

Gender, Labor, and Politics

in Urban Chile, 1900–1930

Labors
Appropriate to
Their Sex

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Introduction

I told the head of investigations and the Criminal Judge that I have been dressing as a man for four years and that I did this, first, in order to better protect my honor as a woman, and second, to earn more so that I could live. Dressed as a man, I am more respected and no one propositions me. In this way I can work without anyone making me uncomfortable or bothering me. Dressed as a woman, I could not live among men nor work in whatever job [I wished]. Work for women is scarce and very badly paid. I preferred to look for another way to satisfy my physical necessities without upsetting my spiritual inclinations.

—Laura Rosa Zelada, November 26, 1903

In November 1903, the Santiago and Valparaíso newspaper-reading public were entertained by the revelations of an illiterate young woman named Laura Rosa Zelada, also known as Honorio Cortes. The nineteen-year-old bakery employee was discovered to be a woman in man's clothing, arrested for dressing in disguise, and thrown in jail. According to lawyer Agustín Bravo Cisternas—who dubbed her “Laura, Virgin of the Forest” in his account—Zelada had fled her rural home and an abusive brother-in-law four years earlier, shed her skirts for pants, and gone to work in and around Santiago as a servant, fruit seller, hotel employee, and baker. In the above petition for her release, Zelada argued that she was not guilty of the crime of wearing a disguise, because she had dressed as a man only to earn a decent living and to protect her honor. When charges were dropped and she was released, Zelada disappeared without a trace.¹

During the six months of her imprisonment, Zelada's case became the talk of the town. As the details of the case emerged, she was lauded as a local heroine in urban newspapers, which also took advantage of the situation to produce titillating accounts of cross-dressing throughout

history. One editorial defended Zelada's right to wear pants and mocked the charges that had been made against her, arguing that she had "cut her hair and become a better man than any Deputy or Senator."² The bulk of editorials, however, focused on the economic logic of Zelada's actions. Journalists from the working-class daily *El Chileno*, for example, followed the case closely, justifying Zelada's masquerade in light of women's limited occupational choices: "If she had not changed her clothes, she would have been a laundress, a seamstress, which is to say, a slave to someone who only pays her enough so that she doesn't die right away."³ Publicity about Zelada's arrest provoked widespread sympathy for her plight, reflecting the common perception that working women were unduly exploited. Zelada's case was also used to illustrate complaints about women's low wages, poor working conditions, excessive sexual vulnerability, and desperate poverty. By dressing as a man to survive and to protect her honor, Zelada had apparently won more fans than critics.⁴

The most extensive and revealing treatise in Zelada's defense was penned by her lawyer, who included a chapter about her case in his legal polemic, *La mujer a través de los siglos* (Women Through the Centuries). Bravo Cisternas rendered a detailed account of Zelada's hardships and defended her cross-dressing as a rational economic choice: "She solved the economic problem regarding women's capacities in male occupations and found a way for a woman to get a better salary and more respect from men."⁵ According to Bravo, "the Virgin of the Forest" had chosen the only virtuous option available to a woman who had to support herself, and she should not have been punished for it. On the contrary, he argued, Zelada's actions should be considered exemplary until legal reforms that would improve the lot of working women could be implemented.

The scandal generated by Zelada's arrest was only one manifestation of widespread public concern for the plight of working women in early-twentieth-century Chile. Labor organizers, elite Catholic women, industrialists, and legislators all debated the nature and propriety of women's paid work as they confronted a rapidly changing society. As urban and industrial growth engulfed Santiago and women literally went out to work, traditional gender and social arrangements came under intense scrutiny. What did it mean that poor women could not, or would not, tend exclusively to domestic responsibilities? How should the state or private organizations intervene to ensure healthy future

generations of workers? These queries spurred private and public efforts for the aid, protection, and organization of women workers that characterized the era of the social question in Chile.

In part, this preoccupation was a result of the increasing evidence of women in the urban labor force around the turn of the century; according to the 1885 national census, women constituted 35 percent of the national workforce, and their work was concentrated in manufacturing, service, and commercial activities in urban centers. Women working for wages outside the home had become not only more numerous, but also more visible against the backdrop of the dramatic urban transformations of the late nineteenth century. Much of the public concern about the mushrooming urban population, therefore, focused on the unseemly presence of *women* in the city: as factory workers, street sellers, domestic servants, and prostitutes. In the still predominantly rural society of nineteenth-century Chile, women's work, though necessary for family survival, was not paid or public; in the burgeoning capital, by contrast, women and their work were everywhere in evidence. This study explores the origins, motives, and objectives of debates on women's urban work in Chile over the first three decades of the twentieth century to show how these debates influenced broader developments in labor politics, women's activism, and state formation. In this fashion, the Chilean case illuminates how gender affects and is affected by social transformations linked to urban and industrial growth in Latin America prior to the 1930s.

Public outcry over working women's condition was just one aspect of a society that anxiously confronted far-reaching social and economic changes. This period spans a critical juncture in Chilean development, from the aftermath of the Second War of the Pacific (ending in 1883) through the Ibañez era, a period in which a set of crucial socioeconomic and political changes transformed Chile's territory, demography, and administration. Many of these changes stemmed from Chile's acquisition of vast nitrate fields in its second great war with Peru; taxes from the export of nitrates to Europe funded the growth of the Chilean state and encouraged national integration through the development of transportation networks. The so-called Parliamentary Republic that followed, initiated with the fall of Balmaceda in 1891, described a thinly disguised version of oligarchic rule, one riven by increasing levels of class conflict in the new century.

Changes linked to the export of nitrates also dramatically transformed the living and employment options of working people. Rural wage la-