Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo: Group Development from Single-Issue Protest Movement to Permanent Political Organization

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Introduction

In 1976, the Argentine military took control of the government and ushered in an era of extreme brutality and repression known as the Dirty War. In the seven years of military rule, an estimated 30,000 dissidents were disappeared, that is, they were kidnapped, taken to detention centers, tortured and ultimately killed. During that time, the government blamed the disappearances on paramilitary groups or on the victims themselves, claiming they had left the country of their own volition. The disappearance of dissidents was officially denied, and family members were often unsuccessful in their search for the missing.

In 1977, a group of 14 mothers met in front of the Casa Rosada, the Argentine presidential palace, to share information. Congregating in public was forbidden by the dictatorship, and the mothers were told to move. They walked silently around the pyramid in the Plaza de Mayo, a ritual they continue doing to this day every Thursday at 3:30 p.m. Those 14 women formed the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Madres), an organization which has since grown to include thousands of women across Latin America and abroad. The white handkerchiefs the Madres adorned symbolized the disappeared, a silent act of defiance. In a time of extreme military brutality, the Madres and their symbolic modes of protest were the only form of open opposition to the dictatorship.

The Madres remain the most recognized human rights organization in Argentina, and one of the most recognized human rights organizations in the world. The group has been the subject of numerous political, sociological, and anthropological studies. The organization has also been the focus of many fictional works by Latin American and North American authors. The Madres are the most prominent of many human rights organizations in Argentina, and the group exemplifies what Brysk (1994: 46) labels “family-based groups” formed to combat government
oppression. Family-based human rights organizations operate in Latin America along with two other types of organizations: “civil libertarian movements and religious movements” (Brysk 1994: 47–49). Each type of human rights organization operates from a unique dynamic that ties its operations to the national population and the international community.

Protest is, by definition, an action against an existing event, process or party. The nature of protest is shaped, in part, by the social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics of the society in which the protest occurs. A protest organization operating through jurisdictional frameworks such as the courts may have its options for protest limited by government edicts declaring court action against the government illegal. Religious-based protests may also be discouraged or significantly curtailed if the presiding religious hierarchy orders protests stopped. As options for protest are eliminated through the banning of rallies or the publication of print media, new forms arise through necessity. The Madres represent a form of protest organization and expression that is unique to its contemporary situation of vocal opposition to an anti-democratic brutal military dictatorship that incorporated murder as a method of dealing with its opponents.

The Madres also serve as an example of how transnational links to similar protest organizations as well as expatriate populations sympathetic to the goals of a protest organization serve to shape and sustain the mechanism of protest. The brutal repression of any form of protest by the military dictatorship caused the Madres to first seek financial and emotional support from Argentines living abroad. Because there were no external sources of cohesion for Madres members in Argentina, the group sought cohesiveness through the interpersonal and emotional bonds of members. This also shaped the identity of the group and its forms of protest and sustainability.
The Madres represent a unique tie between traditional forms of protest in Latin America and liberation ideology. The group was not originally formed on the principles of liberation ideology. The transition to liberation ideology, which represents a radical opposition to most democratic norms and advocates the need to essentially rebuild a society’s institutions to allow for genuine mechanism of social justice, was almost by default. Traditional institutions, including the Catholic Church, were closed to the Madres. The expatriate populations supporting the Madres tended to support more radical approaches to reform and transnational sources of financial and moral support in Latin America tended to reflect liberation ideology values.

The Madres were formed just as the role of peremptory rights was becoming prominent on the international political stage (Sikkink 2008:3). International covenants guarantying the rights of all persons to certain inalienable human rights were signed in 1976: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). These covenants provided an ideological justification for the Madres’ protests, and provided validation for a movement that was viewed with complete disregard by the government and by many of the Argentine people (Sikkink 2008:4).

As international peremptory rights covenants allowed the Madres to be validated, the inauguration of the Raúl Alfonsín administration in 1983 began to lessen the need for Madres as an engine for revealing the truth of the Dirty War (Sikkink 2008:5-7). The inauguration of truth commissions established the process of “transitional justice” under a democratic civilian government that supported the establishment of collective memories of the criminal acts of the dictatorship (Sikkink 2008:6). These institutional reforms filled the void previously addressed only by the Madres. But the links between the Madres allowed the organization to remain cohesive during this period of transition. In 1995, Navy Captain Francisco Scilingo confessed
that, during the Dirty War, he commanded flights of dissidents over the ocean and personally tossed political prisoners to their deaths. His confession restored interest and validation in the Madres’ agenda and message, providing them with the moral authority to pursue a wide range of social causes.

The idea that social phenomena do not occur in a vacuum is hardly unique or surprising. Cultural processes shape the nature of all activities within a society to some extent. The formation of the Madres represents the convergence of social, political and cultural dynamics joining together to shape the nature of protest used by the Madres against the repressive and brutal military regime during the military dictatorship. Following re-democratization in Argentina, the Madres have grown from a single-issue movement focused on attaining justice for the disappeared into a permanent political unit acting against the existing institutional frameworks that they identify as perpetuating the pervasive injustices in Latin America and abroad. The Madres have developed into a permanent social movement fighting against economic and social imperialism of the West, which they view as the underlying causes of global inequality. The group has adopted a radical socialist ideology and has attained political legitimacy within Latin America.

What factors have motivated the Madres’ expansion from a single-issue social movement to a permanent Argentine political organization involved in the global movement against capitalism, imperialism, and social and economic inequalities? This study sought to understand the Madres’ motivation for adopting a leftist ideology and working in the political sphere toward a socialist society. A content analysis of documents published by the Madres dating from 1988 until the present shows that the group’s development was motivated by 1) the Madres’ perception of a link between the abuses of the dictatorship and the capitalist system, 2) their understanding
of the nature of social and economic imperialism and the inverse relationship between capital
profit and social welfare, 3) a desire to continue the social and political agenda of the
disappeared, and 4) the Madres’ decision to socialize motherhood. Further, the Madres’ moral
authority, stemming from their sole open resistance to the dictatorship and reinforced by the
Scilingo confession of 1995, allows them to pursue a broad political agenda with the support of
the Latin American public.

**Literature Review**

The literature regarding the human rights protest movement in Argentina during the Dirty
War is vast in scope and represents exhaustive research by scholars representing many
disciplines. The dramatic and emotional nature of subject matter relating to the Dirty War can
pose an obstacle to the detached and objective study of Argentina’s protest movement. Some of
the literature loses appropriate scholarly objective and any review of the literature must be aware
of the presence of some subjective research that should be avoided or assessed carefully. The
literature devoted to the Madres sometimes veers into emotional descriptions or assessments of
the organization. These studies are still valuable, however, especially when exploring the role of
emotional bonds between members and the emotional forces shaping symbolic forms of protest.

Three central themes appear in the literature dealing with the Madres: 1) the historical
and social forces that shaped the Madres’ message and their adoption of liberation ideology,
2) the role played by organizational structure on the nature of protest used, and 3) the symbolic
means of protest and collective memory. These themes are not isolated from one another, and
many studies factor in one, two or all three themes to explain a particular action or aspect of the
Madres. The emphasis on a particular theme often depends on when a study was performed.
Brysk (1994) provides one of the best analyses of the Madres, but her book was published in
1994, when the influence of the Madres was waning in Argentina as the re-establishment of civilian democratic government allowed civil libertarian and religious-based protest organizations to once again function. Her book was published before the confessions of Francisco Scilingo in 1995. The public confession of how murders were carried out against the disappeared prompted a loss of public faith in traditional government institutions to root out the perpetrators of the Dirty War and exact punishment. The confession, and the confessions and apologies for the dictatorship that followed turned public attention back to the Madres, and supported the belief of Madres members that existing government institutions were corrupt.

Generally, works published prior to the Scilingo confession do not explore the Madres’ return to prominence as the voice of opposition in Argentina to existing government institutions and practices. Works published prior to 1995 explore more systems-based analyses and historical and cultural forces at play in the formation of the Madres. The transnational influences on the Madres are explored in most published studies, but the role of transnational links to the embrace of liberation ideology by the Madres is generally linked to the Scilingo confession and so is found primarily in studies published after 1995.

**Historical and Social Forces and Liberation Ideology**

Literature chronicling the rise of other human rights organizations in Argentina exhibits fewer instances of emotional or favorable treatments. The role of religious organizations operating in concert with one another in opposition to the Catholic Church’s support of the military dictatorship is generally singled out as the most unique aspect of Argentina’s religious-based protest movement. The Church’s alliance with the military was not universal. Extreme leftist elements of the Church, often tied to liberation ideology, opposed the government and the mainstream Church. This may have contributed to liberationist influences on the Madres, since
most of the Madres were Catholic and could not turn to the mainstream Church for comfort and assistance in opposing the dictatorship (Bouvard 2002:52). The Church’s role as “the conduit for rightist intellectual elites” defending the government’s actions (Bouvard 2002:52) alienated most of the Madres. Even after the military dictatorship was removed, the mainstream Church opposed attempts by the Madres to hold leaders of the dictatorship accountable (Kaplan 2004:125). The alienation of most members of the Madres from the Church caused them to bond closer with one another. This occurred within a population that already felt common bonds given the nature of the loss suffered by members of the group.

Movimiento Ecumenico por los Derechos Humanos (MEDH) represents a domestic alliance of non-mainstream Catholic Christian human rights organizations, often acting in concert with transnational religious-based Christian human rights organizations and with domestic non-Christian religious human rights organizations. MEDH and Madres formed within a twelve-month period of one another, but Madres remained the more effective mechanism for protest and the marshalling of civil opposition to the government than MEDH and its domestic partners (Jabine and Claude 1991:96).

Brysk (1994) as well as Bosco (2001) and Bouvard (2002) suggest that family-based groups such as Madres operate from a framework forged by emotional ties and affection among members, and that the nature of these ties is demonstrated through the use of powerful symbols that defy government attempts to repress the use of electronic and print media. Books, periodicals and broadcasts may be banned successfully by oppressive regimes, but images of mothers wearing white headscarves silently holding photographs is a potent form of protest. This view of the interpersonal ties that bond family-based groups and their use of symbolic politics is valid, and is useful for understanding the dynamics of the Madres movement.
Protest groups utilizing more traditional forms of protest, such as the courts (civil libertarian movements) and religious organizations, remain subordinate to some external hierarchy of authority that can be subject to repression or significant influence from oppressive regimes. Some scholars suggest that this difference, combined with the symbolic nature of the Madres’ protest dynamic, explains Madres’ success at both influencing policy regarding the perpetrators of the Dirty War, and expanding the group’s political and social agenda toward a liberationist ideology-based dynamic.

Brysk (1994) relates the transition of Madres to a more expansive agenda of social and political issues to the removal of the oppressive regime, which allowed more traditional civil libertarian protest organizations to pursue leaders of the regime through traditional institutions (the courts and legislature). Brysk’s analysis of the Madres’ transition to a permanent political movement is insightful, particularly in light of the fact that her work was published prior to the Madres’ reemergence as a dominant movement. Re-democratization in Argentina was accompanied by the proliferation of civilian organizations aiming to normalize society, and this proliferation resulted in the Madres losing authority and shifting left in their political ideology. This ideological progression is in line with Brysk’s argument that the Madres’ expansion to broader social and economic causes was facilitated by the fall of military power.

Robben (2005) demonstrates that the Madres began to lose credibility with the Argentine public as memories of the Dirty War began to fade amid new civilian governments. The Madres’ public image began to lose its significance as the majority of Argentines attempted to forget the crimes committed during the dictatorship. This completely changed with the public confession of Francisco Scilingo, as his confession aroused the memories of the dictatorship’s crimes and revitalized the Madres’ public mission to seek justice for the disappeared (Robben 2005:121).
But while the Scilingo confession brought the Madres once again to the forefront of public attention, and allowed them to forge alliances with new family-based protest organizations such as HIJOS (formed by the children of those persecuted by the dictatorship), religious and civil-libertarian organizations also sought the same objective through venues now open to action (the courts, a free press, and religious activism) that were closed during the dictatorship’s rule. The ability of alternative human rights organizations to fight for “justice” (such as the persecution of junta members) caused the Madres to turn to larger issues of injustice since they no longer had a monopoly for the protest of Dirty War crimes. I do not agree with this view on the expansion of the Madres, as I believe it was the failures of the civil libertarian and religious-based movements to obtain justice for the disappeared, rather than the ability of these groups to take on the cause post-1983, that prompted the Madres to expand their focus, since superficial changes to the system had not yielded any real results.

Organization Aspects and Principles of Protest Organization

Activist networks are the connections formed among actors, which facilitate the exchange of information. The ties connecting activists serve as media over which knowledge is passed and through which common goals are pursued. The quality of the connections among activists determines the strength of the network and the dominant literature suggests that networks are most efficient “when they are dense, with many actors, strong connections among groups in the network, and reliable information flows” (Keck and Sikkink 1998:28). This understanding of network ties is convergent with Jelin’s (1998) analysis of women’s social movements in Latin America. By moving from the private to the public spheres, women began to interact with other women and learn of their similar positions. These interactions created the ties that formed the
basis of network formation. The formation of these networks was and is crucial to the advancement of movement goals.

Social movement network ties are developed on several levels: 1) inter-personal ties between activists, 2) the relations between activists and organizations, and 3) the connections among organizations that facilitate collective social activity (Bosco 2001:310). Some scholars argue that the fundamental connections between activists are of utmost significance to the development, successes and sustainability of the movement. Inter-personal connections are the basis for recruitment into collective action (McAdam 1982:44) and the contemporary literature emphasizes the role of emotions in developing and sustaining inter-personal bonds. The ties between the mothers of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo movement are built around their shared struggle to find the truth about and justice for their disappeared children (Bosco 2001:311). The emotional component of their experience creates deeper bonds between the activists and contributes to the strength of their network.

According to Keck and Sikkink (1998:95), “solidarity involves a substantial dimension that rights-based activism does not, that is, support based on a conviction of defending a just cause. Human rights appeals, on the other hand, raise the more procedural claims that violations of personhood or of recognized civil or legal norms and procedures are always unacceptable, whatever the victim’s beliefs.” In this sense, it is the emotional bonds between activists rather than the principled goals that they pursue that garner external support, as is the case of the Madres movement. Bosco (2001:317) suggests that the strong emotional connection between activists “provides the basis for the construction of a collective identity and the continued sharing of grievances” that factor into the sustainability of the movement. The importance ascribed to emotions by scholars of transnational social movements is certainly valid and provides insight
into the organizational dynamics of the Madres. Further, the views on interpersonal ties and collective identity may help to explain why some human right organizations, such as the Madres, continue their collective action while other organizations falter.

Although there is a consensus in the dominant literature on the importance of interpersonal ties, the geographic spatiality of those connections is a point of contention. Bosco (2001:314) argues that the endurance of a social movement is dependent upon that movement’s “capacity to develop geographically flexible networks that are embedded in different places and operate at a variety of spatial scale.”

The emphasis Bosco (2001) places on the role of geographic expansion on sustainability in collective action is supported by the boomerang pattern developed by Keck and Sikkink (1998). Often, when activists cannot find redress by appealing to their own governments, they must garner support from international activists, networks, and organizations to pressure their governments into working in accordance with their goals. This is true of the Madres. From the movement’s beginning, the founders contacted Argentines and supporters living abroad in lieu of creating ties with other human rights organizations within the country (Bosco 2001: 319). By doing this, the Madres engaged in leverage politics, “the ability to call upon powerful actors to affect a situation where weaker members of a network are unlikely to have influence” (Keck and Sikkink 1992:16).

Bosco’s (2001) argument for the merits of a geographically flexible network is further supported from a resource mobilization standpoint. Resources are necessary for the inception, sustainability and success of a movement (McAdam 1982:23). The transnational ties that the group cultivated, Bosco argues, “connected the Madres with members of governments and progressive social movements across Europe (and to some extent, North America)” (Bosco 2010:
319). Through the Argentines living abroad, the movement was able to amass necessary resources, among them legal expertise, monetary assistance and the attention of governments and media outlets (Bosco 2001: 319).

An analysis of the civil rights movement in the United States, in contrast, supplies an argument for the importance of localized networks for collective action. The tight, local networks developed in the colleges, churches and National Association for the Advancement for Colored People (NAACP) chapters in the American South provided the resources necessary to generate and sustain insurgency (McAdam 1982: 125). An examination of movement organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) shows that local chapters developed ties with other local organizations to attain the resources they could not accumulate alone (McAdam 1982: 141). These local connections kept the movement from having to expand geographically. Although the civil rights movement provides an example of spatial expansion not playing a role in insurgency generation, Bosco’s (2001) argument for geographic expansion is more relevant to the workings of transnational social movements, particularly in relation to the boomerang pattern. In situations where activists cannot achieve their goals on a local level, with or without the support of indigenous organizations, distant spatial connection may well be necessary. Therefore, although the civil rights movement does provide a compelling counterargument, it provides more support for the assertion that “geographic expansion maximizes the strategic potential of network bridges … but local bridges may provide similar benefits if both another receptive group willing to cooperate and favourable political opportunity structures are present at the local level” (Bosco 2001: 321).

An analysis of the civil rights movement has shown that the openness of political opportunity structures was conducive to the movement’s generation. According to McAdam
(1982:41), “any event or broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured occasions a shift in political opportunities.” The dominant literature generally refers to changes in the political opportunity structure as relating to shifts in and access to power and reformation of elite alliances. Some scholars argue that the preconditions for women’s movement in the third world “are shaped by political, local and historically contingent processes” (Ray and Korteweg 1999:53). As such, women’s movements against repressive governments can be understood according to the political structure concept. However, Ray and Korteweg (1999:53) contend that “if we wish to apply this concept to the third world… we must be prepared to expand it to include more fundamental changes in the nature of the state, such as the transition from colonialism to independence or from dictatorship to democracy.” This is a valid argument, as the governmental structures of the developing world have sustained much more basic changes than their developed counterparts. Particularly in Argentina, the overthrow of the Peronist government and oppressive rule of the military government created the grievances around which the Madres mobilized and the re-democratization of the country factored into the expansion and sustainability of the movement.

Symbolic Politics and Collective Memory

Although the Madres movement has sustained collective action for over thirty years, a multitude of other, similar Argentine human rights organizations have been unable to garner the same attention or sustainability. The dominant literature suggests that the tight connections that Madres in Argentina and abroad maintain result from the symbolic politics and framing techniques that they employ.
Keck and Sikkink (1998:16) suggest that symbolic politics, defined as “the ability to call upon symbols, actions, or stories that make sense of a situation for an audience that is frequently far away,” are evident in many of the Madres’ activities, and they foster the strong bonds among them even across large spatial divides. The Madres continue to gather for a silent march each Thursday, not only around the pyramid in front of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, but also around any important monument in a plaza in the many locales of Argentina. According to Bosco (2001:315), these walks “reinforce their basic moral commitments and group solidarity and … maintain their activist identities” and “have to be seen as an example of processes of collective action that contribute to the sustainability of social movement communities that extend across space.” The view that the symbolic politics employed by the Madres factored into their ability to sustain collective action is interesting and insightful, especially because the Madres continued to protest as a cohesive group in the years post-military rule when their participation was not viewed as vital by the Argentine people.

While these marches contributed to the maintenance of emotional connections among the activists, they also served the strategic purpose of gaining visibility, as Madres who have traveled abroad participated in the march at a time synchronized with that in Buenos Aires (Bosco 2001:316). These symbolic walks “indicate that place-based collective rituals- the rootedness and frequent practices of activities in particular places of symbolic importance for a group- play a role in the sustainability of activism and of a shared collective identity even among members of geographically extensive networks of activists” (Bosco 2001:317). Bosco’s interpretation of the symbolic politics employed by the Madres is accurate, and provides further evidence for the merits of geographic expansion of social movements. While the movement was
able to attain the resources needed by spreading out spatially, it maintained its network bonds and shared identity through these acts of emotional labor.

The literature on collective memory suggests that the symbolism allotted to a physical space can create and maintain emotional bonds and serve strategic functions. Since the end of the Dirty War, locations used for detention, torture and repression have been areas of contention among human rights activists. Some activists argue for the destruction of these structures and for the creation of monuments in their place as a step toward collective healing. Other groups, among them the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, fight to keep these locations untouched, leaving them as a reminder of the past. The acts committed within these places created their grievances and the Madres’ identification as victims and their continued visibility allows for those ties to continue on into the future (Bosco 2001:322).

The preservation of these locations may serve a strategic function as well, as “activists may deploy symbolic images of place to match the interests and collective identities of other groups and thereby mobilize others and gather support for their causes” (Bosco 2001: 322). The description of the Plaza de Mayo by the Madres as a place for everyone and every collective action serves this function when a mass mobilization is needed for the annual 24-hour march (Bosco 2001:322).

The creation of a monument or memorial, scholars contend, can also have numerous emotional and strategic functions. The continued memory may serve as public censure for horrendous past acts. Also, the monument may embody meaning and memory for victims to identify with and future generations to learn from. According to Jelin (1998), “spatial markers of memory are attempts to make statements and affirmations, they are facts and gestures, material spaces with a political, collective and public meaning… They are public and collective insofar as
they convey and affirm a feeling of belonging to a community, sharing an identity rooted in a tragic and traumatic history.”

These interpretations of the framing and symbolism techniques used by the Madres, while conflicting around the specific actions taken, seem to converge on the importance of ascribing meaning to particular locations. The literature suggests that the place-based marching, and both the preservation and demolition of detention centers serve the same function for the activists: building and sustaining emotional ties amongst themselves and maintaining a collective memory for future generations. The focus on keeping the memories alive is an important part of the literature, and of the Madres’ struggle for justice.

Collective memory also served as a force for returning the Madres to the forefront of the public’s concern with justice after the Scilingo confession (Robben 2005:139). Traditional collective memory institutions such as the truth commissions and numerous museums and memorials failed to obtain justice for victims of the Dirty War, since Scilingo was never prosecuted for his crimes even as the civilian administration sought to punish the perpetrators of the Dirty War.

The existing body of literature on the Madres is extensive and fairly exhaustive. My contribution to the literature is essentially twofold. I examine the Madres’ view of the capitalist system and their understanding of the nature of economic and political imperialism. Also, I analyze the group’s development through the lens of its decision to socialize maternity. The 1986 split is mentioned in the current literature but its impact has not yet been explored, particularly with regard to the Madres’ adoption of a radical, socialist agenda. The Madres’ development has predominantly been examined through the lens of historical background and interpersonal and transnational links. This study sought to understand why, rather than how, the group expanded its
focus and the motivating factors behind its development into a permanent political unit. Since my analysis focuses on primary literature published by the group and its leaders, I believe I gained an in-depth understanding of the Madres’ views of world relations and the group’s role within the global movement for economic and social justice.

**Data and Methodology**

The Madres movement originated from the repressive practices of the military dictatorship responsible for the Dirty War. Since traditional avenues of protest were eliminated, literally by executive decree, the Madres formed in non-traditional ways utilizing common emotional and situational bonds forged through the abduction and disappearance of family members and relatives. The Catholic Church, normally a source of strength and support for Argentine women, allied itself with the repressive regime, and this fostered even closer emotional and spiritual bonds between members who could only rely upon themselves for succor and support.

The emphasis on interpersonal bonding combined with the repressive nature of the regime caused the members of Madres to seek out fellow Argentines beyond the nation’s borders, and this allowed for transnational construction of the protest paradigm. This occurred as two critical international covenants served to validate the Madres’ existence. This validation was challenged by the re-establishment of civilian control and the creation of truth commissions and justice tribunals. But the essential message of the Madres – that justice required institutional shifts in the nature of government – was again validated in 1995. The Scilingo confession demonstrated to the Argentine people that traditional mechanisms for justice failed to punish the criminal acts of the dictatorship.
Traditional human rights organizations following civil libertarian and religious models were controlling the transitional justice phase of the civilian return to power. They failed to even identify those who murdered the disappeared. The revival of the Madres resulted from the failure of traditional human rights organizations to root out and punish individuals like Scilingo. The mission of the Madres shifted to a larger framework of social justice and radical change of all existing political, social, religious and economic institutions.

This study sought to understand the motivations behind the Madres’ expansion from a single-issue movement into a permanent political unit opposing the fundamental sociopolitical injustices of Argentine society. Further, the factors that facilitated the Madres’ development were explored. The methodology followed the model of a content analysis of 37 primary documents published by the Madres from 1988 to 2010, retrieved from the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo website, madres.org. The documents included Madres statements, letters, the transcription of a videoconference, and press releases through Página/12, a social democratic newspaper based in Buenos Aires.

Documents were analyzed with attention to the shifting themes in the Madres’ agenda. The changing tone, particularly regarding United States economic and political policies, was a central focus of the analysis. The statements were examined to understand the Madres’ views on the relationship between the capitalist system and global inequality. Madres slogans were analyzed, as were the uses of symbolic politics in their communiqués.

The documents were coded according to the frequency of central themes and development of the group’s agenda. For instance, statements indicating the importance of the socialization of maternity were coded as “motivation- socialization of motherhood” and were organized chronologically to examine the development of this factor from 1988 to the present.
This same coding technique was used for the remaining aspects of study. The chronological analysis of the motivating factors proved enlightening in understanding the development of the group.

The study of documents was limited by several factors. The *Madres* documents were published in Spanish. I translated the documents myself, and there is a risk of some particular nuance of meaning lost in the translation. The *Madres* organized their protests during the Dirty War using symbolic expressions more often than they used printed material. The repressive nature of the dictatorship largely eliminated printed expressions of protest. I was unable to access documents published pre-1983.

Under civilian administrations, the *Madres* were able to publish various position papers and protest statements without fear of retribution or inviting violence upon members. This literature was the primary source of printed material. The *Madres* have made select documents dating from 1988 to the present available on their website. I translated each of these 134 statements. The abundance of primary sources was such that I did not feel it necessary to search for documents dating from 1983 to 1988. The *Madres*’ decision to socialize motherhood only predates the earliest available document by two years. Thus, I felt that the full scope of *Madres* development relating to this decision could be understood by analyzing the available documents.

Analysis

Movement Development

An investigation into *Madres* publications clearly reveals the group’s evolution from a single-issue movement to one protesting a plethora of social, economic and political injustices in South America and abroad. The *Madres* view the capitalist system, and by extension, the Western imperialist agenda, as the underlying cause of the grievances against which they fight.
Their development into a permanent political institution in Argentina is contemporaneous with their adoption of leftist, radical ideology.

An analysis of Madres statements reveals that many of the injustices the group protests are rooted in the group’s perception of a link between the abuses of the military dictatorship and the capitalist system. As such, the Madres’ struggle is in many ways an extension of their resistance against the military dictatorship. One such example is the group’s position on the Church. In 1995, bishops of the Catholic Church stated that they were not able to gauge the extent to which actions of the dictatorship had negatively impacted Argentine society. The Madres responded with a letter stating, “since 1977 [the Madres] informed the bishops with a luxury of details [of] everything that was happening in the country; we brought you the testimonies of the disappeared, of our children, documents with stories from the concentration camps” (Madres 1995d). The Madres fault the Church for turning its back on the people and ignoring the mounting evidence of the dictatorship’s abuses. In subsequent writings, the group often referred to the bishops as accomplices of the dictatorship. In a 2007 criticism, the group censured the Church and Argentine justice system for not having punished those priests who were complicit in the crimes of the junta. The Madres spoke of the blessings given to dissidents before they were thrown drugged and naked from airplanes into the ocean. Referring to priests who were frequently present at the concentration camps and had full knowledge of the tortures inflicted on the disappeared, the Madres wrote, “We do not forget that they used to say ‘seven hours of torture is not a sin’” (Madres 2007f).

The Madres’ continuing criticisms of the Church serve two functions. First, an analysis of the group’s statements reveals that targeting former junta supporters and publicly denouncing their actions serves the Madres’ mission of preventing the Church from regaining legitimacy and
influence post-1983. By continually reminding the public of the Church’s past misdeeds, the group is able to combat its current positions and views. This is evidenced by the *Madres’* attacks on the Church for its stance against abortion. In a 2005 statement, “Our Right to Decide,” the *Madres* challenged the Church’s moral authority to proclaim abortion a sin: “Those bishops that participated in the plan of extermination that took 30,000 youths, those bishops accomplices of the looting and impunity of the Menem administration, those bishops corrupt friends of the bankers, those bishops abusers of children…say that they defend life” (Madres 2005c). The statement ends with the *Madres’* defense of the right to choose: “we not only defend life, but also fundamentally the dignity of women… Therefore, we condemn all killers, including those who wear a cassock” (Madres 2005c). By directly equating the Church with the dictatorship, the *Madres* attempt to rid it of all legitimacy and to make a mockery of the Church’s assumed role of authority.

The *Madres’* criticisms of the Church serve both to diminish the Church’s authority and to augment the group’s own legitimacy. By stating that the *Madres* provided the Church with information that fell on deaf ears during the dictatorship, the group reminds the public of its brave resistance during a time of great repression and also of its dedication to justice. As is evident from earlier statements, the *Madres* faced strong opposition in post-1983 Argentina. In a letter written in 1988 to their disappeared children, the *Madres* recall insults spoken against them by the military, the Church, judges, corrupt politicians and “a great part of the middle class that traded their conscience for trips to Miami and imported televisions” (Madres 1988). The *Madres* were referred to as “terrorists” and it was said that “it is necessary to annihilate them” (Madres 1988). In the face of such public rebuke, it is clear that they needed to reassert their position as defenders of the people with a legitimacy behind their words and actions.
The 1995 public confession of Navy Captain Francisco Scilingo helped to bring the Madres back to the forefront of Argentine politics and reestablished the legitimacy they had lost in the transition to democracy. In a statement made shortly after the confession, the group remarked on the great attention given to Scilingo’s confession by the media: “What a strange society of ours, that rejected during the years that which we told them and now believes the assassins and their accomplices! But good dear, now that they know, no one can say that it wasn’t true” (Madres 1995a). This statement echoes back to the group’s sentiments regarding the public’s denial of the past and exchange of conscience for material possessions. Also, it indicates a turning point in the Madres’ development into a permanent political movement since the public could no longer deny their claims, resulting in a reaffirmation of their authority.

Much like the Madres’ public denunciations of the Church, the group regularly issues statements opposing the appointment of former Junta members to educational and administrative positions in Argentina. In 2006, they issued a press release opposing the intended appointment of Atilio Alterini to the post of Rector of the University of Buenos Aires. The release exposed Alterini as a “Director of Legal Matters of the City of Buenos Aires, when their managers applied politics of terror, pursuit and death” (Madres 2006a). The group, which had petitioned countless writs of habeas corpus on behalf of the disappeared during the military dictatorship, added “Alterini was an accomplice in routine legal proceedings like the systematic refusals of habeas corpus, the cover-up of tortures, the disappearances, the violations and the robberies of the killers” (Madres 2006a). The Madres questioned how such a man could be deemed fit to head the University of Buenos Aires and declared that they would not step into the University again if he were appointed. Similarly, in a 2007 statement praising the Supreme Court of Justice for overturning the pardons instituted by former-President Menem, the Madres ended by stating
“At the same time, we condemn and disown the decision of the same court to authorize Antonio Bussi and Luis Patti to become members of the National Congress. The Madres consider that it is inadmissible that two killers and repressors like Bussi and Patti are representatives” (Madres 2007h). The Madres’ statements against the appointments of former Junta members are indicative of the group’s continuing struggle against the dictatorship and its remnants. The Madres are determined to expose every former member and prevent him from obtaining a position of power and influence in the democratic Argentine society.

The Madres’ struggle for justice has expanded dramatically in the years following re-democratization in Argentina. The group has embraced Latin American and global struggles against inequality and injustice and has worked to bring these challenges to the forefront of Argentine politics. Within Argentina, a major focus of the group is the astounding poverty of the majority of the country’s people. The growth of marginalized workers since the recession of the 1990s and particularly since the severe downturn in 2001 resulted in an ever-expanding informal sector of the economy. One result of the 2001 crisis, which severely devalued the Argentine currency and pushed millions below the poverty line, was a rise in the number of cartoneros, marginalized workers who scour the garbage of Buenos Aires’s wealthy neighborhoods, collecting cardboard and paper for recycling. The city responded to this influx of workers by legalizing garbage picking and unofficially providing a train to transport the workers from the outskirts into the city. The election of Mauricio Macri to the post of Mayor of Buenos Aires altered the city’s favorable view of the cartoneros. Macri, whose family has a city sanitation contract, accused the cartoneros of stealing garbage from waste removal companies and of not paying taxes. In a 2007 statement, the Madres proclaimed their support for the cartoneros, whom Macri blamed for a fire started on a train. The group stated, rather sharply, “As everyone knows,
Macri wants to drive the waste-removal business and thus is bothering the cardboard collectors for doing the most difficult job. Macri said that the cardboard workers steal garbage, but the true garbage is named Mauricio Macri” (Madres 2007j).

This and other Madres statements accusing Macri of self-serving politics and corruption underlie the group’s struggle against inequity in Argentina and abroad. Corruption is a main target in the group’s agenda to attain equality and incriminations against government officials are commonplace in the group’s communiqués. In a later accusation of wrongdoing regarding government funding for construction projects, the group wrote, “The government of the city of Buenos Aires, headed by Macri, is full of thieves and swindlers. They hate the poor, they want to exterminate them. For this reason they steal from us the funds that the National Government deposits to continue the projects, to pay the workers, to continue building” (Madres 2008b). The statement ends with the Madres declaring their intent to “do all the impossible to free the funds that are of our people” (Madres 2008b). The group’s ardor in the fight for equity is evident in such statements, but their scathing accusations are also indicative of their legitimacy. Not many groups can go about name-calling top politicians and retain their prominence in a country’s politics. The Madres’ history as the only form of open opposition during the Junta allows them to make strong accusations that are taken seriously.

An examination of the group’s statements reveals that the Madres’ involvement in the struggle is not limited to rhetoric. A 2007 statement discusses Secretary General Oscar Parrilli’s visit to 72 dwellings constructed in the Hidden City, a shantytown in Buenos Aires. The homes, which were built as part of an agreement developed between the Universidad Popular de Madres de Plaza de Mayo and the Minister of Human Rights of the City, were part of a bid won by the Madres to urbanize the neighborhood. The development would include the construction of nearly
450 homes, a school, a hospital, and gardens. The Madres involvement in reconstructing the blighted areas of the city is demonstrative of the group’s development into a permanent political movement. By beginning reconstruction in Buenos Aires, the Madres are acting as a government within the existing government. The group’s statement, “We want to create a new country” (Madres 2007a) indicates that its goals extend to the nation as a whole and that construction in Buenos Aires is only a first step.

Later in the year, the group learned of government agreements to cancel all social spending and projects in motion. The Madres occupied the government headquarters of the city of Buenos Aires and issued a statement that they “recognize all of the work and signed agreements with the Chief of Government. An ethical, moral and social commitment that returned hope to thousands of families and that changed subsidies and charity into decent work and the dream of building their own houses” (Madres 2007g). The Madres asked the government to honor the agreements that had set in motion a construction project of schools, gardens, and more than 1,500 homes (Madres 2007g). This action further exhibits the group’s dedication to eradicating poverty in Argentina.

The Madres view the nation’s struggle against poverty and inequality as necessarily linked to Argentina’s foreign debt. In a 1995 statement titled “The Government Pays the Foreign Debt with Lives,” the group accused the Menem administration of protecting international economic groups that “plunder the country with impunity” (Madres 1995b). This reference to groups like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and multinational corporations, is one among many and is a major focus of the Madres’ agenda. Referring to the Menem administration, the group states, “The only result of six years of government is hunger, unemployment, marginalization, discrimination … The children die in abandoned hospitals. The
teenagers are thrown in filthy jails. The retired survive in misery. Education has been privatized. The police murder the youth in precincts and in the streets. The military continues killing the youth in headquarters...The Menem administration does not invest in health nor in education, but buys arms to equip the police. Today it is cheaper to repress and murder the people than to give them food” (Madres 1995b). This statement is reflective of the group’s current struggle as a continuation of its fight against the dictatorship. By speaking of economic injustice and military crimes in the same breath, the Madres are undeniably linking the current oppressive nature of the capitalist system with the market economy introduced with violence during the military dictatorship.

Further evidence of this link is the group’s use of human rights rhetoric. In 2006, the Madres, accompanied by representatives of the Movement for the Recovery of Energy Sovereignty (MORENO), met with President Kirchner to discuss nationalization of petroleum corporations in Argentina. MORENO is a grassroots movement led by technicians, professionals, and former energy workers. In a statement published following the meeting, the Madres discussed the necessity of understanding energy as a human right and social good (Madres 2006b). The group argues that Argentina’s petroleum belongs to its people and should be extracted for their profit. In a later statement, the Madres recounted a time when petroleum companies were state-controlled: “Every worker and his family had an enormous amount of benefits: free fuel, a Christmas bonus and participation in the profits twice a year. The territory of the Country was inhabited with hundreds of thousands of places of genuine work. The country did not have a foreign debt” (Madres 2006e). By equating the opportunity to make a decent living with a human right, the Madres are able to expand their agenda without changing its basis. The Madres first acted collectively with the hope of attaining justice for their children and
punishment for human rights abuses. By framing the current struggle against poverty and injustice as a movement for human rights, the Madres are able to continue fighting in the capacity and manner in which they began.

Just as the Madres understand inequality in Latin America in terms of the foreign debt, the group equates the debt itself with economic imperialism. In a 2005 communiqué, the group stated, “The International Monetary Fund debt made us hostages to imperialism and submitted us to the extortion of the large economic groups that conditioned all of our futures. They, and their local allies were depriving us of life and dignity” (Madres 2005e). The Madres’ fight against poverty has evolved into a struggle against foreign influence, and, necessarily, in favor of national sovereignty. In a statement applauding the Argentine government’s boycott of the petroleum multinationals Shell and ExxonMobil, the Madres urged the government “to recover the privatized businesses that affect national sovereignty” (Madres 2005b). In a later statement, the group reemphasized the importance of nationalization of private companies by stating, “It is not important how many times we have to repeat it: petroleum is and should be ours, it is part of the national sovereignty. The Country isn’t only the flag and the hymn, it is also our people and our natural resources” (Madres 2006e).

The Madres’ analysis of the influence of foreign economic entities is crucial to their struggle against poverty. In a 2005 communiqué, they clearly delineated their understanding of what they view as the pernicious nature of foreign influence and the inverse relationship between corporate profits and human welfare: “Every time that a people and a Latin American government decide to stand up against the voracity of the multinationals, imperialism reacts in the only way that it knows, that is to say: destabilizing, causing increases in prices, cornering the people in more hunger and more misery” (2005b).
The Madres’ struggle against economic imperialism in Latin America has evolved into a global resistance to military, economic and cultural imperialism and has also further radicalized the group. Beginning in 2006, the group has continually issued statements denouncing what it views as the imperialism of the United States and its allies. In a 2006 statement, the group proclaimed, “We do not take part of governments that are not friends of anyone and that are always prepared for war. The United States is the true enemy of humanity,” (Madres 2006d) indicating both its stance against the United States and its evolution into a radical, leftist group.

Again, the group’s opposition to the United States can be viewed as an extension of its fight against the military dictatorship. In 2006, the Madres denounced the U.S. and Israeli intelligence investigation of a potential Iranian connection in the 1994 bombing of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association building stating “[We] respect President Nestor Kirchner. But we ask that he remembers that the United States with Kissinger at the head and the military dictatorships of Chile, Uruguay and Paraguay organized the terrible and sinister Operation Condor” (Madres 2006d). A 2007 statement, “The Enemy of Latin America” elaborates on this sentiment: “[We] know that the United States is our enemy because it has been one of the most responsible for the genocide in Argentina. And it will continue being our enemy, as much for what it says as for what it does” (Madres 2007m). The Madres’ criticisms of the United States continue, demonstrated in part through their denunciation of President Barack Obama. In a 2010 “Open Letter to the Nobel Committee,” the Madres, who were nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize, demanded the Nobel Committee withdraw the Peace Prize it awarded to President Obama because “not only did he not close the concentration camp in Guantanamo … he continues the way of his predecessor George W. Bush, invading and sending troops, with false excuses, never verified, to different places” (Madres 2010b).
The Madres’ resistance to what it feels is U.S. imperialism extends to America’s allies, in particular, Israel. In 2006, they condemned the Israeli government for bombing Lebanon and “the United Nations for its complicit silence, for its friendship with the United States that is a part of these crimes” (Madres 2006c). In 2009 the group announced its support for the Palestinian right to independence and its condemnation of the Israeli genocide of the West Bank and Gaza. While the group proclaimed its opposition to any fanatic religious group, it also denounced the “indiscriminate bombing of the civil population, systematic torture [and] genocide and isolation of the Palestinian people” (Madres 2009a). In a statement demanding the withdrawal of the Israeli military from Palestinian territories, the Madres linked the aggressions of the U.S. and its allies with the dominance of the global capitalist system: “We know that behind the Israeli genocide are North American interests and the necessity of Europe and the United States to keep their arms industry functioning. Some dream that the Middle Eastern conflict is the new motor of the world capitalist economy” (Madres 2009a). This analysis is fundamental to the group’s struggle against injustice as it inextricably connects the capitalist system with imperialism and inequality.

In the struggle against Western domination, the Madres call for Latin American unity and also for global alliance against the U.S. and its allies. In a statement supporting Honduran President Manuel Zelaya’s attempt to regain power, the Madres proclaimed, “The Mothers will always be with the people who struggle and resist against imperialism. The only fight that can be lost is that which is abandoned, companions! Not a step back!” (Madres 2009c). The group’s frequent statements in support of international movements against Western oppression are indicative of its evolution into a movement that views global unity as the only way to achieve Latin American independence and equality. In a 2010 statement supporting the Sahrawi people
for their decades-long resistance to “Moroccan oppression that counts on the support of Western powers,” (Madres 2009d) the Madres proclaimed, “The white handkerchief will always be at the side of those who resist oppression and imperialism” (Madres 2009d). This statement is evidence of the Madres’ continued use of symbolic politics in reference to the white handkerchief that originally identified them as mothers of the disappeared and which is now used by the group as a symbol of resistance to hegemonic control.

Recently, following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the Madres released a statement condemning “the imperialist landing of the United States, whose intention is to militarize and occupy a country in ruins. Already they have send more than 13,000 armed soldiers to Haiti” (Madres 2009d). The group’s quick appeal against United States intervention signals its deep distrust of American intervention, believing it to be a military sent “to subdue the country and put it under its control” (Madres 2009d). The extent to which the Madres protest Western actions is indicative of their feelings of urgency and necessity in combating the spread of dominant influence. The Madres have expanded their focus over the years from their own disappeared children to the people fighting against injustice worldwide. This development is indicative of the Madres’ development into a permanent political unit.

The Madres’ status as a political organization is further evidenced by their capacity to direct discussion and debate and to suggest policy. In 2005, they organized a meeting of 20 Madres members and 50 other women, among them sex workers, teachers, psychologists, workers occupying recovered factories, journalists, artists and mine workers. The seventy-member delegation congregated to discuss Latin American unity, the struggle against imperialism and class and gender struggles. The meeting resulted in a detailed outline of “analysis, critique and proposals” (Madres 2005d).
The document begins with an examination and denunciation of “the killer character of imperialism” (Madres 2005d). Similar to previous statements, the group identifies the invasion of Iraq and the Israeli occupation of Palestine as imperialist actions carried out by the United States and its allies. Guantanamo, Malta and Abu Ghraib are touted are examples of torture that are “an indissoluble part of these politics of extermination” (Madres 2005d). The group’s analysis of the forces of imperialism are reflective of the Madres’ views, interrelating the cultural, economic, military and political dominance of the Western powers: “Imperialism exercises its domination through military high-handedness, international agencies like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank; weaving economic and political alliances with the dominant classes of each one of our countries” (Madres 2005d). In Latin America, the delegation argues, imperialism comes in many forms, ranging from the privatization of natural resources to “cultural re-colonization: the concealment of the histories of the people, and the naturalization of the domination that is installed like common sense and expresses itself in the language” (Madres 2005d).

Culpable of disseminating the imperialist agenda and indoctrinating the people it oppresses is the mass media, which the delegation criticizes as an extension of hegemonic power. This echoes an earlier Madres statement supporting the Venezuelan government in its decision not to renew the contract of a media chain that was involved in a 2002 attempted military coup d’état and also supporting President Chavez’s opposition to the destabilizing maneuvers of CNN and Globovision. The Madres vowed to “join with all of our strength the decision of the Venezuelan people and government to defend the right to popular communication and anti-imperialism” (Madres 2007d).
The policy document identifies “Latin American unity as indispensable to face the aggressions and interventions of imperialism” (Madres 2005d) but calls also for the alliance of Latin American nations with all global movements struggling in the face of hegemonic oppression. The delegation calls for global unity that neither discriminates nor differentiates between those in the struggle on the bases of culture, religion, ethnicity, sexual diversity, gender, and age. Further, in examining the roles of class and gender, the delegation affirms that “men and women are victims of a system of exploitation and oppression, and therefore we are all in the class struggle” (Madres 2005d).

The document ends with a series of proposals, among them the following: nonpayment of the foreign debt, an end to the installation of military bases in Latin America, a refusal to receive United States President George W. Bush in Argentina, revocation of the antiterrorism laws in effect, and freedom for political prisoners. The paper is indicative of the Madres’ development into a permanent political movement active in the politics of Latin America and abroad. The group’s ability to call together a delegation of activists from disparate social movements is evidence of its legitimacy within Latin America and its work creating and suggesting policy shows its active participation in Argentina’s political sphere.

**Factors Motivating the Madres’ Development into a Permanent Political Movement**

Following re-democratization in Argentina in 1983, the Madres have developed into a permanent political movement whose agenda encompasses the struggles against poverty, injustice, inequality, and corruption and for equal access to education and dignified work, worker’s rights, land rights, and nationalization of privately-controlled companies. The common theme behind each of the causes they have assumed is an opposition to capitalism and the economic, political and cultural hegemony of the West.
The Madres’ struggle against the capitalist system can be traced back as far as 1988, when in a letter to their disappeared children, they wrote, “We, as always, continue fighting for life, against death, although so many want to make us believe now that this system that enslaves and humiliates is the only one possible” (Madres 1995a). The Madres view the connection between the capitalist agenda and death in such absolute terms that it provides a vigor of urgency and necessity to the fight for a sovereign socialist nation. The group’s focus on capitalism underlies the many causes they have taken on since the late 1980s.

Undoubtedly, the group’s legitimacy has allowed it to expand its issue base. The Madres’ resistance to the military dictatorship, coupled with the public’s renewed interest in and acceptance of their claims following the confession of Francisco Scilingo, gives them the authority to pursue a wide range of interests and to question global political and economic policies. The group’s moral and political authority is evident in its relationship with government agencies and actors, its involvement in the rebuilding of Argentina, its development of policy measures, and its collaboration with and influence on other social movements. Still, the Madres’ legitimacy serves to explain why the group has been able to adopt a radical, socialist ideology, but does not explain why it has chosen to do so.

The Madres’ motivation for their activism in the struggle against capitalism lies partly in their perception of a link between the abuses of the military dictatorship and the capitalist system. In a 1995 statement, the group connected the International Monetary Fund’s structural adjustment programs with the Junta’s economic agenda. Referring to the Menem administration, the Madres wrote, “In six years, they succeeded in transforming the country, completing the bloodthirsty project of the military dictatorship. Under the orders of the International Monetary Fund a project of death was set in motion, of repression and of exploitation” (Madres 1995b).
The *Madres* view the privatization of state-controlled companies and police brutality under the Menem administration analogous to and a continuation of the forced opening of the Argentine economy during the military dictatorship. The group identifies capitalism as the common thread between the extreme repression experienced by the Argentine people under the military dictatorship and the brutal inequality following re-democratization.

This perceived link extends to the United States’ War on Terror. Following the 2005 meeting of the *Madres* with other women activists, the group decided to travel to Guantanamo and “other concentration camps today in operation” (Madres 2005d) with delegations of activists. The *Madres* associate the struggle against U.S. political and economic imperialism with the struggle of their children against the dictatorship and likewise associate today’s political prisoners with their disappeared children. Understanding and framing the issues as such allows the women to continue fighting their children’s battles. In a 1988 “Letter to Our Children,” the *Madres* wrote of how they came to adopt their children’s activism: “And little by little we began to fight also for the same thing for which you fought. And, as if we were complying with a parallel destiny, we had to face, one and a thousand times, the same enemy hatred, the repression and barbarism” (Madres 1988).

The *Madres*’ adoption of their children’s political agenda is evident from the many references made to their children’s vision of a more just world. In 2007 they wrote, “in the first place is our commitment to the people, to the neighborhoods, to the construction projects that we never abandon because it is the commitment and the struggle of our 30,000 disappeared children” (Madres 2007c). The *Madres* repeated this sentiment later in the year, stating, “we have to work hard to achieve the profound change in the construction of the country that our children dreamt about” (Madres 2007i). The *Madres*’ desire to continue their children’s goals is
in part responsible for their embrace of disparate causes. Speaking of their involvement with the teacher’s struggle in Argentina, the *Madres* asserted that they unconditionally support the strikers because the teachers’ activism for better working conditions was in line with their children’s goals (Madres 2007b). In fact, the *Madres*’ dramatic politicization and adoption of leftist ideology can be attributed to their determination to continue their children’s agenda. This is clearly evidenced by a 2007 statement, which the *Madres* ended with, “And we continue claiming Socialism and the Revolution that Our Children loved” (Madres 2007e).

In Latin America, the traditional role of the mother is a caregiver, a provider for her children. Her role is sacred and it is respected. A woman’s duty is to give birth to and care for a child. The disappearance of the *Madres*’ children politicized them partly because they view continuing their children’s struggle as a way of keeping them alive, the greatest obligation of a mother to her child. In a 1995 letter addressed to a disappeared child, a mother wrote “You do not know how many things I am doing to continue giving you life” (Madres 1995a). Later in the letter, the mother told her child about speaking with other young people. She wrote, “When I look them in the eyes, they look down. Do you know why? Because I look at them with your eyes and I speak to them with your voice” (Madres 1995a). This letter attests to the motivation of the *Madres* for assuming their children’s political agenda and also the extent to which they have internalized the struggle.

The military’s disappearance of their children also robbed the *Madres* of their identity as mothers. They held on to this role by fighting for justice for their children, but also by undertaking their children’s political agenda. In a letter titled, “To Give Birth to a Child, to Give Birth to Thousands of Children,” a mother wrote, “essentially, your fight will be in the Plaza de Mayo. There … I feel that I am giving birth to other children, that like you, teach me the better
way, of love and solidarity to each beating of my heart” (Madres 1995a). The Madres view their struggle against injustice as one for all of the children, and by “giving life” to other children, they are able to continue in their role as mothers. Indeed, the Madres articulated the all-important role of the mother in a letter, referring to the singular value of Mother’s Day as “to give life defending life, as did the 30,000, delivering theirs in the fight for liberty” (Madres 1996).

The consciousness of being mothers to all of the children stems from the Madres’ split into two separate groups in 1986. In that year, some of the women adopted the concept of ‘socialized motherhood,’ building interpersonal links on the idea that “each member is no longer the individual mother of a disappeared person; rather, each member embodies the universe of all mothers of disappeared children, including those women who never turn into activists” (Bosco 2001: 311). The women who embraced this notion formed the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo while the other faction formed the Madres de Plaza de Mayo-Línea Fundadora. The de-individualization of motherhood is evident in many statements made by the Madres. In an early letter written to a disappeared child, the mother signed the letter, “Mamá,” (Madres 1995a) indicating that she represents every mother and is writing to every disappeared child.

The concept of socialized motherhood has further developed into the idea that every Madre is the mother of every child in Latin America and around the world. This development is critical to understanding the motivation behind the Madres’ assumption of the global struggle against inequality. By viewing the world’s children as their own, they have the rationale to extend their struggle for justice beyond Latin America. In recent years, Madres statements have often referred to activists and victims worldwide as their children. This is true of a 2009 statement, “Berlusconi is Worse than Mussolini,” in which the Madres condemned Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi for his decision to criminalize illegal immigrants and to create civil
patrols to pursue them, labeling him “the true illegal” (Madres 2009b). In this instance, the group professed its support for the immigrants claiming that “they also are our children” (Madres 2009b).

The Madres’ adoption of socialized maternity has extended even further to include all mothers worldwide. In a 2006 statement condemning Israel for the bombing of a small town in Lebanon, the Madres wrote, “In the name of all mothers we shout: No to the war! Enough war! Enough bombings!” (Madres 2006c). This sentiment was repeated in 2009 with a Madres demand that Israel withdraw its military from Palestinian territories, in which they wrote, “The Mothers of the world must unite to stop genocide” (Madres 2009a). The expansion of the concept of socialized motherhood has in part facilitated the movement’s development from a single-issue movement into a permanent Argentine political organization and it shows the Madres’ aim to become a lasting fixture in the global social justice movement. In a 2005 videoconference (Madres 2005a), Hebe de Bonafini spoke of the group’s inception of socialized motherhood and its resulting development into a permanent political movement:

> We understood that we didn’t only have to fight for our own children but for all of the disappeared. We have grown at the moment to socialize maternity, to begin the judgments for all the disappeared persons; it was a very strong thing. We had the first intent to make 150 writs of habeas corpus* for the disappeared and thus, permanently, we have a legal fight but accompanied by a political fight, for the plaza, for growth, for our involvement in the social problems and today we have a university, we are about to create schools. We occupy ourselves, of the judgments on one hand and on the other we occupy ourselves with education and the political formation of the youth.

* The transcription of the videoconference was somewhat incomplete and I inferred the meaning to be “writs of habeas corpus.”
The *Madres* connect their decision to socialize motherhood with the group’s attempt to find justice for their children through judicial means. The group has since developed into a political movement, evidenced in part by the mechanisms set in place to continue their political agenda. Among these is the establishment of the *Universidad Popular de Madres de Plaza de Mayo* in 2000, built in the Secondary Naval School, which was used as a concentration camp during the military regime (Madres 2007k). The University was founded to provide a space for popular movements to create and participate in political construction. It fosters education for social activists and discussion of the movements against economic, political and social hegemony. Students of the school go on to become activists for social justice (Madres 2008a).

The *Madres* have succeeded in securing an influential position within Latin American politics. The permanence of this organization is confirmed by its clear intention to outlive the *Madres* themselves. As they are organized today, the *Madres* have a top-down structure. The head of the movement, Hebe de Bonafini, serves to bring issues to the forefront of the Argentine political sphere. She represents the group and its authority and thus has access to influential political leaders and governmental offices. At the grassroots level, the *Madres* collaborate with other social movements and work to train future activists. Their involvement in the building of communities and education of the youth demonstrates their desire to continue the struggle for economic and social justice in the coming years. Still, one must wonder what direction the different movements in Argentina and Latin America will take without the *Madres*’ political involvement. The *Madres* speak for many of the social movements and actors without a voice and lend their legitimacy to their causes. The lasting influence of the *Madres* and the development of their related movements are worthy of study in the coming years.
Conclusion

Since the group’s inception in 1977, the Madres have evolved from a single-issue protest movement into a permanent political unit in Argentina. They have adopted a radical socialist ideology and embraced myriad social causes, each a part of their resistance to the capitalist system and the economic and political domination of the West. The Madres have attained a respected, permanent position within the public political sphere, despite the unapologetically revolutionary tone of their agenda.

This research sought to understand the factors behind the Madres’ adoption of socialist ideology and its development into a permanent political organization. Intrinsic to understanding the group’s move to the left is understanding why the Madres have been able to sustain collective action for over thirty years. Undoubtedly, the close ties formed by the Madres over their collective grievances laid the foundation for a lasting commitment. Similarly, their shared experiences of military repression forced a deeper bonding, evidenced by the solidarity of these women in their defiance. In 2005, Hebe de Bonafini spoke of the intense repression of the military dictatorship and the bonds formed between the women: “When they arrested a Madre, she was kept in a cell overnight with a dead prisoner. So they decided that if one was arrested, they would all go together and they were called ‘The lunatics … crazy. No one wants to go to prisoner and they go’” (Madres 2005a). Still, bonds formed on the bases of combating government repression and attaining justice for the disappeared, the former moot and the latter no longer the group’s main focus, do not account for their longevity. In fact, it is the Madres’ adoption of a left-wing ideology that explains the group’s determination to continue collective action.
Several factors have influenced the Madres to expand the scope of their resistance post-1983. The group’s perception of a link between the military dictatorship’s abuses and the global capitalist system is a major motivator in their activism. This connection drives the group, which originated out of resistance to the military dictatorship, to continue activism on an agenda they feel is inextricably linked to the abuses of the past and injustices of the present. The Madres’ analysis of the nature of capitalism and the contrary relationship between profit and social welfare is another driving force. Further, the Madres’ role as mothers is ingrained in the group’s adoption of causes, as a main goal behind their sustained action is to continue the struggle of their children. For these women, continuing their children’s struggle against the right keeps their children’s message alive and honors their cause. Finally, the group’s 1986 decision to socialize maternity has undoubtedly played a role in influencing the Madres to expand their agenda both in Latin America and globally because, by viewing themselves as the mothers of all children, their activism for equality is personal, urgent, and necessary.

The Madres’ authority within Latin America is apparent in its dealings with local and national governmental offices and authorities. It permanence is evidenced by the steps the group has taken to continue the movement for global social and economic equality beyond the scope of their own lives. The Madres’ development of a school, construction of communities and collaboration with grassroots movements shows its determination to continue revolutionary activism into the future. What remains to be seen, however, is what direction activism will take without the Madres leading the movement in the political sphere and lending their legitimacy to grassroots organizations. Also of interest for future study is the effectiveness of the Madres’ dialogue and actions. Investigating the success of the group’s policy proposals and initiatives was beyond the scope of this study and could prove difficult to accurately assess. Further study
into the group’s success in enacting change, particularly with respect to the different tactics it employs, could prove beneficial.
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