

# ARGENTINA'S ABORTION DEBATE: TRACING THE LINKS BETWEEN THE MADRES, THE MAREA VERDE, AND THE MAREA CELESTE

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## ABSTRACT

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**This article explores the links between the activism of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (henceforth 'Madres') during Argentina's most recent dictatorship (from 1976 to 1983) and the country's abortion campaigns from 2019 to 2020. Social media played an instrumental role in Argentina's abortion debate, particularly during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (Laudano, 2021: 187). Despite this, a gap exists in the extant literature regarding Argentina's pro-choice and pro-life campaigns on Facebook. Through 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000) of Argentina's most popular pro-choice and pro-life Facebook pages, this paper identifies and explores how the framing of abortion activism was linked to the Madres' dictatorship-era activism. It is shown how pro-choice activists (known as the 'marea verde' in Spanish, or 'green wave') aligned their movement with the Madres' 'social movement repertoire' (Tilly, 2006; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). However, it is also identified that the pro-life campaigners (known as the 'marea celeste', or 'blue wave') employed 'frame-jacking' (Clifford, 2012) to mirror the Madres' activism.**

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Scholars predominantly consider that the legacy of dictatorship-era human rights activists - such as the Madres - helped cultivate a fertile ground for human rights movements in contemporary Argentina. Notably, Kathryn Sikkink (2018) posits that Argentina metamorphosed from a 'pariah' during the dictatorship to a 'global protagonist' of human rights following its democratic transition. D2117\_Hughes\_Offer Holders\_PuB. I argue that social media provides a competitive

space in which human rights movements, and counter-movements, may engage with the dictatorship's legacy.

The first section contextualises the Madres' activism during the dictatorship and the history of Argentina's abortion debate, before reviewing the pre-existing literature that explores the link between both movements. The second section explains this study's theoretical and methodological approach. The penultimate section draws three main comparisons from the findings. The

final section reflects on how Facebook abortion activism allows us to reconsider the influence of the dictatorship's legacy on Argentina's contemporary activism.

## I. CONTEXTUALISING THE MADRES' DICTATORSHIP-ERA ACTIVISM AND THE ARGENTINE ABORTION DEBATE

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### A. Madres

During the 1970s, Argentina's economic crisis prompted a guerrilla war (see Feitlowitz, 1998: 6). This culminated in a military coup on 24 March 1976 which ousted the democratically appointed President, Isabel Perón, and instated General Videla as the national leader. Argentina's military junta emerged during a larger wave of right-wing military coups which swept across South America during the Cold War. The Argentine military, supported by the Catholic Church, followed a National Security Doctrine which 'defined [...] security in terms of containing Communism' (Cardenas, 2010: 61). State terror was used to traumatise, fracture, and control the entire population (Lessa, 2011: 32). The regime legitimised its violence as a war against so-called 'subversives' who threatened Western Christian values, including politicians, students, lawyers, journalists, and syndicalists (Burchianti, 2004: 134; Guzman Bouvard, 1994: 36; Morales, 2015: 45; Lessa, 2011: 32). Death squads night-raided civilians' homes or publicly targeted victims before transferring them to clandestine detention centres across Argentina and neighbouring countries through Operation Condor (see CONADEP, 1984; Lessa, 2015, 2018; Dinges, 2004). Detainees then faced physical and psychological torture, often followed by death.

One of the most brutal acts of state terror was the stealing of babies. Females who gave birth in captivity were ostensibly forced to send their babies to live with relatives. However, in reality military sympathisers unlawfully adopted the new-borns (CONADEP, 1984). The state thus 'policed not only citizens' political ideas but also women's personal choices and sexuality' by denigrating mothers who challenged patriarchal norms (Sutton, 2018: 111; Hollander, 1996: 53). By killing these 'bad mothers' and stealing their babies, the state tore entire families apart (Sutton, 2018: 90).

Victims' families began to mobilise in search of their loved ones during the regime's most brutal years from 1976 to 1979 (Feitlowitz, 1998: 8). This included the Madres de Plaza de Mayo. The Madres were mainly housewives who entered the public sphere in search of their abducted children. The local authorities responded by blaming the victims and denying the state's system of enforced disappearances, prompting

the Madres to conduct searches and file *habeas corpora* (*Ibid.*: 46, 56; Burchianti, 2004: 139). In April 1977, 14 women first assembled at Buenos Aires' Plaza de Mayo demanding to know the whereabouts of their children, who they believed to still be alive. Over the following months, as more and more women joined the marches holding photographs of their missing children, the systematic nature of the disappearances became increasingly apparent. In 1979, the Madres formed a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) to pressure the state to accept its accountability. The women focused on capturing international attention by building 'Transnational Advocacy Networks' (TANs) with exile communities (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). When Pope John Paul II visited Brazil in 1980, the Madres even held up banners outside the cathedral to unveil Argentina's human rights violations to the world (Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 2020; Burchianti, 2004: 133-134).

During the democratic transition, the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons' (CONADEP) Nunca Más (Never Again) report estimated that the dictatorship disappeared and killed almost 9,000 citizens (CONADEP, 1984). However, the Madres insisted the figure was closer to 30,000. In 1986 the Madres split into two separate organisations: the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo (the Association of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo) and the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Línea Fundadora (Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, Founding Line). Nonetheless, they still march separately every Thursday in their plight for truth and justice.

### B. Abortion debate

The history of abortion in Argentina began almost a century before the Madres' mobilisations. During the 1880s, Argentina's Penal Code first declared abortion a universally punishable crime. In 1922, therapeutic abortions were decriminalised in cases of rape, endangerment to the mother's health, or mental disability (HRW, n.d.). However, complicated and stigmatising judicial procedures restricted access to therapeutic abortions throughout most of the Twentieth century (Vázquez & Brown, 2019: 66; CELS, 2020: 6).

Argentina's first abortion campaigns emerged during the 1970s as a response to the democratic government's rollbacks in reproductive rights (Sutton, 2020: 3). During the dictatorship, the state toughened its anti-abortion measures and silenced the early pro-choice activists (Bellucci, 1997: 101). The democratic transition provided an opening for new feminist movements including the 'Encuentros Nacionales de Mujeres en Argentina' (National Encounters of Women in Argentina, henceforth 'Encuentro'). The organisation held its first meeting in 1986 to forge a non-partisan space for feminist debates and workshops (Gabarra, 1995) but largely bypassed abortion to avoid divisions (Sutton, 2020: 3). Pro-choice activists, therefore, established separate groups to litigate abortion claims for rape victims (Blofield, 2006:

142; Vázquez & Brown, 2019: 66). Meanwhile, pro-life supporters established their first NGOs to stifle the discussion of legal abortion.

However, Argentina's abortion debate took off during the 1990s. President Carlos Menem (1989-1999) adopted a pro-life agenda to coax the Vatican into overlooking his harsh neoliberal policies. He introduced a 1994 constitutional reform protecting the right to life from conception and passed a 1998 decree establishing the Day of the Unborn Child (see Bellucci, 1997: 103; Bessone, 2017b: 42-43). The executive and conservative Catholics thus became the bedrock of the pro-life campaign (Blofield, 2006: 149-154).

The 2001 economic crisis catalysed the pro-choice campaign's expansion by spurring alliances with the 'piquetero/as'<sup>4</sup> and middle-class women (Sutton, 2010: 105; Sutton & Borland, 2018: 1382). The national action plan defined at the 2003 Encuentro Nacional led to the establishment of the 'Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito' (National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion, henceforth 'National Campaign') in 2005. The National Campaign broadened its inclusivity to defend not only the rights of women but all those 'with the capacity to gestate' (see Sutton & Borland, 2018). The pro-choice campaign thus aligned abortion with Argentina's recent sexual and reproductive laws, including sex education (2006), equal marriage (2010), and gender identity (2012).

The National Campaign presented abortion bills to Congress from 2007, following the FAL/12 court ruling that confirmed decriminalised abortions for rape victims (Vázquez & Brown, 2019). NGOs advised women to self-perform abortions using misoprostol (see McReynolds-Pérez, 2017). Pro-life campaigners, feeling threatened by the same-sex marriage law, established evangelical and secular organisations, and built provincial support (Faúndes & Defago, 2016: 154; Faúndes, 2015: 421-425; Faúndes, 2018: 56). Now that the abortion debate had reached the entire country, Congress knew that could no longer ignore the issue.

As the first bill to be debated in Parliament, the 2018 abortion bill catapulted the National Campaign. Thousands of 'pibas'<sup>5</sup> were marching, chanting, dancing, banging drums, pitching tents, and demanding change. Pro-life activists also huddled outside the National Congress, alongside their opponents, to watch the live debates (Vaggione, 2010: 303). The Chamber of Deputies approved the bill on 14 June, but it was later rejected by the Senate on 9 August. President Alberto Fernández then declared his support for legal abortion upon assuming office in December 2019. In December 2020, both the Deputies and Senate approved the landmark bill. The President finally signed the bill into law on 15 January 2021, making Argentina third and most

populous, South American country to legalise abortion.

### C. Reviewing the literature linking the Madres and abortion campaigns

Scholars widely recognize how the dictatorship's legacy is the prevailing element of Argentina's contemporary social movements. Notably, Varela (2020) explores the 2008-2015 anti-human-trafficking campaign's references to the 30,000 'disappeared'. Furthermore, the literature notes how the Madres' maternal activism has become a blueprint for human rights movements across Latin America (see Bejarano, 2002; Burchianti, 2004; Borland, 2006). Borland *et al.* (2015) offer the most comprehensive overview of the Madres' contemporary influence on the Argentine national media and international artistic production. The scholars demonstrate how the Madres' cultural symbolism can be appropriated by heterogenous agents with divergent motivations. However, a considerable lacuna in Borland *et al.*'s (2015) analysis is the exclusion of counter-movements.

Numerous scholars have already examined how Argentina's contemporary pro-life and pro-choice activism draws on the dictatorship's legacy. However, they principally focus on comparing the Madres with the pro-choice campaign. This is unsurprising given that transitional justice scholars such as Sikkink (2018) laud Argentina for its transformation from a human rights 'pariah' during the dictatorship to a 'global protagonist' following its democratic transition. Sikkink highlights that dictatorship-era activists, such as the Madres, drove this transition.

Sikkink's (2018) account is supported by the pro-choice scholarship. Morgan (2015), Bessone (2017a), and Sutton (2021) identify how pro-choice activists connected women who died from clandestine abortions to those killed in clandestine detention centres during the dictatorship. Sutton (2020) also explores the intergenerational transmission of activist know-how from the Madres to pro-choice campaigners. This supports Sikkink's (2018) argument that the legacy of dictatorship-era activism favours the expansion of human rights today.

The scholarship pays far less attention to the links between the dictatorship and the pro-life campaign. Morgan (2015), Bessone (2017a), and Sutton (2021) concord that pro-life activists framed aborted fetuses or embryos as today's 'disappeared'. By labelling abortion as 'a genocide' or 'crime against humanity', pro-life campaigners present abortion as a gross violation of the right to life that could not continue under democracy (*ibid.*). Morgan (2015) identifies an interesting paradox utilised by pro-life campaigners: legal abortion contradicts the Madres who selflessly defended their

<sup>4</sup> Piquetero/as were unemployed workers who organised roadblocks during Argentina's late 1990s/ early 2000s financial crisis.

<sup>5</sup> Argentine slang for 'girls'.

children's lives during the dictatorship (Morgan, 2015: 140). Although somewhat limited, the pro-life literature has made an insightful contribution by suggesting how the legacy of dictatorship-era activism can be used to restrict - as well as expand - human rights.

Thus far, scholars have used discourse analysis to compare dictatorship-related language with abortion activism through selected examples from campaign websites, leaflets, and artwork. This paper offers an alternative approach by using 'repertoires' (Tilly, 2006; Tarrow, 2007) and 'frame jacking' (Clifford, 2012) to explain how Facebook abortion activists engage with the Madres' dictatorship-era campaign. I shall now turn to explain my theoretical and methodological approach.

## II. OUTLINING THE FRAMEWORK OF 'REPERTOIRES' AND 'FRAME-JACKING' ON FACEBOOK

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The concept of 'repertoires of contention' - developed by Charles Tilly (2006) and Charles Tilly and Sidney G. Tarrow (2007) - significantly enhanced the understanding of social movements' framing processes. Tilly posits that activists inherit 'repertoires', that 'draw on the identities, social ties, and organizational forms that constitute everyday life' (2006: 42). This does not mean that activists merely copy their predecessors, but rather, 'contenders experiment constantly with new forms in the search of tactical advantage, but do so in small ways, at the edge of well-established actions' (*Ibid.*: 43). I shall now show how the pro-choice campaign aligned itself with the Madres' 'repertoire'.

Deborah M. Withers (2015) applies a cultural-studies lens to the crosstemporal study of social movements. The scholar proposes the concept of 'feminism's already there': 'a cavernous information-entity [which is] organised and operationalised through acts of transmission' (*Ibid.*: 22). The Madres' activism during the dictatorship and pro-choice activism during democracy emerged from contrasting political opportunity structures (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; McAdam *et al.*, 1996; Tarrow, 1998). Nevertheless, Withers (2015), Tilly (2006), and Tilly and Tarrow (2007) help to envisage a cultural trajectory connecting the Madres' dictatorship-era activism to contemporary abortion movements.

Furthermore, social movement scholars are increasingly interested in conceptualising counter-movements. Notably, Bob Clifford's (2012) 'frame-jacking' concept refers to how anti-rights movements 'hijack' their opponents' human rights lexicon to legitimise their cause. Morgan (2015), Bessone (2017a), and Sutton (2021) have already exemplified how pro-life NGOs in Argentina 'frame-jack' the language of activists from during the dictatorship and democratic transition. Since

my study explores how pro-life activists *hijack* the human rights lexicon of a specific group (the Madres de Plaza de Mayo), my analysis will focus on references to the right to life. My empirical research compares the contemporary abortion campaign with the dictatorship-era activism of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo. My analysis of the abortion campaign begins in 2019 (after the 2018 bill's rejection) and ends in 2021, when abortion was legalised. I study the Madres' activism from their first march in April 1977 to the first democratic general election in October 1983.

Social media played an instrumental role during the abortion campaign and thus provides an interior perspective on the debate (Laudano, 2021: 187). I examine pro-choice and pro-life Facebook posts to address a gap in the pre-existing literature. Laudano (2021) offers an insight into the key themes of the 2018 abortion debate by analysing pro-choice and pro-life activism on Twitter. However, Laudano (2021) adds a concluding remark that there was a transition from reactionary individual activism on Twitter towards constructive collective activism on Facebook and Instagram from 2018 (*Ibid.*: 187). Facebook allowed both campaigns to build and maintain their communities online during the Covid-19 pandemic (*Ibid.*).

Given the widespread influence of Facebook in Argentina, I decided that it needed to be brought into the scholarly discussions of abortion activism. Facebook is Argentina's third most popular social media platform, with 90.4% of the country's internauts having used the platform from December 2020 to January 2021, exceeded only by WhatsApp (92.9%) and YouTube (95.8%) (Kemp, 2021). I exclude WhatsApp from this study due to privacy concerns. I do not examine YouTube since the platform only includes videos, while Facebook offers a wider range of media. I expect the age demographics of people who create or engage with such posts to be concentrated around the 18-44 age range (especially the 25-34-year-old age bracket) (Kemp, 2021).

For spatial reasons, I draw my sample of posts from two Facebook pages: 'Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito' ('National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion') and 'Pro Vida Argentina' ('Pro Life Argentina'). I chose the former page because it is the official national pro-choice page for Argentina. It publishes posts from the National Campaign's central administration and shares photographs from provincial rallies. It thus provides a significant cross-section of pro-choice activism in Argentina. Since the pro-life campaign is a decentralised and federal movement, selecting a single Facebook page as my case study was more complicated (Bessone, 2017b: 45). I conducted Facebook searches to identify all 49 of Argentina's municipal, provincial, and national pro-life Facebook pages to date and compared the number of likes per page. I chose the page called Pro Vida Argentina because it was the most-liked

page, with 83,000 likes: over three times more than the second most-popular page. I, therefore, expect this page to be the most representative of pro-life activism in Argentina. Many of Argentina's pro-life Facebook pages self-identify as 'NGOs' and publish their organisations' contact details. Surprisingly, Argentina's most-liked pro-life Facebook page excludes such information and it is impossible to ascertain who creates and publishes its posts.

To offer a broad picture of Argentina's abortion activism, I select posts that cover the time from 2019 to 2020 and feature activism from the provinces, as well as the capital. I also include a range of media in this study such as images, testimonies, and letters. I only analyse the image itself and any text included within the image. I exclude any corresponding text within the Facebook posts or comments for privacy reasons. I draw examples of the Madres' dictatorship-era activism from interviews and secondary literature.

This virtual ethnography required me to maintain a deep engagement with the pro-life and pro-choice campaigners by following their Facebook pages from March to October 2021. This enables me to select posts that provide an insight into thousands of Argentines' everyday engagements with the abortion debate from 2019 to 2020. However, the scope of this study only allows a small sample size of posts. My findings are, therefore not intended to make generalisations. Instead, they aim to shed light on some comparisons between the Madres and the pro-choice and pro-life campaigns. It is also important to state my positionality as the author. I self-identify as a 'scholar-activist' since I participated in pro-choice activism online and through rallies organised by Latin American diaspora communities in the United Kingdom. I also built close companionships with pro-choice activists while living in Argentina in 2019. Although I have harnessed my first-hand experiences to enrich my analysis of abortion activism, my personal views on abortion are irrelevant. The following findings are uniquely interested in how the pro-choice and pro-life movements framed their activism.

### III. IDENTIFYING 'REPERTOIRES' AND 'FRAME-JACKING' THROUGH ARGENTINA'S ABORTION CAMPAIGNS ON FACEBOOK

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In this section, I use my findings from my cross-temporal comparative analysis to show how pro-choice activists engaged with the Madres' 'repertoire of contention' (Tilly, 2006; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007) and how pro-life activists mirrored the Madres' human rights activism using 'frame-jacking' (Clifford, 2012). From my findings, I identify and discuss three tangible steps through which

the pro-choice and pro-life activists drew on the Madres.

#### A. Quantifying deaths/ disappearances

Firstly, abortion activists adopted the battle cry of 'the 30,000 disappeared' from the Madres. This step is informed by Merry's (2016) argument that quantitative data are seductive because they seemingly provide objective answers. Merry contends that data are subjective since numbers are manipulated to influence opinion. Pro-choice activists used maternal mortality statistics and pro-life activists quantified the aborted fetuses or embryos when framing their campaigns. Abortion activists, therefore, harnessed the 'seduction of quantification' (Merry, 2016) to render visible the threat to the right to life and legitimise their causes.

The tactic of quantification is embodied by the battle cry of the Madres: '[b]ring back the 30,000 disappeared alive'. Varela's finding holds that the figure '30,000' awakens public consciousness and stops civil society and the state from negating human rights violations (2020: 166-169). Pro-choice activists also highlighted the fact that abortions existed illegally anyway and, therefore pragmatically framed their movement as protecting lives (Sutton & Borland, 2013: 217). Figure One claims that '[s]ince the return to democracy, in Argentina, there have been 3,200 deaths due to unsafe abortions. All these deaths could have been avoided'. As such, pro-choice activists used the memory of the dictatorship during the 1970s to expose other injustices today (Bessone, 2017a). Pro-choice activists, therefore, leveraged this legacy, drawing a cross-temporal line between gendered human rights violations under the military regime and the criminalisation of abortion under democracy. Consequently, the National Campaign demanded that the state be held accountable for its continued failure to protect thousands of women (Sutton, 2017: 894).

Pro-life activists quantified the unborn babies who had lost their 'lives' from abortions in order to link them to the 'disappeared' during the dictatorship (Bessone, 2017a). For example, Figure Two asserts that '[i]n only one month, the human loss from abortions was double that of Auschwitz'. Pro-life activists employed the strategy of 'naming' observed by Payne (2000): amplifying the threat of abortion and calling it 'genocide'. This presented legal abortion as a crime under democracy that would provoke a return to the systems of state terror and death during the 1970s (Bessone, 2017a). The emotionally charged word, 'genocide', was a fear-mongering technique used by pro-life activists to condemn therapeutic and illegal abortions (Sutton, 2021). In sum, pro-choice activists and pro-life activists mimicked the Madres' quantification tactics to denounce the state's violation of the right to life under the dictatorship and democracy.

#### B. Voicing the narratives of the 'ungrievable' lives

Narratives or testimonies humanise lost lives, so that



## Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito

2005-2020: Seguimos en Campaña

**SENADORES Y SENADORAS, ¡SEAN PARTE DE LA HISTORIA!**

**ES AHORA, #ABORTOLEGAL2020**

La lucha por la despenalización y legalización del aborto en Argentina tiene un recorrido de décadas. Desde la **Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal Seguro y Gratuito** llevamos 15 años de historia. **Más de 700 organizaciones políticas, sociales, feministas, de mujeres, LGTBTTIQ+, sindicales, académicas, estudiantiles nos unimos de manera transversal y federal** bajo una consigna integral: "Educación Sexual para Decidir, Anticonceptivos para no Abortar y Aborto Legal para no Morir". Nos moviliza un objetivo común: lograr el aborto legal, seguro y gratuito para todas las mujeres y personas con capacidad de gestar.

Hoy cada 3 horas en nuestro país una niña de entre 10 y 14 años es obligada a gestar y a parir. **Desde el regreso de la democracia, en Argentina hubo 3200 muertes por abortos realizados en condiciones insalubres. Todas esas muertes podrían haberse evitado.**

FIGURE 1  
(NC, 2020a)

they do not become just another number (Cardenas, 2010: 46). I consider narratives as 'social acts performed within specific contexts that organize their meanings and consequences' (Ewick & Silbey, 1995: 205). Narratives allow activists to legitimise their causes as the guardians of vulnerable citizens. The Madres asserted that their children were not 'subversives', but rather innocent victims who were 'ungrievable' until their bodies were found. Likewise, pro-choice activists shared the testimonies of vulnerable women who underwent unsafe or fatal clandestine abortions. In response, pro-life activists claimed to defend the right to life of the voiceless unborn babies.

The idea of 'ungrievable' narratives is informed by Butler (2009), who contends that lives are culturally embedded in social power structures that dictate which are 'grievable', or even worthy of acknowledgment, and which are not. Although Butler writes about the US war context, her theory is, indeed, relevant to Latin America. Argentine abortion activists voiced these 'ungrievable' lives to appeal to those who were not directly impacted by the human rights violations and frame their cause within the wider fight against injustice.

As Brysk observes, '[s]tate terror has an impact not captured by a body count' (1994: 677). The Madres' narratives, therefore, capture the devastating impact of disappearances on victims' families. The Madre, Evel de Petrini, articulates how the disappeared children's lives remain 'ungrievable' until the truth is exposed: 'Es el no saber. Vos decirle a tu hijo, mirándole la cara, "Chau, hasta mañana", y después no verlo más'<sup>6</sup> (Todos son mis hijos, 2016). By recounting mundane details, such as saying 'goodbye', the Madres enhanced the credibility



FIGURE 2 'In just one month, the number of lives lost from abortions doubles the death toll of Auschwitz' (Pro Vida Argentina, 2019a)

of accounts that their children were kidnapped. This counteracted the military regime's accounts which blamed the victims' mothers for 'raising subversives' (Burchianti, 2004: 140; Sutton, 2018: 130). Narratives switched the life from 'ungrievable' to 'grievable' once the victim became somebody's child, rather than an internal enemy (Varela, 2020: 170). By humanising the victim, the Madres asserted their child's 'right to have rights' (Arendt, 1951). These 'subversive stories' also connected the victims' personal stories to unveil the wider system of human rights violations. By seizing the power of language, the Madres inverted the state's 'lexicon of

6 'It's the not knowing. You try looking your child in the face and saying, 'bye, see you tomorrow' only to never see them again'.

## Somos víctimas de la criminalización

A\*, tenía 19 años, vivía en condiciones de extrema pobreza en el barrio San Jorge de la localidad bonaerense de Virreyes, cuando sufrió una agresión sexual y quedó embarazada yendo a la escuela. Fue al baño -desconociendo su estado de gravidez- y, al ver un bebé que no lloraba ni se movía, lo supuso sin vida. Fue condenada a seis años y ocho meses de prisión por el delito de abandono de persona seguido de muerte, agravado por el vínculo. Tres años después, la Sala I del Tribunal de Casación Penal de Buenos Aires la absolvió.



\*inicial del nombre utilizado para resguardar la intimidad

### #AbortoLegal2020



terror' which sought to quell victims, traumatise society, and maintain civil obedience (Ewick & Silbey, 1995: 219; Feitlowitz, 1998: Chapter One).

Pro-choice activists highlighted the parallels between deaths in unsanitary clandestine detention centres during the dictatorship and deaths from clandestine abortions under democracy (Bessone, 2017a; Sutton, 2021). According to pro-choice activists, today's 'ungrievable' lives thus belonged to impoverished and uneducated women, female migrants, and young girls who died from, or were prosecuted for, clandestine abortions (Sutton 2017; Vázquez & Brown, 2019: 68). Such maternal deaths disproportionately affected the 'brown spots' (O'Donnell, 1993) or 'zonas de clandestinidad'<sup>7</sup> (Sutton, 2017) deprived of quality sex education and family planning services. By voicing the narratives of the 'ungrievable' lives, pro-choice activists emotively appealed to middle-and-upper-class women whose lives were rarely threatened by unsafe illegal abortions<sup>8</sup>. The 'ungrievable' women's testimonies often included their initials and would vividly describe their psychological and physical trauma resulting from an unsafe abortion (see Figure Three). Such narratives broke the taboo surrounding abortion's illegality, humanising women as victims, rather than criminals (Sutton, 2021).

In parallel, pro-life activists 'frame-jacked' the Madres' defence of their children's right to life by presenting themselves as the protectors of the 'ungrievable' babies<sup>9</sup>. For instance, in Figure Four, the foetus addresses the reader: 'I need your voice to defend my life!'. The first person singular humanises the foetus and the

juxtaposition with the second-person possessive pronoun ('tu') highlights its defencelessness. Images of fetuses presented the unborn babies as individuals with legal rights and who demanded protection from the state (Bessone, 2017b). Pro-life activists thus portrayed themselves as moral and pacific by othering themselves from the 'violent' and 'murderer' pro-choice activists (Bessone, 2017b: 42).

However, the voicelessness of the foetus put the pro-life campaign at a performative disadvantage compared to the National Campaign which could invite abortion survivors to share their stories. Pro-life NGOs, therefore, offered therapeutic and/or financial support to women who had undergone abortions or were considering doing so (see Faro Films, 2021). The #salvosmoslasdosvidas<sup>10</sup> campaign trumped the National Campaign by supposedly protecting two 'ungrievable' lives: that of the foetus and the impoverished woman. Pro-life activists continued the Madres' legacy by encouraging women today to protect their biological children and the *nation's* children. In brief, pro-life, and pro-choice activists framed themselves as spokespeople of the 'ungrievable' lives. As such, both movements mirrored how the Madres voiced the narratives of the 'disappeared' to affirm their right to life.

7 'Zones of clandestinity'.

8 Safe surgical abortions were available in private clinics (McReynolds-Pérez, 2017: 360).

9 Butler refutes the pro-life argument that fetuses' lives are 'ungrievable' (2009: 16-23).

10 #Let'sSaveBothLives



FIGURE 4

Figure Four: 'I need your voice to defend my life' (Pro Vida Argentina, 2020)

### C. Using bodily props for symbolic performances

Activists employ symbolic props to mark their collective identities and elevate their demands. Argentina's pro-choice activists used headscarves (a symbol of the Madres) to interweave their movement with the dictatorship's 'repertoire' (Tilly, 2006; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). Pro-life activists 'frame-jacked' (Clifford, 2012) the Madres' identity as human rights defenders by also wearing headscarves. Pro-life and pro-choice activists thus presented their cause as a natural element of 'argentinidad', or Argentine national identity.

Upon wearing the white scarf, the Madres transitioned from the individual objective to search for one's biological child to the collective objective to defend all 30,000 lives (Borland, 2006: 119). The white scarves visualised the Madres' solidarity; encouraging them to perform their 'trauma [which] manifests itself [...] in both the individual and social body' (Taylor, 2006: 1675). Performance relieved the individual's pain, transforming victimisation into empowerment (*ibid.*: 1674). Their chanting then crescendoed into a collective 'grito'<sup>11</sup> that overpowered the state and destabilised women's subordination (Morales, 2015).

The National Campaign adopted the green scarf to mark its intergenerational 'sororidad'<sup>12</sup> and symbolically align itself with the Madres (Gutiérrez, 2018: 4; Sutton, 2020). Notably, the Madres' white scarves were integrated into the National Campaign's logo. The Madres' legacy amplified the pro-choice activists' 'grito'; empowering and unifying the women who collectively identified as 'the granddaughters of the witches that you could not burn' (Sutton, 2020: 8). By integrating the Madres'

scarves, which are 'cultural artefacts' of Argentina's 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1984: 4), pro-choice activists inferred that the nation inherently supported legal abortion. This is normalised as the next step in Argentina's 'repertoire' (Tilly, 2006; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007).

However, pro-choice activists did not passively repeat the performances of maternal activism by the Madres. Rather, they skilfully harnessed the Madres' legacy to make their demands about bodily autonomy seem less radical. During the dictatorship, the Madres somewhat uniformly wore their headscarves to mark their solidarity as politicised mothers. Whereas contemporary activists celebrated their bodily autonomy and individuality by adorning themselves with green glitter, hairspray, and paint (Jelin, 2021; Sutton, 2020: 8). A plurality of identities constituted the 'marea verde' from mothers to students, lesbians, doctors, pregnant women, transgender people, lawyers, journalists, and many more.

Pro-choice activists chose how they drew on the Madres to resist the homogenising expectation for Latin American women 'to enact their citizenship in their roles as wives and mothers' (Bejarano, 2002: 143). Their individual performances were divergent, yet the colour green represented their unified objective to protect every woman's right to determine how she lives her life and to only become a mother by choice (Seca, 2019: 93). Such quotidian gender performances ingrained the National Campaign's message into society that legal abortion ensures women's rights to self-determine their bodies and lives (Seca, 2019: 93). By showing that women could adopt a range of identities in the political sphere beyond motherhood, pro-choice activists illustrated Tilly's (2006) claim that 'repertoires' are adaptable.

Similarly, pro-life activists used symbolic blue scarves (the colour of Argentina's flag) to 'frame-jack' the Madres' 'repertoire'. The white scarves of the Madres, representing their children's nappies, rendered visible their absence and triggered a national outcry (Bergman & Szurmuk, 2001: 390). Likewise, the pro-life activists' scarves payed tribute to Argentina's aborted babies whose rights deserve to be defended (Bessone, 2017b: 52-53). Through street performances, pro-life activists portrayed themselves as the inheritors of the Madres' activism. They identified a common threat: the state which was attempting to intervene in women's reproductive bodies and disappear their children *again* (Bessone, 2017a; Sutton, 2021).

Pro-life activists erased the authoritarian context surrounding the Madres' activism and strengthened the myth that all Argentine women must naturally defend their (unborn) children from the state. Overall, the fact that pro-choice and pro-life groups adapted the Madres' headscarves demonstrates the strength of their 'repertoire' in Argentina today.

<sup>11</sup> 'Scream'.

<sup>12</sup> 'Sororidad' refers to 'women's political ability [...] to have each other's back, and to work across differences towards a common vision' (Sutton, 2020: 5).



## IV. HOW THE LEGACY OF DICTATORSHIP-ERA ACTIVISM INFLUENCES ARGENTINA'S CONTEMPORARY MOVEMENTS: LESSONS FROM FACEBOOK ABORTION ACTIVISM

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This article traced the links between the Madres de Plaza de Mayo's activism during Argentina's most recent dictatorship (from 1976 to 1983) and the pro-choice and pro-life campaigns' Facebook activism from 2019 to 2020. Scholars, such as Morgan (2015), Bessone (2017a), and Sutton (2021), have identified the existence of dictatorship-related language in selected output from the pro-choice and pro-life campaigns. This article offered a new approach by conducting the first study of Argentina's abortion activism on Facebook. It used the pre-existing theories of 'repertoires' (Tilly, 2006; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007) and 'frame-jacking' (Clifford, 2012) to explain the links between abortion movements and the Madres' dictatorship-era activism.

It was shown that the pro-choice movement aligned itself with the Madres' 'repertoire' by claiming to protect the right of women to determine their own lives free from the state. This mirrored how the Madres defended the right to life of their children who were 'disappeared' by the military regime. The counterpart is that pro-life groups also 'frame-jacked' the Madres' human-rights language, claiming to protect innocent, unborn babies.

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The comparisons of the Madres' dictatorship-era campaign with Facebook abortion activism suggested that Argentina's 'repertoire' of dictatorship-era activism is a double-edged sword. In other words, it may be harnessed to expand- or restrict- abortion rights today. Through Facebook, the legacy of dictatorship-era activism has not necessarily led Argentina to switch from a 'pariah' to 'protagonist', as Sikkink (2018) claims in the case of transitional justice. Rather, Facebook is a competitive space in which heterogeneous actors may engage with the dictatorship's 'repertoire' in contradictory ways.

Due to spatial limitations, this study included a small sample size of Facebook posts and only focussed on one of the most renowned groups of dictatorship-era activists: the Madres de Plaza de Mayo. I, therefore, encourage further research to confirm the generalisability of my findings. I suggest a hybrid qualitative and quantitative approach that would identify dictatorship-related lexicon within numerous municipal, provincial, and national pro-choice and pro-life pages.

To conclude, although Argentina legalised abortion in January 2021, abortion access remains threatened by pro-life groups who are encouraging conscientious objections (see Politi, 2021). It is thus a crucial moment to examine how pro-life movements frame their activism, especially on social media. Legal abortion does not represent the end. It is just the beginning.

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