

READING 6

The Arpilleristas: The Courage to Resist

Each month, on a given day, the *arpilleristas* would bring the tapestries they hoped to sell to the Vicaría de la Solidaridad. Since Chilean women were traditionally barred from selling the fruits of their labor, this undertaking was revolutionary. But as they entered the world of labor and politics, because they were women, the regime ignored them—arpilleristas were freer than any man in the country.

Somewhat unexpectedly, arpilleristas challenged traditional roles and male prejudices and found themselves confronting not the state but their own menfolk. In the first years of the dictatorship, remarks Morales, “men never said, ‘Compañera, let’s go out and struggle together to change the reality of this country.’ Women were the ones who fought.”¹ The men, she continues, “were so *machista*. Instead of helping us in those years, they pulled us down. Some of the women’s husbands would not let them attend the meetings or help in the training or with the solidarity work.”² Arpillerista Patricia Hidalgo echoes these themes:

If we had stayed at home, if we hadn’t participated in the workshops and everything that went on there, we would be the same as we were, we would not have grown, we would not value ourselves. I was used to having money, but I was educated like most women were, to occupy themselves with their husband and their children. To have respect and obedience and to work a lot,

but our world was always the house. When a woman begins to think and know and to believe “I am also a person” everything changes.³

What had begun as a search for loved ones became something quite different. The *arpilleras*, commented Agosín, “represented the empowerment of a type of domestic labor that had been considered marginal,” a species of work never recognized as such—unpaid and unnoticed.⁴ As they acquired this unsought power, these women encountered and resolutely faced new challenges.

Members of the arpillera cooperative came together for their own emotional and economic survival. In the workshops they discovered solidarity and cooperation and began to weave a network of support that carried them through the desperate years of the dictatorship. As their meetings became regular and frequent, they gradually added music and dancing to their group activities. This led to the creation of a dance called *la cueca sola*, popularized by the British musician and human rights activist Sting in the late 1980s. Traditional Chilean dance (*cueca*) was always performed by couples, but *la cueca sola* was deliberately performed alone to protest the absence of men in these women’s lives. Songs and poems by the arpilleristas contributed to an increasingly distinctive women’s culture. In the end, they formed roughly 200 workshops in Santiago alone.

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Arpillera 6: “La Cueca Sola Chile.” Created by Gala Tores, this arpillera shows women dancing a traditional Chilean courtship dance for couples, la cueca. Women danced alone to protest the disappearance of their men and gave it the name la cueca sola.

Then came the public protests. Viviana Díaz Caro, whose father was disappeared, directed the Association of Families of the Detained-Disappeared, which collected information about the disappeared and helped their relatives in the fight for justice. In this passage she recounts the political journey taken by the relatives of the disappeared in the late 1970s and 1980s:

We completely devoted ourselves to the Association. We started to participate in the hunger strikes, chainings, street protests, and we found out what it was like to be held in

jails and police stations. We weren't afraid anymore and became armed with an infinite bravery. We knew we didn't have anything to lose if we fought and our father's life was at stake. . . .

Over the years, the Association initiated numerous national and international petitions asking for help in our search for victims of the dictatorship. In July of 1977 our organization wrote an open letter to General Pinochet. We accused him of being responsible for the disappearance and detention of thousands of people and asked him to tell us the fate of all our tortured relatives who were in the concentration camps. Pinochet never responded to that letter or the hundreds of individual letters that so many daughters, mothers, wives and sisters of the political prisoners wrote.⁵

An extraordinary combination of personal determination and commitment propelled the arpilleristas. Agreeing to use only peaceful methods, mothers, daughters, and sisters of the disappeared took to the streets. Their first demonstrations were nothing more than a few families and their friends collected outside Santiago's infamous interrogation centers. They marched and banged their pots around central plazas, and when the police dispersed them, hunger strikes followed, some lasting weeks.

This nonviolent strategy, which soon attracted a great deal of attention, led to a breakthrough in the search for the disappeared. Viviana Díaz Caro recalls that the “17-day hunger strike of 1978 started a powerful movement so that bishops, with the mediation of the Catholic Church,

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Women march on the streets with pictures of their disappeared loved ones to protest the abuse of Pinochet's power.

began legal proceedings and for the first time publicly released [their] official [records] of the detained and disappeared." The strike, she contends, "marked a milestone in our movement," drawing more people into its ranks even as it began to seek international support. Efforts extended to other Latin American countries being run as police states.⁶

Our group helped form the Latin American Federation of the Families of Detained-Disappeared (FEDEFAM) in 1981, and our first congress was held in San José, Costa Rica. [Moreover], in 1985, FEDEFAM was recognized by the United Nations as a governmental organization. This meant we were allowed to actively participate in the United Nations Commission on Human

Rights so we could denounce not only the disappearances and imprisonment, but also the serious problem of torture in Latin America. Chile held a special place in that commission because United Nations officials were sent to our country to visit detention centers [and] managed to receive information directly from tortured political prisoners. This helped us gain more support from international groups in our fight for justice.⁷

The arpilleristas played a special part in the broader struggle for international recognition. Hundreds of arpilleras were smuggled out of Chile and seized the attention of foreign audiences. Exhibitions in the United States, Canada, and France attracted thousands of viewers, and Amnesty International's colorful calendar brought images of these arpilleras to many more. While the Western media feasted on this striking art and drew attention to Pinochet's crimes, Amnesty International declared Chile's missing persons "prisoners of conscience" (people imprisoned for their political beliefs) and launched an international campaign for their release. American activists pressed their government to condemn the dictatorship and to demand that all human rights violations cease immediately. When Jimmy Carter succeeded Gerald Ford as president of the United States in 1977, his administration declared that a country's human rights record would be linked to foreign aid. To survive, Pinochet was forced to loosen his stranglehold on civil rights.

Ariel Dorfman, a celebrated writer whose role in Allende's administration had forced him to flee shortly after the coup, visited



Arpillera 7: “Where are the detained-disappeared?” This arpillera depicts the suppression of public demonstrations and contrasts the violence of the regime with the nonviolent protest of the people.

the country around that time and reported that Chileans have hesitantly begun taking over the public [spaces] of the country, gradually grouping in associations, clubs, cultural centers, trade unions, until they have managed to create a vast network of organizations outside the Government’s control.⁸

Having reached a critical mass, the women’s movement had allied itself with long dormant political parties to agitate

for Pinochet’s ouster. Dorfman felt he could pinpoint the moment when the tide turned: “It was on May 11, 1983, at 8 o’clock in the evening, to be precise, that Pinochet lost his hold over the country he has ruled for so many years.” That was when “the Chilean people found a way to tell their dictator they had had enough.” The nonviolent forms of protest pioneered by the arpilleristas finally resonated throughout the entire capital. “The people responded,” Dorfman reported, “by banging pots and pans, blowing whistles, letting the children loose to kick up a ruckus, building barricades—and, as the noise mingled with other sounds and echoes, the powerless inhabitants of Chile discovered, with amazement, that they constituted the majority.”⁹

Women returned to Chile the political voice it had lost—they did it through art, through their determination, and through the feminine symbol of the empty cook pot. Political scientist Lisa Baldez argues that in giving a political voice to the nation, the women who joined forces became a true protest movement.¹⁰

VIOLETA MORALES'S SEARCH FOR HER BROTHER

Newton Morales disappeared shortly after the military coup of September 1973. His sister, Violeta Morales, set aside everything else and began a tireless search for her missing brother, a search she continued until her death in September 2000. Struggling with a tradition that denied women a political role, with the repressive dictatorship, and with her own loss, Violeta recounts a story illustrating the courage and determination of many women who became artist-activists in the course of the search for their relatives.

Since the military coup on September 11, 1973, we knew that my brother would be detained. . . . After working in the industry [of electronic engineering] for several months, his co-workers at Sumar elected him president of the plant union. We in the family knew that they were looking for him because of it. On September 11, 1973, a military order was issued saying that everybody with union positions had to report to the government authorities. That is what the junta dictated immediately after rising to power. . . .

When Newton came home the men took him by the arms and he called out to my mother who was in the kitchen. "Mother, the DINA is taking me away." My mother didn't understand what was happening at the time because she had never been political. The men tried to assure her because she was grasping my brother. One of the agents took her aside and said, "Don't worry ma'am; we'll bring him back in ten minutes—we only want to speak with him. We're friends from work." My brother looked pale and didn't say anything, probably so as not to frighten our mother. . . . When they took my brother Newton away from home, my other brother was arriving and followed the wagon in his taxi. From a distance he saw them bring Newton close to the church of San Francisco, a place that we now know as Londres 38.

After our brother's disappearance, we began looking for him everywhere—like all the relatives of the detained. The DINA was created in July 1974, and the military continued refining its methods and applying them more cruelly. We began doing things immediately and found out that at the Pro-Paz Committee, which was located on Santa Monica Street, they were getting all types of reports about abuses and violations of human rights. We began looking for our brother in jails, cemeteries, morgues, commissaries, and anywhere a military regiment existed. We also went to the law courts, and at many of the places we went, they received us with machine guns just for asking questions and for going around searching for the detained-disappeared. We sent thousands of letters abroad asking for help as well. We even went so far as sending letters to the leaders of the dictatorship themselves, but nothing came of all this. . . .

My sister, my brother, my mother, and I went to Pro-Paz everyday and everywhere where we thought they could help us find our brother. . . . All of us

were followed in the streets, and we were stopped and asked where we lived and where we worked. They made our life impossible. At the Pro-Paz Committee, we began organizing more and more. . . . We went to Three Alamos [a prison camp in Santiago] many times. There, the guards would ask us for things for the family prisoners, then they would give us back torn bags and would eat the food we had brought for the prisoners. Sometimes they'd tell us that visiting hours were at seven in the morning and when we'd arrive at the prison they'd say that they'd been changed to five in the afternoon; then when we returned in the afternoon, they'd tell us that the visiting hours had been on the preceding day. They were always making fun of us. On Christmas in 1974, a . . . lieutenant . . . told us that my brother was famous in that detention center. According to him they called him "Tough Guy Newton" because he tolerated the beatings well. . . . That Christmas of 1974 we asked the . . . sergeant to let us see our brother and talk with him, even if only for a few minutes. He went inside and then after a while another police officer came out and said, "Newton Morales has never been here." I had gone with my sister-in-law, who had her baby in her arms, and since we didn't leave right away, they pointed a machine gun at the child's head and told us that they'd shoot the baby if we didn't go away. . . .

Military agents also often stopped my mother near the house to threaten her and tell her that if she didn't stop bothering them searching for her son, she would also lose the rest of her children. . . . My brother Newton hadn't wanted to go into exile because he said, "I'm not leaving this country because I didn't do anything and I'm not afraid." He never imagined that in his country where the lowest of criminals has the right to a trial, he would end up without justice. He always thought that if they ever detained him, he'd have the right to a fair trial and he'd be found innocent. But here in Chile, this was not the reality. There were abuses of power by the military, which eliminated anyone who thought differently without a single law saying that thinking differently was against the law. The military made up their own criminal laws. Despite all this, we continued working with Pro-Paz and kept going on so that we could find our loved ones and fight against human rights abuses. . . .

From the despair, emerged the idea of making *arpilleras*. We didn't want to make something that would function as a decoration. We wanted to design a handmade product that would denounce what we and our country were living. We wanted to tell people about our personal experiences through pieces of our own clothing. We wanted to embroider our story, the harsh and sad story of our ruined country. At first, we had problems getting the materials, especially the cloth and the wool. So, we got the idea of cutting up our own clothes and unraveling our sweaters to make the first *arpilleras*. . . .

We opened our workshop in 1974, but we didn't go public until 1975. In those years, I took on full responsibility for the search of my brother. My sister had been kidnapped by a cab driver who interrogated her about the names of people she knew. She told him about her years as a volunteer worker in rural organizations

and about all her activities as a university student. After that my sister was afraid to go out into the street to look for our brother. I was scared too. We were all afraid to keep on asking and searching. Then I put all my energy into the *arpillera* workshop; it was sometimes the only thing that kept me balanced emotionally. There I found other people who were suffering from the same thing and trying to help them sometimes helped me with my own tragedy. . . .

In the same *arpillera* workshops we started training sessions to teach the women about solidarity and their role in the soup kitchens and other group activities. Sometimes it was hard teaching the women in the townships because they treated us worse than lepers; they believed that our protest activities would put them in jail or among the disappeared. It was hard convincing them that if we didn't unite and support each other, then we wouldn't be able to do anything. Many times the money that we got from the sale of *arpilleras* paid some child's medical fees or gave relief to a workshop family member. . . .

We women of Chile who were involved in the struggle had a more difficult time because, as we now realize, our men were so *machista*. Instead of helping us in those years, they pulled us down. Some of the women's husbands would not let them attend meetings or help in the training or with the solidarity work. In those years, men never said, "Compañera, let's go out and struggle together to change the reality of this country." Women were the ones who fought. . . .

As a woman I realized as part of this process of fighting for liberty in my country that the myth that they had driven into our heads all our lives—that the man is the one with the power and physical force to control everything—only goes so far. It's relative, and it's like all the other myths that they implanted in us women. It was the women comrades who managed to end the military nightmare in our country; they had the strength that the men lacked or lost along the way. Women, who were always housewives, woke up and didn't submit until freedom returned to their country and its citizens. . . .

A few years after we *arpilleristas* organized at the Vicariate, the priest Pepe Aldunate approached us and asked us to form the group named "Sebastian Azevedo." This organization was primarily concerned with the problem of torture. . . . We were so desperate to spread our message, as so many others in our country had already done many times before, that we chose to include other art forms, such as song and dance. We not only wanted to embroider and cry out our grief, but we also wished to sing our message of protest. This is how it came about that we began organizing people in other areas to form song and dance groups. . . . Since 1973 until now, 1994, I have always worked in all of the groups whenever I could and I have organized the women in the townships. I have put my own life aside, because for all of us the Pinochet dictatorship made us exist but not live. The dictatorship forced us to renounce everything and to struggle against torture and human rights violations, as well as to search tirelessly for our loved ones.¹¹

CONNECTIONS

1. What does the word *solidarity* mean to you? In what ways did solidarity and the ability to come together help the arpilleristas?
2. The arpilleras produced for the Vicaría de la Solidaridad drew on a set of traditionally female domestic skills—sewing, weaving, and embroidering, for example. In what ways were they able to turn their disadvantage as women in a traditional society into a political tool? In what ways did they defy traditional social roles in Chile?
3. In her study of the strategies used by arpilleristas and other women activists in Latin America, the feminist scholar Sara Ruddick writes about what she calls “political speech”:

In their protests, these women fulfill traditional expectations of femininity and at the same time violate them. . . . Their political circumstances, as well as the apparently greater vulnerability and the apparently greater timidity and conventionality of the men they lived among, required that they act publicly as women. Women who bring to the public plazas of a police state pictures of their loved ones . . . translate the symbols of mothering into political speech.¹²

Thinking about the “levers of power” available to women under the dictatorship, why do you think women were able to confront the junta more effectively than men? Why did the work of the arpilleristas lead them into conflicts with tradition?

4. What transformation does Violeta Morales’s testimony document? How did the search for her disappeared brother affect her as a person? as a woman?
5. What options were available to those who hoped for democratic reforms in Chile? Why do you think the arpilleristas chose nonviolent strategies? What other nonviolent movements have you studied?
6. Why do you think human rights groups used the arpilleras to call attention to the abuses of the regime? Compare the arpilleras with the text of the document in reading 3 (“Chilean Executions”). Both document similar things. Which is more effective for you?
7. The arpilleras helped to create momentum for human rights intervention in Chile. What other ways might capture the attention of the international community? When is intervention justified?