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The influence of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo on contemporary  
feminist movement in Argentina, Ni Una Menos

by

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the development of Argentine feminism between the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and Ni Una Menos. This study will examine the extent to which the Madres have established a permanent human rights framework that provides a structure for contemporary movements in Argentina. First, the socio-cultural and economic conditions in which the Madres emerged are dissected, including the results of Peronism and Eva Perón's influences on Argentine culture as explored through a feminist lens. Next, the tactics used by the Madres to subvert patriarchy and instead use oppression to their advantage are analyzed through their conceptions and expressions of motherhood which previously constricted women but were revoked to instead advance their positions. Finally, the similarities between the movements are presented to emphasize their common roots and goals. Their shared strategies signal the existence of a decade-long effort and struggle to ensure bodily autonomy for all. This work strives to provide insight into feminist development and to underline the benefits of understanding Argentine feminism as a legitimate model to follow.

**Keywords:** Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Ni Una Menos, feminism, Argentina, motherhood.

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## Introduction

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, Argentine feminists have strengthened the roots of political feminist activism nationally and worldwide. Contemporary movements such as Ni Una Menos (Not One Woman Less), the Campaña Nacional Por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito (The National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe, and Free abortions) along with others, have undergone immense growth in Argentina and thrive in their communities. While these developments are spontaneous, they are not random. Revolution and dissent have remained key characteristics of Latin American history and are intrinsically intertwined in the culture and socio-economic conditions since colonial times. Argentina's history with military dictatorship, censorship, and political violence created a unique environment that has culminated in the prominent feminist figures and movements surfacing today. The thread that runs through this history is the struggle for control over our own bodies.

The emergence of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo was revolutionary for human rights activism and the history of Argentina was permanently altered. This group of mothers formed in Buenos Aires during the military dictatorship in 1977, in direct response to the political disappearance of more than 30,000 people, many of them their children (Howe, 2006, p. 43). What started as a group of fourteen women walking silently, developed into an international movement against violence. As they marched weekly in the historical Plaza de Mayo, their identities as women, mothers, and human rights activists, along with their unprecedented tactics, gained traction and became acclaimed worldwide. Despite death threats and the intense grief felt from losing a child, they persevered. Their mark on society has been influential and continues to provide a source of leadership and hope to millions worldwide.

The Madres de Plaza de Mayo are the result of strong female leaders. The environment that formed them was full of extraordinary feminist thinkers and leaders. Our discussion will begin in the 1940's with Eva Duarte de Perón, the first lady of Argentina. Most commonly referred to as Evita, she was a charismatic leader who brought important changes to Argentine politics, most famously being women's suffrage. Her presence as an influential and powerful woman in politics set a precedent and continued to encourage other women to enter into leadership spaces. As the Madres were influenced and inspired by Evita, Ni Una Menos carries and expresses influence from the Madres. The social contexts within which these movements operate are the result of previous struggles, and from Evita to these days we can identify a common line of struggle in the expansion of women's rights.

Ni Una Menos is a major movement that started in Argentina in 2015 and has been adopted and implemented by feminists around the world. The initial objectives were to bring awareness to femicidio, the killing of women for being women, to decrease its prevalence, and to protect women. In Argentina, one woman is murdered every 30 hours, and Ni Una Menos has set an objective to address this directly (Beatly, 2017). Ni Una Menos' methods are unique because they understand the linkage between oppression and globalization, therefore, implementing complex tactics into their practices to dismantle disadvantageous, violent systems and structures. Political dissent is not a new phenomenon, and over time, as human rights activism has increased, so have the breadth of political tactics. Ni Una Menos is responsible for this expansion and it works to improve conditions for everyone.

The trajectory and development of feminism would be nowhere close to complete without an intersectional approach and understanding. Sociocultural and economic factors contributed immensely to the progress and spread of feminist thought and to women's accessible

positions in society. In reference to 1981, Argentine activist, feminist, and journalist, Agustina Paz Frontera explains: “Back then, we [Argentina] were a country in which people were going hungry, and women were the hardest hit, the economic downturn and wage gap made women more vulnerable to financial instability and domestic abuse” (Beatly, 2017). When instability becomes present in society, the oppressed and marginalized groups receive the brute force, both before anyone else experiences any strain, as well as long after others are no longer experiencing difficulties. This concept is then multiplied through countless lenses that can be added to a situation to better describe the marginalized experience. Economic difficulties, unemployment rates, poverty, and a lack of income all overlap into the Madres’ identities as activists who are in the workforce and at a disadvantage economically due to these identities they hold. In Argentina, many women attribute their inequalities to an adverse economic framework and the forces that control its direction. The violence that women face has reached the prevalence that it has because it is only now being addressed after countless incomprehensible deaths and economic neglect. While not a single woman should be killed for being a woman, the efforts cannot end there and “when we talk about gender violence, the most terrible thing that can happen is that they kill you. But then there’s a whole framework before you reach that point” (Beatley). In order to cease the occurrence of murders, oppression must be addressed in all sectors of society or developments will again fester into the deplorably intense conditions that lead to murder and even genocide. All forms of oppression must be eradicated at the roots.

In the past century, violence, wars, and chaos have been primary indicators of the times and while instability does not foster positive growth, desperation leads to radical measures. On June 3rd, 2015, 40,000 people took to the streets of Buenos Aires and set the course for the *marea verde* (green tide). With international support, Argentine women proudly vested their

green and purple *pañuelos* from that day forward in a collective effort to support feminist development everywhere. Their use of *pañuelos* by the movement is in direct reference to the struggles by the Madres de Plaza de Mayo that preceded them by 40 years. This thesis will explore correlations between the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and Ni Una Menos as feminist movements while examining how practices have developed, emerged as new, and have origins with the Madres.

## Objectives

In order to research how current feminist theory in Argentina has been influenced by Argentine history and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, I will explore the work of Argentine feminists and analyze how their practices ascended from the transformative, brave, and necessary choices that were taken by women before them. Each movement, including the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and Ni Una Menos, will be considered individually and researched through the lenses of theoretical frameworks including but not limited to intersectionality, gender, and patriarchy.

Neither feminism nor human rights can exist alone without the other. They are foundationally connected and both the Mothers and Ni Una Menos underline this claim. To highlight the intersectionality of human rights and feminism, the examination of both movements will strongly call on these similarities. While the *pañuelos* worn by the Mothers' once warranted a death sentence, today's green and colorful versions are worn just as proudly by millions worldwide and serve as a reminder to how far women's positions have advanced. In this respect, changes have been drastic and improvements significant, however, the frameworks created by their struggles must still continue to be built upon as inequalities and violence persist.



## Argentine Women's History

Feminist practice and advancement became prevalent in Argentine politics and society through actions carried out during the Perón administration. For the purpose of this research, the feminist narrative will begin with Maria Eva Duarte de Perón, wife of Juan Perón, and first lady of Argentina from June 1946, until her passing in 1952. More commonly known as Evita, the first lady existed in a uniquely situated position in the politics of Argentina. With the support of her husband, she was able to rapidly improve women's rights in the private and public spheres. In 1947, with the approval and implementation of the Ley de Sufragio Femenino (Women's Suffrage Law), women's rights expanded immensely. Not only did this law guarantee that women would be included in the right to vote but it also encouraged the government to expand and create new sectors such as public services and funded programs represented and run by members of marginalized groups to include even more people in the political process (Barry, 2011, p. 2). Evita was also the founder of the first feminist political party in Argentina, the Partido Peronista Femenino.

More than a political figure, Evita was a source of hope for a large number of the Argentine population. Her photos were included in shrines throughout homes and businesses and her speeches were repeated and repurposed infinitely. Her efforts, "gave women a working class consciousness. She was always on the side of those historically silenced and oppressed" (Eger, 2021). Evita's funeral was so sought after to attend that it lasted 16 days due to the length of the lines of people waiting to say goodbye to her body. As Evita's influence grew, Perón's popularity did as well and Peronismo, the largest political party in Argentina still today, became increasingly more established and accepted (Levitsky, 1998, p. 82). The strength of this movement rested in the lower, middle, and working classes whose majority support was

unprecedented and very loyal. Peronismo has remained a major influence throughout Argentine politics. Perón is still considered a champion for “the common people” and his popular reign, amassing 54% of the votes in his first election of 1946, led to important results including unionization of the workforce, an increase in real income among workers, and the expansion of labor rights. As with any election, the true sentiments of the voters are not intrinsically connected to how they vote. While someone might have voted for Perón, they might not identify as a Peronist, and these implications are significant. In order to differentiate these meanings, scholars call on the intense study and analysis of various socioeconomic factors to most accurately understand voting trends and authentic sentiments in Argentina during the initial decades of Perón’s leadership.

Evita set the historical and societal context in Argentina for the Madres de Plaza de Mayo to emerge. In addition to being immortalized by Madonna in *Evita*, “Her figure today is replicated in distinct symbols of the fight for the women’s movement. Flags, cards, t-shirts and tattoos light up the marches through their faces and phrases” (Eger, 2021). With such a public presence, Evita was not, however, exempt from hate. Many people, men and women, benefitted and continue to receive short term benefits from the maintenance of patriarchy and her overt stance on women’s rights was not accepted by all. Evita has been coined as a “Bitch. Crazy. Creeper. Bastard. Cheeky. There is no doubt that Evita was the receptor of unjustified aggression from the conservative sectors to negate her figure as a political leader. She was a woman who never self-identified as a feminist but occupied a fundamental role in the promotion and political participation of women for the transformation of rights” (Eger, 2021). Her public presence was magnetizing and the overwhelming, unconditional support from many was an unprecedented phenomenon. One aspect of this occurrence can be attributed to her persuasive rhetoric seen

famously both in one of her first speeches addressing the victory for women's suffrage as well as in one of her last speeches before her death:

**Eva Perón's Announcement of Womens' Suffrage Law, 23 September 1947**

“We have reached, I repeat, the objective that we had set, that we caressed lovingly throughout the day. The way has been long and laborious. But for the glory of woman, indefatigable defender of her essential rights, imposing obstacles did not frighten her. On the contrary, they served as a stimulus and incentive to her to continue the fight. As those obstacles multiplied, our enthusiasm intensified. The more they grew, the greater was our determination to win. And finally, on the verge of triumph, the chicanery of a falsely progressive opposition, tried to strike the last blow to delay the law's implementation. The maneuver against the people, against women, increased our faith. It was and is the faith placed in God, in the future of our country, in general Perón, and in our rights” (Duarte de Perón, 1947).

**Speech to the Descamisados, 1951**

“I deserve it for one thing alone, which is worth more than all the gold in the world: I deserve it for all I've done for the love of these people. I'm not important because of what I've done; I'm not important because of what I've renounced; I'm not important because of what I am or have. I have only one thing that matters, and I have it in my heart. It sets my soul aflame, it wounds my flesh and burns in my sinews: it's love for this people and for Perón” (Perón, 1951).

These two key moments mark strategic moments of Argentine history that permanently changed the trajectory of the country. The legacy of Evita's rhetoric reinforced the conceptions of social class that challenged previous notions within politics (Masut, 2006, p. 5). The issues that she brought to the fore were carefully crafted to shape the political environment into a position that would be most beneficial to her husband's leadership. Evita's perseverance with the establishment of the Peronist Feminine Party, designed to ensure voting rights for women, was fueled by her determination to gain support for Perón and achieve women's loyalty to the Peronist regime (Scriven, 2020, p. 2). This intentionally constructed relationship did not only strongly link women's progress and social advancement to Argentina's goals but relied on the figure of Perón and Evita. In this context, women's rights were intrinsically connected to the popularity and success of Perón and his wife, and were used as a way to garner support from the female population. In some ways, feminists argue that while Evita undoubtedly played a large role in increasing women's rights, her intentions were questionable and the working class women pushing boundaries with these rights are the true revolutionaries. After Evita's death, at just 33 years old, Perón became less connected to the working class. Additionally, he lost more followers as he attempted to controversially introduce the separation of church and state. As a result of mounting opposition among the middle class and armed forces, on September 19, 1955, Perón was forced from power and into exile by a coup d'état carried out by the Argentine army and navy. His removal from power had the goal of returning to the old order where workers lacked rights. While the military called their coup revolutionary, they were in fact, reactionary. During the years that Perón spent in exile, he remained a prolific political leader and remained extremely popular among the working class. Throughout these years, Peronismo was outlawed from politics in order to prevent his return and undermine his popularity among the electorate.

Finally, in 1972, Perón was allowed to return to Argentina after he spent 17 years in exile. He was again elected President, for a third time, in October 1973. However, his leadership was short-lived because he died less than a year later, on July 1st, 1974. Peronismo, although without its founder, did not die with Perón. Isabel Perón, the former Vice President and Perón's third wife, took office with the population hoping for a second Evita. Isabel ultimately lacked the leadership skills and was unable to control a chaotic situation as guerilla warfare against her government spread.

On March 24, 1976, yet another coup against a Peronist government signaled the beginning of the bloodiest military dictatorship in Argentina's history. Since the first military coup in 1930, Argentine politics had been marked by violence, mass mobilization, and sporadic insurgency in response to injustices. The so-called Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (PRN - Process of National Reorganization) aimed "to stamp out Argentina's culture of political mobilization, thoroughly reform the country, and protect its western, Christian culture against the revolutionary onslaught" (Robben, 2012, p. 307). Their leadership committed crimes against humanity such as torture, disappearances and extrajudiciary executions. The time period has been termed the *Guerra Sucia* (Dirty War) due to the military's use of state terror tactics to rid the nation of left-wing sympathizers. Evita Montonera, a magazine clandestinely published during the late seventies, was in opposition and declared that "This is a dirty war, like all wars waged by reactionary armies. It is not just dirty because it uses the people's sons to fight against their brothers and their interests, but because it doesn't even respect the war conventions. The enemy assassinates the wounded, tortures and executes prisoners, and turns its brutality against the people's relatives" (2012, p. 307). This term, however, faced polarizing usage as it was later repurposed and used by military officials against those being oppressed as "General Vilas

emphasized: ‘This is a dirty war, a war of attrition, dark and sly, which one wins with decisiveness and calculation ...’ General Camps explained: ‘The subversives made it dirty. They chose the forms of combat and determined our actions’ (2021, p. 308). Each side used *dirty* to their own purpose, however, it has remained an identifier of the brutal military regimes’ unimaginable actions.

Jorge Rafael Videla was the president of Argentina the first few years of the military junta (from 1976 until 1981) as extreme repression and violence was unleashed onto the population. The Madres de Plaza de Mayo organized to address his actions and had a singular, clear and consistent objective: “that the detained and disappeared are returned alive” (Fig. 1). Their method consisted of silent protests in front of the Casa Rosada, the seat of power in Argentina. Today, symbols unique to the Mothers are at the forefront of feminist motifs as the



**Figures 1 & 2** White and green *pañuelos* worn by protestors.

Source: VOA 2015

iconic green, purple, and orange bandanas coveted by millions reference the Madres’ white *pañuelos*. One of the formational Madres’ suggested using it as a form of identification, “How about a gauze shawl, a diaper? It will make us feel closer to our children” as seen in Figure 1 (Bouvard, 1994, p. 74). The *pañuelo* itself is a direct parallel to the white ones vested by the Mothers to represent their lost children who were no longer wearing them (Bouvard, 1994, p. 64).

After the Madres de Plaza de Mayo held their first protest with only 14 women, their numbers grew rapidly. Soon enough, news recordings aired internationally, one capturing a grief-stricken mother expressing her distraught for their lost children, proclaim amid tears that “We don’t know if they are sick, if they are cold, if they are hungry, we don’t know anything” (Parque de la Memoria, 2018). When they began to take matters into their own hands and fervently search as detectives for their children, the Madres wanted to make reports of their disappearance for judicial and/or journalistic investigation. However, instead of being received with support by the authorities, police stations, consulates, embassies, ministries, and churches offered no help, and instead told the mothers that their children’s files and names did not exist, erasing their entire lives (Parque de la Memoria, 2018).

### **The Madres and Feminism**

The struggles for justice carried out by the Madres have undergone extensive review and their inclusion in scholarly works is vast. While they are recognized extensively for their efforts and successes in the human rights sector, their influence reaches much deeper and has changed fluidly over time. The Madres’ struggles to garner notability and respect were framed in a societal context that was very different from that of today. Routinely, patriarchy attempts to discredit women’s struggles and demands by labeling their efforts as hysterical rather than rational. Politicians and journalists intentionally focus on emotional outbursts and breaks from the societal norm to categorize women in the space of the ‘other’ and one that is delirious. At first, the Madres were discredited and referred to instead as “*las locas de Plaza de Mayo*” (the crazies of the Plaza de Mayo) as neither the junta leaders or society members believed they could achieve their stated goals or undermine the military dictatorship’s reign (Nabuca and Amarante,

2011, p.2). Women's movements often have had more impact on social aspects than politics. Furthermore, feminism was heavily rooted on the West and 'modernization,' leading many in Argentina to completely reject it or at least disagree (Howe, 2006, p. 44). The Madres have proved this conception of a digestible, modern, western feminism wrong for nearly half a century as they never gave into these constricting stereotypes. When a group of 14 women turns into hundreds, then thousands, and their demands and methods are adopted worldwide, and they aid in the redemocratization efforts in Argentina, and found a powerful human rights organization known today as "Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo" we can see that women, whether or not they are empowered by Western conceptions of feminism, can bring about significant social and political change. Their objectives have shifted, and while they have grappled with disorganization and inevitable disagreements, their ability to persevere is reinforced by contemporary intersectional feminism that champions all identities and struggles. The Madres' identities and experiences with middle to lower class working backgrounds made their fight accessible and appealing to a wide spectrum of people who opposed the military for a diversity of reasons. Living and working conditions during the military dictatorship faced severe lows. Stagnation, and even regression, were encouraged and enforced through violent repercussions when not complied with. If one had any connection to dissent, they were subject to cruelty of the regime and even death. The Madres are remarkable because they were able to create a strong movement even under these brutal circumstances, while very few of the rest of the members of society were able to do anything at all. At the time, the Madres did not consider themselves to be feminists because their goals had nothing to do with traditionally feminist purposes, however their initiatives required feminist practice. They undermined both the military dictatorship and



the patriarchal systems through the implementation and representation of their diverse identities, backgrounds, and experiences which is inherently a feminist act.

Nevertheless, the Madres faced criticism from other feminists. They relied heavily upon a maternal feminine framework which excludes those who do not fit into who was thought to be a woman or a mother (Barry, 2014, p. 21). The Madres were criticized as antifeminist because they harnessed traditional gender roles that were seen by some as affirmation of patriarchal domination. In Latin America during this time, women faced stereotypical expectations that placed them in a disadvantageous position “as guardians of the home and family that Latin American feminists were so desperate to deconstruct” (Howe, 2006, p. 44). As a result, the use of motherhood as a political tool was seen as an affront to feminist struggles in the region. Efforts to break down patriarchal roles and beliefs and provide freedom to women were underway across the region and progress was being made. The Madres walked peacefully, silent, with embroidered white *pañuelos* around their heads, in a downward gaze. Some thought that their adoption of these traditionally female expressions would limit their ability to create change and achieve their goals. If they were rough, violent, loud, and carried intense tones, some feminists wondered if they would have a more extraordinary influence.

### **Feminist Identities and Purpose**

Speaking of the Madres as solely human rights activists does a tremendous injustice to their struggles. As Sara Howe skillfully demonstrates, studying overlaps of identity can offer insights into the extent of political participation, historical context, and effects of oppression (2006, p. 48). While the Madres purposefully relied and amplified their identities as mothers and

used it to their advantage, Ni Una Menos rejects these confining stereotypes, yet both groups are still feminist. Over time, some scholars have berated the Madres for their maintenance of traditional female stereotypes and therefore, their strategies could appear as a contradiction in the theoretical framework of feminist theory. However, the answer to this apparent contradiction lies in the objective and purpose of feminism. In *Feminism is for Everybody* by author and activist bell hooks, feminism is famously defined as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (Hooks, 2015, p. xii). The notion that feminism is for the benefit of all those who use it is especially present in comparison between these two movements because each employ vastly different feminist techniques, yet, remain distinctly feminist and consistently fight oppression with resilience, using whatever means necessary.

There would be no need for action if there was no problem to begin with. The Madres did not choose to identify as feminists because their primary goal was for the living return of their children and to end disappearances. In fighting for this goal to be achieved, however, they were in close contact with patriarchal forces that did everything in their power to prevent the Madres’ success. They were situated in a space that made them inherently feminist. Scholars worldwide identify patriarchy as a structure that has sustained over centuries and has developed into fractures that spread throughout all sectors of society. This system can be placed within a broader context that frames violence against women as intertwined with the social, economic, and cultural conditions (Acacio and Cabral, 2016, p. 172). Patriarchy serves as a method to reaffirm the domination of men over women in society and impose oppression over all. Practices of patriarchy are not limited to spaces, gender, or societies, but can be expressed by everyone when not actively working to implement the opposite. In the context of the current systems, violence

exerted towards women by men is not abnormal or exceptional but is a norm that in many environments is protected and even encouraged or supported (Femenias, 2008, p. 11).

Through the creation of monuments, books, and textbooks, the Madres' legacy continues to inspire and support all who come into contact with them. The struggle in Argentina with abortion does not only center around its legal status, but increasingly around its accessibility. In *Revolución de Las Hijas* (Revolution of the Daughters), noteworthy feminist Luciana Peker presents statistics which show that more women from Argentina are dying, 46 per year, from clandestine abortions than women in Uruguay where deaths resulting from these abortions are at zero because there are no barriers to legal, safe abortions (Peker, 2019, pp. 17-18). Peker urges readers to fight to ensure that access to safe and legal abortions are not prevented by obstacles. As an intersectional feminist, Peker holds the state accountable for its policy choices and for the deaths of women that were trying to access safe abortions in some way reflecting what the Madres have done in relation to the deaths of their sons, daughters, grandchildren, and loved ones.

### **The Madres and Ni Una Menos**

It is impossible to overlook the connections between the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and contemporary Argentine feminism. These associations prove to highlight the successful tactics that were employed by the Madres and have maintained popularity even until today. On the other hand, when comparing the two, it is clearer which tactics are not being practiced today and why. The conditions in which the Madres formed under, required rapid action and they did not leave room for deliberation or extensive rationale. There are choices they made that did not benefit

their progress in the long run and feminists today can learn from these shortcomings to prevent setbacks. While these protocols might have been beneficial for the Madres' goals, women's positions in society have changed and those practices no longer serve the same purpose. Ni Una Menos has chosen to reject certain practices to reflect progress, innovation, and reject boundaries. The unique layer of extremely violent and overt oppression that the Madres fought against called for extraordinary measures and this environment has shifted, leading to the transformation of frameworks and fundamental behaviors. This section will examine the similarities and differences in formation, practice, composition, and results between the two movements.

At the most foundational level, both movements were initially catalyzed by reaction to genocide. The Madres were losing their children and loved ones based on political ideologies and the targeting of political 'subversives' and in response were able to exploit their marginalized identities to demand justice and compel others to fight back. In the Madres' experience it was genocide in the form of disappearances and overt violence by the military dictatorship, resulting in more than 30,000 disappearances over a seven year long period. Similarly, the founding journalists of Ni Una Menos were appalled by the almost universal acceptance of a societal norm that inherently placed women in harm's way simply for their identity as women. The femicide of Chiara Paez, a fourteen year old schoolgirl in May of 2015, was the last murder that would take place without the presense of a major international movement's advocacy. Chiara's legacy, the journalists, and caring people fighting to expel the existence of inequality, were able to mobilize millions and received overwhelming support.

No catalyst can thrive without a host and the extraordinary women who started, and continue the fight, for justice, sacrificing everything. It is no coincidence that each movement

was established by women and it points to the repetition of a phenomenon that results in the emergence of leaders from marginalized groups' taking responsibility during times of crisis, when no one else is taking the initiative. It is only once a crisis has become dire and affects everyone that those of oppressed identities are left to undertake the imperative efforts and deal with the most intense of the struggles. The Madres' first demonstration consisted of fourteen women, Azucena Villaflor, popularly regarded as the group's "determined, charismatic, and decisive leader," along with infinite notable efforts from Berta Braverman, Haydée García Buelas, María Adela Gard de Antokoletz, Julia, María Mercedes, Cándida Gard, Delicia González, Pepa Noia, Mirta Acuña de Baravalle, Kety Neuhaus, Raquel Arcushin, Nora Cortiñas, and Senora De Caimi (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, 2022). Before the first demonstration in the Plaza de Mayo, the Madres met in churches and homes, searching for justice. After visiting a church together, and being denied information and support, Villaflor is documented by Nora Cortinas and cataloged by various authors in the book *Las Viejas* as well as in an interview with Norita herself, hosted by La Tribu: La Mar en Coche, as making a call to action and she states:

Azucena: "Well, this is no longer where we need to come, we have to go to the Plaza de Mayo so that they see us. We will enter the Casa de Gobierno and stop coming here to listen to the terrible things that this priest says to us. Let's go Saturday."

Azucena has been largely regarded as a vital leader for the Madres and Marcela Ojeda, journalist and activist, has been deemed with a similar reputation for Ni Una Menos after her use of a coveted phrase in a tweet from May 11, 2015 that has now been repurposed infinitely as seen in Figure 3.



“Actresses, politicians, artists,  
... business owners, social  
references ... women,  
everyone, bah.. We aren’t going  
to raise our voice? THEY ARE  
KILLING US”

**Figure 3** Marcela Ojeda’s original tweet.

Through the use of Ojeda’s journalist platform, her connections and professional network quickly responded to the idea and the traction it gained immediately supported the reality that she was no longer alone in demanding involvement and change. Those who she called on to use their voices followed suit and soon enough the name for the movement, Ni Una Menos, was born while demonstrations were simultaneously being planned and officials were being forced to take notice. Every woman has a different experience interacting with the oppressive system, however, all involved, regardless of gender, are pulled into action through empathy employed by Ojeda in her initiative.

In both situations, those in harm's way are targeted for either their personal identities, political involvement, or both. While the conditions of genocide differ, their direct correlation is to oppressive systems, violence, and efforts of marginalization. Even after about five decades of the existence of the Madres, the infrastructure for these oppressive systems remains in place and morphs into new shapes. Are the systems contributing to the existence of femicidio today directly related to the disappearances carried out by the regime during the Guerra Sucia?



*Figures 4 & 5* Traditional protest locations in downtown Buenos Aires.

Methods of dissent such as public protest have remained in use and are replicated, at times identically, to elicit attention and to require a response. Both the Madres and Ni Una Menos first expressed official dissent through public protest in downtown Buenos Aires, centering around iconic and powerful historical sites such as the Casa Rosada, Plaza de Mayo, and the National Congress Building (Figures 4 & 5).

Whether in the 70's or today, women do not hold back in times of crisis. The Madres took an extremely vulnerable and sentimental symbol of motherhood, a diaper, and used it to garner attention and legitimacy. These vulnerable symbols of motherhood, pregnancy and infancy, were thrust into the center of the political forum to threaten the foundation of the military regime's logic. The body serves as an instrument to political will, however, the Madres' inverted this belief by relying on the intense polarity between the delights and distresses that come along with the experience of labor (Bouvard, 1994, p. 184). It is a shared tactic to use overtly feminine symbols to elicit a shock out of the opposition. Patriarchal systems often elicit the most confounding responses as they commit the most offenses. Each movement has mastered the reappropriation of previously persecuted and repressed themes. Ni Una Menos, while inclusive of all genders, was started by women and can often be seen using depictions of vulvas, vaginas,

and reproductive systems in protesting materials as well as across social media. While this unquestionably grabs the attention of everyone in the path of the media, it simultaneously empowers those involved to be proud of who they are and use their once marginalized identities to advance themselves and their goals. People with internal reproductive organs have been historically oppressed for ownership of these, however, both the Madres and Ni Una Menos have used this classification to empower and uplift instead of disadvantage and shame.

### Modern Feminist Expression

The developments of feminist practice have clear relationships between the two movements discussed throughout this research. The Madres de Plaza de Mayo have undergone drastic shifts as an organization, however, they have adapted and exist today as the Hijas,



**Figure 6** Green *pañuelo* worn for abortion rights.

*Source: CECLI 2019*

Abuelas and of course, Madres de Plaza de Mayo. The original composition of the Madres have not been forgotten and can still be seen in the media consistently. Symbolically, their message is used in Argentina's fight for abortion access as seen in Fig. 6.



The ribbon-like structure in the middle is meant to resemble the *pañuelos* that the Madres wore and the words read, “Sexual education to decide, contraceptives for no abortion, legal abortion to not die.” These bandanas have turned into an iconic feminist symbol that millions repurpose and use to express their dissent and intentions. Even those in opposition of abortion access, who identify as pro-life, use a light blue bandana wrapped around their heads that reads, “*Salvemos las 2 vidas*” (We save both lives), to spread their message. The irony with the emergence of this bandana lies in the roots of the *pañuelos*. The Madres were not pro-choice or pro-life, however, they fought fervently for equal rights and anti-violence which inherently coincides with the right to choose and the control of ones’ own bodily autonomy. Efforts of Ni Una Menos today strongly tie into the complex historical developments of bodily sovereignty that the Madres demanded with determination.

Major accomplishments of the Madres include the introduction of a major human rights movement that supports more education, subsidized programs for support, and continued weekly protests to raise awareness. Their organization has always been run democratically and serves as a reminder to the success of their “anarchist vision of equality and self-determination through direct participation” in the 70’s and 80’s (Bouvard, 1994, p. 229). The president of the organization, Hebe de Bonafini, and one of the original Madres, says that she “acts only with the full consent of each member; no decisions are taken unless there is agreement among the fifteen-member commission” (p. 229). The Madres have contributed immensely to the filing of criminal charges and to convictions against accomplices of the military regime by the hundreds in court houses throughout Argentina. Modern day science of DNA recognition has been a major resource advocated by the Madres to investigate mass graves and identify desaparecidos. Additionally, the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo formed as an organization to continue the fight of

the Madres but to specifically search for the children born from pregnant desaparecidos (Pauchulo, 2008, p. 29). At least 130 children have been identified as children of the desaparecidos who were never returned to their families but were distributed by the military rule to various families and orphanages (Casos resueltos, 2019). The Madres have not ceased since they began marching and today they coexist with Ni Una Menos, working separately but collectively towards the same universal goal, rights to bodily autonomy.



**Figure 7** Map of Latin America's abortion laws.

Source: Center for Reproductive Rights 2019

In December of 2020, Argentine feminists fought and protested for safe, legal abortions and ultimately won. This vote of Congress passed a law to legalize abortions, for any reason, up to 14 weeks at no cost to the patient on December 30th, 2020. This counted as a massive win for not only Argentina but as an influential initiative for the rest of Latin America to follow suit (Figure 7). The right to access safe, legal, and free abortions is intrinsically connected to Ni Una Menos because it deals with the sovereignty over one's own body, "Without legal abortions, Ni Una Menos is not possible" (Ni Una Menos, 2017). Chiara Paez, for example, who was murdered by her boyfriend, was six weeks pregnant and was found with abortion pills in her system. This finding points to the possibility that her death could have been partially a result of a dispute over her pregnancy and complications with a clandestine abortion that could have had a different outcome if access to reproductive health was universally legal. Abortions save women's lives and Ni Una Menos has taken on the fight for abortion access just as strongly as they have for femicidio because the struggles are connected. When necessary, Ni Una Menos shifts, takes on new issues, and does whatever it takes to improve conditions for those facing adversity and insecurity.

Feminists of Ni Una Menos have embraced an intersectional approach that champions anticapitalism and decolonization. The single-issue narrative that was once most prevalent, and arguably most advantageous, is no longer the case due to the interconnectedness, and globalization, that now prevails. Not only is this outdated narrative isolating human rights activists and feminists being removed from practice, it is intentionally being changed and reimplemented with more inclusive practices that acknowledge the complexities of oppression and patriarchy. Known today as intersectional feminism, it first labeled and widely spread by Kimberly Crenshaw in 1989, and was already in practice in Argentina before there was a word

for it. In Argentina, ensuring that one's feminism is intersectional has been proven to be most advantageous. Ensuring that one's own personal feminist practice is intersectional, while ensuring that an entire movement's is as well, is unyielding and requires a great deal of energy and attention. The lack of research on women's political activism, specifically on their accomplishments, is reflective of improvements that still must be made to reach true equality. Feminist efforts are not only feminist, as we have seen with the Madres and Ni Una Menos, human rights activists and feminists can coexist and smoothly work together.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this thesis, I have strived to highlight the uniqueness of feminism and activism in Argentina. Unlike anywhere else in the world, the caliber of social change that has been introduced and developed over the 50 year timespan between the Madres and Ni Una Menos is revolutionary. The challenges that each movement has surpassed are seemingly insurmountable, however, their persistence has truly succeeded in redefining social position and activism. Incredibly, the pace shows no sign of slowing down as women, and other historically marginalized communities continue to meet objectives, design initiatives, and implement change.

Patriarchal roots run deep and even so, the Madres have overturned the conceptions of motherhood from being passive and private and transformed them into an act that goes beyond biology and prioritizes love and care as revolutionary and powerful acts. They rejected notions of femininity that did not serve them and redefined what it was to be a woman and a mother (Bouvard, 1994, p. 221). Similarly, Ni Una Menos has taken the issues they see being ignored into their own hands and overtly address domestic violence at its root. They leave no room for

negotiation and since their first manifestation on June 3rd, 2015, Ni Una Menos has served as a reminder to what is possible when revolutionary work takes place. Domestic violence is unacceptable, however, it will not be eliminated overnight because of the vast systems which it benefits. Bringing awareness to an issue is a great start to decreasing its prevalence and Ni Una Menos has continued to go further in decreasing femicidio with the introduction of educational materials on body sovereignty and abuse, by increasing access to resources, and by building a framework that never acknowledges domestic abuse or oppression as an acceptable action.

As legislation is continually introduced worldwide that limits women's autonomy, the Madres' objectives grow even more imperative. Ni Una Menos was born during this context and can be understood more clearly through a historically-informed feminist perspective that acknowledges the development from the framework set by the Madres. Where the Madres have faltered, modern-day feminism can learn, improve, and prosper. Without the work of the Madres and Ni Una Menos, women would have significantly less legitimacy and influence and feminists even 50 years apart agree that the fight for equality is worth it.

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