicized by opposition leaders to demonstrate the extent of dictatorial abuses, which extended even to "defenseless ladies." Individual women found a certain level of acceptance by the leadership, although some were aware that they were not being trained for future political activity.

Women undertook many of the same duties as men but were called on especially for certain tasks. A major one was acting as an *enlace*—a combination of liaison and "gopher"—for men in the opposition leadership.<sup>34</sup> Enlaces undertook a range of activities, such as transmitting daily messages to and from key contacts, finding "safe houses" in which the leaders could hide, setting up meeting sites, and running errands for the

32. Almost all the interviewees were women who were either clandestine party members or sympathizers during the dictatorship: 54 percent supported the AD, 37 percent the PCV, 7 percent COPEI, and 1.4 percent the URD.

33. Several interviewees were members of the Federación Venezolana de Maestros (FVM), one of the most active associations to take part in the early opposition. Alcira Colmenares and Mercedes Sandoval Marcano mentioned that the FVM, reflecting the makeup of the profession, was about three-quarters female, although not led by women. Interviews with Colmenares and Sandoval Marcano, participants in the clandestine opposition, Caracas, 17 May 1994.

34. *Enlace* means literally *connection* or *link*. Sonia Alvarez has noted women's frequent adoption of this role in opposition politics (1994, 17).



leaders.<sup>35</sup> Women were often entrusted with crucial information. For example, Regina Gómez Peñalver was the only other person besides the male secretary-general to know the names and hiding places of the clandestine leadership of the AD was hiding in the early years of the opposition (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 253). Providing personal protection was also part of women's responsibility. They often chauffeured party leaders or accompanied them on foot or on public transportation.

Taking care of the *correo* (mail delivery) and propaganda distribution were other regular duties. Women passed secret messages to male prisoners in food or while greeting them with an embrace. A woman pretending to be imprisoned AD leader Alberto Carnavali's sister smuggled him the gun that he used in an escape attempt. Women also carried notes in their clothing and leaflets hidden in folded umbrellas. When the wife of the AD's clandestine secretary-general Leonardo Ruiz Piñeda was forced into exile following his assassination, she stuffed her daughters' teddy bears with documents. Women also put their houses at the disposition of the parties, facilitating meetings and hiding those who could not risk being seen. Socorro Negreti noted that clandestine radio broadcasts were transmitted from her house (Farías Toussain et al. 1985).

Examination of the assignments that individual women carried out reveals how women's tasks were facilitated by their gender. Women's mere presence effectively disguised the political escorting of a male leader as a romantic stroll. As Clarisa Sanoja explained, "Many times they needed a woman, not as a driver, but at their side to appear as though they were a couple out walking in the street" (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 125). Prisoners were allowed to get visits, packages, and embraces from their "sisters," "sweethearts," "wives," and "mothers." Women's clothing, especially the undergarments and maternity smocks that most suggested their gender, was a nonsuspect area for transporting messages, as were children's toys.

While party leadership benefited from the activities women could accomplish under cover of their "nonpolitical" gender, leaders also used gender relations to publicize the fact that the dictatorship violated gender norms in persecuting those same women.<sup>36</sup> The AD's clandestine secre-

35. The *Libro negro* itself was delivered to the publisher by Carmen Veitia, one of the secretary general's key enclaves (*Libro negro* 1983, vi).

36. As noted in these accounts, the dictatorship came to recognize that women as well as men were taking part in the political opposition and began to treat them much like the male activists. One imprisoned woman was greeted by her interrogator with a slap and the words "Here women don't have a sex." See "Nosotras también nos jugamos la vida," *El Nacional*, 12 Mar. 1980, p. C-1. Many women were interrogated, imprisoned, and exiled, and some were brutally tortured. But some treatment remained gender-specific. Activist Yolanda Villaparedes recalled being threatened with rape by her jailers: "because [women] pretend not to know anything and are enemies of the government, we are going to make them pregnant by the government to see what they will do with the children" (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 298).

tary-general Ruiz Piñeda, writing to author Luisa Velásquez, the enlace responsible for collecting material on women for the *Libro negro*, documented the party's interest in showing that women were mistreated by the Pérez Jiménez regime.

I have an important job for you. . . . Right now we are preparing a pamphlet about the violations of the regime against public liberties. . . .<sup>37</sup> I want it to be you who works on everything referring to offenses against women. To this end I suggest you: a) Draft a central report, a sort of history of police violations against Venezuelan women since November 1948. This report should be extensive, it doesn't matter how long. You should do an inventory of searches, ill-treatment, detentions, exiles, imprisonments, etc. You should describe whatever facts you know. b) [Include] complementary documents referring to the women's struggle against the dictatorship. . . . [W]e will also need graphic material: photos of abused, arrested, imprisoned, and exiled women.<sup>38</sup>

Velásquez came through. Details on women's treatment are scattered throughout the text of the *Libro negro*. Women were clearly considered part of the opposition, as shown in use of the phrase "men and women" in descriptions of the general actions of participants. But the gender hierarchy is equally clear: in discussions of leadership, only "men" are noted. Moreover, women's gender roles are emphasized for effect. Although portrayed as active participants, women are portrayed simultaneously as weak and victimized. The report noted that repression has not respected sex any more than age or political affiliation. But the party does respect sex, condemning the dictatorship's abuse of the weaker one: "*Damas indefensas* have been jailed and thrown into prison cells, in outrageous proximity with criminals, and, afterwards, forced into exile" (*Libro negro* 1983, 59).<sup>39</sup> The section on the methods of persecution and terror contains the subsection "Exiled, Imprisoned, and Hunted Ladies," against which "the most brutal and unusual police aggression has been committed" (*Libro negro*, 122). Finally, attacks on women are cited along with references to the Guasina concentration camp and torture to indicate the full extent of the persecution employed by the dictatorship.

The exiled founder of the AD, Rómulo Betancourt, also named the abuse of women as the worst violation of the dictatorship: "What passed all previous limits in Venezuela and probably in all Latin America for savagery was the imprisonment, indignity, and torture inflicted on numerous women" (Betancourt 1979, 258). He found it a trespass on proper gender relations that mothers, female professionals, schoolteachers and students, and the female relatives of male opposition leaders were imprisoned.

37. The pamphlet was the *Libro negro*, in preparation at that time.

38. This correspondence is on file at the Hemeroteca Nacional (the national newspaper library) in Caracas.

39. Many of the women who fought in the early opposition describe how they were forced into exile after they became too visible. They continued to work in communities of fellow ex-

This was a new horror introduced by the worst despotism in Venezuelan history. It has been a national tradition, inherited in part from the courtly Spaniards, to always respect the female sex. In the terrible nineteenth century, with its cruel wars and authoritarian governments, jail and exile were reserved for men. Even Juan Vicente Gómez respected the female sex. The Pérez Jiménez regime, so closely akin to fascism, violated the limits that had been set by the most barbarous autocracies of the past. Great numbers of women passed through the jails, often tortured and kept for years behind bars. (Betancourt 1979, 259)

Despite the fervor, outrage over the persecution of women only respected the sex of certain women. In both the *Libro negro* and Betancourt's account, the imprisonment of female activists with prostitutes and other criminals was cited as evidence of degrading treatment (*Libro negro* 1983, 110, 122; Betancourt 1979, 258). Women themselves were divided on this issue, reflecting their class affiliations. Olga Luzardo of the PCV mentioned teaching "common criminals" how to read, write, and sew during her imprisonment (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 188). COPEI member Isabel Landaez remembered a friend protesting to the prison director that they were from "good families" and should not be kept with the other prisoners (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 358).

Some female activists felt that their participation was valued according to its own merits and that they did not experience discrimination at the hands of the leadership. The first two clandestine secretaries-general of the AD surrounded themselves with female enlaces. Ruiz Piñeda reportedly said to one, Carmen Azopardo, "What will we do with all these valiant women the day that we come to power? We'll put [their names] in huge letters in all the newspapers so that all the world will know how they acted" (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 217). When asked about his and other leaders' attitudes toward women, the women who had worked with the leadership claimed that they never discriminated between the sexes (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 199, 216, 247). Other interviewees also felt that "being a woman was never an impediment" and that they were allowed to take part in the clandestine activity "like any man."<sup>40</sup> Women also recognized that some participated in less direct ways, making contributions that went unrecognized at the time because they were not seen as political "risk-work." Esperanza Vera elaborated:

You have to look at history with the eyes of that moment. Not all the women were messengers. . . . Not all were cooks for the prisoners. We could not expect the number of [female] participants to be high. What percentage of women were studying then? How many women were there who could leave their children in day care? No, participation cannot be measured in terms of leadership-work or risk-work

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iles in Latin America, Europe, and the United States to put pressure on the Pérez Jiménez government (see the interviews in Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979).

40. Interview with Alcira Colmenares, participant in the clandestine opposition, Caracas, 17 May 1994; and with Mercedes Sandoval Marcano, participant in the clandestine opposition, Caracas, 17 May 1994.

only. All the jobs were risky, and nevertheless this participation has been given very little value. How many women had to raise their children alone while their husbands were fighting? How many had to spend day after day on the staircases of the Seguridad Nacional waiting for Pedro Estrada [head of Seguridad Nacional] to grant them permission so that at the end of two or three years they might catch a glimpse of their husbands? I understand this also as participation. This also can be called Resistance! (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 271)

Despite the contributions that individual women made to the opposition and the fairness with which they were treated by individual male leaders, they were rarely included in the more important decision making or organizational activities of the opposition. The AD's clandestine structure had no women in its national leadership, nor were any to be found in regional, union, or youth director positions. Only a few women were included in the PCV leadership (García Ponce and Camacho Barrios 1982, 84–86).

Some women recognized their exclusion from the party hierarchy and the resulting lack of political training. AD activist Elia Borges de Tapia reflected, "Although it appears that in clandestinity we are all equal—like when we die—it must be recognized that the women did not participate in leadership. Women's jobs were very risky. They took on great responsibilities and accomplished rather dangerous missions. Only at the hour of making decisions, at the moment of designating those who ought to lead, they continued to be the stone guests [*las convidadas de piedra*]" (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 336).

Another female activist made the connection between most women's roles in the opposition, as helpmates to the leadership, and women's lack of political development. As Isabel Carmona explained,

We have to recognize that in the political struggle, they enlisted certain women in the work of being enlacs of the leaders, who brought them the papers, who ran that type of risk that was as great as that run by a person who placed bombs, because the punishment was the same. But the development wasn't the same. Because the person who placed the bomb was in a part of the movement that had a more direct role in action. . . . While the person who brought the paper was like a courier or a messenger who didn't read the document and thus was not able to grow, she was growing in her morals, her ethics, her devotion, but perhaps she wasn't able to develop in her thinking because she did not engage in direct confrontation. . . . From the point of view of fostering political thinking, this was not the best work.<sup>41</sup>

The reliance on women's nonpolitical identity, while leading to the participation of individual women in the clandestine struggle, had detrimental consequences for women's participation in the new regime. Because women were viewed as private actors who facilitated political ac-

41. Interview with Isabel Carmona, founder of the Asociación Juvenil Femenina, the Comité Femenino de la Junta Patriótica, member of the AD Directorio Nacional, and former congressional deputy, Caracas, 26 May 1994.

tivity when men could not take part as easily or illustrated the extent of authoritarian abuses, they were not trained to continue their political activism after the danger in men's participation had passed. The fact that some women continued to be active, within the parties or on their own, is a tribute to their individual efforts, which were frequently aided by the lessons they learned in women's opposition groups.

### *The Potential of Women's Group Organizing*

Parties also took advantage of women's ability to participate by organizing women-only groups. Unlike the enlaces, the women who led the groups had autonomy in decision making and thus developed organizational skills and political awareness, including a recognition of their subordinate position within party life. Moreover, their experience in party-linked groups led them to form a multiparty women's committee. The Comité Feminino de la Junta Patriótica served as the catalyst for expanding women's cross-class opposition, manifested most visibly in the huge rally of women following the downfall of Pérez Jiménez on International Women's Day in 1958. The success of this group echoed women's history of organizing in the 1940s and foreshadowed what they would accomplish in the future.

Both the principal parties of the opposition started young women's groups to facilitate organizing above ground. The PCV sponsored the longest-lasting all-female group under authoritarian rule, the Unión de Muchachas. Active between 1951 and 1954, it was initially organized within the framework of the PCV's strategy of "*salir a la superficie*" and make connections with the masses.<sup>42</sup> Juventud Comunista started a group to attract young workers, but it failed because they could not risk unemployment. Juventud then turned to organizing female students, who usually had family financial support and were therefore more able to undertake political involvement. The Unión de Muchachas became the only branch of the PCV to have legal status under the dictatorship. Around the same time, the AD also founded the Asociación Juvenil Femenina, a group modeled on the Unión.

Party leaders' sponsorship of women's groups, much like the incorporation of individual women, took advantage of the fact that women's activities initially did not arouse suspicion. The head of Juventud Comunista explained, "at this time, it was supposed that young women did not become involved in this [type of] struggle. They were [assumed to be] occupied with young women's things."<sup>43</sup> This sentiment was confirmed by

42. The details on the formation of the Unión de Muchachas were taken from García Ponce and Camacho Barrios (1982) and from my interview with Guillermo García Ponce, head of Juventud Comunista during the dictatorship, Caracas, 19 Dec. 1994.

43. Interview with García Ponce.

Isabel Carmona, founder of the AD women's group: "[This] organization counted on the support of the party because it viewed [the group] as a tool in the legal struggle; women who were not known to be active in politics were a very expeditious peripheral tool to do things that men could not."<sup>44</sup> Unlike the enlaces, women in the Unión de Muchachas and the Asociación Juvenil Feminina led their own organizations. In at least one case, this outcome resulted from a deliberate strategy by a male leader to foster women's political development. García Ponce, head of the Juventud Comunista, claimed that one reason for setting up the Unión de Muchachas was that "if the young women directed their own organization, they would have more possibilities to develop politically, as organizers, and to act with much more initiative and liberty."<sup>45</sup> Juvenil leaders recognized that in the presence of young men, who had more political training and were prone to take control in group situations, young women had less chance to develop. Therefore, the leadership of the Unión de Muchachas, while following the general line of the PCV in establishing contact with the masses, was allowed independence in its work, including the crucial ability to make decisions about tactics and strategy.

In keeping with the class perspective of the PCV, the Unión de Muchachas organized working-class and poor young women in the factories and barrios of Caracas. They held history and craft classes, sponsored sporting events, and even started a medical clinic.<sup>46</sup> Members kept a lookout for potential recruits for the party but claimed that the main purposes of the group were to maintain a legal presence and to help young women. They clung tenaciously to their mandate, never yielding to party pressure to make the Unión more overtly oppositional.

Notwithstanding its explicitly nonoppositional strategy, as the Unión de Muchachas gained in membership and visibility, the government recognized that the group was actively organizing women. According to María del Mar Alvarez, the dictatorship "realized . . . that it was not the work of *muchachas locas* but rather political work."<sup>47</sup> The regime began to track down the leaders. After they sponsored a sporting event for more than a thousand young women, the leaders were imprisoned and interrogated. Although these women were eventually released, governmental repression prevented the Unión de Muchachas from continuing its activities. After three years of operation, the group dissolved.

Yet the Unión left behind women who had discovered that they

44. Interview with Isabel Carmona.

45. Interview with García Ponce.

46. The description of the work of the Unión de Muchachas comes primarily from my interviews with its founder, Esperanza Vera, and a member of the leadership, María del Mar Alvarez.

47. Interview with María del Mar Alvarez, leader of the Unión Nacional de Muchachas, Caracas, 12 July 1994.

could lead movements and had recognized some of the obstacles confronting them as women. According to María del Mar Alvarez, work for the Unión de Muchachas

awoke in us, in all who were party activists, [the realization] that we had a problem that was greater than the attention we were giving it. In seeing the situation of the women in the parties who sold the raffle tickets, those who cooked when there was a meeting, those who washed the dishes, you began to understand that in the work of the party meetings the women were the ones who were selling and making things. . . . [T]hus we began to see, why were we so foolish? Why do we sell? Why don't [the men] sell? . . . That sort of thing.

[We were able to see this from being in the Unión] because we were only women. We met and made decisions. . . . We had independence in our work. . . . And I believe that this helped us a great deal. . . . We realized that we had abilities and that we were not sufficiently esteemed in the party.<sup>48</sup>

The leaders were not the only women who gained from the experience. The founder of the Unión de Muchachas, Esperanza Vera, noted that participating in the Unión allowed young women in the barrios to justify doing something outside their homes. By coming together and discussing their common situation, they experienced what she considered a feminist recognition that "my problems aren't only my problems. They are the problems of many. And what I aspire to, others also aspire to. What I can do can be shared."<sup>49</sup> Thus women's experience in group organizing under the dictatorship made possible their development as political leaders and activists on their own behalf, an outcome not fostered by individual participation.

The benefits of group organizing were not confined to women acting within their parties. Female leaders made connections across parties to foster women's solidarity. Although the Unión de Muchachas was a party-based initiative, it was aided in formation by the first women's rights organization, the nonpartisan Agrupación Cultural Femenina (ACF). Founded sixteen years earlier, the ACF provided members of the Unión de Muchachas with resources and a meeting space.<sup>50</sup> The Unión in turn inspired the creation of other groups, such as the Unión Nacional de Mujeres, a short-lived group (1952–1953) founded to educate adult women in the barrios about their rights, first aid, and neighborhood improvement.<sup>51</sup>

48. *Ibid.*

49. Interview with Esperanza Vera, Founder of the Unión de Muchachas, Caracas, 13 July 1994.

50. Established at the end of 1935, the ACF pursued the fight to reform civil laws to give women more equality within the family. It also participated in the suffrage movement. From 1938 to 1945, the ACF published a near-weekly page of women's news, culture, and commentary in a leading national daily newspaper. See Clemente Travieso (1961) and de Leonardi (1983).

51. The organization was forced to disband after the suspicious Seguridad Nacional found out that many of the members of the Unión Nacional de Mujeres were linked to the AD and the PCV.

Founders of these new organizations continued to use the strategy of disguising women's activism as apolitical (often cultural) endeavors. The Unión Nacional de Mujeres was founded in the guise of an essay contest to honor world-renowned Venezuelan pianist Teresa Carreño on her birthday. The AD-based Centro Gabriela Mistral took the poet's name in an effort to disguise the political hall as a cultural center.<sup>52</sup> But the Seguridad Nacional appeared at the inauguration of the center, either tipped off or at that point suspicious of any new organization. The Centro Gabriela Mistral was immediately closed.

Party women also helped to coordinate mass women's protests, most of which drew on women's identification with the private sphere.<sup>53</sup> In June 1952, 141 women signed a widely distributed letter protesting the conditions under which their relatives were being kept at the Guasina concentration camp (*Libro negro* 1983, 191–93). Women collected five thousand signatures protesting the dictatorship and attempted to deliver them to participants attending the 1954 conference of American Secretaries of State in Caracas. They had already placed copies of the *Libro negro* on these officials' desks and demonstrated publicly outside the conference (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 88, 164, 294). On 17 January 1958, 338 women signed the "Manifiesto de las Madres sobre la Situación Estudiantil," calling for an end to police abuse of school-age children.<sup>54</sup> The signers took this document from house to house (Umaña Bernal 1958). Women also staged mass demonstrations, as described by Yolanda Villaparedes: "We held activities with women dressed in black in front of the Congreso Nacional when an important personality came to the country. These demonstrations that we prepared were silent actions. . . . [W]e also disguised ourselves as students, joined in the obligatory parades organized by the dictatorship and shouted slogans against it. Or we held *actos relámpagos* to denounce the torture" (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 293–94).<sup>55</sup>

The most significant cross-party organizing among women occurred toward the end of the dictatorship. By this time, many activists had met through clandestine efforts or in prison and were in a position to take advantage of the political opportunity presented by the unified opposition. Seeing that the leadership of the broad-based organizing group, the

52. Several interviewees confirmed that the strategy of establishing "cultural centers" or clubs was common in clandestine organizing, especially at the universities. The information on the Centro Gabriela Mistral came from my interview with one of its founders, Elia Borges de Tapia. She was also a participant in the clandestine opposition, former member of the AD Directorio Nacional, former head of the AD Comisión Feminina, and a former senator. She was interviewed in Caracas, 15 Aug. 1994.

53. Although the extent of direct party influence in these actions is unclear, the signatures on the protest letters included many well-known female party activists.

54. Police repression had reached into the high schools by this time.

55. *Actos relámpagos* were quick public denunciations of the dictatorship made in crowded streets or plazas.



Junta Patriótica, was entirely male, two women who had led women's groups, Argelia Laya of the Unión Nacional de Mujeres (PCV) and Isabel Carmona of the Asociación Juvenil Femenina (AD), organized a committee to coordinate women's participation in the opposition.<sup>56</sup> After recruiting two women from COPEI and the URD, they founded the Comité Femenino de la Junta Patriótica on 23 September 1957.<sup>57</sup>

The determination of the leaders of the Comité Femenino to fight women's exclusion by forming a multiparty organization indicated the growth in Venezuelan women's ability to undertake independent political activity. Its formation drew on the experience of women who had organized among themselves in the 1940s for legal reform and suffrage, an experience now adapted to the current situation. Carmona cited the name of the Comité Femenino as evidence of women's continuing subordination to male leadership: "Look at how we had a tendency to devalue what we ourselves were doing! It was given the name of the Comité Femenino de la Junta Patriótica . . . as if we were a committee of the men!" Yet in calling themselves the "Comité Femenino," the founders clearly sought to take advantage of a political opportunity by strategically linking themselves to the major coordinating body of the opposition.<sup>58</sup>

Members of the Comité Femenino also used their gender to their advantage. They encouraged participation through propaganda distribution and demonstrations deliberately directed at women. Their major pamphlet, "Carta a las mujeres venezolanas," solicited women's opposition. Forty thousand copies were issued. Demonstrations were held where women were most likely to be found: outside churches after mass on Sundays and in the marketplaces. The Comité also collected money for Christmas presents for the children of political prisoners (Umaña Bernal 1958).

By means of these methods, the Comité Femenino unified women's opposition in Venezuela. Journalist Lucila Palacios claimed that its demonstrations were multiclass, including women from the barrios, secretaries, students, professionals, and wealthy women (Umaña Bernal 1958). The demonstrations grew larger and more audacious as the opposition grew. In the beginning of January 1958, according to Gudrun Olbrich, "a women's demonstration was convened in the Museum of Fine Arts Plaza to plead for the freedom of political prisoners. Everyone remembers this demonstration because an impressive number of women were brought together . . ." (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 324–25). When the women started singing the Venezuelan national anthem, the approaching Seguri-

56. Carmona claimed that she deserved a spot on the Junta Patriótica for her role in mediating the rapprochement between the PCV and AD youth leadership, but at the last minute, it was given to a man.

57. Information on the Comité Femenino came from interviews with its founders and from Umaña Bernal (1958).

58. I am indebted to Brooke Ackerly for helping me to clarify this point.

dad Nacional stopped in its tracks. Seeing the success of this tactic, the protesters sang for several hours, until a superior officer showed up and ended the demonstration by ordering the women to be beaten with billy clubs.

The Comité Femenino was so successful that it continued organizing with considerable momentum after the fall of the dictatorship. The group staged the first mass rally of the new democracy, the one that brought together ten thousand women to celebrate International Women's Day in March 1958. Along with male organizers, women leaders were riding high on the unity achieved by the opposition, as illustrated by the ads run in the daily *El Nacional*: "Everyone come celebrate International Women's Day! The Comité Femenino of the Junta Patriótica calls all women of Caracas to come together en masse at the Nuevo Circo Saturday, the 8th of March, at 7 p.m."<sup>59</sup> The next day's ad read, "United we will stabilize the conquests gained in the political arena. United we will achieve the solution of all the problems that plague our country. United we will achieve a better future for our children. Unity has always been the slogan of the Women's Movement of Venezuela for the Celebration of International Women's Day."<sup>60</sup>

Under the headline "Ten Thousand Women Attended the First Unitary Assembly Last Night," *El Nacional* described this major rally at length as a clearly unified endeavor.<sup>61</sup> The article mentions that representatives of the AD, the PCV, COPEI, and the URD started the day by offering flowers at the tomb of Simón Bolívar, the hero of the liberation from Spanish rule, and those of two Venezuelan women of letters, Luisa Cáceres de Arismendi and Teresa de la Parra. Throughout Caracas, female party members and nonaffiliated women gave speeches that "insisted on the need for Venezuelan women to organize themselves" and commemorated the women who had been imprisoned and exiled during the dictatorship. That night, ten thousand persons, almost all women, attended the rally. Invitees from women's groups, political parties, and cultural groups sat on the platform. Each speaker emphasized the success of the unitary struggle, how the meeting reflected the unity of women, and the need to remain unified in the new democracy. Yet paradoxically, the new democracy became the agent that dissolved women's unity—and impeded their incorporation into other channels of representation.

59. Nuevo Circo was the largest amphitheater in Caracas at that time. See *El Nacional*, 7 Mar. 1958, p. 8.

60. See *El Nacional*, 8 Mar. 1958, pp. 36–37. International Women's Day had been celebrated in 1944, 1946, and 1948.

61. The article in *El Nacional* was republished in the *Historia Gráfica de Venezuela* (1958, 81–83). Because this publication reprints articles on the most significant political happenings, the appearance of this piece therein is another indication of the meeting's historical importance.

Women's opposition to the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship, as individuals and in groups, was evidently facilitated by the regime's gendered structure of politics. But their individual actions, while crucial to the success of the opposition, did not provide women with the opportunity to develop the leadership and organizational skills needed to participate in political life. In the women's groups, women became aware of their capacities for organization, recognized the discrimination that had kept them from maturing as political actors, and developed a form of organizing that drew on women's previous successes in uniting women across parties into a single organization. The women involved in the *Comité Femenino* became lifetime allies and went on to work together in campaigns to benefit women—but only after experiencing substantial demobilization.

#### WOMEN ARE DISBANDED IN THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

##### *The Political Opportunity Structure of the Party-led Pacted Democracy*

Immediately after the fall of Pérez Jiménez, the unity of the successful opposition seemed durable. The *Junta Patriótica* pronounced itself in favor of a unified front, and all the political parties involved declared a truce in order to continue working toward a stable democracy (*Historia Gráfica de Venezuela* 1958, 37). But unity was never the AD's long-term goal, at least not unity with the communists. As various sources have confirmed, the AD leadership in exile had agreed to unite with the PCV for strategic purposes only, not to be confused in any way with ideological commonalities.<sup>62</sup> Once back in Venezuela from exile, AD leaders lost no time in rupturing the coalition, acting via the *Junta Patriótica*.

Exclusion of the communists occurred through a process of "pacting," which established the agreements that served as the basis for future political interaction.<sup>63</sup> To attend to the demands of newly empowered sectors and the threat of a return to authoritarianism from more entrenched interests, the three noncommunist parties—the AD, COPEI, and the URD—signed the *Pacto de Punto Fijo* and the *Declaración de Principios y Programa Mínimo de Gobierno*. These documents contained a series of accords that mollified the sectors most threatened by the new regime: the military, the church, and business. They also rewarded potential or actual party supporters—labor, peasants, and the middle class—by distributing resources (generated primarily from petroleum revenues) and institutionalizing channels of access to parties and the state. The noncommunist par-

62. See Rómulo Betancourt's archives: vol. 34, Annex C, p. 179; vol. 33, pp. 90–91; vol. 34, p. 74; and vol. 35, p. 187. Housed at the *Fundación Rómulo Betancourt* in Caracas.

63. For a more detailed analysis of the role of pacting in the Venezuelan transition to democracy, see Karl (1987) and López Maya et al. (1989).

ties agreed to immediate power-sharing measures, some of which were formalized in the Constitution of 1961.<sup>64</sup>

These actions, combined with the economic austerity measures applied by the newly elected AD government under President Rómulo Betancourt, alienated the PCV as well as the left-leaning youth bureau of the AD, which had been fighting the dictatorship while the older leaders were in exile. The youth bureau was frustrated by the curtailing of possibilities for establishing a social and economic democracy as well as a political one. Inspired by the Cuban example, the bureau split from the AD in 1961 and joined the PCV to start the largest guerrilla movement in Latin America up to that time.

This guerrilla movement turned out to be too radical for the Venezuelan political context.<sup>65</sup> Its potential supporters, the urban and rural poor, were more interested in the AD's promise of social services and land reform than in revolution. The movement showed weakness all along, as when its threats against those participating in the 1963 national elections failed to deter the 90 percent of Venezuelan voters who went to the polls. By 1965 the PCV was already discussing reincorporation into democratic politics and split the movement in 1967 by preparing for the next year's national elections. The Left had misjudged the extent to which Venezuelan society was organized by parties and the resulting unlikelihood of establishing the base necessary for a successful uprising.

Thus the political opportunities for women's organizing in the transition occurred in a new configuration of political elites and institutions. A renovated party system excluded the PCV, while a "pact" among party elites and other social sectors distributed political power and economic support, thus determining the major actors in the new democracy.

### *Women's Opportunities Contract in the New Democracy*

Despite the ideal of more inclusive politics under democratization, women's mobilization was fragmented by the new political opportunity structure of the transition period. As Isabel Carmona explained when interviewed for this study,

The Comité Femenino of the Junta Patriótica had the same luck as the Junta Patriótica as a whole. The unity of the people, stitched together through these orga-

64. The first government ensured the representation of the three noncommunist parties. The AD and COPEI later established an "institutional pact" to share power in the different branches of government (López Maya et al. 1989). In the constitution, a strong president was given broad powers to mediate among the parties and a weak congress was established, to be elected by proportional representation that gave more power to the parties than to individual political leaders (Karl 1987).

65. For more information on the guerrilla movement in Venezuela, see Levine (1973) and Wickham-Crowley (1992).

nizations, upset those leaders who came out of exile and returned to the country to conduct the process. . . . So they divided the people who had joined together and formed a unity in their own way. . . . The Junta Patriótica had to disappear so that the traces of a fight in which [the returning leaders] had not participated could disappear. . . . Thus from that moment, the democracy belonged to them and not to the forces who had acted to liquidate the dictatorship.

Because the unity on which women had based their successful activism involved many communists, exclusion of the Left during the transition confounded women's organizational strategy. Although female activists struggled to maintain some form of multiparty organization, this effort was soon defeated by partisan politics. Women were not alone in this demobilization—other groups were also disbanded during the transition.<sup>66</sup>

But the extent of women's "democratic exclusion" far exceeded that of other groups because of the reflection of traditional gender relations in the new structure of political opportunities. Some women left politics altogether, guided by the assumption that once the crisis passed, men would again become the primary political actors.<sup>67</sup> Other women chose to stay in politics, only to find their full participation impeded. Those on the Left who joined the guerrilla movement discovered that its radical egalitarian theory tolerated discriminatory practices. Perhaps most tellingly for the future of women's activism, the reconstruction of political parties marginalized women as a group within this dominant channel of interest representation. State structures also hindered women from functioning as an interest group.

### *Women on the Left*

Following the celebration of International Women's Day, the Comité Femenino set up an office and looked toward continuing activism in conjunction with the Junta Patriótica. The Comité Femenino was allowed to send a representative to the Junta and selected Isabel Medina, the widow of a former president. But the group's attempts to operate under the new democracy were foiled by the ideological struggles during the transition.

66. The effects of this process are summed up in López Maya et al.: "The measures of the coalition government of President Betancourt were oriented with the priority of consolidating the political system that emerged from the pacts of '58, delimiting the quotas of responsibility and participation that the different social actors would have according to the positions that they occupied in the hegemonic model. In the process, the fundamental political parties were constituted and consolidated at the same time that those groups that did not conform to, or were not contemplated within, the sociopolitical project were suppressed, weakened, or marginalized" (López Maya et al. 1989, 77).

67. Most of the interviewees continued to participate in politics after the transition. Little information is available on those who chose to stop. But a few reflections are suggestive. Clara Herrera explained, "It was thought that the women had been 'loaned' to the political activity, and when the democratic movement was consolidated, the governmental and party

Women's united activism represented a threat to the pacting process, whose goal was to isolate the communists and channel all political activity through the parties. Women in the AD ignored their leaders' request not to participate in the International Women's Day celebration, but the pressure increased considerably afterward. When the AD's Betancourt returned from exile, he was furious to hear that the celebration turned out to be a massive event involving women from all the parties, including the PCV. He called the heads of the other two noncommunist parties, Rafael Caldera of COPEI and Jovito Villalba of URD, into his office and demanded to know how they could have let women from their parties join with communist women to celebrate "a communist day."<sup>68</sup> Such solidarity was not to be tolerated.

So from the *cúpulas* of the parties came the word to stop women's pluralist organizing. According to Argelia Laya, in the middle of the meeting called by the Comité Femenino called to discuss becoming an autonomous women's group, Mercedes Fermín, a well-known spokeswoman for the AD, stood up and exhorted all AD members to leave. Many did. When the URD's Villalba was approached afterward, he said he could not let the women of his party participate because "the communists will end up winning them over."

The women who stayed in the Comité Femenino, primarily those associated with the PCV and small leftist parties, attempted to reorganize it as a revived version of the Unión Nacional de Mujeres from the dictatorship period.<sup>69</sup> The group acquired an office and enrolled thousands of members all over the country. Again it focused on poor urban women, organizing around issues of legal reform, economic justice, and social activism, such as establishing clinics, day-care centers, and summer camps.

positions were monopolized by the male activists of the struggle. In contrast, most of the women withdrew to life at home, in time forgetting how they figured in [the overthrow of the dictatorship]" (Herrera 1991, 22). Although some men and women forgot about women's contributions, other former participants suffered under a restored division of labor. Yolanda Villaparedes reported, "[My husband] was the man and I nullified myself as a human being. I left political activity and became a housewife and nanny. At first I rebelled, but later I became lazy until I turned into the typical housewife. Because I had acquired a consciousness of my duties, of my rights, I became neurotic in this new situation" (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 303). She went on, "There were waves of women [participating in the opposition] . . . if I put myself to work remembering names, well then! It seems that we did not know how to appreciate our effort and that it has not been valued. The majority of participants got married, got on with their lives" (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 304).

68. International Women's Day has been associated with communism since it was first proposed by German socialist Clara Zetkin in a resolution before the Second International Conference of Socialist Women in 1910. It was also promoted by the communist-linked International Women's Federation.

69. Information on the Unión Nacional de Mujeres came from Clemente Travieso (1961, 34) and from my interviews with Argelia Laya, founder of the Unión Nacional de Mujeres and the Comité Femenino de la Junta Patriótica, former president of Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), in Caracas, 29 Aug. 1992, 16 June 1994, 8 Feb. 1995.

Organizers claim that their campaign directed at Congress was responsible for the inclusion of a clause in the Constitution of 1961 barring discrimination on the basis of sex.<sup>70</sup>

This attempt to organize women across parties also succumbed to the pressures of the political conflicts. Because many of the leaders were known to support the guerrilla movement, the police searched the office of the Unión Nacional de Mujeres several times, making organizing difficult. The guerrilla leadership was eager to absorb the Unión as a women's auxiliary, but Unión leaders knew that if they attached themselves to the armed struggle, they would become what Esperanza Vera termed "a small closed group that wouldn't respond to the expectations that women had of [such] an organization."<sup>71</sup> But the pressures on the Unión became too great. As Isabel Carmona explained, "The guerrillas wanted to use the organization to build the guerrillas, those who were against the guerrillas denounced the organization for helping the guerrillas, and so amidst this conflict of interests, which belonged to the parties and not to the women, their organized strength died."<sup>72</sup> Neutrality was not possible. Women's unity fell victim to the larger political struggle.

After the Unión disbanded in 1961, many of its leaders joined the guerrilla movement. Here again, women played a crucial role. They repeated the traditional women's tasks of political opposition, working as enlances, helping political prisoners and their families, and forming human rights committees. Some women also fought alongside the men.<sup>73</sup>

As in other guerrilla movements in Latin America, gender ideologies and their reflection in political structures impeded women's incorporation.<sup>74</sup> In the Venezuelan guerrilla movement, women conformed to traditional gender relations in the tasks they were assigned, although they were also given the seemingly radical egalitarian chance to fight alongside their male comrades. But discriminatory attitudes prevailed. Guerrilla commander Argelia Laya recalled one conversation with a fellow commander who asked her to send nine women guerrillas to his battlefield. She inquired, "What kind of women guerrillas—explosive experts, propaganda experts, organizers?" "Just send us some girls," came the reply.<sup>75</sup>

70. Article 61 includes the phrase: "Discrimination based on race, sex, creed, or social condition will not be permitted." The Preamble also prohibits sex discrimination.

71. My interview with Esperanza Vera.

72. My interview with Isabel Carmona.

73. For a description of one woman's experience in the guerrilla movement, see Zago (1990).

74. In a comparative article on women's role in Latin American guerrilla movements, Linda Reif noted the existence of both "ideological and organizational obstacles" to women's incorporation (1986, 151).

75. "Ex-Rebel in a Muumuu Becomes a Potent Force," *The New York Times*, 24 Sept. 1990, p. A4.

When such “girls” were sent along with men into the hills, sexual intrigue quickly became an obstacle to movement discipline. But the mostly male leadership decided that it was the women’s distracting presence that caused the problem, rather than both sexes’ behavior. Commanders refused to continue training women.<sup>76</sup>

Thus even within a structure of radical equality, women were the first to be excluded. The leadership assumed that women were responsible for allowing the temptations of private life to subvert revolutionary political goals. Angela Zago, another guerrilla leader, commented on a meeting where she observed the continuing reluctance of male supporters to allow their female family members to join the movement: “How strange these communists who want their country to be communist, but not their women and children!” (Zago 1990, 207).

### *Women’s Incorporation Is Impeded by Gendered Institutions*

It is not surprising that many women chose to continue participating in political parties with the advent of democracy. Parties were the structure on which the clandestine struggle was built, and the old rival parties—the AD and COPEI—quickly dominated democratic politics. Women soon accounted for half of party membership, but they held few leadership positions or elected offices. Meanwhile, organized labor and peasants were quickly reorganized into effective interest groups and rewarded with favorable legislation, representation, and party posts. But women as a group had to wait until 1974 for the creation of an unfunded national advisory commission on women’s affairs, and until 1982 for any significant legislation promoting women’s equality. This neglect was caused primarily by the way in which masculine gender privilege was institutionalized within the principal channels of political representation.

### *Gender Bias in Party Organization*

Once Venezuelan parties had assured their dominance over politics through the pacting process, they faced the challenge of rebuilding an effective structure on foundations shaken by the torture, exile, and murder of many activists during the dictatorship. Survivors had to be reintegrated and new members indoctrinated (Martz and Myers 1986, 123). Reestablishing central control was essential to guarantee discipline and attract followers.

To guarantee discipline, the parties followed a “democratic-centralist model,” one that they still follow to a large extent.<sup>77</sup> This model dictated

76. Interview with Argelia Laya, 8 Feb. 1995.

77. For more on Venezuelan party structure, see Martz (1966), Coppedge (1994), and Kornblith and Levine (1995). Parties were organized before 1958 but gained much strength under the freedom of organizing made possible by democratic politics.



that decision making on policy and party administration, including the selection of candidates for party and electoral positions, be kept in the hands of a small group of leaders (the Comité Ejecutivo Nacional or CEN) and transmitted down through a highly organized structure to the base.

To attract followers, parties used the mechanism of sectoral bureaus.<sup>78</sup> Their constituencies changed over time, although they always reflected the multiclass aspirations of the parties. The three major bureaus reestablished after the dictatorship were those of labor, peasants, and youth. Bureaus for professionals and women were added subsequently. The bureaus were integrated into the hierarchical party structure. Each was represented by a national secretary on the CEN, and representatives of the bureaus functioned on every other level. These bureaus were supposed to serve as two-way communication channels, providing a means of party penetration into a given sector of civil society as well as a way for the sector to advance its issues within the party—and the government, if the party was in power.

Because parties were founded on the assumption that men would be the primary political activists—as leaders as well as members—the leaders accommodated the masculine gender within the structure of the parties, as will be explained.<sup>79</sup> The requirements for leadership made it very difficult for women to rise to the top, but the masculine-oriented sectoral bureaus were the central culprits. Although the women's bureau had been useful in bringing women into parties, under democratic rule it turned into a women's ghetto. The bureau led neither to expressing women's interests nor to promoting women as leaders but rather to their becoming the housekeepers of political society.

*Leadership* / The national executive committee, the CEN, fiercely guarded its power to control party workings, including the nominations of internal and external candidates. It was no accident that until 1988, no major party had more than three women on the CEN and women representatives remained below 5 percent of the Congress (García Prince 1993; Huggins Castañeda and Domínguez Nelson 1993; Valdez and Gomáriz 1995). These positions were designed for someone of the masculine gender. To move into higher levels of party structure or be nominated for electoral candidacy, devotion to party life had to be a top priority. A woman could not devote herself to the party if she was expected to fulfill the various demands of private life. When asked why so few women rose as high as she

78. Bureaus are also known as "wings," "departments," or "branches." In Spanish, they are called "*secretarías*," "*buros*," and "*frentes*."

79. As Chilean feminist Julieta Kirkwood commented, "because patriarchy is universal, it also affects political parties" (1986, 150). Raquel Reyes reflected that women's situation continues to be difficult in Venezuela because it is a country "penetrated by *pautas machistas* [machista models]" (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 89). While these evaluations are oversimplified, they point to the embeddedness of gender relations in political institutions.

had in the AD, leader Mercedes Fermín responded, “there were no women willing to dedicate their lives completely” to the party, as she had.<sup>80</sup> A recent study of Venezuelan female political leaders found that over half were unmarried (CISFEM 1992, 188–89).<sup>81</sup> Discussion with current female party leaders indicates that little has changed since the transition to democracy. Few have significant home-based responsibilities, and those who do have full-time help.<sup>82</sup> They can take on leadership roles only if they can give up domestic duties or turn them over to others.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, many of the women who have achieved significant party positions are attached to highly placed men, either as family members or lovers, and are often known as “*mujeres de*” (“women of”) a particular man. This pattern reinforces the idea that legitimate leaders are men.

*Membership* / Parties used sectoral bureaus as a means of influencing different social sectors and attracting members. This interaction was greatly facilitated by the fact that parties had helped to establish the peak organizations representing these sectors. As Michael Coppedge remarked, “parties in Venezuela have a preoccupation with controlling social organizations that borders on obsession” (Coppedge 1994, 29).<sup>84</sup> Thus most groups—from unions to student councils, peasant leagues to professional organizations—hold internal elections in which the candidates are chosen on the basis of party affiliation.<sup>85</sup> Those groups that try to remain aloof from party politics rarely succeed.<sup>86</sup>

80. Interview with Mercedes Fermín.

81. Two clandestine leaders interviewed by Petzoldt and Bevilacqua, Eumelia Hernández and Ana Luisa Llovera, blamed their divorces on their need to devote themselves full-time to political life.

82. Interviews with Carmona, Paulina Gamus Gallegos, Isolda Salvatierra, and Ixora Rojas and informal conversation with other women in leadership positions. Gamus Gallegos, a congressional deputy and Vice President of the AD, was interviewed in Caracas, 23 May 1994. Salvatierra, a participant in the clandestine opposition, member of the COPEI Directorio Nacional and senator, was interviewed in Caracas, 30 May 1994. Rojas, a Congressional deputy and head of the AD Secretaría Feminina, was interviewed in Caracas, 9 Sept. 1994.

83. This statement does not imply that all men are able to devote themselves to politics full time, but men’s work schedules on the whole allow for party duties better than women’s, which usually include a range of domestic tasks to be done in the evening, whether a woman works for pay or not.

84. For more information on the AD’s involvement in founding the principal labor federation, see Coppedge (1994, 31–35). For its involvement in the national peasant union, see Powell (1971).

85. Coppedge mentions rumors that even Venezuelan beauty contests are decided along party lines (1994, 28). I heard of at least one instance in which a party organized a beauty contest, although the party affiliation of the winner was not known.

86. The main examples of this tendency have been the *asociaciones de vecinos*, often looked to as the best hope for nonpartisan citizen mobilization in civil society. The parties, however, have attempted to infiltrate this movement as well, creating parallel neighborhood organizations or running candidates for existing organizations’ boards who have the advantage of party resources to distribute (see Coppedge 1994, chap. 2).

Thus Venezuelan civil society was also organized along party lines, with ideological adherence leading to successful clientelistic relationships for the party faithful.<sup>87</sup> Organized labor and peasants were the primary beneficiaries of this form of party organization, receiving in return for promoting party interests within their sector an array of rewards: party posts, representation in both executive and legislative branches, favorable legislation, and material benefits. Women as a group have not fared well under this system, however. The women's bureaus have been chronically weak—always underfunded and understaffed and never given the prominence of the other bureaus.<sup>88</sup>

The ineffectiveness of the women's bureaus of the parties stemmed from the nature of the sectoral bureau, which (like leadership positions) was also designed assuming the participation of men. Because the dominant party model was multiclass, most of the sectors that parties sought to organize were based on some functional derivation of class position that happened to correspond to what were traditionally men's various types of employment in the public sphere—the laborers and peasants of the working class, or the students and professionals of the bourgeoisie. Each of these functions had one or more organizations associated with it—their respective unions, leagues, and associations, whose internal elections were the main point of entry for party penetration. Parties could thus manipulate the workings of the sector, but each sector also had a basis from which to make demands on party leadership. This arrange-

87. For an excellent analysis of party dominance of civil society in Venezuela, see Coppedge (1994, chap. 2). For further consideration of the obstacles this situation posed for deepening Venezuelan democracy, see Brewer-Carías (1988), García Guadilla (1992), and Salamanca (1995).

88. Consequently, it is difficult to conduct research on the fate of the women's bureaus. No written histories exist, and few official documents survive. But the weakness of women's sectoral organizing is well known despite its being understudied. It is often simply glossed over (Mainwaring and Scully 1995, 84) or explained in generic terms, as by Maurice Duverger: "The parties' distrust of women's organizations, and their reluctance to give them any real measure of autonomy, are probably not inspired by deliberate sex discrimination. They are simply particular instances of a general tendency to prevent the development within the party of more or less autonomous groups that might lead to rivalry and division . . ." (Duverger 1955, 109). But while other groups may have suffered from a lack of autonomy stemming from their incorporation into party life, no other group received so little in return as women. Marginalization through women's bureaus in the early formation of political parties, often accompanied by a decline in women's autonomous organizing, has been noted in Peru (Chaney 1971), in Chile (Gaviola Artigas et al. 1986; Kirkwood 1986; Muñoz Dálbora 1987), in other countries in Latin America (Alvarez 1986), and outside the region (Nelson and Chowdhury 1994). In Brazil, in contrast, the women's suffrage movement "could not be relegated to 'women's sections' of competing parties" because of the lack of coherent national parties in that country (Hahner 1990, xv).

ment allowed for the successful co-optation of sectors based on masculine gender into partisan political life.<sup>89</sup>

But women were incorporated on the basis of their gender identity—simply as women, whose primary association as a group was with private life. Because the sectoral grouping of women was not derived from a class position or a socioeconomic function around which they could unite for common demands, there was no “women’s union” in which to hold elections on a party ticket and in whose name women could claim party favors such as leadership positions, candidacy, material benefits, and influence on policy. Thus the women’s bureau, instead of leading to the promotion of women and women’s issues in party life, fulfilled the traditional “function” of women as a whole: reproduction. In politics, this translated into carrying out the reproductive tasks of the political sphere, becoming the housewives of the parties.<sup>90</sup> The primary duties of the first women’s bureaus were “keeping house” (hosting meetings, making coffee and copies, throwing fund-raising parties, and running raffles) and raising “the children” (turning out the vote during elections).<sup>91</sup> Having their work limited in this way made it very difficult for women to achieve more meaningful roles in party politics.

The historical rationale for incorporating women in this manner was that when parties began in the 1930s, many of the women targeted for inclusion had no employment outside the home.<sup>92</sup> Several female party leaders, including two who had been heads of AD women’s bureau in the 1940s, agreed that initially, a dedicated bureau was necessary to reach Venezuelan women, who had had little exposure to politics.<sup>93</sup>

*Women Contest Their Exclusion* / As party politics became more significant and women more prepared to take on public roles, the women’s bureau became less a channel for women’s incorporation and more a mechanism for their gender-based discrimination. Early on in the new Venezuelan democracy, the founder of one of the first women’s bureaus, Mercedes Fermín, objected to its reinstatement in the transition to democracy because “it was time to go beyond that nonsense” and incorporate women at every

89. Even when women entered the same professions as men, men usually retained the leadership positions of the sectoral organizations.

90. In Venezuela the party headquarters are known as the Casa Nacional.

91. As was pointed out by one anonymous reviewer, these duties would no doubt vary according to the class position of the women in the women’s bureau.

92. Some women were employed as nurses and teachers (de Leonardi 1983, 201). Teachers could enter parties through the “professional bureaus,” as they developed. Interview with Mercedes Sandoval Marcano.

93. See the interviews with Mercedes Fermín and Ana Esther Gouverneur in Petzoldt and Bevilacqua (1979). Also, my interviews with Paulina Gamus Gallegos, Evangelina García Prince, and Isolda Salvatierra. García Prince, a participant in the clandestine opposition and former Ministra de Estado para la Promoción de la Mujer, was interviewed in Caracas, 13 June 1994.

level of the party (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 74). In Fermín's view, unless women were incorporated throughout the party alongside men, women would be included for ornamental value, "like someone who is setting the table and forgets a vase. And so says, oh, I'm forgetting the vase! Let's put it here—that's the woman."<sup>94</sup>

Responding to this objection, the AD did not include a women's bureau in the party in 1958. But within a few years, a women's commission (later a department) was reestablished as the means of incorporating women into the party.<sup>95</sup> The more traditional COPEI maintained some form of women's bureau from its inception. This bureau's marginal position was indicated by its absence from party statutes until 1965. As leftist parties returned to legal activism following the pacification of the guerrillas, most of them established a women's bureau.

The different ways in which the women's bureaus led to discrimination based on gender can be gleaned from the reflections of current and former female party members several decades after the transition. Women's relegation to reproductive roles was noted by one AD member. Clarisa Sanoja claimed that because of the women's bureau, "they always look at us as something domestic" (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 132). COPEI leader Isolda Salvatierra said of the bureau, "it turns women into the *amas de casa* [housewives] in the party."<sup>96</sup> The assumption that women would not be primary political actors was clear in the limited access that women gained to party decision making through their bureau. AD leader Elia Borges de Tapia claimed that while she had not felt personally discriminated against, she was aware that "there are talented women, with vast training, with a serious political conscience, and they are relegated to the women's organizations within the parties or attending to household duties. The parties, they utilize them and underutilize them! The woman is marginal in society, in the family, and within the parties" (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 336).<sup>97</sup> Moreover, as Salvatierra pointed out, women ended up fighting over "one directorate position out of eleven possibilities." According to AD member Evelyn Trujillo, little political training took place in the bureau, with the result that the most successful women

94. My interview with Mercedes Fermín. Also see Martz (1966, 202).

95. The full women's bureau was reestablished in party statutes in 1985.

96. Interview with Isolda Salvatierra.

97. AD member Ruth Lerner de Almea echoed this sentiment: "my condition as a woman never was an obstacle. I accomplished [my tasks] and continued on. . . . I assess the participation of women in that time as something very positive, but still done in an unjust manner. We were allowed to participate, but not in relation to women's professional preparation. . . . It is very difficult for a woman to get to occupy high posts. It seems to me that there is an underutilization of women's talent and capacity. They are used at the base, but for social tasks, for the food baskets, for selling tickets. That is to say: to collect money! However, I disagree with all types of women's committees. Nothing works with women alone. Everything has to be with men" (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 206–7).

mixed with the men.<sup>98</sup> These situations were equally lopsided in parties of the Left, despite their claims to promote gender equality. As Lilia Henríquez observed, “Unfortunately the political parties maintain the same attitude as the man in the home. The parties that called themselves progressive and that try to take into account women’s situation, turn to women only when they need them. . . . [W]omen’s struggle should not be in the women’s bureaus of the parties, which are a form of discrimination. The just thing is to incorporate into a party and occupy one’s position in it as one more person” (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 313).

Given the gender-based construction of opportunity in Venezuela, one might ask if things could have been different had the Comité Femenino been able to transform itself into a multiparty women’s association. Could it have then become the peak organization from which women could have made demands on parties through their women’s bureaus? The historical experience of the Comité Femenino indicates that it could not. Why was this unitary group destroyed rather than co-opted by the parties? The idea that it fell victim to the centrist parties’ efforts to marginalize the Left is not sufficient, because the Left failed to take over the Comité. A unitary women’s group could not be effectively co-opted because its demands could not be channeled within the gender-biased structures of parties, unlike the corresponding groups for laborers or peasants. As Aurelena de Ferrer concluded, “To obtain our full liberation, we would have had to stop being women” (Petzoldt and Bevilacqua 1979, 113). The full inclusion of women would have meant restructuring the parties to adapt to the intertwined nature of the private and public in women’s lives, but this effort could not be considered, given the reliance on conventional gender relations during the transition.

### *Gender Bias in the State*

Political parties were not the only channel available for interest representation in the new opportunity structure of the transition. Other groups had established mechanisms within the centralized state to ensure their access to resources and representation outside the electoral arena. The state-based representation of societal groups, such as workers and capitalists, was facilitated through a “semi-corporatist network” consisting of the decentralized administration and state advisory commissions (Kornblith 1995, 79).<sup>99</sup> This mechanism was a crucial channel of commu-

98. Interview with Evelyn Trujillo, participant in the clandestine opposition, Caracas, 3 June 1994.

99. Schmitter defines *corporatist interest organization* as state recognition of one peak association per interest group and its incorporation into the decision-making process on policy in relevant areas (Schmitter 1993). The Venezuelan state is not as limited in its incorporation of interest organizations, leading Kornblith and others to refer to it as “semi-corporatist.”

nication for sector demands because it provided a source of direct access to the powerful central administration (Rey 1989; Crisp et al. 1995). But as was true of political parties, incorporating sectors in this manner was based on the representation of certain class "functions," mainly those of workers and capitalists, a fact that helped exclude women as a group based on gender identity.

Thus women were effectively excluded from political participation by the gendered institutions of the political opportunity structure established during the transition to democracy. The clandestine organizations sometimes led by women and in which they had begun to take political initiatives were closed down, and succeeding organizations provided little room for women's meaningful participation. The rebuilt parties and channels of access to the powerful executive branch privileged men's access to "democratic politics."

#### WOMEN REUNITE DURING THE CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRACY

As a result of the way in which transition politics excluded them, women undertook little activity on their own behalf until the late 1960s.<sup>100</sup> As the tensions of the transition phase receded with the waning of the guerrilla movement, women attempted in May 1968 to unite again for their common interests across party and generational divides. A member of an early women's civic group organized a seminar to assess Venezuelan women's progress since their enfranchisement. Women who had participated in women's groups during the 1940s joined with others politicized by the struggle against Pérez Jiménez. Five hundred women attended the seminar, from almost every political party,<sup>101</sup> calling once again for unified action on behalf of all women (Hernández 1985).<sup>102</sup>

Nothing immediate resulted from the seminar, but within two years, women from leftist parties made another attempt at unification. These founders recognized the need to organize women outside the parties. Claiming their antecedents in the Unión Nacional de Mujeres, they organized the Legión de Mujeres "to achieve the full enjoyment of women's rights [and] to incorporate women in the political and social life of the

100. One group, the Federación Venezolana de Abogadas (FEVA), which had been established in 1956, was restructured in 1965 (de Leonardi 1983, 431). It played a crucial role in reinvigorating women's organizing in the early 1970s, around the issue of reforming the Civil Code.

101. COPEI threatened to boycott the seminar if the communists attended. Organizer Margot Boulton de Bottome told me, "if I have a seminar about the rights of women, I cannot discriminate." No members of COPEI attended. Interview with Boulton de Bottome, member of the Asociación Venezolana de Mujeres, Caracas, 27 Apr. 1994.

102. "Lourdes Morales explica lo logrado en el Primer Seminario sobre la Mujer Venezolana," *El Universal*, 14 Aug. 1968.

country." But once again, the effort failed due to partisan rivalry: "the political differences of the parties ended by smashing the Legión" (Hernández 1985, 23).

Despite the destructive consequences of partisan rivalries, Venezuelan women never stopped organizing completely and came up with important innovations. At one meeting of a small group of dedicated activists, a proposal was made to ensure women's representation directly in the state, similar to that of other groups.<sup>103</sup> This suggestion turned into a pressure campaign directed at the 1973 presidential candidates. Its backers were finally rewarded by the new president, Carlos Andrés Pérez, who established the Comisión Femenina Asesora de la Presidencia (COFEAPRE) in 1974. Although COFEAPRE did not oversee great changes, the establishment of a national women's agency in the executive branch proved to be key in transforming the way in which gender relations were reflected in the state.

In addition to making inroads at the governmental level, women experimented with "regendering" party representation, and they pushed ahead in organizing outside traditional structures. Women in the 1971 PCV offshoot *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) formed a linked women's movement that benefited from the party's initial experimentation with less hierarchical forms of organizing and strove not to replicate the subordination of the traditional women's bureaus (*Mujeres Socialistas* 1973; Ellner 1988). Even the women's bureaus of traditional political parties started to promote women's leadership. Influenced by women's increasing presence in social, economic, and political life and by international women's activism, small feminist groups and other women's organizations emerged in the 1970s (Rakowski 1995, 55–56).

Venezuelan presidents, under continuing pressure from women and from international attention to their issues starting with the UN Decade on Women (1975–1985), reestablished national women's agencies.<sup>104</sup> Women used those agencies strategically to facilitate their unity again in a movement to reform the Civil Code. This effort reached across party lines and inside and outside the government to achieve victory in 1982.<sup>105</sup> With the added strength of the nongovernmental organization network set up in

103. Interview with Isabel Carmona.

104. These agencies included the Ministerio para la Participación de la Mujer en el Desarrollo in 1979, the Oficina Nacional de la Mujer in the Ministerio de la Juventud in 1984, the restored COFEAPRE and a *Ministra de Estado para la Promoción de la Mujer* in 1989, and the Consejo Nacional de la Mujer in 1992.

105. Formerly one of the most discriminatory bodies of familial legislation in Latin America, the Venezuelan Civil Code was reformed to give women legal rights equal to men's in all decisions regarding family life, from control over community property to child rearing. The reform also removed all legal discrimination against children born out of wedlock. See Prince de Kew (1990) and Friedman (1993).



1985, the *Coordinadora de Organizaciones No-Gubernamentales de Mujeres*, such coalition-building continued, resulting in a campaign that increased the number of women in elected office and achieved a gender-sensitive reform of labor legislation in 1990 (Espina 1994).<sup>106</sup>

In the later stages of democratization, therefore, Venezuelan women were able to get around or through the political institutions built for men's participation. From civil society, political society, and the state, women came together to retrieve the opportunity for united action that had been lost in the transition and organize on their own behalf.

#### WHY MACHISMO WAS STRONGER THAN DICTATORSHIP

According to Isabel Carmona,

it would seem that we came to have more strength [during the dictatorship] than has been recognized in legal democracy. Because the parties have not come to recognize women as equals. They acknowledge [us] in declarations but don't put them into practice. The party continues not to be aware of its own history, where it saw us not betraying secrets under torture in prison, where it saw us leaving prison without crying and without giving up the fight but instead returning to it and then being captured again and then returning to the struggle again.<sup>107</sup>

How can analysts explain the paradox that Venezuelan women's organizational strength grew during authoritarianism but declined under the new democracy? Women's ability to participate during a given stage of democratization was mediated by the general political opportunities it afforded but also by their reflection of gender relations. The gender ideology of the dictatorship and its subversive use by clandestine parties facilitated women's opposition. Women participated as individuals, mainly in their roles as nurturers, caring for the clandestine leadership and political prisoners. In women's groups affiliated with parties, however, women learned to lead and came to understand the importance of gender solidarity. Their experience led to the formation of a multiparty women's organization with the potential to foster women's activism in the new democracy.

But the unity that Venezuelan women developed under dictatorship was fractured by the "democratic exclusion" of the pacted transition to democracy. Many women left politics, and others found the gender equality of the guerrilla movement a sham. The rechanneling of interest representation through the gender-biased institutions of parties and state structures left women with only a small part to play in democratic politics.

The fate of women's organizing in Venezuela poses a direct chal-

106. The reforms removed unwarranted discrimination against women while enhancing legal maternity protection and extending employer-sponsored child care for all workers' children under six.

107. Interview with Carmona.

lenge to democratization theory. Theorists have noted the paradox of a general demobilization during the transition, and the majority emphasize the need for strong and immediate political institutionalization through parties. But the link between these two phenomena has not been explored previously. While some level of demobilization must be expected following the demise of an authoritarian regime and while institutionalization is necessary for political stability, this discussion has illustrated how certain forms of institutionalization can serve to marginalize particular individuals and groups during the transition to democracy. Such a result may plague further democratization if structured into transitional negotiations. Highly centralized parties, while effective at channeling participation, can limit the range of those allowed to be decision makers. Moreover, parties that exercise a monopoly on interest representation through the mechanism of class-based, functional organizing may ignore groups based on other identities. In this case, women were neglected. But groups organized around location (neighborhood organizations) and issue (environmental and human rights groups) also face an uphill battle gaining power in the Venezuelan polity (García Guadilla 1992; Crisp et al. 1995; Salamanca 1995).

Yet women face particular problems in attempting to participate in formal democratic politics. As this article has shown, these difficulties cannot be revealed by examinations relying on the accepted definition of political opportunity structure—the actors and institutions conditioning social mobilization. The case at hand confirms the findings of both feminist analysis and the study of women in emerging democracies: it is impossible to understand women's political role without considering the profoundly gendered character of political practice. Only gender-sensitive analysis of opportunity structure is adequate to the task.

For democracies to represent all their citizens, political opportunities as well as the gender relations on which they are built must undergo transition. Although political institutionalization is a difficult process, implementing this second transition is even more challenging. Argelia Laya—clandestine activist, longtime feminist, and former Socialist Party president—commented succinctly on why women were “defeated” by democracy: “In the case of machismo, it was stronger than a military dictatorship! Because it is a problem . . . existing for thousands of years in the minds of women and men.”<sup>108</sup> While “machismo” takes many different forms, some type of masculine bias is bound to be embedded in the political institutions of new democracies because men are primarily the ones who are building them. The experience of many women who opposed au-

108. Interview with Laya, 16 June 1994.

thoritarianism in Latin America attests to this embeddedness: they were marginalized by the return of "politics as usual" with the usual actors.

But in a happy irony, women's "defeat" may produce later innovations. In the Venezuelan case, women's political learning led to new forms of activism, as both national and international contexts changed. Relying on networks established in opposition to the dictatorship and the incorporation of new activists, women improved their strategy of cross-party unification and used the national women's agency that they maintained in the executive branch. This strategy has led to significant legal reform as well as an increase in women's representation at the national level.

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1994 Participant in the clandestine opposition. Caracas, 17 May.
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