

WOMEN'S ROLES IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY CHILE:
Public Education Records, 1843–1883

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In 1877 Miguel Luis Amunátegui, noted historian and Chile's Minister of Education, observed aptly that while the Chinese bound their daughters' feet, his countrymen bound their daughters' minds. Amunátegui's dictum reveals an official concern for women's education that was unique in nineteenth-century Latin America. Chile's efforts to remove the "bindings" from the minds of its young women are important in several respects. Education was in fact the linchpin of an ambitious strategy to revamp and modernize every aspect of Chilean society. Because of the centrality of formal education in this experiment and the intensity of thinking on the subject, when women's education was addressed in official circles, female roles were being defined as part of a coherent national ideology. The Chilean experiments in education thus provide a rare opportunity to observe explicit, detailed reflection on women's roles. Unequivocal official commitment to public education in Chile also resulted in the creation of a large bureaucracy that in turn collected immense quantities of data on household size, family income, occupation, and related subjects. Much of this data concerns women and insofar as it documents the "social bedrock" so often obscured to scholars, it is immensely useful for women's history.¹

The purpose of this essay is to suggest that education may provide the documentary and analytical window that many have sought in viewing the roles of women in nineteenth-century Latin America. Nineteenth-century record keeping was haphazard. Hence, while our knowledge of women in the colonial period and the twentieth century is expanding, the nineteenth century remains a great lacuna. Not that the subject of women's education has entirely been neglected. On the contrary, an impressive number of studies exist on the subject, but such works generally are either traditional biographies of educators or house histories that reveal little about the content or meaning of women's education. The state of scholarship in this field calls to mind above all else

Asunción Lavrín's admonishing historians to reexamine old sources in order to assess the roles of women in Latin America.²

What might be termed the "new history of education" is principally concerned with the interplay of society and education. For practitioners of this new history, the study of education is not an end in itself, but a key to a broad range of social phenomena. Nor should this situation be surprising because education, perhaps more than any other institution, involves value formation and reflects the concerns of a society.

The data base for a history of education in nineteenth-century Chile is extensive. In 1843 the Chilean government established a highly centralized system of national public education. The records this bureaucracy kept fall into two general categories: the first includes documents on the formulation and implementation of education policy; the second is a mass of in-house data that educators collected to measure the effectiveness of national education strategies. Together, the two sources provide a unique, dynamic record of one of the most ambitious educational schemes of that era. The documents outline with great clarity an almost constant evolution and adaptation in response to internal and external demands.

The first documentary category includes several types of information of value for women's history. The Chilean educational effort is revealed in the records to have been a rational, methodical plan to modernize and reform a traditional society. Under the influence of positivism in the 1860s, it culminated in the "estado docente," or "teaching state" concept, wherein the government devoted much of its resources to the reform of society through the educational system.

The capstone of the Chilean network was to be the University of Chile, conceived as an academy of scholars with supervisory powers. A second level in the institutional hierarchy was occupied by the Instituto Nacional, a public preparatory school, and by a system of *liceos* that provided secondary training for boys in provincial areas. The government also maintained a network of vocational, normal, and technical schools. At the system's base was a national network of free primary schools for boys and girls. For those students wishing to supplement the basic five-year course in primary education without advancing to degree-granting programs, the government provided a system of *escuelas superiores* that offered three years of intermediate instruction and were located in larger provincial towns.³

Initially, the Ministry of Education did not commit itself to post-primary education for women. Not until the mid 1870s did the system provide for the admission of women to institutions of higher education, although it did establish a normal school for women, a necessity because of the prevailing sex segregation at the primary level. The lack of provi-

sion for women's higher education reflects with some accuracy the official conception of women's roles. Chile's liberal social ideology basically cast women in roles as wives and mothers for whom higher education was superfluous. Sex-role differentiation was undoubtedly a major influence in this conclusion.⁴ It should be added, however, that the Chilean Ministry of Education operated under budgetary constraints during the wars with Spain, Peru, and Bolivia in the 1860s and 1870s and during the recession of the 1870s. In such times of crisis, education budgets were cut severely and instruction for women suffered most acutely.⁵

Nineteenth-century Chileans were especially concerned with their national image vis-à-vis other societies because they hoped to attract European immigrants. Chilean educators in large part accepted Domingo Sarmiento's judgment that the most accurate measure of civilization is the position that a society affords its women. Chilean liberal educators and politicians of the 1870s viewed the role of their women as clearly comparable to that of women in other nations, a notion expressed frequently in celebrationist literature.⁶

Another source of nineteenth-century elite opinion on female roles were University of Chile theses that treated the social and legal position of women. Perhaps the central assumption of these treatises was that the domain of women was the family. In this view, women were respected, influential members of society who were expected to confine their activities within a narrowly defined orbit.⁷

Another kind of information that may be gleaned from the first documentary category is found in the detailed day-to-day record of educational administration, the *Boletín de Instrucción Pública: Decretos y Leyes*. These published data reveal that after conducting an initial five-year national school census, the ministry discovered that five times more males than females were enrolled. This finding led to an emphasis on the creation of new primary schools for girls throughout the 1850s.⁸

The *Boletín* also provides important glimpses of women's roles as conceived by educators. Although official policy decidedly cast women as wives and mothers, the government also recognized the need of women from lower social strata to support their families. This realization resulted in a series of vocational certificate programs for women. Courses in obstetrics, sewing, dressmaking, tailoring, hat and cigarette making were developed and, with the exception of obstetrics, were staffed by women.⁹

The *Boletín* is a source of extremely detailed information on women—the kind of information from which social history can be reconstructed. The *Boletín* includes community petitions for girls' schools, government responses, and records of school construction, staffing, and enrollments. Equally detailed data are provided on teacher promotions

and reassignments. The *Boletín* records, for example, that male and female teachers of comparable rank were paid the same salaries. It also reveals that women taught classes for handicapped children and drafted textbooks on such subjects as metric education, which were sometimes adopted for public school use. Female teachers also won commendations and were awarded financial bonuses for classroom excellence.¹⁰

Another source of published information on the attitudes of national-level educators is found in the minutes of the Consejo de la Universidad de Chile. This council served as a national board of education and advised the Minister of Education on a wide range of subjects including curricula and textbooks. Although theoretically responsible for the gamut of educational activities, the council actually dealt only with higher education. It was not until 1877 that the council addressed itself to an issue that concerned women—the question of the appropriateness of women's higher education. This issue arose when Valparaíso citizens petitioned to have the private school that their daughters attended officially recognized and funded by the government and asked that its graduates be permitted to take standard government-supervised final examinations. Because successful completion of the examination was the basic requirement for admission to the university, the council's decision to administer the exam and to fund this and similar liceos was a significant step.¹¹

Public pronouncements by cabinet-level education officials reveal that the question of higher education for women had become bound up in partisan politics. Underlying the issue was the increasingly heated debate between liberals who sought the further secularization and modernization of Chilean society and clerical conservatives who hoped to preserve the status quo. Addressing an assembly of parents at the Liceo de Niñas in Valparaíso, Miguel Luis Amunátegui argued that the government had too long spent "millions on the education of our men but centavos on the education of women." As a result, he said, the education of women was "superficial and incomplete."¹²

Amunátegui's motivation was clear. The failure of government to accept responsibility for the education of women placed this function within the domain of conservative religious corporations. While Amunátegui propounded the practical necessity of education for women, his goal was more precisely to enlist women as agents of secularization and modernization. Amunátegui and his liberal colleagues regarded woman as man's "mother, his sweetheart and his wife," roles in which she could accomplish pervasive socialization.¹³ Beginning in the 1860s, Chilean liberals undertook an ambitious plan to transform national institutions that, unlike many analogous programs, assumed that change could occur only after the citizenry had been broadly prepared. Viewing the position of women in Chilean society as pivotal, liberals

hoped to enlist them as front-line troops in their pedagogical campaigns. Recruitment of women to their cause would thus create a constituency for liberal theory and reform at the lowest common denominator of social organization—the family. National educational policy, as recorded in the minutes of the Consejo, reflects this view with consistency after 1877. Increasing numbers of liceos were established for women and the number of women admitted to the university showed a concomitant increase.¹⁴

The detailed annual report of the Minister of Education provides a final source of policy documentation. These reports reveal, for example, that the single most significant decision concerning women's education may have been the creation of "alternate" or platooned schools in rural areas in 1872. This ruling required that girls and boys be taught on a half-day basis in rural primary schools in order to utilize better scarce classroom space. The following year, the ruling was amended so that boys were taught three days a week and girls two. Although this arrangement appears discriminatory, these measures effectively extended the opportunity for formal education to girls who had formally lived beyond its pale. In 1880 the rural system was placed on a coeducational basis.¹⁵

This central role assigned to women in the modernization of Chilean society also resulted in their employment as teachers. When alternating and mixed schools were created, women were placed in charge of them. The decision to place the system of rural primary education in the hands of women grew from two considerations. First, women were thought to have greater inherent patience in dealing with small children. Second, women provided a pool of cheaper labor than their male colleagues, who had more lucrative employment opportunities in other fields and who were generally unwilling to work in primary education. Yet, even as the decision was made to make women vehicles for nationalism and change in rural areas, the policy was hedged with conditions. It was believed that women would have difficulty in maintaining discipline among male students. Female staff consequently were permitted to teach only the youngest boys at first, later "graduating" to more advanced levels.¹⁶

These reports contain curious pieces of intelligence with great potential for social historians. For example, one Minister of Education discussed at length an unexpected and undesirable result of women's education: primary-school graduates refused to enter domestic service or performed badly when they did. He therefore proposed the creation of domestic training schools to correct this lamentable state of affairs. Social mobility was an obviously unforeseen by-product of women's education.¹⁷

Attached to the ministerial reports are elaborate appendices.

These documents constitute a second category of information because they are excellent sources of data on the consequences of education schemes. Every liceo, every special school and vocational school, as well as Chile's three normal schools for women all submitted elaborate annual reports. One of the most thoroughgoing sources of this variety is the annual report of the inspector general of primary education. In these reports, progress was usually measured against baseline data from school censuses. (In Chile, censuses of every phase of educational activity were conducted at ten-year intervals.) The censuses themselves are exhaustive records of attendance, enrollment, matriculation, finances, curricula—virtually every sort of data susceptible to tabulation.¹⁸

In conclusion, education may provide the data base that historians of women have lacked for the nineteenth century in Latin America—and indeed the entire Third World. Women have been consistent victims of the law of documentary elitism: because they have not occupied positions of recognized importance, they have not generated records, nor have records been kept on their activities. This tendency is exaggerated in the nineteenth century, when record keeping reached a nadir. Formal education is the one area of institutional activity that dealt on a day-to-day basis with small people at the local level and generated large volumes of paper. Much of this paper, by the very fact that it records the activities of ordinary people, records the activities of women. Moreover, education is not a culturally or socially peripheral activity. Even when underfunded and ignored, it remains a point at which most of the major social vectors intersect. Because education creates the central values and reflects the central concerns of an entire society, when it touches the lives of women, it touches them in important ways.

NOTES

1. "Boletín de Instrucción Pública," *Anales de la Universidad de Chile* 52 (1877):50. ("Boletín de Instrucción Pública" appears hereafter as BIP. *Anales de la Universidad de Chile* appears hereafter as *AUCH*).
2. Meri Knaster, "Women in Latin America: The State of Research, 1975," *LARR* 11, no. 1 (1976):3–74. See also her *Women in Spanish America: An Annotated Bibliography* (Boston, 1977), pp. 95–136, 616–24. A sampling of this literature includes: Jesus Galindo y Villas, "La educación de la mujer mexicana a través del siglo XIX," *Memorias de la sociedad científica "Antonio Alzate"* 11 (1900–1), pp. 289–312, and his "Breves consideraciones sobre la educación de la mujer mexicana," *ibid.* 9 (1897–98), pp. 109–36; María Aldana, *Dos palabras acerca de la educación femenina* (Puebla, Mexico, 1902); Manuel Valldeperes, "Salomé Urena: poetisa y maestra," *Inter-American Review of Bibliography* 19 (1969):23–38; Mariana de Cáceres, "Women of the Americas: III María Francesca Reyes: Honduras," *Boletín* (Pan American Union) 74 (1940):500–3; Carlos Restrepo Canal, "El Colegio de la Merced al cumplir los ciento treinta años de su fundación," *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfica* (Colombia) 5 (1962):760–62; and Juan Antonio Susto, "La educación de la mujer panameña en el siglo XIX," *Lotería* 9 (1965):91–96 and 10 (1966):57–71.
3. "Lei orgánica de la Universidad de Chile," *AUCH* 1 (1843). Also see Amanda Labarca

- H., *Historia de la enseñanza en Chile* (Santiago, 1939); M. Vaughan and M. S. Archer, *Social Conflict and Educational Change in England and France, 1789–1848* (London, 1971).
4. Knaster, "Women in Latin America," p. 15.
 5. Compare the budgets made to various peacetime and crisis ministries. *Boletín de leyes, ordenanzas i decretos del gobierno* (Santiago) 19 (1851), p. 548; 20 (1851), p. 295; 23 (1854), p. 302; 26 (1858), p. 638; 28 (1860), p. 431; 30 (1862), p. 384; 32 (1864), pp. 36, 482; 33 (1865), p. 628; 35 (1867), p. 368; 43 (1875), p. 681. Also see the annual reports of the Minister of Education for discussions of current spending policies. (*Boletín de leyes, ordenanzas i decretos del gobierno* hereafter appears as *BLODG*).
 6. Nancy Caro Hollander, "Women: The Forgotten Half of Argentine History," in Ann Pescatello's *Female and Male in Latin America: Essays* (Pittsburgh, 1973), p. 142.
 7. See, for example "Legislación antigua i moderna. Estado comparativo de la mujer bajo el influjo de la legislación pagana i de la cristiana. Memoria de prueba de don Zorobabel Rodríguez en su exámen para obter el grado de licenciado en leyes leída el 17 de junio de 1864," *AUCH* 26 (1865), pp. 193–204. Also see "Memoria. Religion. El liberalismo. Discurso de incorporarse a la facultad teológica el 8 de enero de 1878 por el presbítero Guillermo Juan Carter," *AUCH* 53 (1878), pp. 87–141.
 8. "Memoria leída por el rector de la Universidad de Chile en el aniversario solemne de 29 de Octubre de 1848," *AUCH* 5–6 (1848–49), pp. 143–95. Also see "Documentos oficiales," *AUCH* 8 (1851), p. 103. See also *BLODG* 19 (1851), pp. 128, 127, 129, 250, 252, 249, 254; "Relación del secretario general leída por don Ramon Briseño," *AUCH* 7 (1850), pp. 479–89. See also the following entries in *BIP*, *AUCH* 7 (1850), pp. 371, 403; 10 (1853), pp. 451–67, 530, 549–57; 12 (1855), pp. 427–33.
 9. See *BLODG* 21 (1853), p. 6281. Also see *BIP* in *AUCH* 10 (1853), pp. 347, 527–30; 17 (1860), p. 493; 26 (1865), p. 745; 52 (1877), pp. 44–47, 62–64, 214–18; 30 (1868), pp. 55–59.
 10. For community petitions see *BIP*, *AUCH* 10 (1853), pp. 451–67, 530, 549–57; 12 (1855), pp. 427–33, 489, 531–34, 712–22; 14 (1857), pp. 235–44, 379–86, 547–52, 15 (1858), pp. 120–48, 216–34; 17 (1860), pp. 868–74, 315–22, 431–89. For salary information see, for example, 23 (1863), p. 311; 32 (1869), p. 322; 12 (1855), pp. 813–17; 17 (1860), pp. 315–18, 322. See "Reglamento jeneral de instrucción primaria," *ibid.* 23 (1863), pp. 841–58. Concerning prizes see 17 (1860), pp. 873–74. Doña Carmen Carrasco and Doña Carmen Aguirre are cited as excellent teachers; Doña Rosario Vargas was cited for her contributions to teaching the physically handicapped. See also "Consejo de la Universidad de Chile," *ibid.*, 17 (1860), pp. 377–78. Textbooks were presented in mathematics, geography, and domestic sciences. See *ibid.* 52 (1877), p. 7; 37 (1866), pp. 230–31; 22 (1869), p. 322. Doña Ecluvijes Casanova submitted a text entitled "Educación de la mujer," which the consejo approved. (Consejo de la Universidad de Chile appears hereafter as *CUCH*).
 11. *CUCH*, *AUCH* 52 (1877), p. 7; 54 (1878), p. 522; 8 (1851), pp. 407–34. Private liceos existed prior to this date; see *AUCH* 2 (1845), p. 39; 8 (1851), pp. 109, 403.
 12. "Las mujeres pueden rendir exámenes válidos para ejercer profesiones científicas," *AUCH* 52 (1877), pp. 206–7. Also see R. Florencio Moreyera, "Observaciones al proyecto de educar científicamente a la mujer," *Revista Chilena* 7 (1877), pp. 603–15; Juan Enrique Lagarrigue, "El buen sentido de una mujer," *ibid.*, pp. 631–33; Ernesto Turenne, "Profesiones científicas para la mujer," *ibid.* 7 (1877), pp. 352–427; C. González Ugalde, "Algo sobre instrucción," *ibid.*, pp. 573–603.
 13. Benicio Alamos González, "Enseñanza superior de la mujer," *Revista Chilena* 10 (1878), pp. 533–43.
 14. *CUCH*, *AUCH* 54 (1877), p. 522; 55 (1878), p. 190.
 15. The annual reports of the Minister of Education appeared in *AUCH* under the title "Instrucción pública—su estado actual, según la memoria del ministro del ramo al congreso nacional i según los documentos anexos que a continuación se insertan." For examples see the following volumes of *AUCH*: 2 (1844), pp. 111–21; 5–6 (1848–49), pp. 143–205; 15 (1858), pp. 259–90; 17 (1860), pp. 650–72; 19 (1861), pp. 383–449; 24 (1864), pp. 476–510; 23 (1863), pp. 765–806; 28 (1865), pp. 141–248; 29 (1866), pp. 495–569; 31 (1868), pp. 3–180; 33 (1869), pp. 47–239; 38 (1871), pp. 240–

- 324; 42 (1872), pp. 180–292; 45 (1873), pp. 320–59; 46 (1874), pp. 250–396; 58 (1880), pp. 197–232; 60 (1881), pp. 277–372.
16. *AUCH* 45 (1873), pp. 320–59; 46 (1874), pp. 250–396, 383.
 17. *AUCH* 45 (1873), pp. 320–59.
 18. See note 15.