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By Orlando Milesi - IPS / Globetrotter
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Social Activists Demand Real Equality for Chilean Women

Women social activists recognize that gender equality is gaining ground in Chile, but maintain that there is still a long way to go to turn into reality the promises to “level the playing field” between women and men, while they highlight the importance of addressing the issue of care work.

“We push feminism for the people, because we are looking at everything, not just women but the whole family, from a gender perspective,” social activist Aída Moreno, a veteran weaver who founded the [Huamachuco Women’s House](#) in 1989 in the municipality of [Renca](#), northeast of Santiago, told IPS.

She argued that gender inequality is still “an open wound in Chile.”

“The issue of care work, for example, is on the table, but nothing has been resolved yet. All we have is hope,” said the 77-year-old campaigner for women’s rights at her organization’s offices.

Carolina Cartagena, 42, is the national secretary of the [Asociación Yo Cuido](#)—an association of caregivers—based in the municipality of [Villa Alemana](#), in the Valparaíso region, 131 kilometers north of the Chilean capital.

In an interview with IPS at the association’s headquarters, she said, “There are many women caregivers whose mental health is already overwhelmed. We have extreme cases...and where does that leave the person being cared for, if his or her caregiver is not well mentally, economically, and emotionally?” she asked.

The rights of caregivers emerged as a much more visible issue after left-wing President Gabriel Boric included them among the priorities of his social policy and instructed the respective ministries to mainstream the issue.

The first step was to open a registry of caregivers within the [Social Registry of Households](#). Since 2022, the State has been providing accredited caregivers with a credential that for the time being provides them with facilities to speed up procedures in public services.

The [Ministry of Social Development and Family](#) estimates that in the first stage, some 25,800 people will be registered in the national registry of caregivers. Their estimate is that there are 470,000 informal live-in caregivers, as they define people who live in the same household and take care of family members on an unpaid basis.

There are also 1.12 million Chileans who require a caregiver and a survey by the ministry found that 85 percent of caregivers are women.

Cartagena sees the registry as a step forward but said that “much remains to be done” for caregivers.

The activist believes that “the most urgent thing is a system of care that is ongoing and permanent. In many cases, there are government programs, but they last three months and what do you do for the rest of the year?”

Cartagena was referring to a pilot project implemented so far only in a few municipalities such as Villa Alemana, which lasts three months and provides caregivers with medical assistance, therapies, and rehabilitation. Her demand is for it to be made permanent and nationwide.

Yo Cuido brings together 800 families from five regions of this long narrow country wedged between the Andes Mountains and the Pacific Ocean: Metropolitan Santiago, in the center; O’Higgins and Valdivia, in the south; and Valparaíso and Coquimbo, in the north.

The association argues that caregiving is a responsibility that should be shared by the government and not just a responsibility of a family or a couple, as the State saves funds thanks to the work of caregivers.

Changing Conditions

The overall living conditions of women in this South American country of 19.5 million people have changed over the last two or three generations, with advances in economic participation and educational levels.

The extension of pre- and post-natal leave and an increase in day care centers were followed by stiffer laws against femicides—gender-based killings—and the decriminalization of therapeutic abortion under three circumstances: fetal malformation, danger to the mother’s life, or rape.

But this last achievement is threatened today by the far-right Republican Party, which holds a majority in the council that aims to propose the text of a new constitution that voters will approve or reject in a plebiscite in December.

Sociologist Teresa Valdés, of the [Gender and Equity Observatory](#), told IPS that “gender gaps remain, as do conditions of discrimination, mainly related to machismo (sexism), harassment, and the difficulty of getting ahead in the workplace.”

She added that the experience of inequality varies greatly, depending on where the women live.

In Chile, 47.7 percent of households are headed by women, according to the government’s 2022 [National Socioeconomic Characterization Survey](#), and 58.7 percent of these live in poverty.

The latest [National Time Use Survey](#), from 2015, showed that the hours dedicated to unpaid work in a typical day average 2.74 for Chilean men and 5.89 for Chilean women.

Valdes also warned about the high rates of violence against women in the country, despite policies to promote gender parity.

“The latest prevalence survey says that two out of five women have experienced situations of intimate partner violence and these are higher numbers than before. We do not know if this is because there are more cases than before or because there is more sensitivity and recognition of the violence,” said the sociologist.

And she complained that there is a lack of capacity in public programs to attend to these victims in the healthcare or judicial systems.

“That is a huge debt owed to women, and we continue to see a significant number of femicides per year,” Valdes said. In 2022 there were 43 gender-based murders of women in the country, according to the [Ministry of Women and Gender Equity](#).

Huamachuco, a Pillar of Training and Community Services

The Huamachuco Women’s House is a center for training and combating poverty and discrimination against women.

It began in 1989 as a soup kitchen for children and families. Then it became a center for training, especially traditional embroidery on burlap made from jute or hemp, whose

handcrafted works are about to be exhibited in the presidential palace of La Moneda. Later it became a place to learn trades such as hairdressing or sewing.

It currently offers a wide range of workshops and courses including baking, jewelry making, therapeutic massage, and a digital skills course provided by Mujeres Emplea, a United Nations employment training program led by [UN Women](#).

But above all, it is a place of support for women who suffer various types of violence and who feel protected by their peers.

Moreno said that women used to work the same amount or more than today and their work was not recognized. She added that now their work is more highly valued, but still “very insufficiently.”

“There are many gaps we have in terms of men who go out to work and come back home just to rest. He never lays awake at night thinking about what he is going to cook the next day, which is double work when there is no money,” she said.

“Today we are placing value on women’s work. I don’t say price, although I could say it because if a man on his own had to pay for laundry services, food, etc., he wouldn’t be able to afford it with what he earns,” she said.

Moreno is also concerned about children and stressed that “preventing violence against them is a job that has no price.”

The Huamachuco Women’s House is now promoting a very important project: getting kids who have dropped out of basic education back into school, with follow-up.

“We work with children and families and aim to reinsert them in another school. We look for schools and provide them with support. In general, they are critical cases, of parents who are in prison or similar circumstances,” she said.

Women Caregivers Plead for Time Off

“Recognition of caregiving is urgently needed because we women become poorer by staying at home and not being able to go out and work to improve our quality of life,” Moreno said.

It is also a central demand of the Asociación Yo Cuido.

“My daughter, age five, has cerebral palsy,” Cartagena said. “There are many moms with children on the autism spectrum. There are caregivers caring for two or three people. The problem is cross-cutting and includes Alzheimer’s. There are women who take care of their 90-year-old mothers.”

And she regretted that there is no legislation to protect caregivers.

“We are fighting for a support and care system that is being promoted with participatory dialogues in different municipalities to learn about the needs of caregivers,” she said.

“Never again alone” is the motto of the association, created in 2018, which defines itself as national, non-profit, social action, and non-welfare oriented in character.

“In many cases, the person has been born with some type of disability or dependency. Their situation is precarious, they are vulnerable. And the State and society punish you for being in care. You are left without health care, unemployed, often without support or family co-responsibility,” said Cartagena.

She added that many caregivers suffer from psychological and emotional deterioration, as well as poverty.

“A main objective of our association is to ensure the mental health rights of caregivers,” she underlined.

She pointed out that caregiving work involves mainly women: 90 percent of the members of the association are women.

“We want centers to be opened where they can drop off the person they take care of, so they can have just a few hours off a day,” she said.

This is the role of the day care center in Huamachuco that serves women who suffer physical, psychological, or economic violence.

“Most of the mothers in these projects are single women who have no networks. And they have to go out to work leaving their children with other people,” said Moreno.

UN Women rewarded the work of this day care center by [donating another similar one](#), fully equipped, to be installed in another part of Renca.

The elderly activist said with pride that “the fruits are there for us to see because there are young people who are now professionals and who say well...if it hadn’t been for this day care center I don’t know what would have become of us.”