



Militant Motherhood Re-Visited: Women's Participation and Political Power in Argentina and Chile

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Abstract

This article addresses the immediate and long-term implications of militant motherhood in the Latin American Southern Cone. It contributes a new perspective to the now sizable literature on women's resistance and political participation by comparing militant motherhood under leaderships on opposite sides of the political spectrum. Mothers' mobilization could, but did not, by definition, focus on gender equity or feminist goals. Anti-Allende women in Chile demanded military intervention – while the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina requested an end to human rights abuses by the incumbent military regime. Both show how cross-national variation in the objective of militant motherhood still led to similar outcomes. The case studies of Chile and Argentina reveal that militant mothers' immediate and long-term success lay in the nature of their resistance and their skillful use of tradition. They expanded traditional understandings of motherhood, and helped overcome the limits of gendered citizenship rights that restricted women's political participation.

'Having children is the most beautiful and most revolutionary experience there is. . . . As a mother, I can't just watch out for one child, there are millions of children in the country. . . . Maternity has a historical dimension and not just an individual one.' – Marta, Salvadoran woman, fighting for the liberation of her people¹

Militant motherhood, defined as women's use of maternal responsibilities to justify engagement beyond the domestic sphere, has transformed the characteristics of political discourse and the gendered underpinnings of political participation in Chile and Argentina, most significantly since the 1970s.² In both places, mothers mobilized, initially, in response to political and economic conditions that undermined their ability to fulfill traditional family expectations. The study of motherhood, the state, and women's roles in re-democratization has inspired this article. Its focus took shape as the outcome of a number of analytical considerations, of some preliminary conclusions, and of a resulting effort to contribute a novel perspective to motherhood and gendered histories of political participation in the Latin American Southern Cone. In earlier projects, I aimed at illustrating how

authoritarian leaders yoked the meaning of motherhood to the interests of military regimes. Indeed, military governments generally stressed all traits commonly associated with motherhood as within the house and home – far removed from political participation in different spheres. The military aimed at intensifying the marginalization of women, thereby reinforcing patriarchal control over women's bodies, reproductive labor, and the family. While immediate regressive effects of military policies on gender equity and women's resistance to these measures have been well documented, women's on-going political mobilization and the long-term implications of militant motherhood deserve closer attention.³

When we compare two groups of women with very different goals and political convictions, the Chilean organizers of the March of Pots and Pans and the Argentine Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, we find that their skillful use of tradition and not the appeal of the content of their political message secured the ongoing importance of women's political voices in both national settings. Analysis of the challenge women posed to traditional images of motherhood and to the roles of mothers constructed by governments or dictatorships allows us to gain insights into militant mothers' ability to overcome a number of *immediate* barriers to women's political participation. We can also trace how women built legacies that strengthened their access to *lasting* political participation and full citizenship rights. Ongoing challenges to gender equity in both countries make the comparison particularly relevant. Chile and Argentina still negotiate the meanings of bureaucratic authoritarianism and the long-term effect of the temporary suspension of political activity within civil society. The terms of political participation and women's access to decision-making power remain contested in both re-democratizing settings. The case studies of Chile and Argentina shed light on these tensions and reveal that militant mothers' immediate and long-term success lay in the nature of their resistance.

Can the politicization of motherhood, women's references to their maternal roles and family responsibilities, indeed 'revolutionize' motherhood in order to legitimize women's voices in the political arena? Can women of all classes rely on the strength of militant motherhood as they attempt to become political actors with equal rights to men? What are the characteristics of motherhood that represent its collectivist or unifying force, evoked by Marta from El Salvador, who reminded us 'Maternity has a historical dimension and not just an individual one'? Two examples of women's unprecedented political participation illustrate that the debates surrounding militant motherhood are far from over.

Militant Motherhood in Chile: The March of Empty Pots and Pans in Historical Context

On December 1, 1971, more than five thousand Chilean women stunned their fellow citizens in an unprecedented, public display of political protest

to Salvador Allende's *Unidad Popular* coalition government. The women first met at *Plaza Baquedano*, a square at the center of Santiago that many Chileans considered a dividing line, both symbolic and real, between the wealthy and poor sectors of the capital city. At the meeting, no clear dividing line separated the protesters: elite and working-class women alike had decided that the intolerable shortcomings of Allende's peaceful revolution required an active, collective response.⁴ Marching through busy downtown areas, they made their objections seen and heard by shouting anti-government slogans and by banging empty pots and pans purchased especially for the occasion. Pounding household tools not only provided the desired sound effect, but also delivered the message that food shortages and women's concern for their families had motivated their call for military intervention to replace the incumbent government. The sounds that outdid habitual city noise, and, even more important, the presence of large crowds of women on the streets of Santiago, were positively provocative.⁵

Chilean women had taken to the streets in response to the signs of increased economic shortcomings and political tensions initiated by the peaceful revolution of the first elected socialist president in Latin American history. Salvador Allende, elected by a narrow margin in 1970, promised to diminish class differences through redistribution of political and economic power. His government initiated the nationalization of the economy and set out to increase access to political decision-making for all Chileans – within the margins of the democratic Constitution. While most supporters were optimistic at the onset, euphoric feelings soon gave way to caution. An economic squeeze by international and national opponents challenged the production process within national boundaries and prevented the import of basic consumer goods. Divisions among the members of Allende's governing coalition challenged the unified line of the revolutionary process. Workers demanded control of the production process before the government was ready to comply. Long lines for food became familiar occurrences, increasing the sense of insecurity, and stimulating growing unrest. Women felt the need to act according to their understandings of the political situation and their daily experience of crisis. It was, after all, mostly women who stood in line for access to goods. Thus women were the first to feel the difficulty, or outright inability, to provide for their families. They justified their militancy on their own rational grounds, as mothers and wives, and demanded a change of leadership by all means necessary.⁶

Argentine Mothers of the Disappeared: Legitimizing Quests for Truth under Military Dictatorship

Argentine women, meanwhile, initiated their protests as a quest for knowledge, first, and for political change, second. They mobilized under military rule, a context quite distinct from the process of peaceful revolution in Chile – and their paths had first crossed in prisons, hospitals, government

offices, and court houses while searching for their missing children. In 1977, their initial public appearance was less intrusive than the sound of empty pots and pans, but equally disturbing to the Argentine leadership. Marching in circles, carrying large photographs of missing relatives, women brought private pains to the public domain. Committed to the search for the 'disappeared', fourteen women first demanded their rights as mothers: to know the truth about their children. The *Mothers of Plaza de Mayo* convened in downtown Buenos Aires, in front of the *Casa Rosada*, the government palace, on the square near the May Pyramid, the political, financial, and symbolic center of power in Buenos Aires.⁷ Given that military law prohibited three people or more to stand together in public, the women decided to move, not stand, and started perpetually walking in a circle. Persistence was part of their claim to success: they met and marched every Thursday afternoon at 3:30 p.m. Other mothers and grandmothers joined, and the circle of marchers quickly grew in size. Even though all protesters appealed to traditional gendered rights and responsibilities, they were soon confronted by police, claiming, ironically, to defend a country under siege.⁸

Argentine militant mothers had taken up protest in the year following a military coup. The military seized power within the midst of the political turmoil following the death of former president and populist Juan Domingo Perón. Perón had left state leadership in the hands of his third wife, Isabel, in a moment of intense, often violent political competition between right- and left-wing Peronists. Argentine civilians were no strangers to military intervention, but this time, the brutality and longevity of authoritarianism exceeded their worst expectations. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, the military moved aggressively to repress civil liberties and to eradicate what it considered a leftist insurgency. It implemented a Process of National Reorganization, the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*, and imposed a system of 'national security' of staggering brutality. From 1976 to 1983, between 15,000 and 25,000 people were killed or disappeared. More were imprisoned and tortured. Curfews and censorship prevailed, phones were tapped, private mail intercepted, and no news could be distributed without passing the new Secretary for State Information. National Security legislation opened the path to quick arrests and incarceration of those accused of threatening the social order. Many Argentine citizens ended up in clandestine concentration camps and detention centers before they were killed or 'disappeared'.⁹

Militant Motherhood as a Cross-Class and Dynamic Phenomenon

In Chile and Argentina, women of all sectors of society used motherhood and family welfare as principal mobilizational references that justified their public appearance and overt protest to the incumbent leadership. Women, deemed apolitical members of civil society in traditional gender systems, could step into the political arena without direct opposition to their

intervention. They rallied to defend their rights as wives and mothers, rights which traditional gender systems assured them in theory, but which current economic and political realities denied them in practice. Chilean women demanded the right to care for their families; as mothers, they experienced the tensions of food shortages, and, with it, the inability to fulfill their traditional obligations. Argentine women mobilized as mothers who had lost their family members and, evoking maternal bonds and obligations, demanded information on children, husbands, and relatives. Even though the two groups' political outlook was miles apart and reflected goals specifically connected to the particular tensions in each national setting, both groups' mobilizing efforts raise questions about the strategic potential of militant motherhood in developing powerful and lasting political voices.

Re-visiting the anti-Allende women in Chile, this analysis takes seriously the reminder that 'conservative women were neither static nor inflexible', and 'did not hail exclusively from the upper classes'. As organizers of one of the first women's protest marches to make history, and as an ongoing presence in Chilean politics, 'they cannot be . . . dismissed summarily as *viejas momias* (old mummies)', since they were of different ages and varied class backgrounds.¹⁰ These dynamic characteristics hold true for the Argentine women as well. At one time unified, the political engagement of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo took different directions. Years after their first appearance, members chose diverse strategies in their ongoing political engagement. Both multifaceted movements, once again, raise important questions: to what extent has the practice of militant motherhood indeed 'revolutionized' motherhood to legitimize women's voices in the political arena – and could women, as mothers, break the patterns that have prolonged the lack of gender-equity in political participation in the Southern Cone? Could the gap between the gendered citizenship rights of men and women be diminished through militant motherhood?

Contemporary Chilean and Argentine experiences provide initial clues to these important questions: in both countries, the patterns of women's political participation have changed significantly. The groups themselves, conservative anti-Allende women and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, have transformed over time, revealing the flexibility of their expressions of gender-based political claims and innovative strategies. Both groups were highly responsive to political transitions they either accepted or rejected. In the aftermath of the March of Empty Pots and Pans, conservative women of the political right in Chile inspired subsequent public appearances of women's groups of other political affiliations and alternative cross-class alliances. The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo moved from pronounced 'apolitical' positions to accept 'political' responsibilities and helped shape the way Argentines address their authoritarian past.¹¹ A comparison of the extended historical trajectory of two histories of militant motherhood in Chile and Argentina provides more detailed responses to the above questions.

Long View I: From Anti-Allende Protests to Expanding Women's Political Participation in Chile

In the 1970s, negotiations among political leaders and women were not entirely unprecedent. A few months prior to the public appearance of militant mothers, banging on pots and pans, government officials had drawn their own conclusions and had identified women's challenges. With food shortages and growing tensions in the air, Allende's government, with the help of women's organization of the governing coalition, called women for a meeting at Santiago's stadium on July 29, 1971. Thousands of women followed the call and stayed put to listen to Pedro Vuskovic, Minister of Economy, Development, and Reconstruction.¹² The minister pleaded for support. He asked women to help calm the rising storm, and, significantly, addressed them as both mothers *and* citizens. It became clear that leaders felt obliged to explain the crisis and promised to work on relief. While women citizens were hardly expected to resolve the challenges of political and economic transitions on their own, incumbent male political leaders expected their patience and support. Yet, conservative women, heedless of the message, decided to act on their own. They changed the gendered terms of interaction between male leaders and female citizens, and provoked new understandings of the roles and responsibilities of mothers and women.

Anti-Allende women's March of Pots and Pans in December of the same year had consequences on multiple levels. Other protests by Chilean women appeared promptly: new stories of marches involving empty pots and pans made the headlines three days later in the port city of Valparaíso, and similar types of protests were reported in Rancuagua, south of Santiago.¹³ More importantly, organizers and participants provoked a re-visioning of the gendered understandings of citizenship rights and notions of women's political participation. First, images of thousands of women marching the streets of Santiago abruptly shattered conventional visions of 'secluded' motherhood and domesticity, as imagined by tradition-bound city residents. Second, the March initiated a lasting 'border-crossing', in which the protesters removed old boundaries that had prevented women's active political participation in earlier decades.

The public reactions to the March, as well as the silences, offered revealing insights into the force of militant motherhood. In the context of traditional gender responsibilities in Chilean society, it seemed surprising that nobody condemned the women's active involvement as 'maternal transgressions'. Instead, both left- and right-wing political leaders worked hard to question the women's autonomous decision to march against Allende. Male leaders of the right made every effort to use the event for *their* Anti-Allende campaign by describing the superior feminine virtue of the women in the March. Male leaders of the left, supporting Allende, singled out the working-class mobilizing mothers and described them as ignorant and tradition-bound, as victims of right-wing propaganda campaigns, as puppets without their own cause.¹⁴ The nature of the critique from both sides of the

political spectrum, as well as both sides' silence about the challenge this display of militant motherhood posed to traditional understandings of maternal responsibilities and of womanhood as apolitical, represented a pivotal step on the path to the lasting power of militant motherhood.

Women *did* seize interpretive power even if we look to male leaders for an initial perspective on the March and even as male public voices tried to question their autonomous political decision to march for a cause. A society that had long defined motherhood and women's family roles as fundamental expressions of womanhood began to engage in a process of transforming women's identity from private to public. Leaving behind the role of *apolitical* mothers, women were on their way to becoming citizens with new rights and obligations. Conservative women contributed to the end of peaceful revolution and to the rise of the infamous military regime (1973–89) led by General Pinochet. Yet, regardless of their political convictions, they paved the way for the militant mothers of the future.

Democracy in the Country and Democracy at Home: New Generations of Militant Mothers and Mobilizing Women

Different groups of Chilean women subsequently extended the meanings of militant motherhood and women's political participation when they protested the regime that violently terminated Allende's government on September 11, 1973. Initially, Chileans witnessed human rights violations and disappearances that affected, predominantly, former affiliates of Allende's government. Soon thereafter, the threat of violence became a central control mechanism imposed by the military, and all members of civil society were exposed to potential arrest, torture, or death.¹⁵ The effects of state terror adversely affected women. Seeing their families destroyed as a result of arrests and disappearances, women began to mobilize. By the 1980s, self-help, human rights, and feminist initiatives included activities as diverse as soup-kitchens, marches for human rights, and demonstrations that explicitly addressed the rights of women. Some began to connect the military to domestic violence and took a critical stand towards authoritarian and patriarchal practices in both domestic and public spheres. In the process of asserting the power of militant motherhood, they redefined the traditional link between mother and the home, the private space. A political configuration of mother's roles in the public sphere, once reserved for men, emerged as a result.¹⁶

The new force of women's political presence became most obvious by 1983, when economic crisis, combined with outspoken critiques of on-going human rights abuses by Chilean and global voices, sparked strong waves of opposition to the regime.¹⁷ Women's resistance played a vital role not only in the attempt to unseat the dictatorship, but also in a new quest for a democratization of political rights. Protesters made the call for 'democracy in the country and at home', a familiar rallying cry, attesting to substantial

changes women had made for the mainstreaming of hitherto excluded gendered demands for change.¹⁸ They also took active roles in preparation of the 1988 plebiscite proposed by military leaders. Chileans had to vote *No* or *Yes* to decide the future of military rule, accepting or rejecting Pinochet as the single candidate. A *Yes*-vote would confirm his leadership for eight more years. A *No*-vote would open the door to democratic elections to be held the following year. The plebiscite concluded with a victory of the *No* campaign, and represented the first official step towards re-democratization. From that moment on, women's demands for rights appeared in a new light, re-connected to the right of equal citizenship under an elected government.¹⁹

With the option to return to participatory democracy, women further expressed the lasting legacies of militant motherhood, asserting their on-going presence in a campaign 'I am a woman, I have rights.'²⁰ Over the course of five months, and intensely active in 48 organized gatherings, women from all spheres of life listened to presentations, read documents, and discussed what they saw as major challenges to women's citizenship rights. Campaigns reached far beyond the larger Santiago area, and counted on the attendance of about 1700 women from rural and urban backgrounds.²¹ Militant mothers had, indeed, helped set in motion a new generation of women who broke old limits of gendered citizenship rights.

Long View II: From Private Resistance to Model of Mobilization in Argentina

Comparison with Argentine women reveals that a different trajectory of militant motherhood in the making had similar consequences: women entered the political arena and came to stay. The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo made their first public appearance in the aftermath of the 1976 military takeover, when state terror had disrupted their everyday lives. Arrests, imprisonment, and disappearances of family members moved some women to share their private suffering with others. When women, as mothers, began to talk about their personal tragedy of loss, they helped create a new collective sense of motherhood, and with it, the incentive to act. Women, as mothers, joined forces to find children and relatives, and brought their initiative to the public arena. In 1977, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo appeared in front of the government palace with the claim to be on an apolitical mission. Their private responsibilities as mothers justified their entry to the public domain, the latter closed to men in a state of terror. Family ties, lost children and relatives, not political protest, would make their mobilization effective without provoking the regime. The mothers initiated their weekly demonstrations – and kept walking in a circle at the Plaza de Mayo, every Thursday, at the same time, in the same place.

While their protests provided continuity, the impact changed rapidly. Initially, the regime reacted with ridicule. Ridicule became nervous hostility. The violence that followed showed that the military was hardly

willing to grant the mothers the apolitical public space they initially intended to claim. In 1978, the military kidnapped twelve members and killed the group's first leader, Azuzena Villaflor de Vicenti.²² Prominent members suffered threats, other mothers were attacked and killed, and the group's meeting place was seized by security forces. While the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo had rejected political labels from the start, it became clear that their reliance on the apolitical connotation of the wife-mother role did not grant them immunity. After all, the private was political.

Not only the violent attacks by the military, but also the women's agency brought to the forefront the political character of militant motherhood. Women like Bonafini, in public reflections on the nature of their protest, showed that for many, traditional womanhood could be combined with public, political protest, a connection *without* contradiction:

what makes me angriest of all is that the boots, the slaps and the kicks were necessary before we good housewives would finally go out and participate and actually produce a shout of protest instead of listening to it on the radio. So I'm angry for not having left my knitting and pots and pans earlier to go out and complain about the tanks.²³

Others, like Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, pointed to the contradictions of military rhetoric. The 'harmony' the military claimed to defend by eliminating 'dissidents' had long been broken by their own violent intervention. Like the Chilean women who protested the Pinochet dictatorship, Argentine women saw military violence enter the private sphere and disrupt domestic peace.²⁴ Connecting the public and private, the mothers kept walking in a circle, carrying pictures of their missing children and relatives, wearing white head scarves to display solidarity as mothers. While the scarves stood as a symbol of maternal-child purity for some, they also stood as a sign of women's political engagement, their militant motherhood, a new motherhood that was the necessary outcome of the bond between mothers and their families.

The Mothers responded to domestic and global changes and developed a variety of peaceful strategies of resistance. In the process, they helped spread awareness of military violence to fellow citizens in Argentina and to other parts of the world. Events like the 1978 World Cup soccer match in Argentina provided opportunities to raise global awareness. While the eyes of the world followed the athletic competition in their country, the Mothers organized demonstrations and information campaigns in support of human rights. Their peaceful resistance not only strengthened the awareness of human rights abuses, but also mobilized financial and moral-political support from abroad. A women's group from the Netherlands was among the first to make financial resources available. Additional support from human rights groups in Sweden, France, and Italy followed.²⁵ Poetic and artistic expressions of solidarity arrived from all over the world. Dutch citizens sent outlines of their own hands, each with the name of a missing Argentine Child. A group

from Switzerland set up marches through Geneva to honor Argentine artists who were missing. All helped to hold on to the memory of the disappeared.²⁶

The Mothers also secured their ongoing presence after the decline of military rule. In 1982, Argentina's loss of the Malvinas/Falklands War dealt a final blow to a regime deeply in crisis – and the military had to accept a gradual transition to democracy. In the first phase of civilian government, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo helped shape the process of re-democratization. Assuming that military leaders and their underlings, responsible for deaths and disappearances, would be brought to justice, the mothers took an active role in debates with the state regarding human rights. They helped define and defend some rights to be protected in a re-emerging democracy, rights that were, predominantly, framed in terms of the need to protect the family.²⁷ However, democratic leaders failed to offer major concessions to relatives of the disappeared. The military was not inevitably held responsible for disappearances and human rights violations. Awareness-raising campaigns the Mothers organized in 1983 ended without immediate or long-term response by politicians. One symbolic act involved the creation of nameless silhouettes that represented the disappeared and evoked the human rights violations of the past. The silent, faceless, images were meant to haunt those who had decided the fate and taken the lives of the humans they represented. Another symbolic act involved 'living, breathing human beings', each with the assigned name of a missing person, lying on the pavement.²⁸ Still, in the aftermath of the deaths and disappearances, few members of the military were held fully responsible.

Negotiations regarding the prosecution of killings and human rights abuses of the past remained an ongoing part of re-democratization – and just as political leaders disagreed about the compromises they were willing to make, the Mothers disagreed about their political role of the future.²⁹ In 1986, internal disputes led to a lasting split between the *línea fundadora*, the Founding Group, and a second organization, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who kept the original name. The first, now led by Renée Epelbaum, defended its interest in bringing to justice the violators of human rights of the military regime. They kept connected to the political negotiations in the process of re-democratization. The latter, headed by Hebe de Bonafini, felt committed to the apolitical position of militant motherhood, to the search for missing children, and to the demands to see them 'back alive!' President Alfonsín, first democratic leader after dictatorship, agreed to a statute of limitations on the prosecutions of military officers in 1986. Subsequent political leaders made major concessions to the military as well. In 1989, President Menem's government gave amnesty to military men accused of torture and homicide. Under these conditions, the Mothers secured continuous awareness of the human rights abuses of the recent past in spite of their own internal division.³⁰

Dimensions of Militant Motherhood in Argentina: Domestic and Global Implications

Beginning in 1977, with the first march, and enduring in multiple strategies of resistance until the present time, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo provoked fellow Argentines and the military to react. Simultaneously, they invited activists, politicians, and scholars to re-think protest strategies to human rights violations and methods of resistance that allowed for redistribution of political power to civil societies long deprived of access to decision-making processes. After all, the women, as mothers, had demonstrated the courage to provide an immediate response to violence. They had addressed the most disturbing legacy of military rule in Argentina, the massive campaign of state-led violence, and the fate of those detained and disappeared during the *Proceso*.

For Argentines, the mothers helped re-construct the master narrative and the official historical memory of the events.³¹ Their ongoing call for truth had immediate and long-term implications: the mothers invaded the space occupied by those who defined the official version of history. In the process of unearthing the fate of their missing children they attacked the master-narrative of the leadership. As an immediate consequence, the women undermined censorship as a control mechanism the regime could rely upon. As a long-term consequence, they gained a genuine political voice in the re-writing of Argentine history, thereby shaping the memory of future generations. They articulated historical realities that others tried to silence: disappearances and assassination campaigns by the Argentine military. 'Denied the traditional mourning process, a ritual of grieving which includes burial . . .', the women initiated 'an *un*burial, an unearthing of the truth which translates into an invasion of the space occupied by official history'. This act provided a service for future generations who can, indeed, learn about the once buried and silenced chapter in their history.³²

Argentine militant motherhood had global implications. When leaders Hebe de Bonafini and others traveled to Europe in 1983, they were received by heads of state.³³ As a prominent mothers' movement, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo set a pioneering example after which similar movements modeled themselves in Latin America and other parts of the world.³⁴ In the Americas, groups like the Co-Madres mobilized in El Salvador, and mothers groups have appeared in Brazil, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and other countries.³⁵ In the Middle East, the *Women in Black* from the Gaza Strip organized their political mobilization around motherhood. They started vigils against Israeli occupation in 1988 – soon accompanied by other Women in Black who held vigils against different forms of violence in countries as diverse as Azerbaijan and Italy. Not all mothers' groups defended gender equity or feminism – and not all held on to motherist mobilization. In India, some mothers' groups shifted to mobilizing as daughters, thereby 'shifting the focus from suffering and sacrifice to strength and rights'.³⁶ Finally, other examples of militant motherhood from, for example, Kenya, remind us that

militant motherhood can defend conservative political platforms and work to keep alive gendered spaces and inequalities.³⁷

Militant motherhood was followed by a new discourse on women's political participation and human rights mobilization. In consequence, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo not only challenged the authoritarian leadership in their home country, but also inspired a vast body of scholarship on women's political participation in Argentina, the Latin American Southern Cone, and other parts of the world.³⁸ Scholars and popular audiences embrace a human rights agenda with more ease than an agenda that supported the military.

Changing the Southern Cone: Continuities of Militant Motherhood and Women's Political Participation

Clearly, the protests of militant mothers in the Southern Cone inspired re-definitions of motherhood as an institution. Women expanded the meanings of motherhood on their own terms. In the process, they claimed the right to redefine an 'untouchable' institution. They also confirmed their political strength by claiming the right to provide those new definitions. We can document the impact of militant motherhood in two different contexts: first, in the re-evaluation of the traditional values associated with motherhood as an institution, and second, in the assessment of politicized motherhood as a lasting force in shaping the political arena.

Traditional meanings of motherhood were constructed by dominant gender systems, extensively portrayed in contemporary scholarship. The model of *marianismo* reinforced the social expectations connected to motherhood, a model that Evelyn Stevens described as 'the cult of feminine spiritual superiority, which teaches that women are semi-divine, morally superior to, and spiritually stronger than men'. This perception helped reinforce a pattern of repressive social expectations; most importantly it reinforced the image of the morally superior yet submissive and self-abnegating mother.³⁹

Classic feminist studies of motherhood as an institution – beyond Latin American borders – contribute valuable insights to additional definitions of motherhood. Adrienne Rich identified motherhood as an idealized and oppressive institution constructed for male need and desire.⁴⁰ Others asserted the dominant expectation that mothers subordinate their personal objectives and put the needs of others first, loving and giving unconditionally. The basic requisite, hence, became mothers' selflessness.⁴¹ Luce Irigaray pointed to the lack of maternal subjectivity, asking

So what is a mother? Someone who makes the stereotypical gestures she is told to make, who has no personal language, who has no identity. Mothers and the women within them have been trapped in the role of she who satisfies need but has no access to desire.⁴²

Both Argentine and Chilean militant mothers have challenged traditional, fixed prescriptions of the characteristics of motherhood as an institution. They have liberated mothers from 'making gestures they are told to make' and have, thereby, developed their own gestures and political language. Marching against unwanted political leaders or dictators, they have transformed the passive stance where mothers, uncritically, subordinate their personal objectives for the needs of others. Militant mothers – and women – appeared as actors with solid moral-political agency, created by what they defined as changing needs and obligations. They re-defined mothers' needs and obligations in light of the impact unwanted political systems, or violence led by military leaders, has on their children and families.

As militant mothers and as women active in the public sphere, women helped overcome some of the gendered restrictions to citizenship rights. In Chile and Argentina, they confronted political leaders and repressive state machineries and laid claim to their right to use a political language that transcended the private realm. Through empty pots and pans, and through pictures of lost family members, they brought the private to the center of public attention and to the center of political demands.

Conclusion

This comparison of Chilean and Argentine militant mothers aimed at complicating the politics of militant motherhood and evaluated the changing terms of women's political participation. What is the power of motherhood as a political tool? To what degree have women been able to create lasting re-definitions of the gendered terms of political participation? The mothers we met in both countries helped revolutionize the institution of motherhood by adding the dimension of active participation in the public sphere to mothers' traditional domestic responsibilities. Anti-Allende women in Chile presented militant motherhood as a means through which later women articulated multiple concerns. Argentine women situated their 'apolitical' militant motherhood in an emerging human and women's rights movement at home and abroad. They have, indeed, helped construct 'revolutionized motherhood'.

The epigram that introduced this article illustrated the view of Marta, a Salvadoran woman who confirmed the 'natural' inclination of a mother to become politically active in a country at war. She contested the idea that women's use of the rhetoric of motherhood aimed at seeking merely a 'private' good, or that it would run the danger of reducing politics to moral posturing void of real consequences. Maternity has a historical dimension, explicitly distinguished from an individual one, and embraces the children of the nation as part of any political project. Women, as militant mothers in Chile and Argentina, challenged and transformed patriarchal spaces. They worked towards independent alliance building, and the construction of political strategies. Even if some groups of militant mothers have defended

conservative political platforms, they have helped secure women's ongoing presence as political actors and allow us to think of militant mothers as democratic innovators in re-democratizing societies.

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Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ 'Tener hijos es la experiencia más linda que hay, la más revolucionaria. . . yo como madre no puedo velar sólo por un niño, hay millones de niños en el país. . . la maternidad tiene dimensión histórica y no sólo individual.' See C. Alegría and D. Flakoll, *No me agarran viva: La mujer salvadoreña en la lucha* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1983), 97–9, as quoted in N. Saporta Sternbach, 'Re-Membering the Dead: Latin American Women's "Testimonial" Discourse', *Latin American Perspectives*, 18/3 (Summer 1991): 97.

² Sonia E. Alvarez first used the term to describe women's claims that traditional responsibilities of motherhood justified their resistance to military authoritarianism in the Latin American Southern Cone. She examined the rise of *militant motherhood* among poor and working-class sectors of Brazilian society and connected it to the history of feminist mobilization. See S. E. Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil. Women's Movements in Transition Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990). The complexities of militant motherhood and motherist mobilization have, since then, made their way into a wide range of scholarship on Latin America. See, for example, L. Stephen, 'Gender, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity', *Latin American Perspectives*, 28/6 (November 2001): 54–69. Stephen connects motherist mobilization to the political necessity of projecting 'sameness' for successful political organizing and addresses movement identity from the perspective of participants as well as outsiders. Nikki Craske's *Women and Politics in Latin America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), examines women's political participation since the 1940s, and addresses the relationship between motherhood and citizenship. She adopts the concept of militant motherhood to describe women's political protest under dictatorship. For an insightful approach to militant motherhood that combines history and literature, see M. Traba, *Conversación al sur* (México, DF: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1981). Traba chronicles government violence in the Latin American Southern Cone through the dialogue of two women who take changing positions on the meanings of militant motherhood.

³ My decision not to address the dictatorships' efforts to reinforce traditional images of motherhood is also shaped by the deceitful undertones of this effort. While claiming to defend the sacred domestic space of family life, military regimes invaded limitless sacred spaces. See, for example, X. Bunster-Burotto, 'Surviving beyond Fear: Women and Torture in Latin America', in J. Nash and H. Safa (eds.), *Women and Change in Latin America* (New York, NY: Bergin and Garvey, 1986), 297–325.

⁴ Camilla Townsend effectively showed that middle- and upper-class women were joined by working-class women who came on their own terms, with a political agenda of their own. See C. Townsend, 'Refusing to Travel La Vía Chilena: Working Class Women in Allende's Chile', *Journal of Women's History*, 4/3 (Winter 1993): 43–63.

⁵ On right-wing women in Chile see M. Power, *Right-Wing Women in Chile: Feminine Power and the Struggle against Allende* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); M. de los Angeles Crummett, 'El Poder Feminino: The Mobilization of Women against Socialism in Chile', *Latin American Perspectives*, 4/4 (Autumn 1977): 103–13; P. Garrett-Schesch, 'The Mobilization of Women during the Popular Unity Government', *Latin American Perspectives*, 2/1 (Spring 1975): 101–3; also see the first part of L. Baldez, *Why Women Protest: Women's Movements in Chile* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁶ For the history of the peaceful revolution and primary sources see J. Cockcroft (ed.) assisted by Jane Carolina Canning, *Salvador Allende Reader: Chile's Voice of Democracy* (New York, NY: Ocean Press, 2000); M. González Pino and A. Fontaine Talavera (eds.), *Los mil días de Allende*, 2 vols. (Santiago, Chile: Centro de Estudios Públicos, 1997). For the role of urban labor, see P. Winn, *Weavers of Revolution: The Yaurur Workers and Chile's Road to Socialism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1986). For rural contexts see H. Tinsman, *Partners in Conflict: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Labor in the Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1950–1973* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁷ On the symbolic importance of space and on the Mothers' performative and communicative strategies see D. Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's 'Dirty War'* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1997), 183–222. The author presents the Mothers' acts of resistance as a continuity of ongoing re-enactments of an Argentine national struggle between men staged through the feminine.

⁸ For a taste of the extensive scholarship on the Madres and testimonial accounts see M. Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love Over Death: Testimonies of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1997); M. Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1994); A. Malin, 'Mother Who Won't Disappear', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 16/1 (February 1994): 187–213; M. Agosin, *Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (Línea Fundadora): The Story of Renée Epelbaum, 1976–1985* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1990); M. Navarro, 'The Personal is Political: Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo', in S. Eckstein (ed.), *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 241–58.

⁹ On the Argentine military dictatorship in historical context see D. C. Hodges, *Argentina's 'Dirty War': An Intellectual Biography* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1991) for a number of controversial ideas on the rise of the military; see I. Guest, *Behind the Disappearances: Argentina's Dirty War against Human Rights and the United Nations* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) for a well-researched, readable journalistic account of the Dirty War; and see D. Rock, *Argentina, 1516–1987: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín*, rev. edn. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987) for a solid historical overview. Also see L. Roniger, and M. Sznajder, *The Legacy of Human Rights Violations in the Southern Cone: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) for a discussion of the rise of the military and the roots and legacies of violence in comparative context.

¹⁰ Margaret Power makes this point in 'Defending Dictatorship: Conservative Women in Pinochet's Chile and the 1988 Plebiscite', in V. González and K. Kampwirth (eds.), *Radical Women in Latin America: Left and Right* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 300. Power also comments on the origins of the term. Supporters of the Chilean left referred to the opposition as mummies 'to convey the idea that they were members of the dead bourgeois class' (300).

¹¹ Definitions of apolitical vs. political positions – as well as the exact nature of the Mothers' political engagement, are widely debated. Outspoken about their goal to incriminate the military, presented as a political goal without political affiliations, the Mothers gained political influence and power by damaging the military's credibility in Argentina and far beyond Argentine borders. The Mothers claimed to mobilize for children and family, thereby rejecting any power for themselves. Nevertheless, they *have* had and continue to have impact in the political arena in Argentina and beyond – and, thereby, help document the powerful impact of mobilization through militant motherhood.

¹² The speech itself is a remarkable document, and offers insights into the challenges faced by the leadership when negotiating the re-distribution of political power among the population on one hand and government responsibilities to keep control on the other. See a translated version of Pedro Vuskovic's speech in D. Johnson (ed.), *The Chilean Road to Socialism* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1973), 457–73, as referenced by Townsend, 'Refusing to Travel La Vía Chilena', 61.

¹³ Power, *Right Wing Women in Chile*, 156. Also see Power's insightful discussion of the multiple reactions to and implications of the March (156–68).

¹⁴ Camilla Townsend refers to these reactions. See Townsend, 'Refusing to Travel La Vía Chilena', 43.

¹⁵ For accounts on the coup and military dictatorship see M. Ensalcado, *Chile under Pinochet: Recovering the Truth* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); P. Drake and I. Jaksic (eds.), *The Struggle for Democracy in Chile* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); P. Constable and A. Valenzuela, *A Nation of Enemies: Chile under Pinochet* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1991); A. Valenzuela, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Chile* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

¹⁶ For gendered dimensions of military rule see M. E. Valenzuela, *La mujer en el Chile militar: Todas íbamos a ser reinas* (Santiago: Ediciones Chile y América, 1987).

¹⁷ Women's resistance under Chilean military rule has been discussed from multiple perspectives. See P. Chuchryk, 'Protest, Politics and Personal Life: The Emergence of Feminism in a Military Dictatorship, Chile, 1973–1983', Ph.D. dissertation (York University, Toronto, 1984); P. Chuchryk, 'From Dictatorship to Democracy: The Women's Movement in Chile', in J. S. Jaquette (ed.), *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Feminism and the Transition to Democracy* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 65–107; Baldez, *Why Women Protest*; E. Moya-Raggio, '“Arpilleras”: Chilean Culture of Resistance', *Feminist Studies*, 10/2 (1984): 277–90; J. Adams, 'Art in Social Movements: Shantytown Women's Protest in Pinochet's Chile', *Sociological Forum*, 17/1 (2002): 21–56; G. Waylen, 'Rethinking Women's Political Participation and Protest: Chile 1970–1990', *Political Studies*, 40/2 (1992): 299–315; A. Frohmann and T. Valdés, 'Democracy in the Country and in the Home: The Women's Movement in Chile', by C. Elizabeth McGrory, A. Basu (ed.) *The Challenges of Local Feminism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 276–301.

For scholarship on resistance in Chile and beyond see J. S. Jaquette, *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Feminism and the Transition to Democracy* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989); H. I. Safa, 'Women's Social Movements in Latin America', *Gender and Society*, 4/3 (1990): 354–69; J. Fisher, *Out of the Shadows: Women, Resistance, and Politics in South America* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1993); S. Radcliffe and S. Westwood (eds.), 'ViVá: Women and Popular Protest in Latin America' (London: Routledge, 1993); T. Kaplan, *Women, Youth, and Direct Democracy: Taking Back the Streets* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

¹⁸ See Frohmann and Valdés, 'Democracy in the Country and in the Home' for insights into women's re-conceptualization of democracy.

¹⁹ For references to the multiple meanings of re-democratization see A. Wilde, 'Interruptions of Memory: Expressive Politics in Chile's Transition to Democracy', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 31/2 (May 1999): 473–500; G. Waylen, 'Women and Democratization: Conceptualizing Gender Relations in Transition Politics', *World Politics*, 46/3 (April 1994): 327–54; P. Oxhorn, 'Understanding Political Change after Authoritarian Rule: The Popular Sectors and Chile's New Democratic Regime', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 26/3 (October 1994): 737–59.

²⁰ Multiple manifestations of women's demands preceded this campaign and helped prepare for its unprecedented scale. Among them 'Manifiesto Feminista' (1983); 'Principios y reivindicaciones que configuran la plataforma de la mujer chilena', MEMCh'83 (1985); 'Resoluciones', Departamento Femenino de la Coordinadora Nacional Sindical (1985); 'Demanda de la mujer rural', Departamento Femenino de la Comisión Nacional Campesina (1986); 'Pliego de las mujeres' (1986); and 'Demandas de las mujeres a la democracia', Movimiento Feminista (1988).

²¹ Coordinación de Organizaciones Sociales de Mujeres, 'Soy Mujer . . . Tengo Derechos': *Campaña de Discusión* (Santiago: FLACSO-SEPADE, 1991), 1–6.

²² Agosin, *Mothers of Plaza de Mayo* (Linea Fundadora), 19–20.

²³ H. de Bonafini, *Historias de vida* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Fraterna/Del Nuevo Extremo, 1985), 73, qtd. in Saporta Sternbach, 'Re-Membering the Dead', 96. For details on Bonafini's views also see H. de Bonafini and G. Bauducco, *Hebe: La otra mujer* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Urraca,

1997); A. Diago, *Hebe, memoria y esperanza: Conversando con las Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Dialéctica, 1988).

²⁴ For comments on the 'Dirty War' from a Mother's perspective see Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 19–45.

²⁵ See Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, 187. Global support also included the United Nations, the U.S. government under President Carter, the Organization of American States, Amnesty International, as well as additional independent groups and individual supporters in the United States and in Europe.

²⁶ Agosin, *Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (Linea Fundadora)*, 21–2.

²⁷ Human rights organizations and the Argentine leadership continuously negotiated the rights to be defended under democracy. M. D. Bonner makes this point in 'Defining Rights in Democratization: The Argentine Government and Human Rights Organizations, 1983–2003', *Latin American Politics & Society*, 47/4 (2005): 55–76. Bonner shows that Argentine political leaders were less reluctant to respond to demands that emphasized the place of the children of the disappeared in the family, rather than the place of the disappeared themselves. See Bonner, 'Defining Rights', 55.

²⁸ Agosin, *Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (Linea Fundadora)*, 21.

²⁹ On the one hand, the division can be seen as a change that weakened their agenda; on the other, it confirmed that the Mothers had responded to changes in the political arena and had grown in complexity. They continue to disagree about mobilization strategies and the priority of specific goals.

³⁰ Families of the disappeared continuously challenged the government to punish those responsible. In the mid-1990s, the government promised financial restitution for each death, but the promise was not kept. See 'Argentine Default Reopens "Dirty War" Wounds', *New York Times* (March 12, 2002).

³¹ The complexities of history and memory go beyond the scope of this article. For insightful reading, see K. P. Serbin, 'Memory and Method in the Emerging Historiography of Latin America's Authoritarian Era', *Latin American Politics & Society*, 48/3 (2006): 185–98; E. Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); D. E. Lorey and W. H. Beezley (eds.), *Genocide, Collective Violence, and Popular Memory: The Politics of Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002), especially E. Jelin and S. G. Kaufman, 'Layers of Memories: Twenty Years After in Argentina', 31–52. For an insightful focus on language and memory and a new 'dictionary' of tainted words after dictatorship see also M. Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³² Saporta Sternbach introduces these references in 'Re-Membering the Dead', 94.

³³ They were also 'received as though they were heads of state'. See Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 123.

³⁴ Malin, 'Mother Who Won't Disappear', 188. See also F. Miller, *Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1991). Miller asserts that the Mothers 'have become a metaphor for the thousands of Latin Americans who have dared to protest the practice of state terrorism against the populace through nonviolent means' (11).

³⁵ For a discussion of the Co-Madres see L. Stephen, 'Women's Rights are Human Rights: The Merging of Feminine and Feminist Interests among El Salvador's Mothers of the Disappeared (CO-MADRES)', *American Ethnologist*, 22/4 (November 1995): 807–27.

³⁶ R. Kumar, *A History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1990* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993), as referenced in R. Ray and A. C. Korteweg, 'Women's Movements in the Third World: Identity, Mobilization, and Autonomy', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25 (1999): 50–1.

³⁷ Ray and Korteweg, 'Women's Movements in the Third World', 51. Kenyan women's 'combative motherhood' countered attacks on their rights while, simultaneously, protesting egalitarian gender relations. See P. Stamp, 'Burying Otieno: The Politics of Gender and Ethnicity in Kenya', in J. Brenner, B. Laslett, and Y. Arat (eds.), *Rethinking the Political: Gender, Resistance, and the State* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), as referenced in Ray and Korteweg, 'Women's Movements in the Third World', 50.

³⁸ Approaches range from studies of the transition of Latin American feminism to studies on the gendered politics of re-democratization. See, for example, G. Waylen, 'Gender and Democratic

Politics: A Comparative Analysis of Consolidation in Argentina and Chile', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 32/3 (October 2000): 765–93.

³⁹ E. P. Stevens, '“Marianismo” The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America', in Ann Pescatello (ed.), *Female and Male in Latin America* (Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), 89–101.

⁴⁰ A. Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York, NY: Norton, 1986).

⁴¹ M. R. Polatnick, 'Why Men Don't Rear Children: A Power Analysis', in J. Trebilcot (ed.), *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), 35.

⁴² L. Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford/Cambridge, MA: Basil and Blackwell, 1991), 50–1. See also L. J. Peach, *Women in Culture: A Women's Studies Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

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