

**Gender and the politics of gradual change:
Understanding the role of neoliberal and maternalist legacies in Chilean social policy**

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Taking a feminist institutionalist perspective, this paper looks at the politics of gradual change in Chilean social policy in the early 21st century. Feminist analysts have repeatedly pointed to the striking continuity in the gendered underpinnings of recent social policy reforms and innovations in Latin America, in particular its tendency to reinforce women's role as mothers (maternalism). Looking at the case of Chile, this paper shows that while recent reforms explicitly broached the problem of gender inequality, the measures put forth to address did indeed often revert to 'maternalist' modes of compensation rather than promote equal rights and responsibilities. It argues that the tension between neoliberal and maternalist policy legacies is at the root of this concomitant pattern of change and continuity. Against this backdrop, maternalist legacies play out differently today—in a context that has been radically altered by the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s—than it did during the early phase of welfare state creation. In the face of strong neoliberal policy feedbacks—at the level of both interests and ideas—maternalism operates in highly ambiguous ways. It is not simply a 'cognitive lock' or an 'institutional blueprint' on which policymakers rely, but also a frame they deploy to advance women's rights against the opposition of vested business interests and neoliberal policy prescriptions. Motherhood idea(l)s are selectively and strategically activated to complement or compete with neoliberal prescriptions; and in the process, the very meaning of motherhood is sometimes redefined. The paper discusses the gains as well as the trade-offs of recent social policy reforms from a gender perspective, locating them within the institutional constraints that have hampered more ambitious equity-enhancing reforms in Chile more broadly.