



## CHAPTER 2

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# In Green and White: Feminist Struggles for Abortion Rights in Argentina

*Diana Mulinari*

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*Saying thank you just doesn't seem to be enough, to the feminist scholars/activists who helped me complete this journey. Thanks to Maria Alicia Gutiérrez, Florencia Partenio, Elsa Schwartzman and Monica Tarducci, and to the art collective Mujeres Publicas, especially to Fernanda Carrizo.*

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R. Selberg et al. (eds.), *Struggles for Reproductive Justice in the Era of Anti-Genderism and Religious Fundamentalism*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31260-1\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31260-1_2)



...AHORA... Y SIEMPRE...

This drawing entitled *The Two Scarves* by Mariana Baizán identifying the intergenerational connection went viral and is often seen at feminist events.

## INTRODUCTION

On March 25, 2018, a big plastic doll representing ‘the unborn child’ carried on the roof of a truck meets participants occupying the central scene of a march organised by diverse coalitions of right-wing and religious fundamentalists for ‘the unborn child’, which takes place every year in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Many of the participants carry blue scarves and cover themselves with the blue-and-white Argentinean flag. Others carry banners, many of them in blue and white, with the slogan ‘Save the two lives’. They march (we march) first to the Argentinean Rural Society (a symbol of the country’s oligarchy) and then to the Faculty of Law. Feminist activists whom I have met call them *anti-derechos* (‘against rights’), identifying the systematic mobilisation of these networks against reproductive and sexual rights in the last few decades. I am following two journalist friends who identify as feminists covering the event. ‘I wonder what would happen if we put our green scarves on!’ one of them said. Everybody laughed,

but I sensed that the three of us were a little scared among the neo-Nazis, defenders of the military dictatorship and religious fundamentalists mobilising against abortion rights (fieldwork notes March 25, 2018).

More than forty years have passed since the country engaged in the transition towards democracy, after the 1976–1983 dictatorship. Scholars of human rights identify the societal fractures that the experience of the Argentinean military dictatorship has left in individuals, families and communities. To celebrate ‘the unborn child’, the march on March 25 is extremely politically sensitive, taking into account that millions of people have marched the day before, asking for Memory, Truth and Justice, identifying the cruelty of the military dictatorship with its policy of appropriation of the children of women political prisoners; nearly everybody has a family member, a relative, a friend, a work colleague who has been killed, ‘disappeared’, imprisoned or forced into exile (Calveiro, 2008).

The 3000 who gathered on Sunday, March 25, 2018, with their blue-and-white bandanas, in the colours of the Argentinean flag, are, however, very few when compared with the 500,000 who participated in the feminist-inspired March 8 celebration—named ‘The Green Wave’ (*La Marea Verde*) wearing what is today a transnational feminist symbol, the green scarf, the symbol of the campaign for the public’s right to safe, free and legal abortion—or compared with the million feminists who gathered outside the Congress building in Buenos Aires, Argentina’s capital city, on April 10, when the Lower House supported and voted for the bill proposal written by the Campaign for Safe, Free and Legal Abortion.

Feminist scholars have analysed the role that women’s movements and feminist-inspired networks and organisations have had in the search for reproductive justice, among other issues, during the struggle for abortion rights. Their investigations explore feminist activism at the crossroads between engagement in legal and parliamentary debates and street mobilisations (Ferre, 2003; Valiente, 2001; Smyth, 2005; Zanotta Machado, 2017; Król & Pustulka, 2018). Scholars have also grasped the diverse forms of resistance to the expansion of women’s and minoritised groups’ rights evolving from right-wing and religious fundamentalist coalitions (Tarducci, 2005; Zarembek et al., 2021).

The feminist movements in Latin America (Beckman et al., 2003; Vargas 2015) embody one of the most important societal transformations and political visions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: they have widened the narrow democratic limits of the region (Jaquette, 2009). Research on feminism in Argentina converges on the reading of feminism

at the crossroads between the experience of the military dictatorship and the struggle for engendering democracy (Alma & Lorenzo, 2009; Barrancos, 2013).

The demand for abortion decriminalisation, Argentinean feminist scholars argue, finds its antecedents in the transgression of gender roles through women's political activism in the 1970s and has been nourished by multiple political traditions of leftist, human rights and LGBTQ activism (Bellucci, 1997; Tarducci et al., 2019). A new generation of women workers shaped the resistance to neoliberalism in the 1990s, from female workers occupying and self-managing factories to women organised in the unemployed workers' movement leading assemblies and street protests (*piqueteras*) (Freytes Frey & Crivelli, 2007). In the last few decades, feminist struggles have provided a space to establish a productive dialogue with diverse social movements from human to indigenous rights (Di Marco, 2010).

The *Encuentros* (Encounters, the annual national women's meetings) started in 1986, taking place in different cities; they gathered at a massive feminist mobilisation in 2019, in the city of La Plata, with over 600,000 participants. The *Encuentros* played a fundamental role in providing articulation of feminist visions, practices and coalitions in the mobilisation for abortion rights (Sutton & Borland, 2013; Sutton, 2020). Since 2015, the visibility of feminist practices embodied in *Ni Una Menos* (Not One Woman Less) provided a reading of femicide that bridges the defence of vulnerable bodies coded as female with the defence of land and water and vulnerable communities.

In 2020, Argentina became the third country in Latin America to provide the right to abortion, following Cuba and Uruguay (Mexico had guaranteed this right in 2007, but only in Mexico City, and in Oaxaca in 2019, then six other states in 2021–2022). The Argentinean feminist movement is internationally well known and publicly recognised for its massive mobilisation for the legalisation of voluntary termination of pregnancy.<sup>1</sup> The decision to support the bill proposal for the legalisation of

<sup>1</sup>Since 1921, abortion in Argentina has been regulated under Article 86 of the country's Penal Code, which permits abortion only when the life and health of the woman are at risk or if someone with mental disabilities is raped. Legal prohibition has not stopped women from having abortion. It is estimated that 450,000 abortions take place in Argentina each year. Abortion is the highest cause of maternal mortality in the country. It is estimated that, since the return to democracy, approximately 3000 women who aborted have lost their lives. In 2012, as a response to feminist mobilisation, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of a broad interpretation of the law that allows abortion to be legal in cases of rape and not requiring a judge's permission (Romero et al., 2010).

abortion, taken finally, after a failed attempt in 2018, by the Argentinean Senate in December 2020, must be understood as a product of Argentina's long history of women's struggles and of decades of feminist mobilisation.

The aim of the chapter is to explore the feminist-inspired struggle for the right to abortion, with particular emphasis on the intergenerational and intersectional feminist labour at the core of the 2020 feminist success. The aim is also to analyse what scholar and queer activist Mabel Bellucci (2014) names a 'history of disobedience': the diverse and contradictory ways through which feminist struggles for abortion rights created powerful alliances and innovative forms of collaboration, developing an understanding of abortion rights within the frame of reproductive justice.

The chapter is organised as follows. The first section briefly introduces the concept of reproductive justice (Ross, 2006) and provides a methodological reflection framing the analysis. The second section locates the Argentinean feminist movement at the core between its own agendas and the field of the political. What follows is an ethnographically inspired analysis of feminist activism focusing on how the intersectional, intergenerational and human rights coalitions are framed in the everyday. The last section briefly identifies the *anti-derechos* ('against rights') and argues for the need to understand these coalitions locally and globally.

## FROM REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS TO REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

The concept of reproductive justice developed by Black feminists in the 1990s (Galarneau, 2013) takes its point of departure in the experience of Afro-American women, grasping how diverse forms of systematic inequalities, and institutional forces such as racism, shape people's possible decisions regarding childbearing and parenting. An intersectional feminist agenda demands (Corrêa et al., 2008; Ross, 2017; Galarneau, 2013) a conceptual understanding of the body that expands claims of bodily integrity and transcends neoliberal individualism. Thus, reproductive justice, Loretta Ross suggests (2017), is framed through three interconnected rights: the right to have children under the conditions of one's choice, the right not to have children by using diverse methods of birth control and abortion, and the right to parent children in safe environments free from violence, both from individuals and the state.

In Rosalind Petchesky's words:

Research I did in the late 1980s and early 1990s pushed me to conclude that how we think about the concept of 'property' in one's own body or person may vary greatly depending on how we understand property in general. Among groups and social movements whose land and livelihoods and well-being, along with their bodies, have been systematically usurped and colonized, the language of owning or reowning may mean something very different from what it means in the privatized, exclusionary, hyper-individualized consumer societies of late capitalism. (Petchesky, 1995: 390)

The author challenges the shift in the 1990s from notions of body entitlement towards notions of personal security, a shift she argues has not only depoliticised but also fractured feminists' struggles, putting sexual rights as 'minority rights'. An understanding of the body, Petchesky concludes, inspired by feminist antislavery and anticolonial demands for bodily self-determination, takes a point of departure in a claim about social necessity and interconnectedness.

Body politics (Harcourt, 2009) covers the identification and politicisation of experiences in and through the body (rape, gendered violence) at the core of feminist mobilisation but also the forms and strategies of political mobilisation where the body, both represented and acted upon, plays a central role; in the Argentinean context, this is identified by the notion of 'putting the body on the line' (*poner el cuerpo*) (Sutton, 2010; Cuesta & Mulinari, 2018). Regarding the struggle for abortion rights, the visions and practices of putting the body on the line grasp a feminist agenda that transcends the narrow limits of liberal individualism (my body, my decision) towards a feminist agenda (Gago, 2020) that creates care communities challenging patriarchal political economy and its institutions.

## METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

I have participated in many events wearing the green scarf, a dear gift from one of the 'historical' members of the Campaign. I have also many green scarves at home, from the time nobody wanted them and 'we' were less than a thousand marching on March 8 in Buenos Aires.

A feminist writing about other feminists (Armbruster & Laeke, 2008)? Belonging to the Argentinean diaspora and living in Sweden, identifying myself as a feminist, my position is one of an ‘outsider within’ (Collins, 2000) regarding the Argentinean feminist movement.

The analysis evolving from these pages is, however, not based on autobiography, though I have to acknowledge that feminist struggles in Argentina were for me (and many others) a space and a practice fundamental to healing the scars produced by the military dictatorship. The analysis is based on a case study crafted through more than six months of participant observation of the feminist movement and the organisations working with abortion rights from 2015 to 2020. It is also based on twenty in-depth interviews with identified human rights and feminist activists working with reproductive and sexual rights in diverse organisations, institutional contexts and political parties.

What could possibly be left to write after the rich, impressive and solid work of Argentinean feminist scholars on the topic? My intervention is located in a feminist practice of learning from the margins, identifying the contributions of the feminist struggles in Argentina (Mulinari, 2018) for a transnational feminist agenda.

## THE POLITICS OF FEMINISM: FEMINISM AND POLITICS

We have tried to explain this to feminists from abroad. We are feminists, but everybody here is ... you must be ... you have to choose sides here. Many members of the campaign [for abortion rights] are leftists, but others support Cristina Kirchner. And Lohana, she is a trans activist, but she also belongs to a leftist political party ... Politics is everywhere in this country—you breathe it from the moment you are born ... feminism in Argentina is ... well, is different from the Global North ... the political is in your face every day. (Agustina)

This section aims to provide a short background framing the Argentinean feminist movement, arguing, as mirrored in the above quote, for an understanding of feminism as at the crossroads between the feminist movement’s own agenda and the field of the political.

In 2007, Argentina had for the first time in its history a woman president, Cristina Kirchner, who succeeded her husband, Nestor Kirchner, who had served as the president from 2003 to 2007. During Cristina Kirchner’s presidency, Argentina made international headlines as the first

Latin American country to legalise same-sex marriage (Law 26.618, 2010) and to provide one of the most progressive Gender Identity laws (Law 26.743, 2012) that established fundamental rights for trans persons.

Mariela, one of the feminists engaged in reproductive and sexual rights for over twenty years, describes this period with the notion of Latin American magic realism:

That was the time when we began the slogan ‘When human rights do not reach all humans’ (*‘Cuando los derechos humanos no llegan todos los humanos’*). What was it the novelist García Márquez said regarding Latin American magic realism: that he did not create anything; he only described what he saw in Latin America? That was the case here. On the one hand, gay marriage, the identity law and law of reproductive assistance, and on the other NO, NO, NO *{emphasised by bodily posture}* to abortion.

While the Kirchner administration, which had successfully acted upon human rights, did not legalise abortion, there had been important developments. In 2006, the Health Minister, Ginés González García, declared his support for women’s organisations on the issue of the decriminalisation of abortion and supported the legislation (Law 26.150) that established and developed the first programme of integral sexual education targeting public schools.

The insulting term ‘mare’ (female horse: *la yegua*) mirrors the powerful sexism at the core of the right wing, used systematically to attack and resist Cristina Kirchner’s governmental policies (Russo, 2011). In the words of Silvia, a feminist activist supporting the Kirchner government:

The right hates Cristina because she embodies notions of social justice but also, and particularly, because she is a woman. And it is true that the abortion bill did not go through, but so many other excellent reforms took place .... To focus on the narrow issue of abortion is not to understand the centrality of Cristina’s policies towards working-class women. Her support of human rights. Feminist policies, I would argue.

While some feminist activists and organisations urged confidence in and support for the Kirchner administration, emphasising several policies that have transformed the position of women and the politics of gender, with slogans such as ‘Thanks, Cristina’ or ‘If they attack Cristina, they attack us all’, others continued to confront the Kirchner administration particularly on the issue of abortion rights, or, rather, continued to explore the



tensions of a women-friendly government that confronted the Catholic Church by way of a number of laws and policies but that argued that Argentinean society was not mature enough for the abortion debate (Pecheny, 2005).

Businessman Mauricio Macri won the 2015 election by acting upon an emotional regime of hate against Cristina Kirchner as a woman but also through mediating a neoliberal agenda of heterosexual (white) middle-class success against the racialised other. One of his first measures was a reduction in the National Programme of Integral Sexual Education budget, and many employees within the Programme of Reproductive Rights lost their jobs (Sarmiento, 2018).

These policies came as no surprise to feminists; it was publicly known, the position of Mauricio Macri himself and his party that opposed the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2006.

The term ‘smokescreen’ (*la cortina de humo*) was used by a number of political actors, suggesting that the opening of the parliamentary debate on abortion rights in 2018, during Mauricio Macri’s neoliberal and neo-conservative government, marginalised central issues of increasing poverty and inequalities. That a conservative neoliberal government opened a parliamentary debate on abortion rights has also been understood as a threat to the Catholic Church, which under the leadership of the Argentinean Pope Francisco has been critical of Macri’s neoliberal policies.

Antonia, confronted by the arguments that President Macri was ‘using’ feminism to obscure central societal conflicts, describes her feelings in the following way:

I get so angry ... so angry. All this talk on the smokescreen ... As if we feminists would be so stupid and childish, as if we could be used by the right to silence the government’s neoliberal politics. The Campaign has negotiated with every government, but, whatever happens with Macri and the bill proposal, we will as feminists still be in the streets protesting against his neoliberal policies and his lack of respect for Memory, Truth and Justice.

The bill was passed by the Lower House but rejected by the Senate.

Many feminists I talked to, wearing the green scarf or with their bodies painted green, the symbol of the campaign, were convinced that, despite the August 8, 2018, Argentinean Senate’s vote against a feminist-inspired bill proposal and supported by the Lower House, the level of feminist

mobilisations in the streets and the powerful presence of feminist voices in the media demonstrated that ‘we have already won’. And they were absolutely right. After a marathon session, in December 2020, the Senate approved the proposed bill, a historic decision in Catholic Latin America. The law of the ‘thousand days’ that provides support during pregnancy and the first years of childbearing was also approved on the same day.

### INTERSECTIONAL AND QUEER: THE CAMPAIGN (*LA CAMPAÑA*) AND THE GREEN WAVE (*LA MAREA VERDE*)

Extremely excited, impressed, inspired, proud, happy, hopeful ... *{laughs}* I do not know ... impossible to tell you how I feel, meeting these very, very young women and also very young men, most of them in secondary school, with the green scarf in their backpacks ... They are so beautiful, with all their body paintings in green ... *{laughs}* (Julia)

Julia is identifying what many feminists who have been engaged in the struggle for abortion rights for decades feel when confronted by the powerful presence of a new feminist generation: what came to be called ‘The Green Wave’ (*‘La Marea Verde’*), making the mobilisation for abortion rights visible in the streets, but also and particularly through their own bodies in the ways they wear the green scarf, the symbol of the campaign. The Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion (*Campaña por el derecho al Aborto, Seguro, Legal y Gratuito*)<sup>2</sup> is a network of diverse feminist groups and a multiplicity of feminist actors that have converged since 2005. Sexual education to enable decisions to be made regarding the use of contraceptives in order to obviate the need for abortion, and availability of legal and safe abortions, succeeded in posing the issue of reproductive rights at the core of the feminist agenda (Coledesky, 2007; Barrancos, 2018; Rosenberg, 2020).

Marta, now in her late sixties, has worked all her life as a psychologist. She was forced to leave Argentina during the military dictatorship, and returned there from Mexico after the democratic transition at the beginning of the 1990s. Marta and I are on our way to the Argentinean National

<sup>2</sup>National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion. Facebook. Retrieved September 21, 2022, from <https://www.facebook.com/CampAbortoLegal>

Congress to participate in what many define as a historic event: the opening of the parliamentary debate on abortion rights, inspired by the law project written by the campaign. She is trying to mediate a common feeling among what in Argentina are identified as *las historicas* (the very few women who, with total lack of support, went public in the late 1990s at city street corners demanding reproductive rights): a feeling that this possible victory is not an eruption of a ‘feminist spring’ but the consequence of feminist commitment that has been going on for decades:

For years, I had scarves at home because no one was interested, and now ... people stop me in the supermarket and ask me where they can get one ... But we have been working with this issue for decades ... I get so angry when the media speaks about a ‘feminist explosion’ as if the everyday organisations hadn’t existed for decades, going to meetings where sometimes just three people came, or those cold winter afternoon tabling [sitting at tables in the street, enlisting support for petitions]: do you remember where that was, in Corrientes and Callao? When the left called us ‘the ladies with the small lists’: writing law proposals; creating networks with health professionals; hours and hours and days of conversation and more conversation with the *Socorristas* [who provide information to people seeking abortions], popular feminisms, or the Catholics for the Right to Decide, or different groups of the left ... to protect the inclusive frame ... to protect the autonomy of the Campaign ... and the media speaks about an ‘explosion’, making feminists’ labour invisible once more.

Marta outlines fundamental topics for an understanding of the feminist struggle for abortion rights in Argentina. First, the centrality of the symbol, the green scarf, or rather the centrality of the use of the symbol in public spaces, particularly among young feminists today. She also recognises many of the strategies developed by the campaign, from the sometimes very demanding labour of sitting with a little table in the street asking people to support petitions (the first one that I remember was in 1985, not about the right to abortion but the right to divorce and shared custody of children) to the labour of creating networks with health professionals, to learning the language of the law through writing different law proposals (the one presented in 2020 was No. 14). Finally, she speaks about the work of not only creating but reproducing an organisation that, while being very strict in demanding a total identification with the agenda of the campaign, includes the activism of lesbians, feminists and *Socorristas*,

who work outside the frame of state institutions, running hotlines, offering information and providing support to women who choose misoprostol (the ‘abortion pill’) when taking the decision to conclude a pregnancy,<sup>3</sup> to the sophisticated ways through which the Catholics who are in favour of the right to abortion move between religious hierarchies and religious identities,<sup>4</sup> and the difficulties in defending an autonomous position outside the political parties, even if most of the members of the campaign identified broadly with a socialist/leftist/Kirchnerist political frame.

Queer feminist scholar Mabel Bellucci’s (2014) work provides a solid and systematic overview of the complex web of networks, organisations, political parties and individual feminist collaborations at the core of the mobilisation for abortion rights. The strength of her work is her exploration of how feminist communities were crafted through sometimes serious contradictions and antagonism, such as those between feminists supporting the Kirchner administration and feminists arguing for a leftist political frame. Bellucci also identifies the complex relationship between ‘autonomous’ feminists and feminists organised in political parties, between feminists whose activism focuses on parliamentary strategies and collaboration with health professionals and those anarcho-inspired feminist activists, and between feminists (narrowly) focusing on women’s rights and those inspired by the success of the trans\* movements that have expanded and rewritten the category of women. In the following quote, Patricia acknowledges some of these tensions, but also identifies the practice of creating dialogues and coalitions:

Of course, we disagree sometimes, and at times the trans movement has been too demanding. But in this country, you know your friends in the streets, those putting their bodies on the line. The lesbians’ organisations, the trans organisations have always been here, in the streets, in the rough times, and not for the TV photos. That is the way alliances are made.

The bill proposal presented to the Argentinean Congress speaks of women and persons who can become pregnant (*personas gestantes*) mirroring the productive dialogue (Fernández, 2020) between more traditional feminist-inspired women’s reproductive rights activism and a new generation of

<sup>3</sup> Socorristas en Red website. Retrieved August 1, 2022, from <http://socorristasenred.org>

<sup>4</sup> Catholics for the Right to Decide. Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir Argentina website. Retrieved August 1, 2022, from <https://catolicas.org.ar>

activists working within the frame of reproductive justice agendas—what Sutton and Borland (2018) define as the ‘queering of abortion rights’.

In her reading of the agenda campaign, feminist and cultural studies scholar Maria Alicia Gutiérrez (1998, 2011) identifies two central axes located within debates on gendered citizenship and social justice. The first one is the fundamental argument that abortion is an issue of class justice: investigations identify the strong correlation between women dying as a consequence of clandestine abortions and women lacking the resources to cover the cost of a clandestine but safe abortion in private clinics. Gutiérrez underlines the need to extend democracy to women’s bodies, arguing that a woman’s right to choose over her own body is at the core of her ability to act upon citizenship in a democratic nation-state. In other words, a struggle for abortion rights framed through a reproductive justice paradigm.

Amanda, in her late thirties, tells me with a big smile that she was born in democracy, and continues, ‘but I have an aunt in Mexico and another one in Norway’, as if giving this information, that locates her family history in relationship to the experience of exile during the dictatorship, was central to her (feminist) identity. She moves on to argue firmly that the criminalisation of abortion is also a class-based practice (or, as she puts it with a bit of benevolent irony, as ‘an intersectional topic, as feminists might say in Europe’):

It is how these people are. How they always have been criticising Cristina Kirchner for her policies ... according to them, women get pregnant to get the maternity benefit, but on the other hand abortion is a sin. All these opinions, if you can call them opinions, while they move from their country club to their summerhouse by the sea. Abortion is not only a gender issue; it is a class issue. An intersectional topic, as feminists might say in Europe. It is true that the denial of abortion rights is an attack against all women, but we know very well that the rich protect their own. When we say ‘so and so many women die of clandestine abortions’, you have to read it (and everybody reads it) as a working-class teenager dies, an indigenous woman in her forties dies. Nobody who lives in San Isidro [a privileged neighbourhood] dies. And, of course, not dying does not take away the guilt and the shame all women feel, the guilt we experience that goes with the illegality of the practice. Look, swimming pools on the fifth floor, money from the clinics doing illegal abortions.

Amanda takes the interviewer through the double-edged discourse in which women's deaths due to abortion are read in Argentina as poor women dying. Patriarchy is also in her narrative, about dominant classes protecting their 'own' women. It is interesting how at the end of the quote she returns to the shared experience of women's stigma around abortion when she has been so strongly arguing for women's different locations that create different experiences of the practice.

Betty, another young woman, with the green scarf in her backpack, accompanies the interviewer towards a space of privilege, describing how an interruption of pregnancy occurs in safe conditions for those who can afford it:

It is pure hypocrisy. Here in Argentina it is the easiest thing in the world to have an abortion if you have money. You know how it is ... Waiting room with comfortable armchairs, Vivaldi music in the background ... nurses who smile and offer you green tea and therapeutic support after the intervention. But if you are a black skull [*cabezita negra*], then prepare to bleed yourself to death. Do not come to me with the illegality issue. In this country abortion is illegal only if you are poor. They are hypocrites, because their women, they do not die. That is the difficult thing when feminists from the North visit us. Some of them have these colonial fantasies, thinking that here we have only machismo and the Catholic Church with crosses and nuns everywhere. This is not the case here. Everybody does it. Everybody knows. Only the poor die. The issue here is not for or against abortion. If you are against abortion, you support clandestine abortions.

Betty underlines the tokens of these privileges—the armchairs, the smiling nurse, the support of a therapist—and then confronts these experiences with that of bleeding to death for working-class women, using the term 'black skull' to name the ways through which class is racialised in the country. Betty is also trying to mediate the gap, particularly towards feminists from the Global North, who travel to the country with colonial representations, between official discourses and privileged women's practices. While it could be argued that the criminalisation of abortion is a signifier of societal norms and as such a policy that impacts the lives of all women, it can also be argued that the criminalisation affects only those who are not protected by belonging to families where the power of hegemonic masculinity provides strategies and resources. Women's autonomy is a class issue in Betty's story.

Amanda's and Betty's reflections and analyses illuminate how a narrow focus on the right to choose would be inadequate in a context where so many privileged women, despite the legislation that criminalises abortion, have the social and economic capital to make decisions over their own bodies. The feminist struggle for abortion rights in Argentina transcends an individualist agenda of 'my body, my choice', framing a struggle inspired by a notion of reproductive justice that challenges not only patriarchy but the political economy of patriarchy.

### WHITE SCARVES, GREEN SCARVES: FEMINISTS' GENEALOGIES

Argentinean feminists faced an immense challenge in posing the issue of abortion in a context where the splitting-up of families, the kidnapping of children and the creation of the figure of the disappeared were resisted and challenged through the powerful symbol of the Mother and the white scarves (Goñi, 2017). The Mothers (*Madres*), staging weekly demonstrations in Buenos Aires' main city square, the Plaza de Mayo, were for many years the most outspoken and courageous opponents of the brutal repression by the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 until 1983.

Social anthropologist Lynn Morgan (2015) identifies the tensions between transnational and local feminism when exploring the frame of the Argentinean debate in terms of human rights rather than, as she would argue, in terms of reproductive justice:

How can abortion be legalized in Argentina, when killing babies (in the form of the *Madres*' children) is one of the horrors that Argentina is trying to leave behind? (Morgan, 2015: 138)

This is a challenge that feminist communities have successfully framed through defining abortion rights as an issue of expansion of democracy and of human rights. Perhaps the most fundamental illustration of the continuity between these two movements is the use of the green scarf as a symbol of the feminist movement connecting to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo's white headscarves. Or, rather, the best example of these continuities is the figure of Norita Cortiña from Mothers of the Plaza's *Línea Fundadora* (the founders), who often bears a green handkerchief together with her traditional white scarf with the name of her disappeared son (Bellucci, 1999; LATFEM, 2018).

During 2018, a number of events organised by the collective of Feminists and Lesbians for the Decriminalisation of Abortion took place at the Mothers' House, the local meeting place of Hebe de Bonafini and her group of Mothers. Hebe de Bonafini, also using the green scarf, put the issue of life and death in terms of the protection of women's lives, linking the protection of the life of women to poverty and market corruption.<sup>5</sup>

The following quote is from Member of Parliament Gabriela Cerruti during the debate on abortion rights in 2018, wearing, like many other Members of the Lower House, the green scarf. Cerruti grasps the continuity between the human rights and feminist movements in Argentina, framing the debate within the historical heritage of the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo:

The truth is that we were told more than once, and not so long ago, that we Argentines were the sons and daughters of the grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. I like to say that we are the daughters of those crazy old women wearing the white scarves and that today we are the mothers and fathers of those crazy *pibas* [young girls] wearing the green scarves. And the two scarves, united and intertwined, and in intergenerational dialogue, are building the history of the conquest of rights and freedom in this country, in this community, and are undoubtedly giving many lessons to the world. (Valdes, 2018)

The trauma of the dictatorship, or rather the taking sides on issues regarding Memory, Truth and Justice, was highly present in the parliamentary debates when the abortion law was discussed. Victoria Donda, a young woman appropriated as a baby by the dictatorship when her mother was assassinated, wearing her green scarf, challenged the hypocrisy of those against abortion, particularly their silence:

when women were kidnapped, disappeared and forced to give birth. As if that womb was war booty and the results of the womb, which were babies who were born alive, were also a booty of war. You people, you hypocrites who are now against abortion, were silent. (Quoted in Valdes, 2018)

HIJxS, the organisation that represents the children of the disappeared and of those in prison or in exile during the dictatorship, supported the feminist struggles with a document that was highly successful in social

<sup>5</sup> Retrieved July 3, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWQXw1KC3Dc>



media, where they connected the suffering of mothers with the criminalisation of abortion:

We are the daughters of women victims of the genocide, murdered and disappeared by state terrorism, of abducted pregnant women, whose babies were stolen, women tortured and raped in the clandestine centres, of women political prisoners, of women forced into exile. We are the daughters of the white scarves. Today we also put on the green scarves. (Hijos e Hijas Capital, 2017 [Capital Sons and Daughters])

Finally, Nicolás Massot, a right-wing, conservative, ‘anti-rights’ parliamentary member, used human rights arguments for the protection of the ‘two lives’ by equating the proposal for abortion rights with the genocide during the dictatorship. In the middle of his argumentation, he turned towards Juan Cabandié, a child born in the ESMA (Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada) concentration camp, and said: ‘not even at that time did we kill babies; we did not dare to go that far.’ The argument produced strong reactions, in terms of the ‘we’ that Massot used in identifying himself with the dictatorship, but also in equating the foetus to the babies born to women political prisoners in concentration camps.<sup>6</sup>

While many Catholic priests and nuns, as well as committed believers inspired by the Latin American liberation theology, suffered torture, persecution and assassination, the Church leadership actively supported the military dictatorship. Carita, a feminist activist within the health profession whose sister was killed by the military, describes the experience in the following terms:

Do you remember that a picture of the *Nunca Más* went viral with the body of a pregnant woman and a foetus?<sup>7</sup> Infamous, that is the word. Infamous. Using the idea of *Nunca Más*. Who was he? One bishop, I do not remember his name [Miguel Esteban Hesayne, Bishop of Viedma], spoke of abortion as a crime against humanity and human rights. The Church, the Church that not even wanted to receive us, that continues to be silent regarding their own registers, the Church speaks of abortion as crimes against humanity?

<sup>6</sup> *MI* (2018, June 13). Massot and his misplaced reference to the dictatorship: ‘Where you are today, Juan?’ Retrieved September 25, 2022, from <https://www.minutouno.com/notas/3076491-massot-y-su-desubicada-referencia-la-dictadura-vos-donde-estas-hoy-juan>

<sup>7</sup> *Nunca Más (Never Again)* (1984) was the title of the Truth Commission Report on Human Rights Violations that contains detailed accounts of the treatment by the Argentinean armed forces towards political activists and their families.

We do not forget what they said: that seven hours of torture was not a sin! The Catholic Church calls itself 'pro-life' but it kept very quiet when the disappearances were taking place under the military dictatorship.

A very powerful and strong nodal in the ways the human rights and feminist movements interact is the criticism of the Catholic Church, or rather the role of the Catholic Church during the military dictatorship. This role has provided the feminist movements with powerful arguments regarding the moral economy of the Church. Antonia's quote is very similar to Carita's not only in developing the same kind of arguments but in providing a number of illustrations:

Ask someone who has this kind of documentation; I am not an expert. I remember what everybody does. This pervert [Bishop Antonio Baseotto in 2015], suggesting that a Minister of Health supporting sexual education at schools should be thrown into the sea with a stone round his neck ... Evil, he is evil, with our experience of the disappeared who were thrown into the sea ... Maybe in other countries, but here in Argentina the Catholic Church lacks the moral authority to speak of abortion as a sin. They are the only sinners .... They gave their blessing to the soldiers during the death flights. They did not move a finger despite so many families asking for help when their sons and daughters and their grandchildren were kidnapped and 'disappeared'. How could they dare to speak of sin? They are the only sinners. The Church was not interested in any life during the dictatorship. They gave their blessing to those torturing pregnant women with electric shocks in their vaginas. Which two lives are the ones they want to protect now?

While many feminist slogans challenge the power of the Catholic Church, such as 'Take your rosary away from our ovaries' (*Saquen los rosarios de nuestros ovarios*) or 'Yes, indeed, ladies and gentlemen, the paedophile priests want to prohibit abortion' (*Si, sí, señores, prohíben el aborto los curas abusadores*), none of them is so powerful and creates such strong emotional bonds between different generations as the one often voiced when feminist demonstrations approach Buenos Aires Cathedral: 'Church, as filthy as during the dictatorship' (*Iglesia, basura como en la dictarudra*). The slogan is not only a description of the role of the Catholic Church, but a cross-generational bridge that creates bonds between forms of suffering and, through collective mobilisations, feminist agendas.

### ‘IF THE POPE WERE A WOMAN, THE RIGHT TO ABORTION WOULD BE A LAW’ (FEMINIST GRAFFITI IN BUENOS AIRES)

I have met these religious fundamentalists many times before. Screaming their dirty slogans: ‘Today and yesterday it’s the same—if yesterday they stole babies, today the feminists want to kill them in the womb. What is the difference ...?’ Calling us murderers. Inviting people to watch the anti-abortion film *Silent Scream*, praying in the entrance at the opening of León Ferrari’s exhibition, holding hands and singing when awaiting the parliamentary decision on same-sex marriage. But they are more aggressive now. A friend of mine is a mother of a seven-year-old girl who came home crying because the teacher had told them that feminists want to kill babies ... in a public school!!!!

Zulema is telling me this story, trying to go through the street while the ‘anti-rights’, as feminists in Argentina name them, throw plastic dolls at us, calling her/us murderers, holding their blue-and-white flags with the slogan ‘Protect the two lives’. During the beginning of the parliamentary debate in 2018, they were always in the streets around the Parliament building, distributing baby milk and showing films, among them *Silent Scream*. Some of them carried banners with slogans such as ‘Let the womb be a sanctuary, not a cemetery’ and ‘We speak for those innocents without voice’.

In Latin America, the impediment to the continuity of Dilma Rousseff’s term as president of Brazil was that she was accused of destroying girls’ and boys’ natural gender identities, and in Argentina the resistance through an alliance of the country’s white middle class and the country’s elite towards Cristina Kirchner’s (their first elected female president) administration had strong and powerful anti-gender subtexts (Manne, 2018). Scholarly research shows that right-wing xenophobic agendas and religious fundamentalists create interpellation not only through discourses of crisis, fear and threat but also and particularly on anxieties around gender relations, the family, sexuality and reproduction (Dhaliwal & Yuval-Davis, 2014).

While the Catholic Church continues to play an important role in the resistance to reproductive and sexual rights, new emergent and powerful actors of what a number of scholars consider a regional trend (Vaggione, 2020) are the US-inspired Evangelicals, supported by several NGOs, creating a variety of civil society organisations, lawyers, pro-life doctors,

associations in defence of the family and pro-life international networks (Morgan, 2014).

The Evangelicals were the ones kneeling and praying in the streets around the Parliament building when the bill was to be discussed, both in 2018 and in 2020. While the religious aspects were powerfully present among the Evangelicals who organised huge mobilisation with rock bands playing in the streets nearby the Senate to pray so that the members voted ‘right’, arguments inspired by science and human rights were also present.

*La Merced Vida* defines itself as a non-governmental organisation, but many Catholic priests support the network.<sup>8</sup> In 2018, the organisation invited the Spanish activist Esperanza Puente Moreno to participate in a number of events, among others a celebration of March 8. The activist’s performance was based on the narrative of her experience of abortion as a trauma. They also invited gynaecologist Catalina Gerace from the scientific committee of the Argentinean Obstetric Association. Science is in several ways present in the arguments developed by these actors, on the one side suggesting that developments within science confirm the Catholic Church’s position regarding the beginning of life, on the other through the use of psychology and psychological arguments the construction of the post-traumatic syndrome after abortion.

Scholarship has also identified, in the case of Argentina, the emphasis on human rights (the rights of the foetus, the rights of the unborn child, etc.) since the 1990s. While the argument for protecting and saving two lives has been the most central to the debates, the emphasis on the connection between abortion rights and genocide is central to the Argentinean context, as in the quote below from the Catholic Church newspaper where it is argued that it is the defence of those who are more vulnerable that separates democracies from dictatorship:

Respect for the right to life and defence of the weak is the most basic guarantee that separates the rule of law from tyrannies and democracies from dictatorships. In Argentine history, the Penal Code was modified twice to unprotect the unborn child, through laws 17,567 and 21,338. The first carried the signature of Juan Carlos Onganía and the second, that of Jorge

<sup>8</sup> *La Merced Vida*. Retrieved July 23, 2022, from <https://www.lamercedvida.org/ficha.php?referencia>

Rafael Videla. Let us reflect on what respect for human life these *de facto* rulers had, and let us act according to our times.<sup>9</sup>

In the words of Marucha, a feminist activist reflecting upon the presence of *anti-derechos* at the feminists' annual meetings:

Every year the same thing ... We are Argentinean Mothers and we want to protect life and family ... and there you go. We do not have time to discuss other issues, because they are present at all the workshops and all the efforts go to discuss with them. Remember Mendoza? All that graffiti with 'Feminists, you are murderers' and, even at the school where we were meeting, 'No to sexual education', 'No to abortion'. This is how we were received in Mendoza. There is so much strength in the Encounters. So many dreams ... so much struggle. You cannot narrow that down because of the presence of these *fachas* [fascists coded as females]. When we want to rid our meetings of these people who have come to disrupt them, we shout 'Filthy Church, you are the military dictatorship!' until they leave. The conferences always finish with a demonstration, and we make sure that we march around the cathedral in whichever city we are in, to make our voices heard. We are always met by at least three lines of young Catholic men [often mobilised by Opus Dei], who hold up rosaries and threaten us. We point out that the Catholic Church calls itself 'pro-life' but that it kept very quiet when the disappearances were taking place under the military dictatorship. But of course it is an issue, because it takes a lot of energy from a feminist agenda. And then you should not forget the Catholics for the Right to Decide who go with the green scarf.

While it is fundamental to provide an analysis that does not fall into binary oppositions between religion as conservative and secularism with progressive sexual politics (Pecheny et al., 2016), there is no doubt that in the Argentinean case religious actors have had a fundamental role in framing the resistance against reproductive justice (Vaggione, 2007; Morán Faúndes & Peñas Defago, 2016). Vaggione (2005) develops the concept of *reactive politicisation* to grasp the response of religious sectors and argues that religion continues to be a key player in defining certain politics and that it is precisely in sexual politics that its presence has intensified in recent years. Many of these mobilisations and events are articulated

<sup>9</sup>Sebastian Schuff (May 17, 2018). Should we continue to penalise abortion? *Télam* (2018, May 5). Retrieved August 1, 2022, from <https://www.telam.com.ar/notas/201805/282432-hay-que-seguir-penalizando-el-aborto.html>

through an emotional regime of hate directed towards feminism and towards women embodying feminist agendas.

Feminist anthropologist Mónica Tarducci (2017) analysed the agenda of the Catholic women against abortion who have been mobilising in the Encounters. Her work shows both a systematic presence of these groups locally and nationally coordinated and financially supported and a variety of arguments from maternalism to human rights and psychology, woven together against women's reproductive justice. Among others, she identifies the following quote in their documents: 'Right to life since conception, no to the use of condoms, no to the use of emergency contraceptives, no to lesbianism, no to homosexuality. Yes to the dignity of home and domestic work and the nuclear family and no to public policies that decrease population, an imperialist weapon against poor countries.' Tarducci argues that even when these women did not identify themselves as militant Catholics, their racism and homophobia clearly did, and that their presence conditions the possibility for a productive and needed exploration of feminists' agendas and visions.

## CONCLUSION

The first step is: '*ni olvido, ni perdón*' ('neither forget, nor forgive'). We will practice *escraches* (public shaming) against these senators. We will fight to strengthen the network of abortion providers, occupy public hospitals, demand the public production and free use (not only in hospitals) of misoprostol, and for each death due to a botched abortion we will accuse the state and call it a state femicide. We will continue to expose how the issue of abortion intersects with other social problems such as work, poverty, and racism. One of the singular features of our movement is that we are weaving abortion into a web of other political issues. (Verónica Gago, with Cavallero et al., interviewed by Arruzza & Bhattacharya, 2018)

The above quote evolved as a response to the defeat of the bill proposal by the Senate in 2018. Slogans such as 'We want to be alive, free, and without debt' in reference to the recent IMF agreement, 'Defend our bodies, defend our territories' and the successful organisation of the March 8 strike in 2019 with the participation of diverse groups from labour unions to teenagers from different schools mirror the Argentinean feminist

movement's ability to name and understand the struggle for abortion rights as a struggle for *reproductive justice* providing a powerful link between, on the one hand, earlier genealogies of resistance and, on the other, bridging the diversity of struggles (labour, indigenous, against austerity) towards a successful coalition that provided the landscape through which the 2020 abortion law is not only an expansion of women's rights but an expansion of reproductive justice understood through a Global South feminist agenda.

The anthology *The Time When Feminism Was a Bad Word* (Tarducci et al., 2019) provides a genuine analysis of feminist activists and their impressive labour during a time when feminism was absent from political parties, from labour unions, from human rights organisations and outside the universities' curriculum. Tarducci identifies the efforts to organise the first March 8 in Argentina's democracy through the participation of diverse groups of women from lesbians to women returning from exile to female political party leaders. Central to the authors' agenda is to illuminate the powerful bonds and the endurance of several generations of Argentinean feminists.

It is impossible to overlook the connections, mirrored in the green-and-white scarves, between the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and the human rights movement and contemporary Argentinean feminism. But it is also impossible to overlook the connections between the LGBTQ and trans activism and the understanding of abortion rights that transcends an essentialist conceptualisation of the category of women. Finally, feminist struggles in Argentina are acted upon through an intersectional lens, providing visions of reproductive justice that demand a radical societal transformation. Central to this chapter is the conceptualisation of Argentinean feminism within a tradition and politics of hope, a multivocal feminism being created and promising feminist futures.

Feminists' struggles in Argentina both shape and act upon a range of ongoing political struggles and social conflicts. A conceptualisation of abortion rights in terms of reproductive justice in continuous dialogue with diverse social movements created feminist visions that could act upon and name social suffering as gendered but also that through the slogan 'It is worth fighting for' ('*Vale la pena luchar*') could act upon and name possible futures and possible hopes.

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