"A SCHOOL OF CIVICS": MEMCH AND CHILEAN FEMINISM AT HOME AND ABROAD (1935-1941)

Introduction by Ivan Jaksic, Director of the Bing Overseas Studies Program in Santiago

Reagan Dunham spent a Summer quarter in Santiago, Chile, conducting research under the aegis of my course "Topics in Chilean History." The outcome of her research is a nuanced, multi-dimensional analysis of the women's movement in Chile in the 1930s, after it won several civil rights but was still short of achieving full electoral rights. Therefore, and with a clear awareness that this was a continuous struggle, Chilean women gathered under the capable leadership of remarkable women such as Elena Caffarena and Amanda Labarca to demand democracy not only at the public level, but also in the private sphere. In the process they contested several ideologies, including fascist ideologies coming from Europe, intent on keeping women constrained in traditional roles. Reagan Dunham has given justice to a particularly important period in Chilean history and has also provided essential background for understanding the resistance of women against the later regime of Augusto Pinochet.

"A School of Civics": MEMCh and Chilean Feminism at Home and Abroad (1935-1941)

Reagan Dunham

Citizens can evaluate the quality and direction of their democracy by engaging with the socio-political issues their community faces. The Pro-Emancipation Movement of Chilean Women (MEMCh) addressed such issues head-on from 1935 until it disbanded in 1953. The organization emerged in a particularly ideal time for feminist activism in Chile. A collection of leftist parties - the Radical Party, the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the Confederation of Chilean Workers, the Federation of Students of the University of Chile, and the indigenous Mapuche-led Frente Unico Araucano - joined in the mid-1930s to form the Popular Front coalition. This left-wing alliance sought to provide a voice to Chileans who had been underrepresented in the conservative governments of previous years, as illustrated by its slogans, "to govern is to educate" and "bread, roof, coat."¹ The emergence of this progressive coalition was coupled with significant change in women's participation in the workforce; by 1940, women made up nearly one quarter of the Chilean labor force.² Women's labor also diversified during this period - a change largely driven by surges in women's employment in professional occupations, particularly nursing and education.³

These factors contributed to a hospitable climate for political reform, and it was in this political climate that MEMCh was born. It focused primarily on issues of economic, reproductive, and political independence for Chilean women, and challenged the gender-based hierarchy that characterized the pre-existing social <u>order. From its</u> inception, the organization rejected gender-based

2 Corinne Antezana-Pernet, "Peace in the World and Democracy in the Home: The Chilean Women's Movement in the 1940s," in *Latin America in the 1940s*, ed. David Rock, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 166-183.

3 Ibid.

^{1 &}quot;Pan, Techo y Abrigo," *Memoria Chilena*, last modified 2018, http://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-542750.html.

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restrictions on political participation that denied women the right to influence their government. Even after Chilean women gained the right to vote in municipal elections in 1934, MEMCh continued to assert that women be given the opportunity to combine life in the domestic sphere with life in the public sphere. Elena Caffarena, a co-founder of MEMCh, summarized the movement in a few short words when interviewed in 2003: "MEMCh was a great school of civics."⁴ Its primary goal was to urge Chilean women to demand the right to a life that was not defined by their roles in the home. The organization contended that democracy could not truly exist in Chile until all citizens, regardless of gender, were able to fully partake in social and political life. In order to be a truly citizen-centered government, MEMCh argued, the Chilean government must center itself around all of its citizens. MEMCh's school of civics had an emphatic answer to this question from its very beginning. From 1935 to 1941, MEMCh answered that question by asserting that Chilean women must see themselves as citizens of three communities - their home, their country, and the world - and that they must fight to secure democracy in each.

Democracy in the Home: Bread, Roof, Coat

When addressing the Inter-American Commission on the Status of Women in 1946, pioneering Chilean feminist Amanda Labarca underscored the importance of mothers and the home in the development of democracy. "If, for example, we want peace and democracy, we have to fight for them," she announced. "Peace must be made And how could it be established in nations if we don't find it first in family life and in relationships with human beings? Democracy must begin in the home."5 While not a member herself. Labarca worked closely with many of MEMCh's leaders and the organization shared her sentiment. Memchistas maintained the conservative notion that the home was the fundamental unit of Chilean society. However, they distinguished themselves from the political mainstream by insisting that Chileans must reconstruct the home in order to prioritize the needs of women and the work-Elena Caffarena. "Elena Caffarena: un siglo, una mujer." Interview by 4 Diamela Eltit. Servicio Nacional de la Mujer, 2003.

5 Amanda Labarca, *Feminismo* Contemporaneo (Santiago, 1948), 230, http://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-98299.html. ing class.

MEMCh's publicized newspaper, La Mujer Nueva (The New Woman), urged women to advocate on behalf of their homes to form the foundation for a better society. The League of Nations reported in 1933 that the Great Depression had impacted Chile more than any other country, and inflation and scarcity continued to afflict families across the country throughout the decade.⁶ The authors of La Mujer Nueva lamented the fact that families had to ration common household goods while monopolists and landowners controlled the resources they desperately needed. In August of 1936, for example, the periodical dedicated an entire page to addressing the high cost of goods like milk, sugar, and bread.⁷ "Bread, roof, coat" - the rallying cry of the Popular Front - was frequently adopted by Memchistas to support their position that all Chileans must be guaranteed access to the basic necessities of survival.8 MEMCh also argued that children's health must be prioritized in order to protect Chilean homes. When the organization was founded in the 1930s, nearly 250 out of every one thousand Chilean children died in infancy, and MEMCh often positioned itself as a defender of Chilean children.9

MEMCh also strongly advocated for the right of Chilean women to support themselves financially. Caffarena proclaimed in *La Mujer Nueva's* second issue, "Without room for doubt the most important point of the Pro-Emancipation Movement of Chilean Women is that which refers to the economic emancipation of woman."¹⁰ One of the major roadblocks to securing this emancipation was the persistence of coverture in the Chilean legal system. The legal rights of married women were assumed by their husbands,

⁶ Simon Collier and William F. Sater, *A History of Chile*, *1808-2002*. (Cambridge Latin American Studies, 2002), 223.

^{7 &}quot;Por que es cara la vida?" *La Mujer Nueva*. August 1936, http://www. memoriachilena.gob.cl/archivos2/pdfs/MC0023520.pdf

^{8 &}quot;Emancipación económica," *La Mujer Nueva*. December 1935, http:// www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/archivos2/pdfs/MC0023512.pdf.

^{9 &}quot;Tasas de mortalidad infantil, neonatal y postneonatal en Chile, 1915-2000," *Memoria Chilena*, last modified 2018, http://www.memoriachilena.gob. cl/602/w3-article-74939.html.

^{10 &}quot;Emancipación económica," *La Mujer Nueva*. December 1935, http:// www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/archivos2/pdfs/MC0023512.pdf.

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leaving wives with little ability to control their own property or possessions.¹¹ Another challenge to economic autonomy was the fact that many female workers received lower wages than their male coworkers. Women were often paid lower salaries than men because, in the eyes of employers, a man's salary supported an entire nuclear family while a woman's merely augmented that of her husband.¹² MEMCh, however, consistently emboldened women to demand equal salaries on the basis that "la mujer obrera" was no less deserving of economic autonomy than her male counterpart.

The articles in La Mujer Nueva are not the only source of information about MEMCh's efforts to provide women with entry points to the public sphere and more opportunities to become self-sufficient. The publication's first two editions ran advertisements alerting readers to upcoming night school classes offered for free to the general public.¹³ Another advertisement for an ophthalmologist named Dra. Ida F. Thierry was published twice in 1936 and a surgeon named Maria Guajardo placed one in 1937, demonstrating to working class readers that it was possible for women to have professional careers.¹⁴ Reflecting Labarca's assertion that democracy begins in the home, MEMCh spoke directly to Chilean women and nurtured the believe that fighting the right to provide for their families, control of their reproductive rights, and act as their own breadwinners would enable them to overcome the barriers they faced and establish themselves as Chilean citizens in their own right.

Democracy in the Country: Women's Political Participation

Chilean women had the right to vote in municipal elections during the years in which *La Mujer Nueva* was published, but

11 Newspaper Article, September 1937. PCH 10272, Año 1: no.8 (1936:jul)-año 2: no.18 (1937:nov.). *La Mujer Nueva*, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, Santiago, Chile.

J. E. Pieper Mooney, *The Politics of Motherhood : Maternity and Women's Rights in Twentieth-Century Chile* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).
Newspaper Article, 8 November 1935. PCH 10272, Año 1: no.7 (1935:nov. 8)-año 1: no.7 (1936:jun.). *La Mujer Nueva*, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, Santiago, Chile.

14 Newspaper Article, July 1936. PCH 10272, Año 1: no.8 (1936:jul)-año 2: no.18 (1937:nov.). *La Mujer Nueva*, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, Santiago, Chile. presidential contests remained out of reach. Determined to create space for women in Chilean politics, MEMCh sought alternative methods of civic involvement. With the dual goal of finding ways for women to engage in the political sphere without suffrage and demonstrating that they deserved the vote, the organization made a concentrated effort to teach its audience one of the most important lessons a civic education can provide - that political participation is not limited to electoral politics.

One example of such a lesson was the importance of evaluating the performance and decisions of government. In "The War," an article published in 1935 in the second edition of La Mujer Nueva, MEMCh asked its readers to consider the nationalistic language that surrounds discussion of war. The author presented three terms - "patriotism," "nationalism," and "heroism" - and challenged their traditional definitions. While citizens often understood these terms as references to love of one's country, she characterized them as tools that politicians employ to convince mankind that violence is necessary.¹⁵ The author painted a picture of the men and women of the working class, who labored for hours and still struggle to feed their children, and claimed that these families are not able to enjoy the benefits of the "patriotism, nationalism, and heroism" that their government boasts of. The author further asserted that while those terms are commonly understood as affectionate terms regarding one's homeland, they more closely resemble intentionally-broad terms that have been employed by politicians to convince the people to support their goals: "Those who organize the massacre of humanity invent pretty things to deceive women and men."16

After listing statistics about the number of people who died, were wounded, or widowed after World War I a generation earlier, she urged readers to ask themselves why governments prioritized military strength over public services that would address malnutrition, infant mortality, or one of the other important social challenges the nation faced:

¹⁵ Newspaper Article, 8 December 1935. PCH 10272, Año 1: no.7 (1935:nov. 8)-año 1: no.7 (1936:jun.). *La Mujer Nueva*, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, Santiago, Chile.

¹⁶ Ibid.

"And the nations continue to arm themselves, they continue consuming wealth in the purchase of arms. For this, money is not spared. However, there is no money to build or improve hospitals, there is no money to attend to malnourished children, nor for schools, not for a single work that benefits the people.¹⁷

In addition to encouraging readers to appraise the decisions of their government, this statement also illustrated to its audience how deeply the politics of home, country, and world are related. Because national government chose to emphasize militarization efforts for global wars, local homes and communities had to learn to do without. In this way, "The War" offered readers insight into the necessity of understanding the overlapping nature of their roles in civil affairs at varying levels of government.

Although MEMCh provided its readers with a variety of alternative tools for civic engagement, it by no means ignored the importance of electoral politics. La Mujer Nueva's coverage of the 1938 presidential election stands as one of the most prominent displays of MEMCh's dedication to educating women about the democratic process. The publication began reporting on the election in earnest in early 1937, when it declared, "An election that can entirely change the life of the country is approaching."¹⁸ As women could not yet vote themselves, La Mujer Nueva urged them to immerse themselves in alternative forms of civic action. One of its primary suggestions to Chilean women was to encourage their male relatives to vote for candidates that supported equal pay, women's suffrage, more government support for children, and other political issues that MEMCh prioritized.¹⁹ A second suggestion urged women to attend political meetings and communicating the problems and aspirations of the organization, in the hopes that men would begin to understand the necessity of women having equal political rights.20

The October 1938 issue of *La Mujer Nueva* in particular served as a crash course of civic engagement. The publication sup-

¹⁷ Ibid.

^{18 &}quot;La mujer y la política," *La Mujer Nueva*, February 1937, http://www. memoriachilena.gob.cl/archivos2/pdfs/MC0023506.pdf.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

ported the Popular Front in its early days, and while it criticized the coalition for failing to carry out its promise of advancing women's rights, it nonetheless threw its support behind the Popular Front candidate, Pedro Aguirre Cerda. The front page was covered in political cartoons that warned of a bleak future if the Popular Front was not successful - working class families would continue to live in poverty, without access to the health and financial resources they needed to sustain themselves.²¹ A noteworthy feature of the issue was a report on an interview with Aguirre Cerda himself. La Mujer Nueva presented him as a studious man, a labor ally, and a supporter of women's rights, making him MEMCh's ideal candidate for president.²² Aguirre Cerda spoke largely of issues that related specifically to gender-based discrimination, and affirmed that he shared MEMCh's assertions about improving the status of Chilean women by pledging his support for the vote, more educational opportunities, and social assistance programs for women.²³

This edition also addressed the external factors that can influence how citizens choose to vote. Special attention was paid to the buying and selling of votes, a remnant of nineteenth century politics that lingered well into the 1950s.²⁴ Landowners were known to offer their tenants food, money, or valuables in order to sway their vote, usually in favor of candidates who supported policies that maintained the socio-political order that kept them in power. In its attempt to combat vote-buying, MEMCh sought to fundamentally change the way the women in its working class audience approached electoral politics. Rather than continuing to view elections as day-long events that had little implications on one's personal life, *La Mujer Nueva* insisted that its readers see elections as important political events that had long-lasting impacts on citizens and the society in which they lived.

This edition of *La Mujer Nueva* was scattered with brief Newspaper Article, February 1937. PCH 10272, Año 1:no.8 (1936:ju-1)-año 2:no.18 (1937:nov.). *La Mujer Nueva*, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, Santiago, Chile.

22 Newspaper Article, October 1938. PCH 10272, Año 1:no.19 (1937:nov./1938:ene.)-año 2:no.23 (1939:jul.). *La Mujer Nueva*, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, Santiago, Chile.

23 Ibid.

²⁴ Collier and Sater (2002), 237.

boxes of text in which authors lambasted the practice of vote buying, most likely for two reasons. Primarily, democracy could not be truly secured in the until all Chilean voters were informed on political issues and able to make their own decisions in elections without fear of coercion. Secondarily, vote-buying had traditionally kept progressive platforms that MEMCh and its leftist contemporaries supported out of power, thereby preventing the advancement of their preferred policies. By encouraging working class communities to keep their votes, MEMCh hoped to promote democratic processes in Chile and generate more votes for the Aguirre Cerda and the Popular Front. The edition's entreaties stressed the humiliation of vote-sellers, the corruption of vote-buyers, and the consequences that six years of political decisions could have for citizens. Appeals directed at its largely female audience prompted Chilean women to view fighting against vote-buying as tantamount to fighting to provide food for their children, and encouraged them to persuade their male relatives to back labor-friendly candidates.²⁵ In a few cases, La Mujer Nueva diverged from its usual path of only addressing women and appealed directly to men, likely in hopes that its largely female audience would encourage the men they knew to read it. The text implored: "Citizen: Don't sell your future well-being for a plate of lentils," and "If you sell your vote you'll bring for yourself and for Chile... six more years of the rich being richer and the poor poorer."²⁶ MEMCh's efforts proved fruitful, as Pedro Aguirre Cerda won the election and was sworn in as the President of Chile the following month. Although La Mujer Nueva proclaimed that his election ushered in "[a] new era for the Chilean woman," another eleven years would pass before Chilean women gained the right to vote in presidential elections.²⁷

Democracy in the World: The Fight Against Global Fascism When reflecting on World War I in the 1940s, Amanda

²⁵ Newspaper Article, October 1938. PCH 10272, Año 1: no.19 (1937:nov./1938:ene.)-año 2: no.23 (1939:jul.). *La Mujer Nueva*, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, Santiago, Chile.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Newspaper Article, December 1938. PCH 10272, Año 1:no.19 (1937:nov./1938:ene.)-año 2:no.23 (1939:jul.). *La Mujer Nueva*, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, Santiago, Chile.

Labarca remarked that mankind hoped that it truly would be a war to end all wars. "We fight in the name of democracy so it will be the last of wars," she wrote, going on to praise the fact that faith in humans' ability to overcome adversity survived the war.²⁸ As the onset of a second world war became apparent, women in Chile employed this faith to demand for a future free of fascism and the substantial borders it placed in front of female independence.

The international events of the 1930s and 1940s encouraged many Chilean feminists to connect political issues in their country to those around the world. Historian Corinne Antezana-Pernet writes that in Chile, "World War II acted as a necessary catalyst in the formation of a broad, ambitious women's movement committed to the defense of democracy and its extension to women."29 During the buildup to and onset of the war, MEMCh urged Chilean women to consider how fighting for women's independence at home was related to fighting for liberty abroad. As the war raged in Europe, La Mujer Nueva addressed global fascism head on and examined the impacts that repressive governments had on the women who lived under their rule. This dedication was evident from an article on the front page of the publication's first edition in 1935. In "Women and fascism," author Sofia Martinez remarked that recent events in Germany and Italy required Chilean women to extend their gaze to global politics.³⁰ She argued, "It is necessary to raise our eyes toward the boarders and examine the panorama," and listed a series of quotes from Hitler, Göring, and Mussolini that demonstrated their desire for women to remain in the home. Martinez held that the quotes demonstrated that the primary civic responsibility of women in a fascist state was to live as "queen of the home" and provide "children for the fatherland."31

31 Ibid.

Amanda Labarca, *Feminismo Contemporaneo* (Santiago, 1948), 230, http://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-98299.html.

²⁹ Corinne Antezana-Pernet, "Peace in the World and Democracy in the Home: The Chilean Women's Movement in the 1940s," in *Latin America in the 1940s*, ed. David Rock, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 166-183.

³⁰ Newspaper Article by Sofía Martínez, 8 December 1935. PCH 10272, Año 1:no.7 (1935:nov. 8)-año 1:no.7 (1936:jun.). *La Mujer Nueva*, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, Santiago, Chile.

Martinez pushed her readers to see beyond sentimental rhetoric about family and country, and reminded them of the reality of life confined to the home. With palpable sarcasm, she wrote to her audience: "We know quite well what this glorious 'return to the home' means."³² Further, she contended that while "the current owners of the world" wanted women to exist purely in the domestic sphere, the women of the world themselves did not.³³ Martinez's sharp rebuke illustrates the fact that many feminist activists were not willing to relinquish the professional and political gains that Chilean women had made in the preceding decades.

Martinez also presented the international unity of women as a potent tool against the rise of fascism. "And we, the women of Chile, hand in hand with our sisters from other countries, are willing to begin an implacable fight against this tragic horror that encloses us."³⁴ Martinez's declaration of solidarity firmly demonstrates how MEMCh implored its readers to consider fascist regimes in Europe as issues that affected women around the world, rather than insular problems that existed an ocean away. The publication dedicated itself to providing its readers with information about international events from its first edition to its last, encouraging Chilean women to see themselves as global citizens in the process.

Order, homeland, family

Many of MEMCh's contemporaries opposed the organization efforts, arguing that its goals would lead to the demise of the family. This was position held by the National Action (Acción Nacional), a conservative women's group that made an effort to distance itself from MEMCh in an editorial in El Mercurio in 1935. The organization declared that:

"It is... a program that contains unacceptable points that openly threaten the constitution of the family and that support methods of so-called biological emancipation that go not only against the most elemental concepts of morality but also against the very laws of

- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid.

nature."35

Well aware of critiques that labeled MEMCh as a threat to established norms in Chile, memchista authors positioned themselves as defenders of alternative constructions of social order. Elena Caffarena published an article entitled "Order, homeland, family" in La Mujer Nueva in 1936 and presented challenging pre-established social order as an example of civic virtue. The activist affirmed that the organization did in fact oppose the constructions of order, homeland, and family that existed in Chile, but maintained that it did so not to weaken the country but rather to build it into a stronger, more democratic nation. In so doing, she maintained that MEMCh's goal was not to completely dismantle motherhood and marriage, but rather to criticize their current state. What kind of order, Caffarena asked, denies women access to social and political life for the sole fact of being mothers, denies female workers the same benefits as their male counterparts, and denies half of the population the right to influence the government?

She implored her audience to believe that this was not the type of order that Chileans needed in order to create in a truly egalitarian republic and that they must work to forge new definitions of order, homeland, and family that did not consistently subject women to subservient and self-sacrificing positions. Caffarena encouraged Chilean women to fight openly for the three pillars of social order, but also advised them to do so in a way that required each level of society to fight openly for women in return. By establishing a new order, Chilean women could play a role in a construction of a society that was more attentive to their needs and rights, and in the eyes of MEMCh, more democratic.

MEMCh underscored that position in an article entitled "True order." After acknowledging that MEMCh was viewed as an enemy of the social status quo in Chile, the author highlighted a series of national problems that the organization viewed as consequences of the pre-established order. She noted statistics about the <u>infant and child</u> mortality, disease, and illiteracy that many Chilean 35 Servicio Natural del Patrimonio Cultural. "MEMCh: ¡Por la defensa de la mujer y en contra de todos sus flagelos!" Archivo Nacional de Chile, accessed 21 August 2018, http://www.archivonacional.gob.cl/616/w3-article-72894. html? noredirect=1. families faced and argued that true order had to be based around new traditions that would ensure egalitarianism. Her final statement – "We want 'order' the synonym of justice, and not 'order' the synonym of conservatism" - illustrates MEMCh's efforts to redefine Chilean society and push issues of justice and civic equality to the forefront of political conversation. Marta Vergara summarized MEMCh's position in 1937 when she proclaimed that "we are the only and true defenders of order, homeland, and family."

Conclusion

Maria de Arancibia Lazo defined "la mujer nueva" - the new Chilean woman and the namesake of MEMCh's periodical and described what set apart from her predecessors. While continuing to embrace maternalism, Arancibia Lazo explained that modern Chilean women sought to expand their roles and let it be known that they intended to be important figures outside of the home as well:

"Those who criticize woman for her new activities do so because they are incapable of appreciating all that this great evolution means and represents. Woman has abandoned the narrow circle of herself and has flung herself with open arms, wishing to embrace her maternal breast with all of humanity."

Elena Caffarena described this sentiment decades later when she reflected on MEMCh as coalition of different women unified by a common goal:

> "MEMCh was a pluralist institution. It called to women of all social classes and of all economic levels. We had college students, employees, laborers, farmers, domestic workers, professionals, housewives, and one thing united us: fighting for the economic, social, and legal emancipation of woman."

In accordance with MEMCh's goal of being a source of civic education, *La Mujer Nueva* instructed its readers to hold political and social leaders accountable for their actions and to speak up to protected the rights and liberties of all Chileans. While the organization disbanded in 1953, later feminist movements in Chile adopted its commitment to linking democracy with feminism.

Activist Juliana Kirkwood demanded in the midst of the Pinochet regime that Chilean women needed "Democracy in the country and in the home."³⁶ A generation after Chile's return to democracy in 1989, women in the country are pushing questions of gender equality into the center of political debate. 2018 marked a watershed year for Chilean feminism. Two national issues - allegations of sexual harassment against prominent university professors and the reelection of conservative Sebastian Piñera - prompted discussions about the role machismo continues to play in Chilean society. Feminist activists linked democracy at home with women's rights around the world through their support of two international campaigns - the #NiUnaMenos ("Not one woman less") movement against gender-based violence and the #MeToo movement against sexual abuse. Students around Santiago launched strikes and protests in 2018 to demand an end to sexual violence and harassment. In June 2018, students of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Academy of Christian Humanism University, located a mere block away from the Stanford Center in Santiago, spray painted a phrase that embodies much of the current movement right outside their school's gates: "El feminismo cierra la escuela pero abre el camino" ("Feminism closes the school but opens the path"). MEMCh forsaw this in 1935, and its school of civics opened the path for generations of Chilean women to demand democracy in their homes, their nation, and their world.

³⁶ "Julieta Kirkwood y los saberes feministas (1937-1985)," Memoria Chilena, last modified 2018, http://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-arti-cle-3494.html.