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The *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*: asserting motherhood; rejecting feminism?

By Sara Eleanor Howe¹

Abstract

This paper analyses the relevance of the 'motherist' politics of Argentina's *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* to Latin American feminism. The *Madres* were one of the most visible and outspoken opponents of the military regime that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983, staging weekly demonstrations in the city's main square in the name of reclaiming their children who had been 'disappeared' by the regime as terrorists and subversives. The *Madres* adopted a strongly maternalist role, focusing their opposition to the regime through their role as mothers, and the rights and responsibilities inherent to motherhood. This paper aims to assess how such an approach can be related to movements in Latin American feminism at this time. The *Madres* undoubtedly proved the capacity and power of women as activists, yet faced criticism for inhabiting, emphasising and exploiting the traditional role of women which feminists were striving to deconstruct. The paper discusses the ways in which the *Madres* reinterpreted the traditional role of motherhood, subverting it from a restrictive label to a positive force, asserting the rights of mothers and transforming motherhood into a positive and politicised force. However, the paper also assesses the extent to which such a reassertion can be considered feminist, given the seeming incompatibility of the *Madres*' identity with the equality and freedom from traditional roles as sought by feminism. It is acknowledged that the *Madres* themselves have rejected the feminist label, seeking to distance themselves from what they consider bourgeois thinking that neglects real issues. Even so, the paper also discusses how the *Madres* can be seen to have contributed to feminist aims, especially within the increasing acceptance of diversity witnessed in feminism since the 1980s. The paper concludes by relating these questions of motherist versus feminist to the overall political and ethical objectives of the *Madres*.

Keywords: Human Rights, Latin America, Maternalist politics

Under the years of military rule in Argentina from 1976 to 1983, some 30,000 people, labelled subversives and terrorists by the regime were 'disappeared': the majority kidnapped, tortured or murdered with no trace or record of their fate. In desperation, as the search for information of the whereabouts of their children proved fruitless, a group of mothers of the 'disappeared' came together in the Plaza de Mayo, the centre of power in Buenos Aires, to demand the return of their children. In time, the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* would become one of the most visible and outspoken opponents of the regime, gaining international recognition with their marches and demonstrations in the square, as well as through their other actions of protest.

¹ This essay was originally written during Sara Howe's degree course in French and Spanish at the University of Southampton, as part of the assessment for the *Hispanic Feminisms* module taught by Carrie Hamilton. She graduated from Southampton with a first class degree in July 2004, and recently obtained a Masters with distinction in Translation at the University of Surrey. She is currently applying for jobs in the translation sector, and competing in a number of graduate recruitment schemes.

In this essay, I aim to assess the relation between the actions and beliefs of the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* and Latin American feminism. An understanding of this relationship is essential not only to understand the disparate and often conflicting nature of Latin American feminism, but also to assess the changing role of the *Madres* in a world where the tragic circumstances of their formation fall further into the past. Although the *Madres* undoubtedly proved the role of women as activists and broke down numerous boundaries, they faced criticism in certain quarters for exploiting and inhabiting the traditional role of women as guardians of the home and family that Latin American feminists were so desperate to deconstruct. The relationship between the *Madres* and the more theoretical, even 'western', streams of feminism in the region is one that both parties have been compelled to consider, and that offers an enlightening insight into the wider conflict between traditional values and evolving rights in modern Latin America.

It is important first to be aware of the context of feminism in Latin America and in Argentina from which the *Madres* emerged. The early 1970s represented a breakthrough decade for feminism on the continent, Maxine Molyneux (2000: 63) remarks how second-wave feminist organisations developed alongside more popular movements aiming to meet basic needs, all accompanied by the effects of UN Decade for Women (1975-85). However, it is clear that in spite of this general increase in political participation among women, many female activists still encountered two significant obstacles. The first of these is a general tendency to regard any collective action involving numbers of women as a social rather than a political movement (Craske 1999: 3), due to the fact that women were viewed by many as apolitical beings who were none the less permitted – to an extent – an interest in social issues as an extension of their mothering role. As we shall see, the *Madres* would later exploit this same role to gain access to the political sphere. The second obstacle was the rejection of feminist thought as a foreign, western doctrine, of little relevance to the Latin American situation, incompatible with traditional conservative values and at best a secondary consideration in the Marxist class struggle (Feijoó 1998: 32). It should be noted nevertheless that, in spite of these barriers to progress, a number of feminist groups had emerged in Argentina in the 1970s. However, the coup in 1976 led to the dissolution of the great majority of these (Feijoó 1989: 80), given that political activism was criminalised and feminist thought was seen as incompatible with, and indeed threatening to, the traditional 'values' of the military regime. Thus although at the time of the *Madres*' formation Argentina was largely devoid of any feminist network, there was a growing mobilisation on the continent as a whole, and a degree of precedent for women's movements in the country itself.

A consideration of even greater importance is the predominant position in Latin American feminisms of the role of motherhood. Even within certain sectors of feminist thought, motherhood has become a key manner of defining female difference, no longer as a restrictive label but instead as a positive force believed to be exemplary of particular qualities such as an 'especially ethical and responsible (attitude) to life' (Schirmer 1992: 60). In a debate not restricted to Latin American feminism (see for example the controversy surrounding Sara Roddick's 1989 publication *Maternal Thinking*), many feminists have criticised this maternalist approach, viewing it as reducing the female subject to the role of mother and confining her to that category. This

belief in exclusively maternal qualities is translated in political terms as promoting justice and the provision of basic needs such as health and housing, demands that Nikki Craske describes as difficult for governments to deny because they are seemingly legitimised by the ‘duties and responsibilities of motherhood’ (Craske 1999: 83). The *Madres*’ main demands may have been in response to a particularly extreme situation, but they can certainly be seen to have appropriated this ‘motherist’ position.

Obvious as it may be, the *Madres* represent clearly and unapologetically a group of mothers, something unashamedly evident in the name of the group itself. It is quite clear from the outset that this is a movement affirming its existence purely around the identity of its members as mothers. The fact that this membership is designated exclusively as the *mothers* of the ‘disappeared’ reinforces the assumption that child raising, and indeed the responsibility for the welfare of the child, is the preserve of women. As Diana Taylor states, in her study of the role played by the *Madres*’ motherist politics in resisting the Dirty War and its aftermath, it was this sole identity and role that has endowed them with the capacity and the duty to carry out their protests, representing motherhood as a set of ‘universal, immutable and eternal values...something forever fixed’ (Taylor 1997: 200), in a manner which granted them a precious degree of legitimacy in such precarious times. In this way they certainly reinforced rather than challenged the traditional maternal category, but there are many nuances to their approach that should be considered.

The objectives of the group (to have their children returned to them alive, and to bring the perpetrators of the ‘disappearances’ to justice) reflected and were directly linked to this maternal role. Certain criticisms have been made with regard to this narrow focus, notably that it again placed the idea of the ‘mother’ as absolutely central, negating in Taylor’s opinion the opportunity either to confront other issues, or indeed to acknowledge the divides and variations of interest that would have existed within the group (Taylor 1997: 204-5). In a similar vein to more traditional forms of motherist politics, the demands of the group can be seen as legitimate purely because of the maternal role of the *Madres*. Maria del Carmen Feijoó states that this strategy represents a certain risk, because ‘linking the possibility of change to feminine emotionality constitutes a paradoxical ‘vicious circle’’ (Feijoó 1989: 88) given that an affirmation of such ‘emotionality’ as a feminine quality could be seen to support traditional perceptions.

To some extent however, the appropriation of this role can be attributed to purely strategic purposes. The image of woman as the traditional mother, dedicating herself to the care of her home and family, was one encouraged and promoted by many military regimes, including that of Argentina. This image formed part of their traditional Catholic-based ‘values’ and was seen to discourage subversion. As a result, by protesting within this role assigned by the regime itself, the *Madres* found a degree of impunity that would have been denied other human rights or feminist groups. Additionally the performance of this maternal role afforded them ‘visibility in a representational system that rendered most women invisible’ (Taylor 1997: 195), as well as an ‘ethical commitment which is unnegotiable’ (Jelin 1990: 205). However, despite the strategic importance of such a projection of roles, there are undoubted dangers in adopting it so readily, not least that – in addition to feminist complaints over conforming to traditional gender roles – in spite of the safety of representing an apparently officially approved category of women, they risked being ‘drawn into the discourse and logic from which they are trying to differentiate’ (Taylor 1997: 203). The manner in which the *Madres* adopted this label of

maternal femininity, and their intentions in doing so, are important considerations if we are to understand their attitude to feminism and the roles and rights of women.

Most commentators, including those such as Feijoó and Taylor who have not hesitated to highlight what they view as certain contradictions or limitations of the movement, concur that the *Madres* indeed challenged traditional constructions of gender roles. Admittedly the *Madres* have reinforced the idea that a woman's primary role is that of mother to her children, but they have challenged the very meaning of that motherhood. Feijoó refers to their use of traditionalism as 'a daring gesture, an indictment of its original meaning of passivity and submission' (Feijoó 1989: 77), while Taylor remarks that the way in which they have adopted the role of mothers, politicised and in protest, has permitted them to challenge and break down the restrictive social construction of motherhood that they initially inhabited (Taylor 1997: 185).

Jo Fisher acknowledges that in the initial period of the movement the women took on the role of 'weeping, pleading mothers' (Fisher 1993: 115), but that as they gradually became more assertive, the traditional role was subverted. As Feijoó remarks, 'if...this way of entering the public realm could be criticised as a return to a form of *marianismo* (i.e. expounding the 'essentialist' female values of humility and self-sacrifice), it was hardly a return to the role of the *Mater Dolorosa*' (Feijoó 1998: 36). Indeed, no better is this illustrated than by the words of Maria del Rosario, one of the *Madres*, on the occasion of the exhumation of bodies of the 'disappeared' from mass graves: 'our dead children are no use to us – we don't want a tomb to cry at, we want to know who was responsible and we want them in prison' (quoted in Fisher 1993: 117). This attitude demonstrates clearly the politicisation of motherhood carried out by the *Madres*.

This politicisation has been achieved by the relocation of the role of the mother from the private to the public realm. By taking their sorrow and frustration out of the traditional confines and isolation of the home, and manifesting them collectively in the most public of public spaces, the women were able to transform the conceptualisation of traditionally female roles (Chuchryk 1994: 70). Hebe de Bonafini, the current leader of the *Madres*, confirmed the impact of this move from the private to the public sphere: 'women like us lived in an isolated world which finished at the front doors of our houses... when you live like this you don't know what rights you've got... you don't understand anything' (quoted in Fisher 1993: 107-8). The *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* contributed in this sense not only to challenging perceptions of women as apolitical, poorly organised and submissive, but also to a fundamental 'transformation in women's consciousness and the female role' (Feijoó and Gogna 1990: 91), making women aware of the role they could play. This is however still largely confined to the maternal role, albeit a transformed one, as shown by this further quote from Hebe de Bonafini: 'we've fought to build the image of mothers who fight for all the country's children. We've learned that there are more important things than washing, cooking and ironing' (quoted in Fisher 1993: 136).

Even so, Lynn Stephen, in her discussion of the CoMadres, a similar movement in El Salvador, warns against concluding that such groups represent a 'unilateral move from the private-domestic-feminine sphere into the public-political-feminist sphere' (Stephen 1997: 54). Certainly, although the *Madres* have redefined many of the boundaries between the public and private spheres, they have certainly not discarded their feminine ideals to take on purely feminist ones: indeed, the new perspective that they can be seen

to have introduced has a distinctly feminine/maternal slant. To quote Hebe de Bonafini once again 'we're political, but our politics are moral, ethical and with love' (quoted in Fisher 1997: 136), and the *Madres* are persistently pursuing the promotion of the 'mother' with the political world. As Bouvard states, the *Madres* have 'transformed themselves from women seeking to protect the sanctity of the mother-child bond within the existing political system to women wishing to transform the state so that it reflects maternal values' (Bouvard 1994: 118). Thus while there is a clear awareness of the need for a greater female participation in the political world, this is viewed less as a need for equality of participation and representation between abstract subjects, both male and female; rather it is intended to bring a feminine perspective, something that contradicts the attempts of feminists to break down these traditional characterisations.

It is appropriate therefore to ask whether the *Madres* can be seen at all to represent a specifically *feminist* viewpoint. If a feminist viewpoint can be said to be that which seeks to eliminate the instant identification of women as mothers, then the answer is no. As Marguerite Bouvard explains, 'the mothers are not interested in eliminating maternity as a gender identification', rather, as we have discussed, they wish to create a political role for maternity (Bouvard 1994: 187). The *Madres* have not identified themselves as feminist, and have in the past flatly rejected the term, something that can be attributed as much to the negative connotations of the term 'feminist', as to the specific concrete differences between the two movements. For example, to once again quote the words of Hebe de Bonafini, 'the mothers aren't feminists, we believe in equality between men and women. Feminists here are very radical. They want men out of the way and we don't agree with that' (quoted in Fisher 1997: 136). In considering the rejection of the term 'feminist' by the *Madres*, it is important to also consider attitudes with regard to class. Bouvard cites a wariness of certain feminist organisations in Argentina, which are seen to represent 'privileged circles' (Bouvard 1994: 191), while Hebe de Bonafini criticises bourgeois feminists for being overly concerned with gender demands, at the expense of more important issues (Fisher 1997: 136). This can explain the assertion made by Taylor that the work of the *Madres* could be seen, to an extent, to have bridged the gap between the more bourgeois feminist movements and popular, grassroots forms of action (Taylor 1997: 207).

Even so, in spite of the *Madres* rejection of the feminist label, there have certainly been several developments in trends of Latin American feminism over the past few decades that were congruent with the more motherist orientation of the *Madres*. Francesca Miller mentions several of these in her account of the evolution of feminism in the region: firstly the redefinition of feminism to include access to basic resources, the 'matters of daily life and death' (Miller 1991: 201) that can be seen to coincide with motherist politics' demands that a mother be able to assure the welfare of her children. Secondly, the increasing tolerance seen during the 1980s of variations in approach and the acceptance of diversity (Miller 1991: 208) could also be seen to permit an understanding between the motherist politics of the *Madres* and more progressive feminist thinking.

One of the key elements in the rapport between the *Madres* and feminist thinking is that of the gradual evolution and development of the *Madres*' situation and values to make them more receptive to ideas they might previously have rejected. Jennifer Schirmer, in her study of El Salvador's CoMadres and Guatemala's CONAVIGUA

widows, describes how the women come to gain a gendered consciousness through their actions, and that many move 'beyond the 'motherist' paradigm to a larger objective of challenging traditional constructions of 'femininity'... and 'mothering' itself' (Schirmer 1993: 31). With reference to the *Madres'* current stance towards feminism we can recognise a tendency to appreciate the work of feminist groups with respect to furthering women's rights, but not a total rededication of their efforts to this issue. Indeed, Bouvard states that the *Madres* would not support any 'change that would unravel women from their maternal role' (Bouvard 1994: 191). Instead what we can see is a willingness to support wider social reform, with women's rights forming part of a general project of human rights that has evolved directly from the women's experiences of the most extreme human rights violations. According to Bouvard's study, one of the key features to distinguish the *Madres'* work from that of more bourgeois feminist groups is the *Madres'* emphasis on improvements in the private realm of the home rather than on furthering women's progress in the worlds of work and politics (Bouvard 1994: 190).

In terms of the impact of the *Madres* on the feminist movement in the region, there are several points to be made. Aside from the obvious renown of the group in human rights circles and their influence on similar movements such as those already mentioned in El Salvador and Guatemala, they have also entered into co-operation with several other women's associations on a transnational level (Taylor 1997: 192). Taylor also affirms that the *Madres'* cause and approach has had a positive impact on the fight for those women's issues linked to human rights, such as domestic violence (Taylor 1997: 201), while Jane Jaquette notes that the *Madres'* story has influenced many women, who have taken the example of the *Madres* as justification for their own political action (Jaquette 1994: 225). However, it is worth remembering that in this case most of the activists also followed the *Madres'* example by 'framing their interests as mothers of families and not as individuals' (Jaquette and Wolchik 1998: 13). Even so, it is to be assumed that a general rise in political awareness and participation amongst women would be recognised as a positive occurrence, even if it was on a motherist trajectory.

If the *Madres* are to remain relevant both to Latin American feminism and on the Argentinian political scene, it is essential for them to develop activities, ambitions and attitudes that extend beyond the original purpose of reclaiming their disappeared children. Their objective of bringing the perpetrators of the disappearances to justice has had only limited success – although convictions were made, the *Punto Final* (Full Stop) law of 1986 put an end to new prosecutions, and many officers accused of human rights violations were since pardoned in amnesties in 1989 and 1990. Although several children and grandchildren of the 'disappeared' have been restored to their families, the original goal of reclaiming the original lost children has now become a symbolic aim, as the terminal nature of the disappearances becomes increasingly undeniable. A symbolic struggle of this type still allows the *Madres* to occupy their maternal role, perhaps even in a stronger, more transcendental, unifying sense. Craske recognises that the apolitical stance and non-negotiable objectives based on motherhood, which once afforded the *Madres* such influence, are now elements of their approach that – following the transition to democracy and the changes in the political process- could result in 'political paralysis' (Craske 1999: 198). Clearly in the democratic era, the conditions for successful political participation have changed, and it is essential that both the *Madres'* and the groups they

have influenced acknowledge and react to these changes, in order to continue their work in favour of women's and human rights.

In conclusion, although the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* could initially be seen as representative of a motherist tradition that is in practical opposition to feminist movements, given its reinforcement of traditional –and to feminist eyes, restrictive– gender roles, the *Madres* have in fact contributed a great deal not only in furthering the political participation of women, but also in promoting human rights, and thereby the women's rights that are frequently tied up with them. It is clear that, although the initial outward aims of the *Madres* may not have been concerned with feminist causes, they have come to acknowledge the importance of furthering women's rights, understandably within the context of the maternal politics that were so essential to their success and survival under the military regime. Above all then, when questioning the motherist politics of the *Madres*, it is essential to remember the context within which the movement was formed, and the immediate and tragic nature of its objectives. For, in spite of all the analyses of the politics, the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* came together not for the sake of feminism, but to confront the most appalling violations of human rights. The impact they have had on the furtherance of women's rights and participation is undeniably positive, but it is not on this issue alone that their true merit should be judged.

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