

Lessons Promoting Gender Equality in the State: Institutional Evolution of Women's Policy Agencies in Costa Rica and Chile

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Currently, over 75% of the world's countries have instituted some form of gender equality machineries (including women's ministries, women's policy agencies and equality commissions) within the state bureaucracy charged with promoting women's right and gender equality (McBride and Mazur 2012). However, in comparison to the sustained attention given to national legislature and women's elected political positions, very little research has examined the either the institutional evolution of these agencies in the developing world, or the long-term impact of these agencies on laws and policies promoting gender equality. In this paper, I compare the development of two women's policy agencies in Latin America, the National Women's Service (SERNAM) in Chile and INAMU (National Women's Institute) in Costa Rica to provide a preliminary analysis of the role played by these agencies in promoting changes within the political institutions of the state around women's inclusion and gender equality.

SERNAM (created 1991) and INAMU (1986) represent both the longest-lasting and most powerful women's policy agencies in Latin America. Both have undergone a process of institutional strengthening as the result of laws and executive policies designed to protect both the political autonomy of the institutions and their role in overseeing the implementation of broader gender equality measures. However, the political context in which they developed is quite different. SERNAM was instituted as a result of political pressure by a broad women's movement during Chile's transition to democracy and has been closely tied to the policies of the center-left coalition. The Chilean state bureaucracy is highly politicized, with over 16,000 positions appointed by the executive, which has lead to continual turn-over within the state, including in the positions tasked with either oversight or development of state policies around gender equality. INAMU, in Costa Rica was created through the sustained work of a small, network of women political elites, and has developed within a state bureaucracy known for its autonomy, stability and power vis-à-vis the elected executive. Given these markedly different contexts, what can we learn about the process of institutional strengthening of women's policy agencies in different state contexts? Who are the critical actors in this process? What political factors have promoted institutional strengthening? What barriers remain within the state in terms of the agencies fulfilling their mandates?

Drawing on interviews in both Costa Rica and Chile, I argue that one key variable is civil servants' political will and the everyday actions they undertake to promote gender equality. The two institutions benefitted from an increasing number of civil servants who expressed a political commitment to gender equality, had experience with gender analysis, and were positioned throughout the state. This group of civil servants served as an important part advocacy group within the state in promoting the increased institutionalization of gender equality measures and the slow, but steady progress towards changing the gender regime of the two states.